



BIBLE CONFIDENCE SERIES

Understanding Old Testament Law

A beginner's guide to why God gave Israel so many commands—and how they help us understand His heart and His plan

The Law belongs inside God's story.

God did not give Israel a random collection of rules. He had rescued them, made them His people, and was teaching them how to live with Him and with one another.

WHY THIS MATTERS

You do not have to understand every command immediately. Begin with the story, look for what it reveals about God, and follow the Law toward Jesus.

"The instructions of the Lord are perfect, reviving the soul."

Psalm 19:7 NLT

Read the Law in context—and let it lead you toward Christ.



START HERE

What do we mean by “the Law”?

In the Old Testament, “the Law” often means the commands God gave Israel through Moses. It can also refer more broadly to the first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (Exodus 19–24; Deuteronomy 4:1–14).

Start with the story

God rescued Israel from slavery before He gave them the Ten Commandments. The Law showed a rescued people how to live with their holy and loving God (Exodus 19:3–6; 20:1–2).

Why did God give Israel the Law?

To show what God is like

The Law reveals that God is holy, just, faithful, merciful, and deeply concerned about worship, truth, relationships, and the vulnerable (Leviticus 19:2, 9–18; Deuteronomy 10:17–19).

To guide everyday life

Israel needed instruction for worship, families, courts, property, health, work, rest, and care for neighbors. God’s commands brought faith into ordinary life (Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 15:7–11; 24:17–22).

To show the seriousness of sin

The Law gave God’s people a clear standard and showed why forgiveness and grace are necessary (Romans 3:19–24; 7:7–12).

To prepare the way for Jesus

Sacrifices, priests, holy days, promises, and patterns within the Law help us understand who Jesus is and what He came to do (Matthew 5:17; Luke 24:27; Hebrews 10:1–14).

Grace came first

The Ten Commandments begin with God saying, “I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt” (Exodus 20:2 NLT). God rescued Israel before giving His commands. They did not obey to earn His rescue; they learned to obey because He had already saved them.

Remember the order

Rescue → Relationship → Instruction. God rescued His people, brought them near, and then taught them how to live.



THE BIG QUESTION

Do Christians have to obey every Old Testament Law?

Christians do not live under Israel's covenant as the nation of Israel did. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus—not by keeping the Law (Romans 3:20–26; Ephesians 2:8–10; Galatians 3:23–29).

That does not make the Law useless. It is still God's inspired Word. It teaches us about His character, shows us the seriousness of sin, gives wisdom, and helps us understand Jesus (Romans 7:12; 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:15–17).

Jesus fulfilled the Law

Jesus said He came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17–20). He obeyed perfectly, fulfilled God's promises, and offered the final sufficient sacrifice for sin (Luke 24:25–27; Hebrews 10:1–14).

Some commands pointed forward to Jesus

Animal sacrifices are not repeated by Christians because Jesus offered the complete sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 9:11–14; 10:11–14).

Some commands governed ancient Israel

Laws about Israel's courts, land, priesthood, and national life belonged to that people in that time. They still teach us about justice, responsibility, and God's priorities.

God's moral truth still matters

The New Testament repeats and deepens commands about loving God and neighbor, truth, purity, justice, mercy, and faithful living (Matthew 22:37–40; Romans 13:8–10; Galatians 5:13–26).

What should I do when I read the Law?

- Ask what the command meant for Israel.
- Notice what it reveals about God and people.
- Look for how Jesus or the New Testament fulfills or develops it.
- Apply the lasting truth faithfully—not necessarily the ancient practice itself.

A simple summary

Christians do not copy every Old Testament command directly, but we should never ignore the Law. We read it in its setting, through Jesus, and as part of God's complete Word.



READING WITH CONFIDENCE

Why do some Old Testament Laws feel strange or severe?

Some commands sound unfamiliar because they were given to people living thousands of years ago in a very different place and culture. A confusing Law often becomes clearer when we slow down and learn what was happening around it.

Four beginner-friendly questions

- Who was God speaking to? Read the verses before and after the command.
- What problem or part of life did it address? Look for worship, safety, justice, health, relationships, or care for others.
- What does it show me about God? Notice His holiness, mercy, wisdom, justice, and concern for people.
- How does the rest of the Bible help me understand it? Look especially at Jesus' teaching and the New Testament.

An example: leaving the edges of a field

God told Israelite landowners to leave part of their harvest for the poor and the foreigner (Leviticus 19:9–10; Deuteronomy 24:19–22; see Ruth 2). We may not own grain fields, but the command reveals God's concern for dignity, generosity, work, and practical care for vulnerable neighbors.

An example: parapets on rooftops

Deuteronomy 22:8 required a railing around a new roof because flat rooftops were used as living space. Our homes may look different, but the principle is easy to see: loving our neighbor includes taking reasonable steps to prevent harm.

It is okay to pause

You do not have to force an immediate answer. Write down your question, read the surrounding passage, compare Scripture, and use trustworthy study tools. Difficult passages are invitations to keep learning—not reasons to give up.

When you encounter a difficult Law

- Ask God for wisdom (James 1:5).
- Read the surrounding verses and note your questions.
- Look for what the passage reveals about God.
- See whether Jesus or the New Testament addresses the subject.
- Ask a mature believer or consult a trustworthy study resource.



WANT TO GO DEEPER?

A closer look at the Law

Once the basic story feels clear, these ideas can help you study more carefully. You do not need to master them before reading the Old Testament.

Covenant setting

The Mosaic Law governed Israel within the covenant established at Sinai (Exodus 19–24; Deuteronomy 5:1–3). Christians are not under that covenant as the means by which they are justified or identified as God's people (Romans 6:14; Galatians 3:23–29; Hebrews 8:13). The Law remains inspired Scripture for teaching, warning, wisdom, and understanding Christ (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:6–11; 2 Timothy 3:15–17).

A helpful—but imperfect—framework

Christian teachers often group Old Testament Law into three categories. Scripture does not place every command into three labeled lists, and some Laws overlap, so treat these categories as a study aid rather than an inspired classification.

Moral instruction

Commands concerning worship, truth, justice, sexual faithfulness, love of neighbor, and protection of life reveal moral truths grounded in God's character (Exodus 20:1–17; Leviticus 18–19).

Civil and community instruction

These Laws governed Israel as an ancient nation and addressed courts, restitution, property, debts, agriculture, and care for vulnerable people (Exodus 21–23; Deuteronomy 15; 19–25).

Ceremonial and worship instruction

Sacrifices, priests, purity practices, food Laws, sacred space, and festivals shaped Israel's worship and pointed toward Christ (Leviticus 1–7; 11–17; 23; Hebrews 8–10).

Two errors to avoid

Do not dismiss the Law as irrelevant, and do not apply every command directly to Christians without considering its covenant, context, and fulfillment. Ask what it meant then, what it reveals about God, how Scripture develops it, and what faithful principle remains today.

Perspective note: This guide presents a widely held Protestant understanding of Christians and the Mosaic Law. Other Christian traditions may describe aspects of continuity, moral Law, and grace differently. Readers are encouraged to compare every conclusion with Scripture in context.

Keep going

Explore Exodus 19–20; Leviticus 19; Deuteronomy 4:1–14; Matthew 5:17–20; Romans 3:19–26; Galatians 3:19–29; and Hebrews 8–10. Read slowly, compare passages, and let the Law lead you toward Jesus.