

December 2002

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WOULD GOD EVER GIVE LAWS THAT ARE BAD?

The Bible reveals to us the details of God's dealings with mankind. After God had brought Israel out of Egyptian slavery, God gave Israel His laws. This entailed not only the ten commandments, but also all of the laws and statutes and judgments that we find recorded in the Old Testament. The Bible uses a number of different words to refer to different categories of laws. For example, Abraham had lived not only by God's commandments, but also by God's additional laws and statutes, as well as obeying God's voice and keeping God's charge. This is what God stated to Isaac.

Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws. (Genesis 26:5 AV)

In Psalm 119, for example, we find 8 different words in the English text (being the translation of 12 different Hebrew words, with 4 of those English words each being the translation of two different Hebrew words) that all refer basically to "God's laws". The 8 different English words or expressions are: your commandments, laws, judgments, precepts, testimonies, statutes, word and ways.

[Comment: Every verse of the 176 verses of Psalm 119 has at least one of these twelve Hebrew words for "God's laws" in it EXCEPT one verse, verse 122, which has none of these words.]

Now we know that God is good (Psalm 34:8; 73:1; 105:5; 118:1; etc.), and we also know that THE LAW is holy, and THE COMMANDMENT is holy and just and good (Romans 7:12). So this raises the questions:

Does this mean that ALL the "laws" we find in the Old Testament are actually "GOOD"? Are there ANY laws that God gave to Israel that could possibly be described as being "NOT good"? And IF perchance there are some such laws, which ones would they be? And further, WHY would God possibly have given any laws that are "not good", if indeed that should be the case? And would God Himself describe those laws as "not good"?

Let's start by looking at a Scripture that has puzzled many people in God's Church over the years.

UNDERSTANDING EZEKIEL 20:25

Here is this verse.

Wherefore I GAVE THEM ALSO STATUTES *THAT WERE* NOT GOOD, AND JUDGMENTS WHEREBY THEY SHOULD NOT LIVE; (Ezekiel 20:25 AV)

God is the One who is speaking these words. And God very clearly says: "I GAVE THEM ..." statutes and judgments.

Now this clashes with our own preconceived ideas. How could God POSSIBLY have given Israel bad statutes and judgments? And so we have traditionally always tried to EXPLAIN AWAY this verse. We have tried to soften this statement by claiming either of two explanations:

A) It supposedly means "I gave them OVER TO statutes that were not good ...".

B) It is supposedly a Hebrew idiom that really means "I SUFFERED OTHERS TO GIVE THEM statutes that were not good ...".

Both of those options were designed to remove from this statement the meaning that GOD actually gave those statutes and judgments. And because these "explaining away" explanations fitted in with our own preconceived ideas, therefore we readily accepted them without question or examination.

However, BOTH of those explanations are wrong! Ezekiel 20:25 does NOT mean "I gave them OVER TO ...", and neither is it a Hebrew idiom that means "I suffered OTHERS to give them ...".

The KJV of this verse is in fact a good and correct translation of the Hebrew text!

The key issue in this verse is the verb that is translated in the KJV as "I GAVE them". It is this verb that we have tried to manipulate with our "explaining away" attempts in the past.

The verb here translated as "I gave" is "NATHAN".

Now in Hebrew, verbs have different "stems" which allow the verbs to express different concepts. For most "stems" there is an active voice form and also a passive voice form. Below are the four most common active voice "stems" with some examples to illustrate their meanings in English.

A) The "QAL" stem denotes: simple or causal action. This "qal" stem is the most common form of verbs found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Examples of this form are:

qal stem = he ate, he came, he gave, he washed, he sent, he broke, etc..

B) The "HIPHIL " stem denotes: CAUSATIVE ACTION. Examples of this would be:

qal stem = he ate; hiphil stem = HE CAUSED to eat, i.e. he fed;

qal stem = he came; hiphil stem = HE CAUSED to come, i.e. he brought;

qal stem = he reigned; hiphil stem = he MADE KING, i.e. he crowned;

qal stem = he gave; hiphil stem = HE CAUSED to give; etc.

C) The HITHPAEL stem denotes: reflexive action. An example would be:

qal stem = he washed; hithpael stem = he washed HIMSELF.

D) The PIEL stem denotes: intensive or intentional action. Examples would be:

qal stem = he broke; piel stem = he broke TO PIECES, i.e. he smashed;

qal stem = he sent; piel stem = he sent away, i.e. he expelled.

As can be seen, to establish the meanings of the three last forms one always starts with the meaning of the first form (i.e. the qal stem). The qal stem is the basic one. It is due to these different stems of the verbs that we find that each one Hebrew verb may be translated into English by a variety of different English language verbs, depending on whether the verb is a simple statement of fact (qal stem), or

whether it is intended to convey a causative action (hiphil stem) or a reflexive action (hithpael stem) or an intentional / intensive action (piel stem).

From this simplified explanation it should be becoming clear that our previous explanations of this verse always SIMPLY IMPLIED that the verb "nathan" was used in Ezekiel 20:25 with THE HIPHIL STEM, the causative action stem.

BUT THAT IS NOT CORRECT!

The fact is that in Ezekiel 20:25 the verb "nathan" is used with the QAL stem, and with the "perfect" tense. The "perfect" tense refers to A COMPLETED ACTION.

One other point should be noted.

In Hebrew verbs the pronouns to which the verbs apply are usually implied in the form of the verb. Thus there is typically no need to include a pronoun in the text itself. However, when the intention is TO EMPHASIZE THE PRONOUN, then a pronoun is included in the text in addition to the correct ending of the verb.

In Ezekiel 20:25 the verb "nathan" is used with the qal stem in the "perfect" tense in the first person singular form, BUT FOR EMPHASIS the first person pronoun "aniy" is also included in the text. To make this special emphasis EVEN CLEARER, the Hebrew adverb "gam" is then used. This Hebrew adverb "gam" is in the KJV correctly translated as "also", and its purpose is also to convey emphasis.

So not only is it correct to translate this verse as "I GAVE THEM statutes ...", but the Hebrew text emphasizes the One performing the action (i.e. God) by first specifically including the pronoun "I", and by then including the adverb "gam" (i.e. ALSO) for further emphasis.

I realize that for most of us this is all extremely technical information, but the bottom line is this: there is no way that the meaning of Ezekiel 20:25, as conveyed by the KJV, can be explained away. The Hebrew text of this verse really does have God saying:

"I gave them also statutes that were NOT good, and judgments whereby they should NOT live."

As a matter of interest, out of 16 English language translations I checked in addition to the KJV, 14 of them convey the same meaning as the KJV. The only two I found that alter the wording slightly in an attempt to change the meaning are:

A) The 1982 New King James Version has it as: "I also gave them UP TO statutes ...".

B) The 1984 NIV (British) has it as: "I also gave them OVER TO statutes ...".

The point is: the vast majority of translations recognize that the KJV is a correct translation for this verse. And this is borne out by the Hebrew text of this verse. Even the Jewish Publication Society translation is virtually identical to the KJV (except that the JPS changes the word "judgments" to "ordinances"). The JPS text reads:

Wherefore I gave them also statutes that were not good, and ordinances whereby they should not live; (Ezekiel 20:25 JPS)

So God very plainly states that:

A) He gave Israel statutes THAT WERE NOT GOOD; and

B) He gave them judgments or ordinances whereby they should NOT live.

So does this then contradict Romans 7:12? No, certainly not. Romans 7:12 is speaking about "THE LAW" and about "THE COMMANDMENT". Paul was obviously very familiar with all 12 of the Hebrew words for "laws" that are found in Psalm 119. Ezekiel 20:25 does not use the words that mean "commandment" (Hebrew "mitsvah") or "law" (Hebrew "torah"); Ezekiel 20:25 only uses the Hebrew words "choq" ("statutes") and "mishpat" ("judgments").

So, NO, God did NOT give Israel any "laws" or "commandments" that were bad; but God DID give them "statutes" and "judgments" that were not good. While "statutes" and "judgments" are types or categories of laws, they are emphatically on a lower level than "commandments" and "laws", and Paul was not concerned with that lower level when he wrote Romans 7:12.

But even though statutes and judgments are on a lower level than "THE LAW", the question still is: WHY would God have given ANY KIND OF LAW that is not good?

To understand this we need to understand HOW God deals with us human beings.

GOD RESPONDS TO HUMAN SINS

The philosophy underlying God's way of living is perfect. It cannot be improved upon. In contrasting it to Satan's way of life, Mr. Armstrong would often say: "God's way of life is the way of GIVE, of outgoing concern for others; and Satan's way of life is the way of GET, of concern for the self."

God's original plan was based totally and completely on God's way of life. In the future, once God's kingdom has been implemented, then God tells us that "they shall not hurt nor destroy" (Isaiah 11:9; 65:25), and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain (see Revelation 21:4). The conditions that will then be extant are also the ones God had ORIGINALLY planned for His creation.

But Satan's rebellion brought with it destruction and pain. So after Satan's rebellion God built the potential of pain and suffering into His recreation, forcing Adam and Eve to make a choice between His way of life (the give way) and Satan's way of life (the get way). God pointed out to Adam that death would be the result of Adam choosing Satan's way, when God told him: "for in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17).

When Adam and Eve did choose Satan's way of life, THEN God implemented various penalties which would impact on man's life on earth. Amongst other things, the ground would from then onwards also produce thorns and thistles and weeds, something that God had NOT originally intended to be a part of man's environment. This curse was compounded after Cain killed his brother Abel.

For the next approximately 1500 years man's sins became worse and worse. It got to the point where God Himself was sorry that He had created human beings, as we are told in Genesis 6:6.

And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.
(Genesis 6:6 AV)

Man turned out to be far more perverse than God had anticipated before this time. Man's heart was "only

evil continually" (Gen 6:5).

THAT ENVIRONMENT made it impossible to continue with the plan AS GOD HAD INTENDED IT TO DEVELOP. It required some DRASTIC modifications on God's part to avoid aborting the whole plan. Those "drastic modifications" started with the worldwide flood God brought upon this earth in Noah's time. They continued with a very drastic shortening of man's lifespan, a modification of the nature of animals, and (later) A PERMISSION from God for some of the laws HE, God, had intended for governing man's existence to be MODIFIED somewhat, in order to accommodate man's UTTERLY SELFISH DISPOSITION (the opposite of the give way of life!). This God allowed for the sake of avoiding the total and complete breakdown of human society, as had happened before the flood.

In the same way as human conduct in general shocked God in Genesis 6:5-6 to the point of making some drastic modifications to His original intentions, SO ALSO Israel's hardness of heart SHOCKED God to the point of reluctantly allowing Israel some of the selfish conduct that is in fact contrary to God's nature and God's original intentions, conduct that God had originally NEVER intended to accept or allow.

So note very carefully:

God actually GAVE man permission for SOME of the things from Satan's way of life, because man really WANTED those things. BUT at the same time God also ATTACHED PENALTIES to the very things He gave man PERMISSION to do. Or, to be more accurate, when God DID give man "permission" for some of these things from Satan's way of life, God did NOT remove any of the penalties that are INHERENTLY attached to everything that is a part of Satan's way of life. The penalties always remained attached to these wrong things. So these things that God "gave permission for" are actually NOT GOOD by God's standards, and even though God gave "permission", they are still things whereby man should NOT live.

This is something many people seem to find hard to understand.

Man WANTED certain aspects of Satan's way of life, and so God in effect said to Israel: "Fine, you can have some of those things, but at the same time I will surely punish you for your selfish conduct". By giving them permission for the things they wanted, God wanted man to learn that ANYTHING that departs in ANY way from His way of life will ALWAYS and inevitably bring undesirable penalties with it. Man needs to learn that it NEVER pays to depart from God's original intentions for man.

Let me give you an analogy to explain God's "modifications" of His original intentions:

Picture an island of perhaps one square mile in area in a very large lake. God appoints a workforce of perhaps 100 people, men and women, to build him a large mansion on that island. So God ships the workforce, together with the plans for the mansion and EVERY ITEM of building material needed to the island ... the stones, bricks, tiles, timber, steel reinforcing, plumbing materials, piping, wood panels, paint, tools ... everything down to the last nuts and bolts that will be needed for the project. God makes clear that if any of these building materials are damaged or lost, then no replacement parts will be forthcoming ... the building will have to be constructed without the things that were broken or lost. God gives this 100-person strong workforce a precise time-frame by which He wants the mansion completed. And then God leaves "on a long journey", to return only at the appointed completion time. And the "workforce" is confined to the island for the entire length of the project.

Now once God has left, unexpected things happen. Some of the timber intended for the doors is damaged by water, a fire partially destroys some other building materials, some of the tools are misused and they are now much harder to work with. But meanwhile one of the men in the workforce has gotten two different women pregnant and he makes clear that he plans on living with both of them, while several other men are quarrelling over one of the other women. Tensions have also developed between some of

the artisans and they are almost ready to fight one another. Meanwhile some of the shrewder members of the workforce are manipulating some of the weaker members to be their personal servants after work hours. Etc. ...

God on His far journey hears about all these problems via "closed circuit video conferencing", and so God makes some decisions. God's first decision is that the project will continue in spite of the problems. Damaged tools and materials will just have to be used as best as they can, even if the plans have to be modified somewhat. God realizes that there is the very real danger that there will be a total breakdown in the relationships between the members of the workforce unless some forms of conduct are at least officially "acknowledged as permissible". Unless such "concessions" are made, they might just all kill one another and then "no flesh should be saved alive".

So God gives them the following instructions: Since some men very obviously WANT to have multiple women to sleep with, and they will do that anyway, therefore God "allows" polygamy, but with certain constraints. Similarly, God "allows" them to divorce, since they have clearly indicated that they will change sexual partners anyway. God also gives certain instructions as to how they are to resolve strong conflicts (i.e. laws regulating warfare). And then God also lays down rules for how those who are smarter may get those who are less smart to do their work for them (i.e. laws regulating slavery).

Now while all of these concessions have God's "approval", it does not change the fact that ALL OF THESE CONCESSIONS MAR THE JOYS OF HUMAN EXISTENCE! Or to be more precise: THE CONDUCT that necessitated these concessions had severely damaged the potential joys that the workforce could have achieved, had they continued to work positively, harmoniously, selflessly and with an attitude of consideration and genuine friendship towards everyone else on the workforce. The establishment of the "concessions" in no way removed the penalties that are intrinsic to any utilization of those concessions. The concessions simply placed bad conduct into more manageable confines.

To be quite clear:

The wrong forms of human conduct that God had "ALLOWED" for the hardness of their hearts STILL carried the same penalties of pain and anguish and emotional stress and suffering, just as if God had never allowed them! The only thing that God's "concessions" did was that they allowed those people who utilized those concessions to remain without recriminations within the social structure of the nation ... i.e. men who married multiple wives or who divorced their wives or who kept slaves, etc. were not ostracized for such conduct. IF God had not allowed polygamy and divorce and slavery, THEN anyone who engaged in these things would have had to be "cut off" from the nation. It is such "cutting off" that God's "concessions" avoided ... but the penalties, in the form of human suffering, for engaging in such "concessions" were never removed from these activities, EVEN WHEN GOD GAVE STATUTES AND JUDGMENTS THAT "ALLOWED" THEM!

Understand something about how God works.

1) If we are in the right attitude of humility and respect towards God, God will always listen to any reasonable requests we may have. In some cases God may grant our requests, and in other cases God may deny our requests. But the key is that we are in the right attitude towards God.

2) But if we are NOT in a totally submissive attitude towards God, if we are in any way being selfish, THEN God MAY in some cases also give us the answers we would like to receive ... AND THEN GOD PUNISHES US FOR ACTING ON THOSE ANSWERS FROM HIM!

In plain language: To those who are selfishly motivated God may say: "I allow you to do this" ... and then when they DO what God has allowed them to do, THEN God punishes them for their selfish conduct.

Let's look at some examples in the Old Testament that illustrate this matter.

A LESSON FOR US FROM BALAAM

You probably know the story of Balaam in Numbers chapter 22. Balak, the king of Moab sent for Balaam to curse Israel. He offered Balaam a vast fortune on which Balaam could comfortably have retired for the rest of his life. In our terms, this was an extremely lucrative job offer for Balaam.

So Balak's messengers, all of them high-profile people, came to Balaam in verse 7. There is no question that Balaam WANTED the money they had brought with them really badly. So Balaam said to these messengers ...

And he said unto them, Lodge here this night, and I will bring you word again, as the LORD shall speak unto me: and the princes of Moab abode with Balaam. (Numbers 22:8 AV)

That sounds just right, very much like what we ourselves might say when faced with a lucrative opportunity. Basically Balaam said: "I am interested in your offer, BUT I first want to find out what God's will is in this matter. I wouldn't want to accept this job if God doesn't want me to do that."

So God obliged and came to Balaam in a vision or dream that night.

And God came unto Balaam, and said, What men *are* these with thee? (Numbers 22:9 AV)

God obviously knew precisely "who those men were". But this was said for Balaam's benefit to be able to start the conversation. Anyway, Balaam now explains Balak's offer to God in the next two verses. Then God responds to this information in verse 12.

And God said unto Balaam, THOU SHALT NOT GO WITH THEM; THOU SHALT NOT CURSE THE PEOPLE: for they *are* blessed. (Numbers 22:12)

This answer from God is as plain and clear and unambiguous as you could wish. It is unmistakable that God does NOT want Balaam to go to Balak. No guessing needed here.

So the next morning Balaam tells Balak's messengers the bad news that God has forbidden him to go with them to curse Israel. The messengers then go back to Balak with this news. So Balak reasons that Balaam is just holding out "for a higher price", and therefore he immediately increases his offer greatly and sends an ever more distinguished group of messengers to Balaam. And so they arrive at Balaam's place.

Now Balaam responds as follows:

And Balaam answered and said unto the servants of Balak, If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I CANNOT GO BEYOND THE WORD OF THE LORD MY GOD, to do less or more. NOW THEREFORE, I PRAY YOU, TARRY YE ALSO HERE THIS NIGHT, THAT I MAY KNOW WHAT THE LORD WILL SAY UNTO ME MORE. (Numbers 22:18-19 AV)

On the surface this sounds like a really good answer, one we ourselves might be inclined to give under similar circumstances. We too would want to say: "Look, I can only do what God allows me to do; I

cannot go against God's Word. I really want to know God's will."

But the answer is in fact hypocritical. Balaam already KNEW God's will very clearly. God had already said to Balaam: "you shall NOT go with them". So what did Balaam expect ... that God would say: "Well, now that Balak is offering you more money, NOW you can go with them"? Balaam was HOPING that somehow he would get an opportunity to get his hands on all that money Balak was offering him.

What Balaam SHOULD have said to these messengers is:

"Look, I really would like to help you and get my hands on all that money Balak is offering me. BUT I have already told you that GOD will not give me permission to go with you to curse Israel. And God is not fickle ... when He said "NO" last week, He is still going to say "NO" right now. I cannot help you, no matter how much money Balak offers me ... so I think you should all just go back home."

But instead Balaam decides to approach God one more time. And so ...

And God came unto Balaam at night, and said unto him, IF THE MEN COME TO CALL THEE, RISE UP, AND GO WITH THEM; but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do. (Numbers 22:20 AV)

Well, what do you know? So God actually COMMANDS Balaam to go with Balak's messengers? And the last part of God's statement really makes it sound like God's will, when God said: "but yet the word which I shall say unto you that shall you do". So it really DOES sound like God has changed His mind ... or has He really?

Let's continue. Balaam was so excited with this answer from God that he probably couldn't sleep for the rest of the night? Anyway, the next morning he is off to go and see Balak (verse 21).

Now notice the next verse.

AND GOD'S ANGER WAS KINDLED BECAUSE HE WENT: and the angel of the LORD stood in the way for an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him. (Numbers 22:22 AV)

Can you understand this? Here Balaam does EXACTLY what God has told him to do ... and then God is ANGRY because Balaam does what God told him to do! How does that work?

Let's understand:

- 1) God's will was clear and unmistakable ... God did NOT want Balaam to go.
- 2) After Balaam already KNEW God's will on this matter, THEN God gave Balaam the answer he really had hoped for all along ... permission to perhaps earn a vast fortune for very little effort.
- 3) God's ANGER should make clear to us that God had still NOT wanted Balaam to go, even when He gave Balaam permission to do so.
- 4) So God's second answer to Balaam was really A TEST for Balaam. Balaam should have used his mind to easily figure out that this second answer could not possibly be God's will, not when Balaam still vividly knew God's first answer.

5) Balaam could have reasoned with God like Abraham and Moses and Peter did; e.g. "But Lord, why are You now saying 'yes' when last week You told me 'no'? Have You REALLY changed Your mind, or are You just testing me? I REALLY don't want to do anything against Your will. I can't fully believe that You really mean 'yes' when Your 'no' was so emphatic last week. Please help me to understand."

6) This is obviously a highly fictionalized response from Balaam. But the point is this: We should be VERY SUSPICIOUS when God approves of us wanting to engage in some selfish activity. Selfishness is INHERENTLY contrary to God's will and God's ways. So when it seems that God DOES approve of something selfish we would like to do or have, then we need to realize that WE ARE BEING TESTED BY GOD! And IF we go ahead and engage in the selfish activity, we will usually also be punished for doing so, even when it may seem that we had God's approval for the activity.

7) So the lesson for us is: When God DOES seem to give us approval for in some way being selfish, THEN we need to approach God (in prayer) VERY EARNESTLY and spell out in detail why we feel unsure of His approval for our selfish wishes. God DOES want to know how our minds work when our own wishes and desires are at stake, when we have a vested interest in the outcome. If we are HONESTLY seeking to know God's will, then God will also make that clear to us.

8) There is a vast difference between "blessings from God" and "approval for selfish conduct". The one enhances our lives, while the other has a negative effect on our character. And for those who are being trained to be a part of the first resurrection, God EXPECTS us to use our own minds to discern God's will in many cases. If we don't have the understanding and the initiative ON OUR OWN ACCORD to say to God: "Not so, Lord, for You have never before approved of me behaving selfishly" (a paraphrase of the principle of Acts 10:14), then our discernment is still deficient in major ways. God is looking for THINKING obedience in us, not for mindless and thoughtless obedience like that demanded by some human dictator.

9) We must ALWAYS use our minds when we obey God. As with Balaam here, God may SOMETIMES throw a test our way to see how much we REALLY understand and are in agreement with His way of thinking.

10) Every Christian is tested by God in at least TWO ways. First of all, God tests our obedience to all of His laws. As God gives us an understanding of various ones of His laws, we are tested as to whether or not we will obey those laws. Obedience in this way will form the foundation of our relationship with God. Once that foundation has been established, THEN God will also test OUR MINDS at some point or other. There is no set pattern for this. It is different for different people. But God needs to not only know that we will PHYSICALLY obey all of His laws; God also needs to know that we fully obey with our minds, and that our minds THINK LIKE HIS MIND AND NOT LIKE SATAN'S MIND. That is to find out whether we really do love God "with all our MINDS" (Matt. 22:37). And towards that end God also confronts us with various tests.

11) And probably the most effective way to test our minds is to seemingly give us God's approval for some selfish thing or other that we really want to do or have very badly. THAT'S when our minds are really tested before God.

12) Never lose sight of this fact that God sometimes "gives us the answer we want" in order to test us. Be especially on guard when, after one minister told you "no" in response to something you wanted to do, a second minister tells you "yes" to the same question. God tested Balaam's mind, and Balaam failed the test. When similar tests come our way, we need to pass them.

Now notice a principle in Jeremiah chapter 17 ...

JEREMIAH 17 EXAMINED

Notice the following well-known verses:

The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the LORD SEARCH THE HEART, / TRY THE REINS, EVEN TO GIVE EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS WAYS, *and* according to the fruit of his doings. (Jeremiah 17:9-10 AV)

Here is what we see in these verses.

- 1) Our minds, yours and mine, are deceitful. Therefore our minds must also be tested. [Comment: "Heart" is used in Jeremiah to refer to "the human mind". Biblical Hebrew, unlike biblical Greek, did not have a word that specifically means "mind". When you see the word "mind" in your O.T. it is always the translation of one of several words that really have different meanings, one of which is the word "heart".]
- 2) When God says: "I try the reins" God is saying that He will TEST OUR MINDS.
- 3) The last part of verse 10 shows a very common way God tests our minds ... BY GIVING US THE THINGS WE SET OUR HEARTS ON! Because THAT is when what goes on secretly in our minds becomes really exposed and transparent, often even to the people around us.
- 4) IF our minds are set on the wrong things, SOMETIMES God may just give us enough rope to either "pull ourselves out of the mess we are in" or else "to hang ourselves". (I am speaking idiomatically here.) God gives us the opportunity "to show our true colours".
- 5) So when the nation of Israel WANTED laws that were not really good, THEN God actually gave them the opportunity to have such laws. Few, if any, Israelites in O.T. times realized God's true feelings, as expressed in Ezekiel 20:25, about such "concessions" to them. And many of us in God's Church today have not really understood this either.
- 6) Jesus Christ made quite clear that such "concessions" were granted only reluctantly by God, when Christ said:

He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: BUT FROM THE BEGINNING IT WAS NOT SO. (Matthew 19:8 AV)

Jesus Christ's reference to "from the beginning it was not so" makes quite clear that God had originally NEVER intended to make any allowance for divorce. And when God did allow it, it nevertheless was STILL a law "whereby they should NOT have lived". God "hates divorce" (Malachi 2:16). It should be self-evident that when God actually "allows" something that He really HATES, then that is OBVIOUSLY a law whereby we should NOT really live! God would much prefer for people to NEVER appeal to this "concession" He made, to never seek a divorce.

[Comment: This is not intended to imply that God does not accept a divorce for the reason spelled out in Matthew 19:9. Jesus Christ made clear that for THIS reason God does accept a divorce. The Apostle Paul states one other "acceptable" reason for divorce in 1.Cor. 7:15. We'll look at this matter more closely later.]

The point to understand from Jeremiah 17:9-10 is that God may just give us what we set our hearts on, even when it is wrong before God, in order to test us. So God may sometimes tell us "yes" when His real

desire for us is "no". That's what God did with Balaam.

Notice also another statement from God, this time in the Psalm ...

But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. SO I GAVE THEM UP UNTO THEIR OWN HEARTS' LUST: *and* they walked in their own counsels. (Psalm 81:11-12 AV)

The context is that when God had brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, then they refused to obey God, they rebelled against God time and again. So verse 12 tells us GOD'S RESPONSE to their rebellion.

The Hebrew verb translated as "I gave them up" is different from the verb used in Ezekiel 20:25. The verb used here is "shalach", and it is here used with the "piel" stem and the "imperfect" tense. The "imperfect" tense in Hebrew expresses an action, process or condition which is incomplete. As we saw earlier, the "piel" stem denotes INTENSIVE or INTENTIONAL action. The Hebrew verb "shalach" means "to send". Used with the piel stem this verb means: to send off, to send away, to dismiss, to give over to, to cast out, etc.. The Hebrew noun translated as "lust" really means "stubbornness".

This verse tells us that God's response to Israel's refusal to obey Him was that He "sent them away and gave them over to their own heart's stubbornness". In other words, GOD GAVE THEM THE THINGS THEY STUBBORNLY WANTED TO HAVE! And God makes clear that this condition was still "ongoing" (imperfect tense).

It is precisely the same thing as when they wanted a king. God disagreed with them, but God nevertheless gave them the king they wanted ... and IMMEDIATELY pointed out the penalties attached to wanting a king. As God said to Samuel ...

Now therefore hearken unto their voice: HOWBEIT YET PROTEST SOLEMNLY UNTO THEM, AND SHEW THEM THE MANNER OF THE KING THAT SHALL REIGN OVER THEM. (1 Samuel 8:9 AV)

The rest of 1.Samuel chapter 8 spells out the penalties attached to wanting a king.

Psalm 81:12 makes the same point. God GAVE THEM "concessions" for polygamy, divorce, slavery, etc. BECAUSE they stubbornly wanted those things ... BUT God left the penalties that are intrinsically tied to these activities IN FULL FORCE! At no time in human history were the penalties tied to such activities EVER removed or expunged, even when God gave statutes and judgments that "allowed" these things. These were statutes and judgments whereby Israel really should NOT have lived!

Understand that sometimes there can be a vast difference between something that "God may allow" and something that is "pleasing in God's sight". If we seek to live only by the things "God may allow" we are going to fall far short before God, and we will still only be "unprofitable servants" (Luke 17:10). We must go a step higher than that; we MUST seek to do those things that will PLEASE God (see 1.John 3:22).

Let's go back to the story with Balaam.

BACK TO THE ACCOUNT WITH BALAAM

After God's second answer to him Balaam then starts out to go to Balak (Numbers 22:21). And NOW a number of "setbacks" and "accidents" happen to Balaam ... and none of these does he associate with his

selfish conduct. Any setback should ALWAYS motivate us to examine ourselves and our relationship to God. It is only when God speaks to Balaam, first through his donkey and then through an angel, that Balaam starts to get the picture. As the angel then said to Balaam:

And the angel of the LORD said unto him, Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? behold, I went out to withstand thee, BECAUSE *THY WAY IS PERVERSE BEFORE ME*:
(Numbers 22:32 AV)

Note that statement! Here Balaam was following to the letter the instructions God gave him in verse 20, yet God STILL says: "your way is PERVERSE before Me". Yes, it is PERVERSE before God when we reason that God approves of our selfish conduct. In the next verse the angel states that he had intended to kill Balaam ... and that, when all Balaam was doing is following God's instructions in verse 20 to the letter. This should make quite clear that God had NOT really wanted Balaam to go to Balak ... even though God had "given him permission to do so"! God had simply told Balaam what he wanted to hear, in order to test Balaam.

There should be a major lesson here for us! Beware when it seems God approves of something you KNOW is really motivated by selfishness, or when you've asked your minister for some advice concerning something you know is selfish that you really want to do ... and the minister tells you that it is okay for you to do this (whatever it is). Never forget that when you really WANT something badly, God may just see to it that you get the answer you want to hear, even if it is wrong before God ... and God will be testing you.

Balaam then replies as follows ...

And Balaam said unto the angel of the LORD, I HAVE SINNED; for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me: NOW THEREFORE, IF IT DISPLEASE THEE, I will get me back again.
(Numbers 22:34 AV)

Balaam did not argue and say: but I was only doing what you told me to do. No, he acknowledged that he "had sinned"; he knew that he had really WANTED to go to Balak even when he knew that God disapproved of this. His comment of "now IF it displease you ..." shows that he still didn't really get it. HOWEVER, God has changed His original intentions (as per verse 12) and instead decided to USE Balaam for His, God's, own ends. And so Balaam cannot help but bless Israel ... you know the story.

HOWEVER ...

In spite of God Himself severely warning Balaam REPEATEDLY, Balaam STILL managed to get his hands on at least SOME of the money that Balak had offered him ... by giving Balak the PERVERSE advice (recall that God had said to Balaam that his way was PERVERSE before God!) to send his women into the Israelite camp to entice the Israelites to commit whoredom, so that God would THEN punish them for their disobedience. These details are recorded in Numbers 31:14-16, and a few verses earlier (i.e. verse 8) we are told that Balaam was also killed. Balaam paid with his life for his perverse selfishness ... had he fully accepted God's FIRST instruction he might very possibly have lived longer.

Realize that IF people really WANT bad advice, then God will often see to it that they get that bad advice. And if people really want "bad laws" then God will sometimes even oblige in this regard, and see to it that they get their "bad laws". If anything, the testing of our minds before God is of far greater importance than our testing regarding physical obedience to all of God's laws. However, obviously BOTH are very important.

Let's examine another example of God's dealings.

GOD GAVE THE NATION OF ISRAEL WHAT THEY WANTED

Consider the account we find in Numbers chapter 11.

And the mixt multitude that was among them fell a lusting: and the children of ISRAEL ALSO wept again, and SAID, WHO SHALL GIVE US FLESH TO EAT? We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: But now our soul *is* dried away: *there is* nothing at all, beside this manna, *before* our eyes. (Numbers 11:4-6 AV)

In modern terms this was almost like a demonstration, in which the marchers are singing: "We want meat. We want meat". God had provided them with manna, but they didn't want that. They were not satisfied with the food God provided for them, totally free of charge. They didn't have to grow it or raise it; they simply had to pick up as much as they wanted to eat. But they complained.

They didn't accept what God had in mind for them. So God was very angry.

Then Moses heard the people weep throughout their families, every man in the door of his tent: AND THE ANGER OF THE LORD WAS KINDLED GREATLY; Moses also was displeased. (Numbers 11:10 AV)

The Hebrew text that is translated as "Moses also was displeased" literally reads "in the eyes of Moses it (their conduct) was EVIL".

So what did God do?

Moses was somewhat discouraged by the conduct of the people. So God told him to gather 70 elders who would help Moses to bear the burden of the people. Then God said to Israel:

"I WILL GIVE YOU WHAT YOU WANT!"

And say thou unto the people, Sanctify yourselves against to morrow, and YE SHALL EAT FLESH: for ye have wept in the ears of the LORD, saying, Who shall give us flesh to eat? for *it* was well with us in Egypt: therefore the LORD will give you flesh, and ye shall eat. Ye shall not eat one day, nor two days, nor five days, neither ten days, nor twenty days; *But* EVEN A WHOLE MONTH, UNTIL IT COME OUT AT YOUR NOSTRILS, AND IT BE LOATHSOME UNTO YOU: BECAUSE THAT YE HAVE DESPISED THE LORD which *is* among you, and have wept before him, saying, Why came we forth out of Egypt? (Numbers 11:18-20 AV)

This was a case of the Israelites "despising" God. So God said "I will give you meat until it comes out of your noses ...". This should have been a warning for the people, but we'll see that they didn't get it.

So God sent very likely IN EXCESS OF TEN MILLION quails to their camp.

And there went forth a wind from the LORD, and BROUGHT QUAILS FROM THE SEA, and let *them* fall by the camp, as it were a day's journey on this side, and as it were a day's journey on

the other side, round about the camp, and as it were two cubits *high* upon the face of the earth. AND THE PEOPLE stood up all that day, and all *that* night, and all the next day, and they GATHERED THE QUAILS: he that gathered least gathered ten homers: and they spread *them* all abroad for themselves round about the camp. (Numbers 11:31-32 AV)

AND THEN GOD PUNISHED THEM!

And while the flesh *was* yet between their teeth, ere it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was kindled against the people, AND THE LORD SMOTE THE PEOPLE WITH A VERY GREAT PLAGUE. (Numbers 11:33 AV)

A lesson we can learn from this event?

God gave people exactly what they wanted, and then punished them for their lusting (verse 34) and their selfishness.

This event is also mentioned in one of the Psalms.

And they sinned yet more against him by provoking the most High in the wilderness. And they tempted God in their heart by asking meat for their lust. (Psalm 78:17-18 AV)

So they did eat, and were well filled: for he gave them their own desire; They were not estranged from their lust. But while their meat *was* yet in their mouths, THE WRATH OF GOD CAME UPON THEM, and slew the fattest of them, and smote down the chosen *men* of Israel. (Psalm 78:29-31 AV)

We should also understand that sometimes people actually WANT BAD ADVICE! Let's look at an example in the life of King Ahab.

AHAB GOT THE BAD ADVICE THAT HE WANTED

Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah came to visit Ahab, the king of Israel. So Ahab asked Jehoshaphat if he would support him in a war against Syria. Jehoshaphat said: "Sure I'll support you. But let's first enquire if it is God's will for us to go to war" (paraphrased, see 1.Kings 22:4-5). So Ahab called in about 400 prophets of Baal, who with one accord all said: "go to war, God will give you the victory" (verse 6).

Jehoshaphat didn't trust these prophets of Baal and asked if there wasn't a real prophet of God around, who could tell them God's will. To this Ahab replied:

And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, *There is* yet ONE MAN, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may enquire of the LORD: BUT I HATE HIM; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil. And Jehoshaphat said, Let not the king say so. (1 Kings 22:8 AV)

Here we already see that Ahab didn't really want the truth. He wanted people who would tell him exactly what he wanted to hear ... and that is what the 400 prophets of Baal had done.

Anyway, with Jehoshaphat's persuasion Ahab sends a messenger to call this servant of God named Micaiah. The messenger promptly tries to intimidate Micaiah into agreeing with all the prophets of Baal.

And the messenger that was gone to call Micaiah spake unto him, saying, Behold now, the words of the prophets *declare* good unto the king with one mouth: let thy word, I pray thee, be like the word of one of them, and speak *that which is* good. (1 Kings 22:13 AV)

Micaiah responds to the messenger that he will only say exactly what God wants him to say.

And Micaiah said, AS THE LORD LIVETH, WHAT THE LORD SAITH UNTO ME, THAT WILL I SPEAK. (1 Kings 22:14 AV)

Note what he said! Did Micaiah actually stick to this or did he add something off his own bat? I ask this because of what follows. Notice ...

So he came to the king. And the king said unto him, Micaiah, shall we go against Ramothgilead to battle, or shall we forbear? And he answered him, GO, AND PROSPER: FOR THE LORD SHALL DELIVER *IT* INTO THE HAND OF THE KING. (1 Kings 22:15 AV)

Here Micaiah gave Ahab EXACTLY the answer that Ahab wanted, the same answer the 400 priests of Baal had given him. Now Micaiah no doubt said this in a very sarcastic tone of voice, because Ahab IMMEDIATELY knew that this was not the truth. Very likely Micaiah said this in a way that imitated the way the priests of Baal had made their pronouncement. Ahab believed what his 400 priests of Baal had said, but when Micaiah said exactly the same thing, then he didn't believe Micaiah.

Question: Did Micaiah use this sarcasm off his own bat, or did God actually INSPIRE him to first of all give Ahab this sarcastic answer? I suppose that it doesn't make a difference, but once again God saw to it that someone who didn't want the truth received the answer that he wanted ... and then God punished the man. Ahab died in battle shortly after this.

Let's continue with the account.

Ahab now makes a great show out of wanting nothing but the truth, and so Micaiah gives him the whole truth.

And the king said unto him, How many times shall I adjure thee that thou TELL ME NOTHING BUT *THAT WHICH IS* TRUE in the name of the LORD? And he said, I SAW ALL ISRAEL SCATTERED UPON THE HILLS, AS SHEEP THAT HAVE NOT A SHEPHERD: and the LORD said, These have no master: let them return every man to his house in peace. (1 Kings 22:16-17 AV)

Micaiah here told Ahab that he would lose the battle. Ahab then tells Jehoshaphat: "didn't I tell you that he would say something like this?" And THEN Micaiah gives us a very interesting insight into how God works! This is important to understand.

He describes a vision at God's throne in heaven (i.e. at the throne of Jesus Christ, the God of the Old Testament) with all the angels standing around God.

And he said, Hear thou therefore the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne,

and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left. (1 Kings 22:19 AV)

In this vision God asked the angels: "how can we persuade Ahab to go to war so that he can die in battle?" At first none of the angels came up with a workable solution.

And the LORD said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramothgilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. (1 Kings 22:20 AV)

Eventually A DEMON stepped forward and said: "I'll do it".

And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the LORD, and said, I WILL PERSUADE HIM. (1 Kings 22:21 AV)

So God (this is actually Jesus Christ, the "LORD" of the Old Testament, and not God the Father) asked the demon: "how are you going to do it?" The demon replied: "simple, I'll be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets".

And the LORD said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade *him*, and prevail also: go forth, and do so. (1 Kings 22:22 AV)

God then replied with: "good, that's the way we'll do it, and you will succeed".

In the next verse Micaiah then explained.

Now therefore, behold, THE LORD HATH PUT A LYING SPIRIT IN THE MOUTH OF ALL THESE THY PROPHETS, and the LORD hath spoken evil concerning thee. (1 Kings 22:23 AV)

A lesson for us?

Even though a demon was involved in giving Ahab bad advice, the point is that once again God saw to it that Ahab received the bad advice he so desperately wanted ... and then God punished Ahab.

Needless to say, Ahab didn't listen to God's true advice through Micaiah. What seems stranger though is that Jehoshaphat, who had at first INSISTED on finding a true servant of God, also rejected Micaiah's explanation, because Jehoshaphat then promptly went off to war on Ahab's side ... Ahab was killed and Jehoshaphat managed to escape with his life.

So note well!

OUR OWN ATTITUDE WILL DETERMINE THE ADVICE THAT GOD WILL GIVE US! IF WE ARE NOT RECEPTIVE TO GOD'S WILL, THEN GOD WILL NOT GIVE US THE TRUTH! OFTEN GOD WILL GIVE US EXACTLY WHAT WE WANT ... AND THEN, IF WHAT WE WANT IS SELFISH, PUNISH US!

- That's the way it was with Israel when they wanted meat to eat.

- That's the way it was with Balaam.

- That's the way it was with Ahab.
- That's the way it was when Israel wanted a king.
- That's the way it was when Israel stubbornly wanted "bad laws".
- That's the way it is when people really set their hearts on becoming wealthy.

Notice something Solomon had observed, which he then mentioned in the Book of Ecclesiastes:

THERE IS A SORE EVIL *which* I have seen under the sun, *namely*, RICHES KEPT FOR THE OWNERS THEREOF TO THEIR HURT. But those riches perish by evil travail: and he begetteth a son, and *there is* nothing in his hand. (Ecclesiastes 5:13-14 AV)

There is AN EVIL which I have seen under the sun, and IT *IS* COMMON AMONG MEN: A man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, YET GOD GIVETH HIM NOT POWER TO EAT THEREOF, but a stranger eateth it: this *is* vanity, and it *is* an evil disease. (Ecclesiastes 6:1-2 AV)

It is the same point again. Sometimes God will give riches to those people who really strive to become wealthy, in the process making money their god, and then God punishes them ... taking away any ability to actually ENJOY the benefits of their riches. In many cases they end up being nothing more than miserable spectators on the stage of life. Solomon, one of the wealthiest men to ever have lived, knew what he was talking about. He himself ended up hating life (Eccl. 2:17) and hating all of the things he had accomplished (Eccl. 2:18) ... by the time he wrote those words Solomon was obviously a very miserable man.

Now let's look more closely at the statutes that were not good.

IDENTIFYING THE "LAWS" THAT WERE NOT GOOD

Originally there were only two God Beings, whom we know as God the Father and Jesus Christ. Their inherent nature was the only "law" in existence. Their nature is one of outgoing concern for the well-being of the other. When they then created angels and other spirit beings, they gave TWO commandments to these spirit beings: the first one is to LOVE God, their Creator, above all else, and the second one is to LOVE all of their fellow spirit beings as themselves.

The key element here is to understand exactly what God means by "love". Satan has deceived the whole world into thinking of love as "A FEELING". Yes, "feelings" do enter the picture when we speak about love, but love most assuredly is NOT A FEELING! Love includes having feelings, but that is not the same as love BEING a feeling. The Bible tells us that "God IS love" (1.John 4:8). And God is certainly not "a feeling". By "love" God means a genuine outgoing concern for the welfare and well-being of others. So let me put it like this:

For anyone who is not God, LOVE IS AN EMULATION OF GOD'S INHERENT NATURE. LOVE IS AN ATTEMPT TO DUPLICATE THE WAY GOD'S MIND WORKS.

These two commandments that God gave to the spirit beings covered every possible facet of their existence. They were expected by God to apply THE PRINCIPLES, or the obvious spiritual intent, of

those two commandments to any and every situation that would ever arise. God expected these spirit beings to use their minds in conducting their lives.

When God then later created us human beings, our existence was to be governed by the exact same two commandments. But, since human beings exist on a somewhat lower level than spirit beings, for "human consumption" those two commandments were amplified into the TEN commandments of Exodus chapter 20. The ten commandments spell out specific applications of the original two commandments as they apply to the human existence. So God spelled out for mankind some of the things that God expected the spirit beings to be able to deduce on their own with the minds God had given them.

Those ten commandments are "holy" because they are an expression of the mind of God applied to human circumstances; they are "just" (the Greek word in Romans 7:12 here reads "righteous") because they define in practical terms the best possible way we can live our human lives; and they are "good" because of the results that are achieved by living by these commandments. The ten commandments reveal God's way of thinking and living.

Jesus Christ made clear that the ten commandments are based on, and an expansion of, these original two commandments, when He said ...

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is THE FIRST and great commandment. And THE SECOND is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. ON THESE TWO COMMANDMENTS HANG ALL THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS. (Matthew 22:37-40 AV)

These ten commandments were to be the constitution for the nation of Israel. But Israel did not obey God; Israel sinned and rebelled against God. So God "modified" the constitution to some degree. In our terms, God added "some amendments" to the constitution. Oh no, the ten commandments were not changed in any way. But some "statutes" and "judgments" were given by God to ADD to the constitution, which in actual fact were to some degree in conflict with the spirit of the constitution. God gave those statutes and judgments "because of the hardness of their hearts" (see Matthew 19:8). And it seems, as with any human constitution, that "THE AMENDMENTS" receive more attention from people than the whole original constitution.

These "amendments" are the "statutes that were NOT GOOD", and they are the "judgments whereby they should NOT LIVE" of Ezekiel 20:25. God wanted Israel and all mankind to live by the original constitution, but Israel insisted on living by "the amendments". So can we identify these specific statutes and judgments that are "these amendments"?

Yes we can.

The statutes and judgments that were not good and by which Israel should NOT have lived, and by which WE TODAY ARE NOT TO LIVE, are ANY LAWS THAT VIOLATE THE SPIRIT OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS.

UNDERSTANDING MATTHEW CHAPTER 19

Let's look at what Jesus Christ explained in Matthew chapter 19. This is a section that is extremely revealing if we really understand what Jesus Christ actually said.

The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, IS IT LAWFUL for a man

to put away his wife for every cause? (Matthew 19:3 AV)

Note that the Pharisees were asking: is divorce LAWFUL? What is the right answer ... yes or no? One way or the other this section is going to give us a clear answer to this question. It was not a question which Jesus Christ tried to avoid answering. His answer was not in any way evasive. His answer is very clear.

But I suspect that we have in the past not fully comprehended Christ's answer because we ourselves have tended to approach this question with a preconceived answer. In a sense, we have come to this question with a perspective that is very similar to that of the Pharisees and, for that matter, even that of Christ's own disciples.

Jesus Christ's answer approaches this question from GOD'S perspective. Jesus Christ's answer approaches this question from the spirit and obvious intent of the ten commandments.

The Pharisees ASSUMED that the concept of divorce was lawful, and their trick question was really only: is it lawful FOR EVERY CAUSE? However, Jesus Christ TOTALLY IGNORED this particular slant on the question, He completely ignored the matter of "for every cause"! Jesus Christ went ABOVE the trick question they had posed to Him, and the question that Jesus Christ really answered is: IS DIVORCE PER SE LAWFUL OR NOT?

This is where we need to start getting rid of our bias. Yes, the question was: is it lawful for every cause? But that was nothing more than an attempt to sideline the real issue. The real issue in life is DIVORCE; the real issue in life is NOT divorce "for every cause"!

We need to focus not on the question but on THE ANSWER! The answer gives us the very words of God, not the question.

Jesus Christ's words, which shocked even His own disciples (note that!), are recorded in verses 4-6 and verses 8-9, with some additional explanations to His own disciples in verses 11-12. THAT'S ALL Christ said in response to this question!

Read those five verses (i.e. 4-6 and 8-9) very carefully. There is NOTHING there to indicate even a hint of addressing the matter of "for every cause". ALL of Jesus Christ's comments really only focus on the question of "is divorce per se lawful or not?". Jesus Christ addressed the real issue of divorce, and not the side issue of divorce for every cause.

So what was Christ's answer ... is divorce per se lawful or not?

Let's look at Christ's reply.

And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made *them* AT THE BEGINNING made them male and female, (Matthew 19:4 AV)

So notice: what is LAWFUL (that is the question, remember) is determined by WHAT GOD DID AT THE BEGINNING! What is "lawful" is NOT determined by anything that happened later! That may be difficult for some of you to understand. But realize that GOD'S LAW NEVER CHANGES! So whatever happened "at the beginning" is an expression of "what is lawful", and ANYTHING that was later done to MODIFY something that was done at the beginning is nothing more than "an amendment", a statute that in reality was "not good" in comparison to what was done at the beginning.

There is a vast difference between God's laws and a human constitution. When men write a constitution (e.g. the US Constitution) it is not going to be perfect to start with, because men cannot foresee changed conditions and circumstances that may prevail at some future point in time. Therefore with a human constitution there must be the provision for amendments. But, by contrast, GOD'S LAWS are perfect to start out with, and NOTHING can ever improve on the laws of God as God ORIGINALLY instituted them ... any amendments to God's laws will only TAKE AWAY from the original perfection. And therefore any amendments can of necessity ONLY be of a TEMPORARY nature.

To make this quite clear: In any human constitution "amendments" have the purpose of CORRECTING some flaw or deficiency that had not been foreseen by those who wrote the original constitution. But with God's "constitution", the law of God, it is IMPOSSIBLE to make any "corrections". God's law was PERFECT to start out with, and the "amendments" that were added later only served the purpose of showing some reluctant acceptance of certain "unlawful human practices" because human beings were so hard-hearted. So with God's law the "amendments" in fact TAKE AWAY FROM THE ORIGINAL PERFECTION. And therefore it is inevitable that sooner or later those "amendments" must again be repealed.

Getting back to Jesus Christ's words in Matthew chapter 19, what is lawful on the subject of marriage and divorce is determined by the fact that at the beginning God created ONE man and ONE woman. Let's continue with Christ's words.

And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? (Matthew 19:5 AV)

So Christ pointed out that God established marriage as a union for the one man and the one woman He had created. Christ is saying that GOD established marriage for the purpose of it being a union between one man and one woman. It is GOD who joined the original man and woman in marriage. Let's continue with the next verse.

Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. WHAT THEREFORE GOD HATH JOINED TOGETHER, LET NOT MAN PUT ASUNDER. (Matthew 19:6 AV)

Now Jesus Christ draws a conclusion from the facts He has thus far presented. So what is Christ's conclusion ... is divorce lawful or is it not lawful? What is Christ's answer to the question the Pharisees posed in verse 3?

CHRIST'S ANSWER IS THAT DIVORCE IS NOT LAWFUL!

In other words, Jesus Christ is pointing out that divorce goes AGAINST THE LAW! Christ has deliberately and intentionally avoided making any references to "any causes" for divorce, be they valid or be they invalid. He has simply made the carte blanche statement that divorce is against the law. And divorce has been unlawful ever since God created Adam and Eve. It has ALWAYS been unlawful.

Can we understand this?

The reply by the Pharisees to this statement makes very clear that they CORRECTLY UNDERSTOOD that Jesus Christ was saying that divorce is "unlawful". They were in no doubts as to what Jesus Christ was saying. That is why they CHALLENGED His statement that divorce is unlawful. They understood that Jesus Christ had totally ignored their trick question regarding "for every cause".

The Pharisees had ASSUMED that the concept of divorce was lawful, and they tried to trick Jesus Christ by asking whether it was lawful "for every cause". Here Jesus Christ has now pronounced divorce in its entirety as unlawful. And now the Pharisees are on the back foot, having to defend and justify even the very concept of divorce. So they now present the only justification they had for divorce. Notice the next verse.

They say unto him, WHY DID MOSES THEN COMMAND TO GIVE A WRITING OF DIVORCEMENT, and to put her away? (Matthew 19:7 AV)

Because they understood that Jesus Christ had said that divorce was unlawful, they now appeal to what they claim is A COMMAND from Moses. Notice that the Pharisees have dropped their appeal to "for every cause". Instead of Jesus Christ having to explain or pronounce "which causes" are valid for divorce and which are not, NOW the Pharisees have to defend and justify why THEY believed that the concept of divorce is "lawful".

Notice how Jesus Christ responded to this justification. First of all He corrected a false claim the Pharisees had made.

He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts SUFFERED YOU to put away your wives: but FROM THE BEGINNING IT WAS NOT SO. (Matthew 19:8 AV)

Did Christ say that Moses had "COMMANDED" divorce? No, Christ did NOT say this! What Jesus Christ said is that Moses "SUFFERED THEM" to divorce their wives. "To suffer someone to do something" is a far cry from "commanding someone to do something". It is in fact THE OPPOSITE of "commanding". You might "command" someone to do what is right, and then you "suffer" them when they fall short and don't do what is right.

As a matter of interest, the Greek verb here translated as "suffer" is "epitrepo". Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament defines "epitrepo" as follows: to permit, allow, give leave. "Permitting" something is far different from "giving a command".

Next, Jesus Christ spells out the reason WHY Moses gave them this "permission". It was because THEY WERE HARD-HEARTED! We've always understood this point, as to why Moses allowed divorce. But we need to go one step further and recognize that NO PART OF GOD'S LAW CAN EVER BE BASED ON THE HARD-HEARTEDNESS OF ANY PEOPLE!

Can we understand this?

God's law is the diametric opposite of hard-heartedness. This means that it was IMPOSSIBLE for divorce to ever have been a part of GOD'S law! Within the parameters of God's law there is simply no room for hard-heartedness. Hard-heartedness is in conflict with what is holy. And God's law is holy, but hard-heartedness is certainly NOT holy!

Think this through very carefully. Divorce has never been, and could never have been, a part of GOD'S law!

Next, notice that once again Jesus Christ has gone back to "the beginning". The point is: GOD'S LAW is determined by what was established "in the beginning", and NEVER by any "amendments" or "concessions" that were made later. So here is a vital lesson we should always remember:

ANYTHING THAT IS IN CONFLICT WITH WHAT GOD ESTABLISHED "IN THE BEGINNING"
CAN NEVER BE A PART OF GOD'S LAW!

Let's look at Christ's next words.

And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except *it be* for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery. (Matthew 19:9 AV)

The Greek word here translated as "fornication" refers to "all sexual transgressions".

In verse 8 Jesus Christ explained THE REASON why Moses gave Israel "the concession" of divorce. Now, in verse 9, Christ explains THE FACTS as they have always been, in spite of the "concession" of divorce Moses made for their hard-heartedness. But notice, NOW Jesus Christ introduces one acceptable justification for seeking a divorce.

Question:

Is a divorce that is undertaken because of "sexual transgressions" therefore "LAWFUL" according to God's law?

NO, IT IS NOT LAWFUL BY THE LAW OF GOD!

That's what Jesus Christ is explaining in this passage. GOD'S LAW makes no provisions for divorce as a part of the law. The law is fixed! The law of God never changes, and from the beginning there was no provision within that law for divorce.

Where divorce fits in is that it is A CONCESSION to the working of the law that God has allowed. But "concessions" do not change the law. It was for the hardness of their hearts that God allowed this concession. What Jesus Christ is explaining here is this:

THE ONLY REASON that God recognizes for appealing to this concession is "sexual transgressions". So again Christ is stating the opposite of what the Pharisees believed. Where they believed in "the command" of divorce "for every cause", Jesus Christ teaches that THE ONLY REASON for which God will recognize an appeal to this "concession" is "sexual transgressions".

[Comment: Later the Apostle Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 one additional reason for appealing to this concession which God will recognize, where in a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever the unbeliever makes life intolerable for the believer.]

So where does divorce fit into the picture?

Divorce is one of the "statutes that were NOT good"; it is one of the "judgments whereby they should NOT live". It was only given "for the hardness of their hearts". And while the hardness of people's hearts can be the cause for "a concession" of condoning conduct that really falls outside of the parameters of God's law, it can NEVER be the cause for any part or facet of THE LAW OF GOD itself.

Next, notice that God views divorce (and then remarriage) for any reason other than sexual transgressions as adultery. To get divorced (except for sexual transgressions) and then remarry is viewed by God as adultery. Similarly, for someone to marry a divorced person is also viewed by God as adultery. Jesus Christ's words here in Matthew 19:9 are very direct and unequivocal. There is no

mistaking what He meant to convey.

Christ's blunt and direct comments here even shocked His own disciples. They had always believed that the concept of divorce was acceptable before God. So they then took up the discussion themselves (now the Pharisees are out of the picture).

His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with *his* wife, it is not good to marry.
(Matthew 19:10 AV)

Christ's disciples reasoned: look, if you aren't going to have access to divorce in case you don't get along with the woman you married, then it is really better to not even get married in the first place ... without recourse to divorce marriage is far too risky. Their attitude and perceptions give us an idea of how common divorce had become by that time, probably fairly similar to our time today. It also shows how far the Jews had by then drifted from what God had established "in the beginning".

Christ replied as follows:

But he said unto them, ALL MEN CANNOT RECEIVE THIS SAYING, save *they* to whom it is given. (Matthew 19:11 AV)

The expression "this saying" (in the Greek it reads this "logos", this word) refers to Christ's statement that sexual transgressions are the only reason for which God will allow "the concession" of divorce. God will not apply the concession of divorce for other reasons.

Here Jesus Christ is saying that "all men" aren't going to accept this standard ... they want access to divorce for a whole range of other "reasons" as well; the Pharisees wanted access to divorce for "every cause". So the world would continue using the standard of the Pharisees in seeking to get divorced. But we in God's Church are expected by God to never seek a divorce except if there have been sexual transgressions (and also the principle of 1.Cor. 7:15), and neither are we to marry someone who has been divorced for any reason other than sexual transgressions by the other party (or again also the principle of 1.Cor. 7:15). We, who have been called by God into His Church, are the ones "to whom it is given" to understand God's standards and God's requirements.

IF we have been divorced for reasons other than these two, THEN before God we are not really free to remarry. That is what Jesus Christ means in the next verse.

For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from *their* mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and THERE BE EUNUCHS, WHICH HAVE MADE THEMSELVES EUNUCHS FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN'S SAKE. He that is able to receive *it*, let him receive *it*. (Matthew 19:12 AV)

Some people who come into God's Church may choose not to get married because of the special demands placed on them by the responsibilities of preaching, etc. that God has placed on them. The Apostle Paul is an example of this type of situation. Others who come into God's Church may realize that they are not free to remarry because of certain conditions in their own lives? Some may voluntarily abstain from the opportunity to get married when they could perhaps have appealed to God's "concession" regarding divorce? Others may realize that God's "concession" does not apply to their circumstances? As Jesus Christ said, he that is able to receive it, let him receive it.

Let's now look at another point regarding this Scripture.

Was Jesus Christ here making A CHANGE in the law?

CERTAINLY NOT!

People have sometimes reasoned that because divorce was supposedly "lawful" in Old Testament times, therefore Christ's statement here in Matthew 19:9 represented a change in the law. But that is not correct.

Jesus Christ is here not giving any new laws and He is not making any laws. Christ is only EXPLAINING the way things have ALWAYS been, since "the beginning", notwithstanding the concession that God (through Moses) had allowed because of their hard-hearted attitude. Matthew chapter 19 is not in any way "a law-giving situation"; Jesus Christ was doing nothing more than answering a question that had been put to Him.

Christ is showing that divorce had always fallen outside of the parameters of GOD'S law, even when God "conceded" to their stubborn selfish demands for "statutes that were not good and whereby they really should not have lived".

Consider the following point:

Jesus Christ said in Matthew 19:9 that divorce (except for the two reasons already mentioned) opens the way to committing ADULTERY ... by giving the divorced person the feeling that they can now marry someone else. So divorce is against the spirit of the seventh commandment. So divorce is against the spirit of the law of God.

That all by itself should tell us that DIVORCE is one of the statutes of Ezekiel 20:25.

Now Jesus Christ's explanation here in Matthew 19:4-8 should make equally clear that POLYGAMY is another of those statutes of Ezekiel 20:25.

"From the beginning" God intended for a man to have only ONE wife. Polygamy had started long before the flood, Lamech being the first recorded bigamist (Genesis 4:19). God again showed at the time of the flood that He only wanted each man to have ONE wife ... the four men on the ark only had one wife each. But men stubbornly wanted polygamy, so God allowed them to have a statute to this effect ... and then punished polygamists for their selfish attitudes. No polygamist ever had a really happy marriage. It just doesn't work because God NEVER at any time removed the penalty that is an intrinsic part of the concept of polygamy. It doesn't work for "three to become one flesh". Polygamy reduces marriage to a mere sexual relationship.

So Jesus Christ's statements regarding marriage and divorce identify two of the statutes that God gave in the Old Testament that were not good:

- DIVORCE

- POLYGAMY

Let's now look at two other statutes that were also not good by God's standards, and by which Israel really should not have lived.

TWO MORE STATUTES THAT WERE NOT GOOD

When God made the covenant with Israel, God told them that they themselves would not need to fight. GOD would send His FEAR before them into the land and the people living there would either be destroyed or driven out by hornets. There would be no need for the Israelites to go to war ... God would fight for them even as He had done at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:14). Notice ...

I will send my fear before thee, and will destroy all the people to whom thou shalt come, and I will make all thine enemies turn their backs unto thee. AND I WILL SEND HORNETS BEFORE THEE, WHICH SHALL DRIVE OUT the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite, from before thee. I will not drive them out from before thee in one year; lest the land become desolate, and the beast of the field multiply against thee. BY LITTLE AND LITTLE I WILL DRIVE THEM OUT FROM BEFORE THEE, until thou be increased, and inherit the land. (Exodus 23:27-30 AV)

God repeated the promise that He, God, would drive out the local inhabitants before Israel in Exodus 33:2 ...

And I will send an angel before thee; AND I WILL DRIVE OUT the Canaanite, the Amorite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite: (Exodus 33:2 AV)

And God repeated this promise again in Exodus 34:11 ...

Observe thou that which I command thee this day: behold, I DRIVE OUT BEFORE THEE the Amorite, and the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite. (Exodus 34:11 AV)

Had Israel relied totally on God, they would not have ever needed to fight against any enemies. God would have done the fighting for them. But Israel disobeyed God and rebelled repeatedly. And so in the 40th year of their wanderings we see that God tells them that THEY must drive out all the local inhabitants. No longer would God be doing the driving out.

Notice ...

Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye are passed over Jordan into the land of Canaan; THEN YE SHALL DRIVE OUT ALL THE INHABITANTS of the land from before you, and destroy all their pictures, and destroy all their molten images, and quite pluck down all their high places: (Numbers 33:51-52 AV)

BUT IF YE WILL NOT DRIVE OUT THE INHABITANTS of the land from before you; then it shall come to pass, that those which ye let remain of them *shall be* pricks in your eyes, and thorns in your sides, and shall vex you in the land wherein ye dwell. (Numbers 33:55 AV)

Now God is saying: YOU yourself must drive them out. However, God would still be on the side of the Israelites in this "driving out" process, but the Israelites themselves would be actively involved in the process.

In Deuteronomy chapter 11 Moses rehearsed God's dealings with Israel, and then stated: "IF you will keep God's commandments ... THEN God will drive out all these nations from before you". Notice ...

FOR IF YE SHALL DILIGENTLY KEEP ALL THESE COMMANDMENTS which I command you, to do them, to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, and to cleave unto him; THEN WILL THE LORD DRIVE OUT ALL THESE NATIONS FROM BEFORE YOU, and ye shall possess greater nations and mightier than yourselves. (Deuteronomy 11:22-23 AV)

But by then Israel had already disobeyed God so often, that God would not drive out the other nations with hornets or through His angel; by then it was already a matter that God would drive out the other nations by using Joshua and the Israelite armies to do the actual driving out ... God would always give Israel the victories, as long as Israel obeyed God.

Joshua understood it this way, when he said ...

And Joshua said, Hereby ye shall know that the living God *is* among you, and *that* HE WILL WITHOUT FAIL DRIVE OUT FROM BEFORE YOU the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Hivites, and the Perizzites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Jebusites. (Joshua 3:10 AV)

When Joshua was too old to lead the army himself any longer, God told Joshua ...

Now Joshua was old *and* stricken in years; and THE LORD SAID UNTO HIM, Thou art old *and* stricken in years, and there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed. (Joshua 13:1 AV)

All the inhabitants of the hill country from Lebanon unto Misrephothmaim, *and* all the Sidonians, THEM WILL I DRIVE OUT FROM BEFORE THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL: only divide thou it by lot unto the Israelites for an inheritance, as I have commanded thee. (Joshua 13:6 AV)

And once Joshua had died, Israel disobeyed God even more and then God made quite clear that He would NOT drive out the remaining people before Israel (Judges 2:3,21).

Wherefore I also said, I WILL NOT DRIVE THEM OUT FROM BEFORE YOU; but they shall be as *thorns* in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you. (Judges 2:3 AV)

I ALSO WILL NOT HENCEFORTH DRIVE OUT ANY FROM BEFORE THEM of the nations which Joshua left when he died: (Judges 2:21 AV)

The point is: had Israel faithfully obeyed God from the beginning, then there would never have been any need for Israelites to take up arms and to fight for themselves ... God would have fought all of their battles for them. It was because of their disobedience that God commanded them to do their own fighting. The laws regarding military service were really a penalty God imposed on Israel for their disobedience.

Military service goes against the spirit of the 6th commandment, which says: "You shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13). The laws pertaining to military service are laws that also are in reality "not good"; and they are laws whereby Israel really "should not have lived".

Next, when God created Adam and Eve, it was never God's intention that some of Adam's children would eventually ENSLAVE some of their own brothers and sisters. Adam himself lived to be 930 years

old. Before his death the human population may have approached, or perhaps even greatly exceeded, one million people? Did slavery perhaps already exist by the year 930 after Adam's creation? It seems almost certain to me that it did; after all, every imagination of man's heart was only evil, remember? So Adam would have lived in the knowledge that SOME of his children (several generations down the line) literally OWNED some others of his other children, controlling their lives to the last detail. Not a very comforting thought.

Slavery is in opposition to the law of God. It violates the principle of "you shall love your neighbour as yourself". Furthermore, we cannot really serve two masters, as Jesus Christ pointed out. It follows that, since we are ALL "owned by God", we cannot really OWN another human being. Slavery would imply JOINT-OWNERSHIP of all those who are slaves ... the ownership of every slave would be SHARED between the human owner of the slave and God, who happens to own all human beings. And it doesn't really make sense to expect God to share the ownership of "my slave" (i.e. if I were a slave owner) with me. OWNING another human being is presumptuous against God, because it elevates the slave owner to God's level, who happens to be the owner of all human beings.

God originally never intended human beings to be SOLD like a piece of property. However, again because of the hard-heartedness of human beings, God "allowed" slavery to exist. The motivation behind slavery is human greed ... wanting something for nothing. If I OWN a slave, THEN I never have to pay him for the things I command him to do for me ... I get his services for nothing.

Slavery also goes against the spirit of the ten commandments.

So we now have four groups of laws that apply to Ezekiel 20:25, statutes that were NOT good and judgments whereby they should NOT have lived:

- the law regarding DIVORCE
- the law regarding POLYGAMY
- the laws regarding MILITARY SERVICE and WARFARE
- the laws regarding SLAVERY

All of these are laws that God gave "for the hardness of their hearts", because Israel stubbornly wanted to live like the nations around them. All of these "concessions" always carried penalties, which were never at any time removed, even when God "allowed" these things. The Bible is filled with examples of the pain and suffering and misery and heartache and death that were the consequence of people making use of these "concessions" by God. In polygamy the different wives of the same man would view one another as "enemies". Divorce always brings heartache and shatters families. Military service produces suffering and death ... a soldier's job is to kill enemies, and killing will make an indelible mark on the minds of those who do the killing. Slavery was something Israel had been in before God brought Israel out of slavery ... and they had groaned because of the heavy burden the Egyptians had imposed on them. Slavery also produces human misery. Yet the Israelites, themselves ex-slaves, wanted to have slavery as a legitimate institution.

Now the question arises: what about the SACRIFICIAL LAWS and the CEREMONIAL LAWS ... are they also a part of the statutes and judgments that were not good of Ezekiel 20:25?

SACRIFICIAL AND CEREMONIAL LAWS

These "laws" form a totally different group of laws, and they are NOT a part of the statutes and

judgments that God was referring to in Ezekiel 20:25.

The "laws" that are meant in Ezekiel 20:25 are all laws which were never **COMMANDED** to be performed by the people of Israel; they were all only "concessions" that God allowed for the hardness of their hearts. They all qualify for the description that God "**SUFFERED THEM**" to appeal to these concessions. No Israelite was ever **COMMANDED** to divorce his wife or to have multiple wives or to have slaves ... these were simply things God "allowed" because people were so hard-hearted.

The sacrificial laws and the ceremonial laws, on the other hand, are laws that **COMMANDED** Israelites to do certain things when certain conditions existed ... when they had become ceremonially unclean, then they were commanded to go through a certain purification process; when they had sinned in certain ways, then they were commanded to bring certain sacrifices; in other circumstances they were commanded to wash in certain ways; when a baby boy was born, then the parents were commanded to have that child circumcised on the 8th day; etc.. The key is that these laws commanded the Israelites to do certain things in specific circumstances.

These are the laws that Paul had in mind when he wrote Galatians chapter 3. These are the laws that were "added" to the basic law of God (i.e. to the basic constitution of the nation of Israel) because of transgressions (Galatians 3:19); and they were added with a specific time limitation ... "**TILL THE SEED** (i.e. Jesus Christ) **SHOULD COME**". These are the laws that were to serve as a "schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ" (Galatians 3:24). But these laws were not in any way "concessions" to the hard-heartedness of the people, and neither could these laws be described as judgments by which God did **NOT** want them to live.

So the sacrificial laws and the ceremonial laws do not fall under the statutes that "were not good" or under the judgments "whereby they should not live". In Ezekiel 20:25 God is not speaking about any instruction that could be described as in some way being "a ritual".

But now let's look at some examples of people having to use their minds when dealing with the Almighty Creator God. Let's see some examples of when God expected people to even disagree with Him.

WHEN GOD CAME TO ABRAHAM

You know the account where Jesus Christ, the God of the Old Testament, together with two angels, came to visit Abraham in Genesis chapter 18. After they had eaten a meal which Abraham had prepared for them, they departed towards Sodom (verse 16). God then told Abraham that "the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great", which cry had come up before God (verses 20-21).

Question: **WHY** do you think God told Abraham this? What would be your **NATURAL** response to finding out that God intended to punish a city filled with sexual perversion? And what sort of response do you think **GOD** expected from Abraham?

Yes, God said that He wouldn't hide from Abraham the thing He, God, was planning to do because Abraham was going to become "a great and mighty nation". But there are any number of other things that God didn't reveal to Abraham. So why did God choose to reveal **IN THIS CASE** the thing He intended to do?

God obviously expected **A RESPONSE** from Abraham, and exactly **HOW** Abraham responded to this information was extremely important to God.

Realize that **WHENEVER** God gives us some information, **THEN WE ARE BEING TESTED** by God, because God wants to see exactly what we will do with that information. God never gives us specific

information for its own sake, so that we can say: "Oh, that is nice to know. Thank you very much." Any information from God is always some kind of test for us.

Note also that God indicated to Abraham that His judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah was not yet final ... God appeared to be open to more input. God told Abraham ...

I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know. (Genesis 18:21 AV)

God said in effect: "I am going to get the facts for Myself, and THEN I'll make a decision as to what I will do about Sodom."

Now do we really think that God was in ANY doubts about the facts regarding Sodom and Gomorrah? God knew already EXACTLY how bad things were in Sodom, even before He visited Abraham. God already knew everything about Sodom, to the smallest detail. God already knew that there was only one righteous man in Sodom. And Jesus Christ Himself didn't actually go to Sodom ... only the two angels ended up going to Sodom. So Christ didn't actually go further than meeting with Abraham. This meeting with Abraham was the only reason why Jesus Christ accompanied the two angels this far.

We need to realize that God said this the way He did in order to elicit A RESPONSE from Abraham. God was giving Abraham the opportunity to give some input BEFORE God was going to take some action ... without telling Abraham exactly what He was going to do. God was here TESTING ABRAHAM'S MIND.

What would be some of the possible responses that we might have thought of in Abraham's place, if we didn't already know how Abraham handled this? Would we have responded with one of these answers:

- 1) My nephew Lot is down there. Whatever You do, Lord, please spare my nephew and his family.
- 2) Yes, I also know they are very perverse down in Sodom. I think you should just destroy all of them for their wickedness.
- 3) Your will be done, Lord. Whatever judgment You will reach, I know that it will be fair and righteous. And I am in full agreement with it.
- 4) I know how wicked they are in Sodom. That's why I didn't go and live there like my nephew Lot. I really don't know what got into him, to move into such a bad town?
- 5) Are You going to destroy them, Lord? Isn't there perhaps a way whereby they could first have a warning and a chance to change without You having to destroy them all?

Every one of the above answers would have told God something about how our minds work. So what did Abraham's answers tell God?

Notice how Abraham responded to God.

And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that *are* therein? THAT BE FAR FROM THEE TO DO AFTER THIS MANNER, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Genesis 18:23-25 AV)

Abraham's first response was to reason with God where Abraham was totally confident that he knew how God would answer. Notice ...

1) Abraham did NOT make an appeal for his nephew Lot, not here and not in any of his subsequent statements to God. Abraham did NOT ask anything selfishly.

2) Instead Abraham appealed FOR THE RIGHTEOUS. That is totally independent of whether they are of his own family or not. Abraham KNEW without any doubts that God simply would not destroy the righteous for the sins of the wicked. The question was only whether God would take "the 50 righteous" out of the place and then destroy the whole place, or whether God would spare the whole place for the sake of "the 50 righteous" who lived in it? Abraham felt pretty confident that for "50 righteous" God would spare the whole place. But either way, Abraham knew that God would not destroy the righteous with the wicked.

3) So Abraham approached this whole question not selfishly for the protection of his own kin, but from God's perspective of God's concern for the righteous who were trying to live by God's laws.

4) Also Abraham did not approach this matter from a destructive perspective ("yes Lord, I think You should really let them have it"), but from the perspective of trying to avoid destruction.

God's response shows that Abraham had correctly assessed what God would do.

And the LORD said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, THEN I WILL SPARE ALL THE PLACE FOR THEIR SAKES. (Genesis 18:26 AV)

We all know how Abraham reasoned with God and eventually reduced the number of righteous from 50 down to 10. And God even then said:

And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I WILL NOT DESTROY *IT* FOR TEN'S SAKE. (Genesis 18:32 AV)

We know the rest of the story. And even at that point in time God already knew that there were not even 10 righteous people in Sodom. Throughout the entire conversation between God and Abraham, God ALREADY knew that He would destroy Sodom, because God knew that there was only ONE righteous person in Sodom, and that was Lot (see 2.Peter 2:7-8 for verification that Lot was righteous and just). So in one sense the whole conversation was purely academic for God, EXCEPT that this conversation gave God further insight into how Abraham's mind worked.

Abraham certainly had courage. He was bold and yet also very careful not to be presumptuous. Abraham's mind showed God a very clear concern for the righteous. Lot's fate was not in Abraham's hands (as in Abraham perhaps pleading with God to spare Lot's life), but totally in God's hands (as in God determining who is righteous before Him and who is not). In short, I believe Abraham responded to the information God gave him in verses 20-21 exactly as God had hoped Abraham would respond.

While this test was on a totally different level from the one Abraham would face later when God told him to sacrifice Isaac, it was nevertheless still an extremely important test, especially also because it would have been easy for Abraham to not even realize that he was being tested. The situation revealed to God how Abraham responded "spontaneously" to a given situation.

I believe that God would not have been as pleased with Abraham as He was, had Abraham NOT pleaded the cause of the righteous, had Abraham not tried to intercede.

Let's look at a test that Moses faced.

A TEST FOR MOSES

You also know the account where Israel made a golden calf while Moses was up on the mountain with God. When Israel sinned in this way, God told Moses:

Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: AND I WILL MAKE OF THEE A GREAT NATION. (Exodus 32:10 AV)

God's instructions are quite clear:

- 1) God was very angry with Israel.
- 2) God told Moses to go away.
- 3) God said that He intended to destroy the whole nation.
- 4) God said that He would then start a new nation through Moses, in effect elevating Moses to be the fourth of "the fathers"; i.e. "Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses".

It should be clear that God obviously wanted a response from Moses. The obvious response would have been for Moses to just say: "Yes, Lord, Your will be done", and then to get out of there as God had instructed him to do.

BUT IS THAT THE RESPONSE GOD REALLY WANTED FROM MOSES?

NO, IT IS NOT!

God WANTED Moses to disagree with Him. God wanted to see if Moses would accept this (for Moses) selfish offer, or if Moses was willing to put the interest and welfare of the whole nation above any possible personal advantage for himself!

God wanted to know whether Moses was really willing to stand in the breach for Israel, to defend their cause. As David wrote in the Psalm ...

Therefore he said that he would destroy them, had not MOSES his chosen STOOD BEFORE HIM IN THE BREACH, to turn away his wrath, lest he should destroy *them*. (Psalm 106:23 AV)

I do not believe that God would have been pleased with Moses, had Moses simply said: "Yes, Lord, destroy them and use me to start the nation once again." God didn't WANT Moses to agree with Him, any more than God had really wanted Balaam to go to Balak.

God was testing what went on in the mind of Moses. God gave Moses the opportunity to act selfishly, while hoping that Moses would resist this temptation to put self-interest first. It also took a great deal of courage for Moses to confront God like this. And Moses responded the right way to this test. God was pleased with the way Moses responded. It showed God that Moses' mind worked the right way.

Now let's look at some testing that David faced.

SOME TESTS FOR DAVID

King Saul repeatedly tried to kill David. Saul hunted David totally unfairly. On two occasions David had the opportunity to kill Saul. The first occasion was when Saul came into a cave, in which David and his men were hiding (1.Samuel chapter 24). The second occasion was when David and Abishai went into Saul's camp at night and took Saul's spear and water bottle (1.Samuel chapter 26).

Let's look at the first of these two incidents.

When Saul came into the cave on his own "to cover his feet", he did not know David was hiding in the cave. David's men urged David to go and kill Saul. They even claimed that God would approve of such an act.

And the men of David said unto him, Behold the day of which THE LORD SAID UNTO THEE, Behold, I will deliver thine enemy into thine hand, THAT THOU MAYEST DO TO HIM AS IT SHALL SEEM GOOD UNTO THEE. Then David arose, and cut off the skirt of Saul's robe privily.
(1 Samuel 24:4 AV)

It certainly seemed like God would approve of David killing Saul ... had God not given Saul into David's hand? What would we have done in David's place? David had by this time already killed quite a number of people, and he certainly wasn't squeamish about killing one more person.

But God was here testing David's mind. And God CERTAINLY did not really want David to kill Saul. Had David killed Saul, God would not have been pleased with David. God's apparent "approval" for David to kill Saul was only a test to see how David's mind worked.

David handled this situation correctly, as God REALLY wanted him to handle it. And David showed enormous courage in going out of the cave after Saul ... you know the story.

God gave David another opportunity to put self first. After all, if he would kill Saul, THEN he could have become king, as God had told him years earlier through the prophet Samuel. But again, in going into Saul's camp at night, David showed restraint as well as enormous courage. After all, in David's own mind he was quite clear that he would not kill Saul, even before he and Abishai went down into Saul's camp. So he was taking a great risk with potentially very little to gain.

David resisted the temptation to act selfishly, choosing rather to continue to flee from Saul until such a time as God would take Saul's life in some other manner.

David handled these tests exceptionally well before God.

Let's look at an example involving Solomon.

A TEST FOR SOLOMON

When Solomon became king while he was still a teenager, God appeared to him in a dream in Gibeon. And God granted Solomon a wish.

In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, ASK WHAT I

SHALL GIVE THEE. (1 Kings 3:5 AV)

Anytime God says to someone "ask what I shall give you", IT IS OBVIOUSLY A TEST FOR THAT PARTICULAR PERSON!

God is saying: I want to see how your mind works, what priorities you have, what it is that motivates you. So this was certainly a test for the young King Solomon. We know how Solomon answered this offer from God, by asking for wisdom and understanding to be able to rule the nation wisely and fairly.

Give therefore thy servant AN UNDERSTANDING HEART to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people? (1 Kings 3:9 AV)

This answer pleased God BECAUSE there was nothing selfish about Solomon's request. It was only a request for help to be able to do the job that had been thrust upon him.

And THE SPEECH PLEASSED THE LORD, that Solomon had asked this thing. (1 Kings 3:10 AV)

Therefore God also gave Solomon all the things he had not asked for, great wealth and fame.

Solomon had made what was probably the best choice possible. His heart was right before God. And he had passed a test designed to expose selfishness.

Let's now look at an example in Peter's life, where God clearly expected Peter to disagree with God.

PETER'S VISION

The Apostle Peter was praying on the housetop at around noon, and he became very hungry. He then had a vision of a huge sheet coming down from heaven with all kinds of animals in it. Then he heard a voice from heaven speaking to him.

And there came a voice to him, RISE, PETER; KILL, AND EAT. (Acts 10:13 AV)

In this verse the verbs "kill" and "eat" are both in the imperative mood, meaning that they are stated as commands.

Peter's response makes quite clear that he understood perfectly that this vision and this voice were FROM GOD, because Peter addresses the voice as "Lord". So Peter knew that God was here telling him to do something, and Peter without hesitation disagreed with what God told him to do.

Peter responded with ...

But Peter said, NOT SO, LORD; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. (Acts 10:14 AV)

God then CORRECTED Peter as follows ...

And the voice *spake* unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, *that* call not thou common. (Acts 10:15 AV)

So God in this vision showed Peter a whole lot of UNCLEAN ANIMALS, which God instructed Peter to "kill and eat". When Peter refused to do this, God corrected Peter and told him not to call that "common" which God had "cleansed" ... all the while showing Peter a selection of "unclean animals".

This instruction was given to Peter three times before the vision ended.

THIS WAS DONE THRICE: and the vessel was received up again into heaven. (Acts 10:16 AV)

We understand that the vision was intended to show Peter that he should not call ANY MAN "common or unclean" (Acts 10:28).

But the point is: God did NOT want Peter to obey the literal instruction to "kill and eat", which Peter had been given in the vision. God WANTED Peter to disagree with that instruction. What if Peter had just responded with : "Yes, Lord. I'll do whatever you tell me to do"?

God obviously wanted Peter to USE HIS MIND to evaluate this instruction that God had given him.

To assume that God really changed HIS LAW to make provision for things like polygamy and divorce and slavery and warfare, etc., would be like Peter assuming that God really DID want him to kill and eat all the unclean animals he saw in that vision.

God EXPECTED Peter to respond with "not so, Lord". And God expects us to likewise respond with "not so, Lord" whenever we are faced with something that is in conflict with the spiritual intent of His law. God wants us to use our minds to understand that in the Old Testament there were indeed "statutes that were not good and judgments whereby they should not live"; that SOME of the statutes and judgments were nothing more than "concessions" made to the stubborn selfishness of a hard-hearted people.

God tests us on obedience to His laws, yes, certainly. But even more so, God tests us ON SELFISHNESS! At times God will give us the answers we would really like to hear, answers that allow us to behave selfishly, to pursue selfish goals. But that does not mean that God really WANTS us to behave selfishly. As with Solomon, God may confront us with: "what do you really want?" and then make it seemingly possible for us to have our wants. But when that happens we always need to understand that WE ARE BEING TESTED. And if we do pursue selfishness, then the penalties for such selfishness are usually not that far behind.

God wants to see how THE MINDS of the people He has called work. Towards that end God tested ...

- Abraham
- Moses
- David
- Solomon
- Peter.

Towards that end God at times also gave people the wrong answers or the wrong things they wanted, including to ...

- Balaam

- Ahab

- the whole nation of Israel.

It is time that we clearly understand that God Himself gave Israel some statutes that were NOT good, and some judgments whereby they really should NOT have lived. Concessions to the stubborn selfishness of a people can never change the law of God. We need to understand that when it grieved God at His heart that He had created human beings (Gen. 6:6), that God came quite close to aborting the whole "human project". Thankfully a merciful God did not take that course of action; thankfully God only made some drastic modifications to what He had originally intended to do ... so that you and I and, eventually, all mankind can STILL be given a very real opportunity to attain unto the goal that God had ORIGINALLY planned for.

We also need to understand that if God had NOT given the statutes and judgments that were not good, God would have been forced to deal FAR MORE HARSHLY especially with Israel, because there would have been no excuse of any kind to mitigate against such selfish practices as polygamy and divorce and slavery and warfare. If God had not given these statutes and judgments for the hardness of their hearts, vast numbers of people would still have engaged in immoral sexual conduct, in taking advantage of the weak, and in killing for the sake of advancing the self-interest of nations or of individuals ... and with the concomitant guilty consciences it would have resulted in the total breakdown of human society. That's what God had learned from man's conduct before the flood. And so God reluctantly gave Israel statutes and judgments that were not good in order to prevent a rapid repetition of what had happened before the flood.

We who are members of God's Church need to recognize where those statutes and judgments fell short, and WHY God was prepared to make such concessions, when obviously "from the beginning it was not so". And we must realize that NONE of those concessions that were in reality not good can ever apply to us today. WE must live our lives NOT by "what God may have allowed", we must live our lives by "what is PLEASING to God".

Frank W. Nelte