

# Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

## Contradictions in Scripture: Sin By Command Part 3

In our first message, we introduced the difficulty found in Scripture when God seems to command people to do things that are sinful. We examined specific cases of “sin by command” and considered the reasons for them. First, we discussed the command for Hosea to marry a prostitute; and not just a former one, but one who was still practicing. Yet we found that there was no specific command against anyone who was not a priest marrying a prostitute, though a woman who was a prostitute should have been punished herself. Second, we viewed the command to Ezekiel to eat meat defiled by being cooked on human dung. Yet we pointed out that the only reason food was unclean is because God proclaimed it unclean. Since it was not something inherent in the food itself and God made the clean and unclean laws, He certainly had the right to tell someone not to keep them, if He so wished. The same applies to the command to Peter to kill and eat unclean things in Acts 10.

In the second message in the series, we examined more examples. First was the case of the prophet in I Kings 20 who commanded a man to strike him. When the man refused, he was punished with death. Yet we established the principle that the ultimate good is always to obey the voice of the LORD, and the worst of sin is to disobey Him from I Samuel 15:22-23a.

### **22. So Samuel said:**

**“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,**

**As in obeying the voice of the LORD?**

**Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,**

**And to heed than the fat of rams.**

### **23. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,**

**And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.**

So the man who refused to strike the prophet disobeyed, and paid the ultimate penalty. Later, when the prophet commanded another man to do the same, he did it, but only wounded the prophet, which was the point of the command. Next, we considered images that God commanded to be made in the temple, contrary to the command against graven images. Yet when we examined this command, we found that it referred specifically to idols, not to any image whatsoever. The images in the temple were not to be worshipped, so did not qualify under the prohibition. Finally, we considered Elijah’s altar that he built at Mount Carmel in I Kings 18. Since Deuteronomy 12 forbade them from sacrificing anywhere except the LORD’s altar at Jerusalem, this seems like God was having His prophet break the command. However, we saw that in Exodus 20, rules were set down for making your own altar, and surely Elijah followed these rules. Since in the northern kingdom they were cut off from going to the altar at Jerusalem, it seems that Elijah was in his rights to build an altar according to Exodus 20.

But there are other puzzling passages that seem to be examples in the Bible of sin by command. In this message, we will consider a few more of these.

## **Genocide Against the Canaanites**

The Israelites were commanded by the LORD many times to commit what we would consider as genocidal acts. This was particularly true of the Canaanites whose land the people took in the wars under Joshua. This was not just something the people undertook to do on their own, but something the LORD specifically commanded them to do. One example of such a command is in Deuteronomy 20:16-17.

**16. “But of the cities of these peoples which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, 17. but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you,**

How is it that God could command something as terrible as the destruction of entire nations full of people? This we would consider to be genocide in our day, and would count it as a most terrible act for any nation or people to commit against another. How, then, could the LORD have commanded such a seemingly sinful thing?

What can we say about God commanding the Israelites to wipe out the nations in the land they were to inherit? The command was harsh and unequivocal. Moreover, the Israelites carried it out, as we see in the case of Jericho in Joshua 6:21.

**21. And they utterly destroyed all that *was* in the city, both man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword.**

They did the same to the city Ai in Joshua 8:25-26.

**25. So it was *that* all who fell that day, both men and women, *were* twelve thousand—all the people of Ai. 26. For Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the spear, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai.**

And if we would follow it out in Joshua 10 and 11, we would see that the Israelites did the same thing to many other cities also, wiping out every single inhabitant. This would be considered a war crime of the greatest magnitude today. How could the LORD command such a thing?

To understand this, we need to see what the LORD says justifying this extreme command that He made. First, let us consider Deuteronomy 20:18, where the LORD explains the reason for His harsh command of verses 16-17.

**18. lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God.**

One reason the LORD wanted the Israelites to wipe out the Canaanites, rather than allowing them to live alongside them as neighbors or slaves, is that He knew that the Canaanites would lead the Israelites into their abominable practices. They would be fascinated by their religion, and would end up worshipping their gods in the many grotesque and immoral ways that the Canaanites did. To spare Israel from the temptation to do this, the LORD wanted these wicked people wiped out. Notice that another reason is implied in this: the Canaanites committed abominations. This takes us back to a statement in the book of Genesis. There, the LORD explains to Abram in Genesis 15:13-16 what will happen to his family in time to come.

**13. And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years;**

**14. And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance.**

**15. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age.**

**16. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.**

The LORD was going to send Israel away to a foreign nation, where they would be afflicted and serve that people. It would be four hundred years before Israel would return to inherit the land the LORD had promised to Abram. The reason the LORD gives for this long delay is that “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.” In other words, the LORD knew that the Amorites were getting wicked and wicked, but they had not yet gotten to the point where He was willing to wipe them out. In four hundred years, they would reach that point, and then He would bring Abraham’s descendants against them. So we see here that the LORD’s judgment was long delayed by His grace. Whatever we may think about it when it finally fell, He graciously put off the punishment until the time came when the wicked abominations of the Canaanites had reached their peak.

Leviticus 18 gives us further proof of the corrupt practices of the Canaanites. In verses 1-3, we read:

**1. Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2. “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘I am the LORD your God. 3. According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances.**

He then goes on to outlaw incest (verses 6-16,) taking a woman and her sister, daughter, or granddaughter as wife together (verses 17-18,) having sex with a woman during her period (verse 19,) adultery with your neighbor’s wife (verse 20,) causing your children to pass through the fire to Molech (verse 21,) homosexuality (verse 22,) and bestiality (verse 23.) After forbidding all these disgusting practices, the LORD continues in verse 24,

**24. ‘Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you. 25. For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants.**

The LORD accuses all the nations who had dwelt in the land before Israel of performing all these wicked practices. It seems no sexual perversion was beneath them, and the sacrificing of their children to their degenerate gods was a common practice. According to James Hastings and John A. Selbie, “Traces of infant sacrifice are much more clear” (than those of animal sacrifice.) “In the Canaanite levels of all the mounds, jars containing the bones of new-born infants have been found in large numbers, buried beneath the floors of the high places, under the corners and thresholds of houses, and in other places where sacrifice would naturally occur. With these infants were deposited small jars containing food and drink. In some instances the bones showed signs of burning, but usually this was not the case. The jars were often filled with fine sea-sand. It is evident that first-born infants were sacrificed in honor of the mother-goddess, the giver of children.” “Sacrifice of adults was not so common as sacrifice of children; still it was occasionally practiced.” (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics Part 5*, Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2003, page 187)

So we know that the Canaanite were, indeed, wicked, and committed many practices that would be considered abominable by any righteous standard. That the Canaanites deserved punishment is clear. Whether or not they deserved complete and utter destruction is our next question. To this question, the Bible provides a clear answer.

First of all, we need to keep clearly in mind the Biblical principle expressed in Romans 6:23, **“For the wages of sin is death.”** Moreover, all we as human beings are sinners, as Romans 3:23 expresses. **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** Therefore, we all deserve death, for we are all sinners. Any time, therefore, when God metes out death in judgment, He is giving people no more than what they deserve. Whether He metes out that death by plague, by flood, by fire from heaven, or by an invading army, His actions are just, and His punishment fitting.

Therefore, far from dealing out death being harsh, any time God does not deal out death to sinful men, He is actually being gracious, and punishing us less than our sins deserve. As Lamentations 3:22 says:

**22. Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed,  
Because His compassions fail not.**

Finally, I would like to point out that those who decry the destruction of the Canaanites probably imagine them to be normal people just like they are themselves. There might be some truth to this, but the fact is that none of us has ever met a Canaanite. It is very easy for us to question God's judgment, therefore. Perhaps, if we actually met a Canaanite, we might develop a different perspective on things, once we saw what they were actually like. We judge too easily, without being able to possibly have all the facts at our disposal. It would be best if we left this decision to God, and trusted His judgment.

## White Lies

Another question that often arises when it comes to Biblical matters is the matter of so-called "white lies." There are a good many of these in the Scriptures, and we will not attempt to consider all of them here. Instead, we will make note of a few pertinent examples. First of all, there are times when things that seem to be "white lies" are commanded to be spoken by the LORD. For example, the LORD commanded Moses to say to Pharaoh:

Exodus 3:18. **Then they will heed your voice; and you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt; and you shall say to him, "The LORD God of the Hebrews has met with us; and now, please, let us go three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God."**

We know that this was communicated to Pharaoh, as we are clearly told this in Exodus 8:27.

**27. We will go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the LORD our God as He will command us."**

So the LORD seems to make out that all He wants is the freedom for His people to go three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to Him. He does not act like what He actually wants is for them to be able to go free and leave the land of Egypt altogether. Yet when the Egyptians actually let the Israelites go, we read in Exodus 14:5:

**5. Now it was told the king of Egypt that the people had fled, and the heart of Pharaoh and his servants was turned against the people; and they said, "Why have we done this, that we have let Israel go from serving us?"**

So when the time came, the people fled from Egypt altogether, and didn't just go three days journey into the wilderness. Did the LORD, therefore, command Moses to lie to Pharaoh in making this claim?

Other times, though God did not command the lie directly, it is clear that His people benefit from the lie. For example, in Joshua 2, we read that Rahab lied to the messengers of her king, the king of Jericho, when they came to her seeking Israel's spies.

**4. Then the woman took the two men and hid them. So she said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. 5. And it happened as the gate was being shut, when it was dark, that the men went out. Where the men went I do not know; pursue them quickly, for you may overtake them." 6. (But she had brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax, which she had laid in order on the roof.)**

She said the men had gone out, but they had not gone out. Rahab was lying.

Finally, there are times when God's people lie. David lied to King Achish of Gath, for example, in I Samuel 27:8-11.

**8. And David and his men went up and raided the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites. For those nations were the inhabitants of the land from of old, as you go to Shur, even as far as the land of Egypt. 9. Whenever David attacked the land, he left neither man nor woman alive, but took away the sheep, the oxen, the donkeys, the camels, and the apparel, and returned and came to Achish. 10. Then Achish would say, "Where have you made a raid today?" And David would say, "Against the southern area of Judah, or against the southern area of the Jerahmeelites, or against the southern area of the Kenites."**

**11. David would save neither man nor woman alive, to bring news to Gath, saying, "Lest they should inform on us, saying, 'Thus David did.'" And thus was his behavior all the time he dwelt in the country of the Philistines.**

David clearly lied to King Achish, for he did not want the king to know his actual activities, fearing he would no longer be welcome in his country if the king was aware of them.

Jeremiah the prophet lies in a similar way according to Jeremiah 38:24-27.

**24. Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "Let no one know of these words, and you shall not die. 25. But if the princes hear that I have talked with you, and they come to you and say to you, 'Declare to us now what you have said to the king, and also what the king said to you; do not hide it from us, and we will not put you to death,' 26. then you shall say to them, 'I presented my request before the king, that he would not make me return to Jonathan's house to die there.'"**

**27. Then all the princes came to Jeremiah and asked him. And he told them according to all these words that the king had commanded. So they stopped speaking with him, for the conversation had not been heard.**

What Jeremiah told them was not what had actually occurred, for King Zedekiah had sent for Jeremiah and asked his advice on what to do in the light of the besieging of the city by the Babylonians. So this seems to be another case of "white lying."

Let us consider these "white lies" in order. First of all, the LORD commanding Pharaoh to let the children of Israel go three days into the wilderness. There are multiple things we need to realize about this. First of all, Pharaoh really had no right to enslave the Israelites or to claim to own them. Except for Joseph, Israel had come into Egypt of their own free will (Genesis 46:2-7.) They had not belonged to Pharaoh, and the Egyptians had no right to enslave them. Moreover, they had already had a Master, as the LORD makes plain when He commands Pharaoh, **"Let My people go, that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness."** (Exodus 5:1b) The people of Israel belonged to the LORD, and for the Egyptians to attempt to enslave them was for them to attempt to steal them from their former Owner. The LORD made prior claim to this people, and Pharaoh had no right to them.

So considering the fact that the Israelites had come into Egypt as a free people and that they had belonged to the LORD when they came in, the LORD had every right to demand their ability to leave Egypt, not only for a short time, but also for good. His cry to Pharaoh was **"Let my people go."** The fact that He demanded a three day journey into the wilderness to worship Him did not change the fact that they were His people, and He had every right to do with them what He wished. Moreover, He never promised that after the three day journey and sacrifice, He would bring them back into Egypt. Egypt had no legitimate claim on them, and they had every right to go where they wanted after the sacrifice was over. A return to Egypt after the sacrifice was neither stated nor implied. Israel were the LORD's people, and would go where He wished after their three day journey was over. Therefore, no real "white lie" was told here.

As for Rahab, hers does certainly seem to be a white lie. We would point out several things here. First of all, her "white lie" hardly justifies many of ours. She was lying to keep some of God's people from being murdered by their enemies. Our typical white lies, like telling a woman you like her outfit when really you think it is hideous, are hardly life-and-death situations. The lie here has to

be measured against the consequences of telling the truth. By telling the truth, Rahab would have been betraying two of God's people who had come to her for protection, and would have all but guaranteed their deaths. How could this possibly have been right? Moreover, Rahab is commended for this in James 2:25.

**25. Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent *them* out another way?**

James argues that Rahab was actually justified by doing this. Therefore, her actions are commended. Yet I would still call upon my readers to notice that Rahab was not commanded to lie in this way.

As for David and his lies to Achish, while the LORD never openly condemns him for this, I would point out that David got into considerable trouble for doing this. When Achish and his army joined the rest of the Philistines in order to make war on Israel, David and his men were expected to join them. (I Samuel 28.) This put them in a great quandary. How could they fight against their own people? Yet if they refused, their actions would appear traitorous to the Philistines, and they might have been killed. Only by the LORD's gracious intervention did they escape with their lives, and that only by a desperate flight. Then, when they returned to their homes, they found that the vengeful Amalekites had attacked while they were gone, burned their city, and carried off their families as prisoners. Somehow, apparently, news of what David had been doing had gotten out to them, or else they had tracked the troublesome raiders back to David's hometown of Ziklag. Again, David's policy appeared to have gotten him in terrible trouble. Again, he escaped when the LORD gave him victory over the Amalekites and brought about the safe return of all the prisoners, their families. Yet David's policy of lies brought no good upon him and his men.

Finally, in the case of Jeremiah, we would point out that it was Zedekiah, not the LORD, who commanded Jeremiah to tell this lie. Plus it might not have been entirely a lie. Certainly, Jeremiah did not want to return to Jonathan's house, for that would likely have meant his death, and he might well have requested this of Zedekiah. His answer masks the real reason for his visit to Zedekiah, but telling part of the truth to those who do not deserve all of it is not exactly the same as lying.

Thus, while the Bible may contain things that we could call "white lies," it is questionable whether or not the LORD ever directly commands any of these. The most obvious examples are when people have lied to save others' lives, and these kinds of lies in such extreme circumstances are hardly justification for the kind of everyday lies people usually tell. We are people of the truth, and should tell the truth, a few extreme exceptions notwithstanding.

So we have examined multiple cases of what at first glance would seem to be "sin by command." Yet many of the things that we have found are not necessarily "sins" that God has commanded. Either the LORD did not actually command the thing that was done, or there were circumstances that explained why what He commanded was not actually sinful, but justified. Ultimately, many of these things must be examined on a case-by-case basis, as no single "one size fits all" explanation can be given for all the times the LORD seems to command a sin.

In the final analysis, we would say that the LORD does not sin Himself, nor can any of His commands be sinful, though they might feel so to someone who is used to doing something else. Yet to obey the LORD is always the ultimate good, and to disobey is rebellion, which is worse than the sin of witchcraft. Therefore, His commands should always be obeyed, whether or not they might seem "right" to one at the time. That is the final lesson we should learn, and what we should take away from our study of "sin by command."

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