

## LOOKING BEYOND OFFENSE

### A Devotional Meditation on Misphatim (Ordinances)

Exodus 21:1-24:18; Jeremiah 33:25-26, 34:8-22;  
Matthew 6:21-26; John 13:34-35; 1 Corinthians 6:1-11; Galatians 3:19; 2 Peter 3:14-18

Albert J. McCarn

February 14, 2026

Let's look into one of those difficult things Paul wrote. We have to be careful, though. If we're not diligent in seeking the full counsel of the Pharisee Apostle, then we might end up twisting his words, which ignorant and unstable people do, as Peter the Fisherman Apostle warns us. It's not that they have an evil agenda, but simply that they don't know what they don't know. That's the ignorant part; the unstable part is that they might not be inclined to accept correction. That's when ignorance becomes obstinance, and innocent error becomes defiance.

In this case, the difficult thing Paul wrote is this:

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.

Galatians 3:19 ESV

This is one of those passages that occasionally gets presented as proof that Messiah Yeshua did away with the Torah, which is what Paul means by "law". Actually, it's more than that; the Torah is God's instruction on how we humans should live. It's his designer's specification pointing us to his concept of how an ideal society filled with people made in his image is supposed to operate.

But then, we turn to the Torah and find things in there that just don't seem right. Why, for instance, would God have told Moses to include this among his directives?

When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.

Exodus 21:7-11 ESV

We would be correct to say that regulation of child marriage or slavery isn't right in God's ideal society. There is the question of what this really meant nearly 4,000 years ago to cultures very different from our own, but we still can't get around the point that fathers apparently had the right to commit their daughters to a status that might be demeaning, oppressive, or even life-threatening. Some cultures still do this sort of thing, but our Western culture with its Judeo-Christian foundation has laws that prevent it – at least in theory. Laws don't prevent people from doing whatever they want to do if they are determined. That's why we still have a grievous human trafficking problem.



Photo by OSPAN  
ALI, September 29,  
2020, [on Unsplash](#).

And that's precisely the point of Paul's comment that the Torah was added because of offenses. That regulation about child marriage follows the Ten Commandments, when God spoke directly to his people to give them the principles by which he expected them to live. His intent was that they would each take these principles and apply them to their own lives, and come back to him for further instruction when they encountered difficult situations that didn't easily resolve according to those principles. That was too much for most of the Israelites, though. In fact, it's too much for just about all of us at any point in history.

Going to God for answers is difficult. It means we first have to acknowledge that he exists, and then have to acknowledge that he has standards by which he expects his human image bearers to live. Then we have to learn what those standards are by studying what he gave us in his word, and by consulting one another and sages and saints of the past to find out how those standards have been applied or disregarded through the ages. All of that requires a lifestyle change. Ideally, it's a change born of inner transformation, which is what God intended when he said he would circumcise our hearts. That's another way of saying he would put his Spirit in us so we would have the ability to live by his principles.

Living by the Spirit is better than living by a list of legal requirements. The legal requirements give the bare minimum of acceptable behavior, along with the maximum punishment for unacceptable behavior. Anyone can abide by strict rules, at least on the surface. It's easy to maintain the appearance of righteousness, at least until we're caught doing what we know is contrary to the rules. That's why the rules must remain in place.

Even those who live by the Spirit instead of by the letter of the law still need the rules. Messiah Yeshua taught us that. In fact, the rules he gave us are even more strict – things like not hating someone because that's the same as murder, and not looking with desire on a woman because lust is the same as adultery. Paul even said it would be better to suffer wrong than to accuse another brother in a court of law.

This sheds more light on what Paul said about the law being added because of offenses. Maybe it's not so much the offenses we cause God, but the offenses we cultivate among ourselves. If all we're trying to do is keep our own little fiefdoms intact, then we'll do the minimum for others. Someone who takes that approach might arrange to give his daughter to a rich man in hope of keeping his family out of poverty. If, however, we take seriously what Messiah said about loving one another as he has loved us, then doing the minimum doesn't matter. What matters is doing what we can to lift up our brothers and sisters. Someone who does that might see a family struggling to pay the bills and find a way to bless them. That's how we build the ideal society our Creator has had in mind from the beginning.