

God's Natural Law of Morality in Genesis

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law [of Moses], by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law [revealing right from wrong] is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness. (Romans 2:14–15)

As you study the first book of the Bible, you will see a moral code of ethical conduct is present and understood by nearly all. In Genesis, we can see God's code of morality from Genesis 4 to 50. Although the word "law" does not appear anywhere in Genesis, there is plenty of evidence of the presence of God's law (a code of good and evil). We see this in two ways. First, moral judgments or confessions are made throughout the text. Second, actions, decisions, choices, and behaviors are described as sin or evil. Genesis records no less than 2000 years of human history before Moses. During those millennia of years, humans knew right from wrong. Sin existed in Genesis 4, thousands of years before God gave Israel the law on Mt. Sinai. The Apostle Paul teaches in Romans that without the law, he would not know what sin is (7:7). In Genesis 42:21, Joseph's brothers say, "We are guilty." God's inner law convicted them of their guilt. Examples of this inner moral law foreshadowing the Law of Moses are easily seen in Genesis. Here are four examples.

You shall not murder. In Genesis 9, God institutes capital punishment for murder. Anyone who takes another person's life must lose their own life. Genesis 9:5b, "If someone murders a fellow human, I will require that person's life" (CSB). Murder is so egregious of a crime against society that the guilty party must be put to death.

You shall not commit adultery. In Genesis 39, Joseph's master's wife wants to break her marital vows by sleeping with this young man. Joseph declares she is his master's wife. This is of no concern to her—she wants to lie with him. Joseph refuses to succumb to the temptation. He asks, "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (v. 9). "Sin against God," but there is nothing recorded in Genesis that states it is wrong to sleep with another man's wife. Chapters 21 and 26 both contain narratives about Abimelech rebuking Abraham and, subsequently, Isaac for nearly causing adultery to happen through their half-truths.

You shall not steal. While Rachel's father was away shearing the sheep, the Scripture says, "Rachel stole her father's household gods" (31:19). In Genesis 23, Abraham does not take for himself a burial plot of land for his wife, Sarah. Instead, he pays someone else four hundred standard shekels of silver for the land. Just two chapters earlier, Abraham and Abimelech are in a dispute over a well. Abraham argues that his servants dug the well, and all must acknowledge his ownership of the well. Abimelech's servants must stop stealing his water.

You shall not bear false witness. The serpent of Genesis lied to Eve. She tells God, "The serpent deceived me" (3:13). Fast forward to Jacob deceiving his dad for the blessing in Genesis 27. Old Isaac asks Jacob, "Are you really my son Esau?" And Jacob replied, "I am." Turn a few pages in the book to chapter 29, and Jacob is furious with Laban. He exclaims, "Why then have you deceived me?" Jacob, the hypocrite, knows that lying to someone is wrong. He is like the thief who has been gone all night breaking into homes only to come home to find his own home has been burglarized. Angry and frustrated, he calls 911 to report a crime. He knows stealing is wrong for all people everywhere.

Well before Deuteronomy 22, Lot asks the city's men not to "do evil" with the two men he is sheltering in his home (19). How does he know men raping men is evil without the law of Moses? God's pre-Moses moral law is the answer. When Shechem rapes Dinah, her biological brothers are outraged, indignant, and very angry. They plainly state that what Shechem did "must not be done" (34:7). With that judgment, they show a moral compass is present and functioning.

A code of morality was written on the hearts of Adam and Eve when they ate the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. From that moment forward, all the sons and daughters of our first parents were born with God's natural (moral) law written on the heart (Rom 2:15). Even without a codified law given like the one of Mt. Sinai, God tells Cain he must rule over sin (4:7). Sin predated the Mosaic Law because God's natural law of morality for all people everywhere was the standard for right and wrong the moment Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. A non-codified moral law existed for all people everywhere long before God gave Israel the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. It is this law that makes all people everywhere guilty before God, even without the knowledge of the Law of Moses or the Law of Christ.