

THE MINISTRY OF THE NEW COVENANT
2 CORINTHIANS 3:4-18

A Paper

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by

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2 Corinthians 3:4-18

“Behold, days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.... But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people’” (Jer 31:31, 33). One of many classic passages which detail and discuss the nature of the New Covenant is 2 Corinthians 3:4-18. This particular grouping of verses from Paul’s second epistle to the Corinthian church contrasts the Old and New Covenant ministries in terms of their nature, their glory, their ministers, the degree of liberty associated with each, and their efficacy.

The first point of contrast between the Old and New Covenants expressed in this passage is the nature of both covenants. The Apostle Paul describes the New Covenant as being “of the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:6) and “a ministry of righteousness” (2 Cor 3:9). This covenant stands in fulfillment of Ezekiel 36:27, which states, “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.” Because the New Covenant is a covenant “of the Spirit” who “gives life,” it is fitting to call the New Covenant a covenant of life (2 Cor 3:6). In contrast, Paul describes the Old Covenant as being “of the letter” which “kills” (2 Cor 3:6), “a ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones” (2 Cor 3:7), and “a ministry of condemnation” (2 Cor 3:9). It is also important to note that the law of the Old Covenant is engraved upon stones (2 Cor 3:7), whereas the law of the New Covenant is written upon the heart of the believer (Jer 31:33). The nature of both covenants is clearly demonstrated in the circumstances surrounding their enactments. For instance, shortly after the Old Covenant was ratified, Israel committed spiritual harlotry via the golden calf, and consequently, 3,000 men were killed at the hand of the Levites for that apostasy (Ex 32:28). Contrastingly, 3,000 souls were added to the Church at Pentecost in response to Peter’s sermon (Acts 2:41). Therefore, the Scriptures clearly contrast the Old Covenant as a covenant of death against the New Covenant which is a covenant of life.

2 Corinthians 3:4-18 also contrasts the Old and New Covenants in terms of the glory associated with each covenant. In 2 Corinthians 3:7-8, Paul writes, “But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently upon the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how shall the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?” The Apostle continues: “For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory on account of the glory that surpasses it” (2 Cor 3:9-10). Essentially, what Paul is saying is that the glory of the New Covenant, the covenant of the Spirit, eclipses the glory of the Old Covenant, the covenant of the letter, to so great an extent that compared to the New Covenant the Old Covenant can be considered as having no glory. Again, the Apostle states: “For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory” (2 Cor 3:11). It is also important to note that the glory of the Old Covenant can be seen in the glory on Moses’ face, whereas the glory of the New Covenant can be seen in the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

The third point of contrast between the Old and New Covenants expressed in 2 Corinthians 3:4-18 is the ministers of both covenants. The Apostle Paul opens this passage with the following words: “And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant” (2 Cor 3:4-6a). The context of chapters three and four of 2 Corinthians seems to indicate that the ministers of the New Covenant mentioned in these verses are the apostles, their associates, and the prophets of the New Testament. Perhaps, even in a more general sense, pastors and teachers could be included here, provided, of course, that they are doctrinally faithful to the teaching of the apostles and prophets of the New Testament. The ministers of the New Covenant are ministers of a covenant of life, whereas Moses was a minister of a covenant of death. Furthermore, Paul contrasts the ministers of the New Covenant who “use great boldness” in their speech, against Moses, “who used to put a veil over his face that the sons of Israel might not look intently at the end of what was fading away” (2 Cor 3:12-13). Additionally, the Apostle describes the ministers of the New Covenant as being all “with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord” (2 Cor 3:18). The ministers of the New Covenant are ministers of a covenant of life with great boldness and unveiled faces, whereas Moses was a minister of a covenant of death with reservation and a veiled face. Therefore, we must conclude that ministers of the New Covenant are superior to those of the Old Covenant.

2 Corinthians 3:4-18 also contrasts the Old and New Covenants in terms of the degree of liberty associated with each covenant. The Apostle states in 2 Corinthians 3:17: “Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” Now, we know that prior to the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, the Holy Spirit had not yet been given, for John 8:39 declares that “the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” Therefore, the Holy Spirit was not given (except to a few, select individuals in order to accomplish very specialized purposes) in the Old Covenant, and thus, there was no liberty under that covenant. This point is even more clearly elucidated in other writings of Paul; for instance, in his epistle to the Galatians, the Apostle describes the Old Covenant as “a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1), whose children themselves are “slaves” (Gal 4:21-25). Because there is liberty in the New Covenant, it is found to be yet again superior to the Old Covenant, which is a covenant of slavery.

The fifth point of contrast between the Old and New Covenants expressed in 2 Corinthians 3:4-18 is the efficacy of both covenants. The Apostle Paul poignantly describes the lack of efficacy of the Old Covenant with the following words: “But their minds [i.e. the Israelites from whom Moses veiled his face] were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains un-lifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (2 Cor 3:14-16). It is important to highlight that the veil is “removed in Christ” (2 Cor 3:14) and “whenever a man turns to the Lord” (2 Cor 3:16), that is, when one enters into the New Covenant through faith in Christ. In the Old Covenant, a veil of spiritual hardness is placed over the heart; however, in the New Covenant, that veil is completely

removed. The writer of Hebrews declares that the old covenant has been set aside “because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect)” (Heb 7:18-19). Elsewhere, the same author writes, “The Law...can never...make perfect those who draw near.... For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:1-2, 4). Although the Old Covenant lacks efficacy, the New Covenant does not, for the Apostle writes, “But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18)

2 Corinthians 3:4-18 clearly portrays that the New Covenant is superior to the Old Covenant in terms of its nature, its glory, its ministers, the degree of liberty associated with it, and its efficacy. The author of Hebrews writes: “For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second” (Heb 8:7). However, the Old Covenant was weak and useless (Heb 7:18-19), and it has been made obsolete with the arrival of the New Covenant, the covenant of the Spirit and of life.