

SMALL GROUP STUDY QUESTIONS 10/25/09 2 CORINTHIANS 3:7-18

This section of 2 Corinthians focuses on the superior nature of the new covenant to the old Mosaic covenant. Before discussing the particulars of the text it is helpful to have a general understanding of the nature of Old Testament covenants. In Israel's history God's covenant with the Israelites is the fundamental basis of their faith. The word covenant is mentioned 82 times in the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch or the Torah).¹ It is the heart of God's relational expression of Himself. There are numerous covenants in the Old Testament, but those which are of primary importance from a New Testament perspective are the covenants made with Abraham, and Moses (and through Moses to the people of Israel), and David. Generally, there are two types of covenants appearing in the Old Testament. The first type is called a unilateral covenant.² It is initiated by God and it involves God's solemn promise to an individual. It requires no response on behalf of the other party. The covenant made with David regarding the eternal establishment of his throne is one such covenant. The promise is made to David, but the fulfillment of the promise is not dependent upon the obedience of David or his descendants. We see in the history of Israel's monarchy that the kings who served God with all their heart were the exceptions, and yet God remained faithful in fulfilling this promise in and through His Son Jesus.

The second type of covenant is called a binary covenant.³ This type of covenant is initiated by God, but it calls for a response of obedience on behalf of the other party. The covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses all belong in this category. The similarities between these three covenants are 1) God appears to each of these men announcing His intentions for them and the long-term implications of His promise. 2) Each of these men respond by making a sacrifice to God. 3) In each case God provides a sign of His promise. With the Mosaic covenant, God appears to Moses on Mt. Sinai to communicate to him the requirements that He has for the nation of Israel. In this covenant with Israel, God claims the nation as His own, and His desire is for His people to be set apart from the other nations and to reflect Him in all areas of their lives. The covenantal requirements given on Mt. Sinai are presented in the Ten Commandments as well as in the worship, sacrificial, purity, and legal requirements detailed in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

Something that is noted with all of the covenants is that although the desired response is obedience to the covenant, the reality is that the human heart is incapable of the total submission required by God. In every case, there is a commitment to God on behalf of the people to remain faithful to the covenant and in every case over time the faithfulness of the people wanes. As the Mosaic covenant is being given, the Israelites tire of waiting for Moses and they begin worshipping a god of their own creation. God reestablishes His commitment to them, and in the time it takes for the

¹ P. R. Williamson, "Covenant," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander & David W. Baker, 139-155.

² P.R. Williamson, 146.

³ P.R. Williamson, 146.

Israelites to complete their wandering in the desert, they need to reaffirm their faith and their commitment to God once again. Israel's history of faithfulness from the time they enter into the Promised Land to the time that they enter into exile is rather erratic. The pattern of a short-lived burst of devotion to God, followed by long periods of failure to trust in God ultimately leads to the exile of the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah. God's covenant relationship with Israel could only guarantee that He would remain faithful to them. It could do nothing to produce faithfulness on the part of Israel. It is in this sense then, that the covenants of the Old Testament are considered "old" or ineffective. As it is with the Law, there is nothing wrong with the covenants; rather it is the heart of man that is flawed and unable to accomplish what is demanded. The new covenant that is ushered in by Jesus' death and resurrection is described in Jeremiah as "new," "better," and "superior" in that it affects the internal change of heart that is necessary to be in a right standing with God.

The author of Hebrews writes, "For if that first *covenant* had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second," (8:7). So, what is the fault with the Law? The fault is that the Law is external and incapable of addressing the internal inclination of the heart. Paul tells us that the Law arouses sin in us (Rom. 3:20), so the Law is incapable of making us perfect. The Law is at fault because it is unable to affect internal heart changes in a person. The people are at fault because their sinful nature prevents them from adhering to the Law. This new covenant is the final covenant of God. It is superior to the old because perfect obedience to the covenant has been attained by Christ on our behalf.

What has been promised in the Old Testament covenants has now been fulfilled through the Son. Christ's sacrificial death makes the ministry of the priests and the accompanying sacrifices obsolete. These demands of the Law have disappeared as we are granted the ability to know God, to experience God's forgiveness and God's care with unrestricted access. As is the case when God's promises are fulfilled, there is a present and a future aspect involved. There are elements of the old covenants and the Law that are no longer appropriate and to return to these elements is to misunderstand the greatness of what Christ has done. There are also elements of the covenants and Law that have even greater significance following Christ's work on the cross. The promise is made that those who seek God will be His people. This was true of the Israelites in the Old Testament, but although they experienced God's covenant faithfulness, they were unable to complete the required demands of the covenant. With the new covenant, not only do we belong to God, but we have fulfilled the demands of the covenant in Christ. We are able to love and pursue God with a deep sense of security that everything that keeps a marred, imperfect person from a Holy, set apart, and perfect God has been eradicated through Christ.

2 CORINTHIANS 3:7-18

2 Cor. 3:7-18 can be divided into two sections. 2 Cor. 3:7-11 uses glaring antonyms to highlight the differences between the ministry of the old and new covenant. 2 Cor. 3:12-18 stresses the superior and permanent effects of the new covenant. If the old covenant is accompanied by glory, how much more glorious is the new covenant. Paul concludes 2 Cor. 3:6 with the dramatic statement, “the letter kills but the Spirit gives life.” In this next section (2 Cor. 3:7-18) Paul goes to great length to explain this view and to counter the ideas of the false teachers in Corinth. Through his focus on the difference between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant it is evident that these false teachers were Jewish and that the source of misinformation concerns the Mosaic Law, the Ten Commandments in particular. In Paul’s argument he never states that the moral mandates of the Ten Commandments are no longer binding. Jesus spends considerable time in Matt. 5-7 making the point that nobody is able to keep the commandments, because they are not merely external behavioral checks, rather they are internal measurements of the heart. It is not a slavish adherence to moral principles that leads a person to righteousness. Instead it is a realization that no human being is able to fulfill the demands of the Law. It is at this crisis point of faith that we are able to throw ourselves on the mercy of the one who has obtained perfection and who offers righteousness to us (a right standing with God) through His accomplishments.

Paul’s argument is not that the Law no longer applies, but that the point of the Law was to lead us to Christ not to our own striving for perfection. Paul places his focus on the contrast between life lived according to the letter (which is ineffectual) and life lived according to the Spirit which is what has been promised by the Old Testament prophets and realized at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit. The believer now has the Spirit leading, guiding, indwelling, and empowering him or her to live the Christian life. This does not negate the power of God’s word in the Old Testament, but the Spirit is absolutely necessary to interpret and apply the word in our lives and in the life of the church. Ben Witherington writes, “The Spirit that Paul is talking about is the Holy Spirit, who is palpably present in the community as an experienced reality, manifest in spiritual gifts such as tongues and prophecy . . . transforming lives and empowering the work of ministry. *Spirit* is not an essence or an abstract theological concept. It is the daily experienced mode of God’s powerful presence in the community of faith.”⁴ The letter kills because it can only condemn fallen human beings who are incapable of keeping the letter. The Spirit gives life because He is the one promised to abide with us and reside in us (John 14:17).

In 2 Cor. 3:7-11 Paul begins by asking the question, “If the ministry of death in letters engraved on stone (referring once again to the giving on the Ten Commandments) came with glory, a glory so intense that the Israelites could not look upon Moses’ face, how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to bring about an even greater glory?” The following table categorizes the two different ministries.

⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, 384.

Moses' Ministry (Old Covenant)	Paul's Ministry (New Covenant)
Ministry of death, 3:7	Ministry of the Spirit, 3:8 Spirit gives life, 3:6
Ministry of condemnation, 3:9	Ministry of glory, 3:9
Letters engraved on stone, 3:7	Letter written on hearts, 3:3
With fading glory, 3:7, 3:10	Surpassing glory, 3:8, 3:11
Glory that fades away, 3:11	Glory that remains, 3:11
Veil over the heart, 3:15	Veil that is lifted, 3:16

Paul writes that the Mosaic Law came with glory. Exodus 34 tells the story of Moses descending Mt. Sinai after spending 40 days and nights in the presence of Yahweh as he received the covenantal promises and commands. When Moses came down from the mountain his face shone and the Israelites were afraid. Moses then put a veil over his face only taking it off when he went in to speak directly with God. Paul describes Moses' shining face as a kind of glory that was blinding, yet fading. In the Old Testament, glory represents God's presence. It was God's glory that displayed itself in the holiest part of the tabernacle and temple. Although no one was able to look directly upon God's glory and live (Ex. 33:20). Moses is described as meeting God face to face (Ex. 33:11). This encounter with God was so unique that there were many in Paul's day who venerated Moses believing him to be semi-divine. It is likely that this highly exalted view of Moses lies behind Paul's discussion of the old and new covenants. Paul acknowledges Moses and his unique place in Israel's history as God's mouth piece, but stresses that his ministry was limited, his glory was a fading glory. The word "fading" is better translated as transient or impermanent. What Moses had to offer Israel was a picture of a Holy God who could not tolerate the sins of humanity without a mediating sacrifice. Moses' ministry is one of death and condemnation. It is transitory. Moses' ministry has served its purpose—to place all humanity under condemnation, so that the need for a Savior would be felt. In contrast to this ministry of death is the ministry of the Spirit, which is accompanied with a far greater, surpassing glory. The ministry of the Spirit is ever present in our lives. It does not fade. As the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit grants us direct access to God every moment of the day. His glory is manifest to us in the present.

In 2 Cor. 3:9-11, Paul continues contrasting the fading glory of the old covenant with the surpassing glory of the new covenant. The ministry of the Law came with glory, but it brought condemnation. The ministry of the Spirit comes with a far greater glory because it provides a solution to the human predicament. According to the Law, one day a year on the Day of Atonement, the high priest of Israel would offer a sacrifice to atone for the sins of Israel. The high priest would enter the holy of holies, the innermost part of the temple where the glory of God would appear, offering blood from a sacrifice.

One day a year Israel could say that they had right standing with God. As they went on with their business, their sins began to accumulate again and even though they made routine sacrifices for their sins and the priest ministered daily in the temple, they still had to wait until the next Day of Atonement for forgiveness. One day a year the Israelites could feel good about themselves and the rest of the year they lived under condemnation. The beauty of Christ's sacrifice is that it atoned once for all for our sins. Our part is to trust in the completeness of this act and accept that when we place our faith in Christ's work on the cross that God the Father views us as righteous. When he sees us, He sees His Son and His Son's righteousness becomes ours. Like glory, our righteousness is also a present reality that speaks to a future complete realization. Paul describes the ministry of righteousness as abounding and permanent. What God offered through Moses was one piece of the puzzle, one plot line in the story. What God offers through Jesus and the Spirit's ministry is permanent, abiding, abounding life in His presence.

2 Cor. 3:12-18 continues the discussion of the old vs. the new covenant by contrasting two types of people: those under the old covenant (3:12-15) and those under the new covenant (3:16-18). Paul describes both groups as follows:

Old Covenant People	New Covenant People
Could not look intently at what was fading (old covenant) (3:13)	Boldness, openness in speech (3:11)
Minds/hearts were hardened at reading of old covenant (3:14)	When a person turns to the Lord, the veil is lifted (3:16)
A veil lies over their hearts (3:15)	Liberty, transformation (3:17-18)

In his commentary on 2 Corinthians, Paul Barnett writes that Paul (the apostle) has a threefold purpose in this discussion: 1 to explain the blindness under the old covenant (14-15), 2) to show how the veil is removed (16), and 3) to show what happens when the veil is removed (17-18).⁵ Regarding the blindness of the Israelites, Paul writes that his hope in the surpassing glory of the new covenant is what has given him the boldness, or openness (unveiled-ness) to explain the effects of the new covenant. In v. 13 he writes that he is not like Moses who wore a veil to prevent the Israelites from seeing a fading glory. Behind Moses' veil lay the reality that the old covenant was not God's ultimate, intended goal for His people. It would point to the one who would come and ultimately abrogate its demands, but until then the Israelites were under the letter of the Law until Christ's advent. In v. 15, Paul then describes the fate of those who cling to the old covenant. Paul can write in such stark terms because not only was he one who previously had a hardened mind and heart at the reading of the old covenant, but he also experienced the brutal opposition of many Jews who opposed his new covenant message. He had gone to trial during his first visit to Corinth at the

⁵ Paul Barnett, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 189.

hand of the Jews who did not receive his gospel message. Paul writes that this veil can only be lifted in Christ. Those who had come to Corinth teaching that the Corinthians needed to adhere to the old covenant were advocating a return to the ministry of condemnation under Moses. In v. 16, Paul writes that when a person, any individual, turns to the Lord, that veil is taken away. As was the case in Paul's own life, when the scales fell off his eyes, he has able to see the Lord with clarity. He was able to live his life empowered by the new covenant outpouring of the Spirit. Christ is central to the promises of the new covenant but for those who continue under the old system after Christ's sacrifice, there is no hope of forgiveness. It is only offered in Christ.

2 Cor. 3:17-18 focuses on the effects of the new covenant in the believer's life. By making the statement in 3:17 that the Lord is the Spirit, Paul is pointing again to the new covenant. Under the old covenant, the Israelites were implored to turn to the Lord, but the distinctive element of the new covenant is the pouring out of God's Spirit (Jer. 31). So in turning to the Lord, one must also turn to the new covenant. Paul describes this experience as liberty. What is this freedom to which Paul refers? It must be in opposition to the requirements of the Mosaic covenant: freedom from condemnation, death and the letter that kills. It is freedom to now have God's Law written on our hearts to internally transform and motivate us to follow Him. As the veil is removed, we now behold the glory of the Lord, the glory of the Father that is reflected in the face of His Son. The new covenant promises transformation that the old covenant could never bring about. We are transformed into the same image (the image of the Son). In the final day, in our glorified state, we will have perfection. We will no longer live in the tension of our present fallen state versus our future perfect standing. We will be transformed from one kind of glory (the glory we experience when we turn to Christ) to another glory—that which is perfected in His presence.

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2 CORINTHIANS 3:7-18

Read Exodus 34:27-35

Exodus 34:27-35

²⁷ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." ²⁸ So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did not eat bread or drink water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. ²⁹ It came about when Moses was coming down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the testimony were in Moses' hand as he was coming down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because of his speaking with Him. ³⁰ So when Aaron and all the sons of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ Then Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the rulers in the congregation returned to him; and Moses spoke to them. ³² Afterward all the sons of Israel came near, and he commanded them to do everything that the LORD had spoken to him on Mount Sinai. ³³ When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. ³⁴ But whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with Him, he would take off the veil until he came out; and whenever he came out and spoke to the sons of Israel what he had been commanded, ³⁵ the sons of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone. So Moses would replace the veil over his face until he went in to speak with Him.

- 1. In Ex. 34:32, what did God command the Israelites to do?**

- 2. From your knowledge of Scripture (or humanity) did the Israelites ever follow through in perfect obedience?**

Read 2 Corinthians 3:7-11

2 Corinthians 3:7-11

⁷ But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, ⁸ how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? ⁹ For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. ¹⁰ For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. ¹¹ For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.

- 3. In 2 Cor. 3:7-11, how does Paul describe the Mosaic covenant?**

4. How does Paul describe the ministry of the Spirit?

5. The subject of this passage is the glory. How do you understand “glory” and relate to it?

Read 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

2 Corinthians 3:12-18

¹² Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, ¹³ and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. ¹⁴ But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. ¹⁵ But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; ¹⁶ but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. ¹⁸ 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.

6. What is Paul’s hope in 3:12?

7. Have you had an experience in which the veil was lifted in your heart? What was this like? How has it impacted the way you express Christ in your life?

8. V. 17 refers to the liberty of the new covenant.

9. How would you describe this liberty when it may appear to some as a list of rules?

10. How have you experienced this freedom?