



The Glory of the New Covenant

2 Corinthians 3:7-11

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Turn once again to the book of 2 Corinthians. We continue our journey through Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, continuing in chapter 3. Last week we looked at verses 4-6, and this morning we will be looking at verses 7-11. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant. Second Corinthians 3, beginning at verse 7:

Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, we ask that you would illuminate your Word, that as we look upon it, we would not only know you better, we would not only know ourselves better, but we would be changed by the power of your Spirit. Lord, make us more like Jesus. Help us to see our Lord Jesus Christ in all of his glory. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

The relationship between the old and the new covenants is one of the more challenging subjects of the Bible. There are, for example, Christians who want to take the old covenant and make it the model for the believer today. One example of this would be taking Old Testament laws as they are written in detail and making them binding upon Christians today. At the same time, there are also Christians who want to do away completely with the old covenant and act as if it has no relationship at all with the new.

Paul faced these same controversies in every one of the churches he founded. Evidence of these controversies is evidence of how sin can get a grip on our minds and our thinking. Paul's answer to the acknowledgment of the glory of the old and also how the new was even more glorious... Paul answers by telling us how the new was connected to the old and how the new has surpassed the old, and here he gives us three comparison, or contrasts, to help us to understand in our text this morning.

First, Paul tells us that the new covenant is *spiritual, not external*. Next, Paul tells us that the new covenant is *more glorious than the old covenant*. Then thirdly, Paul tells us that the new covenant is *permanent, not temporary*. The new covenant is spiritual, not external like the old covenant; the new covenant has even more glory than the old covenant; and the new covenant is permanent, not temporary like the old.

The New Covenant is Spiritual

Let's begin, then, by looking at Paul's first contrast: how the new covenant is spiritual. Once again, we must set the context. You have heard me say this over and over again, but we will lose sight of Paul's point if we miss the context. There is a controversy in Corinth. Again, we have to remember what Paul is facing. Men had come to Corinth from other churches, presumably in Judea, and they knew their Old Testament very well.

They emphasized the God of Israel. They emphasized the Law. They emphasized the ministry of Moses, and their message to the church was, "Paul is leading you astray. You need to focus more on *these* things, on Israel, the Law, Moses. You need to follow *these* ways to show that you belong to God." Now, the irony here is they're saying that Paul is wrong, and Paul knows more about these things than they do.

You may recall that Paul tells us he was not just a Pharisee, he was a Pharisee of Pharisees. Under the Law he was blameless. He knew the Law inside and out. He was meticulous in the keeping of it. He was trained under Gamaliel, the great Pharisee professor of the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul took this with such seriousness he actually persecuted those in the church who would not follow the Old Testament Scriptures to this level of detail.

Paul also knew that when Jesus came, everything changed. Jesus fulfilled all that the old had promised. Jesus brought a new era to the church and to God's people. So, Paul sets up for us here a series of contrasts, but the first overarching thing you must see is that Paul is not saying the old is bad, the new is good. That's not what Paul is saying. Instead, he's saying the old is good, the new is better. Or maybe even more precisely, the old leads to the new and the new fulfills the old.

You see, Paul uses the word *glory* here in our text over and over and over again. Ten times he uses this word, and he applies glory to both the new covenant *and* the old covenant. He says the old and the new covenant each have a form of glory. Now, he does want us to see the limitations of the old covenant. He wants us to see the difference in degree of the glory of the old and the new covenants, because what the new covenant has done has been to remove the limitations of the old.

So, the first contrast Paul speaks of is one of external and spiritual; that is, the external nature of the old covenant and the spiritual nature of the new covenant. We see here in verse 7: "Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory..." There's that word. "...that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?"

As Paul begins describing the old covenant to us, he takes one of the most glorious incidents in all of the Old Testament. What he is summarizing here in our text is the story of Exodus 34, the time when Moses came down from Mount Sinai the second time with the Ten Commandments. God wrote on the tablets. God repeated his covenant with Israel. He forgave Israel for their unbelief and their idolatry. You may recall, prior to Exodus, chapter 34, Moses had gone up to Sinai and received the Ten Commandments, and in Exodus 32, he came down and found the Israelites had fashioned and were worshipping a golden calf.

So Moses broke the tablets, the perpetrators were killed, and Moses had the golden calf burned down and ground up, and he made the Israelites drink it. That is hard-core pastoring. They would not forget what they had done.

Moses now comes back the second time, and his face shines with the glory of the Lord, because he has spent 40 days with the Lord. Moses comes down to the people, and it is evident that he has been with God. He himself is glorious.

So, we have this wonderful image of the glory of the old covenant. But Paul also describes the shortcomings or the incompleteness of the old covenant. He calls it here in verse 7 a *ministry of death*. Now, what does Paul mean by that? He says it was carved in letters on stone. Just previously, he had told us that the letter kills but the Spirit gives life. What's Paul's emphasis here on death? Is he trying to tell us that the old is bad, that it should never have existed, it should never have been? No. He's telling us that the old is incomplete, that it is not the new. It is not of the Spirit.

The law was given to Israel, but it was not written on their hearts by the Spirit. This means that Israel *had* God's law, but they only had it externally. They were called to obey, but their focus was on the outward, the external. God's perfect, holy demands came to his people, and more often than not, they were met with a refusal to obey those demands. After all, isn't this the story of Israel? One of wandering, unfaithfulness, and disobedience. It's why God has kept sending prophets to Israel over and over again to call them back to himself.

The law, then, promised life, but it only brought death because of disobedience. So, just as Israel was unable to look at Moses' face because he reflected the glory of God, so they were unable to keep God's glorious law. It's not that the law was bad. It's not that the law was inglorious. Paul tells us elsewhere that the law is holy and just and good. It is that the law was actually more than Israel could bear. It was a reflection of God's character.

So, what does God do, then? How does he resolve this impasse? His people fail time and again. How does God resolve a people who disobey his will? Does he do away with the law? Does he do away with his glory? Does he change it or hide the glorious character of the law? No. God does something even more remarkable and even more glorious. He brings about the ministry of the Spirit to replace the ministry of death.

Now what does that mean? If the law was written on tablets of stone and, as a result, accused and condemned because we could not keep the demands, God instead says that *he* will fulfill the demands. The commandment promised life, but it brought death because of judgment, Paul said in Romans 7:10. So, God instead sends his Spirit to write the law on our hearts. In doing so, God enables his people to fulfill the demands of his law.

The ministry of the Spirit, unlike the ministry of the law, is transforming. The Spirit renews us. The Spirit gives us the ability to do God's will, not perfectly, but actually and really. As a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, you have the Spirit of Christ, and because of that, you can keep God's law. Do not mistake the fact that you cannot keep it perfectly all of the time to mean that you cannot keep God's law. You *can* because of what God has done. Not because of anything in you, not because of your merit or your ability, but because God has given a ministry of the Spirit to you and to me to keep God's law.

The ministry of the Spirit is, therefore, even more glorious than the ministry of death, because the ministry of the Spirit renews. It makes sinners into willing saints. One of the things you should think about in the Christian life is a short phrase: it is when duty becomes desire. It is not just that we try to keep God's law because it is our duty; it

is that we keep the law of God because it is our desire to be like Jesus, to glorify God, to acknowledge that God's law is holy and true, and to know that we can only do it by the Spirit of God.

Now, this means the emphasis we have is no longer on external obedience. Even when Israel *did* obey under the old covenant, they instead focused on the external nature of obedience. Jesus shows us this over and over again in the Gospels. The Pharisees are the prime example. They would try to keep the letter of the law, but their hearts were not in it. They would want to make sure they were following all of the rules as they understood them, but it was not from a heart of love. It was not from a heart of obedience.

Let me give you an example of what this looks like in families. Let's say you ask your children to clean their room. Or, kids, Mom and Dad ask you to clean your room. Now let's say that your children do it. They clean their room, but all the while they're doing it, they grumble. They complain and moan about how they're being forced to do this.

Now, make no mistake. They clean it properly. They do it the right way, but the only reason they do it (and they make that clear to you) is because they don't want to be punished. They're not doing it because you asked them to. They're not doing it out of love for you. They're just doing it because they have to. This is not how we should live life under the new covenant. Now we have the Spirit in our hearts, not only to enable us to obey but to take delight in God's commands. This is a glorious spiritual new covenant.

The New Covenant is More Glorious

Paul's second contrast that he brings up is with respect to glory. Paul makes clear that the old covenant had glory. This was not just a rhetorical point he was making to gain supporters. It was the truth. Think about the start of the new covenant. Israel was gathered around Mount Sinai. The entire mountain was set apart. No one, not even an animal, was allowed to touch the mountain upon pain of death. It was holy.

Moses went up the mountain, and there was thunder and lightning and earthquakes. God spoke in thunder and lightning, and the people were afraid. Moses himself was greatly afraid. This was glorious. Paul writes about this in verse 9 when he says, "There was glory in the ministry of condemnation." What does he mean by that? He's referring to all of the expressions of the glory of God in the old covenant.

The old covenant had the tabernacle. It had the temple. With painstaking detail, each aspect of the tabernacle and the temple reflected the character of God, the holiness of God, the greatness of God. There were symbols of God's holiness and perfection everywhere in the tabernacle and the temple. Then think about the laws and how they affected the lives of the Israelites...the laws that told them what to eat, what to wear, not to mix fabrics.

In each instance, the law set forth the holiness of God and the need for obedience, but the failure to obey the law also pointed to condemnation, because the law had no provision for life. It only announced death for disobedience. Now, that was glorious in a terrifying kind of way, but there was still a sense of distance, just like at Sinai, between God and his people. So, Paul deliberately chooses an Old Testament text that brings up this idea of the glory of God in the distance of the old covenant. In Exodus 34:29 we read:

"When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him."

Think about that. The glory of the old covenant was such that not only could the people not bear to be close to God; they could not bear to be close to his messenger. But in the new covenant, there is even more glory. The new covenant surpasses the old. Paul's language here is very important. He does not say the one is glorious and the other is not. No. He says the new covenant far exceeds the old in glory; that is, it abounds in glory more than the old.

It is a ministry not of condemnation but of righteousness. The new covenant is a ministry of righteousness because it is the fulfillment of the gospel. In the new covenant, God fulfills all of his promises in the old covenant. God brings his righteousness to his people in the person and work of Jesus Christ. I don't think it's put anywhere better than how Paul puts in Romans, chapter 8. He says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." So, we had a ministry of condemnation, and now Paul tells us there is *no* condemnation for those of us in the new covenant.

"For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death." Once again, Paul says the Spirit has freed us from sin, freed us from death in this new covenant. "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do." Do you see Paul in one sentence summarizing the old covenant of the law? It could not do this. So how did God do it? "By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

You see, this new covenant is more glorious than the old covenant because there is no condemnation. There is only righteousness, and the righteousness that comes to us is the righteousness in Jesus Christ. Forgiveness and restoration are central to the new covenant. Do you want to be free from fear? Do you want to be free from condemnation, from a vision of God as a harsh judge who can never be satisfied? Then you need to look to Jesus.

You need to trust Jesus to fulfill in you God's righteousness. Trust Jesus to give you his Spirit and to enable you to follow the Lord. There is no greater glory. God would be glorified in judging you as guilty and condemning you, but he's even more glorified in the work of Jesus Christ in you.

The New Covenant is Permanent

Paul finishes with a third contrast: temporary versus permanent. In this contrast, he does the same thing he has done in the first two. He clearly states that the old covenant was good and glorious. It was not bad. But just as clearly, he states that the new is better. Look with me at verses 10-11. "Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory."

Look closely at verse 10 with me. Paul begins by saying, "Indeed..." He wants our attention. He's saying, "Listen up here. I've got something important to say." "In this case..." In the matter of the old covenant being a ministry

of death, in the matter of the law, in the matter of the law rather than the Spirit, the external rather than the internal. "In this case," Paul says, "what once had glory..." This is a wonderful phrase. It's actually one word, a verb, in the Greek. It is a perfect passive participle. What do I mean by that? It is a past tense passive...that is, it is acted upon, not acting...verb. It means what has been glorified.

Now, your first question should be, "Well, if it has been glorified, by whom has it been glorified?" The answer, of course, is God. The old covenant had glory because it was glorified by God, but now it has come to have no glory at all. It is no longer glorified. It is no longer seen as glorious. Why? Is it because it never had glory? Of course not! We just heard Paul say that it *did* have glory. No, it's because there is a glory that surpasses it. It is a super-abounding, hyper-glory.

Let me put it to you *this* way. Most of us have outdoor lights on our porches or on our front doors. Some of you may even have powerful LED lights. You turn them on when it gets dark so that the house is lit up and so you can see people who come to the front door, and it does a good job of lighting up that portion of the front of your house.

Have you ever had the experience of forgetting to turn the light off when you go to bed? You get up in the morning, and you open the door, and you go outside, and you don't even see that the light is on. Why? Is it because it's not working? Is it because it doesn't throw off light? No. It's because in comparison to the light of the sun, it's like nothing at all. You don't even notice it. As a matter of fact, someone could stand behind you and turn that light on and off, on and off a dozen times, and you'd never notice in the brilliance of the sun.

That's what Paul is talking about here. The old was not designed to be permanent. It did not fail. It served its purpose. So, looking back at verse 7, the old was being brought to an end, Paul tells us. It was being discontinued. It was being superseded by something better. That doesn't mean the old was bad. It just means we should rejoice in the new.

Now, things get discontinued, superseded all the time. We're about to go on vacation on a trip, and one of my sons decided he wanted over-the-ear headphones for the trip. Because I'm a dad and I'm cheap, I looked to try to find something on sale, and I found good Sony noise-cancelling headphones for about half the price of Amazon at Costco. So, we drove over to Costco to go get these headphones. We had to make someone go and find them for us.

We found out later there were only four of them in the store. Why were there only four? Well, as the clerk brought us the headphones, he said, "You have to understand these are version 2. Version 3 is out now, so we're getting rid of the version twos. Everyone is going to want version 3." Now, I have to tell you this. The version 2 headphones are fine. I don't know if they've come off his ears yet. They work perfectly well. Version 3, I'm sure, has additional things to it. It works better in certain ways. But that doesn't mean version 2 was useless.

This is how we have to view the old and the new covenants. The old leads to the new. The new fulfills everything that was in the old and more. It's better to think of the old as being swallowed up in the new. The new is not a

replacement. It is a complete fulfillment of all the old pointed to. This is the most glorious thing about the new. It will never become obsolete.

We live in a world of planned obsolescence, don't we? When you go and buy the latest smartphone at the store, the company that sells it to you already knows the date on which it is to be obsolete. They want there to be a point where you have to buy new because the old doesn't work anymore. It's obsolete. The glory of the new covenant is that it never becomes obsolete. Do you see how Paul describes this new covenant? He uses the future tense. Not that it's about to come about in the future but that it will extend into the future forever.

We see this first in verse 8. Paul says: "...will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?" The ministry of the Spirit is here to stay. It is permanent. Again, in verse 11, Paul writes: "...much more will what is permanent have glory." The old is being brought to an end. It is being inactivated. "For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory." The old is being phased out, and the new continues forever. The new is permanent by definition. The word actually means that which remains or stays.

This is a new and better covenant. It is better because it is permanent and abides. It is immune to replacement. The old has served its purpose, and it has been rendered obsolete by the new. This is what Hebrews tells us in Hebrews, chapter 8. "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." That describes the old covenant vanishing in the face of the new, but the new never vanishes. The new is eternal. The new is founded in Jesus.

Paul wants us to know that his ministry is glorious. It's more glorious than that of Moses, and that means *our* ministry is more glorious than Moses'. But that's not because we're better people than Moses. It's because our Lord Jesus Christ has come and brought about the new covenant. He has fulfilled all of the promises of God. He has done away with the condemnation and brought about righteousness. He has sent his Spirit to dwell with us and to empower us to follow God's law. Do you see this glory? Come to the foot of the cross and lay your burden down, and you will be overwhelmed by the glory of what God has done in Jesus Christ.