

The Book of 2 Corinthians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: Ministers of a New Covenant

2 Corinthians 3:1–18

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Second Corinthians 3 carries the heaviest doctrinal weight of the early lessons, and the teacher should prepare to handle it with both clarity and reverence. The central truth is the relationship between the old covenant given through Moses and the new covenant established in Christ. Paul does not despise the law. He calls it glorious, a ministry that came with such splendor that Israel could not gaze at Moses' face. But he insists, with deliberate force, that this glory was a fading glory, and that the old covenant has now been surpassed and set aside by the new. The ministry carved on stone is "being brought to an end," while the ministry of the Spirit abides in surpassing glory. This is the great covenantal turning point of redemptive history, and the teacher must present it plainly: Christians are not under the Law of Moses but under the new covenant in Christ's blood.

This has enormous practical consequences, so it must be handled accurately. The Law was holy, righteous, and good, yet it could only command and condemn; it could not produce the life it required. That is why Paul says "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." In Christ the law has been fulfilled and taken out of the way, nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14), and a better covenant has been established on better promises (Hebrews 8:6–13). The teacher should be ready to show how this informs everyday Christian living: we are not seeking to be justified by keeping a code, nor are we bound to the old covenant's regulations, its sabbaths, festivals, and sacrifices, which were shadows of what has now come in Christ.

At the same time, this chapter is not merely a lecture on covenants. It ends with one of the most heart-forming promises in all of Scripture: that with unveiled faces we behold the glory of the Lord and are transformed into His image from one degree of glory to another. The doctrine is meant to set us free and to set our gaze on Christ. So aim at both targets. Help students grasp clearly and confidently why we live under the new covenant and not the old, and lead them into the transforming practice of beholding the glory of the Lord, so that they are actually being changed into His likeness.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul tells the Corinthians they are "a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (vv. 2–3). What does this teach about how the gospel is meant to authenticate itself, and why does Paul point to transformed lives rather than credentials as the proof of true ministry?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the boldness of Paul's claim. Asked for his credentials, he points to the Corinthians themselves: "You are our letter." The transformed lives of believers are the living evidence that the gospel is true and that his ministry is genuine. No parchment could say more than a changed person.

Notice the precise contrast Paul draws. This letter is written "not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." He is already reaching back to Sinai and forward to Jeremiah's promise of a covenant written on the heart. The very form of the evidence, lives changed from the inside, proclaims the nature of the new covenant.

Help students see what this means for how the gospel commends itself. Arguments have their place, but the most powerful apologetic is a community of people visibly being remade by Christ, marked by love, holiness, forgiveness, and joy. A watching world reads lives more readily than it reads tracts.

This also guards against a ministry built on self-promotion. Paul refuses to commend himself with impressive letters. The fruit of the Spirit in real people is the recommendation that matters. Where that fruit is present, the gospel is believable; where it is absent, no credential can supply it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Transformed lives as the authenticating evidence of the gospel and of true ministry
- The new covenant written on the heart by the Spirit, fulfilling Jeremiah 31:33
- The witness of a changed community as the most powerful commendation of Christ
- The contrast between inward transformation and external credentials

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul point to changed people rather than credentials as proof of his ministry?
- How does a transformed life make the gospel believable to those watching?
- What makes a congregation's "living letter" easy or hard for the community to read?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think honestly about what your own life "letter" communicates to the people who read it every day, your family, coworkers, and neighbors. What story does your life currently tell about Christ, and is there a chapter you would want the Spirit to rewrite?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks students to consider what their own lives communicate. Everyone is a letter being read by someone, a spouse, a child, a coworker, a neighbor. The question is not whether our lives say something, but what they say.

Help students reflect honestly and without despair. The point is not to manufacture guilt but to invite the Spirit's ongoing work. Ask what story their daily conduct, their words, their priorities, their reactions under pressure, currently tells about the Christ they claim.

Move toward hope. The beauty of the new covenant is that God Himself does the writing. We are not left to reform ourselves by willpower. We can ask the Author to take up the pen again and rewrite the chapters we are ashamed of.

Encourage one specific area for the Spirit to address, perhaps a recurring impatience at home, a coldness toward a difficult person, a private compromise. The goal is to invite real, Spirit-empowered change in a concrete part of life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The believer's life as a continual witness, for better or worse
- Sanctification as God's ongoing writing on the heart, not mere self-improvement
- Honest self-examination held together with hope in the Spirit's work
- The integrity of public profession and private conduct

Discussion Prompts

- What does your daily life currently tell others about Christ?
- Is there a "chapter" you would want the Spirit to rewrite?
- How does it change things to know God Himself is the one writing on your heart?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul says our competence is "from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (vv. 5-6). What does it mean that "the letter kills but the Spirit gives life," and why could the old covenant law expose and condemn sin but never produce the life it required?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question opens the central contrast of the chapter: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Be careful to define terms. By "the letter" Paul means the old covenant law, the commandment carved in stone. By "the Spirit" he means the life-giving ministry of the new covenant.

Explain why the law, though holy and good, could only kill. It told people what righteousness required, and it pronounced a curse on every failure, but it gave no power to obey. Like a mirror,

it could show the dirt on a face, but it could not wash it. The law diagnosed the disease of sin and even inflamed it, but it carried no cure (Romans 7:7–13).

The new covenant is different in kind. The Spirit does not merely command life from the outside; He gives life from within. God writes His law on the heart and supplies the power to walk in it. This is the decisive advance from Sinai to Calvary and Pentecost: from a covenant that demanded what it could not produce to a covenant that produces what it demands.

Stress that Paul is not criticizing the law for being bad. He is celebrating the gospel for being better. The competence to minister this new and living covenant is “from God,” not from human ability. The whole arrangement, from first to last, is a gift of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The old covenant law as holy and good, yet unable to give life (Romans 7:12; 8:3)
- The law’s function to expose and condemn sin rather than to save
- The new covenant ministry of the Spirit, which gives life from within
- Christian competence and power as gifts from God, not human achievement

Discussion Prompts

- In what sense does “the letter” kill while “the Spirit” gives life?
- Why could the law command righteousness but never produce it?
- What is the difference between trying to obey from the outside and being changed from within?

Question 4

Student Question:

Where in your walk with God are you still trying to live by sheer willpower and rule-keeping rather than depending on the Spirit who lives in you? What would it look like this week to draw on God’s power rather than gritting your teeth and trying harder?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question presses the truth home. Many sincere believers still live, functionally, under the old covenant, relating to God as a demanding list of rules to be met by sheer effort, and feeling perpetually defeated.

Help students recognize the symptoms of letter-living: a joyless, white-knuckled religion, a constant sense of falling short, a reliance on willpower that always eventually fails. This is not the freedom of the new covenant but a return to Sinai.

Point them to the new covenant alternative: drawing on the Spirit who lives in them. This does not mean effortlessness or passivity. It means working, but working in dependence, praying for

power, abiding in Christ, and trusting the Spirit to produce fruit that mere willpower never could (Galatians 5:16–25).

Encourage one concrete practice for the week, perhaps beginning a recurring struggle with prayer for the Spirit's help rather than a private vow to try harder. The aim is to shift from self-powered effort to Spirit-empowered obedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between law-driven willpower and Spirit-empowered obedience
- Walking by the Spirit as the path to real change (Galatians 5:16–25)
- Dependence on God's power rather than self-reliance in the Christian life
- Freedom from the joyless treadmill of self-justification

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you still trying to change by willpower rather than by the Spirit?
- What does dependence on the Spirit look like in practice, as opposed to passivity?
- What recurring struggle could you begin to bring to God in prayer this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul grants that the old covenant, the “ministry of death, carved in letters on stone,” came with real glory, yet he insists the “ministry of the Spirit” has far greater glory, and that the old was “being brought to an end” (vv. 7–11). How can the old covenant be both genuinely glorious and yet fading, and what does this teach about the relationship between the law of Moses and the gospel of Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here Paul makes a carefully balanced statement that the teacher should present with precision. He grants that the old covenant, which he calls the “ministry of death, carved in letters on stone,” came with real and undeniable glory, so much that Israel could not look at Moses' shining face. He is not belittling the law.

But he insists that this glory was a fading glory. Moses' face shone and then dimmed, and Paul takes that as a parable of the old covenant itself: glorious, but temporary, and now “being brought to an end.” By contrast, the ministry of the Spirit possesses a surpassing and permanent glory.

Help students hold these two truths together. The law was good and glorious in its time and for its purpose. And the law was always meant to give way to something greater, just as the morning star gives way to the sunrise. To insist on clinging to the old after the new has come is to prefer the fading glory to the abiding one.

This sets up the major doctrinal question to come. For now, the point is the relationship: not law versus a rival, but shadow giving way to substance, lesser glory eclipsed by greater. The old pointed forward; the new is the fulfillment it pointed to.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The genuine but fading glory of the old covenant
- The surpassing and permanent glory of the new covenant ministry of the Spirit
- The old covenant as preparatory and temporary, pointing forward to Christ
- The danger of clinging to a fading glory once the greater has come

Discussion Prompts

- How can the old covenant be both truly glorious and yet fading?
- What does the dimming of Moses' face picture about the old covenant?
- Why is it a mistake to cling to the lesser glory after the greater has arrived?

Question 6

Student Question:

Are there old, lesser glories you find yourself clinging to, former ways of measuring your standing with God, past spiritual achievements, religious traditions you trust more than Christ Himself? What would it mean to let those fade so that the surpassing glory of the new covenant can fill your view?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the image of fading glory toward the heart. We all have "lesser glories" we are tempted to trust, things that once meant much to us and that we are reluctant to let dim, even when Christ Himself is offered.

Help students name what these might be. For some it is a record of past spiritual achievement they quietly rest in. For others it is a religious tradition or routine they trust more than they trust the living Christ. For others it is an old way of measuring their standing with God by performance.

Be gentle but clear. These things are often not evil in themselves, just as the law was not evil. The danger is in clinging to them as our glory when the surpassing glory of Christ is held out to us. They become idols not by being bad but by taking a place that belongs to Him.

Invite a deliberate letting go, a willingness to let the lesser glories fade so that Christ can fill the view. This is not loss but exchange, trading dim and dying lights for the sunrise of His glory.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to rest in past achievements or traditions rather than in Christ
- Good things becoming idols when they take Christ's place
- The call to let lesser glories fade in light of the surpassing glory of Christ
- Christ as the believer's true and abiding glory (Philippians 3:7–9)

Discussion Prompts

- What "lesser glory" are you most tempted to cling to instead of Christ?
- How can a good thing, like a tradition or a past achievement, become an idol?
- What would it mean to let that fade so Christ can fill your view?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says that whenever Moses is read "a veil lies over their hearts," but that "when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed" (vv. 14–16). What does this teach about why people can read or hear the Scriptures and still miss Christ, and how does turning to the Lord change the way we see and understand God's word?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul now explains why so many of his fellow Israelites read the Scriptures and yet miss their meaning: "a veil lies over their hearts." The problem is not the text but the heart. Until a person turns to the Lord, there is a covering that keeps the glory of Christ from being seen, even in the very Scriptures that point to Him.

Help students grasp that understanding God's word is not merely an intellectual achievement. A person can know the words, even memorize them, and still not perceive the Christ to whom they testify. Spiritual sight requires a turning of the heart, not just a sharpening of the mind.

The promise is glorious: "when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed." The same Scriptures that seemed closed and dead spring to life when read in Christ. The Old Testament itself becomes a book about Jesus once the veil is lifted (Luke 24:27).

Apply this to how students read the Bible. We should come to Scripture prayerfully, with hearts turned to the Lord, asking the Spirit to lift the veil, rather than treating the Bible as mere information to be mastered. Understanding follows surrender.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The veil over the heart as the reason people read Scripture yet miss Christ
- Spiritual understanding as a matter of the turned heart, not mere intellect
- The Old Testament fulfilled in and illuminated by Christ (Luke 24:27)
- The Spirit's role in opening the word to the believer

Discussion Prompts

- Why can a person know the words of Scripture yet miss its meaning?
- What does it mean that turning to the Lord lifts the veil?
- How should this shape the way we come to the Bible?

Question 8

Student Question:

Are there places in your own heart where a “veil” still dulls your sight of Christ, hardness, distraction, an unsundered area, a settled assumption you have never questioned? What would it look like to turn more fully to the Lord so that the veil is lifted there?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question brings the image of the veil close to home. Even believers, whose veil has been lifted in Christ, can have areas where their sight of Him is still dulled, places of hardness, distraction, or unsundered habit where the glory does not yet shine clearly.

Help students locate such places honestly. It might be a corner of life they have never really opened to God, a settled assumption they have never tested against Scripture, a hardness that keeps them from feeling the weight of His love.

Remind them that the cure is the same as before: turning to the Lord. The veil is lifted not by trying harder to see, but by turning the face toward Christ. Where we have turned away, we can turn back, and the covering lifts again.

Encourage one specific area of turning this week, one unsundered place to bring into the light. The promise of the next verse is that those who behold the Lord with unveiled faces are changed into His likeness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Remaining areas of dullness even in genuine believers
- Turning to the Lord as the ongoing remedy for a dulled heart
- The connection between surrender and clearer sight of Christ
- The believer’s call to keep turning the face toward Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Where might a “veil” still dull your sight of Christ?
- What would it look like to turn more fully to the Lord in that area?
- How does surrender lead to clearer spiritual sight?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul declares that the new covenant has replaced and surpassed the old: the ministry carved on stone is “being brought to an end,” while the ministry of the Spirit remains in glory (vv. 7–11), and he later says believers are now under a covenant “not of the letter but of the Spirit” (v. 6). How does the New Testament present the relationship between the Law of Moses and the new covenant in Christ, in light of passages like Matthew 5:17, Colossians 2:13–17, and Hebrews 8:6–13, and what does it mean for Christians today that the old covenant has been fulfilled and set aside in Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it should be taught plainly, reverently, and without apology. Paul’s argument across the chapter establishes that the new covenant has surpassed and replaced the old. The ministry carved on stone is “being brought to an end,” while the ministry of the Spirit remains in glory. Christians do not live under the Law of Moses; we live under the new covenant in the blood of Christ.

Set the biblical witness alongside Paul’s words. Jeremiah had promised a new covenant, not like the one made at Sinai, in which God would write His law on hearts and remember sin no more (Jeremiah 31:31–34). Hebrews quotes that promise and draws the conclusion directly: “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete” (Hebrews 8:13). The old covenant did its appointed work and has now passed.

Show how Christ Himself fulfilled and set aside the Law. He said He came “not to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). The Law was never thrown away as worthless; it was brought to its goal in Him. Paul says God canceled “the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands,” nailing it to the cross, and therefore no one is to be judged by the old covenant’s regulations of food, festival, new moon, or sabbath, which “are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2:14–17). The shadow has given way to the body that cast it.

Draw out what this means for Christians today, carefully and pastorally. We are not justified by keeping the law of Moses, nor are we bound to its ceremonial system, its sacrifices, its priesthood, its holy days. We worship under the new covenant, gathering on the first day of the week as the apostles did (Acts 20:7), not keeping a Jewish Sabbath as though Sinai were still in force. The moral character of God revealed in the law is upheld and deepened in Christ, but our covenant relationship is now governed by the law of Christ and the teaching of His apostles. The New Testament, not the old covenant code, is the standard for the Lord’s church.

Finally, keep the tone one of marveling rather than mere argument. Paul is not sneering at Moses. He is awestruck that what Moses only glimpsed has now come in full. We stand where prophets longed to stand, under a covenant in which our sins are remembered no more and God’s own Spirit dwells within us. To prefer the old to the new, or to drag Christians back under

the law, is to trade the sunrise for the fading stars. Help students feel the privilege of the covenant they have been brought into.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The new covenant surpassing and replacing the old, which is fading and set aside (vv. 7–11; Hebrews 8:13)
- Jeremiah's promised new covenant fulfilled in Christ (Jeremiah 31:31–34)
- Christ fulfilling rather than abolishing the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17)
- The legal demands of the law canceled and nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14–17)
- The old covenant's sabbaths, festivals, and sacrifices as shadows fulfilled in Christ
- Christians governed by the new covenant and the New Testament, not the Law of Moses
- First-day worship under the new covenant rather than a Christian Sabbath (Acts 20:7)

Discussion Prompts

- In what specific ways does the New Testament say the old covenant has been set aside in Christ?
- How would you lovingly explain to someone that Christians are not under the Law of Moses?
- Why is this good news rather than a loss, and how should it make us marvel?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter, the living letter, the Spirit who gives life, the surpassing glory of the new covenant, the unveiled face that beholds Christ and is transformed "from one degree of glory to another" (v. 18). Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this passage, and what is your first step toward that change this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter ends not with an argument but with a promise, and the capstone question should land there. With unveiled faces we behold the glory of the Lord and are "transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." This is the goal of the whole new covenant: not just forgiveness, but transformation into the likeness of Christ.

Help students see how this transformation happens: by beholding. We become like what we gaze at. As we fix our attention on Christ, in His word, in worship, in prayer, the Spirit gradually remakes us into His image. This is gradual, "from one degree of glory to another," not instantaneous, which is both realistic and encouraging.

Invite each student to name one specific way this passage is forming them, whether it is trading rule-keeping for Spirit-dependence, letting a lesser glory fade, turning a veiled area over to the Lord, or simply resolving to behold Christ more steadily.

Close by reminding them of the wonder of it. The same Spirit who wrote the new covenant on their hearts is at work changing them, slowly and surely, into the likeness of the One they behold. Our part is to keep turning our faces toward Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Transformation into the image of Christ as the goal of the new covenant (v. 18)
- Beholding Christ as the means of being changed into His likeness
- Sanctification as gradual, from one degree of glory to another
- The Spirit as the active agent of the believer's transformation

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that we are changed by beholding the glory of the Lord?
- Which truth from this chapter is most forming you right now?
- What is one concrete way you can "behold" Christ more steadily this week?