

The Book of 2 Corinthians

Lesson 3: Ministers of a New Covenant -- 2 Corinthians 3:1-18

Imagine a traveling teacher arriving in a strange city, reaching into his bag, and pulling out a sheaf of letters. They are recommendations, signed by important people, vouching for him. In the ancient world that is exactly how you established your credentials. Paul's rivals in Corinth came waving such letters. And so a question hangs over this chapter: where are Paul's letters of recommendation? His answer is breathtaking. "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all." The proof of Paul's ministry was not ink on parchment. It was changed lives. The Corinthians themselves, transformed by the gospel, were a living letter "written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

That single image opens up the great theme of the chapter, and it is one of the most important in the whole New Testament: the contrast between the old covenant and the new. Paul deliberately echoes the giving of the law at Sinai, the tablets of stone, the glory on Moses' face. He has no doubt that the old covenant was glorious. It came with such splendor that the people could not look at Moses' shining face. But Paul makes a daring claim: that old glory, real as it was, was a fading glory, and it has now been eclipsed by something greater. The covenant carved in stone has given way to a covenant written on hearts by the Spirit of the living God.

This matters for every Christian, because it tells us where we stand. We do not live at the foot of Mount Sinai. We are not under the law of Moses, straining to keep a code carved in stone that could command but never empower. We live under a new covenant, sealed in the blood of Christ, in which God writes His law on our hearts and puts His Spirit within us. Paul will say it starkly: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." The old covenant, holy and good as it was, could only diagnose sin and pronounce the sentence of death. The new covenant brings the very life of God to people who could never earn it.

And then the chapter ends with a promise that takes the breath away. When a person turns to the Lord, the veil is lifted. We come to behold the glory of the Lord with unveiled faces, and as we behold Him, we are changed, "transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." This is the Christian life: not staring at a code we cannot keep, but gazing at the face of Christ and slowly, surely, being made like Him. Read this chapter and marvel that you have been brought into a covenant Moses himself only glimpsed from a distance.

Group Discussion: Paul says the Corinthians themselves are a "letter of Christ," written "not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God," known and read by everyone (vv. 2-3). If the strongest evidence for the gospel is changed lives rather than clever arguments, what does that say about how a congregation actually commends Christ to its community? What can make a church's "living letter" compelling, and what can make it hard to read?

Personal Reflection: Paul contrasts a covenant carved in stone, which could command but not empower, with a covenant written on the heart by the Spirit, which brings life (vv. 3–6). Are there areas where you still relate to God mainly as a list of rules to keep by your own effort, rather than as a Father who has put His Spirit within you? What would change if you lived more from the new covenant than the old?

Read 2 Corinthians 3:1–18

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Jeremiah 31:31–34, the promise of a new covenant with God’s law written on the heart; Hebrews 8:6–13, the new covenant making the first one obsolete; Colossians 2:13–17, the record of debt nailed to the cross and the law fulfilled in Christ; Matthew 5:17, Christ coming not to abolish but to fulfill the Law and the Prophets; 2 Corinthians 3:18, beholding the Lord’s glory and being transformed into His image