

The Fading Glory of the Old Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:1-11)

Series Title: The Law of Christ and Continuity and Discontinuity of the Old and New Covenant

Definitions:

- **Natural law:** the moral law (Law of God) that exists in every image bearer, regardless of exposure to the Holy Scriptures. It is a principled law to love God and to love others.
- **Positive law:** laws, commands, and prohibitions that must be revealed, which cannot be known otherwise (circumcision, dietary, cultic, clothing, festivals, Baptism, etc.).
- **Mosaic law:** 613 laws given as a covenant to the nation of Israel. It was established in the context of redemption from the slavery of sin with anticipation of inheriting the land (Deut. 5:1-6). It was temporary as a Guardian (Gal. 3).

Summary of Romans 7:1-8:4: Paul illustrates marriage to describe the believer's relation to the law (Mosaic for the Jew and natural law for the Jew/Gentile). In faith, they have died to the law through the death of Christ (v.4). The purpose of 7:7-20 is to demonstrate that sanctification and justification cannot come from the law in the realm of the flesh and sin, as the law does not produce holiness in that "envelope." Instead, it reveals the true character and nature of sin. Those in the flesh (before salvation in Adam) cannot please God. The "new man in Christ" who is regenerated, justified, and adopted through faith in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ and the accompanying sanctifying work and power of the Holy Spirit fulfills the law (Rom. 8:4).

Context:

- Corinth was a milieu of Greek and Roman culture, with many gods (8:5). The worship of these gods was a part of everyday life, including the "public sphere."
- It was "world-renowned" for its Olympic games, rhetoric, philosophical schooling and debates, and a strong commerce and trading city.
- Paul brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to Corinth, helped by Priscilla and Aquila, who were displaced Jews (Acts 18:1-4, 18-19, 24-28). The three of them spent 18 months in Corinth.
- Paul departed and settled in Ephesus, where he wrote 1 Corinthians (53 AD). He learns of the havoc wrought by false teachers, Gnostics, and Judaizers from Timothy (Acts 19:22) and Titus (2 Cor. 7:13-15). Paul writes another letter before writing his last letter (2 Corinthians) in Philippi more than a year after writing 1 Corinthians.

Paul wrote four letters to the church in Corinth, although we only have two (1 and 2 Corinthians). He wrote: (1) "the previous letter..." (1 Cor. 5:9), (2) 1 Corinthians, (3) a letter which was "tearful, sorrowful, in much affliction" (2 Cor. 2:3-4), and (4) 2 Corinthians.

1. The Appeal of Paul as a Servant of the New Covenant (v.1-6)

- In Paul's absence, false teachers, Gnostics, and Judaizers had infiltrated the Corinthian church. Despite Timothy and Titus' visit and Paul's third letter, these "wolves" wrought havoc in the church and sought to discredit Paul's apostleship and shepherding.
- These men demanded a "recommendation letter" from Paul. This would be a written letter from the Jerusalem synagogue, his credentials as an orator, or letters from those he has shepherded. In essence, these "troublemakers" are asking for a resume.
- All four of Paul's letters would have been read in the public gathering of the church, including many (perhaps the majority) whom the Lord saved under Paul's ministry.
 - Paul's response to those who demand a "recommendation letter" is no. Those who are in attendance are my "recommendation letters."

- Paul refers to them as "you are our recommendation letters" (including Timothy, 1:1). He defends himself from accusation, not by appealing to a physical letter, but to a "living letter" (those who came to faith in Christ through the ministry of Paul and Timothy).
- Not only are they recommendation letters, but their "heart" is the recommendation letter.
 - Paul skillfully crafts prose that compares physical recommendation letters to something else (i.e., the heart and the New Covenant).
- The reader discovers which sect of false teachers Paul is addressing in v.3: the Judaizers.
 - Judaizers insist that the members of the New Covenant return to the Law of Moses (Old Covenant) and observe the cultic, ceremonial, and cultural worship that was reserved for the Jews only (or proselyte Gentiles).

2. The Abating Glory of the Old Covenant/ Mosaic Law (v.3-11)

- Paul calls the Corinthians a "letter from Christ delivered by us," written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but in tablets of human hearts" (v.3)
 - Paul uses play-on-words, relating a dead, orthodox recommendation letter (v.1) to a living one and, consequently, the tablets of stone with a living heart.
 - Paul, in mentioning the "tablets of stone" (v.3), is speaking of the Ten Words (Ten Commandments), which are a summary of the Old Covenant (Mosaic Law).
- Paul renounces any merit, sufficiency, or worthiness as qualifying him to be a minister (servant) of the New Covenant. He demonstrates that the letter (ink → stone) kills (v.6-7).
- The Mosaic Law (Old Covenant) is a ministry of death (v.6-7). How is it a ministry of death? In the realm of sin and the flesh:
 - Apart from the law, sin lies dead, i.e., unrecognizable (Rom. 7:8). The law gives sin its power (1 Cor. 15:56) and is an instrument of deception (Rom. 7:11). Through the law, there is a curse (Gal. 3:13) and the charging of sin to one's account (5:13). It reveals and defines sin (Rom. 3:20; 5:13; 7:7), increases transgressions, arouses sinful passions that bring condemnation and death (4:15; 7:5, 8-11, 13; 7:19; 2 Cor. 3:6), and unmasks the actual color of sin. It demands a standard people cannot keep (Deut. 27:26; Rom. 3:20; Rom. 7:7-11) and perfects nothing (Heb. 7:9).
- Although the Mosaic Law itself is spiritual in that it reflects God's character in many ways, it is not the only law that reflects the character of God (New Covenant).
- Paul demonstrates (v.7-11) that the Old Covenant was always intended to be temporary as he alludes to Moses' descent from Sinai in fading glory after receiving the Ten Words (Commandments) for the second time (Ex. 19-20:22; 31:18-32:20; 34:29-35).
- The veil came after the law (Ten Commandments) was given. The veil represents the hardness of the nation of Israel and its inability and unwillingness to receive the law internally in the realm of sin and the flesh.
- The glory of Moses and the covenant of the letter had always intended to be temporary and were ontologically (being) designed to transpire and end (3:11). They were transitory (Gal. 3:19-25; Rom. 10:4) and, as a result, are considered "old" (3:14).
 - Moses was helpless to change the heart, as law cannot change the heart, but instead "incites, aggravates, and enlivens sin" (Rom. 7:7-16).
- The fault was not with Moses or the law but with the sinful people, who are referred to as hardened and stiff-necked (Isa. 6:9-10; 29:10-12; Jer. 5:21-24; Ezek. 12:2; Mk. 4:10-12; Jn. 12:39-40; Acts 28:25-27).
- The Old Covenant law provided no "batteries" as the will and desire to obey God must come through a new power and principle. This is consummated in and through the New Covenant and Law of Christ.