

# The glory of new covenant ministry

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon

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*<sup>6</sup>He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant — not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. <sup>7</sup>Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, <sup>8</sup>will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? <sup>9</sup>If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! <sup>10</sup>For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. <sup>11</sup>And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!*  
(2 Corinthians 3.6 – 11)

## Introduction

In the passage that we are looking at this morning, the apostle Paul speaks of the glory of the work of making known the new covenant. He says in verse 6 of our reading, “He [that is, God] has made us competent as ministers [or servants] of a new covenant — not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” He then goes on to speak of how excellent the work of speaking about the New Covenant is by contrasting New Covenant ministry with the ministry of Moses. The ministry of Moses was, in its own terms, glorious, but, next to the ministry of the New Covenant, it fades into insignificance.

Some of you might be asking, “What does the word ‘covenant’ mean?”

A covenant is an agreement or a contract which includes promises and obligations, and penalties if that agreement is broken. A human example of a covenant is marriage. When a man and a woman get married, they

both promise, one to the other, that they will be faithful to each other for the rest of their lives. Having made these promises the husband and wife are then bound by the covenant that they have made.

When God enters into covenant with men, he similarly makes promises to men, and he expects from men their obedience and love in return. There is a big difference, however, between the covenants that God makes with men and the covenants that are made between human beings. Covenants between human beings are usually made by equal partners, who contract voluntarily and freely together. In the example of marriage, the man and the woman voluntarily agree to enter into a covenant together. But when God enters into covenant with men, God is the initiator. He comes as Lord and King. He chooses whom he will include in his covenant. God lays down all the terms. Our job is simply to acquiesce in his terms.

There are two covenants that are referred to in this passage.

The first one that is referred to is the covenant that God made with the people of Israel at time of Moses. This is sometimes called the “Mosaic Covenant” or the “Old Covenant”. God promised to the people of Israel that if they kept his law, the Ten Commandments, they would know him as their God and they would be allowed to live in the promised land of Canaan. The penalty was that if they did not obey his commandments they would be ejected from the land.

The other covenant that is referred to in this passage is the New Covenant that God has made with all true believers through Jesus Christ. According to this covenant, God has promised that his people will all know him, they will all have God’s law written on their hearts, and they will have all their sins forgiven. All those who are included in this covenant are given the Holy Spirit. They are guaranteed a place in heaven. God has commanded that in return for the blessings that his people receive under this covenant they should love and obey him, and keep the same moral commandments that he gave to his people at the time of Moses. But there is a massive difference between this New Covenant and the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant was conditional. At its heart, it said, effectively, “Obey God’s law and you can stay in the land. Disobey God’s law, and you will be expelled from the land.” But, under the New Covenant, God says that the blessings of new life and salvation are unconditional. These blessings depend not upon our obedience but God’s free and undeserved love to us, which does not change according to how much we obey him.

In the passage that we are thinking about today, Paul is speaking about the glory of the ministry of the New Covenant. He does so by contrasting New Covenant ministry with the ministry of Moses, who announced the Old Covenant.

The word “ministry” could also be translated “service”. The word is the verb form of the word “diakonos” which meant a table waiter, and is the word from which we get our English word “deacon”. A deacon is a servant of the church.

Why is it important that you understand and believe this passage? It is important because many try to relate with God on the basis of what we might call “salvation by works”. “Salvation by works” is the idea that you get into heaven by doing good works. All the major religions of the world, apart from Biblical Christianity, teach this method of getting to Paradise. For example, Islam teaches that if you follow the teaching of Islam then you have a reasonable chance of being admitted to Paradise, if not immediately, after a few years in Hell to be purged of your sins. Roman Catholicism similarly teaches that, if you are religious, you get baptised when you are a baby, you receive your first communion as a teenager, you go regularly to confession and Mass, you have the last rites before you die, and try to live a good life, then you will probably be admitted to Heaven. You may have to go to what it calls “Purgatory” for a while, but after you have paid for your sins there you will be admitted to Heaven. Many who would call themselves Bible-believing Christians often, in reality, try to make themselves fit for Heaven by doing good works. They say, effectively, “Try hard to obey God, read your Bible every day, go to church each week, be involved in the outreach activities of your church, keep yourself from serious sin like sexual immorality, and, if you succeed in reaching this standard, you will get into heaven.” Even those of us who are truly saved from our sins by Jesus can find ourselves slipping back into this false perspective.

The “salvation by works” mentality is very similar to the Old Covenant. So it is really important that we properly understand how radically different the New Covenant is from the Old Covenant, so that we might be truly saved, and also so that, having been saved, we might be confident and joyful in our salvation.

Another reason why it is important that we hear this passage is because many of us who are true Christians can easily struggle with what the world might call an “inferiority complex”. We feel that we are so small, so useless, and so insignificant in what we are able to do in our lives. But this passage tells us that as we are engaged in Gospel work – and all true

believers can be involved in this by prayer and personal witnessing – we are involved in the most glorious enterprise known to man.

So let us see what the apostle Paul has to say about the glorious nature of New Covenant ministry. There are four things that we learn about the ministry of the New Covenant from this passage.

1. The ministry of the New Covenant is a ministry of the Holy Spirit
2. The ministry of the New Covenant brings life
3. The ministry of the New Covenant makes people righteous in God's sight
4. The ministry of the New Covenant is glorious

Let us think about these things together.

## **1. The ministry of the New Covenant is a ministry of the Holy Spirit**

We read in verse 6 “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant — not of the letter but of the Spirit”. In verse 8 the apostle speaks about the ministry of the New Covenant as the “ministry of the Spirit.”

This is a fundamental and very important aspect of the New Covenant. Key to the New Covenant is that under this covenant the Holy Spirit works in believers to change their hearts, to make them alive to God, to enable them to understand the Gospel, and to give them the desire to obey God.

By contrast, under the Old Covenant there was no operation of the Holy Spirit inside most of the people of Israel. They heard the law of God, but it was external to them. As the apostle says in verse 7, the law “was engraved in letters on stone”. But it did not affect their hearts. It was the ministry of the letter, not of the Spirit.

The gift of the Holy Spirit was a fundamental aspect of prophecies of the New Covenant that are found in the Old Testament. A really important prophecy of the New Covenant is one that is found in Jeremiah chapter 31, and verses 31 to 34. This prophecy is frequently quoted and alluded to in the New Testament, especially in the book of Hebrews. Here is what the verses say:

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It

will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

God promises that he will bring in a new covenant, which will be different from the covenant that he made with the people of Israel at the time of Moses. At the time of the Old Covenant God wrote his law on tablets of stone. Now he will write it on the hearts of his people. Under the Old Covenant most of the people did not know God personally. Now they will all know him, from the least to the greatest. How will these things be possible? They will be possible by the work of the Holy Spirit.

That it is the Holy Spirit who brings about these changes is clear from another prophecy of the New Covenant which is found in Ezekiel chapter 36 and verses 26 and 27, where God promises to his people, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

How is it that the Holy Spirit works in people's lives in New Covenant ministry? The answer is that as the message of salvation through Jesus Christ is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit works in those whom God has chosen, and causes them to be born again and their lives transformed. This is why the apostle Paul says, in Romans chapter 1 and verse 16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." He also says in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verses 17 and 18,

For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel — not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

He goes on to say in verses 22 to 24,

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

So Gospel ministry is Holy Spirit ministry. There are many today who claim to be anointed by the Holy Spirit. They claim to have Holy Spirit empowered ministries, and to do signs and wonders. But in many instances these people do not proclaim the Gospel of salvation from sin by Jesus Christ. Therefore their ministries are bereft of the real work of the Spirit.

If you are a Christian, be “proud” in the right sense, of this ministry. Boldly speak of Christ and the work that God has done through him.

So there is the first point. New Covenant ministry is a ministry of the Holy Spirit.

## **2. The ministry of the New Covenant brings life**

The apostle says in verse 6, “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant — not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

This follows directly from the first point. What does the Holy Spirit do when he works in a person’s life? The Holy Spirit brings life. In our natural state we are dead spiritually. But the Holy Spirit makes alive those in whom he works.

By contrast, the Old Covenant came to people who were dead spiritually, and made them even more dead. In verse 6 Paul says how the “letter kills”. In verse 7 he describes the ministry of the Old Covenant as “the ministry that brought death”.

This work of the Spirit in making alive those who were dead in their sins is described by the apostle Paul in Ephesians chapter 2. In verses 1 to 3 he reminds the believers how they were before God worked in them.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its

desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

They were spiritually dead in transgressions and sins. They were following the ways of the world, and following the prince of this world, the devil. They were slaves of sinful desires. They were heading for God's wrath.

But then something happened. God made them alive! Paul continues in verses 4 and 5, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved."

How did this happen to them? It happened through the work of the Spirit as they heard the Gospel being preached.

Let me ask you this question: do you know the Holy Spirit in your life? Have you been born again? If not, then you are still dead in your sins. Come to Christ. Ask him to do that work of the rebirth in your life.

So there is the second thing. The ministry of the New Covenant brings life.

### **3. The ministry of the New Covenant brings God's righteousness to men**

We read in verse 9: "If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!"

Paul says in this verse that the ministry of the New Covenant brings righteousness. What is this righteousness? The answer is that it is the righteousness of God. We have no righteousness of our own. In and of ourselves, we are sinful and guilty. But when a person hears the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ, and believes that Gospel, God gives his own perfect righteousness to that person. God treats that person as though he were sinlessly perfect. Not only are his sins forgiven, but he is regarded as being good before God, because God has given him a status of being righteous in his sight.

By contrast, the Old Covenant condemned men. It said, effectively, "Keep these laws and you will be God's people and you will be able to live in the promised land." But this had the effect of condemning all, because no-one perfectly obeys the law of God.

The truth that the New Covenant ministry makes people righteous in God's sight will also be spoken of in chapter 5 and verse 21, where the apostle says, concerning the death of Christ, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus had no sin, but as he hung on the Cross he represented our sin. He became our sin. The result was that, in him, we might become the righteousness of God.

Paul also speaks of this in Romans chapter 1 and verse 17. I have already quoted verses 16 where the apostle says that he is not ashamed of the Gospel. He goes on to say, in verse 17, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

Paul speaks about it also in Philippians chapter 3. In this chapter he speaks about how, as a Pharisee, he used to try to make himself righteous in God's sight by doing good works. He used to think of himself as a good person, because he tried very hard to keep God's commandments, and he was proud of his achievements. But then he realised that all that he used to be so proud of was useless for getting him to God. Then he continues, in verses 8 and 9,

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

Through this message of the New Covenant, the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, Paul received a righteousness that was not his own, the righteousness of God.

Here is tremendous good news for you, if you are not yet saved. If you come to Christ and trust him as your Saviour, God will make you righteous in his sight. He will clothe you with a righteousness that is not your own. He will regard you as completely righteous in his sight.

So there is the third thing: the Ministry of the New Covenant brings God's righteousness to men.



## 4. The ministry New Covenant is glorious

Let us read verses 7 to 11 again.

<sup>7</sup>Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, <sup>8</sup>will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? <sup>9</sup>If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! <sup>10</sup>For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. <sup>11</sup>And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Notice how, again and again, the apostle uses the word “glory” in connection with the New Covenant.

Here there is not so much a contrast as a comparison with the ministry of Old Covenant, because there was a certain degree of glory even with the giving of the Old Covenant.

As regards the covenant that was given at the time of Moses, we read, in verse 7, “the ministry that brought death [that is, the Old Covenant ministry], which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory.” In verse 9 we read, “the ministry that condemns men [that is, Old Covenant ministry] is glorious”. In verse 10 he says of Old Covenant ministry that it “was glorious”. In verse 11 he says that “what was fading away came with glory”.

What does the word “glory” mean? It is very hard to describe the word because the glory of God is beyond our imagination. The way I think of the glory of God is by thinking of the sun in all of its brilliance and magnificence. Multiply that by a million times, and you still have something which is less splendid than the glory of God.

In all these different ways the apostle says that the work of Moses, as the one who told the people about the covenant that God made with his people, came with glory. This glory was manifested in the way that Moses’s face shone when he went into the presence of God. We read about this in Exodus chapter 34 and verses 29 to 35,

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all

the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. Afterwards all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai. When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the Lord's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord.

So there was a glory that attended the ministry of Moses, as he announced the covenant to the people.

But, says the apostle, the ministry of the New Covenant is far more glorious even than the glory which attended the ministry of Moses. The glory of the ministry of Moses was fading. It did not last. But the glory of the ministry of the New Covenant is permanent.

The ministry of the New Covenant is "even more glorious" than the ministry of Moses (verse 8). It is "much more glorious" than the ministry of Moses (verse 9). "What was glorious [the ministry of Moses] has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory [of the ministry of the New Covenant]" (verse 10). The glory of the ministry of Moses was "fading away", but "how much greater is the glory of that which lasts [i.e. the glory of the New Covenant]" (verse 11).

How is the glory of the New Covenant seen? With the exception of rare times when the glory of Jesus was physically manifested, such as on the Mount of Transfiguration, or when Jesus appeared to Saul who became the apostle Paul, most of the time the glory of the New Covenant is not physically manifested in this life. But this does not mean that it is not real. The glory is seen in lives being transformed. Paul will go on to speak about this in verse 18, where he says, "We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." And then, when Jesus comes again, the glory that he has given to us will be fully revealed, and we shall shine with him in glorious splendour.

Let me make a point of application here. If you are a Christian and seeking to speak to others about Christ, do you realise that you are involved in something which is amazingly glorious, far more glorious even than when the face of Moses was transformed and became like the sun?

Our world puts great store by its sports superstars, and by its great actors and singers. But the achievements of these great celebrities of this world are nothing next to the glory of the work of the humblest Christian who is praying for the conversion of his friend, and telling others about Christ.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen four things about the ministry of the New Covenant.

1. The ministry of the New Covenant is a ministry of the Holy Spirit.
2. The ministry of the New Covenant imparts life.
3. The ministry of the New Covenant makes people righteous in God's sight.
4. The ministry of the New Covenant is glorious.

As we finish, let me ask you this question: have you received the blessings of the New Covenant? If your answer is "no" or "not sure", I urge you to come to Jesus right now and ask him to save you. You do not need to wait until you go home. You can come to him now. I urge you, do not put it off. You might die on the way home, or Jesus might come again.

If your answer is "yes" then I would urge you to be strong in your faith. Do not allow yourself to go back under a sort of "salvation by works" mentality. Believe that you are righteous in God's sight. Be confident in the Gospel. In the right sense, be proud of it. See that the work that you are involved in, of making this Gospel known to others, is the most glorious thing any person can do. Do not be discouraged or downhearted. Your contribution to this great effort to make Christ known is glorious.

*This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A video recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at <https://youtu.be/dN-ZNjm6X3E>. An audio recording may be found at <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=11622724580>.*

*This booklet is produced by Poplar Baptist Church, Zetland Street, London E14 6RB, from where further copies may be obtained. Our services on Sunday are at 10.30 a.m. and 6.30 p.m.. You will be very welcome to attend these. The church building is situated on the corner of Zetland Street and the Blackwall Tunnel Approach Road. It is ½ mile south of Bromley-by-Bow underground station, and ¼ mile from Langdon Park DLR station, and the 309 and D8 buses pass the door. If you would like to discuss any spiritual matter arising from this booklet, feel free to contact our Pastor, Henry Dixon, on 020 7001 7776, or enquiries@poplarbaptistchurch.org*

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