

Stephen Johnston

The Glory of the New Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:1-18)

(Sermon Summary)

Sunday Morning, 14th August 2022

Context

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian church at a time when it was distancing itself from him. When preaching at Corinth, Paul had deliberately avoided making a show of his intellectual prowess, as he wanted them to see that the power of his message came from God alone. Embarrassed by Paul's unassuming manner and straightforward speech, factions in the church were turning to charismatic, intellectually dazzling leaders who fitted in with the expectations of their culture. Paul's humility, and his many sufferings, made him a failure in the world's eyes but marked him out as a true follower of Christ. In distancing themselves from Paul, the Corinthian Christians were also distancing themselves from the Lord who was despised and rejected.

In this letter, Paul defends his ministry, arguing that he is indeed sufficient to serve as an apostle, and this is all because of the New Covenant. He compares the Old and New Covenants, demonstrating the far greater glory of the New Covenant.

The Old Covenant

A covenant is a binding agreement between two people or parties. God bound himself to the nation of Israel when He gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. If the people obeyed all the laws and commands, they would be blessed, but if they disobeyed, they would be cursed. The people agreed to this covenant, but throughout the history of Israel they were unable to keep it because sin was written into their hearts. Our hearts are deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9) and like the Israelites we may believe that we are able to obey and please God, but in fact it is impossible. There was only one possible outcome from the Old Covenant: disobedience and death.

Jeremiah prophesied that the day would come when God would make a new covenant with His people (Jeremiah 31:31-34). God would write His law on their hearts, giving them the power to love, unlike the Old Covenant which merely commanded them to love. Paul knew that the New Covenant had come because he could see the evidence in his own heart: Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee who hated Gentiles and persecuted Christians, was now the apostle Paul who loved the Gentile Christians at Corinth. Paul's

confidence in preaching the Gospel came from the power of the message. He was proclaiming promises that Christ Himself had made.

Do you feel unworthy to represent Christ or share the Gospel? Remember that our sufficiency lies in the message, not in our abilities. If you are not yet a Christian, believe the promises of Jesus and be saved!

Comparison of the Old and New Covenants (vv7-11)

The Old Covenant is glorious because it flows from the character of God, but the New Covenant is far superior.

The results of the two covenants

Paul calls the Old Covenant 'a ministry of death'. It was inevitable that the Israelites would break the law and perish. The New Covenant, on the other hand, is called 'the ministry of the Spirit'. God's Spirit indwells the believer, uniting them to Christ. This is a free gift which cannot be taken away, and the result is eternal life.

The judgements of the two covenants

Paul calls the Old Covenant 'the ministry of condemnation'. People are judged according to their performance, and there is only one outcome. If you are trying to earn God's blessing by keeping the law, you will be condemned. No one is righteous ..all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

The New Covenant is the 'ministry of righteousness' under which sinners are declared 'not guilty'. Jesus has been punished for our sins, and His perfect life is credited to our account.

The duration of the two covenants

The Old Covenant was temporary, but the New Covenant is permanent. God knew that we would not be able to keep His laws, so from the beginning He planned to replace the Old Covenant with the New Covenant, and give us new, clean hearts.

The New Covenant can never fail: Jesus lives to make intercession for us, so can save us to the uttermost.

Paul may have lacked image and status, but what a glorious role he had to play! Let's thank God for the New Covenant, and never take it for granted. And let's share Paul's confidence in the power and glory of the New Covenant as we proclaim the Gospel.