

## A New Covenant

“... our sufficiency is from God; who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant; not of the letter but of the spirit, for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. But if the ministration of death, written and engraven on stones, came with glory, so that the children of Israel could not look steadfastly upon the face of Moses ...” (2 Cor. 3:5-6).

The word “covenant” found here in the text, is from the Greek word *diatheke*. W. E. Vine defines the word primarily to signify a “disposition of property by will or otherwise” (Expository Dictionary of N.T. Words, p. 250). While in modern usage “covenant” usually refers to an agreement between two equal parties; in both testaments it refers to God’s promises which He makes and man, to receive those promises, complies with whatever conditions God designates. Frequently, in the KJV, the word “covenant” appears as “testament” (as it does in this Corinthian passage in the KJV). Sometimes in the ASV the same word *diatheke* is translated “covenant,” sometimes “testament” (see Hebrews 9 for an example of this: in verse 15 *diatheke* is translated covenant; in verses 16 and 17 it appears as testament).

To every Bible student the phrases “Old Covenant” (or testament) and “New Covenant” (or testament) is familiar language. We should recognize that the Bible actually speaks of several covenants; for a variety of aspects. The most important and universal in application is the one God made to Abraham: “In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 22:18). That covenant was never altered nor changed nor should we wish for it to be.

The Old Covenant of which Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3 was not the covenant God made with Abraham; it was the covenant God made with the nation of Israel at Sinai (Deut. 5:1-21). Paul specifically points out that just as in a man’s covenant, once it is confirmed, no one can make it void or adds thereto (Gal. 3:15), so it is with God when He makes a covenant. He used that to illustrate that God’s promise to Abraham was confirmed by God and that although in process of time the law (the “first covenant” in our Corinthian text) was given (430 years after God’s promise to Abraham); that law did not make God’s promise of none effect (Gal. 3:17). That was to say that God promised that through Abraham's seed (Christ) all nations would be blessed, which blessing is identified by Peter to be the forgiveness of our sins (Acts 3:26). Permanent forgiveness of sins never occurred under the law: 1) it was not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to remove sins (Heb. 10:4); 2) there was a remembrance of sins year by year (Heb. 10:3); and, 3) it was Christ’s blood, not that of bulls and goats, that ultimately made forgiveness a permanent reality (Heb. 9:15).

The covenant God made with Abraham was an eternal one but the first covenant was “added” because of transgressions until the seed should come to whom that promise was made (Gal. 3:19). Paul likened the law as a schoolmaster which brought us to Christ that we might be justified by faith, adding that “now that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster” (Gal. 3:25), or the Old Covenant.

The Holy Spirit had predicted the removal of that first covenant by stating that God would make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah (Jer. 31:31). The Hebrew writer tells us that “If that first covenant had been faultless, then would no place have been sought for the second” (Heb. 8:1f). The fault of that first covenant (the covenant of our text) was that it could not do for man what man needed to have done for him — free him from the penalty of sin. Paul addressed that issue in Romans 8:1-3: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin; condemned sin in the flesh ...” Three laws are mentioned in this passage: “the law of the Spirit of life” (the second covenant); “the law of sin and death,” that decree that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23) and “the law” — the first covenant, the law given by Moses. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (the New Covenant) could do something “the law” could not do — it could make one free from the law of sin and death.

Many commentaries have difficulty with this 2 Corinthian passage. They affirm that man still is bound to keep the ten commandments, and their efforts to make statements in 2 Corinthians 3 refer to something other than the ten commandments would be amusing if the consequences were not so tragic. One has to look long and hard to make “... the ministration of death, written and engraven on stone ...” (2 Cor. 3:7) refer to anything other than the clear reference to the two tables of stone on which the ten commandments were engraved.

Our next article will address this specific issue in 2 Corinthians 3 and show that when Paul writes of the ministration of death, he is referring to the ten commandments.

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