

“Where the Spirit of the Lord Is, There Is Freedom”

The Third in a Series of Sermons on 2 Corinthians

Texts: 2 Corinthians 3:1-18; Exodus 34:27-35

The coming of Jesus Christ is the critical turning point in redemptive history. Before the coming of Jesus, God’s people (Israel) related to God under the terms of the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. The Sinaitic covenant (or Old Covenant) centered in God’s revelation of his will (complete with blessings and curses) in the form of the two stone tables of the law. The mediator of that covenant was Moses, and its character was that of type and shadow. But with the coming of Jesus Christ, through his sacrificial death and perfect obedience, the law of God is now fulfilled, and a new age of redemptive history has dawned—an age we know as the New Covenant era and the age of the Holy Spirit. The fading glory of the Old Covenant has given way to the glories of the New. Understanding redemptive history in terms of promise (Old Covenant) and fulfillment (New Covenant) is not only essential in making sense of the Bible, but in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul draws our attention to this matter in order to help us understand the nature of his apostolic office, which is conducted in the power of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel.

We are continuing our series on select passages in 2 Corinthians. We have come to Paul’s remarkable contrast between the ministry of Moses and glory of the New Covenant. Although much mischief has been done throughout the centuries by those who misread Paul’s contrast between the law and the Spirit, this distinction arises from the fact that the coming of Jesus Christ fulfilled everything to which the law and the Old Covenant administration had pointed. The coming of Jesus Christ reveals that God’s promises have been fulfilled, and that the coming of the Holy Spirit is one of the great hallmarks of the New Covenant era just as Jeremiah, Joel, and Ezekiel had predicted. Paul now sets forth the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old as the theological basis for his mission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, and to establish largely Gentile churches such as the church in Corinth.

It is important to keep in mind the reason why Paul wrote the letter we know as 2 Corinthians. Recall that Paul writes this second Corinthian letter instead of undertaking yet another difficult journey to Corinth. In the opening chapters of this letter, Paul addresses the themes of Christian comfort in the midst of persecution and affliction, as well as the need for brothers and sisters in Christ to forgive one another and not let personal disputes foster division in the churches. Paul has also spoken of how the Lord has opened a door for him to go and preach the gospel in Troas and Macedonia, and that despite his own weaknesses, and due to those difficult circumstances which left him feeling as though he could not go on (either physically or emotionally), God had blessed his preaching and Paul gives thanks.

In preaching the gospel, Paul witnessed the triumphal procession of Christ, as he calls it. The gospel establishes the true knowledge of God, and is described by Paul using the metaphor of a fragrant aroma. This metaphor made perfect sense to Paul’s contemporaries who were familiar with imperial processions in which the emperor’s passing presence was accompanied by flower petals and incense, while the defeated enemy brought up the rear, wreaking with bodily stench. In using this metaphor, Paul is also alluding to the fact that throughout the Old Testament, various sin offerings and thanksgiving offerings are described as having a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Paul describes the gospel as a pleasing aroma unto God because Jesus offers the one sacrifice which is sufficient to remit the guilt of our sins.

As we turn to our text, Paul is continuing to defend his apostolic office from his detractors in Corinth. Paul contrasts the Old Covenant ministry of Moses with the New Covenant established by Jesus the

mediator, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The distinction between these two covenants is a fundamental element of Christian theology.

The sad irony of Paul's relationship with the Corinthians is that he has been forced to defend his apostolic office and authority because of certain men whom Paul will call false apostles in chapter 11. These men are self-appointed and have been highly critical of Paul. They have probably been using Paul's absence from Corinth to claim that he doesn't really care for the poor struggling Christians in Corinth (but they, of course, really care about the Corinthians), and that Paul does not possess the kind of classical rhetorical skills necessary for him to fulfill his office. One of these men has hurt Paul deeply by undermining his apostolic authority, and probably has been disciplined as a result—even though Paul has urged the Corinthians to restore this man lest he be overwhelmed with sorrow (2 Corinthians 2:5-7).

Paul has also made the point that it matters not a wit whether he is personally weak (from all the traveling and labor on behalf of the churches), or that he might not possess the eloquent rhetorical skills so admired by Greeks. Paul knows the power of that gospel which had been revealed to him by none other than the Risen Christ. Therefore, his confidence is placed in the message which he preaches—Jesus Christ and him crucified. Paul has no confidence in the flesh—his own skills and abilities.

As so as we move into chapter 3, Paul continues to define and defend his office in the face of the stinging criticism he has received from the false apostles in his absence. Paul now takes up a discussion of the New Covenant and its superiority to the Old Covenant. In light of all this background, in verse 1, Paul now asks the Corinthians yet another rhetorical question. *“Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?”* In the apostolic church, a letter of recommendation was issued by that church in which you were a member. The letter confirmed that an individual (or a family) was a member in good-standing of a particular church. When church members traveled and visited other churches and were not known there, they could present the letter from the elders of their home church, to the elders of the church they were visiting. This letter affirmed that they were professing believers, that they should be granted admission to the Lord's Supper, and that members of the church should feel free to offer them hospitality if needed.

Paul sarcastically asks that if he returns to Corinth, will he (and Timothy and Titus) need to bring with them letters of recommendation from their home churches? The obvious answer is “no.” Paul's unique call (from Jesus himself), and his track record of suffering on behalf of the gospel (which he recounts in 2 Corinthians 11:16 ff.) is his letter of recommendation to the Corinthians. In verse 2, he writes, *“You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.”* Paul helped found the church in Corinth. With few exceptions, everyone in the church there knew Paul, his history, and his passion for the gospel. That the church in Corinth even existed in the first place was due in small part to the labors of Paul. So, who were these false apostles to claim apostolic authority for themselves, and then treat Paul like some sort of an outsider who was moving in upon their territory?

In light of the fact that the very existence of a church in Corinth is the ultimate letter of recommendation because this fact is public and self-evident, Paul continues to define and defend his apostolic office in verse 3, now turning to a theme which dominates the third chapter of 2 Corinthians and is the subject of our sermon this morning, the superiority of the New Covenant to that covenant God made with Israel at Sinai. *“And you show that you are 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 on tablets of human hearts.”*

Notice the contrast Paul draws between that which was external (stone and ink—God's word written) and that which is internal (The Holy Spirit and the human heart). Paul is not saying that if you have the Holy

Spirit, you do not need the written word. Nor is he saying that the written word is secondary, or not as important as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in terms of possessing the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. That the Spirit replaced the word was the view of the radical Anabaptists at the time of the Reformation. They claimed that they did not need the authority of the church, nor did they need church tradition (a point made in response to Rome), nor did they need to prove everything they did and taught from the Bible (or as a legitimate inference based upon biblical teaching). Anabaptists believed that the Holy Spirit had replaced the written word (the external: stone tablets, ink, and paper). The Spirit gave believers new revelation or deposited truth directly in the heart (internal). Such internal revelation was supposedly superior to the written word. Anabaptist leader Thomas Munster mocked Martin Luther's constant appeal to Scripture, contending that he (Muntzer) had something better than the Bible—he had the Holy Spirit, and was not bound to the dead letter of the word.

We still see this misreading of Paul today whenever someone claims to have received some sort of direct revelation (or a word from God), which comes apart from Holy Scripture. It is commonplace on TBN, or in the Word-faith movement, or in certain Pentecostal groups for individuals to claim that God speaks to them directly apart from Scripture. They make this claim because they believe that New Covenant and the Holy Spirit replace the Old Covenant and the law, because the Spirit (internal) supposedly does away with the need for any external authority (the written word).

But this is not Paul's point. Paul's point is that which was external (the law) is now written on the human heart through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit does not replace the law and the Bible. Rather Jesus Christ fulfills the Old Testament promises. The Holy Spirit applies to us everything promised in the Old Covenant. Therefore, it is not as though the Old Covenant is torn up and thrown away by the coming of Christ and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Rather, the New Covenant is the fulfillment of everything promised in the Old Covenant. It is not new in the sense of being something entirely new of a different kind (a covenant which was written from scratch). Rather, it is new in the sense that the New Covenant is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant (the former or earlier Covenant) and the New Covenant is much greater in its clarity and in the blessings it delivers. Paul does not pit the written word against the Spirit as though they are fundamentally opposed to each other. Rather, the apostle is arguing that with the coming of Christ, the promised New Covenant is now a glorious reality, and superior in every way to the Old Covenant. Promises have become reality.

Paul now lays out his case. The existence of a thriving Christian church in the heart of a pagan city such as Corinth should be seen as proof of the superiority of the New Covenant (which is the covenant of grace as it is fulfilled in Christ) over the Old Covenant (established by God with Israel at Mount Sinai). Through their very existence, the church in Corinth and its members “demonstrate” (“*and you show*”) that they are “a letter from Christ.” But the very category, “a letter from Christ,” illustrates the profound difference in redemptive history between the Old Covenant (originally carved on tablets of stone and now written down as Torah) and the New Covenant (which is written by the Holy Spirit upon the hearts of justified sinners). Notice the contrast—the law written (as in Torah) or engraved on stone tablets (at Sinai) belong to the old order (promise, type, shadow). The old order has been superceded by the coming of Jesus Christ. His coming establishes the New Covenant and inaugurates the age of the Holy Spirit. This is why it is superior to the Old.

This is why Paul can state in verse 4, “*Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.*” That which was promised, is now a reality. According to the prophet Jeremiah, “*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares*

the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." Paul proclaims that these days have now come, because Jesus has come. Paul not confident in himself, but in his message. He does not rely on that fading glory which has been superceded. Jeremiah's new covenant is now a reality.

In verse 5, Paul moves on to explain why his own weakness and lack of rhetorical skills do not diminish the cause of Christ. "*Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.*" We can read between the lines a bit (as we must do in this letter because the precise circumstances are known to everyone reading it because they were there and directly involved, and we are not). This is Paul's reply to those who boast about their rhetorical skills and eloquence as the reason why they claim apostolic authority and undermine Paul. When Paul speaks of "being sufficient in ourselves" he is no doubt getting to the heart of the matter. These self-proclaimed false apostles may indeed be eloquent and captivating speakers. But all they have is what they are. They must rely upon the external (rhetoric and eloquence) and that which fades away (just as the Old Covenant is superceded). The irony is that the physically weak and unimpressive apostle Paul knows that his sufficiency comes from God. By trusting in God and the power of the gospel, Paul's resources are unlimited.

This is a critical consequence of the great event in redemptive history—the coming of Jesus Christ, who leads forth a triumphal procession, and whose sacrifice is that offering pleasing to God. As Paul writes in verse 6, God "*has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit.*" When Paul was called by God while on his way to Damascus to hunt down and arrest Christians (as recounted in Acts 9), he was also called to be a "servant" (a minister) of this new covenant—the covenant of grace first promised to Adam, then to Abraham and the Patriarchs, then to Moses, David and Israel's prophets, and now fulfilled through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Because this is the age of the Holy Spirit, the New Covenant is written upon our hearts, not externally on tablets of stone (as was the case, with a few exceptions) under the Old Covenant. The New Covenant also secures for us the forgiveness of sins. And it is made with all of God's people, from the least to the greatest!

This New Covenant is unlike the former covenant which pronounces blessings for obedience and threatens curses upon disobedience, yet gives believers no power whatsoever to obey any of its demands. Because the law can only demand, inevitably the law subjects us to the covenant curses and death. This is why Paul can state so emphatically in the latter part of verse 6. "*For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*" The law demands. Therefore it condemns. The gospel gives us what the law demands, therefore it brings forth life. This is why the Spirit (and the New Covenant) of which Paul is a minister (servant), is so vastly superior to the Old Covenant which has now been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Far from being the invention of Martin Luther, here is the law-gospel contrast in all its glory and simplicity.

As is his custom whenever Paul makes an important theological point, he turns to redemptive history to make his point. This time he takes up Exodus 32-34 (of which we read a portion as part of our Old Testament lesson). In verses 7-8, Paul begins to spell out the contrast between the Old Covenant (of which Moses was the Mediator), and the New Covenant of which Christ is mediator. Paul writes, "*Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.*"

Remarkably, Paul speaks of the ministry of Moses as a ministry of death. Why? The law itself is holy, righteous and good Paul says (Cf. Romans 7:12). The problem is not with the law. The problem is with us. We are sinful. Because of our inability to obey God's commandments, the law now exposes how sinful we are, leading to our guilt, to death, and to eternal condemnation. Under the terms of that transitional and inferior covenant made at Sinai, God's glory (through his presence on the mountain) was such that Moses' face radiated for days, but that no one could look at him. How much greater glory of that covenant which does not condemn, but through which the glory and righteousness of God is revealed—that New Covenant ratified in the blood of Jesus and now written upon our hearts.

Paul continues his contrast in verses 10-11. *“Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.”* Not only is the contrast between the degrees of glory associated with the Old and New Covenant important to consider, but notice that Paul also speaks of the Old Covenant as being “brought to an end.” The covenant God made with Israel at Sinai has run its course. Israel has fulfilled its national purpose. Jesus Christ has come, turning promise into fulfillment. Type and shadow are replaced by reality and fulfillment. As Paul puts it so plainly, the Old Covenant which God made with Israel at Mount Sinai (which once had a certain glory associated with it), has now been superceded by a new and better covenant with much greater glory, and which is permanent. It is permanent, because this covenant has been ratified by the blood of Jesus Christ, applied to us through the work of God's Spirit, and signed and sealed unto us in our baptism.

Beginning in verse 12, Paul begins to speak of impact of the New Covenant upon his apostolic ministry. Paul can be very bold (despite his personal short-comings) because the New Covenant ministry is conducted in the power of the Holy Spirit bringing life and righteousness whereas the Old Covenant only brought death and condemnation. As Paul puts it in verses 12-13, *“Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end.”*

The ministry of the New Covenant is grounded in the certainty of Christ's cross and resurrection and is proclaimed in and through the power of the Holy Spirit—word and sacrament. Therefore, Paul can minister boldly, with great hope, replying on the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul knows that the promises made to Moses are now a reality, whereas Moses could only offer the Israelites promises yet to be fulfilled. This is seen in the fact that the glory reflecting from Moses' face (real as it was) had to be hidden from the people with a veil who could not bear to look upon it because of human sinfulness. What is more, Moses' glory eventually faded away, pointing to the fact that the Old Covenant would eventually come to an end (in the sense of being superceded) by the coming of Christ.

In verse 14, Paul reminds his readers of the sad fact of Israel's unbelief. *“But their minds were hardened.”* This is not only true for Israel in the days of Moses, it is true for the Jews of Paul's day. Paul describes how a spiritual veil covers their hearts. Just as in Moses' day when the people's hearts were said to be hardened against God, so too in Paul's day such hardness remains among the Jews who will not embrace Jesus as their Messiah

In the last half of verse 14, Paul applies the veil image to Israel's unbelief. *“For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away.”* The types and shadow of the law and the sacrificial system could not bring life. Since the Jews still cling to the types and shadows, they renounce Jesus as Messiah, they renounce the righteousness of God, and they seek to establish their own (as Paul puts it elsewhere). Unless God removes that veil through regeneration and faith, the Jews will not see that the law was given to them to drive them to Jesus Christ

and to a greater glory than that which shone on Moses' face.

But because they could not see this, Israel remains satisfied with the Old Covenant, which after the coming of Jesus Christ, was superceded and is now null and void. Paul laments that *“Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.”* It is only through the light of Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, that people understand that the promises of the Old Covenant have given way to the realities of the New.

Paul can remind the Corinthians, *“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”* Although there is a huge debate about the meaning of the phrase the “Lord is the Spirit,” Paul’s primary point seems to be that to trust in Christ (to turn to the Lord) is the result of the work of the Spirit (who is also divine—“the Lord”, i.e., the third person of the Trinity). To be “in Christ” (and in union with him through faith) is also to be “in the Spirit.” No longer does the law bring death to those who trust in Christ, and who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In the New Covenant there is forgiveness of sin, and the indwelling Holy Spirit internalizes that which was external (the law). The law no longer kills. In fact, because we are righteous in Christ, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we are now free (not from the law), but free to obey the law. People who are now alive through the Spirit, now “live” to God. The veil (which is actually a shroud of death) is taken away. People who are alive to God are free from condemnation, and because the law is written upon our hearts, we are now willing to obey that same law which once condemned us out of gratitude for all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

And so says Paul in verse 18, because we participate in the New Covenant through faith in Christ, *“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”* Beholding the Lord through the indwelling work of the Spirit (not in that temporary and fading way as did Moses), we are being transformed (i.e., we are being sanctified), and made ready for that resurrection glory which far exceeds what Moses experienced, and which will be our permanent existence. The distorted image of God (a consequence of the fall) will be restored in us, first in regeneration, and finally and fully on the day of resurrection. All of this results from the work of the Holy Spirit, who unites us to Christ, and who conforms us to his image, which is the greater glory of this new and better covenant.

What then, do we take with us, by way of application?

Because Paul is a minister of a new and better covenant, which, unlike the Old Covenant, does not have a fading glory which has already passed away, Paul need not rely upon clever words or human eloquence. Since the New Covenant is tied to the age of the Holy Spirit, Paul’s apostolic office is grounded in the preaching of Christ crucified, the message which is not only a pleasing aroma to God and to attractive sinners, but through which the power of Spirit gives life, and transforms sinners into the image of Christ. Paul is crystal clear that Israel’s role in redemptive history is now complete. The Mosaic covenant and economy have passed away—although sadly, Paul’s people, the Jews cannot see it.

Unless the power of the Holy Spirit lifts the veil over our eyes and hearts, we will never see the superiority of Christ to Moses. But once the veil has been lifted, we can see nothing else. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom from sin’s condemnation. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom from sin’s guilt. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom from sin’s power. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is Jesus Christ, in all of his New Covenant glory.