

2nd Corinthians 2v14-3v18: The Ministry of Christ and The New Covenant Ian Gibson Feb 2015

Ch2v14 - ch7v4 deals with the apostolic ministry concerning the risen & glorified Lord Jesus Christ.

It is the glorious character of this ministry of Christ & the gospel of Christ that sustains Paul, at probably the most difficult time personally in his apostolic service, being so oppressed & physically weakened.

2nd Corinthians tells us much of all the **adversity they encountered for Christ**.

Ch2v14: Victory they experienced in Christ

Paul appropriately begins this parenthetical section dealing with their ministry with thanksgiving to God & a positive note of triumph, "***who always leads us in triumph in the Christ***" (JND).

The analogy is that of the victorious Roman general returning from the battle, showing off all the spoils of the victory, and leading the captives that have been taken in the battle.

We are linked with the mighty Victor of Calvary, who in His death, burial, resurrection & glorious ascension, He has victored over sin, death & Satan, and is now the exalted & glorified Christ at God's right hand. As "***joint heirs with Christ***" (Rom 8v17), we will fully share in His victorious coming again to rule over this world.

We are motivated by the triumphant progress of Christ & His gospel; our victory in Christ is assured.

Ch2v14-16: Savour of the ministry of Christ

It was a "***sweet savour***" of God's beloved Son that they were making manifest, as they made known "***the savour of His knowledge ... in every place***". God appreciates that measure in which Christ is being formed in each of us & displayed by us, and "***we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ***", in the measure that we are a testimony for God's Son in this world.

Whenever Christ is faithfully presented as the only Saviour, He is exalted, and God smells a sweet savour of His own dear Son, both "***in them that are saved, and in them that perish***".

We function in **holy priesthood** capacity, as we present Christ to God in all the beauty & glory of His Person, and there is a sweet savour of Christ in our worshipful service & praise; 1st Peter 2v5 "***Ye also, as lively (living) stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ***".

In our gospel testimony, we function in **royal priesthood** capacity; 1st Peter 2v9 "***But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises (virtues) of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light***". We are engaged in a worshipful service as we present Christ to the unsaved as the only Saviour, and God appreciates the sweet savour of His own dear Son.

Paul contemplates the solemnity of the response of men to the proclamation of the glad tidings of Christ. To those who reject the message, "***To the one [we are] the savour of death unto death***"; but those who receive the message experience spiritual & eternal life, "***to the other the savour of life unto life***".

For such a significant ministry, we would all feel inadequate; even Paul asks "***And who is sufficient for these things?***" He answers this in ch3v4-6, speaking of the divine source of sufficiency for the ministry.

Ch2v17: Sincerity in the ministry of Christ

Paul can attest to their sincerity, not serving with the motive of any personal financial gain, but serving transparently *“in the sight of God”* (a recurring expression of the epistle, see also ch4v2, ch7v12, ch8v21).

Ch3v1-3: Commendation to the ministry of Christ

“Do we begin again to commend ourselves?”; Paul was being discredited for not having the necessary qualifications or credentials, or any official documentation.

We do appreciate the scriptural practice of letters of commendation (see Acts 18v27).

But such a letter would be redundant in the context of Corinth, given Paul’s past involvement with them from the very start of the work at Corinth (see 1st Cor 3v10).

“Ye (emphatic) are our epistle”; i.e. the very existence of the assembly at Corinth was a living testimony & commendation of his apostolic service & work for God (see also 1st Cor 9v2).

The epistle was *“written in our hearts”*, an inward testimony, highlighting the great love & affection that Paul had for these believers (see also 1st Cor 4v14-15, 2nd Cor 2v4).

This epistle was *“ministered by us”*; they were the fruit of his labour, he had taught them how to gather to the Person of the Lord Jesus, they were manifesting the truth of the assembly in terms of its order & practice, and they had responded to his corrective ministry (1st Corinthians).

As to the substance & content of this epistle, they were *“manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ”*. These Corinthian believers now declared themselves to be washed & sanctified & justified (1st Cor 6v11), belonging to Christ, and part of that new creation in Christ (2nd Cor 5v17).

As a local assembly collectively, they were now a testimony for Christ in sinful Corinth, to commend the Person of Christ, as a letter of Christ communicating the saving power, grace & virtues of Christ.

This letter of Christ is *“known and read of all men”*, an outward testimony for the risen, exalted & glorified Christ at God’s right hand, commending Him to the world around and all who observe our lives.

This brings great dignity, as well tremendous responsibility, to all who are in the fellowship of the local assembly, contributing to an *“epistle of Christ”*, as we seek to display collectively the spirit of grace, beauties & excellencies of our Lord & Saviour.

This commending letter was *“written not with ink”*, and *“not in tables of stone”*, i.e. in contrast to the Judaisers who were enforcing the OT law of Moses upon believers in the Lord Jesus as a legal requirement.

But it was written *“with the Spirit of the living God”* and *“in fleshy tables of the heart”*, in keeping with the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant, a ministration of the Spirit that brings spiritual life.

In the new covenant, in contrast to the old, God deals with man’s heart & regenerates the heart; *“After those days, saith the LORD, I will put My law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be My people”* (Jeremiah 31v33, see also Heb 8v10, 10v16).

Ch3v4-6a: Sufficiency for the ministry of Christ

Paul was not looking to himself in any self-confident way for the service committed to him, v5 ***“Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves”***. But their confidence was all in divine Persons, v4 ***“And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward”***, v5-6 ***“but our sufficiency is of God, Who also hath made us able (sufficient / competent) ministers of the new testament (covenant)”***.

In divine service, we are all insufficient in ourselves, and it is only based upon His gracious provision, that we are able for anything in the service of God (see 1st Cor 4v7, Rom 12v3).

When God calls a believer to a specific service, He also fits them for the work; with the calling, there is also given the capability. We need to be dependent servants, recognizing that ***“My grace is sufficient”*** (2nd Cor 12v9).

Ch3v6b-18: Enjoyment of the ministry of Christ & the ministry of the New Covenant

Paul speaks of themselves as ***“ministers of the new covenant”***, rather than, for example, a minister of the gospel of Christ, in response to the Judaizing false teachers, who sought to keep believers in Christ under the bondage of the old covenant, the law of Moses, in addition to their faith in Christ.

To counter this fundamental error, Paul here shows the great contrast of the old covenant, versus the new covenant in Christ, specifically the superiority & permanence of the new over the old.

Divine Covenants: A covenant is a binding agreement or promise between 2 parties that cannot be broken under any circumstances. Scripture details a number of divine covenants made between God and men:

- Genesis 9: God makes a **providential covenant** with Noah after the flood in connection with the continued physical preservation of this world; ***“I will establish My covenant with you, neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth”*** (Gen 9v11).
- Genesis 15: God makes a **patriarchal covenant** with Abraham in connection with his seed & a land for that seed to possess; ***“the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land”*** (Gen 15v18), i.e. the Abrahamic covenant.
- Exodus 20: The **provisional covenant** made with Israel, connected with the law given to Moses, i.e. the Mosaic covenant. This was always meant as a temporary arrangement until Christ came; ***“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth”*** (Rom 10v4). It is ***“the old covenant ... done away in Christ”*** (2 Cor 3v14), in contrast with the new covenant in Christ that in God’s purpose replaces it permanently.
- Numbers 25: God makes a **priestly covenant**, of peace and everlasting priesthood, connected with the faithfulness of that priestly man Phinehas. ***“Behold, I give unto him My covenant of peace: And he shall have it, and his seed after him, [even] the covenant of an everlasting priesthood”*** (Num 25v12-13).
- 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 89 & Jeremiah 33: God makes the **princely covenant** with David, ensuring that David’s throne will be established to all generations. ***“My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of My lips ... his seed (seed of David) shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before Me. It shall be established for ever”*** (Psalm 89v34-37), i.e. the Davidic covenant.
- Jeremiah 31: God intimates the **permanent new covenant** that He will in a future day make with Israel, ***“Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah”*** (Jer 31v31).

The New Covenant in Relation to the Church

The new covenant is not made specifically with the Church; God says He will make it “***with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah***” (Jer 31v31). It is “***Israelites; to whom pertaineth ... the covenants***” (Rom 9v4). But the Hebrew writer takes up the theme, quoting Jeremiah 31v31 in both Hebrews 8v10 & 10v16, showing clearly that believers in Christ today are fully enjoying all of the blessings & character of this new covenant, which is based upon the once-for-all, accepted & better sacrifice of Christ, the Mediator of this new covenant. This new covenant does not directly equate with the gospel of God’s grace, as it will be the basis to bring Israel into blessing in a future day. But the gospel of God’s grace that we preach today is the means of bringing believers in the Lord Jesus today into all the blessings of the new covenant, and more besides.

The Superior Character of the New Covenant (see Hebrews 8v6-13, 13v20)

The new covenant is a “***better covenant***”; Heb 8v6 “***by how much also He (Christ) is the Mediator of a better covenant, which was (has been) established upon better promises***”, and it is also “***the everlasting covenant***” (Heb 13v20), for it is based upon the sacrifice & eternally efficacious blood of Christ.

The old covenant of law was a 2-sided conditional covenant of works, and blessing was all conditional upon man’s obedience. Under the new covenant, God promises to bless freely by His grace, and God undertakes to do everything in the new covenant unconditionally, and therefore there is no weakness or failure connected with this new covenant.

Ch3v6-8: The Spiritual Character of the New Covenant

The old covenant was a legal code, “***written and engraven in stones***” (v7). It was the external & outward letter of the law, specific legal commandments, constraints, prohibitions & regulations, demanding man’s obedience. The new covenant is “***not of the letter, but of the Spirit***” (v6), a “***ministration of the Spirit***” (v8), to be enjoyed in an inward & spiritual way, spiritual truth written “***in fleshy tables of the heart***” (v3), see also Rom 2v28-29. The letter of the law commands good things, and makes men hearers of the Word of God, but gives no power to do those things. But the Spirit that operates graciously in the new covenant confers good things, God’s laws are written into men’s hearts, making men not hearers only, but doers of the Word.

Ch3v6-7: The Life-Giving Character of the New Covenant

As for the law & the old covenant, “***the letter killeth***” (v6), it was a “***ministration of death***” (v7). At Sinai, on the occasion of the golden calf idolatry, around 3000 were killed in judgment (Ex 32v28). But the new covenant is a ministration that brings life, for “***the Spirit (of God) giveth life***” (v6). On the Day of Pentecost, around 3000 souls were added to the Church (Acts 2v41).

Ch3v9: The Righteous Character of the New Covenant

The old covenant was “***the ministration of condemnation***”, demanding a standard sinners could never attain (see Gal 3v10); man was left condemned, with no ability to obtain a righteous standing before God. The new covenant is “***the ministration of righteousness***”; based upon Christ’s sacrifice & precious blood, there is imputed righteousness & justification for the believer in Christ (see Rom 3v21-22, Rom 10v4, Acts 13v38-39).

Ch3v7-18: The Glorious Character of the New Covenant (see also Exodus 34v29-35)

v7-12: Glory in the face of Moses, v7 “***the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance***”. The temporary glory of the divine presence & divine power connected with the giving of the law (v7) is far eclipsed by the exceeding (v9), excelling (v10) & everlasting glory (v11) of the new covenant.

v13-16: The veil on the face of Moses, after speaking with the people, illustrates the continuing veil that is yet upon the heart of Israel nationally.

v17-18: Glory in the unveiled face of Jesus Christ our Lord that believers can behold, “***But we all, with open (unveiled, JND) face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory***”; i.e. an expanding glory in the believer who is enjoying the blessings of the new covenant.

Fundamental to this contrasting glory is the duration of the respective glories of the old & new covenants.

The glory reflected in the countenance of Moses was a temporary & diminishing glory. Note the recurring expression “***done away***” (vs7,11,14) and “***abolished***” (v13), i.e. “***annulled***” (JND) or “***passing away***” (RV).

The veil on Moses face emphasizes the transitory nature of the glory of the old covenant (Exodus 34v30-35).

The people did initially see that reflected glory in Moses face as he spoke with them, giving him authority with the people, having been face-to-face with God, as the mediator of the old covenant.

Moses then put a veil upon his face, as he wanted to be able to continue to move freely among the people without them fearing to come near him.

2nd Cor 3v13 gives us the reality of Moses veiling his face before the people, “***the children of Israel could not steadfastly look (fix their eyes, JND) to the end of that which is abolished (annulled, JND)***”.

The veil obscured to the people the fact that the glory of the law was a temporary & diminishing glory.

In contrast, the glory of the new covenant is a permanently abiding & eternal glory, v11 “***much more that which remaineth (abides, JND) is glorious (subsists in glory, JND)***”. This is because it is a glory intrinsic to the Mediator of the new covenant, the glory of the Person of the eternal & divine Son of God, and He brings His own intrinsic divine glory to the covenant that He mediates. In the new covenant, we behold “***the glory of the Lord***” (v18).

It is also the eternal glory inherently linked with His once-for-all, final, eternally efficacious sacrifice & His precious shed blood at Calvary (see Hebrews 9v13-15 “***How much more shall the blood of Christ ... And for this cause He is the Mediator of the new testament (covenant)***”).

Moses was mediator of the old covenant; the law was “***ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator***” (Gal 3v19).

Christ is the Mediator of the new covenant because He gave Himself as the sacrifice & shed His own precious blood, as the basis for all the better promises. Today we come “***to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel***” (Heb 12v24).

The only basis there ever will be for man’s sins to be remitted is the sacrifice & precious blood of Christ, i.e. the glory of His sacrifice, and the surpassing & enduring glorious character of the new covenant.

This is therefore the message we preach with boldness & joy, v12-13 “***Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech. And not as Moses ...***”; i.e. we do not conceal the glory of the Saviour.

Ch3v13-16: Relevance of the Veil to Israel as a Nation

v13: **Israel in the past** - the veil in place on the face of Moses obscured the fading glory of the old covenant.

v14-15: **Israel in the present** - the same veil now in place on Israel's heart of unbelief; v14 ***"But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament"***, v15 ***"But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart"***.

Israel have not, to this day, understood the diminishing glory of the old covenant, that it has no continuing existence, and has been ***"done away (annulled) in Christ"*** (v14), (see also Rom 10v3-4).

This blindness of mind & heart is God's present judicial dealings with the Nation that rejected their Messiah & Saviour, and ultimately crucified God's beloved Son (see also Isaiah 6v10, Matt 13v15, Acts 28v27).

v16: **Israel in the future** - the veil is going to be removed from Israel's heart; ***"Nevertheless when it (the heart of the Nation) shall turn to the Lord (Jehovah), the veil shall be (completely) taken away"***.

In a future day, after the tribulation period, the ***"time of Jacob's trouble"*** (Jer 30v7), Israel will repent & nationally turn to the Lord, and then their judicial blindness will be healed, the veil put there by God will be completely taken away, so that they will see Christ in all His glory & beauty. They will then be a repentant & regenerated nation (see Ezekiel 36v25-27), at the commencement of the Saviour's millennial reign.

Meantime, in this day of grace, for individual Jews (such as Paul), if they presently ***"turn to the Lord"***, they can be enlightened to see Christ as the true Messiah, Saviour, Lord & the Mediator of the new covenant.

Ch3v17-18: The Liberating & Transforming Character of the New Covenant

The new covenant is a ministration that brings liberty (v17), not bondage, and it brings present spiritual transformation (v18), not spiritual stagnation; all a ministry of the life-giving Spirit of God (see v6).

The Spirit of God brings us into the liberty of new covenant blessings, the freedom to enjoy Christ, to make progress in divine things, to behold His glory (v18), leading to a developing glory in a believer's life.

Under the old covenant, the people could not look upon the face of the mediator, ***"Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses"*** (v7), and then his face was completely veiled from them (v13).

In the new covenant, v18 ***"But we all (i.e. all believers), looking on the glory of the Lord, with unveiled face"*** (JND), i.e. the Lord's unveiled face, He being the Mediator of the new covenant. That process begins at the moment of salvation; ch4v6 ***"For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"***.

The great secret of Christianity is our constant daily occupation with the risen & glorified Man in heaven, as He is revealed to us ***"as in a glass"***, i.e. in the mirror of God's Word.

Such occupation with Christ will only produce delight to our souls, and it will morally & spiritually change us to be more like Him. By thus beholding the glory of the Lord, we ***"are changed into the same image, from (one degree of) glory to (another higher degree of) glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord"*** (v18).

This spiritual transformation to Christ-likeness is illustrated in Stephen in Acts 6-7, a man filled with the Holy Spirit. If we are in the good of this superlative ministry of the new covenant, it will give us spiritual strength (ch4v1).