

~ THE GLORIOUS COVENANTS ~

Judaizing teachers in Corinth were boasting about their letters of commendation from important brethren. Paul defended his work by appealing to the Corinthians themselves as his letters of commendation, and then totally undermines the errors of the Judaizers by showing the demise of the Old Covenant. The third chapter of second Corinthians is one of the most devastating chapters in the New Covenant to the doctrine of Sabbath observance today and to the doctrine that God only gave one Covenant.

The chapter contrasts the glory of the Old Covenant and New Covenants. The background of Paul's argument is found in Exodus 34. When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, he did not realize that the skin of his face was shining. Aaron and the people saw "the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him" (verse 30). It was "when Moses had finished speaking with them, (that) he put a veil on his face" (verse 33). "But whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would take the veil off until he came out; and he would come out and speak to the children of Israel whatever he had been commanded. And whenever the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone, then Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with Him" (verses 33-35). The Old Covenant does not tell us the purpose of Moses' veil, but the Holy Spirit revealed through Paul that it was to prevent the people from seeing the fading of the glory on Moses' face (2 Corinthians 3:13), which was typical of the passing of the covenant being given.

The First Covenant and Mount Sinai

It was an impressive, frightening and glorious occasion when the ten commandment law was revealed. This was the covenant that was "written and engraved on stones" (2 Corinthians 3:7). It is important to understand that this law was not given at creation, but after the Israelites came out of Egypt. Moses said, "The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, those who are here today, all of us who are alive...And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (Deuteronomy 5:3, 15). He said, "So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone" (Deuteronomy 4:13). Again, he said, "When I went up into the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which the Lord made with you, then I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water" (Deuteronomy 9:9). Later, Solomon said, "And there I have made a place for the ark, in which is the covenant of the Lord which He made with our fathers, when He brought them out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 8:21). The ark of the covenant was called that because it contained "the two tablets which Moses put there at Horeb, when the Lord made a covenant with the children of Israel, when they had come out of Egypt" (2 Chronicles 5:10). The covenant that contained the Sabbath observance was given at Mount Sinai, not at creation. (Genesis 2:3 does not contradict these passages. When Moses wrote Genesis, the Sabbath had been sanctified, but

this verse does not tell when God sanctified it. Early in the ministry of Jesus, Matthew records that Judas betrayed Him, Matthew 10:4. The verse does not say when Judas betrayed Him, but it had been done when Matthew wrote the book.) Nehemiah confirms that the Sabbath was given at Mt. Sinai. “You came down also on Mount Sinai, And spoke with them from heaven, And gave them just ordinances and true laws, Good statutes and commandments. You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, And commanded them precepts, statutes and laws” (Nehemiah 9:13, 14).

The covenant that was given on Mt. Sinai was a “ministry of death” or a “ministry of condemnation,” and it passed away (2 Corinthians 3:7, 9, 11). In writing to the Romans, Paul said, “I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death” (Romans 7:9, 10). Paul was not blaming the law, in fact, he said that the law was good (verse 13), but justification by perfect law-keeping was futile; it produced death. The law served its purpose, “that sin might become exceedingly sinful,” and to show man his need for a better system which was fulfilled in Christ (Galatians 3:24, 25). It was glorious, but temporary. “For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious” (2 Corinthians 3:10, 11).

Glorious and More Glorious

Moses put the veil over his face, “so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away” (verse 13). The “end” here may refer simply to the fading of the glory on his face, which typified the passing of the covenant being given, or it may refer to the purpose of that covenant. Paul told the Galatians that “the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (Galatians 3:24, 25). Jesus said that He came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, and that “one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Matthew 5:17, 18). If Christ fulfilled His mission, and He did (Luke 24:44), every jot and tittle of the Law passed away.

Paul said that those who did not understand the passing of the Old Covenant had a spiritual veil over their hearts (verse 14). (Translators use the word “Testament” here, which is from the identical word translated “covenant” in verse 6.) When “Moses is read,” without understanding the purpose of his writing, a “veil lies on their heart” (verse 15). “When one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (verse 16, NKJV). Others translate “one” as “it, a man, he, or they,” but either word indicates that the heart that turns to the Lord will see clearly the purpose of the Old Covenant and its fulfillment in Christ.

Only the More Glorious

The New Covenant is referred to as the ministry of the Spirit, or of righteousness. It is a covenant that produces spiritual liberty (verse 17). Paul told the Galatians that “if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain” (Galatians 2:21). The

writer of Hebrews said, "Therefore, if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron?" (Hebrews 7:11). The blood of animals, which dedicated the Old Covenant (Exodus 24:7, 8), could not genuinely forgive sins (Hebrews 10:1-4). When one turns to the revelation of the Spirit of the Lord, the New Covenant, "there is liberty" (2 Corinthians 3:6, 17).

The prophets clearly foretold that in the last days a New Covenant would be given. Isaiah, speaking concerning the last days, said, "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3). Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant is well known (Jeremiah 31:31-34). God said it would not be "according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt..." (verse 32). The writer of Hebrews quoted this prophecy and added, "In that He says, A new covenant, He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (Hebrews 8:13). When God, through Jeremiah, promised a new covenant, that indicated that the one then in existence was going to grow old and become obsolete. Ezekiel predicted the coming of David as "prince among them," and said, "I will make a covenant of peace with them, and cause wild beasts to cease from the land..." (Ezekiel 34:23, 24). This is the same spiritual state that Isaiah described as the wolf and lamb dwelling together, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together and the lion eating straw like the ox (Isaiah 11:6, 7). Later, he said "No lion shall be there, Nor shall any ravenous beast go up on it; It shall not be found there. But the redeemed shall walk there" (Isaiah 35:8, 9). These prophets were not talking about taming wild beasts, nor their destruction, but describing the coming of a New Covenant and a peaceful kingdom in which the prince of peace would sit on David's throne (Acts 2:29-31; Ephesians 2:14-16).

Conclusion

Notice two applications of these principles. First, Moses removed his veil when he went into the presence of God. He was the only Israelite to have that privilege. Paul said "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18). With the passing of time, the glory on Moses' face declined, but when we come into the fellowship of God and behold the glory of Christ, by looking into the mirror (James 1:22-25), our glory increases with the passing of time. Second, the old covenant was glorious, like the stars on a dark night. In St. Augustine, Florida, there is a presentation on how the Spaniards used the stars to navigate to the new world, but when the sun arises, though the stars are still there, they cannot be used for navigation. The Old Covenant once directed God's people, but when the Son arrived, the Old Covenant can no longer be used for our navigation!

Frank Jamerson, 762 County Road 393, Killen, AL 35645