

**Class Notes for Lessons 5 and 6**  
**2 Corinthians 3**

**b. The Results of the Ministry. 3:1-3.**

**Chapter Three**

1 Are we beginning again to commend ourselves? or need we, as do some, epistles of commendation to you or from you?

2 Ye are our epistle, written in our hearts, known and read of all men;

3 being made manifest that ye are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in tables [that are] hearts of flesh.

Having affirmed his own sincerity, in contrast to the gospel-peddlers who were troubling the church, Paul is aware that what he has said will be seized on by his detractors, especially the false apostles in Corinth, and twisted by them into evidence of egotism and self-advertisement. No utterance of his was safe from perversion at their hands.

- 1) **V. 1** -- Paul's problem was that he lacked external credentials. He was not one of the original disciples of Jesus. The Corinthians only had Paul's word that he was in good standing with the leaders of the Jerusalem church.<sup>1</sup> His only course was to reiterate that the risen Lord had called him to be an apostle and to point to his sacrificial lifestyle as legitimizing that call. Yet this had easily made it appear that he was commending himself. His dilemma was that he must either say nothing in his defense or allow the work in Corinth to be destroyed by default, or run the risk of the accusation that he was blowing his own trumpet.
  - a) Self defense is almost always impossible without self-commendation. Paul's opponents made the former necessary and then blamed him for the latter.
  - b) When Paul asks if he is *again* beginning to commend himself, it does not imply that he had done so on some earlier occasion, but rather that the charge had already been made against him in connection with some earlier statements, such as 1 Cor. 4:16 and 11:1 where he urges the Corinthians to be imitators of him. He forestalls his critics by anticipating their charge and turns it against them with irony by referring to them as "some."
  - c) Although Paul does not answer his own question, the question expects a negative answer thus asserting that he does not commend himself. If he will commend himself it is to their consciences and that in the sight of God. **(4:2)**.
    - i) He knew that it was the Lord who commends a person, not the person himself **(10:18)**, and that the commendation is directed toward the consciences of others.

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<sup>1</sup>Galatians 2:9

- ii) Although he does not commend himself, he deeply felt that the Corinthians should have commended him (**12:11**), since he was in no way inferior to his opponents, not even in their much vaunted fields of “signs, wonders, and miracles” (**12:12**). Nevertheless, he does remind them of certain facts. It is by his ministry that the Christians in Corinth manifest that they are a letter from Christ to the watching world.
- iii) Paul’s opponents based their claims on *letters of recommendation*.
  - (1) “letters of recommendation” -- letters establishing the bearers identity and credentials, such as were probably carried by emissaries from the Jerusalem church to Christian communities in Corinth and elsewhere, as they were carried by delegates from the Jewish authorities in Judea to synagogues in the Dispersion.<sup>2</sup>
  - (2) At that time such letters were common, and Paul himself used letters to introduce people to new congregations.<sup>3</sup> If commendatory letters were common and if Paul used them himself and thus did not condemn them, does it not follow that Paul’s implication here is that those to whom he was referring were unworthy and had unreliable credentials.<sup>4</sup>
  - (3) Letters of commendation became customary and perhaps necessary in the early church because of the number of sanctimonious charlatans who sought to lead a parasitic existence by imposing themselves on local congregations as itinerate teachers.
  - (4) Who wrote the letters for Paul’s opponents is one of the great unanswered questions of the New Testament. **11:22** tells us they were Hebrews; thus it is likely that they came from some Jewish quarter.
    - (a) Some suggest that they came from James. **Gal. 2:12**.
    - (b) Against this suggestion is that Paul does not say that James was the source, which presumably he would have done.
    - (c) Some question whether Paul would have persevered in the Judean famine relief and taken it to Jerusalem<sup>5</sup> had the persons who were intent on destroying Paul’s ministry in Corinth, in fact been sent by James.

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Acts 9:2; 22:5; also Acts 18:27; Rom. 16:1.

<sup>3</sup>Rom. 16:1; 2 Cor. 8:22; Col. 4:7-8

<sup>4</sup>In the middle of the fifth century the Council of Chalcedon found it expedient to decree that “strange and unknown clerics were under no circumstances whatever to minister in another city without epistles commendatory from their own bishop.”

<sup>5</sup>Acts 21:17; 24:17

- (d) Moreover, if these persons were from James, why would they have needed letters of recommendation *from* the Corinthians. Verse 1. The great name of the Lord's brother would surely have been sufficient.
  - (5) The most likely suggestion is that they were from some extreme Judaistic Christians in Jerusalem whose emissaries had embarked on a misguided program of capturing Paul's churches for their own brand of Jewish Christianity.
    - (a) The fact that they wanted letters from the Corinthians probably indicates that they intended to use Corinth as a springboard to other churches established by Paul (**10:13-16**).
    - (b) When in **10:12** he says that they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, he may mean that the senders and the messengers belong to the same group and that there is no higher authority than their own in whose name they may come.
  - (6) Whatever the source of the letters, Paul says he does not need them and proceeds to explain.
- 2) **V. 2** -- Imagine the reactions when the Corinthian church assembled for the reading of Paul's most recent letter. The newcomers have letters of recommendation; Paul says he has no need of them. What then will he say? To what will he point to justify his ministry? As the reader reads Paul's next words aloud, the Corinthians assembly must have been somewhat shaken to hear him say, "**You yourselves are our letter.**" He will not point to a great person or persons whom he represents or in whose name he has come. Rather he will stake his claim to legitimate ministry on the existence of the Corinthian church. His letter is written on his heart; it is not flourished in his hand or carried in his luggage.
- a) Paul's ministry is certificate enough of his apostolic authority, especially in a church like Corinth, which owed its existence to his ministry. Such a church was for him a living **letter of recommendation, written** (he says) **on our<sup>6</sup> hearts**. The change which the gospel had effected in their hearts was manifested in their lives so as **to be known and read by all men**.
  - b) When Paul brought the gospel to Corinth he came to know many of them in a personal way. He regarded himself as their father; he had them in his heart (**6:11-13**). The reformed fornicators, homosexuals, thieves and drunkards of whom he

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<sup>6</sup>F.F. Bruce says that the RSV is probably correct in preferring **your** (*hymon*, the reading of Aleph 33 and a few other manuscripts) to **our** (so SV, RV, NEB, rendering *hemon*), the majority reading. Others assert that the reading "our" as opposed to "your" has better manuscript support.

spoke (**1 Cor. 6:11**) were real persons with names and faces. It is unlikely that the new life style of the Corinthians was accomplished easily, smoothly or without disappointment. The letter of the Corinthian Christians was read by all, but it was also written on Paul's heart, the Greek perfect tense indicating that they were permanently engraved there.

- i) Ministry effectiveness is not determined by credentials.
- ii) Are there "living letters"? The confirmation of one's ministry lies in the effects of that ministry in human lives.
- iii) This depends on preaching a pure undiluted gospel, and also upon having taken people into our hearts.
- iv) The proper balance lies in faithfulness to the gospel and love of people. Ephesians 4:15.

3) **V. 3** -- What value had the newcomers' letters of recommendation in establishing their credentials as true ministers of God? At best the letters came with the authority of church leaders elsewhere; at worst they carried the names of persons from their own faction, making the newcomers their own source of commendation. Paul had letters of recommendation, also -- the Corinthians Christians.

- a) The metaphor is developed further: the Corinthian church is a letter of which Christ is the author; Paul is either the messenger by whom it was **delivered**<sup>7</sup> or perhaps the scribe who took it down; it was **written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God**. Any man can write with ink; only Christ can write with the Spirit of God. Paul has been considering the matter from the point of view of the Corinthians relationship to him, as his letter of commendation, engraved in *his* heart. Now he contemplates them more particularly from the standpoint of their relationship to Christ, whose letter they are, and whose handwriting is in *their* hearts.
- b) Paul appeals to a higher authority for recommendation -- You are a letter from Christ. Christ, the author and source of the new lifestyle of the Corinthians, authenticates and legitimizes Paul's ministry. Because the conversion of the Corinthians had its source and origin in Christ it was evident that Paul was his minister.
  - i) What is now manifest for all to read was first written in their hearts with the Spirit of the living God. The new lifestyle which was so visible and striking was the outworking of something which began within the inner recesses of their hearts, through the power of the Spirit of God.
  - ii) True Christianity is not a veneer of morality glued on to the exterior of our lives, but a profound change of heart, mind and will which is then expressed in outward behavior. The word of God changes individuals from the inside out.

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<sup>7</sup>Greek, *diakonetheisa*, "ministered" or "administered"

- c) This contrast between **ink** and **spirit** reminds Paul of the contrast between the old covenant and the new, but in view of the material on which the Decalogue, the old covenant code, was engraved, he thinks not of parchment or papyrus (which would have been suitable for ink), but of tablets of stone as contrasted with the tablets of human hearts (lit. Tablets, hearts of flesh) on which the terms of the new covenant are inscribed.
- d) This language echoes Jeremiah 31:33, where under the new covenant Jehovah will write his law on his people's hearts, and Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26, where he promises to give them a heart of flesh in place of their stony heart.
  - i) The ministry of the newcomers belongs to the now superseded covenant of Moses which was written on tablets of stone. In contrast to the power of the living God, that ministry is now a dead letter, utterly incapable of transforming people.
  - ii) Moses' epoch is now over; it has passed forever; the new missionaries hopelessly attempt to turn the clock back.
  - iii) But it is too late; the new covenant of Christ, in which Paul is a minister, imparts the Spirit to the inner recesses of the heart and brings a new creation.

**c. Competence for service. 3:4-6.**

4 And such confidence have we through Christ to God-ward:

5 not that we are sufficient of ourselves, to account anything as from ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God;

6 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.

- 1) **Vv. 4, 5** -- The challenge from Corinth had apparently forced Paul to engage in some soul-searching. Was it after all just his opinion against that of the newcomers? What right had he to claim to be a minister of the long-awaited new covenant? Was he perhaps too confident in his theological judgment? Did his achievements merely flow from his own innate zeal and ability? Yet he cannot deny what had happened to these people. He has confidence that these things have actually taken place, although it has nothing to do with his own personal competence or sufficiency. He has not measured himself against his opponents and declared himself to be superior. His confidence, significantly, is directed towards God. V. 4. It is only through Christ that he had this confidence before God.
  - a) This confidence of the apostle that he was what God had called him to be, an able or fit minister of the gospel, was not a trait of natural character; it was not a conclusion from his inward and outward experience; it was one of the forms in which the Spirit of God which was in him manifested itself; just as that Spirit manifested itself in his humility, faith, courage, or constancy.
  - b) Having strongly asserted his sufficiency, he tells us what was not, and then what

was, the source of his sufficiency. *Not that I . . . sufficiency is from God.*” He had no power of himself to accomplish any thing. His fitness for his work, whether consisting in knowledge, or grace, or fidelity, or efficiency, did not arise out of anything he was in or of himself. All his fitness for his work -- all knowledge, holiness and power -- is of God. They are neither self-acquired nor self-sustained.

- c) The references to sufficiency or competence (3 in verses 5-6) refer back to his question in 2:16 -- Who is equal to such a task? His opponents claimed a powerful self-sufficiency. They regarded Paul as weak and lacking the resources of a true minister. In agreeing with them Paul indicates that what he is engaged in is not his own project but God’s.
  - d) As though to silence his accusers finally and completely, he disclaims in the plainest terms any measure of self-sufficiency and asserts that such sufficiency as was apparent in his ministry is derived solely *from God*. He is saying in effect what he had said explicitly on a previous occasion -- *not I, but the grace of God which was with me.*” (*1 Cor. 15:10*). Only a man who, like Paul, is humbly awake to his own utter weakness can know and prove the total sufficiency of God’s grace. This great truth echoes and re-echoes through this letter (**cf. 4:7ff; 5:18ff.; 6:4ff.; 7:5ff.; 11:23ff.; 12:9f.; 13:3f.**). He who has, through Christ, received all things from God looks with confidence, through Christ, to God.
  - e) His qualification and source of competence for the work of the ministry, including the assessment of its success, were not natural ability or personal initiative but divine enabling. Paul’s confidence came through Christ, his competence from God, and he says all this against the background of his opponents’ claim to be self-sufficient.
  - f) The ministry of Paul and all who have subsequently become ministers of the new covenant is not offered for the approval of man but for the endorsement of God. It was *before God* that Paul had his *sufficiency*. Nor does the strength which all ministers of the word of God need come from within themselves. Ministers of the gospel will say with Paul, *our sufficiency comes from God.*”
- 2) **V. 6** -- This verse is a confirmation of the preceding. Our sufficiency is of God who hath made us ministers. God made Paul a minister. The past tense implies that Paul, unlike his rivals in Corinth, could actually point back to a definite occasion when God had called him to the office of an apostle and granted him sufficiency for that ministry. His mind undoubtedly went back to the road to Damascus and subsequent events, including the confirmation of Ananias – “The God of our fathers hath appointed thee to know his will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear a voice from his mouth; for thou shalt be a witness for him unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard.” Acts 9:3ff.; 26:16-18; 22:14f. That God should have placed his hand upon him and commissioned him in this remarkable manner never ceased to be a source of wonder and gratitude to the Apostle. *I*

*thank him that enabled me, even Christ Jesus our Lord for that he counted me faithful, appointing me to his service” 1 Tim. 1:12.* The ministry to which the false apostles at Corinth pretended was one of arrogant self-appointment and usurpation. The whole foundation and sole justification of Paul’s apostleship was, by contrast, his appointment in unmistakable circumstances by Christ Himself, and none other.

- 3) He was a minister of the new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life.
- a) Letter and spirit as used here refer to the law and the gospel, which he proceeds to compare in the following verses.
  - b) These are terms that he uses in the same sense elsewhere.
    - i) Rom. 7:6 -- oldness of the letter and newness of the spirit.
    - ii) Rom. 2:27 -- characterizes the Jew as being of the letter, i.e., as having the law. Comp. Also Gal. 3:3.
  - c) These words express concisely the characteristic difference between the law and the gospel. The one was external, the other spiritual; the one was an outward precept, the other an inward power. In the one case the law was written on stone, in the other on the heart. The one therefore was *letter*, the other *spirit*.
    - i) Heb. 8:6-13 argues that the introduction of a new covenant presupposes that it is a better covenant, since if the earlier covenant had been faultless there would have been no need for a second.
    - ii) The old was necessarily temporary and imperfect inasmuch as it looked forward to the establishment of that which is perfect and permanent.
    - iii) The blood of the ancient sacrifices, oft-repeated, would not take away sins; but the blood of Christ’s sacrifice, offered once for all, is the blood of the eternal covenant. Heb. 10:4ff.; 13:20.
- 4) In what sense does the law kill?
- a) The law demands perfect obedience.
    - i) Do this and thou shalt live. Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12.
    - ii) Cursed is everyone who continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them. Gal. 3:10.
    - iii) No man renders this perfect obedience; thus, the law condemns him.
  - b) It produces the knowledge or consciousness of sin, and of course of guilt, that is, of just exposure to the wrath of God. Thus, again, it slays.
  - c) It presents the perfect standard of duty which cannot be seen without awakening the sense of obligation to be conformed to it, while it imparts no disposition or power to obey, it exasperates the soul and thus again it brings forth fruit unto death.
    - i) NOTE: All these effects of the law are systematically presented by Paul in Rom. 6, 7 and Gal. 3.

- 5) The spirit gives life. The spirit, or the gospel, gives life in a sense correlative to that in which the letter kills.
- a) By revealing a righteousness adequate to our justification, and thus delivering us from the sentence of death.
  - b) By producing the assurance of God's love and the hope of his glory in the place of a dread of his wrath.
  - c) By becoming an inward principle or power transforming us into the image of God; instead of a mere outward command.
- 6) It is not Paul's teaching here that:
- a) It is necessary to go deeper than the letter and to observe the spirit of the law -- though this attitude certainly has its place. See Mt. 5:21-27.
  - b) The law may be understood in two senses: a literal and inferior sense and a spiritual and superior one.
  - c) Obedience to law is dispensed with.
    - i) This is plainly shown by the terms in which God announces his new covenant -- I will put my *law* in their inward parts. Jer. 31:33.
    - ii) This is plainly shown by the objective that God's new covenant or law is to obtain -- that they may walk in my *statutes*, and keep *mine ordinances* and do them. Ezek. 11:20.
    - iii) There is no question of a new law or no law. The difference between the old and new covenants is that under the former that law is written on tablets of stone, confronting man as an external ordinance and condemning him because of his failure through sin to obey its commandments, whereas under the latter the law is written internally within the redeemed heart.
- 7) Spirit or spirit?
- a) The contrast is between the external and the internal.
  - b) Paul uses similar terminology in Romans 2:28f. Where he writes: "He is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit not in the letter.

**d. The surpassing glory of the new covenant. 3:7-11.**

7 But if the ministration of death, written, [and] engraven on stones, came with glory, so that the children of Israel could not look stedfastly upon the face of Moses for the glory of his face; which [glory] was passing away:

8 how shall not rather the ministration of the spirit be with glory?

9 For if the ministration of condemnation hath glory, much rather doth the ministration of



righteousness exceed in glory.

10 For verily that which hath been made glorious hath not been made glorious in this respect, by reason of the glory that surpasseth.

11 For if that which passeth away [was] with glory, much more that which remaineth [is] in glory.

- 1) In opposing his opponents “back to Moses” program, Paul discusses wide-ranging contrasts between the old and new covenants. If the old mediated condemnation and death, the new mediates righteousness and life. The old covenant was temporary and is now abolished; the new is permanent and will continue without end. Above all, the new covenant mediates the Spirit of God to our lives transforming them into the likeness of Christ.
  - a) Whenever we write the date on a letter we follow the long established custom of dividing history into two parts BC and AD (before CE and BCE). History’s midpoint is not an invention, or the discovery of a continent, or a war, but a person, Jesus Christ. This practice has its beginning in passages like this one where Paul divides history around Christ. His coming ended one ministry and began another.
    - i) The former ministry is described as belonging to Moses; the latter to Christ.
    - ii) Although both Moses and Christ are described as having glory, their glory is unequal. Now that Christ has come Moses has no glory at all.
    - iii) Why does Paul, in contrasting the ministries of Moses and Christ, introduce the idea of ‘glory’ (which he uses 16 times between 3:7 and 4:17)?
      - (1) Answer probably lies in the new situation in Corinth in which the Jewish missionaries are attempting to win the church over to the Law of Moses.
      - (2) They may have claimed that Moses is equal to or superior to Christ, and that Christ was merely part of the covenant of Moses.
      - (3) Paul in response uses the glory motif teaching from **Exodus 34:29-35** that Moses needed to veil his face to prevent the people from seeing its brightness.
        - (a) Some suggest that this was because the glory of Moses face was fading and he did not wish the Israelites to see it fade (v.13).
          - (i) In other words, Moses ministry was temporary; it was not an end in itself. **Rom. 10:4.**
          - (ii) By contrast with Moses, Christ’s glory is permanent, infinitely greater and heavenly.
    - iv) But why should the Corinthians have been attracted to the newcomers’ message about Moses and the Law?

- (1) If for modern people the problem with Christianity is its antiquity, the problem people had then was novelty.
  - (2) People then venerated the past, believing that old ideas and customs went back to the gods.
  - (3) Doubtless these teachers pointed to Moses as a venerable figure and their temple as an ancient institution.
  - (4) Moreover, the Jews were an ancient people, God's people, who had by this time settled in many parts of the world and constituted about 10% of the Roman Empire.
  - (5) The existence of numerous "God-fearers" or Gentile proselytes is evidence of the attractiveness of Judaism to many pagans.
  - (6) It would have been easy for the newcomers to dismiss Paul as a self-appointed, self-recommended upstart peddling a heretical, novel version of Judaism.
- 2) Paul's response is that, since God has made a new covenant (**v. 6**), Christians should not be looking back over their shoulders to the old. In this passage he employs two related modes of argument to persuade the Corinthians not to return to the old, but to remain in the new covenant.

- a) First, he compares the old covenant adversely with the new. The former ministry was marked by **death (v. 7)** and **condemnation (v. 9)**, whereas the latter is marked by **the Spirit (v. 8)** and **righteousness (v. 9)**.
- i) Paul's negative assessment of the earlier dispensation is in line with opinions of distinguished members of that covenant.  
**Jeremiah 31:32.**
  - ii) "You are a stiff-necked people and to this day the Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear," Moses said. **Deuteronomy 9:6; cf. 10:16; 29:4.**
  - iii) Since they neither observed the law God gave them, nor had any assurance of his forgiveness when they broke them, the commandments became, not the source of life as originally intended (**Deut. 5:33**), but a harsh "letter" (**v. 6**) which condemned them and destroyed fellowship with God.
    - (1) Paul is very careful not to give the impression that the law is in itself something evil or inglorious.
    - (2) It is true that it kills, but it is not designed to kill. **Romans 10:5; 13:10.**
  - iv) Thus, Paul gives due weight to the truth that the law came into being in glory.
    - (1) Since it came from God, it was necessarily glorious.
    - (2) This was apparent to the people by the glory with which the countenance of Moses was suffused when he came down from the Mount after receiving the law -- a glory so bright that they could not maintain their gaze upon his face (**Exodus 34:29f.**).
    - (3) This suffices to answer the charge that Paul, who rejoices in his calling as an apostle of grace and a minister of the new covenant, is a despiser of the law.
    - (4) He is concerned to expose the grave error of the false apostles who were exalting the law at the expense of the gospel. Theirs is in fact a ministry of death.
  - v) The glory of the old is not to be compared with that of the new. The former was external, radiant on Moses' face, resplendent in the **shechinah** cloud of God's presence in the camp; the latter is intimate and internal.
    - (1) In time the glory faded from Moses' face, and in time Moses himself died.
    - (2) The latter is a glory that does not fade -- the light in every believing heart, of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (**4.6**), who is the ever-living Mediator of the New Covenant. (**Heb. 7:24f.; 8:6.**)
    - (3) "The office of the law is to show us the disease in such a way that it shows us no hope of a cure; whereas the office of the gospel is to bring a remedy to those who are past hope. For the law, since it leaves man to himself,

necessarily condemns him to death; whereas the gospel, by bringing him to Christ, opens the gate of life.” John Calvin.

- vi) The new covenant has exactly opposite effects.
  - (1) If the ministry of the letter kills, the ministry of the Spirit gives life (**v. 6**).
  - (2) If the old covenant issues in condemnation, the new issues in **righteousness (v. 9)**, which, since it is the opposite of condemnation, must mean acquittal.
- b) Paul’s second argument against returning to the old covenant is that it is now superseded.
  - i) If the former **ministry... came with glory**, then the latter will be **even more glorious (verses 8, 9, 11)**.
    - (1) However, it is not merely that one ministry is superior; it is, rather, that the lesser, temporary glory of the old did not continue, but concluded, once the greater, permanent glory of the new dispensation arrived. The new covenant so far surpasses in glory the ministration of the old that in comparison with it the old may be said to be no longer glorious: in this respect, that which has been made glorious has been made not glorious -- just as the brightness of the sun altogether transcends and supersedes the brightness of the moon, or the advent of the day causes the brilliance of a lamp to fade away. The impermanence of the earlier dispensation is confirmed by the fact that it was **with** or more literally **through** glory: that is, it was accompanied with the manifestation of the divine glory at Mount Sinai when it was mediated to the people through Moses, whose face also shone with that glory. The permanence of the gospel dispensation, on the other hand, is confirmed by that fact that it is **in glory**: that is, it is established in the sphere of glory. Its glory is the glory that surpasses; and it is all glory, glory leading to glory, without a shadow of condemnation (**see v. 18**). What unspeakable comfort and security there is for the Christian in the knowledge that his is an everlasting gospel (**Rev. 14:6**), and everlasting covenant (**Heb. 13:20**), and an everlasting salvation (**Heb. 5:9**).
    - (2) Again, his language implies that in the new covenant the law is not disparaged.
    - (3) The glory on Moses face was **fading (verses 7, 11, 13)**, or, more accurately, had been “abolished.” **Rom. 5:1; Gal. 3:2**.
    - (4) Had there been no promise, there could have been no fulfillment. In accordance with the promises of the new covenant, God’s law is written on the believing heart and

the power is granted -- the dynamic of Christ's perfect law-keeping -- to fulfill it. Thus the letter of condemnation is transformed by God's grace into the way of love and of life. Before the law the sinner is powerless, shut up to condemnation and judgment; but in the gospel he is offered forgiveness and an everlasting inheritance, in Christ (cf. **Rom. 3:19-26; 8:16ff**).

- (5) Nevertheless, the hands on God's clock have now moved from AM to PM.
  - (6) Let the readers understand that the old has passed never to return; there can be no putting back of God's clock.
- c) What emerges for us in Paul's teaching is that we must establish sound principles in interpreting the ministries or dispensations of God's covenant.

**e. Veiling and unveiling. 3:12-18.**

12 Having therefore such a hope, we use great boldness of speech,  
13 and [are] not as Moses, [who] put a veil upon his face, that the children of Israel should not look stedfastly on the end of that which was passing away:  
14 but their minds were hardened: for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remaineth, it not being revealed [to them] that it is done away in Christ.  
15 But unto this day, whensoever Moses is read, a veil lieth upon their heart.  
16 But whensoever it shall turn to the Lord, the veil is taken away.  
17 Now the Lord is the Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, [there] is liberty.  
18 But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit.

- 1) Verse 12.
  - a) What is the "hope" of which Paul speaks?
    - i) Some say it is equivalent to the "confidence" of v. 4, and a resumption of what is said there, though now the use of the term "hope" shows that his confidence now extends to the future.
    - ii) Some relate it to the hope implied in v. 8, that the ministration of the spirit will surpass the ministration of condemnation.
    - iii) Some suggest that it is the possession of the fulfillment of the hope, referring to the fullness of the glory and of the gospel harvest which is yet to be revealed.
    - iv) Some see it as the hope of seeing the glory, not as shone on the face of Moses, but of that beheld by the three apostles when Christ was transfigured.
    - v) Some say it refers to the hope that we who believe have been accounted worthy of greater blessings than was Moses.
    - vi) Some connect the hope with the immediately preceding thought of v. 11, namely, that the surpassing glory of the gospel is also a glory that is abiding

- and permanent.
- b) This latter suggestion seems the most natural in view of the context and is therefore preferable.
- 2) Verse 13.
- a) Paul reminds his readers that the openness of his ministry of the gospel is in contrast to the ministry of the law by Moses, who had found it necessary to place a veil over his face (see Ex. 34:32ff).
    - i) Moses, in other words, was unable to use complete openness.
    - ii) The KJV's translation of verse 33 gives a wrong impression of that which occurred. Moses did not veil his face while he spoke with them, but when he had concluded speaking with them (see the ASV or NASV).
    - iii) When Moses spoke to the people they beheld his uncovered shining face; when he concluded speaking he veiled his face until he went into the presence of the Lord.
  - b) This accords with what is said in Ex. 34:35 in both the KJV and ASV.
  - c) Paul also states the purpose and significance of this veiling: it was with the object that the Israelites should not look right on to the end of that which was transient – that they should not see even that impermanent glory without interruption.
    - i) They were permitted to look upon it when Moses spoke the words of God to them because it provided irrefutable proof of the authenticity and of his ministry and leadership.
    - ii) The Israelites could not sustain their gaze upon that splendor so Moses veiled his face when he had done speaking, not so much for the convenience of the people as to show them, by a kind of enacted parable that it was their iniquities that rendered them unable, and unworthy, to behold such glory.
  - d) Modern commentators explain v. 13 to mean that Moses veiled his face in order that the Israelites might not gaze upon the end, that is, according to them, the fading away and final vanishing of the passing glory with which it was radiant.
    - i) Aside from the fact that this interpretation finds no support in the exegesis of the patristic authors, it is an interpretation that confuses the issue at this stage in Paul's argument by proposing that it was not the glory but the fading of the glory that Moses was intent on hiding from the people.
    - ii) It also raises a moral problem because, despite disclaimers on the part of many who advocate it, it attributes to Moses the practicing of a subterfuge.
    - iii) At any rate, why should Moses have wished the children of Israel to believe that a fading glory was not fading?
    - iv) Moreover, are we to conclude that Moses kept his face covered for 40 years of wilderness wanderings? (Maybe that is why he took so long to make such a short journey!) Is it not more likely that the brightness faded over time and the veil was removed until Moses spoke with the Lord?
  - e) The best understanding seems to be that Moses placed a veil over his face so that the people could not gaze right to the end of the glory that was passing away, that is, that they might not behold it without interruption or concealment.
    - i) It is the interruption and concealment with which Paul is concerned rather than the fading.
    - ii) In this respect, the ministry of Moses was marked by concealment, and Paul

draws attention to this fact in order to emphasize that, by contrast, his ministry of the gospel has the character of great openness.

(1) He uses no veil.

(2) His is not a message of condemnation and death, but of grace and mercy and life to every sinner who believes and obeys.

(3) The eye of faith can gaze upon the everlasting glory of Christ without interruption.

3) Verses 14-15.

a) Even when confronted with the glory shining from Moses' countenance the Israelites were unwilling to receive what God had to communicate to them through him, and in consequence their minds were hardened and their understandings were dulled and deadened.

i) This is always the result of refusing and suppressing the revelation of divine truth.

ii) A veil of intellectual darkness hides the glory that has been deliberately rejected (Rom. 1:21).

iii) We are warned of the terrible possibility of intellectual hardening when face to face with the glorious revelation of divine truth, and the responsibility is proportionately greater for those who are confronted, not with the partial and transient glory of the law, but with the surpassing and permanent glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:29).

b) Paul affirms that the same veil remains when the old covenant is read.

i) The veil to which he now refers is figurative, symbolical of the veil of rebellion and unbelief that curtained the Jews' hearts from the comprehension of God's glory.

ii) During the succeeding centuries that veil has never been removed from the understanding of the nation of a whole.

iii) Moses is dead and the material veil that he used has perished, but the same veil, the inward veil of which the outward veil was the symbol, is still keeping the hearts of the Israelites in darkness whenever they are confronted afresh with Moses in the form of the Old Testament Scriptures.

iv) Now that Christ has come, it has the added effect of blinding them also to the splendor and significance of the new covenant.

v) The same veil shuts out from their gaze not only the reflected glory of Moses but also the full glory of Christ and His gospel.

vi) This is the import of Christ's condemnation of the Jews. John 5:46-47.

4) Verse 16.

a) Now that the old covenant has given way to the new, the passing glory to the surpassing, it is only by turning in faith to Christ that the veil over the reading of Moses is removed.

i) Paul is not speaking theoretically, but from experience.

ii) Hebrew of Hebrews though he had been (Phil. 3:5), the same veil had remained unremoved until he came face to face with the Lord.

iii) This is the practical issue with which all of his fellow Israelites are faced – unless and until they turn to Christ they will continue to be shut out from the apprehension of God's revealed truth.

- b) It is not merely the intellect, but the heart, which, in the scriptural view of man, is the center of his being, the spring of will and activity, the seat of the affections and the understanding, the focal prism of the personality.
  - c) Israel must turn to the Lord, the same Lord to whom Moses turned in the tabernacle and in whose presence the veil was removed from his face so that he beheld with unimpeded vision the divine glory.
  - d) Paul uses the present tense – the veil is being removed – indicating that the removal was going on even as he wrote. It did not refer to some future turning of national Israel when Jesus would return, establish an earthly kingdom, reinstitute the Jewish system, and reign in Jerusalem.
- 5) Verse 17.
- a) The exegetical problem in this verse revolves around the significance of the term “spirit.”
    - i) Many commentators from the early centuries understood it to refer to the Holy Spirit.
      - (1) The first clause was understood to mean that “the Holy Spirit is the Lord,” establishing the Godhead of the Holy Spirit, or that the Lord (Christ) is the Holy Spirit, indicating the unity of the Second and third Persons of the Trinity.
      - (2) Thus, the verse has been adduced as proof of the Trinitarian doctrine and the deity of the Holy Spirit.
    - ii) Such an understanding seems to fit neither the words of the text or the context in which they appear.
      - (1) Paul’s concern here is not with the nature of the Trinity, but with the relationship between the old and new covenants.
      - (2) In v. 6 Paul has already established that he is a minister of the new covenant that is not of the letter, but of the spirit, and that the letter killeth while the spirit giveth life.
      - (3) Now in verse 17 he says that the Lord is the spirit, that is, Christ is the source of light and life: to turn to Him is to have the veil of misunderstanding removed and to pass from death to life.
  - b) The second part of the verse is a natural consequence of the first .
    - i) The Jews were in bondage to the letter that kills, but Christians have entered into the liberty of Christ – the dynamic liberty of the spirit as opposed to the mere letter.
    - ii) It is important that one who has been made free in Christ should not return to bondage. Rom. 8:15; Gal. 5:1.
- 6) Verse 18.
- a) What Paul says here applies to “we all” – all Christians of all ages.
    - i) Erasmus and others take it to apply only to those who minister the gospel.
    - ii) Calvin seems to have it better when he states that it is evident that Paul is speaking of an experience that is common to all believers.
    - iii) In the old dispensation only one man – Moses – looked upon the divine glory with unveiled face.
    - iv) In the gospel age this privilege belongs to all who are Christ’s, whether great or small, known or unknown.



- b) The glory is “the glory of the Lord,” and we behold it “as in a mirror.”
  - i) To gaze by faith into the gospel is to behold Christ, who in this same passage is described as “the image of God” (4:4) and elsewhere as the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) and “the effulgence of the Father’s glory and the impress of his substance (Heb. 1:13).
  - ii) To see him is to see the Father, and to behold His glory is to behold the glory as of the only begotten from the Father (John 14:9; 1:14).
  - iii) To contemplate Him who is the Father’s image is progressively to be transformed into that image.
  - iv) The effect of continuous beholding is that we are continuously being transformed (Used of Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration, Mark 9:2; Matt. 17:2.) “into the same image,” that is, into the likeness of Christ – increasingly so “from glory to glory.”
  - v) When He appears we shall behold Him face to face and our transformation into His image will be complete (1 John 3:2).
- c) This process of transformation into the image of Christ is none other than the restoration of the image of God that was marred through the fall of man.
  - i) “In Christ,” Ramsey wrote, “mankind is allowed to see not only the radiance of God’s glory but also the true image of man. Into that image Christ’s people are now being transformed, and in virtue of this transformation into the new man they are realizing the meaning of their original status as creatures in God’s image.”
  - ii) Calvin asserts that this is the design of the gospel: “that the image of God, which had been defaced by sin, may be repaired within us,” adding, “the progress of this restoration is continuous through the whole of life, because it is little by little that God causes His glory to shine forth in us.”
  - iii) Putting aside Ramsey and Calvin, Paul wrote in Col. 3:10: “and have put on the new man, that is being renewed unto knowledge after the image of him that created him.”
- d) In origin, process, and consummation this whole work of redemption is “of the Lord the spirit.”
  - i) This expression must be seen in context of the contrast that Paul is drawing between the letter and the spirit (v. 6).
  - ii) It is the Lord, Christ, who transforms the letter that kills into the spirit that gives life, and he does so because He Himself is spirit and life (John 4:24; 14:6).
  - iii) The words that He speaks are spirit and life (John 6:63).
- e) The conditions must be met.
  - i) There must be a turning to the Lord.
  - ii) Every veil that might hide Him must be removed.
  - iii) It must be His glory and no other that is reflected.
- f) When this is done, the Christian is transfigured into the very image of Him whose glory they reflect, and step by step the likeness becomes more and more complete – “unto the full measure of the maturity of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).