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2 Cor 3:7-11

Third Message

John Hanneman

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THE NEW COVENANT: A GREATER GLORY

My English teacher in elementary school, who was a rather large woman, was very mean. She wouldn't hesitate to whack kids with a ruler if they stepped out of line. Rumor had it that once she grabbed a boy by the hair and pulled out a big chunk of his curly locks. We lived in total fear in her class. In 7th grade, on the other hand, I had a science teacher who was marvelous. He loved science and transferred his love and enthusiasm for science on to his students. One of his interests was collecting rocks. This led me to become interested in rock collecting. I visited rock quarries on weekends and stayed after class to cut rocks on his rock saw. I discovered that the way I lived under these two teachers was drastically different. One classroom was the classroom of death; the other was the classroom of life.

The Bible declares that there are two ways of relating to God. There are two teachers or classrooms, so to speak; one is death, the other is life, the old covenant and the new covenant. A covenant is an agreement or contract, an arrangement between two people as to how they are going to live in relationship. A business partnership is a covenant in which two or more parties make agreements about how they are going to do business. A marriage partnership is also a covenant, but it is different from a business arrangement. In marriage, two people make a vow to accept unconditionally and love sacrificially through ups and downs, thick and thin, "until death do us part."

God gave the old covenant to Moses and the Israelites on Mt. Sinai after he had freed them from slavery in Egypt. He wrote a contract with his people as to how they were to live in relationship with him. This was the Torah, or the Law. The way the law was written was similar to a treaty that any king or overlord would make with his people in the ancient near east. The Torah contained blessings for Israel if they obeyed and curses if they disobeyed. In the old covenant everything is from us, nothing from God

The new covenant was realized in Jesus, in his death and resurrection. There were hints of the new covenant in the Old Testament. Through his prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, God had promised the coming of a new covenant. But the new covenant was fully realized and made visible through Christ. It gave a new arrangement for living in a relationship with God in which everything is from God and nothing from us.

The new covenant made the old covenant obsolete. However, as Christianity spread in the first century, certain people wanted to hold onto the old covenant and the old traditions.

Throughout his ministry, the apostle Paul faced continual conflict with these teachers. One such place was the city of Corinth. In our first study we talked about the tensions the apostle faced with the believers there. Because of these tensions, we find a lengthy section of text in 2 Corinthians, where Paul lays out the new covenant ministry of which he was an apostle.

Our text is 2 Cor 3, verses 7-11:

But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory. (2 Cor 3:7-11)

The key term in these five verses is the word "glory," occurring 10 times in the text. The main thrust of this section is Paul's comparison of the glory of the new covenant with the glory of the old. But it also has four comparisons between the two covenants. We will first look at these, and then talk about "glory."

A. Tablets vs. Human Hearts

The first comparison is highlighted by the phrase, "in letters engraved on stones." This refers back to verse 3, where Paul said, "you are a letter of Christ, cared for 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."

The old covenant was written on stone tablets; in other words, it was external. The law gives the standard but not the ability to respond. The external law only effects external behavior through self-effort. The heart remains unchanged.

The new covenant, on the other hand, is internal, because God writes the law on the heart and this results in a changed person. The standard is the same or actually harder, but now the resource for living and obeying is provided through the Holy Spirit. We now live differently, not because we are trying harder, but because we have a new nature born of God. We are a new creation.

One day a little 6-year-old boy was working in the garden with his mother. He was peering intently over a flower with

closed petals, wondering how it would open up. He asked his mother, “How will the petals on this flower open up.” But before she could answer, the little boy said, “Oh, I know. God always works on the inside.” This is how God works through the new covenant.

B. Death vs. Spirit (Life)

The second contrast is highlighted by the phrases, “the ministry of death” versus the “ministry of the Spirit.” This recalls verse 6: “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” The contrast is between the law that results in death and the Spirit who gives life.

The law is called the ministry of death because it gives the standard but not the resources. The law only serves to activate our flesh or self-effort. Notice that flesh is the contrast to the Spirit. We depend on our flesh to perform and validate our life: everything is from us, nothing from God.

But the flesh cannot be godly because its very nature is hostile to God. This is what Paul says in Romans 8: “the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so” (8:7). Even if we want a right relationship with God through the law, we cannot do it. The flesh merely produces the works of the flesh: immorality, idolatry, jealousy, strife, discontentment, loneliness, all the things listed in Galatians 5. Living in our own strength results in failure to keep the law. The law gives the standard and says, “Do this and live,” but in the end we only experience the curse of the law, which is death.

What is true with the law extends to every person, religious or not. We are born into the old covenant. Even if we do not live by God’s law, we make our own law, e.g., how we intend to live and experience life. We seek to validate our life through keeping God’s law or our own law. But we cannot do it. We fail. Any time we seek to validate our life through performance we will eventually experience death.

I grew up playing a lot of golf. I wasn’t half bad, regularly shooting in the 70’s on average courses. When I had children I didn’t play for several years. I didn’t have time and it cost too much. But as the children grew up I began to play a little bit more. One day I was playing with my son and after a frustrating round he asked me, “Dad, will you ever shoot in the 70’s again?” Well, that became a law. Every time I played, that was my goal. The harder I tried, the more frustrated I got. Golf became the ministry of death. Finally, I gave up and stopped keeping score.

The new covenant is the ministry of the Spirit and life. We are no longer under law. The Spirit provides the resources to live according to God’s design from the inside out. When we live by the Spirit, walk by the Spirit and trust in the Spirit, we experience the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy and peace. We experience the life of God, the life of the age to come in this world: everything is from God, nothing from us.

Last year, my neighbor asked me to play golf at his local club. The round started rather poorly, but I decided to take my wife’s advice and just enjoy myself. I didn’t pay any attention to my score. When we finished, my neighbor informed me that I had shot a 78. I was completely shocked, since I wasn’t really trying. That is like the new covenant. We don’t keep score and the Spirit does what our flesh cannot do.

C. Condemnation vs. Righteousness

The third contrast is highlighted by the phrases “the ministry of condemnation” versus “the ministry of righteousness.” Why is the law labeled as the ministry of condemnation? When we fail to keep the law, the law judges us and pronounces us guilty. The law is black and white, like mathematics. The answer is either right or wrong, no matter if you make a silly error or you completely botch it.

The new covenant, on the other hand, is the ministry of righteousness. What we could not do (earn righteousness through our own means) God did by sending his son Jesus. In Christ we receive the gift of righteousness as a 100% gift by faith. We believe that Jesus took the judgment and death for our failure on himself. We give him our dirty, soiled garments and he clothes us in the robes of righteousness. We live in complete acceptance before our heavenly Father. Nothing we do or don’t do changes the foundation of our relationship with him. We are set free from the law of sin and death. We experience forgiveness and grace initially and constantly. God’s steadfast love for us never fails.

Under the old covenant we live in fear and guilt. It’s like trying to earn an A in the class taught by a strict disciplinarian. Under the new covenant we have already received the grade of A from a loving teacher and now we are free to enjoy the class.

Under the old covenant we try to gain acceptance through performance. This is why we try so hard and are so hard on ourselves. Under the new covenant we no longer have to perform to earn approval or validation from God or anyone else.

D. Temporary vs. Permanent

The last comparison is highlighted by the words “fade” and “remain.” The old covenant came in glory, but it was temporary. From the moment of its inception it was on its way out, intended to be abolished. When Moses came down from the mountain with the stone tablets, his face shone brightly. The sons of Israel were so afraid they asked him to wear a veil. Because of the veil they could not see that the glory on his face had faded. (We will have more to say about this next week.) God’s plan was always to replace the old with the new. The old covenant was designed to point to Christ and a new covenant relationship with God. Some people in the OT understood this and looked forward to it.

When everything comes from us, any glory that we achieve through our own strength and fleshly efforts will be temporary at best. This is true in every area of life—getting a promotion,

an A on the test, winning the game, taking an exotic vacation or winning the gold medal. The glory always fades and one has to strive for the next success in order to get it again. This is how Silicon Valley operates. As soon as a new technology product is released, companies are already working on the next product to replace it.

This is what happens when we try to live in right relationship with God in our own strength. For a time we might do well. We feel really good about ourselves. We experience success in some ministry endeavor. But when we are living in the flesh, eventually we will fail. This is why people burn out in the Christian walk and give up. When we try endlessly to maintain the standard and live up to expectations, our resources will run out.

But the new covenant is permanent and everlasting; it remains. The new covenant in Christ will never fade or be eclipsed by anything else. This means that when we trust in God and his resources, he will produce permanent change in our life and will use us for eternal purposes in the lives of others. His resources through the Spirit will never run dry. When God is at work in us he produces a glow that does not fade but only intensifies as we grow in him.

Was the old covenant wrong or bad? No. There was nothing wrong with it. Paul says the “law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Rom 7:12 NAS95). The problem is with our fallen humanity. The old covenant could never give us life. Its purpose was to point us to Christ and the new covenant.

Now, let’s turn our attention to the most prominent word in our text, “glory.” Glory is the main point of these verses as Paul compares the glory of the new covenant to the old covenant. Three times he uses the word “more,” and twice, “much more.” The apostle’s argument is from lighter to heavier, from lesser to greater. The glory of the new covenant is much greater than the glory of the old.

We think of glory as radiance, brilliance or splendor. But in the Bible, the glory of God is often associated with both his presence and character. God’s dwelling with his people is marked by glory—the cloud on the mountain, the tent of meeting, the tabernacle, the temple. When Solomon built the temple, God’s glory descended. The temple was where God dwelt among his people. When Jesus came, John says that “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory” (1:14). Jesus was the new temple of God. But now God dwells among his people by being in his people through the Spirit. We now are the temple of God, the glory of God. The glory of God resides in his sons and daughters.

Glory is also associated with God’s character. When Moses wanted to see the glory of God, God told him that he would proclaim his name to Moses. And then a few verses later, God told him, “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth” (Ex 34:6).

The apostle says in the fourth gospel that in Jesus they saw the glory of God, full of grace and truth—the same thing that God told Moses, lovingkindness and truth. In other words, Jesus revealed to mankind the character of God. And what do we learn about God’s character? He is a God who washes the feet of his disciples and dies on a cross as a criminal. That is true glory. What we see through redemption history is the progression of God revealing himself more fully and dwelling more intimately with his people.

The old covenant revealed God’s glory, his character, his desire for man to live in relationship with him, and his loyalty and faithfulness to his people even when they turned their backs on him. If you had been an Israelite watching Moses ascend the mountain to meet with God and descend with a radiant face, you would have been astonished. That was a glorious event. But Paul is saying that is nothing compared to the new covenant in Christ. Both covenants reveal God’s glory, but the new covenant does it in a much greater way. The two covenants are different in kind, but they are also different in magnitude. The glory of the new is so much greater, it’s as if the old had no glory at all.

Comparing the glory of the two covenants is not like comparing vacations on Maui or Kauai, comparing steak with chicken, or football with basketball. You are not comparing things of equal glory. You are comparing flag football with pro football, Sacramento with the Bahamas, or the brightness of the sun with light from the moon. It’s like shining a flashlight in total darkness when the sun suddenly appears. The light of the sun completely outshines the light from the flashlight. There is no need for the flashlight. The apostle’s point is, Why would you ever want to go back to the old covenant now that the new covenant is here?

Let me try and drive this point home. In high school I was introduced to skiing on a little hill in Crescent, Iowa, about 15 miles from Omaha, where I grew up. There was one short hill and one towline. But since it was my first time skiing, it was glorious. Later in college I went to Steamboat Springs, a new ski resort in Colorado. The mountains were spectacular. The glory of skiing in Colorado completely overshadowed the glory of Crescent, Iowa. I never went back to Iowa again.

My major in college was computer science. I would write my programs on punch cards and do my work on IBM computers with large disk drives. The computer in those days was glorious, but technology has progressed incredibly since the late sixties. We will never revert to the old technology, even though it came it glory. The glory of the new has completely eclipsed the glory of the old.

How about the glory of young love? When my wife Liz and I met, it was glorious. We were enthralled with one another. But there was a lot of work to do in our relationship. Now after 35 years of marriage, I would never want to go back. The depth of our relationship, the history we share, the love we

experience is so much more glorious than the glory of infatuation.

These examples illustrate how we are to leave the old and embrace the new. The new covenant is so much better, so much more glorious than the old, why would we ever want to go back under the old system?

But, here is the problem. Many Christians continue to live in the old covenant either by choice or accident. Some want to hang onto the old traditions, the way things have always been done. They become rigid and lifeless. They only want a portion of God. They strive to make the flesh godly.

Others slide back into the old covenant. It's easy to do. We aren't even aware that it's happening. We go from a real and vital relationship with God to one defined by law and self-effort. In either case we are making the Holy Spirit inactive. Someone has said that if the Holy Spirit were taken away, many churches would look the same and operate on the same basis.

Living in the old covenant is why church seems to be boring and people want nothing to do with God. This is why our spiritual life gets stale and we become stuck. But when the church is alive with the Spirit, people want to be a part of that life. We find ourselves excited every day to see what God will do.

Paul is telling us to let go of the old completely and live in the new. Now that the grace of God has been revealed in Jesus, we are no longer under law. The apostle is saying that there is a new approach to living, and if we are missing that we are missing the key to life.

Here is what the writer of Hebrews says about this:

But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. . . . When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear. (8:6-7, 13)

May God instruct us with the word of truth, inform us with the Gospel of salvation, and enrich us with his love, Through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Gelasian Sacramentary)

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