

Lesson Three

(3:1-18)

SECTION VII 3:1—4:15

3 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? **2** You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; **3** and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

4 Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. **5** Not that we are sufficient of our selves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God, **6** who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life.

7 Now if the dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such splendor that the Israelites could not look at Moses' face because of its brightness, fading as this was, **8** why

STUDIES IN SECOND CORINTHIANS

should not the dispensation of the Spirit be attended with greater splendor? 9 For if there was splendor in the dispensation of condemnation, the dispensation of righteousness must far exceed it in splendor. 10 Indeed, in this case, what once had splendor has come to have no splendor at all, because of the splendor that surpasses it. 11 For if what faded away came with splendor, what is permanent must have much more splendor.

12 Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 13 not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendor. 14 But their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. 15 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; 16 but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

V. 1 — This verse may be understood two ways: 1) take 2:17 as a commendation by Paul of himself, and his response thereto; or 2) it is an address to the accusation which some had made that he had (previously) commended himself on other occasions as a defense, and such a defense always borders closely upon self-commendation. Some consider that 2:17 was an indirect way to commend himself and also to put others down. As we shall note in chapters 10-13, he acknowledged that he had been driven to self-defense ("glorying" in self). As he well knew, 10:17-18, self-commendation is worse than useless. Hence, when he is driven to self-praise, it is in the weaknesses of his life so that God might still be exalted, 12:9, 10.

Letters of commendation were, as now, common (see Acts 15:25ff; 18:27; Rom. 16:1; I Cor. 16:10ff; II Cor. 8:22; Col. 4:10). There was nothing wrong with the practice, unless it were made so. Evidently some had come to Corinth with such letters, and either had compared themselves to Paul (who had no such letter) or had given others the opportunity to do so.

V. 2 — Paul, while denying an "official" letter to vouch for his credentials, nevertheless did affirm that he had a most evident means of commendation: the Corinthian congregation, collectively and individually. They did not make him an apostle, nor did his apostleship depend upon them—yet its existence was a most evident sign of his apostleship, thus making it quite impossible to affirm he was not what he claimed (note I Cor. 11:2). Since their existence was of

such nature, his "letter" could be known and read by everyone, in distinction to a letter on paper that only some could read. (Note here Rom. 1:8; I Thess. 1:7.) As the poet has expressed it, we are the (only) bible (some) men read.

V. 3 — Yet Paul would not neglect to point out that they were actually what they were because of belonging to Jesus Christ, of whom Paul was merely a servant, as 4:5 points out. The obvious contrast is between the work of Christ in their lives (= mind/heart, note carefully Heb. 8:8-13), rather than a letter from some human authority, be it great or small. But even more, as pointed out in v. 6ff, they were the products of a new and different "letter" which was to be contrasted with the "letter" that came on tablets of stone. This new letter, the product of the Holy Spirit working through men (I Thess. 2:13), was about Christ, whom Paul served (2:17). Hence, the complete circle is made: Christ to Paul to the Corinthians to Christ.

delivered — This is a translation of the common Greek term transliterated "deacon." See under Romans 12:7.

V. 4 — A valid and obvious conclusion, then, is that Paul rightly had confidence because of his means of commendation.

toward God — The Greek construction is like John 1:1, "with God." (*πρὸς τὸν θεόν*)

V. 5 — Yet, his sufficiency is directly and only traceable to God, without which sufficiency and help no one would be worthy of the task (2:16). Apparently, as 2:17 stated, some were not so sustained by God, and their ministry was consequently self-centered. Unless one's sufficiency is "reckoned up" from God, one has no sufficiency.

V. 6 — God made us worthy/sufficient, Paul affirms, using the same term as in 2:16, and as in Colossians 1:12.

new covenant — Although promised in passages like Jeremiah 31, this phrase leaped into plain view in Matthew 26, from the lips of Jesus. Henceforth, it referred to the gospel message, I Cor. 15:1-4. See the same idea in Romans 7:6, and also peruse Hebrews 8:8-13. This idea was in Peter's mind, II Peter 1:16, in the sense that the new covenant, under which he served, was that which could give all things that pertained to life and godliness, 1:3-11, which the written code (the Old Testament) could not do (see Acts 13:38-39; Gal. 2:21-22). When the law came in, it merely magnified the sinfulness of man, Romans 5:20, and through that sin, strengthened by the law (O.T. law, or any law system, for that matter), I Corinthians 15:56, death reigned, Romans 5:21. However, thanks be to God, his grace as expressed in Jesus Christ can set us free from the law of sin and death, and we can reign in life, Romans 7:24 — 8:3, 5:21.

V. 7 — **dispensation of death** — The Greek term behind dispensation

STUDIES IN SECOND CORINTHIANS

(ministration, etc.) is the familiar word which is commonly transliterated as "deacon." There was and is no life under any law system, because no one keeps the law. This was so even in Old Testament days. It was only by faith that life came, Habakkuk 2:14.

This section is replete with various descriptions identifying what Paul means by his phrase in v. 6, "written code." Only those who refuse to take the evident meaning can not perceive that the Old Testament, and specifically the ten commandments, the heart of the Old Testament, is what the apostle has in mind, contrasting it with the New Covenant.

Moses' face — As Exodus 34 reveals, Moses' appearance was visibly changed while in the presence of God. It may well be that such happened not only to convince the Israelites that Moses had been with God, but also to typify the non-permanent nature of the Old Testament law. If so, God was providing just such information as Paul was using in our text. Stated differently, the Old Covenant, even at its inception, was already passing away, typified by the fading glory on Moses' face.

V. 8 — **greater splendor** — The Greek term is normally translated "glory." It is worthy of mention that the "written code" came *with* glory, whereas the "dispensation of the Spirit" is *in* glory. One was simply attended by glorious things, etc., while the other was/is glorious, and this was/is so because of the very nature of the respective covenants.

V. 9 — **dispensation of condemnation/righteousness** — These contrastive ideas give the vital facts about each covenant. Jesus, the center and circumference of the dispensation of righteousness, is life, and came to bring such. Thus, all that the New Testament is, the message about Christ, bears testimony on this point. Note especially such texts as John 3:36; Romans 5:10; Galatians 6:8; Colossians 3:3-4; II Timothy 1:1, 10; Hebrews 7:16; I John 5:11, 12. The apostle clearly argued that the covenant of which he was a servant was, because of its intrinsic nature, far greater than the Old Covenant. One was temporary, the other permanent, one brought death, the other life.

V. 10 — Continuing the contrast, Paul showed that the glory/splendor/honor of the first was not even worth comparing to the second, such was the vast difference. The transfiguration scene in Matthew 17 is a good "commentary" on the two covenants.

V. 11 — The difference was not only in the fact that Jesus was the essence of the dispensation of the Spirit, and brought life, but by virtue of Jesus' nature (an indestructible life, Heb. 7) the New Covenant was permanent, not temporary. Consider carefully the argument substantiating this very point in Hebrews 12:18-27.

After all this is said, however, we should observe that the "written code" was "good, and righteous, and holy" (Rom. 7:12) and that it was the "flesh that was weak" (Rom. 8:3). Moreover, the essential quality of the new covenant is righteousness, which comes only from God (Rom. 1:17) and alone brings life, simply because it is from God in Christ, and not in man. Hence, though one should rejoice that God saw fit to replace the temporary with the permanent, the temporary was yet of God, and for a good purpose.

V. 12 — Moses had used a veil under the old covenant — Paul in contrast is very bold under the new covenant, primarily because of the hope that the new covenant produces.

V. 13 — **the end** — The problem here is what "end" does Paul have in mind: the end of the shine on Moses' face, or the end of the old covenant? If the first is correct, we assume that Moses had mercy on the people because of the temporary condition of his face (the Exodus account seems to say this). If the second is correct, then in some way, whether planned or not, Moses did something that kept the Israelites from "seeing" that the covenant they were receiving was even then "passing away" because of its temporary nature, and in the death of Christ was made null and void. The only "real" glory the Old Testament had was in the fact that God had given it.

The problem is not easy to decide, since the preceding context uses the phrase "that which was passing away" (or equivalent) to mean the covenant being received from God. Consistently, then, we should keep the same content in this verse. However, this in some way seems to indict Moses for keeping the truth (as mentioned above) from Israel. Perhaps the fact is that what Moses did was simply another shadow of what was to typify the new covenant, its "openness" and access to God, even if Moses did not know it.

V. 14 — **minds were hardened** — The difficulty with this is to decide the point in time when this happened, and the cause of it. If God hardened their hearts by some direct action, that is one thing. If they hardened them, that is another. Furthermore, if God hardened their hearts prior to the giving of the law, or even afterward, this would definitely put the Israelites in a different light than if they hardened their own hearts, either before or after.

What does remain is the fact that a "heart condition" remained at the time of Paul, since Christ (= the letter/spirit of v. 6) was the only means of clarification for the law and its intended end (that of pointing men to Christ, Gal. 3 and Rom. 10:4). The Jews were unable to see that the Old Covenant did not have any abiding "glory" and, because they could/would not see this fact, the veil remained.

V. 15 — This truth in this verse is really made evident in the gospels

STUDIES IN SECOND CORINTHIANS

and as well as Acts—the Jews who refused to accept Jesus were definitely blind. This condition often caused trouble, as is manifest (see Rom. 9:1-5, 10:1ff) because the Jews were rather radical in their adherence to the law, and in their opposition to any who challenged them. “We are Moses’ disciples” was their battle cry, John 9:28, and yet Moses was to be their accuser, John 5:45-47, because they were unwilling (note Rom. 10:18-21) to hear him.

V. 16 — Of course, only in becoming Christian does a person perceive the truth stated in this verse. The Christian can understand, and much more clearly as years go by, the consummate plan of God in giving of the old covenant, and the many ways it “pointed” people to Christ.

V. 17 — **Lord is the Spirit** — This picks up the point in v. 6, and clarifies the intervening verses. Paul was a servant of the new covenant, which he called the “letter” and also the “spirit.” Its message was in a written covenant in letters, through the instrumentality of the (Holy) Spirit, with its center and circumference being Jesus Christ. Hence, Jesus provided the means to seeing the real purpose of the old covenant, which was passing into oblivion even when it was being given on tables of stone. Whenever Jesus was accepted, the hardened “hearts” were changed because God’s new covenant begins at the heart (= mind) as Hebrews 8:8-13 shows.

Any such effect as was just stated is best described in the terms bondage/freedom, since these terms depict what was/is the result of the two covenants. Thus Jesus would say, If you know the truth (i.e., if you know/accept me, the truth) then you are free indeed, John 8:31-36.

V. 18 — **we** — That is, Christians, those who have turned to Christ which act removes the “veil.”

beholding — The Greek term means to look or to see, as in a mirror.

the glory of the Lord — In context, a glory (of the new covenant) that will abide, and that far surpasses the faded glory of the old covenant.

being changed — Our word “metamorphosis” is a transliteration of the Greek term. This word was used to describe the transfiguration of Jesus, Matthew 17:2. Paul used it in Romans 12:2 in regard to Christians. The idea here is a constant change, which is to occur as Christians grow from child to adult, from babe to the stature of Christ. To some extent, there is probably a play on words here, insofar as the imagery is concerned. The Israelites beholding Moses’ face could see some of God’s glory, even as Christians, looking into the perfect law of liberty with its abiding glory, can see God’s glory. Naturally, Jesus is the means to do this, as he through the “letter” of the “Spirit” is described as the exact representation of God (see Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:15; John 1, etc.).