

Have The Ten Commandments Passed Away?

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Many years ago, I watched a Sunday morning television program presented by a popular Protestant denomination. This particular denomination teaches that the Ten Commandments and the entire Old Testament are now obsolete, and its adherents use only the New Testament. On one program, they used some verses in II Corinthians 3 to try to prove that the Ten Commandments are a thing of the past.

The argument went something like this: In II Corinthians 3:7, Paul speaks about "the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones." He states that this ministry of death "was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance." But, Paul continues, this "glory was passing away."

The shining of Moses' face refers to Exodus 34:29-35, which describes Moses coming down from the mountain the second time with the Ten Commandments, and because of his close contact with God there, his face shone. From this, they concluded that the ministry of death is the Ten Commandments, which are "passing away." To emphasize this further, Paul repeats that this ministry of death is passing away in verses 11 and 13. This reasoning then led them to claim that the Ten Commandments and the whole Old Testament are now obsolete!

What is Paul talking about in these verses? What is this ministry of death? What is it that is passing away? Could the law of God—which Paul declares to be "spiritual" (Romans 7:14) and "holy, just and good" (verse 12)—have passed away and become obsolete? If he is not saying this, why does he mention Moses receiving the Ten Commandments and his face shining? What do these scriptures REALLY mean?

A Contrast in Covenants

As in all cases where scriptures are difficult to understand, we must read them in context. At the beginning of chapter 3, Paul praises the Corinthians for the joy, satisfaction and affection he felt in seeing the growth and accomplishments of this congregation of the church of God.

Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you? You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men. (II Corinthians 3:1-2)

Paul boasts that the church at Corinth displayed such a fine example that their behavior worked like a letter of commendation for him, the apostle who started the congregation and served it.

In verse 3, Paul uses this metaphor of a letter of commendation to lead into a discussion comparing the Old and New Covenants. "You are manifestly an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart." When God made the Old Covenant with ancient Israel, Moses wrote the commandments, statutes and judgments that God had given to him in a book with "ink" (Exodus 24:4). God wrote the Ten Commandments with His own finger on two tablets of stone (Exodus 31:18; 32:15-16).

However, Paul points out, under the New Covenant, God has given us His Spirit, enabling us to keep His laws in their spiritual intent. He is now writing His Ten Commandments on our hearts (Hebrews 8:10)!

In verses 4-5, Paul gives all the credit to God and Christ for the knowledge that he and other ministers transmitted to the Corinthians. In verse 6, he returns to the two covenants, declaring that he and his colleagues were ministers of the New Covenant: "[God] also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit." Under the Old Covenant, God never gave the people the Holy Spirit. He required them to keep the law only in the "letter" and not in its spiritual intent and purpose as Jesus Christ later magnified it.

For example, the sixth commandment forbids murder. As long as one does not actually take someone's life, he has kept the commandment in the letter. However, Jesus taught that anyone who is angry with his brother without a cause or even insults someone else is in danger of breaking this law (Matthew 5:21-22). Because we have God's Spirit under the New Covenant, we can keep His laws not only in the letter but also in their spiritual intent.

The apostle then writes, "for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (II Corinthians 3:6). This statement is a key to understanding the rest of the chapter. "The letter kills" means that, in agreeing to the terms of the Old Covenant and accepting God's law, the carnal nation of Israel fell under the condemnation of the law because the people could not keep it. When law is broken, a penalty results, and the penalty for breaking God's law is death. Thus, without the ability to keep it properly, the Israelites incurred the death penalty.

Paul explains this as it occurred to him personally in Romans 7:9-11:

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. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me.

A Better Covenant

The Old Covenant had a fault: The people under it were unable or unwilling to obey God's law. The author of Hebrews mentions this in his discussion of the New Covenant's superiority over the Old:

For if that first [Old] covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second [New Covenant]. Because finding fault with them [the Israelites], He says: "Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." (Hebrews 8:7-8)

Since the Spirit of God was not generally available under the Old Covenant, the carnal Israelites could not obey the law even in the letter. They broke the covenant that they had made with God, so a New Covenant was necessary.

Under the New Covenant, God gives us His Holy Spirit upon repentance and baptism. This enables us to keep God's law even in its spiritual intent. Furthermore, under the New Covenant, God provides a means for repentant sinners to receive pardon for their sins and have Christ's righteousness imputed

to them. These people are no longer under the condemnation of the law (Romans 6:14), and the way is open for them to inherit eternal life. This is what Paul means when He says, "the Spirit gives life" (II Corinthians 3:6).

We now have the background to understand that when Paul speaks of "the ministry of death" (verse 7), he refers to the administration of the Old Covenant. The Levitical priesthood, a carnal priesthood based on physical descent from Levi, administered the Old Covenant. This covenant provided no promise of eternal life and no means for sinners to receive forgiveness because "it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). Therefore, the people lived and died under the condemnation of the law, and "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Another reason why Paul refers to the Old Covenant as "the ministry of death" is that God required the Levitical priesthood to execute those who transgressed certain laws. God's law mandates the death penalty for certain sins like murder and dishonoring parents (Exodus 21:12-17), Sabbath-breaking (Exodus 31:14-15) and certain sexual sins (Leviticus 20:10-13). The priests were responsible to enforce the death penalty by actually putting such transgressors to death in the proscribed manner. In this sense, the Old Covenant ministry was indeed a "ministry of death."

"Engraved on Stones"

However, why did Paul say that the "ministry of death," the administration of the Old Covenant, was "written and engraved on stones"? Was it not the Ten Commandments that God wrote on two stone tablets? Even though the Ten Commandments were not the covenant itself (a covenant is simply an agreement between two parties), they were the *terms* of the covenant. Because the Ten Commandments constituted the part of the agreement between God and Israel that the Israelites agreed to keep, the Old Covenant became synonymous with the Ten Commandments. In Deuteronomy 4:13 Moses writes, "So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tables of stone." To put it another way, "keeping the Old Covenant" was the same as "keeping the Ten Commandments."

A paraphrase of the first eleven words of II Corinthians 3:7 helps to clarify what Paul means: "But if the administration of the Old Covenant, [the terms of which were] written and engraved on stones. . . ." The Ten Commandments undergirded all the laws that God gave to Israel—laws that the Israelites could not keep. The responsibility to teach these laws to Israel and enforce penalties for disobedience, including the death penalty, fell to the priests.

Therefore, if perfection were 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)

When Moses went up Mount Sinai the second time to receive the Ten Commandments, he wrote God's statutes and judgments in a book, and God wrote the Ten Commandments on two tables of stone. This, in essence, finalized the "contract" that God made with Israel.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write these words, for according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. (Exodus 34:27-28)

Verses 29-35 then describe how Moses' face shone when he delivered the Ten Commandments and the book of the law to Israel.

So what is passing away? Hebrews 8:13 provides the answer: "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." The Old Covenant and the Old Covenant ministry, the Levitical priesthood, are passing away, not the Ten Commandments!

The Glory of the Covenants

The apostle goes on to say in II Corinthians 3:7 that this "ministry of death" was glorious as indicated by Moses' face shining when He delivered the covenant to the Israelites. If this ministry of death was glorious, he reasons, how much *more* glorious must the New Covenant ministry, "the ministry of the Spirit," be?

For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. 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. (II Corinthians 3:9-11)

In this same chapter, Paul explains that the veil Moses wore to hide his shining face (Exodus 34:33-35) symbolizes Israel's failure to understand the truths of the New Covenant.

But their minds were hardened. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. (II Corinthians 3:14-15)

As most of us have experienced, the knowledge of God's truth has to be miraculously revealed to an individual through the calling of God. Understanding opens to us like the lifting of a veil that had been covering our eyes. "Nevertheless, when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (verse 16).

Paul ends his discussion by showing what marvelous blessings God has bestowed upon us in allowing us to enter the New Covenant: "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" (verse 18).

We who have been called and ordained of God to understand His marvelous truths are now having God's Ten Commandments written on our hearts by His Spirit dwelling within us (Hebrews 8:10). We now have no hindrance to learning and applying the Word of God in our lives, which sanctifies and cleanses us (Ephesians 5:26). Through this process, we are being transformed into the glorious image of our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ, the One who kept God's Ten Commandments perfectly.

What a blessing and privilege to be participants in the New Covenant!