

Being Made “Able Ministers”

“Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament [covenant]; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.”

—II Corinthians 3:6

THE MAIN THEME OF II Corinthians, chapters 3 through 6, is based on a background of God’s dealing with Israel when he entered into covenant relationship with them, with Moses serving as mediator of that covenant. Thus we have the Apostle Paul presenting one of the important lessons of the Old Testament, and making his inspired application of its meaning in connection with the outworking of God’s great plan of reconciliation on behalf of the whole world of mankind.

As this beautiful theme begins, Paul says that we are “manifestly declared to be the 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 fleshy tables of the heart.” (II Cor. 3:3) Here the apostle takes us back to the time when God wrote his law on tables of stone. He indicates that these tables of stone picture what he describes as

the “epistle of Christ,” written by the Holy Spirit in “fleshy tables of the heart.”

By this application, Paul is putting himself and all the true followers of Jesus in a tremendously important place in God’s arrangements—that the body members of Christ are to occupy the same relationship to the New Covenant as the tables of stone did toward Israel’s Law Covenant. It is this realization that causes him to observe, “And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God.”—vss. 4,5

Then, in our theme text, Paul says that we have been made “able ministers of the new testament [Greek: covenant].” In verse 7 he refers to the former Law Covenant as being a “ministration of death, written and engraven in stones.” This second reference to the tables of stone leaves no doubt as to the comparison Paul is making between the methods by which the two covenants are mediated.

The Law Covenant was not designed to be a “ministration of death,” but the reverse. In Romans 7:10, Paul says that it was “ordained to life.” That is, it was designed to give life, and would have done so, but for the fact that the people could not live up to its requirements. Because of this, Paul and every other sincere Israelite who tried to keep the Law, found it to be “unto death.” It was this ministration of death that was engraved on tables of stone.

In contrast with this, Paul explains in our theme text that the “spirit giveth life.” Here he is saying that the writing of God’s law in the “fleshy tables” of our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit is for the purpose of giving life. If the Law Covenant had

given life it would have been by virtue of the full obedience of the people to the commandments engraved on the literal tables of stone. By writing his law in the “tables” of our hearts, God will, through the Christ, Head and body, give life to all who accept and obey the terms of the New Covenant. It is thus that “the spirit giveth life.”

THE HOPE OF GLORY

Paul continues to draw lessons from the experiences of Israel in preparation for the giving of the Law Covenant. He refers to the shining countenance of Moses as he came down the mount bearing the tables of stone, explaining that the law “engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away.” (II Cor. 3:7) Contrasting this to the New Covenant, Paul continues, “How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious? For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory. For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth. For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious. Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech.”—vss. 8-12

The glory “which remaineth” Paul declares to be but a hope at the present time. In Romans 8:24, he writes, “Hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?” This glorious ministration of the New Covenant for which we hope is a “glory that excelleth.” It is the same glory

referred to in the next chapter, where Paul writes, “Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”—II Cor. 4:17,18

NOW IN PREPARATION

Paul states that the glory associated with the giving of the tables of stone caused Moses to “put a vail over his face” when he came down from Mount Sinai. (II Cor. 3:13) The apostle comes back to this thought a few verses later, contrasting it with the condition of the footstep followers of Christ at the present time. “We all, with open [Greek: unveiled] face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”—vs. 18

Here Paul is explaining that the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts in writing therein the “epistle of Christ” is also changing us into the Lord’s image, progressively, from “glory to glory.” We first realize that this explanation by Paul places us, as the followers of Jesus, not in the camp of Israel, but with Moses when he went into the presence of the Lord, for it was then that his face was unveiled. (Exod. 34:29-35) The glory of the Lord as reflected on the face of Moses was hidden from the Israelites. However, that glory is seen by us. Because it is, like the tables of stone on which the Law was written during that earlier display of God’s glory, we, by the Spirit or power of God, are having his Law written in the table of our hearts.

It is by virtue of this that we are being “changed.” This word, as used in II Corinthians 3:18, is translated from the Greek word *metamorphoo*, which means “to transform.” Indeed, we are not changed literally, as Moses was, so that his face shone brightly. We note how Paul covers this point. He says that we behold the glory of the Lord “as in a glass,” or mirror. God’s glory, made up of the combined attributes of his character, is reflected to us through the mirror of his written Word. Under this influence, and by yielding wholeheartedly to it, we are being transformed “into the same image.”

In many respects, the world today is like Israel of old. Paul writes that the Gospel is hidden from those lost in the ways of sin, then states the cause of this. “The god of this world hath blinded the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.” (II Cor. 4:3,4) By contrast, concerning the effect of the Gospel in the hearts of those who do believe and obey its precepts, the apostle continues, “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”—vs. 6

This is simply a more comprehensive explanation of the manner in which the Holy Spirit is writing God’s law in the tables of our hearts, for the Holy Spirit operates through the light of God’s truth. Jesus referred to it as the “Spirit of truth.” (John 14:16,17; 16:13) Notice what takes place as a result of this effulgence of light which God causes to shine into our hearts—it gives the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

The Gospel of Christ which has shined into our hearts is but an enlargement upon the message proclaimed to Moses. As in his case the message reflected the glory of the Lord, so now it gives “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.” As then the glory of the Lord was reflected with great brightness on the face of Moses, so now we see the shining face of the example of Jesus Christ, the living Word, and the glory of the Heavenly Father which is reflected therein.

EARTHEN VESSELS

Paul continues, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” (II Cor. 4:7) The “earthen vessels” here referred to are descriptive of our human bodies. The “treasure” they contain is the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God.” This treasure is, in reality, a new mind, the mind of Christ, the mind of the New Creature. (Rom. 12:2; I Cor. 2:16; II Cor. 5:17) To understand the expression, “earthen vessels,” we turn back again to the Old Testament.

In Exodus 24:1-8, we are given a summary of Moses receiving the “words of the LORD,” and of the inauguration of the Law Covenant. As part of this, burnt offerings and peace offerings were sacrificed on behalf of the people. Half of the blood from these offerings, which Moses referred to as the “blood of the covenant,” was first collected in basins. These were likely made of some type of earthen material, and are what Paul evidently had in mind when he spoke of the treasure we have in “earthen vessels.”

Thus we have a further explanation by Paul of the manner in which the New Covenant will become

operative, and which blends with the one he has drawn with respect to the tables of the Law. The question arises, however, as to how we could be as “earthen vessels” to receive the treasure of the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Since Jesus is involved in this question, let us turn to him for the answer.

Jesus said to his disciples, “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” Those who followed the Master for the loaves and the fishes were offended by this statement. His disciples “murmured at it,” and Jesus explained to them, “It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.”—John 6:26,53,61,63

Jesus wanted the disciples to understand that when they received and obeyed his teachings—“the words that I speak”—it was the equivalent of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Jesus’ words constitute the Gospel, the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God” revealed to us. Part of that Gospel is our need of Jesus’ redeeming grace, and our acceptance of the merit of his sacrificed life. Our full acceptance of his “words,” therefore, demonstrated by our complete dedication to the divine will, means the receiving of life, or that which was symbolized by his blood.—Rom. 5:8,9; Tit. 3:5-7

Hence we see that the spirit of truth is not only writing the law of God in the tables of our hearts, but it also has conveyed to us, in our present “earthen vessels,” the life-giving power of the blood of Christ. As it was the blood which Moses collected in the basins that was used to sprinkle the people when

the Law Covenant was inaugurated, so the body members of Christ, as ministers “of reconciliation,” will have the privilege and honor of participating with Jesus, the “mediator of the new covenant,” for the purpose of blessing all the families of the earth.—II Cor. 5:18,19; Heb. 12:24; Gen. 12:3; 22:18

A SACRIFICIAL MINISTRY

After explaining that we have this treasure in earthen vessels, Paul continues, “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus’ sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh.”—II Cor. 4:8-11

We note that Paul repeats the assertion that the life of Jesus is manifest in our mortal flesh, our earthen vessels. There is another aspect of this, however, which is that we are also being “delivered unto death for Jesus’ sake” and are “bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus.” This is Paul’s way of expressing the important truth of God’s plan stated by Jesus, that if we expect to get life from him, we must first die with him: “Whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.”—Matt. 16:25

Every consecrated follower of the Master is “planted together in the likeness of his death.” (Rom. 6:5) They all must die with him in order to live with him. They must suffer with him if they would reign with him. They must present their

bodies a “living sacrifice.” (II Tim. 2:11,12; Rom. 8:17;12:1) Symbolically speaking, there also must be an altar on which that sacrifice can be offered. It was undoubtedly this that the Lord foreshadowed by the altar which Moses built, on which were offered sacrifices pertaining to the inauguration of the Law Covenant.—Exod. 24:4

We are assured that in presenting our bodies a living sacrifice, the offering will be “holy and acceptable.” (Rom. 12:1) This can only be through the merit of the blood of Christ—the blood which also ensured the eventual establishment of the New Covenant. Symbolically speaking, Jesus’ blood, representing his perfect life poured out, is the basis upon which we are provided an “altar” deemed pleasing to God. Thus, we are made acceptable to be joint-sacrificers with Jesus.

The Apostle Peter affirms the present sacrificial ministry of the body of Christ, which precedes the ministry of glory associated with the inauguration of the New Covenant. He says that through the prophets the Holy Spirit testified concerning the “sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow,” and he makes it clear that the body members of Christ participate in this foretold suffering and glory. (I Pet. 1:11; 4:12,13) Through faithfulness in this ministry of suffering we prove our worthiness of appearing with Christ, the greater Moses, in glory.

Paul, writing further on the matter, says, “So then death worketh in us, but life in you.” (II Cor. 4:12) Thus far in this lesson the apostle has said only that the work of writing the epistle of Christ in the tables of our hearts is being accomplished by the Holy Spirit, in that God has shined in our hearts,

giving us the knowledge of the glory of God. Now Paul is indicating that this also involves our ministry to one another, exemplified by the sacrificial “death” which was working in him, in order to work “life” in those to whom he ministered.

The Scriptures indeed reveal the great privilege we have of laying down our lives for the brethren, and of building one another up in our most holy faith. (I John 3:16; Jude 1:20) This preparatory work is, in fact, indicated also to be a ministry of reconciliation. It is not the future ministry of reconciliation when the world in general will be reconciled to God under the terms of the New Covenant. Rather, it is the preparatory reconciliation of those who will prove worthy to participate with Jesus in that future work.

What a reasonable arrangement this is! By our submission to the molding influences of the Holy Spirit through the Truth, we are being transformed into the character likeness of our Lord, and being changed into that aspect of his glory. We are also being prepared, however, to participate in the future glory of Christ, as suggested by his titles of King, Judge, Mediator and High Priest.

How can we be found worthy to be a ruler unless we submit to God’s righteous authority now? How could we be future judges of the world unless we now learn to apply the laws of God in our own lives, and in our dealings with one another? What better way could there be of proving worthy to serve with Jesus in the future work of reconciliation as Mediator and High Priest, than by now being willing to lay down our lives in the smaller work of being sympathetic and merciful to fellow members of his body?

MARVELOUS GRACE

After calling these precious truths to our attention, Paul exhorts, "We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain." (II Cor. 6:1) Wondrous grace it is that has come to us through Christ. It is grace that makes us acceptable to offer sacrifice now, and, if faithful, to be glorified to serve with Christ our Head as Mediator of the New Covenant.—Eph. 2:5-8

To emphasize how much we would lose should we receive this grace of God in vain, Paul quotes from an Old Testament prophecy which outlines some of the privileges involved. "I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."—II Cor. 6:2

The prophecy from which Paul quotes is Isaiah 49:8,9. The portion cited by the apostle is an assurance of the Lord's help in this time when the sacrificial ministry prior to the New Covenant is being carried out, as represented in the "better sacrifices" of the present age. (Heb. 9:23) Paul's partial quote from Isaiah, however, does more than assure us of divine help and that our sufficiency is of God, for by it we see that the entire prophecy applies to the body members of Christ.

Let us quote the full prophecy: "Thus saith the LORD, In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages; That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness,

Shew yourselves. They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places.”

GIVEN AS A COVENANT

When Paul quoted from this prophecy he was merely continuing his theme concerning those whom he describes as “able ministers” of the New Covenant. He has shown that as ministers they are likened to the tables of stone on which Moses presented the Law Covenant to the people of Israel. In carrying out this thought to its full application, he cites God’s promise that those who are coworkers with Christ now, and are faithful in the present ministry of sacrifice, will, when the kingdom is established, be given as a covenant for the people.

More than that, when these able ministers are given as a covenant for the people, they will “establish the earth,” and will cause the people to inherit the “desolate heritages.” Moreover, they will say to the prisoners of death, “Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves.” Here is described a life-giving work of restoring the dead world to life, even raising the dead, and giving all an opportunity to inherit what were formerly desolate heritages of sin, suffering and death, but which will no longer be desolate under the righteous rule of Christ.

This coincides with Jesus’ Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. He opens that parable with the statement, “When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory.” (Matt. 25:31) These “angels” are Christ’s body members, those who will be co-rulers and judges with him, and able ministers of the New Covenant. Their hope of glory will have

merged into reality, for the “glory that excelleth” will have come upon them.

Then will begin the work of uplifting and blessing all people, here presented under the trial, or probation aspect of the work of the next age. The point we wish particularly to notice is that those who then prove worthy will have their lost earthly inheritance restored to them, and will receive life. (Matt. 25:34) Those who are given as a “covenant of the people” will have it in their power to give life to all who prove worthy of it. (Isa. 42:6) Christ, through the sacrifice of his perfect humanity, provided this life. The merit of his shed blood made our sacrifice acceptable so that we might be exalted to glory with him. (I Pet. 2:5) That life, received through obedience to his words, and by reflecting his character image, will then be symbolically “sprinkled ... on the people,” that they may also receive life by accepting it as a gift from God through Christ, and by obeying the laws of the kingdom.—Exod. 24:8

Surely the ministry of the Spirit will thus prove to be a glorious ministry of life. The provision of Christ’s blood will do for the people what the Law Covenant could not do, because there was no life-giving efficacy in the blood of the animal offerings with which the people were sprinkled. Let us realize the glorious part we have in this ministry, which will give life to the people under the New Covenant arrangements. May we, by God’s grace, and through faithfulness unto death, prove worthy to appear with him in glory and share that blessed future work of reconciling the world to God, which Jesus made possible by his own death as man’s Redeemer. ■