

Paul And The Old Covenant

Paul dealt with questions about the covenants in several letters.

1. Did Paul consider himself a minister of the old covenant or of the new?

2 Corinthians 3:6 [NIV] *“He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”*

How did Paul contrast the new covenant with the old covenant that was written on stone?

2 Corinthians 3:3, 7 [NIV] *“You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” ... “Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was,”*

What did the old covenant bring, and what does the new covenant bring?

2 Corinthians 3:6-9 [NIV] *“He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!”*

Comment: The stone tablets under discussion here are the tablets Moses carried when his face shown in glory. The tablets contained “the words of the [old] covenant, the Ten Commandments”.

Exodus 34:28 [NIV] *“Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.”*

This is the ministry that brought death and condemnation.

The law, written in stone, required death for transgression. It did not give righteousness or salvation.

Galatians 2:21 [NIV] *“I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”*

But the new covenant brings the Holy Spirit and life and righteousness. The old covenant could not cleanse the conscience, but the new covenant is written directly on the heart. It changes our hearts in a way that an external law cannot. The old covenant was temporary. It was glorious in its time, but its glory has now faded because a greater glory is now here.

2. Does everyone understand the glory of the new covenant?

2 Corinthians 3:13-15 [NIV] *“We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.”*

How can the covering be taken away from their hearts and minds?

2 Corinthians 3:14, 16 [NIV] *“But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. **But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.**”*

Does the veil prevent people from understanding the gospel?

2 Corinthians 4:3 [NIV] *“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.”*

Who creates this veil that blinds the people who don't believe the gospel?

2 Corinthians 4:4 [NIV] *“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”*

Comment: In this passage, Paul uses the new covenant and the gospel as similar terms. When we see one clearly, we also see the other. Through the new covenant, the veil has been removed from us so we can see the Lord's glory. The gospel is no longer veiled to us.

The god of this age is Satan, who prevents people from seeing the ministry that brings righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ.

Only in Christ can the veil be removed.

Only when we turn to Christ can we see *“the gospel of the glory of Christ.”* Since Jesus Christ is the image of God, the gospel gives us *“the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”*

2 Corinthians 4:6 [NIV] *“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”*

This is the glory of the new covenant, the message that gives us hope and boldness.

Paul discussed the covenants in his letter to the Galatians, too. In that letter, let's pick up the discussion in chapter 3. There, Paul tells us that Christ redeemed us so we might be given the blessing of Abraham, the promise of the Spirit.

Galatians 3:14 [NIV] *“He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”*

3. To whom were the promises given?

Galatians 3:16, 18 [NIV] *“The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.” ... “For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.”*

Through Christ, are we heirs of the promises given to Abraham?

Galatians 3:14, 29 [NIV] *“He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.” ... “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”*

Once the promise was given to Abraham by a covenant, could it be taken away?

Galatians 3:15 [NIV] *“Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case.”*

Could the law set aside God's promise to Abraham?

Galatians 3:17 [NIV] *“What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.”*

Comment: Paul is contrasting the promise given to Abraham with the law of Moses, which was given 430 years later. Both were covenants, **but one was characterised by God's promise, and the other characterised by laws. Christians are, through Christ, inheritors of the promise given through the covenant with Abraham.**

Paul's point in this passage is that what God gave through a promise, he cannot take away by adding extra requirements later on. The law of Moses cannot set aside the promise given to Abraham. The old covenant cannot add extra requirements that in any way thwart the promise God gave through Abraham to everyone who has faith in Jesus Christ.

4. What, then, was the purpose of the law?

Galatians 3:19, 24 [NIV] *“What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator.” ... “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”*

Now that faith has come, are we still under the law?

Galatians 3:23-25 [NIV] *“Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.”*

Comment: In this passage, “the law” refers to the law of Moses or the old covenant, which was the law added 430 years after the promise was given to Abraham. This law was designed to be temporary “until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.”

Galatians 3:19 [NIV] *“What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator.”*

The “Seed” referred to by the promise was Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:16 [NIV] *“The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.”*

So verse 19 means the law was added until Christ had come. The law of Moses served to confine the Jews until the promise was given by faith.

Galatians 3:23 [NIV] *“Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.”*

Galatians 3:24 [NIV] *“So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”*

Paul compares the law to a *paidagogos*, a special type of slave who was part of ancient Greek society. Wealthy Greeks used a *paidagogos* slave to supervise their children's education. The *paidagogos* did not teach, but made sure the children went to school and did their homework. The *paidagogos* also taught manners and social customs, and disciplined the children. There is no modern equivalent of a *paidagogos*, so many different translations have been used: schoolmaster, tutor, custodian, disciplinarian. The NIV tries to convey the thought by paraphrasing: “was put in charge.” Paul was

indicating that the law of Moses was put in a supervisory function to help us learn: *“to lead us to Christ.”*

Simply put, our spiritual problem is sin. We are sinful, and our sin needs to be removed from our record. We need to be declared righteous or justified. The law cannot do that, only the Judge can declare us righteous. Now, we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

Romans 3:26 [NIV] *“he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”*

So the law served a purpose until *“justification by faith”* was revealed through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Before that kind of faith came, the law had authority over us. But now that faith has come, the law no longer has that authority.

This is simply another way of saying that Christians do not have to keep the law of Moses; it is another way of saying that the old covenant is obsolete. The message of Acts and Hebrews and Galatians is similar.

The law of Moses, with its worship rituals, civil laws and other customs, was temporary.

What was its purpose?

To lead people to Christ.

It did this in two ways:

a) Many Old Testament rituals symbolised the work of Jesus Christ. **Hebrews 9** explains that the Day of Atonement ceremonies, for example, pictured what Christ has done for us.

Hebrews 10:1 [NIV] *“The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming, not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make.”*

The law was a “shadow” of the spiritual realities that had been promised.

The law of Moses contains analogies that show in advance, in silhouette form, what Christ does for us.

b) **The law shows that it is utterly impossible for us to earn our salvation. No amount of law-keeping can make us righteous.** It cannot cleanse our consciences or change our hearts. All it can do is condemn us for falling short. So the law leads people to Christ by showing them that they need a Saviour to pay the penalty of sin.

The old covenant helped people see how common sin is.

Romans 7:7 [NIV] *“What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.”*

Human societies rarely have rules about internal desires such as coveting. The old covenant revealed that sin starts in the heart. In this way, the old covenant showed how pervasive sin is, it permeates us, it is found throughout us. **Through the law, sin became revealed as “utterly sinful.”**

Romans 7:13 [NIV] *“Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognised as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.”*

No matter how many good laws people are given, no matter how hard they try to be good, they always fall short. This sinful fruit reveals the kind of tree people are: We are sinful. We need the cleansing sacrifice of Jesus.

The old covenant served other purposes, too. It gave the ancient Israelites a framework for national laws. It helped the people understand God's holiness and their own lack of holiness. It gave practical guidelines for avoiding sin and expressing love toward neighbours. It gave a social context in which Jesus could teach and provide a sacrifice for sin. The main point in this study is that "the law" of the old covenant was temporary.

5. Were some of the Galatian Christians being tempted to come under the law?

Galatians 4:21 [NIV] *"Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?"*

What illustration from the law did Paul use?

Galatians 4:22-31 [NIV] *"For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: "Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labour pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband." Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman."*

Which woman represented the old covenant?

Galatians 4:24 [NIV] *"These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar."*

What is the result of this covenant?

Galatians 4:24-25 [NIV] *"These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children."*

Are we Christians children of the slave woman, or of the free?

Galatians 4:26, 28, 31 [NIV] *"But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother." ... "Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise." ... "Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman."*

Comment: Although the Galatians had faith in Christ, false teachers were trying to get them to add the old covenant to their faith. The false teachers were teaching circumcision, which in Jewish thought was the sign of entering the old covenant. Paul warned them that if they became circumcised, they would have to keep the entire Torah.

Galatians 5:3 [NIV] *"Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law."*

The obvious implication of Paul's statement is that Christians do *not* have to keep the entire Torah, the entire old covenant. We are not children of the slave woman; we were not born under the old covenant; we are not in slavery or in captivity. Rather, Christ has set us free.

Galatians 5:1 [NIV] *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."*

The laws we keep today *may* be in the old covenant, but if so, we keep them not because they are in the *old* covenant, but because they are in the *new*. We evaluate individual laws by the New Testament, which shows that the Old Testament has no legal authority of its own. Having replaced the Old, the New Testament is now the legal authority.

The old covenant stands or falls as a unit, and the fact that some of the laws are obsolete tells us that the entire covenant is obsolete. It is not a moral authority for Christians. **But, although it is not a legal authority, it is still authoritative as a revelation of how God dealt with his people in that specific time and culture. It continues to give us insights into God's will.**

Even the laws of sacrifice are *"useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."*

2 Timothy 3:16 [NIV] *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."*

But that does not mean those laws still have legal authority.

6. Were gentiles once separated from Christ?

Ephesians 2:11-12 [NIV] *"Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men), remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world."*

How have they now been brought near?

Ephesians 2:13 [NIV] *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ."*

Has Christ made one new humanity out of two?

Ephesians 2:15 [NIV] *"by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace,"*

Has he made the two one?

Ephesians 2:14 [NIV] *"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,"*

Are both of them reconciled to God through Christ?

Ephesians 2:16 [NIV] *"and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."*

Comment: The "two" people Paul is talking about in this passage are Jews and gentiles. Christ preached peace not only to those who were near (the Jews) but also to those who were far away, who had been separated from him (the gentiles). Through Christ both peoples have access to God.

Ephesians 2:16-17 [NIV] *“and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.”*

Through him the two have been joined into one. Through the blood of Christ the gentiles have been brought near. Through his cross both peoples have been reconciled to God. Paul’s focus in this passage is the spiritual union of Jews and gentiles in Christ.

7. In order for the two peoples to be made one, what had to be destroyed?

Ephesians 2: 14 [NIV] *“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,”*

How was it done?

Ephesians 2:15-16 [NIV] *“by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.”*

Comment: Although Jews and gentiles used to be spiritual enemies, separated from one another, Jesus has made them one. He saves them both in the same way. **How did he make them one? By breaking down “the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” that had separated Jews and gentiles. What was the wall of division, the cause of the hostility or enmity between Jews and gentiles?**

What barrier did Jesus destroy?

It was *“the law with its commandments and regulations.”* **These were the laws that separated Jews from gentiles, ordinances in the law of Moses, the old covenant, ordinances that were given to Jews but were not commanded for gentiles.** Jesus abolished these laws. He did not die on the cross to eliminate human rules and regulations, he died to abolish old covenant regulations. **All the rules in the law of Moses concerning ritual purification and sacrifices are now obsolete.**

These laws separated Jews from gentiles. The Bible clearly says that some of these laws served that very purpose, to set the Israelites apart from other peoples.

Leviticus 20:24 [NIV] *“But I said to you, “You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey.” I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from the nations.”*

Many other laws did that, too, because God commanded the Israelites to keep certain rules that he did not command the gentiles to keep. Jewish rabbis understood that God gave many laws only to the Jews, and that gentiles did not have to keep those laws in order to be considered righteous.

In his death, Jesus abolished the old covenant rules that separated Jews and gentiles, the rules that caused Jews to be different. This is the way he made peace between Jew and gentile, making one people out of two.

Ephesians 2:15 [NIV] *“by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace,”*

Jesus reconciled both groups to God, making them one body by his death on the cross, “by which he put to death their hostility.”

Ephesians 2:16 [NIV] *“and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.”*

Jesus killed the hostility, figuratively speaking, when he was crucified. He put an end to the rules that separated Jew from gentile. Just as we have seen in Acts, Galatians and Hebrews, Jesus put an end to the old covenant, the law of Moses.

Christ did not unite Jews and gentiles by requiring gentiles to come under the old covenant. Rather, he united them by removing the old covenant and forgiving the sins of both. No one has to keep those obsolete laws. Jews do not have to keep the laws that divided them from gentiles. Peter was able to live like a gentile.

Galatians 2:14 [NIV] *“When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”*

Paul was able to live like he was not under the Torah because he was not under the Torah.

1 Corinthians 9:20-21 [NIV] *“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law.”*

Christians are not under the law of Moses.