

# The Old and New Covenants

In the New Testament portion of our readings for the day, we have a statement which summarises the purpose of the Mosaic Law, whilst at the same time demonstrating the principles by which sinners can become saints in the sight of God:

“... by the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be declared right before Him: for by *the law is the knowledge of sin*. But now the righteousness of God apart from the Law is manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets; even *the Righteousness of God which is by faith* of Jesus Christ unto all, and upon all them that believe ...” (Rom. 3:21,22)

In these words, we have a plain declaration that for a man to be declared righteous in the sight of Yahweh, he must have “faith” - faith in the principles of righteousness revealed through Jesus Christ. By obedience to the Law, no man could be counted as righteous, because no man could obey it in all its points. It set a standard of righteousness beyond the reach of mortal man, and by so doing, it brought an awareness of sin on the part of those who lived under it.

We have similar principles being described by the Apostle Paul in his inspired Epistle to the Galatians:

“As many as are of the works of the Law *are under the curse*: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the Law to do them. But *that no man is declared righteous by the Law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, the Just shall live by faith*” (Gal. 3:10-11).

And again:

“... if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the Law. *But the Scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe*” (Gal. 3:21, 22).

The Scriptures could be no clearer: Righteousness cannot come by obedience to Law, but only “by faith” in the things testified concerning the coming Messiah. However, that is not to say that there was anything wrong with the Law, for elsewhere the Apostle states that “the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good” (Rom. 7:12). Rather it is, that the Law in itself was not designed to give life, but rather to “conclude all under sin” (cp. Rom. 3:9, 19).

In this respect, the Law had a very important function. In Galatians chapter 3, it is written that the Law “was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made ...” (Gal. 3:19). Being designed

to regulate the behaviour of the children of Israel, it was only intended to be a temporary institution, lasting until Abraham's seed (to whom the promises were made) should come.

Looking at matters purely at a practical level, there is a need for any nation to have a legal code which prohibits certain behaviours, and sanctions others. Only by rule of Law can a society be controlled and developed for the common good. But the Law by which Israel were to live carried with it two other principles - it convicted men of sin, and it testified of the future salvation that would come through Christ, at the appointed time.

Many years before the Law came through Moses, certain promises were made to Abraham, and his Promised Seed. Genesis chapter 12 records how Abraham was called upon to forsake his country and family, to go to a land that Yahweh would show him. When he arrived in the land, we read that "Yahweh appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land" (Gen. 12:7). The important point to notice here, is that as yet the land had not been promised to Abraham. It was promised to his "seed" first. Abraham himself was not included in the promises until the events described by Genesis chapter 13, and his departure from Lot. There the promise was given: "All the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever" (Gen. 13:15). There is a principle being established in the order of these promises: Abraham himself could only be given possession of the Land after his Seed had received it first. The seed, we know, is our Master, Jesus the Christ (Gal. 3:16), who is yet to return to receive the inheritance promised to him, and faithful Abraham.

Israel, as a nation, were to live in that same land under Law, not Promise, until Messiah, to whom the promises were firstly made, should come. When we reflect upon the principles that needed to be affirmed, we can see the wisdom of such an arrangement. What the Law did, was to create a situation whereby men could not achieve their own righteousness through works. It was added till the promised Seed should come, to prepare Israel for His coming. As we have already seen, it was a "ministration of condemnation" (2 Cor. 3:9) and a "ministration of death" (2 Cor. 3:7), in that it condemned all who lived under it as being sinners. This was just and necessary, for in order to embrace the things testified concerning the coming Messiah, it is first needful for men to acknowledge their own sinfulness, and need of redemption. The Law accomplished this perfectly, condemning all who lived under it, who could not keep "all things which are written in the book of the Law."

And here, we see the reason why the Promises were given before the Law. Being convicted under the Law as sinners, men could nevertheless have a hope of deliverance, through the promises that were made first. Had the Law come first, there would be nothing for the people to look to beyond their condemnation. By such an arrangement, Israel could look back at their first father to see the manner by which he was "justified", or considered righteous, and trust in the same promises that he did.

So Paul brings these things to mind in Romans chapter 4:

“What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the Scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:1-3).

Living after the justification of Abraham, the children of Israel could look back at his example, and see that Abraham himself was not declared Righteous by obedience to Law, but by the faith that he had in what God had promised to him. Through sharing his faith then, they also could become justified through faith.

The Law itself taught this very principle, in its Types and Shadows that pointed forward to Messiah. In his rebuke to the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said:

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites~! For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the Law: **Judgment, mercy and faith**: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone” (Mat. 23:23).

According to Christ then, “judgment, mercy and **faith**” were the “weightier matters of the Law”. Faith was a particularly important aspect, for it was through faith in the way in which it foreshadowed Abraham’s Seed that the people could find salvation, and themselves be declared righteous.

This is what we read earlier:

“... by the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be declared right before Him: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the Law is manifested, **being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets**; even the Righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all, and upon all them that believe ...” (Rom. 3:21,22)

The Law itself “witnessed” to the Righteousness of God that would be seen outside of itself, even the Righteousness that would be imputed through faith. In this way, the Law was “a shadow of good things to come,” (Heb. 10:1) being “our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, **that we might be justified by faith**” (Gal. 3:24).

The means by which the Old Covenant of Law would be disannulled (Heb. 7:18) and replaced by the New Covenant of Faith, can be seen in certain circumstances surrounding the way in which Moses received it. When he came before the Angelic Presence, “the skin of his face shone while he talked with him. And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him” (Ex. 34:29-30).

In order to appear before the people, and give them the Law, it was necessary for Moses to hide the luminescence of his face, by wearing a veil (Ex. 30:33). But this Light, or Glory that was a fading glory. It gradually diminished until he

appeared in the Divine Presence once again, when it shone once more. The Apostle Paul expounds these things to us in 2 Corinthians chapters 3-5:

“if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his face; which glory was to be done away: how shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?”

The shining of Moses’ face therefore, represented the fading glory of the Law. It was a glory which “was to be done away” with the passage of time. And the veiling of Moses’ face so that the people did not see and fear that Glory represented the means by which Israel as a nation could not behold the spirit of the Law as it pointed forward to Messiah:

“ ... Moses put a vail over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the Old Testament; which vail is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart” (2 Cor. 3:13-15).

The vail that hid Moses’ face ensured that Israel could not see the fading light of his face. This points forward to the way in which Israel as a nation just could not see the glory of that Law in its teaching concerning Jesus of Nazareth, and neither could they see the fact that this glory was to fade away, and be replaced. So, in this same place, Paul speaks of the greater glory of Yahweh that shines to us through the face of Jesus Christ:

“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: and not as Moses who put a vail over his face” (2 Cor. 3:11-13).

The glory that came to Israel through Moses – the glory of the Law – was fading and veiled. But the glory that comes through the face of Jesus Christ is permanent, being not veiled, but openly presented “with great plainness of speech”. So we read that:

“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” (2 Cor. 4:6),

In Jesus the Christ then, we behold the unfading, unveiled Glory of Yahweh. That is not to say that all men can see that Glory, for “the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Cor. 4:4). So despite the permanency and openness of the Glory of God that shines to us through Christ, there is nevertheless a parallel between Israel of old, and men and women of today. Bro H P Mansfield summarises it thus:

“Moses veiled his face to hide a fading glory; but the increasing glory of the Gospel was veiled to those “who are lost” (2 Cor. 4:3).

Just as there was a veil cast over the hearts of Israel, even so there is a veil over men’s hearts in our day, preventing them from receiving the things of the Spirit of God. But just as Messiah shall be openly seen by Israel, when they “shall turn to the Master,” even so in the day when “every eye shall see him”, the veil cast over the nations shall be removed:

“he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations ...” (Isa. 25:7).

When we come to consider the Two Covenants then, we find that the Mosaic institution held a temporary glory, to be eclipsed by that which would come through the blood of Christ, which sealed the New Covenant. Apparently paradoxical to those who take only a surface view, the New Covenant was given before the Old. But it is New in the sense of it being ratified through the blood of Messiah long after the Old was given, and came into operation upon its cessation. The Old, as a wise Schoolmaster, is able to teach us the shadowy outline of those things which were fully revealed in Christ, but in itself, it could not give life. We, “knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the Law: for by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified” (Gal. 2:16). Who then, shall deliver us from the body of this death? We thank God through Jesus Christ our Master ...” (Rom. 7:23).

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