

SHOULD WE KEEP THE SABBATH? (Pt 6)

The New Covenant Priority

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The Christian Scriptures tell us by direct statement and by many illustrations that, the old covenant Law given to Israel has been “fulfilled” and is no longer binding for believers who come under the new covenant inaugurated by Christ Jesus. In this article we will examine three of those illustrations that set out the superiority and the priority of the new testament over the old Law covenant.

1. A NEW MARRIAGE

In our previous study *Jesus and the Law*, we concluded by alluding to one of those illustrations that highlights the superiority of the new testament over the old testament. The illustration comes from **Romans 7: 1-4, 6;**

Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law --- note that Jewish Christians “who know the Law” are here specifically addressed), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband.

So then if, while her husband is living, she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress, though she is joined to another man.

Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you might be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God ... But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound.

If I may use a little writer’s license, we are asked here to think of a woman who has been bound to a husband for years in a loveless, frustrating marriage. But one day her husband dies. She finds herself now a widow. However, she then meets a new man who turns out to be the man of her dreams. Her knight in shining armour has arrived! She gives her heart to him in a new marriage covenant. She is not an adulteress for marrying again, is she? She is free to be madly in love with her amazing husband who delights in her. She joyfully exclaims, “All I want to do is to love my new Man!”

Through this illustration Paul likens trying to keep the terms of the old covenant Law, to being married to that first husband who has treated us, it must be said, with a certain harshness ... “Do this and you will live and be blessed. Don’t do this and you will be cursed.” Nothing we do seems to completely satisfy his demands. “You’re never good enough” he complains, “can’t you try harder, can’t you do better?” Under the first husband, the old Law, we always felt as though we never quite measured up, were never quite good enough. We lived with constant guilt. Failure was always present. (Paul knew this by experience, having been a zealous Pharisee himself, and having failed to meet the demands of the Law.)

Under the Mosaic Law, we were like a wife whose self-esteem has been utterly shattered by threats. We ended up with this despairing cry, **“I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present with me, but the doing of the good is not ... For I joyfully concur with the Law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Oh wretched person that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death? (Romans 7: 18,22-24).**

But now, the apostle teaches, through Christ we are finished once and for all with the demands of that old husband ... **for you were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you might be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead ... But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound (see Romans 7: 1-4, 6).**

Yes, the Gospel of Christ announces we are in a new marriage, a new covenant relationship, for Christ has both fulfilled the Law on our behalf and he has annulled the old marriage certificate completely. **Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4)!** He is both fulfillment (completion) and termination (cancellation) of the old covenant Law that once bound us. Christ himself is now our Sabbath-rest (Matt. 11: 28).

No wonder Paul bursts forth in praise at the end of **Romans 7** and into **chapter 8** (remembering of course, that there were no chapter breaks in Paul's original letter), **Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ... There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and of death (Rom. 7: 25-8:2).**

Now do not miss the revolutionary teaching of the apostle in this illustration. Paul is not only saying that believers in Messiah are free from the *condemnation* of the old Law. Thanks be to God that is gloriously true. However, we miss the impact of his illustration if we fail to see that the believer is also free from the old Law as the guiding principle for Christian living.

The weakness under the Sinaitic Law was not in the Law itself --- which Paul affirms is **good and spiritual (Rom. 7: 13-14)**. The weakness is in us. Remember how Moses had not even arrived at the bottom of the Mountain than he smashed the tablets of the first covenant because the sons of Israel had already committed spiritual adultery? The Sinaitic covenant was never going to be able to bring about the permanent Presence of God among His people because of Israel's hardness of heart exemplified by this Golden Calf incident.

This has relevance to our discussion as to whether we should be keeping the Sabbath, which recall, was **the sign** that Israel was being Torah-observant. We know that in this passage when Paul uses the word **Law** that he includes the Ten Commandments in his description of the old covenant law. How do we know this? Because he specifically mentions one of the Ten Commandments, **You shall not covet (Rom. 7: 7)!**

You can't have it both ways. For in Christ, **we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter (Rom. 7:6)**. Paul is really saying that the Christian who wants to be joined to Messiah and the Law is actually guilty of committing spiritual adultery!

Applying this principle practically, this means that whenever there is a clash between the requirements of the two covenants, the new always takes precedence. So, am I obliged to keep the sabbath which is the sign of old covenant Law? Only if I want to deny Messiah! In fact, we read, that if you want to still be under the old covenant Law, then you have **already fallen from grace (Gal. 5:4)!** Strong words, and I didn't write them ... but I do accept them!

THE THREE SPECIFIC COMPONENTS OF THE NEW COVENANT

Read again what the prophet said about the new covenant;

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the LORD; I will put my laws into their mind, and on their heart also will I write them: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: and they shall not teach every man his fellow-citizen, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and their sins will I remember no more (Hebrews 8: 10-12 quoting Jeremiah 31: 32-34 which adds that the new covenant will not be like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them out by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them, declares the LORD).

Observe the new covenant contains three main parts. **1.** God will put His laws into our minds, writing them within our hearts, so that we may be spiritually united with Him in life. This is God's stated purpose.

2. Being in us, this law will enable us to know God directly, without needing to be taught by others. That is, we shall know God's life internally. This is the process.

3. God will be merciful to our iniquities and remember our sins no more. Forgiveness full and free! This is our glorious experience as we walk with the Lord.

Three magnificent blessings mediated to us through our Lord Jesus the Christ! In the new covenant we have cleansing, life and power, and an inward knowledge of God. How graciously God has treated us in Christ.

So, the new covenant is powered by “**the law of the Spirit of life**”. And who among us who has experienced the power of the new birth by the Gospel-word of Jesus cannot testify to the power of God’s Spirit flowing out of our inner beings like streams of living water?

When I was gloriously “born again” as a teenager, nobody had to tell me it was wrong to enjoy the old dirty jokes of my circle of friends. Suddenly I had a distinct distaste for all that. There was a new life flowing out of me. A new power of the Spirit. I *wanted* to read the Bible. I *wanted* to read good Christian books. I *wanted* to be in Church to hear the preaching of the Word of God! I *wanted* to pray. A new life, a new spirit, a new power, a new motivation was driving me, impelling me. I *wanted* to live a new life before the Lord. His Spirit of life was inside me. I *loved* God and His Son.

All of this is to say that in the new covenant the same power that raised Christ from the dead dwells in us and operates powerfully by his life within. And since **the Spirit of Him who raised Christ from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit that dwells in you (Rom. 8: 11)**. Now that’s something the old law did not and could not give!

The new covenant is not without ‘law’. It’s just not external. In the new covenant God’s *modus operandi* is that, **All who are being led by the Spirit of God these are the sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’ The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ ... (Rom. 8:14-17)**. And speaking of sonship versus slavery ...

2. AN ALLEGORY OF TWO COVENANTS

In another place the apostle contrasts the superiority of the new covenant over that of the first, by allegorising a story from the book of Genesis;

Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you seek to listen to the Law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise.

This contains an allegory; for these women are two covenants, one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be **slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in **slavery** with her children.**

But the Jerusalem above is *free*; she is our mother ... And you brethren, like Isaac, are **children of promise. But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.**

But what does the Scripture say?

‘Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with *the son of the free woman*.

So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman. It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery (Galatians 4: 21- 5: 1).

Remember that Galatians was Paul’s apologetic against ‘Judaizers’, that is, against those **who want to be under law (v. 21)**. Paul has already shown that the Law **came 430 years *after*** the promise had been made to Abraham (Gal. 3:17).

So why was the Law given all that time later? Paul answers, **It was added because of transgressions ... until the Seed should come to whom the promise had been made (Gal. 3:19)**. Paul’s argument is that “seed” or particular recipient of the promise, was Messiah himself (v.16). Yes, the Law had its purpose. It was preparatory, it was

our Tutor designed to introduce us to Christ. But now that the fulfilment and fullness has come in Christ Jesus, we no longer need the old Law to be our tutor, for **the promise of faith has come (v. 22)**.

Let's list the contrasts of Paul's allegory: The Old Covenant of the Law, portrayed as Mount Sinai is represented by the bondswoman Hagar. She is the antithesis of the New Covenant, represented by Abraham's wife Sarah, here called the free woman, **the Jerusalem above**. Hagar's son, the old Law under Moses, was **born after the flesh** and so was born **in slavery**. Sarah's son Isaac, was born **free**. Hagar's son Ishmael **persecuted the son of the promise**, Isaac.

The implications of this allegory for us are far-reaching: **Cast out the bondswoman** equals cast out the old covenant **(v. 30)**. Cast out **her son** means cast out those Judaizers who are promoting the validity of the old covenant of Law **(v.30)**, **for the son of the bondswoman shall not not be heirs with the sons of the free woman**, i.e. Christians living under the new covenant, for **we are not children of the bondswoman**, not living under the old covenant from Sinai. Christians are free-born, sons and daughters of **the promise**. If I may use Ratzlaff's words again,

Here, in clear contextual teaching over several chapters, Paul states in three specific ways that Christians are not under the authority of the old covenant. **(1)**. The Law was given 430 years *after* Abraham and was in effect *until* the coming of Christ. **(2)**. With the coming of Christ we are no longer under the Law. **(3)**. Christians are to "cast out" the old covenant and those who promote its being kept. ^{1 2}

3. STONE AND INK CONTRASTED WITH SPIRIT AND LIFE

Contrasting the superiority of the new over the old covenant, read carefully what Paul wrote to the Christian believers in Corinth;

You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for 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

Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, Who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how shall the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory ...

The first thing to note, as the apostle defends his apostleship, is how he defines and contrasts the two covenants. The old covenant --- although originally written by the very finger of God! --- is described as having been **engraved on stones**. This is a clear reference to the Ten Commandments themselves. Then Paul says that the Christian believer in the new covenant is a "living epistle" --- **not written with ink** --- because God's Spirit and Life dwells in our hearts. The **ink** is a clear reference to the Deuteronomic book of the Law, the Second Law, which applies the Ten Commandments in Israel's everyday life and ritual.

The important thing to note? Paul defines the old covenant as including *both* the Ten Commandments inscribed on stone, and the book of the covenant written with ink. In contrast, Paul says the new covenant in Messiah is written internally in human hearts and bursts forth with the power of new life, the Spirit of God.

As the old testament prophet predicted, God promised, **"I will put My laws into their minds. And I will write them upon their hearts"** (Heb. 8:10). Under the old covenant the Law was external and whilst Israel's significant leaders such as judges, kings, priests like Moses, Joshua, David, etc., knew the anointing of the holy

¹ Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Christ*, Life Assurance Ministries, Az. USA, 2003, p 241

² Note how the apostle piles one metaphor on top of another to make his point. We have already considered his illustration of the remarried woman, and here he says the Law has been like our Tutor. Having introduced us to Christ, the old Tutor has finished his terms and contract of employment (Gal. 3: 24-25). We are no longer under the supervision of the old covenant Law. The tutor's role is terminated!

Spirit for their calling, under the new covenant *every believer* is meant to know by daily experience the intimate and empowering relationship of God in a direct and personal way in our “hearts”.

Thus, the new testament is far superior to the old covenantal law to the degree that Spirit and Life are superior to stone and ink!

FADING GLORY CONTRASTED WITH REMAINING GLORY

As Paul continues his contrasting of the two covenants, he alludes to Moses’ shining face and his need to put a veil over it when he spoke with the sons of Israel, for the glory of God’s presence held Israel in awful dread,

Having therefore such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, and are not as Moses, who used to put a veil over his face that the sons of Israel might not look intently at the end of what was fading away (2 Cor. 3: 9-13).

The Sinaitic covenant had a marvellous **glory**, yes indeed. No other nation on earth has ever beheld such an awful and dreadful display of literal earth shaking, blazing fire with darkness and gloom and whirlwind, angelic trumpet blasting and thundering words as Israel did at Sinai (**Hebrews 12: 18f**). But it was a fading and temporal glory.

The new covenant came with a different glory, for it came in the form of a beautiful, uniquely fathered man who perfectly revealed the very character and purposes of God his Father, being **the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature (Heb. 1: 3)**. The Presence of God Himself tabernacled in Christ Jesus, and as he **dwelt among us, we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1: 14)**.

This one is now exalted as the Divine oracle had prophesied in **Psalm 110: 1**, and he sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high, awaiting the day when he will return in **the glory of his Father, and with the holy angels of God with him**, and all the world will see **the sign of the Son of man in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory (Matt. 24: 30f)**.

At his glorious Second coming, the Lord Jesus Christ’s presence will shake not only the whole earth **but also the heavens** as God’s kingdom comes (**Heb. 13: 26** quoting **Haggai 2:6**). And of the glory of his kingdom there be no end for his kingdom is **an everlasting kingdom (Dan. 7: 27)!**

The glory of the first and old covenant has already faded, but the glory of the new will never fade.

THE VEIL THAT REMAINS AND THE LIFTED VEIL.

As our apostle continues his contrasts between the old covenant and the new, he writes;

But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; (then he quotes from Exodus 34:34) ‘But whenever he turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away’. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. 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 from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor. 3: 14-18).

Paul’s point in these verses is that whoever continues to read the old covenant law without interpreting it in the light of the Christ event, will have a metaphorical veil over their minds. Those who continue to read and live by the old covenant will remain in the dark, so to speak, but we who read the old as having been fulfilled in Christ, **are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory** by the **Spirit of the Lord**.

And here is the climax of the story. When Moses would go in to the tabernacle to talk with the LORD God, he would take off the veil (or covering mask) from his face ... **Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face,**

just as a man speaks to his friend (Ex. 33: 11). But when he came out to speak with the people, Moses' face glowed so much so, that the people could not look at him! So Moses had to put the veil back over his face.

Paul says this incident is illustrative of the difference between the two covenants. The character of the old covenant is likened to Moses' veil. Moses veiled before Israel demonstrates the inadequacies of the old Sinaitic covenant. The Sinaitic covenant never was designed, nor able, to bring about the desired establishment of God's presence with His people. How could it? Their hearts were already hardened as the Golden Calf incident showed.

But Paul continues that we Christians under the new covenant do experience the fullness of God's intimate Presence without fear --- we may speak with God **as friend to friend** --- because the veil has been taken from our hearts. Which is to say, when a man or woman turns to the Lord, they become recipients of the direct revelation that Moses enjoyed.

Those who insist on reading the old covenant law with a view to be guided by its principles have **the same veil unlifted** from their **hardened minds** (2 Cor. 3: 14). And **to this day, whenever Moses is read** [i.e. the old Law] **a veil lies over their heart** (v. 15). This covering veil can only be **removed in Christ** (v. 14).

And here's the kicker. Paul quotes a verse from **Exodus 34:34** referring to Moses --- **When Moses went in before the LORD to speak with Him, he would take off the veil until he came out ...** --- but he applies this verse to the Christian by removing the personal name of Moses, and substituting it with the third person pronoun **he/she** because it now applies to us all in Christ! Note the change;

But whenever he/she turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away (2 Cor. 3:16)!!!

Just as Moses had been the receptor of the old covenant given directly to him by Yahweh, so Christians may directly receive the blessings of the new covenant, which is the fulfilment of the old, by the operation of the Spirit communicating Christ to their hearts. It is this immediacy of the revelation, Paul argues here, this ability to know the mind of God, which characterizes the new era ... Christians are all now in the Mosaic position, the recipients of direct revelation, beholding the glory of the Lord with unveiled face and being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory unto another. ³

SUMMARY

The principle is that, the new covenant sealed by Jesus' blood, is demonstrably superior, far better, much more glorious than the old external Sinaitic covenant.

Our three new testament illustrations and allegories prove this. **1.** Try telling the woman who has been released from her unsatisfactory first marriage, that her new man who adores and lives for her every blessing should really pine for that old, lifeless, yes even harsh marriage, and she would laugh you to scorn!

2. Try telling the free-born son, that he would be better off being a servant and a slave, rather than a son who is the heir, and he would think you deranged!

3. Try telling a masked man or a veiled woman they are not as privileged as one whose face is uncovered to see the full glory of the day! The difference between the first and the new covenants is as far as tablets of stone and letters of ink are from new-creation people empowered by the indwelling Spirit and Life of God Himself!

So take your pick. Either serve God in the newness of the Spirit or in the oldness of stone and the letter! Either remain free in grace, or shackled to the full force of the Law. Either remain faithful to your Saviour Jesus, or commit spiritual adultery.

As for me, I'd prefer the new and better wine which Jesus has kept to the end!

³ William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenant Theology*, Paternoster, UK., 2013, pp 149-150