

## **PREACHING CHRIST FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

“You’ll find our text today in the Old Testament...”

I know this is a rare announcement today, but when you heard it last, what did you think?

“Oh no! Not another historical lecture.”

“We’re going to get another whipping with the law today.”

“Why? I came to church to hear about Jesus.”

“What’s Israel and Babylon got to do with my family struggles?”

Or maybe you didn’t just think it. You said it or emailed it to the pastor afterwards. And pastors are feeling the pressure. Some surveys put the ratio of Old Testament to New Testament sermons at 1 to 10. Some would like it to get nearer zero to 10.

But might this imbalance in the spiritual diet of most Christians explain many of the spiritual problems in the modern Church and in the modern Christian? Or as Gleason Archer puts it: “How can Christian pastors hope to feed their flock on a well-balanced spiritual diet if they completely neglect the 39 books of Holy Scripture on which Christ and all the New Testament authors received their own spiritual nourishment?”<sup>1</sup>

#### **Where did the Old Testament go?**

It wasn’t always like this. The Church used to have a much more balanced diet. So how did we get here? Let me give you eight answers:

##### *1. Liberalism*

There has been a prolonged and sustained attack on the Old Testament by liberal scholars. This has shaken the confidence of many preachers and hearers alike in this part of the Holy Scriptures.

##### *2. Ignorance*

It is almost impossible to preach from large parts of the Old Testament without knowledge of the historical context and geographical setting. However, while this knowledge was once widespread, many now know little or nothing of biblical history, and preachers find it hard to interest their hearers in it.

##### *3. Irrelevance*

Some look at the historical and geographical details and wonder what possible relevance can events and places from thousands of years ago have for me? And anyway, the New Testament makes it clear that many Old Testament practices are now terminated. So, why study them?

##### *4. Dispensationalism*

Although unintended, the dispensational division of Scripture into different eras tends to relegate the Old Testament to a minor role in the life of the Church and of the individual Christian. But even some Reformed preachers are practical dispensationalists!

##### *5. Bad Examples*

Bad examples of Old Testament preaching are easy to find and even easier to ridicule. However, the malpractice of some should not lead to the non-practice of others.

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<sup>1</sup> Gleason L. Archer, “A New Look at the Old Testament,” *Decision*, (August 1972): 5.

### 6. *Missing Models*

Many pastors want to preach from the Old Testament, and they feel guilty about their failure to do so. However, when they look around for preaching models to follow, they find few men whose practice they can learn from.

### 7. *Laziness*

Preaching from the Old Testament is more demanding than preaching from the New Testament. For a busy pastor with two or three sermons to prepare each week, the well-worn paths of the New Testament seem much more inviting than Leviticus, 2 Chronicles, or Nahum!

### 8. *Christ-less*

The last and the biggest reason for so little Old Testament preaching is that there has been so much Christ-less Old Testament preaching. At a popular level, Old Testament preaching has often degenerated into mere moralism (e.g. "Ten lessons from the life of Moses"), and that's just wearisome. At an academic level, there seems to be a determination to downplay and even remove any possibility of Christ-centeredness in the Old Testament. That's equally wearisome. Little surprise then that preachers turn away from the Old Testament and towards the New in order to "find Jesus" and "preach Christ crucified."

## **How do we get the Old Testament back?**

What then is the solution to this crisis in Old Testament preaching? How can we fight and even reverse these trends? Well, we must combat liberal theology. We must teach our congregations biblical history and geography, while also demonstrating the abiding relevance of the Old Testament. We must resist both patent and latent Dispensationalism. We must identify and avoid bad practice, however inviting it may appear. We must search for, value, and learn from good preaching models. And we must be willing to put in the hours, the sweat, the toil, and the tears, as we break up the long-untilled ground of the Old Testament.

But, above all, we must, in faith, stand against Christ-less moralism and Christ-less academia. We must stand in front of the JCB's of the scholarly community and refuse to let them scoop Christ out of the Old Testament.

But how?

Well it's a wrong road back. But we must begin with the New Testament. Yes, the New Testament! That's what this book is all about. It's a how-to book – how to preach Christ from the Old Testament. I'm going to give you some very practical advice on Christ-centered Old Testament preaching. But before I do that, I want to take a step back and begin by proving that it is legitimate to preach Christ from the Old Testament. And I shall do so by turning to the New Testament.

The New Testament? How can I begin a course on "Preaching Christ from the Old Testament" by turning to the New Testament? Because starting with Christ's view of the Old Testament is the most important step of all if we are to rightly preach Christ from the Old Testament. Failure to do so is one of the main reasons, perhaps the main reason, for so many Christ-less Old Testament sermons today. Knowing the New Testament better, and especially the Christ of the New Testament, will help us find Christ in the Old Testament. Dr Michael Barrett explains:

Part of the problem with many Christians is that their inability to find Christ in the Old Testament stems from their limited knowledge of who He is and what He is like. If I am told to pick someone out of a crowd and I have no idea what that someone looks like, it becomes purely a guessing game. Indeed I could be looking right at him and not know it. If we do not

know what we are looking for, we will most likely find nothing. Looking for nothing in particular, we find nothing in particular.<sup>2</sup>

We must know Christ personally and intimately on a daily basis if we are to recognize Him and so preach Him from the Old Testament.

But, you may say, "Why spend time in the Old Testament shadows when the New Testament sun has arisen." Thomas Guthrie heard the same question in his day, and answered:

Why look at the shadow when you possess the substance? What artist studies a landscape in the grey dawn, when he may see it in the blaze of day? True. Yet such study has its advantages. It not seldom happens that a portrait brings to view certain shades of expression which we had not previously observed in the face of the veritable man; and when some magnificent form of architecture, or the serried ridges and rocky peaks of a mountain, have stood up between us and the lingering lights of day, though the minor beauties of fluted columns or frowning crags were lost in the shades of evening, yet, drawn in sharp clear outline against a twilight sky, the effect of the whole was more impressive than when eyed in the glare of noon. Thus it may be well, at least occasionally, to examine the Gospel in the broad shadows and strongly defined outlines of an old economy.<sup>3</sup>

With that, let us begin our study of God's bright shadow. We shall look at Christ's view of the Old Testament, followed by Peter's and Paul's view. And may we too experience burning hearts as we do so (Luke 24:25-32).

### Christ's view of the Old Testament

If we wanted to know what the Old Testament was all about, we should be on pretty safe ground if we asked the author, don't you think?

"But how can we ask Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc?"

We can't. And we don't have to. Because the Old Testament also had a divine author, and he came to this world and told us what the Old Testament was all about. He said it was all about Himself. And, as we shall see, those who spent the most time with Him, said the same.

Take for example, what the resurrected Christ said to his still-mourning disciples on the Emmaus Road (Lk. 24:25-32). Having patiently listened to their story, Christ eventually intervened with a rebuke of their foolish ignorance and unbelief: "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?" (v. 25-26).

Jesus told them that their account of Christ's life and death exactly matched the predictions of the Old Testament prophets. They had believed **some** of the prophets' writings – the parts that spoke of the Messiah's glory. But they had not believed **all** that the prophets had spoken – especially the parts that spoke of the Messiah's sufferings and death.

Having rebuked their foolish ignorance, Christ then gave the disciples a full interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures *in the light of recent events*. Notice that! It is absolutely critical. Christ used New Testament light to interpret the Old Testament Scriptures. He used the light of New Testament events to preach from the Old Testament. As Graeme Goldsworthy says:

<sup>2</sup> Michael Barrett, *Beginning at Moses* (Ambassador - Emerald: Greenville, 2001), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Guthrie, *The Gospel in Ezekiel*. Internet. Available from <http://www.newble.co.uk/guthrie/ezek1.html>; accessed 17 November 2009.

We do not start at Genesis 1 and work our way forward until we discover where it is all leading. Rather we first come to Christ, and he directs us to study the Old Testament in the light of the gospel. The gospel will interpret the Old Testament by showing us its goal and meaning. The Old Testament will increase our understanding of the gospel by showing us what Christ fulfills.<sup>4</sup>

Christ entitles His sermon, *The Things Concerning Himself*. He took a big text – Moses, all the prophets, and all the scriptures (v. 27; cf. v. 44). And it had two main points – His sufferings and His glory. In other words, the whole Old Testament concerned Himself, specifically His sufferings and His glory.

And this note didn't just emerge at the end of Christ's ministry. Right from the start He presented Himself not as a contrast to the Old Testament but as its climax (Matt. 5:17-18).

He described Abraham's faith as something more than general theism. It was Messiah-centered: "Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad" (Jn. 8:56).

When did that happen? When did Abraham see Christ's day with joy? He began to see it when God called him out of Ur. That call is often portrayed as something "out of the blue." However, it must be remembered that it came in the biblical context of the promise to Eve of a Redeemer that would arise out of her seed and bless the world by defeating Satan (Gen. 3:15). God was building upon that Gospel promise when he called Abraham to leave Ur: "In you all families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3).

*Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3).*

But, how can we be sure that Abraham saw the good news of Christ the Redeemer in this promise? Well, because the Apostle Paul tells us:

*And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, **preached before the gospel** unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed (Gal. 3:8).*

Genesis 12:1-3 was not the whole Gospel, but it was enough of the Gospel to enable Abraham to not only obey God's call (Heb. 11:8-9), but to see Christ's day and be glad. Iain Duguid goes further and sees more of Christ promised in verse 7 of Genesis 12.

Genesis 12...also points forward to the coming of Christ. The key to making the connection is found in Galatians 3:16, where Paul says this: "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." In other words, according to Paul, the promises made to Abraham already have Christ in view. When God says to Abram in Genesis 12:7, "To your offspring [*lit.*, seed] I will give this land," he is talking about Christ.<sup>5</sup>

If the Holy Spirit revealed the Gospel meaning of "your seed" to Paul, surely it's very likely that the Holy Spirit also revealed this meaning to Abraham, the original hearer of the words and receiver of the

<sup>4</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan* (Illinois: IVP, 1991), 54-55.

<sup>5</sup> Iain Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality* (Philipsburg: P&R), 24-25.

promise. If God gave Paul hindsight, could He not have given Abraham foresight, a foresight that was extended and clarified by further covenant promises in Genesis 15, 17 and 22.

So when we ask Jesus what he thought the Old Testament was about. His answer is, “Me!”

Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me...For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me (Jn. 5:39, 46).

What about asking those who knew Jesus best? What did the Apostles think the Old Testament was all about? Let’s start with Peter, and let’s break into the first chapter of his letter when he’s talking about the message of the Old Testament prophets.

### **Peter’s View of the Old Testament**

In 1 Peter 1:10-12, Peter taught that Old Testament prophets made predictions, studied the predictions, and understood the predictions. Let’s look more closely at these three stages of prophetic experience.

First, **the prophets made predictions.** The “Spirit of Christ”, or the Holy Spirit, was in the Old Testament prophets (v. 11). Wayne Grudem argues that the title “Spirit of Christ” “suggests that predicting the coming Messiah was the primary focus of his [the Holy Spirit’s] activity in the Old Testament prophets.”<sup>6</sup> This unbreakable bond between all Scripture, Christ, and the Holy Spirit is described succinctly by the apostle John: “...the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10).

We should not, therefore, be surprised to read that, like the New Testament Apostles, the Old Testament prophets were focused on “salvation” (v. 10), and also “prophesied of the grace that should come” (v. 10). And indeed, not only did they preach salvation by grace, but they also preached the way this would be accomplished – by a suffering Messiah (v. 11).

So, through the prophets, the Spirit of Christ “testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow” (v. 11). The Spirit took the things of Christ and showed them to the prophets (John 16:15). Regarding the Scriptural location of these predictions, Grudem writes:

If we are to look for examples of this predicting activity, we may in fact look through the whole of the Old Testament, for the New Testament authors can sometimes speak of the whole of the Old Testament as the writings of ‘the prophets’ (see Lk. 24:27; also Acts 2:30 on David as a prophet). In this sense the predictions of the sufferings of the Messiah begin with the prediction of the ‘seed’ of the woman who would be bruised in the heel by the serpent (Gn. 3:15), and continue through much of the Old Testament writings...Yet all these verses are only a beginning, for they do not include the ‘acted-out prophecies’ seen in the historical events of the Old Testament, where in the lives of people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Jonah, and often the nation of Israel generally, God brought to pass events which foreshadowed a pattern of life that would be later followed by ‘one greater than Solomon,’ one who was David’s greater Son.<sup>7</sup>

Second, **the prophets studied their predictions.** It was not always immediately or entirely clear to the prophets what their predictions meant. Therefore, they “enquired and searched diligently” into the salvation they prophesied (v. 10). Specifically, they searched “what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory

<sup>6</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Commentary on 1 Peter* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 69.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

that should follow” (v. 11). The Greek words used for “enquire” and “search” indicate an active, earnest, careful and diligent pursuit of the meaning of their own and of previous prophecies (e.g. Dan. 9:2). And, as Michaels notes, these are Christ-centered enquiries:

Even though the prophets’ ministry was long before the fact, Peter depicts them as pointing not to an undefined messianic figure but specifically to Jesus Christ. “Christ” is a name to Peter rather than a title, and he writes as if the prophets viewed matters in the same way.<sup>8</sup>

Some versions translate verse 11 to mean that the prophets did not know what person or what time they were talking about. For example, the ESV says the prophets were “inquiring **what person or time** the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.”

The NIV translates it closer to the KJV, saying the prophets were “trying to find out **the time and circumstances** to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.”

This translation implies that the prophets did not puzzle so much over who the person was, but only over what time, and what manner (or circumstances) of time.

The latter translation, which maximizes rather than minimizes the prophets’ knowledge, is to be preferred. It is more consistent with the surrounding verses, which indicate the prophets knew a lot. From his study of this passage, Walter Kaiser draws out five truths that the prophets were certain of:

1. The Messiah would come
2. The Messiah would suffer
3. The Messiah would be glorified (in kingly splendor);
4. The order of events was that the suffering came first, and then the glorious period followed
5. This message had been revealed to the prophets not only for their own day, but also for a future generation.

What then were the prophets all stirred up about in their searching and inquiring? It was the question of time...Therefore, 1 Peter 1:10-12 does not teach that these men were curious, yet often ignorant as to exact impact or meaning of what they wrote and predicted. Theirs was not a search for the meaning of what they wrote; it was an inquiry into the temporal [timing] aspects of the subject, which went beyond what they wrote.<sup>9</sup>

Although the prophets did not have comprehensive and complete knowledge of Christ (who does?), they knew enough to answer the “Who?” question. Their major questions were about the “When?” and the “How?”

Third, **the prophets understood their predictions would be even better understood by future generations.** It was revealed to them that, “not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven” (v. 11). They would have gradually grown in understanding of the Messiah they were looking for. But, Peter tells us that they especially came to understand that their predictions would be better understood by, and therefore would be more useful to, those who lived in Messiah’s day than to themselves. They recognized that many of their prophecies would make sense to their readers only once they had happened. Greidanus highlights this:

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<sup>8</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *Word Biblical Commentary on 1 Peter* (Logos Library System, Electronic Edition).

<sup>9</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 20.

The power and grace of Christ's redemption are present in the Old Testament long before he is born. At the same time, Old Testament believers look forward to the coming of Christ, when they will receive "far more light." In the meantime, God gave many promises of the coming Messiah and raised up types that prefigured him.<sup>10</sup>

This does not mean that the Old Testament presents only the broad, general characteristics of Christ's person and work and that the New Testament fills in the details. While the New Testament is more detailed in some respects, the Old Testament is more detailed in other respects. For example, nowhere in the New Testament are we given such insight into the emotions and feelings of the Lord Jesus during his sufferings, as we are in the Messianic Psalms 22 and 69. Likewise, Isaiah 53 contains considerable detail.

So, Peter is not so much teaching a lack of detail, but rather a lack of full understanding. And, that lack was not due to a lack of spirituality or holiness, but simply because many of the predicted events could not be understood until they happened. Even Christ's disciples had limited understanding of the person and work of Christ until after his resurrection.

Last, notice how Peter ties the prophets and the Apostles together. The same "things" that were predicted, studied, and, in a measure, understood by the prophets, "are now reported unto you by them that have preached the Gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven" (v. 11).

The prophets ministered the same "things" that the apostles "now reported." The Old Testament "things" and the New Testament "reports" were identical in substance. The major difference, apart from the clothes the truths were dressed up in, is that, since Pentecost, the New Testament "reports" are accompanied by a greater measure of the "Holy Spirit sent down from heaven," giving the preaching greater power, and so better enlightening the minds of the hearers (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:33).

### **Paul's view of the Old Testament**

Did anyone, apart from Christ, know the Old Testament better than Paul – "a Hebrew of the Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5)? So, what did Paul think it was all about? Instead of dealing with some of the "easier" passages that show Paul shared Christ's and Peter's view of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, I'd like to deal with three passages in which Paul seems to view the New Testament as nothing but a contrast to and a replacement of the Old.

### **Galatians 3-4**

In Galatians 3 and 4, Paul seems to view the Old Testament in a wholly negative light. But, in Galatians, he is not dealing with the Old Testament as rightly understood, but with the Old Testament as warped and perverted by Judaizing legalists.

Here's the background to these passages. Through the Christ-centered preaching of the Apostle Paul, the Galatians had been delivered from the bondage of trying to get to heaven by obeying the Ten Commandments and following the ceremonial law. Paul preached a Christ who had obeyed the moral law for sinners, a Christ who had suffered the penalty of a law broken by sinners, and a Christ who had abolished the rituals and ceremonies by fulfilling them. And many Galatians believed in this Christ. The yoke of bondage was smashed. The prison doors were opened. The chains fell off. They entered a new world of freedom and liberty. Who would ever give that up?

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<sup>10</sup> S Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 136.

Well, the Galatians did. They allowed false teachers from the Jewish Church to persuade them that faith in Christ was not enough. They needed to be circumcised. They needed to follow the ceremonial rituals. Turning away from Christ they put their neck under the heavy yoke again, they put the cuffs on, and padlocked their legs in chains.

Paul protests: “Tell me, you that desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?” (v. 21). If I may paraphrase this, Paul is saying: “Tell me, you who are trying to be saved by keeping the law of Moses, have you not read the law of Moses?” He then points them to Genesis 15-17, to show that it was never God’s intention that sinners be saved by keeping Moses’ law. He does so by using Abraham’s two sons to illustrate two ways of salvation: “For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman” (v. 22).

The mother of the first child was Hagar, the slave (v. 22). Her son, Ishmael, was “born after the flesh” (v. 23), the result of foolish human reasoning and sinful human effort.

The mother of the second child was Sarah, Abram’s wife. Her child, Isaac, was the result of God’s promise.

Paul calls these two births “an allegory” a living parable for two ways of relating to God (v. 24) The birth of Ishmael is a vivid illustration of relating to God by using the best human reasoning plus the best human effort. Ishmael is human effort apart from the divine promise. Ishmael is a symbol of man’s helping hand for a helpless God. The birth of Isaac, in contrast, is an illustration of relating to God by trusting in His promise alone. He is a symbol for man’s helplessness reaching out for divine help.

Paul then changes the imagery a bit. He moves from an immoral bedroom to a dusty, distant, desert mountain. He says that the Ishmael way of relating to God is similar to the covenant from Mount Sinai, also called Agar by the Arabs (v. 24). On the face of it, Paul seems to be saying that when God entered into covenant with Israel at Sinai, he was initiating a “fleshly” way of relating to Him. Israel was to bring their best human reasoning and their best human effort. If that’s what Paul is teaching here, it’s no wonder that he refers to the Sinai covenant as “bondage” (v. 24). This is the view of many commentators, including Warren Wiersbe, who wrote:

The Law was never given to impart life; it was definitely a ministry of death...The Old Covenant was a covenant of works and bondage (Acts 15:10). But the New Covenant is a ministry of glorious liberty in Christ.<sup>11</sup>

But is that Paul’s view of the Old Testament? I don’t believe it is. Paul is not looking back at the Sinai covenant and portraying it as a legalistic bondage. He is looking at the way the present day Jews had misunderstood the originally gracious Sinai covenant and perverted it into a covenant of bondage.

But how can I say that God intended grace and revealed grace in the Sinaitic covenant. Let me prove this in four ways.

First, **the Sinai covenant painted pictures of grace.** It was preceded by the grace of the Passover lamb (Ex. 12), concluded by the covenant ratification sacrifices (Ex. 24), and followed by the grace of the sacrificial lambs in the ceremonial law (Ex. 25ff). God book-ended the obedience he required with multiple picture sermons of the coming crucified Christ.

Second, **the Sinai covenant is set in the context of grace.** Exodus 19:4 sets forth all God had done in delivering Israel from Egypt as the basis for the divine “therefore obey” (v. 5).

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<sup>11</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1997, c1992), 483.

You have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people (Ex. 19:4-5).

Redemption brought them into a relationship, which they were to show appreciation for by thankful obedience.

And as if that wasn't enough, God underlined it again in Exodus 20 when, just before giving the moral law, He said: "I am the Lord your (relationship) God which brought you out of the land of Egypt (redemption)" (v.2 ff), before saying, "You shall...you shall not" (v. 3ff). Again, redemption and relationship come before rules to express thankfulness.

Third, **the Sinai covenant points to our need of grace.** In the previous chapter, Paul argues strongly that the law was not intended to disannul or cancel the promise of grace (Gal. 3:17, 19, 21). He begins by asserting that the Gospel of Abraham was a Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ (Gal. 3:6-9). But he then goes on to prove that the Gospel of Moses was also a Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

And this I say, *that* the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ [The covenant with Abraham], the law [the covenant at Sinai], which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect (Gal. 3:17).

He argues this from ordinary human experience. He says that even human covenants cannot be cancelled or changed (v. 15). The implication is obvious: whatever the Mt Sinai covenant did, it did not cancel nor change the covenant promises to Abraham. As Paul says, "Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid" (Gal. 3:21).

So, if the law does not cancel, change or even oppose the Abrahamic promises of grace, what purpose does it have? Apart from revealing grace through the pictures of grace and the context of grace, as we have already argued, it also points to our need of grace. "Wherefore then serves the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made" (v. 19).

A large part of the law's purpose was to bring us to see our desperate need for the promise and to lead us, as a disciplinary guardian, to the promise "that we might be justified by faith" (v. 24). The law of circumcision served the same purpose for Abraham. And now that Christ has come, and faith has come, there is no longer the same need for circumcision and the ceremonies (vv. 25-26).

Fourth, **the Sinai covenant shows how we are to respond to grace.** The great statements about God's gracious redemption bringing Israel into a gracious relationship with Him (Ex. 19:4; 20:1-2), are followed by a great divine "therefore obey" (Ex. 19:5; 20:3-4). Having redeemed them and brought them into a relationship with Him, God gives them rules to help them show their gratitude to Him and keep their relationship healthy. What grace that God should guide His people in this way. And as if that was not enough, he promises rewards for obeying in response to His grace (e.g. Ex. 19:5). Many look at these motivation clauses found throughout the Old Testament and say, "See, it's all about works and reward." But that fails to see that redemption and relationship came before any rules or reward.

All this to prove that the Sinai covenant, rightly understood, was an administration of the covenant of grace. Or, to put it another way, the Gospel of Abraham was the Gospel of Moses. Jesus even presents the glorified Abraham as pointing sinners to Moses and the prophets for the way of salvation (Luke 16:29-31). And we are told four times in Hebrews 11 (vs. 24, 27, 28, 29) that Moses walked by faith. In fact we are specifically told that he had saving faith in Christ (v.26).

So, when Paul attacks the Sinai covenant, he is not attacking it as it was designed by God, but as it had been twisted and abused by the Jews. That was Jerusalem's main religion when Paul was writing, and it brought the people into bondage (Gal. 4:25). Paul tells the Galatians (and us) what to do with every attempt to mix law with grace, human effort with divine promise. Cast it out. Expel it. Instead, embrace the freedom and joy of the heavenly Jerusalem's religion of faith in the promise of grace (Gal. 4:30-31).

## **2 Corinthians 3:7-16**

Paul also discusses the relationship between the Old and New Testaments in 2 Corinthians 3:6-16. And on the face of it, he seems to paint a very stark contrast between them.

He describes the Old Testament and its effects using the following phrases: "the letter kills" (v. 6), "the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones" (v. 7), and "the ministration of condemnation" (v. 9).

His description of the New Testament is quite a contrast: "the spirit gives life" (v. 6), "the ministration of the spirit" (v. 8), "the ministration of righteousness" (v. 9). This comparison raises two questions:

### **Question 1: Is Paul describing all of the Old Testament or simply one part of it?**

Paul is not referring to the whole Old Testament, but to the moral law, the Ten Commandments, which were "written and engraven in stones" (v. 7).

### **Question 2: Paul says that the Ten Commandments killed and condemned. Is that what God designed, or was it the result of a misunderstanding and misuse of the law of Moses?**

Let's just recap before we answer this question. You will remember how Jesus said that Moses and the other prophets spoke of Him (Lk. 24: 27, 44; Jn. 5:39, 46).

Peter confirmed this in 1 Peter 1:10-12. In fact, earlier in his ministry, Peter looked back at the times of Moses and said that despite the burden of religious ceremonies then, there were also those who by grace believed in Jesus (Acts 15:10-11).

Paul also taught that the law of Moses witnessed to Jesus Christ as the saving righteousness of God (Rom. 3:21). And remember we looked at Paul's teaching that the Sinai covenant did not cancel grace but rather revealed and furthered it (Gal. 3 & 4). So the Sinai covenant, taken as a whole, was a revelation of the covenant of grace, not a contradiction or cancellation of it.

However, in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul is focusing on the moral law, the Ten Commandments, ripped from their gracious context and taken in isolation. It's not that the Sinai covenant as a whole was a killing and condemning covenant. Rather, by taking one part of the Sinai covenant, the moral law, and divorcing it from the gracious redemption that brought the Israelites into a gracious relationship with God, they turned it into a condemning and killing covenant.

This fits the context of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 3. First, at the beginning of the chapter, he contrasts the written letters of commendation that the false apostles boasted of, with the living letters of commendation that the Corinthian believers were to him. The contrast was between what was purely dead letter on dead paper, and what was internal, living and vibrant due to the work of the Spirit and of Christ (v. 3).

Second, in verse 6, Paul describes himself as a minister of the New Testament, “not of the letter, but of the spirit.” As these words are part of a letter, he is certainly not decrying letters or words! Rather he is speaking of the bare letter, as contrasted with the letter accompanied by the Holy Spirit.

Third, at the end of the chapter he describes how the Word divorced from the Spirit and from Christ results in the continued blindness and deadness of the Jews. In that sense they repeat the mistake of their ancient ancestors. But those who have seen Christ by faith and enjoy the work of the Spirit in their hearts, are freed to live and be transformed from glory to glory (vv. 14-18).

So, three times this chapter describes the killing effects of the mere letter, the Word without faith in Christ or the work of the Holy Spirit. It therefore makes sense to view the middle verses (vv. 6-11) as describing the mere letter, the killing and condemning effects of the Sinai Law when separated from its redemptive and grace-revealing context. As Augustine put it, “If the Spirit of grace is absent, the law is present only to accuse and kill us.”

But Paul is not just concerned to expose the Jewish perversion of the Old Sinai covenant. He also wants to show its temporary and inferior nature compared to the New Covenant. The fact that the shining glory on Moses face gradually faded should indicate that the Old Covenant was not God’s last Word. Paul says that the temporary nature of this glory was a parable for the whole Mosaic system. It was temporary and transient, designed to fade away and eventually be replaced by a system that would be far superior due to its clarity and permanence (vv. 7, 11-12).

As we have seen, grace was gloriously displayed in the types, the predictive pictures of the Old Covenant. Sadly, the people became attached to the pictures themselves, the sacrifices and ceremonies, rather than One pictured and prophesied in them. This focus on the physical and the visible obscured Christ from them, an obscurity symbolized by the veil over Moses face. Hodge explained:

The Israelites of Paul’s day understood their Scriptures as little as their fathers did. They remained satisfied with the external, ritual, and ceremonial without penetrating to what was beneath, or asking the real import of the types and shadows of the old economy.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, the new covenant used “great plainness of speech” (v. 12). It was the same message of grace but the veil was “done away in Christ.” Thus, when Christ fulfilled the ceremonies, the symbols, and the shadows, he removed the need for these interim measures. Hodge puts it like this:

The Old Testament Scriptures are intelligible only when understood as predicting and prefiguring Christ...The knowledge of Christ, as a matter of fact and as a matter of course, removes the veil from the Old Testament.<sup>13</sup>

Hodge summarizes 2 Corinthians 3 as follows:

The main idea of the whole context is, that the recognition of Jesus Christ as Lord, or Jehovah, is the key to the Old Testament. It opens all its mysteries, or, to use the figure of the apostle, it removes the veil that hid from the Jews the true meaning of their own Scriptures. As soon as they turn to the Lord, i.e. as soon as they recognize Jesus Christ as their Jehovah, then everything becomes bright and clear.<sup>14</sup>

## Illustration

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<sup>12</sup> Hodge, 69.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

Let me give you an illustration that I hope will clarify what Jesus, Peter, and Paul teach about the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.

Some years ago, *Office Administration*, an office supplies business, was prospering through selling high quality paper, envelopes, and pens to various local companies. However, with the advent of the personal computer and email, demand for these products began to diminish. The management, however, were unfamiliar with the new technology. Moreover, they felt that they had good products that had been much appreciated for many years. So, instead of adapting to the new situation, they decided just to keep selling paper, envelopes and pens. Sales continued to plummet. Eventually, their warehouses were full, but their order books were empty. At this point, the managing director's son, who had been trying for some time to change the company's product range, offered to buy out the older management. A deal was soon concluded and the son took over. The warehouses were emptied of old stock, and in came personal computers, printers, and business software. The well-respected company name, *Office Administration*, was retained, but below the signs and the letterheads was written "Under New Management." The company soon began to prosper again. The company name and business was the same – *Office Administration* – but the product range was now suited to a new age and to the new ways that offices were administered.

In a sense, the story of the whole Bible is about *Grace Administration*. What the New Testament tells us is that the coming of Jesus Christ changed the way grace is administered. The Old Testament administered grace in a way that suited the times and the people then – through prophecies, types, and symbols. It was glorious – for its time. But now, the same grace is to be administered directly and only through Jesus Christ. *Grace Administration* is "Under New Management." And, as such, it is even more glorious. "For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remains is glorious" (2 Cor. 3:11).

In other words, the New Testament is not a new "business" but a new way of administering the same "business" of grace. It is *Grace Administration* "Under New Management." It's not that the Old Testament was *Law-works Administration* and the New Testament is *Grace Administration*. It is not a contrast of absolutes – law v grace; it's a contrast of relatives – less grace v more grace. The old management of *Grace Administration* was glorious (the Old Covenant), but the new management is far more glorious (the New Covenant).