

The Old and New Covenants

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Quite often I sit at the kitchen table and help my son with his homework. I've noticed that his papers and the notes from his third grade teacher contain very specific and clear instructions. *"Put your name here... draw a straight line between words with the long "E" sound... one word in this list will not be used... for extra credit think up three of your own..."*

These detailed and specific instructions are very necessary for younger students. Even on into junior and senior high school the teachers are likely to go into great detail in making assignments. Rather than risking misunderstanding by just saying, "Answer these questions," teachers are more likely to say, *"Write answers to questions 1-10, page 56, and be ready to turn them in at the beginning of class on Tuesday, March 10. Please use 8½ x 11 lined paper and print clearly. Place your name and date in the upper right-hand corner."*

As one progresses on into College and graduate studies the expectations are higher. Yet in some cases they are less spelled out and defined. I've taken a number of doctoral classes. I suppose it varies depending on what discipline one is pursuing, but in my experience the teacher has often given out a list of recommended reading, assigned a paper (with no page limit), and announced that there would be one final test - worth 50% of the grade. The test may have two or three questions and you choose just one to write on for two hours.

Why the difference? The younger and less mature one is, the more detailed the rules and guidelines need to be.

When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt (where they had been slaves for several hundred years) he met them right where they were. He established a covenant with them that literally contained hundreds of laws. And those laws were spelled out in great detail.

For example:

The law did not simply ask people to bring an offering to the Lord; it spelled out exactly what kind of an offering to bring:

"One male goat for a sin offering and two lambs, each a year old, for a fellowship offering." ([Leviticus 23:19](#))

The law did not simply say to bring a grain offering; it told how much grain to bring and how to mix it:

"Two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil." ([Leviticus 23:13](#))

The law did not simply say to bring oil; it instructed people to bring *"clear oil of pressed olives."* ([Leviticus 24:2](#))

The law did not simply say to bring cakes of bread to the Lord;

it told the people to *"take fine flour and bake twelve loaves of bread, using two-tenths of an ephah for each loaf. Set them in two rows, six in each row, on the table of pure gold before the Lord."* ([Leviticus 24:5,6](#))

Contrast those old covenant regulations with the simple command of the new covenant:

"A new command I give you: Love one another." ([John 13:34](#))

What a simple, yet beautiful and far-reaching command: "Just love each other." That is the whole law of God in the new covenant.

Long before the inauguration of the new covenant through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God foretold its arrival through the prophet Jeremiah.

" 'The time is coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,' declares the LORD. 'This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the LORD. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the LORD. 'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'"
([Jeremiah 31:31-34](#))

This new covenant was not a new idea for God. It was not like his Plan A failed, so he scratched his head and said, "Lets try something different," and came up with the new covenant - Plan B.

The plan of salvation through the substitutionary atonement of Christ at the cross, offered by grace alone to all who would believe, was established before the beginning of human history. That's why Jesus is called *"the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world"* ([Revelation 13:8](#)). All of the prophecies and acted parables - such as the sacrificial services of the temple - pointed forward to Christ.

So the new covenant, the climax of God's everlasting covenant, was not new to God. It is called "new" because it is different from and replaces the covenant made with Israel.

Characteristics of the New Covenant

Now let's look closer at what this prophecy is saying by examining some of the key phrases one-by-one.

Not like the old

The new covenant would *"not be like the covenant made with the forefathers... who were brought out of Egypt"* ([Jeremiah 31:32](#)). The new covenant was *not* like the old covenant

- the covenant made with Israel. Remember that key point. The new covenant is different from the old covenant.

- The old covenant was law-focused; the new covenant is grace-focused.
- The old covenant was given for a period of time; the new covenant is based on the "eternal gospel."
- The old covenant was a "schoolmaster" or "tutor" to point out human sin and the need of a Savior; in the new covenant we are no longer under law.
- The old covenant produced bondage; the new covenant provides liberation.
- The old covenant condemned; the new covenant brings righteousness.
- The old covenant had a fading glory; the new covenant shines with ever-increasing glory.
- The old covenant was an inferior covenant; the new covenant is based on better promises.

The new covenant is *not* like the old covenant. Now some of you reading this may have a different opinion about this. There are a number of different interpretations of the covenants. Some people believe that the old and new covenants are basically the same. I used to hold that view myself. It is okay for there to be diversity of thought and understanding in the church. Just make sure that your view is rooted in Scripture. Make sure also that your view is based on the responsible use of Scripture and not a collection of proof texts which ignore other clear passages on the covenants.

The list of contrasts above between the old and new covenants are all straight out of the New Testament - the very wording I used comes right out of passages we will look at later on in this study. So hang in there with me and wait to draw your final conclusions until we reach the end.

Now let's look at another phrase in this prophecy by Jeremiah.

Written in our minds and on our hearts

God says, *"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."* ([Jeremiah 31:33](#))

Where was the law in the old covenant? It was written on stone tablets and placed in the ark of the covenant in the temple. The expanded laws were written in a book and placed on the side of the ark.

But in the new covenant God promises to write his law in his people's *minds* and on their *hearts*. In a certain sense, the Holy Spirit of God takes the place of the law in the new

covenant. He comes to every converted Christ follower and guides us into all truth, convicts of sin and empowers us to live godly lives.

The fruit of the Spirit is "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*" ([Galatians 5:22,23](#)). A person who is captivated by the love of Christ and led by the Spirit serves according to the *spirit* of God's law rather than the *letter*. That means they are not just interested in a Ten Commandment list or any list. They go beyond the letter to serve according to the spirit of *love* which is the heart of God's law.

A relational covenant

God says, "*I will be their God, and they will be my people*" ([Jeremiah 31:33](#)). That statement reveals the heart of God. He created us for relationship with himself. He loves us and he wants us to be in communion and fellowship with him, to have no barriers between us. He desires a relationship with his people - a relationship which is real and *personal*.

A personal relationship

God says, "...*They will all know me*" ([Jeremiah 31:34](#)). You see, God longs for a relationship with his people that is personal, one-on-one. In the new covenant there is no longer a need for priests to be mediators between God and man. Through his death, Christ destroyed the barrier between God and man that had been created by sin. In Christ all believers are made priests and have direct access to God through Christ who is our High Priest ([Revelation 1:5,6](#)).

Sin forgiven and remembered no more

Jeremiah's prophecy concludes with this promise: "*I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more*" ([Jeremiah 31:34](#)). There was forgiveness for sins during the old covenant - but only through the temple sacrifices which anticipated the coming of Christ, the Lamb of God. In the old covenant there was need for a never ending, constant round of sacrifices and offerings through the temple ritual.

Forgiveness was offered, but sin was never fully dealt with. A final atonement was prefigured in the annual Day of Atonement, but it was not realized until the Christ bowed his head, cried out "It is Finished" ([John 19:30](#)), and died on Calvary's cross.

At that moment the veil in the temple was torn ([Matthew 27:51](#)). The torn veil signified an end to that whole system. There was no longer a need for the sacrificial lambs to be slain. The Lamb of God had come! Sin was dealt with in the person of Christ.

Christ was sacrificed once for all, dealing conclusively and finally with sins. If you are in Christ, if you have received that salvation that has been purchased for all and offered as a free gift based on God's grace alone, then you are a recipient of the blessing of the new covenant and your sins are forgiven *and remembered no more!*

The New Testament teaches that believers in Christ have already been judged in Christ at the cross. You don't have to worry about a final judgment for salvation and how you'll fair. Only *un*believers have that worry - and rightly so. Believers have passed from death into life and will not enter into a salvation judgment ([John 5:24](#)).

*"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."
([Romans 8:1](#))*

That is the New Covenant promise!

Now again, the new covenant was not *new* for God. It was always his intent and plan since the Garden of Eden. God gave the promise of a coming offspring who would be a Savior to Adam and Eve after they sinned, then again in his covenants with Abraham and David. All of the Old Testament pointed forward to the coming Messiah who would "*confirm a covenant*" ([Daniel 9:27](#)).

But when compared with the temporary covenant that God made with the people of Israel, the covenant is called ***new***. The old covenant (Mosaic or Sinaitic covenant) was a law-oriented covenant given to teach humanity about God's basic boundaries, the depravity of the human heart, the inability of self-righteousness and the need for a Savior and grace. It was temporary and inferior, but necessary to prepare humanity for the full glory of the gospel.

The Old and New Covenants compared

There is a classic New Testament passage that is important to look at regarding this point because of the way it contrasts and compares these two covenants.

Writing to the Christians in the church at Corinth, Paul begins by reminding them that as believers they are each one witnesses for Christ:

"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.... 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." ([2 Corinthians 3:3,6](#))

The apostle then goes on to compare and contrast the two covenants:

"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! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison

with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!" ([2 Corinthians 3:7-11](#))

The old covenant had "glory." Moses came into the presence of God and spoke with him. He even saw a glimpse of God's backside. When he came down off the mountain his face was glowing from that encounter. But it faded. In fact, Moses put a veil over his face - not just because it was so bright, but because he didn't want people to see it fading (that's what [v. 13](#) says). The old covenant had glory, but it was a glory that faded.

Comparing the old and new covenant is like comparing the moon and the sun. One only reflects and fades. The other burns with radiant intensity, ever increasing in glory.

What was the Old Covenant?

The text says that the old covenant was "*engraved in letters on stone*" ([2 Corinthians 3:7](#)).

What was "engraved in letters on stone?" Only one thing was ever engraved in letters on stone -- the Law, the Ten Commandments.

In order to fully understand what the Bible teaches about the new covenant we need to understand what is taught about the old. The old covenant was the Ten Commandments. But it involved more than just the Ten Commandments, for they were just a summary. Many more laws and regulations were given to *interpret* and *explain* and *expand* "The Ten." But the Ten Commandments are specifically and repeatedly called "the covenant" in Scripture. That is why the old covenant is said to have been "*engraved in letters on stone*" ([2 Corinthians 3:7](#)).

Let me give you a couple of examples:

"Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights.... And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant - the Ten Commandments." ([Exodus 34:28](#))

This was when Moses met God at the top of Mount Sinai, before he came down with his face shining. That verse clearly says that the Ten Commandments were the "*words of the covenant.*"

Here is another text that says the same thing:

"He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets." ([Deuteronomy 4:13](#))

Here Moses reminds the people of what had happened at Sinai, and reminds them that the covenant *is* the Ten Commandments which were written on stone.

In the next verse, he reminds them also that God gave additional laws besides the laws on stone. Moses wrote them down in a book:

*"And the Lord directed me at that time to teach you the decrees and laws you are to follow in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess."
([Deuteronomy 4:14](#))*

The Ten Commandment Law was put in the ark in the Most Holy Place of the Temple. Because it contained the Law - which was the covenant - it was called "the Ark of the Covenant." Moses said:

"The Lord wrote on these tablets... the Ten Commandments he had proclaimed to you on the mountain... and the Lord gave them to me. Then I came back down the mountain and put the tablets in the ark I had made, as the Lord commanded me.... At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord." ([Deuteronomy 10:4,5,8](#))

The Ark of the Covenant was called the Ark "of the Covenant" because it was the box or container for the Ten Commandments. The old covenant comprised more than just the Ten Commandments, though. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy contain additional laws that God gave Moses as a part of the covenant. These laws spelled out the details of the sacrificial system and provided application and interpretation of the Ten Commandments.

Let me give you a few examples of how the Ten Commandments were expanded by the other laws which were intended to interpret, explain, and apply the Ten Commandments:

1. No Other Gods

Don't sacrifice to another god ([Exodus 22:20](#))

Don't worship any other god ([Exodus 34:14](#))

I am the Lord your God ([Leviticus 20:24](#))

Fear the Lord your God ([Deuteronomy 10:12](#))

2. Do Not Worship Idols

Don't make idols ([Leviticus 26:1](#))

Idol worshippers will never be forgiven ([Deuteronomy 29:17-21](#))

Idol worship makes God angry ([Deuteronomy 32:21](#))

Don't do it ([Leviticus 19:4](#))

3. Do Not Profane God's Name

Do not profane My holy name ([Leviticus 22:32](#))

Punishment of death for profaning ([Leviticus 24:16](#))

Punishment of death for blaspheming God's name with a curse ([Leviticus 24:10-14](#))

4. Remember The Sabbath

A sign between God and Israel ([Exodus 31:13](#))

A lasting covenant with Israel ([Exodus 31:16](#))

Punishment of death for violators ([Exodus 31:14](#))

Don't kindle a fire on ([Exodus 35:3](#))

Keep from evening to evening ([Leviticus 23:32](#))

5. Honor Father and Mother

Death penalty for cursing parents ([Exodus 21:17](#))

Death penalty for hitting father ([Exodus 21:15](#))

Respect father and mother ([Leviticus 19:3](#))

Don't be rebellious to parents ([Deuteronomy 21:18-21](#))

6. Do Not Kill

Killed in a quarrel and fistfight ([Exodus 21:18](#))

Killed by beating with a rod ([Exodus 21:20](#))

Killed by an ox, first offense ([Exodus 21:28](#))

Killed by an ox, several offenses ([Exodus 21:29](#))

7. Do Not Commit Adultery

With another man's wife ([Leviticus 20:10](#))

With father's wife ([Leviticus 20:11](#))

With daughter-in-law ([Leviticus 20:12](#))

Many other situations ([Leviticus 18:16-30](#))

8. Do Not Steal

Punishment for stealing an ox ([Exodus 22:1](#))

Thief caught breaking in ([Exodus 22:2-4](#))

Animal grazing in neighbor's field ([Exodus 22:5](#))

Illegal possession of property ([Exodus 22:9](#))

9. Do Not Bear False Witness

Penalty for lying and swearing falsely ([Leviticus 6:3-8](#))

Thoughtless oaths are sinful ([Leviticus 5:4](#))

Don't give a false report ([Exodus 23:1](#))

Punishment for a false witness ([Deuteronomy 19:18-21](#))

10. Do Not Covet

Don't covet gold on destroyed idols ([Deuteronomy 7:25](#))

Don't covet the land ([Exodus 34:24](#))

I've just given you that list as some examples of how the other laws of the covenant were an expanded version of the Ten Commandments. To show the relationship of the expanded version to the Ten Commandments, instructions were given to place the book of the law in a receptacle on the side of the ark.

"When Moses finished writing in a book the words of the law from beginning to end, he gave this command to the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord: 'Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God. There it will remain as a witness against you.'" ([Deuteronomy 31:24-26](#))

Let's review. So far in defining the old covenant we have seen that the Ten Commandments were the covenant. They were called:

- The "two tablets of the Testimony" ([Exodus 31:18](#))
- The "words of the covenant - the Ten Commandments" ([Exodus 34:28](#))
- The "Testimony" ([Exodus 40:20](#))
- The "covenant of the Lord" ([1 Kings 8:8,9,21](#))

The "other laws" in the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy were called:

- The "book of the covenant" ([Exodus 24:7](#))
- The "book of the law" ([Deuteronomy 31:26](#))

What you need to see is that the old covenant was based on the Law and the people's promise to obey it - the whole Law - the Ten Commandments along with all of the interpretations and expansions.

The Law was a *good* law. There was nothing wrong with it. It certainly helped define boundaries of acceptable and non-acceptable behavior. It was based on God's universal and eternal law of love. But there was a problem.

- The law can point out sin, but it is powerless to change the heart.
- The law can arouse sin by defining it ([Romans 7:7,11](#)), but it can't give power for obedience.
- It can call for holiness, but it can't produce holiness.

- It can show the need for a Savior, but it can't save.

The old covenant demonstrated once and for all that: *The best people (God's chosen), with the best method (the Law), and the best motives (to be right with God)* - could only achieve bondage, condemnation and death. Let that be a lesson for anyone who would seek to be justified through the law.

If a person was going to save himself or herself, the law is the best route. But no one can do it! The law demands perfect obedience.

With that lesson fully displayed, Christ came as a new covenant and did for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Let these words burn into your psyche:

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."
[\(Romans 8:1-4\)](#)

Now let's go back to [2 Corinthians 3](#). It helps to get a visual image of the comparisons and contrasts between the old and new covenants:

Old Covenant

on tablets of stone v. 3
 of the letter v. 6
 the letter kills v. 6
 ministry that brought death v. 7
 came with glory v. 7
 ministry of condemnation v. 9
 fading glory v. 11
 veil remains unlifted v. 14
 bondage (implied)
 unable to change the heart (implied)

New Covenant

on human hearts v. 3
 of the Spirit v. 6
 the Spirit gives life v. 6
 ministry of the Spirit v. 8
 much greater glory v. 11
 ministry of righteousness v. 9
 ever-increasing glory v. 18
 in Christ it is taken away v. 14
 freedom v. 17
 being transformed v. 18

I encourage you to study carefully this whole chapter in your own Bible. See what it says for yourself. We read through [verse 11](#) earlier. Let's continue reading now with [verse 12](#):

"Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. 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. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away." [\(2 Corinthians 3:12-16\)](#)

Before we read the last two verses of the chapter, think about what you just read. Notice first that reading Moses is equated with reading the *old covenant*. They are one and the same. Now notice that a *veil*

remains over anyone's mind that tries to read the old covenant without the benefit of the New Testament interpretation.

If you are a new Christian you should read the Bible, but don't start with Genesis. A lot of people start reading the Bible for the first time and cruise along pretty good until they reach the end of Exodus. By the time they hit Leviticus they often get bogged down and quit.

If you are a new Christian, start with the New Testament. Read the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) which tell the story of Jesus. Then read the Epistles (the rest of the New Testament) that interpret and apply the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is important to have that foundation in order to read the Old Testament with *new covenant eyes*.

There is a veil covering your heart and mind if you are living in the old covenant. It can only be removed through the Gospel!

Only through the Gospel, standing on *this* side of the cross, with the full radiance and illumination of the cross, can the Old Testament be understood properly. The veil is taken away through Christ.

Two extremes

A word of caution is in order here. People love to go to extremes. This area is no exception. Some say that since the Old Testament contains the old covenant which has passed away, *so should the Old Testament*. We do not need it anymore. Do not even read it.

That is an unhealthy and unwise extreme. *All* Scripture is given by God ([2 Timothy 3:16](#)). The Old Testament is the foundation and backdrop for the New Testament. The Old Testament is necessary for complete understanding and the record of salvation history.

The other extreme is to consider the Old Testament equal in every way to the New Testament. It is a simplistic approach that says, "I don't care whether it is Old Testament or New Testament, whatever God says is good enough for me."

That is the other *unhealthy* extreme. In practice, every Christian *must* pick and choose among old covenant laws.

- What Christian today is willing to stone a person to death for breaking the Sabbath?
- What married Christian man is willing to take his brother's wife and raise up children for a deceased brother? (What married Christian woman would let her husband fulfill that law?)
- Who avoids mixing two fabrics in the clothes they wear?
- Who hangs tassels on the four corners of their garments?
- Who insists that the edges of their beard go untrimmed?

Those are all old covenant laws and there are countless more that even the most sincere adherents of Old Testament regulations break themselves.

To use the Bible responsibly, Christians must read the Old Testament through the filter of the New Testament. The New Testament contains God's full revelation in Christ. It turns the light on! It removes the veil. To interpret Scripture responsibly, Christians must allow the more complete revelation of the new covenant to interpret, modify or transform old covenant statements in the light of the fulfillment in Christ.

If you just accept every old covenant statement at face value without running it through the filter of the gospel revealed in the New Testament, then you will be looking through a veil. That's what the text says.

Let me state this principle another way. Christians should not accept an old covenant law or practice on the basis of the statement itself. Every old covenant law and statement must be examined from a new covenant perspective.

Now my guess is that someone is reading this and thinking: "Don't tell people the Ten Commandments were a part of the old covenant. They'll go right out and steal, kill and commit adultery. You're just telling us that since we're under grace we can go out and sin!"

Am I saying that? Of course not! No sincere follower of Christ teaches or believes that. That's not the way the Spirit operates in our lives.

Read the last two verses of [2 Corinthians 3](#):

"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." ([2 Corinthians 3:17-18](#))

When we move out of the bondage and condemnation of being law-oriented, trying to receive or achieve merit with God through our actions, there is *freedom*, glorious freedom. It is freedom from guilt and slavery. It is not freedom to sin. In fact, the more we behold him, the more we are changed into his likeness. Look again at what that last verse says: "*We...are being transformed into his likeness.*"

New Covenant Christians live God-honoring lives, not in order to be saved, but because they *are* saved. As they serve the Lord, they are working *from* victory, not *toward* victory -- motivated by the love of Christ! That's the kind of Christian I want to be. How about you?