

Introduction

Up to this point in the chapter we have learned about letters of commendation and about God's sufficiency. The apostle Paul did not need a letter of introduction to the church or from them, for they themselves were his letter, written by Christ. That he was privileged to minister this "letter" did not mean, however, that he did this all of himself. He was not self-qualified for the ministry, or for anything else for that matter. God gave him the ability to do the work of the ministry.

Verses 3 and 6 begin to turn our attention from these matters to the character of the New Testament ministry of the gospel. They have already made a contrast between ink/stone and Spirit/heart (v. 3), as well as a contrast between letter/kills and Spirit/gives life (v. 6). We will see now a direct head-to-head comparison of the Law and the Gospel of God's grace. One area where we might expect a comparison to be made is between the main "ministers" of each dispensation. Moses was of the first; Jesus Christ of the second. For instance, we know that the law came by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ (John 1:17). The glory of Christ (John 1:14) was visible all the time in his incarnation. But such a comparison is not made in this text (see Hebrews for that particular information). Instead, a comparison of the systems themselves is undertaken in several points.

A. More Glory for the Ministry of the Spirit than the Ministry of Death, v. 7-8**1. The Ministry of Death**

The ministry of death means that the system tended toward death, because everyone who did not keep all of the law was cursed (Gal. 3:10). Further, the law makes no provision for its own keeping. Regeneration and an internal work of the Spirit are required to give someone a heart to keep God's commandments (Deut. 5:29).

2. The Written Law

The phrase "written and engraved on stones" can be translated as "engraved in letters upon stone." This refers specifically to the kernel or foundation around which the rest of the Law was built, namely, the Ten Commandments.

3. The Glory

What does glory mean? Honor, splendor, resplendence (shining brightly, dazzling), bright, shining, radiant. It means to make something have splendid greatness. A simple way to think of it is that it means "shiny." Like that shiny new whatever you purchased.

4. The Exodus 34 Account of the Giving of the Law

The whole last half of verse 7 comes from Ex. 34:1-7 (the revelation of God), and 29-35. See also Acts 7:35 regarding the work of angels in the giving of the Law. See also Heb. 12:18-21. The Law certainly had glory in that respect. See also Ex. 33:11 and Num. 12:6-8 for the close fellowship that Moses had with God.

The radiance of Moses' face was too bright to look steadily at it (like the brightness of the Sun), though it was fading bit by bit. It does not say this specifically in the Exodus 34 passage, but the Holy Spirit through Paul tells us that the glory faded and was apparently "recharged" every time that Moses went in to talk to the LORD. It dimmed after awhile.

What is the connection between the fading or "passing away" glory on Moses face (v. 7, 13) and glory of the old covenant (v. 11)? This fading glory typified the law, that is, the temporary nature of the law.

But the glory itself (not the fading aspect of it) was typical of the splendor of that same system. The children of Israel could not look steadily at Moses' face. The point is that the radiance of his face, as a reflection of the glory of the Lord and the law given to him, was so great that you couldn't look at it but for a moment without dazzling your eyes.

Note that in verse 8 the Bible does not simply say "[then] the ministry of the Spirit is more glorious." Rather, it makes the statement in the form of a question—"how could it not be more glorious?"—as if no one should make a mistake and think the law still has great glory when set side-by-side next to the dispensation of grace.

Notice the if-then structure of verses 7-8 and verse 9. If we admit the if-half, then we have to admit the then-half. And the if is a first class condition, assumed true for the sake of the argument—"if the ministry of death...was glorious (and it was)...if the ministry of condemnation had glory (and it did)."

B. More Glory for the Ministry of Righteousness than the Ministry of Condemnation, v. 9

Verse 9 begins with an explanatory "for", giving the reason why the new has more glory than the old. It is precisely because of their respective outcomes—one for condemnation and death, the other for righteousness and Spiritual life.

Note that condemnation (a declaration of guilt) and justification (a declaration of righteousness) are opposites of each other (Deut. 25:1, 1 Kings 8:32). This is important to note because justification does not make one righteous in and of themselves.

The Law, since it has the character of law, cannot do anything other than give a sentence on someone whether guilty or innocent. And since we know that none can keep the law in all its points, the sentence always comes down "guilty!" Understanding this will deliver you from the common fallacy that says "more law will solve society's problems."

The ministry of the Spirit is called a ministry of righteousness, that is, characterized by and resulting in righteousness. This starts with the initial work of salvation in the gospel, in which is revealed the righteousness of God (Rom. 1:17). This righteousness is available to us by faith, from God, not ourselves (Php. 3:9). But also the Holy Spirit continues to work in us to produce righteousness in our character (1 John 3:7).

C. So Much Glory Throws the Old Ministry into a Shadow, v. 10

Relatively speaking, the Old Covenant has no glory compared to the New. The new so far outshines the old that the old seems dim and worn out, fit for the scrap heap. In fact Hebrews says it would vanish away (Heb. 8:13). This is the force of the "because" – what had glory did not really have glory *because* it is relatively unglorious. So the comparison is extended here – not just that there was more glory in the Gospel, but that there was so much more that the old seemed not really to have any at all. One helpful illustration is that of the moon and the sun—when the sun comes out, the moon does not look so bright.

The shine on the Law faded in comparison to the ever-shining never-dulling finish of the new dispensation of God's grace.

D. More Glory for the Remaining Ministry than the Passing Ministry, v. 11

Here we have a statement that ties together all of the previous points. Again we have a comparison—if the passing was glorious, then the permanent is much better. For instance, if the tabernacle in the wilderness was glorious (and it was), then the permanent temple facility was much more glorious. In this case, a fixed temple structure could have a lot more attention paid to its details. It could be larger, better. The Law was similarly designed as a tutor to bring Israel to Christ, to make them to understand their inability apart from God. The permanent system that replaced it is far better, more "sturdy" and will not be broken.

The idea of "remains" is used to say that we have a hope today that will not pass away—we need not worry about our system becoming outmoded, because it is based on the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. We need not look beyond the Gospel to see our hope for eternity.

Conclusion

The point of what we have been saying is that the ministry of the gospel is splendid in the extreme. It requires God's sufficiency to be involved in it, but it is a great privilege. At the same time, it provides an everlasting hope that will not fade away because it is built on the finished work of Christ, not the blood of bulls and goats which cannot permanently deal with sin.