

## Reading Scripture with Grace-Filled Eyes Part II

### **What's the New Covenant, Really?**

by Ben Pereira

In the last article, we discussed how our past experiences can shape our perception of God and Scripture. For many who come from a legalistic background, reading Scripture passages that emphasize commands or obedience can awaken feelings of guilt or superiority depending on their level of “performance”. The very same passages can trigger shame for those from morally-permissive backgrounds. While these groups seem like opposing ends of the spectrum, they are both experiencing symptoms of the same self-focused spirituality. This vicious cycle doesn't need to be our fate. But before we explore the relationship between ethical commands and grace, we must first define our terms and establish context for the New Covenant.

Scripture describes the New Covenant at numerous points. There is a beautiful parallel explanation in Jeremiah and 2 Corinthians. In Jeremiah 31:33-34, the LORD [Yahweh] states,

“This is the covenant...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...For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

In 2 Cor. 3:3-6, Paul draws a close connection to Jeremiah 31 when he writes:

“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.”

Notice that both passages emphasize *heart*. The New Covenant provides something that the Old Covenant never could: a fundamental change of motivation — why we relate to God, others, and ourselves the way we do. The Old Covenant Law couldn't produce that fundamental change but instead produced legalism in our hearts. It is important to understand that while the Law and legalism are often discussed in the same context, the Old Covenant was never intended to be a

system of legalism. God has always interacted with fallen humanity in the context of grace (Deut. 7:7-8). Paul explicitly states: “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.” (Rom. 7:12) **Legalism is the result of unchanged hearts interacting with God’s standards.** God’s law is not the problem, our hearts are. Therefore, the New Covenant solves the root problem by changing our hearts. This change is not accomplished with behavior *modification* but with personal *transformation*; you are a different person because the Holy Spirit has taken ownership of your body, soul, and spirit. We now relate to God in Christ’s righteousness and life (Rom. 8:3-4); not our attempts (or failures) at meeting a certain standard. The New Covenant provides our hearts the only antidote for the vicious cycles of self-centeredness. It moves the object of our heart’s affection away from ourselves and back to God, the one for whom we were created.

In his book, *The Freedom of the Will*, Jonathan Edwards observes that, “the will is always determined by the strongest motivation.”<sup>1</sup> What we love the most determines our choices.<sup>2</sup> Merely changing external behavior doesn’t address the shame, wounds, or lusts that cause us to run from God. In our natural state, we run from the light because we fear God’s judgement and want to protect ourselves (Jn. 3:20). Because Jesus took that fear and judgment on our behalf, the New Covenant allows us to come to God in the midst of our sin and places us in a grace-filled relationship with God. **Because of grace, our motivation has been moved from fear or self-gratification to a place where we can respond to God in love.** For the legalist, this removes the condemnation of a life constantly on trial before God, others, and themselves. Jesus’ spotless

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards, Jonathan. (1754) *The Freedom of the Will* Christian Classics Ethereal Library Retrieved from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/will.pdf> (pg. 11)

<sup>2</sup> Keller, T. (2019, July 26). A Broken Wall [Audio blog post]. Retrieved July 27, 2019, from Gospel In Life Podcast

record is now theirs to own. For those who struggle with shame, they no longer need to hide. Jesus has borne their sin and shame; destroying them in his death and resurrection.

It is equally important to understand that while the basis of the New Covenant is a distinct change of relationship to God, it is not the removal of ethical responsibility. In the letters to the Corinthians, Paul addressed this, writing to a church struggling to live out their identity in Christ. Factions, sexual immorality, and class warfare were ripping them apart. Paul's reaction wasn't, "Don't worry about behavior. You are in the New Covenant, it's all about grace!" Quite the contrary, Paul penned a forceful reminder to the Corinthians that their behavior was inconsistent with their identity in Christ and warns them of the consequences of that inconsistency.<sup>3</sup>

To Paul, the grace offered in Christ via the New Covenant does not excuse sin or apathy (Rom. 6). Rather, **grace provides the avenue for freedom from sin**. It's sin, not commitment to righteous action, that enslaves us. When we try to manipulate our relationship with God through righteous behavior, legalism and hypocrisy are always produced. **The New Covenant provides the proper power and motivation those righteous actions**. Passages like Ephesians 5:1-7, in which Paul commands the Ephesians to adjust their actions, must be understood in the context of the next verse which states, "For you *were* once darkness, but now you *are* light in the Lord. Live as children of light!" (emphasis mine). The New Covenant always frames ethical behavior as a result of being changed in Christ, not as a prerequisite for it. It is in that context that obedience shifts from obligation to an expression of our loving relationship with God. Below are a few questions that you can ask yourself or discuss with a friend to process through what the New Covenant means to you:

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<sup>3</sup> Hawthorne, G. F., Martin, R. P., & Reid, D. G. (2015). *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. pg. 165.

*Question #1: Think through major decisions you have made in your life. What motivated those decisions? How do those decisions reflect what you value the most?*

*Question #2: How does being an infinitely loved and accepted child of God change how and why a person interacts with God? Do your interactions with God reflect that reality?*