

2 Corinthians 3

Written by K B Napier
Monday, 02 January 2017 09:20

“...with open face...”

I received correspondence from an immature Christian who had been told by her friends that she must observe Hebrew rites and feasts. The church she attended – and there are many like it – taught that Christians must keep a variety of Old Testament celebrations. Was this right, she asked? My answer was a simple “No”.

At the other end of the weird spectrum of sectarian ‘Christian’ life, we have churches that claim the Old Testament is defunct, because it has been ‘done away with’. This is indeed what Paul is saying in this chapter...”...the old testament; which (vail) is done away in Christ.”

But, wait, look again at the real meaning of this text! It does *not* mean we can ignore the text of the Old Testament. The ‘Old Testament’ referred to by Paul is not the collected writings of the Hebraic half of our Bibles. He is talking about the promise made to the Jews, that involved them in sacrifices and rites and the blindness they brought. Paul is saying that the first promise and its rites with their blindness have been done away with, not the book we call the ‘Old Testament’. Do not be confused, for the Old Testament book is essential to our fuller understanding of God and His word. It is the beginning of His word to us and cannot be ignored.

The essence of this current text is that Jewish customs and rites have no place in the Christian life, because God no longer wishes us to pursue the demands and actions made necessary by His promises to the Jews before Christ. Instead, Christ came and completed all the requirements for salvation that earlier rites and sacrifices merely pointed to. When He died and rose again, everything God demanded from us was fulfilled and completed, in Him. For this reason we no longer sacrifice, but obey the Saviour/Messiah. If He fulfilled everything, then there is nothing else to fulfil.

Christ moved us onward. Where before men had to perform rites and sacrifices, today we obey in our hearts and carry our obedience out in our minds and lives, as required by Christ. There is no longer a demand that we sacrifice animals or continue in Hebrew festivals.

When churches go back to these rites, festivals and sacrifices, they are effectively rejecting and denying the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. They are, then, committing blasphemy. They are adding the teachings of men to God’s word! In many ways, they are akin to Roman

2 Corinthians 3

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Catholics, whose religion is one of the most virulent evils on this earth, and whose demands on men are vile and unscriptural.

Anyone can mimic righteousness outwardly, but none can mimic righteousness of the heart, which *must* express itself not just in outward show, but also in mind and word. The true Christian position is far superior to that of the Judaistic way, and this is taught by Paul in the present chapter. It is of faith, not works. No man can now please God by copying the Jewish religious life made obsolete by Christ Himself! We now have a true freedom in Christ that was impossible under the terms of the law. Why return to what is no longer alive? Why revive what Christ made of no effect? Why rely on things that cannot save?

Verses 1-3

1.

“Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you?”

2.

Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men:

3.

Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.”

Do we need, yet again, to obtain letters of approval to come to you, as we did on the first occasion, asks Paul? Or, do we now need, after so much work amongst you, to get you to write us letters of introduction to others? Paul tells them he needs no commendations, as one who is unproved – his commendation is the church at Corinth! They are living proof, or ‘letters written in the hearts’, of the apostles, open for all to see.

This must be remembered by Christians; we are all products of pastors and preachers, mature Christians and many other influences. When we act or speak, our fame or infamy spreads to

2 Corinthians 3

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those who we were once subject to. For good or ill they share whatever we get up to, whether or not they wish to! If a member of my own small church does something bad or dubious, then all of us will share the rumours and charges, even if we were unaware of what was happening. We are 'epistles in the hearts' of each other and are not free to do as we wish, because what we do and say is known to all men and affects us all.

It is obvious to everyone, says Paul, that you are the result and evidence of the Gospel preached by himself and others. This was no mere written tale or report, but an actual and continuing testimony, prompted by the Holy Spirit. Their witness was not only in word or by third-party remembrance, but also in their everyday lives, in hearts ruled by God. The mention of tables of stone may also be a reference to the tablets of the law given by Moses, which were now overtaken and improved by the actions of Jesus Christ. *(Note that reference to what is 'fleshy' is not always to do with sin. Here it simply means something that is evident in one's life).*

Verses 4-8

1.

"And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward:

2.

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God;

3.

Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.

4.

But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away:

5.

How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?"

2 Corinthians 3

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Paul then says that he trusts God to make this fact obvious to all. He has faith in God, through Christ, because Christ is our mediator. The word 'through' is **dia**, which is the channel of an act; Christ was the One through Whom all mediation is made. It is only through Christ that a man can approach God. That is why all other religions are false... no man can reach God unless it is through Christ and His salvation, by grace (free gift) alone. It is also why Romanism, and even charismaticism, are false and godless; they both add to, or remove from, God's word concerning salvation.

The word 'God-ward' is exactly the same as for 'God', **theos**, so it means the same thing – in this text, the Supreme Deity. (The word can also mean 'a deity', but not in this context). This faith or trust in God is through Christ, partly because it is through Christ that we can be saved, and partly because that is God's order of things. Many today try to approach God without firstly going through Christ, so they are in error.

Paul says they, the apostles, are nothing in themselves; they are not worthy to be followed for their own sakes. Their only worth is 'of God'. This clears Paul of the charge often made against him, that he wanted people to follow him personally. On many occasions he said that people must follow him, insofar as he himself followed Christ. He only gave an example to follow that was gleaned from Christ. Always, Paul directed people back to Christ and thereby to God the Father.

None of us has worth except in Christ, Who is worthy in Himself, because of Who He is and what He did. The current vaunting of preachers is base and without scriptural foundation. Even if some amongst us are worthy of 'double honour', the honour is due to Christ and not to us personally. Some preachers and pastors are to be venerated, because they are faithful and teach wisely, but they recognise and teach that they, and others, owe their veneration to God. Preachers who do not do this are false and without value.

It was God Who made Paul and the apostles 'able ministers of the new testament'. This means they were fit, **hikanoo**, to preach and were given power by God to do so. They were **diakonos**, or deacons, acting on behalf of God's Church to serve it. We should realise that words such as 'deacon' and 'minister', etc., are far more fluid in their meanings than those we give to them today. We note that 'deacon' is often spoken of as a lowly position, yet Paul has no problem in using it to describe the work of himself

2 Corinthians 3

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or the other apostles. This was a sign of their humility, even though they were venerated.

They were ministers of the 'new testament'. Again, 'new testament' does not mean the written book we have now, but the spoken words and letters that were found in their day. The 'new testament' referred to the fresh promises of God, given by Christ and repeated by Paul. 'New' or **kainos**, meant that the promise was recent and superior to what went before. 'Testament', **diatheke**

, is the covenant made by God with men, an arrangement or will giving men some kind of benefit – in this case, salvation by grace alone, without works, law, or any other thing men could do to obtain it. We know this because the promises belong to God,

diatithemai

(

tithemi

meaning to ordain).

Paul was not talking about the 'letter': the words, **gramma**, written by them, or even the written law that Hebrews lived by for so long, but of the 'spirit',

pneuma

. This latter word has been misused by charismatics today to mean that scripture is inferior to new revelations supposedly given by the Spirit. This is not what Paul is saying. The 'Spirit' here refers to the 'Spirit of truth' that comes from God. That is, the power of God given by the Holy Spirit to discern and teach God's word truly. This is done verbally, but is based on God's written word.

Paul was saying that many taught the written word but did not have the Holy Spirit in their hearts. So, the 'letter' was rendered sterile in the hearers' ears. It could not give life, because it was spoken in coldness and with lack of personal knowledge of God. The truth spoken by one who knows the truth personally is always **pneuo** – it breathes as a living thing and leads to life.

If we preach the 'letter', what scripture says without God-given power within to do so, then what we say 'killeth', **apokteino**: it deprives men of spiritual life and helps to send them to hell, after destroying truth. We can see that Paul is talking about false unsaved teachers, rather than about Christians who have not been called to preach. The truth, when preached, leads to life.

Compare this text with the one about *unsaved* preachers who preached the truth, leading to salvation of some. The disciples complained to Jesus about them, but He said something quite

2 Corinthians 3

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Monday, 02 January 2017 09:20

remarkable - so long as they preached the truth, they were to be left alone, for the word of God went out by them anyway, even if they were themselves devoid of salvation!

Paul is not saying that preaching scripture is wrong, or that scripture itself is wrong. He is saying that preaching *falsity* is wrong and leads to damnation. This is because the truth is the truth, no matter who relates it.

Even so, says Paul, the law of the Jews, though written in stone tablets, was glorious, **doxa**, full of honour and praise. The written laws were fatal to all who did not obey them, for refusal to obey led to

thanatos

, the separation of soul/spirit and body at death. Thus (according to the root of *thanatos*

), all who were not saved were

thnesko

, spiritually dead. The written laws on tablets of stone were glorious, and the people could not look at Moses' face because of God's glory that shone from him. Even so, this glory was only temporary,

katargeo

, to be cast aside when Christ came and deprived of all its force.

By comparison, the glory of Christ was far greater (verse 8). It replaced the glory of the tablets of stone which could only be observed and enacted physically, with a force and power that was implanted into the heart of every believer. This, says Paul, is even more (**mallon**) glorious. The new promise or will replaced the old promise.

Verses 9-12

1.

"For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory.

2.

For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth.

2 Corinthians 3

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3.

For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious.”

The old testament was a ‘ministration of destruction’ or **katakrisis** (‘condemnation’). It was an example of goodness (**katakrisis**)
ino)
that damned all who could not live up to it, and it was good in the eyes of God. Yet, this new testament did ‘exceed in glory’, because it was superior.

In a way, muses Paul, though the old testament was itself glorious, it was not glorious at all when compared to the ‘glory that excelleth’ – the new testament. Its glory far exceeded the glory that the old testament had. After all, he reasons, if what God cast off was glorious, what does that make what He *later* gave us – the new testament? It had to be even better!

Verses 12-18

1.

“Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech:

2.

And not as Moses, which put a vail over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished:

3.

But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ.

4.

But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart.

5.

2 Corinthians 3

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Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away.

6.

Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty.

7.

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

Because the new testament brings such wonderful hope, **elpis**, with its expectations of good, joy and salvation, Paul was emboldened in his speech,

parrhesia

, toward the Corinthians. His words were confident, plain and open, hiding nothing, because he knew for a fact that his teaching was true. Unlike Moses, he did not need to cover his face with a veil,

kaluma

, because the people could not look upon him. This was also a symbol, of God preventing further knowledge of something (

kalupto

). The Hebrews could not see or understand what the law was meant to do in the long-term. They could not see the ‘end’ of it. But, Paul was speaking plainly and openly, hiding nothing. Therefore, those who heard had a great advantage over the ancients, and even over the Jews of their own day.

We are told at times that God blinds even his own people. Two thousand years after Christ the Jews generally remain blinded to their sin and to the remedy, Jesus Christ. The Jews continue to read their old promise or will, even though God abandoned and abolished it long ago. They are like the dead teaching the dead and believing in death.

The text tells us the Jews’ minds were blinded. Their mental perceptions, **noema**, were hampered and twisted, so they could not think clearly,

noieo

, about Christ’s preaching or purposes. Thus, as Christ told them, they were the blind leading the blind. The veil, then, stayed in place. The Jews read and re-read their old testament words,

2 Corinthians 3

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but they meant nothing, for they ignored and rejected the Messiah Who removed the veil and mystery concerning salvation. Paul said this blindness was evident even in his day, but it still continues, along with God's anger and turning-away from them. This explains the continual struggle Jews have had since the sacking of Jerusalem, and the awful trials they have had to endure, such as the holocaust.

Even so, Paul says that if Jews turn away from their rejection and embrace the Christ, their blindness will be removed. One day, says prophecy, the veil will be taken from their eyes and many will be saved under the terms of the new testament. Many think that being a Jew means automatic salvation, even if he is not saved by new testament preaching. This is an error and places too much emphasis on the fact that Israel remains God's chosen nation. Indeed, it leads to the error of Zionism, which accepts all Jews as they are and not as a people lost and bound for hell unless they are saved.

The One Who can lead them away from their sin and blindness is the Holy Spirit of God, alluded to previously. Wherever the Spirit is there is Truth, because God IS Truth. Where Truth is, there is salvation and liberty, **eleutheria**, freedom to live as God demands and to choose what we wish within the boundaries of His commands. Those who are saved are therefore

eleutheros

– free men and women, no longer slaves to Satan but willing servants of God, free of the law and subject to Christ, Who fulfilled the law.

It is this freedom that many Christians do not grasp, as they muddle around in this life bound to their sins and errors. They cannot see that Christ gives them complete freedom within the boundaries of righteousness, a freedom that far exceeds any freedom they thought they had under Satan! Under Satan all they could do was sin!

Now, with 'open face' we can see the glory of the Lord. The veil is no longer in place, so we can see and understand what was once a mystery to the unsaved Jews. 'Open' in this text is **anakal upto**

meaning to have the veil removed and to reverse the effects of secrecy. By 'face' is meant

prosopon

, that part of us that sees and understands, our inward beliefs and feelings. Thus, we can now see what was once hidden. We can see the glory of Christ as if we were looking at ourselves in a mirror. That is, we see in the mirror our own reflections as saved beings, and by seeing our salvation we also see Christ... we are "changed into the same image from glory to glory" by the Holy Spirit and by His Truth.

2 Corinthians 3

Written by K B Napier
Monday, 02 January 2017 09:20

It is a heresy today that says we are 'little gods'. God does not say we are gods. He says our image has changed, so that we are *morally* like Him, **eikon**. We can enjoy many of Christ's attributes but we do not thereby become gods ourselves. In this way, we retrieve what the first Adam lost and personally lose the curse placed upon all mankind.

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