

2 Corinthians 3 - Let's Make a New Deal

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We are all familiar with the long running TV show "Let's Make a Deal". The host gives you a good deal that has good value, but later offers you a NEW DEAL. You can choose to make a new deal behind a curtain. Some people like the Old Deal so they keep it, even though they are told there is a better deal behind one of the curtains. Since there seems to be a risk involved (a sense of loss), they are tempted to stay with the Old Deal because they would have to give up the Old Deal to get the NEW DEAL. What is so tempting about the Old Deal? They have it, they can see it, feel it, and own it. In the Bible, God gave Israel the Old Deal, which we call the Old Testament or Old Covenant. Testaments or covenants are contracts or deals. The Old Deal was basically that God gave His perfect holy moral standard to them to keep. If they kept it, they would be blessed in every way and be God's special mediators to the world. The problem with the Old Deal was that we are all flawed people and unable to keep God's perfect holy standard. The old deal God made with them was conditional on obedience, and the penalty for breaking the covenant was death.

In the history of the nation of Israel, God's Law was neglected, forgotten, and forsaken, therefore God sent prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah with a bad news—good news message. The bad news was that if they didn't repent, God would send nations with big armies to destroy their cities and carry the people into captivity. The good news was that in the future God would send the Messiah with a NEW DEAL. In Jeremiah 31:31-34, God promised to make a New Covenant with His people that would be much better than the Old Covenant of Law. The New Deal would supplant the Old Deal. In the New Deal God would change their hearts and enable them to keep the Law. In Ezekiel 36:26, God said that in the New Deal He would "give you a new heart and put My Spirit within you and enable you to walk in my statutes". The New Testament authors tell us that this New Deal is a spiritual birth, and God provides His Spirit to change us from the inside out, thus giving us a new heart for God's holy standard. What we couldn't do for ourselves, God has done for us. At the same time, the adversary of God is offering not only Israel, but the whole world something akin to the Old Deal, which is "do it yourself religion" based on self will and self reliance. In Judaism they are to keep the traditions related to the Mosaic Law. In Islam they have to keep the Five Pillars of Faith formula, and in Buddhism they believe in keeping the Eight Fold Path. Whatever the worldly religion is, it depends on the human being's self-reliance to keep it. The adversary of God appeals to our pride and independence in believing we can actually live up to the holy righteous standard of God by our own efforts. We must choose the New Curtain that God is offering because behind it is the atoning work of Christ and the life changing ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Jesus all reveal to us that there are five major problems of the Old Covenant deal: 1. The laws are written on external tablets or paper when it needs to be an internal heartfelt desire to obey, 2. The Old Covenant needed teachers to teach the letter of the law, when it is the spirit of the law we need, 3. The Old Deal requires human priests or mediators, but being human they were selfish and exploited people. 4. The Old Covenant failed to remove sin, as it was designed to only cover it temporarily. Man's need for forgiveness was incomplete. 5. The Old Covenant was conditional and had strings attached and they couldn't keep it so they received the consequences for disobedience. We can read Jeremiah 31:31-34 and see that the New Covenant solved all of these weaknesses. The author of Hebrews put it well, "Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant with better promises" (Heb.8:6), and also "He having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time ...for by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified (believers)" (Heb.10:12-14).

2 Corinthians 2:14- 3:6, Who is Adequate for These Things?

In 2 Cor. 2:14-16, Paul describes his ministry using the imagery of a Roman victory parade. When a Roman general won a war, they had a parade through Rome. A band would march down the main street followed by soldiers, Senators, wagons with the spoils of war, and then captives in chains followed by pagan priests swinging their censers of burning incense, and lastly the Roman general. To the victors the incense was the sweet smell of victory, but to the defeated it was the stench of death. The very same smell had two different responses. Paul was saying that his ministry also had the same opposing responses. To those who were being saved it was the sweet smell of life in Christ their Savior; but to unbelievers the Gospel has the smell of condemnation and death. In v.16 Paul in amazement said, "Who is adequate for these things?" Who can forgive people and give them eternal life, or condemn them for their unbelief? Not Paul, but he praises God that the Lord used Paul (and us) to be His ambassadors to deliver the message. Paul's confidence was in the Gospel message and the power of God to convict people of the truth, as opposed to his critics in Corinth whose confidence was in their own oratory skills. In 2 Cor. 3:5-6, Paul repeated "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God."

Contrast between the Old and New Covenant, 2 Cor. 3:6-18

Paul and his disciples were servants of the New Covenant that is imprinted on people's hearts, but the Old Covenant consisted of external laws written on stone tablets. When Israel failed to keep the laws, it brought about death, but the New Cov. of grace brings about forgiveness and eternal life. The false teachers in Corinth were trying to persuade the church that the Old Covenant was still in place, therefore Paul used the imagery of Exodus 34:29-33 to prove the superiority of the New Covenant. Moses went up on Mt. Sinai and received the tablets in which God had written the Law. He saw and was exposed to the intensity of the radiant glory of God so that Moses' face radiated God's glory. The fear of God filled the people so Moses wore a veil so they wouldn't see the glory fading away. Paul's point was that the Old deal had some glory, but it was fading. The New Deal's glory is permanent and eternal. There was glory in the Law, which was kept in the Ark in the part of the Tabernacle called "the Holy of Holies". The glory of God rested over the Ark (box), and Israel understood that the Law was righteous and holy. Paul's argument is that as the means by which we are declared righteous, the Law failed because we could not keep it. God in His grace has replaced it with something much better that has much more glory, and is permanent.

You may then ask why God gave the holy Law that imperfect people couldn't keep. The New Testament authors explained that "for the people who place themselves under the Law (for salvation), every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God, because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in God's sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:19-20). Then again in Galatians 3:22, "The Scripture has shut up all men under sin...therefore the Law has become our teacher to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith." The perfect holy standard of God was given to reveal to us all that we couldn't live up to God's standard so we all need a Savior. Without the Old Testament we might be lost in our vain thinking that we are good people in God's eyes. When we who are recipients of the New Deal contemplate the difference between the Old and New, we see obedience to external law vs. conformity to the image of Christ. We see unkeepable Law vs. the Spirit of God using the Word of God to change us. We see bondage, guilt and hypocrisy vs. freedom in Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 3:17, Paul wrote, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty". We are free of being judged by the Law by the atoning work of Christ on the cross. The Law was given by God, and it is good, righteous, and holy; but the fault is in human nature being unable to live up to the standard of God. Without grace, we are like the kid playing baseball who hit a foul and broke a window. He forgot about it until another boy acting as his conscience said, "I saw you break that window but I won't tell if you mow our grass. The next day he had to wash the guys car, and the next day do his homework. Finally he went and confessed to his dad, who said, "Son I'm glad you confessed, I forgive you and I will pay for the window". As long as he had denied the sin, suppressed it and tried to make up for it with hard work, he was a slave to his guilt, but now forgiven he was free.

The means of salvation now in the New Deal is the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ on the cross—Jesus atoned for our sins. The way we make it ours is by receiving it by faith, belief, commitment. In the way of application, in 2 Cor. 3:18, Paul wrote that even now as we live in this world, part of the New Deal is the progressive transformation of our inner person from one degree of spiritual growth to another. The Spirit of the Lord is transforming those of us who believe into the image of Christ. The result of the ministry of the Old Deal is bondage, but the result of the New Covenant ministry is freedom in the Spirit as we obey not out of guilt, but because of new internal character. LET'S MAKE A DEAL. God has offered us a better deal behind curtain number 3, but we must step up and give up the old life and take the NEW DEAL of the grace of God.

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