

SESSION 20: A GREATER GLORY, PART ONE

2 Corinthians 3:7-11

August 31, 2025

PREFACE

Before we launch into vv7-11, it is necessary for us to clarify Paul's repeated use of "ministry" (KJVs, "ministration"; Greek *diakonia*).

A comparison is explicitly made in this passage between Moses and the Law (i.e., old Mosaic covenant), and Paul and the Spirit (i.e., a new covenant in Christ).

Here is the pertinent question that we seek to answer: In this extended passage (vv7-18) when the apostle Paul uses the word "ministry," does he refer to the work *issuing directly from* the Law/Spirit, or does he refer to the work of Moses/himself "ministering" (preaching, teaching, administering, etc.) those respective covenants to others?

For example, we can say that the Holy Spirit ministers to believers by helping them understand Scripture; this is a direct, Spirit-to-believer work. On the other hand, a preacher or teacher ministers to believers by helping them understand Scripture; these are *made adequate for this work by the Spirit*. The first is a ministry of the Spirit, while the second is a human ministry *by means of or about* the Spirit. (And, of course we can substitute "Mosaic Covenant" for "letters engraved on stone." and "gospel" or "new covenant in Christ" for "Spirit.")

I began my study with the interpretation that the reference in the text was to the Spirit—i.e., the "ministry" was that of the Law/Spirit. Most commentators, however, especially the more recent ones, lean toward Paul referring to *his* ministry, and one of the definitions of the noun *diakonia* supports this: "the office and work of a *diakonos*, service, ministry; (a) of domestic duties...; (b) spec. of religious ministration, and the exercise of ministerial functions in the Church." Verse six also seems to support this:

who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (emphasis added)

George Guthrie points out that ultimately (and repeatedly) this extended passage from 2:14 to 4:6 is less about contrasting the two covenants than about contrasting the two associate *ministries*.

But if we make the logical (and biblical) assumption that both Moses and Paul were being faithful to their respective sources (Law/Spirit, Mosaic Covenant/Gospel), then the distinction becomes less critical. The gospel itself and the faithful teaching of the gospel are essentially synonymous: they both are delivering truth from God. Yet, because most of my betters favor the “ministry” referring to the work of Moses and Paul and the other apostles, we will work from that. ➡ Let’s begin by reading the passage.

Seifrid: The term [diakonia], in contexts such as these, signifies agency or communication on behalf of another.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:5-11.

vv7-8

But if the ministry of death, in letters having been engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, which was being brought to an end, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be even more in glory?

Last week we discussed how “the letter kills,” so we needn’t spend much time on that here. Put simply, the Law *reveals* sin, but does nothing to remove sin or lead one away from sin. The Law just assigns punishment for sin. And since it is impossible for any human being to keep the entirety of the law, it represents a “ministry of death.”

Even with that, Moses’ ministry of the Law “came with (or in) glory,” and Paul refers to the reflected glory of God seen in Moses’ face after he had spoken with Yahweh.


Read Exodus 34:29-30.

...the ministry of death...

This has to be one of the more odd word combinations in all of the Bible. But anyone who has read the Pentateuch (not to mention the subsequent historical books from Judges on) must acknowledge that the Law, the teaching and administering of the Law, and life under the Law was a continuous, nauseating cycle of punishment and death alternating with God’s grace and mercy (Psalm 78; Romans 5:20-21). Even as the Law revealed the holiness of its author it revealed the abject rebellion in the heart of man against it. And, as Mark Seifrid points out, it is all of a package with its “minister.”

Paul himself alludes to this in v15, where he writes,
But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart, (emphasis added)

That is, the apostle equates the one *administering* the Law with the Law itself.

Seifrid: The message cannot be abstracted from the form in which it is communicated. Neither can the messenger be separated from the message that he bears. The divine “emissaries” are identified with the covenants they administer: Moses is *read* and thus, according to Paul’s metonym,  is inseparable from “the letter” that brings death.

metonym: a word or phrase used as a substitute for another (e.g., use of “the White House” for “the President”).

So even as Moses bears the reflected glory of the Lord God, he also bears the stink of death from the Law which he delivers to Israel. Anything that reveals God reveals His glory. Time spent in God’s presence will leave its mark, and that mark manifested in the visage of Moses was, at least initially, frightful to the Israelites.

Yet, a careful reading of Exodus 34:29-35 reveals that as disconcerting as the holy glow was to the Israelites, Moses did not veil his face when delivering Yahweh’s word to the congregation. Only once he was finished “ministering” did he veil his face until he next went into Yahweh’s presence.

Verse 7 ends with “...which was being brought to an end.” This is a much argued phrase, hinging on how one defines the Greek *katargoumenen*. In a rare instance of the NASB letting us down, along with the original NIV), these two versions translate it “fading as/though it was.” Most modern scholars agree that “the term never means ‘fade away’ and normally carries the sense [as we see in our other versions] ‘to render powerless’ or ‘make inoperative’” (Guthrie).

From v7 through v18 Paul uses Moses’ veil as a metaphor or historical device for illustrating the effectiveness of the old covenant being drawn to a close—made inoperative—and being replaced by a new covenant in Christ of the Spirit. Here, without using the word, the use of a veil by Moses rendered inoperative the “glory of his face” for “the sons of Israel.” But beneath this imagery is the point that the veil also represents the Mosaic *covenant* being brought to an end. The old covenant served/serves a purpose, but a day will come when it will be rendered no longer “operative.”

Along with “ministry” the apostle now, in v7, begins repeating another important word: “glory.” The Greek is *doxa*, a word seldom used to refer to the glory of man. ➡ (For human or earthly glory the Greek *time* is typically used. The “glory of Moses’ face” was not his own, but the reflected glory of Yahweh. On Moses this glory is eventually “brought to an end”; Yahweh’s glory is never lost.)

The meaning of *doxa* can be a bit slippery. First, in secular Greek it means view, opinion or conjecture. Its meaning changed in the LXX ➡ to the honor brought or given to God. This hearkens back to the Hebrew *kabod* (kaw-VODE), which means, at root, weight, splendor, honor. When used of God “it does not mean God in His essential nature, but the luminous manifestation of His person, His glorious revelation of Himself” (S. Aalen in Brown). In the LXX the Hebrew *kabod* was replaced by the Greek *doxa*, hence it came to have essentially the same meaning.

Read Exodus 33:18-23.

A few times in the OT we have revelations of God’s glory (e.g., Ezekiel 1:22-28), but the radiance of His glory actually *hides* His face. The appearance of His glory invariably drives mortal man onto *his* face in worship.

In v7 Paul states that “if the ministry of death”—that is the teaching/administration of the Mosaic Covenant, and by extension, the covenant itself—“came with glory” (implied answer: yes it did). This was the glory of God mirrored on Moses’ face.

v8

...how will the ministry of the Spirit not be even more in glory?

If the affirmative is implied in v7 (and it is), then the corresponding “if that is so, then” is implied in v8. “[if that is so, then] how will the ministry of the Spirit not be even more in glory?”

The old covenant and its ministry *had* to have glory because it was all about God! God Himself, personally to Moses, spoke it into existence and wrote it on the stone tablets. The Law emphasized His utter holiness, His purity, and how the shedding of blood must atone for sin before anyone could come into His presence.

The Doxology:

“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost...”

Septuagint: Greek version of the OT. Most scholars are of the opinion that this was the OT version used by the apostle Paul.

The Law outlined in detail the righteous behavior He expected from His people Israel.

David Garland: The Law's edicts bring death to those who cannot obey them; the gospel brings life through God's Spirit who enables obedience... Paul does not discredit the Law "because of some theological inadequacy in the Law itself" but because it "can no longer be the means of preparing for the final consummation" (Hafemann). Christ's coming had inaugurated the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36, and God's people can only be made fit for the day of judgment if they are in Christ and transformed by the Spirit. *The difference between the old and new ministry is "the activity, or lack of activity, of the Holy Spirit within the human heart"* (Provence; emphasis added).

Personally, I am convinced that the majority of believers take for granted—to the point of forgetfulness—the overwhelming, overpowering, rich and abundant, yet gracious resource we have in the Holy Spirit of God each of us carry around with us.

v9

For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. ☞

abound: overflows, spilling over, to be over and above

Let's compare and summarize how the apostle characterizes the two covenants and their respective ministers.

Mosaic Covenant:

lethal (v6, "the letter kills"),
deadly, fatal (v7, "ministry of death"),
accusatory (v9, "ministry of condemnation").

a new covenant:

spiritual (v6, "of the Spirit"),
makes alive (v6, "gives life"),
even more glorious (v8, "even more in glory"),
righteous (v9, "ministry of righteousness").

George Guthrie: Moses' face shone because he had been in the presence of the Lord. Yet it was a glory suppressed (by the veil) and limited to Moses himself. By contrast, under the new covenant the presence of the Lord, through the ministry of the indwelling Spirit, is manifested in every person involved in that covenant (3:17-18). So, unlike the restricted reach of the glory of God on Moses' face, the new-covenant glory "overflows."