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The New Covenant Is the Spirit

Paul was on board a ship bound for Rome. He had appealed to the court of Caesar and was traveling as a prisoner to be tried. A tremendous storm came up. It had been cloudy for many days, and because they couldn't see the stars they got lost. As the storm worsened, they despaired. They were weeping and losing all hope of life.

But not Paul. He was singing, even though the ship was sinking.

"How can you sing?" they asked him.

Paul said, "Don't worry. Come on, have something to eat. Be of good cheer."

"How can we be of good cheer?"

"Last night I was talking with the Lord and He told me that the ship is going to sink, but we are all going to be saved. There must be an island around here, and we will be cast on it alive."

Notice, he didn't say to them, "Be of good cheer. Read Psalm 23."

No, he said, "The Lord told me that the ship will sink, and we are all going to be saved."

Paul had the latest ABC news, direct from heaven. He had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that meant that he didn't have to turn to Psalm 23 to know that he was going to be all right.

A person in whom Christ lives gets up-to-the-minute news. He sees the Lord doing wonderful things continually. He doesn't have to read the newspaper all the time to see the news of what happened yesterday. The newscaster lives within him.

I say this to illustrate a point. Actually, I have a great respect for the Bible, because everything which belongs to Jesus is always a blessing. There is a sense in which it is never old. But the Gospels are only a starting point in a relationship with Jesus, because He still is alive today. The history of His life is not yet finished.

The first time I read the whole of the New Testament I was a little boy; I think I was seven or eight years old. When I got to the last chapter of the book of Acts I was frustrated.

"Where is the rest?" I wanted to know.

The story of Acts finishes where Paul is in the house of arrest. I was disappointed with the ending. I wanted to keep on reading the rest of the story. Of course, that book will always be unfinished, because the Lord is still alive and you can't finish a book about a person who is still alive. How can you finish a biography of a living person?

So Paul says, "Too much consciousness of Christ in the flesh can be a hindrance in knowing Him today as the living person that He is."

This is a problem for us evangelical Christian people. It is hard for us to know the present-day Lord Jesus Christ because we have made an idol of the story of His 33 years on earth almost 2,000 years ago.

Now a knowledge of Christ in the flesh is good. I am not saying anything against it. And I don't think Paul was speaking against it when he said that he was no longer concerned about knowing Christ after the flesh. To know Him in the flesh is good providing you go on knowing Him.

But for Paul, he preferred to know Christ as He is. I have to say that I would prefer to miss a knowledge of Christ in the flesh rather than to miss knowing Him as He is now. Of course,

we don't need to miss one or the other; we can have both.

A knowledge of the historical Jesus is static, so it doesn't generate growth. But to know the present-day Lord, that is dynamic. You know Him, and you go on knowing Him all the more. You know Him better today than yesterday.

When I talk about knowing Him, I am not referring to knowing more of the Bible. I have seen people studying the Bible continually in seminary, but they didn't grow one bit spiritually. Others, on the other hand, did grow.

The fact that you read the Bible is not in itself a guarantee that you will grow spiritually.

There are great theologians who know the Bible can help, but it is not a guarantee. But if you know the Bible and you also know the present-day Lord Jesus Christ, the Bible can be a great help.

In the days of the primitive church, the living body of believers spread around the world. They didn't have the New Testament yet. They had to rely solely on the living Christ. They had to depend on Jesus, alone.

My concern today is that perhaps we put too much emphasis on our books about the Bible, on the written story of Jesus in the flesh. So much so that we don't need the present-day Lord.

Sometimes I think that we might as well tell Him, "Don't worry, Lord. We have all the sermons You preached when You were on earth 2,000 years ago. We can also repeat the stories of the miracles You performed. Stay in heaven. We really don't need You here."

In the book of Philippians we saw a picture of Christ in His poorest form, made of no reputation, in the form of a servant.

It is a wonderful picture, because the poverty of God is richer than man's finest achievements, the weakness of God is far stronger than man's greatest strength, and the craziest

things of God are wiser than the wisest of men. But Jesus' time on earth was still our Lord at His poorest.

In II Corinthians 5:16, Paul explains that the key to spiritual growth is to know Christ as He is now, and not as He was in the flesh. So what is He like now?

Then there is Hebrews 10:19-22, "We have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, through His flesh."

The writer is implying that the body of Jesus is a veil. I would have to agree, because that body has hidden the eternal glory of Jesus Christ.

Behind that body the eternal Immanuel, God with us, lay hidden.

Only at times did Jesus show His glory through the veil. One of those occasions was on that mount of transfiguration. As the apostles were looking at Jesus, His flesh and garments could not contain the light.

At the end of His life as He was praying alone in the garden, Jesus said, "Father, give Me again the glory that I had with You before the ages." So the flesh of Jesus was a veil in which this eternally glorious being, the creator of all things, was hidden.

To know the bearded and sandaled One was not really to know Christ. He was hidden behind that body. So the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to go through the veil of His flesh to know Him in spirit.

Of course, the writer had the Old Testament tabernacle in mind.

You remember that the tabernacle had an outer court, then the holy place inside the outer court, and then inside of the holy place was the holiest of all. The holiest lay beyond the veil of the temple. It was a very thick veil, and it was kept closed. Only the high priest got to go within it, and then but once a year. The other priests got to see the outside of the veil, but they never saw within. They ministered in the holy

place, but never in the holiest.

But when Jesus died on the cross, the Bible says that the veil of the temple rent in two.

Can you imagine the shock this would be to a priest who might have been ministering in the holy place at the time, perhaps offering frankincense to God? Suddenly, the veil is rent in two and the way into the holiest is open. The priest got to see inside the very holiest.

The real veil that was being rent that day was the body of Christ.

Jesus died for many reasons, but one of them was to finish with that veil. He died to do away with the body of flesh that had hidden His eternal being, His glorious state. So when He died on the cross, the beard and sandals came to an abrupt end. This picture of Jesus had to disappear from the view of the disciples in order to make way for the real Christ who was hidden within that body of flesh.

The author of Hebrews appeals to us to go through the holy place into the holiest—to go beyond the Christ of the Gospels and know Him in the Spirit. We are to worship Him today not in the flesh, but in spirit and in truth.

No wonder the writer had to complain to the Hebrews about their lack of spiritual growth.

They were stuck on the wrong side of the veil. He had to urge them to go on to perfection. And one of the key things they had to do in order to grow was to go through the veil.

When the veil was rent in two in the temple, the Jews quickly sewed it back together again. They closed off the holiest from view. It seems that the church also has sewn the veil back together, and once again we find ourselves on the outside of the veil.

For many years I knew the veil by heart.

The Samaritan woman, the ten lepers, blind Bartimaeus—you tell me the first word, and I'll tell you the rest. I knew it all by heart. I had been hearing the same words since birth. All of my ministry was on the outside of the veil. I was for-

ever preaching about the Samaritan woman, Zacchaeus, and the different events of Jesus' earthly ministry.

One day I saw a little hole in the veil. And I said, "Lord, how come we are still preaching about Your cursing of the fig tree? What would Your angels say if they came to a service, and they saw that the Lord of glory was still cursing a fig tree? Lord, I thank You for cursing a fig tree, but I want to begin ministering on the other side of the veil."

The reason for our lack of spiritual growth in the church is that we have sewn up the veil. Concepts and doctrines concerning the Christ who lived nearly 2,000 years ago are static. They are not alive, so they cannot produce growth; only that which is alive can give growth.

We are more historically-centered than we are Christ-centered.

We have pledged allegiance to the doctrine of a historical Jesus instead of to a living person. That is why we have so many divisions. We all claim to have the truth, but we have different doctrines, even though we don't have different Christs.

If we were Christ-centered, so that Christ would be a living person to us, the actual head of the church, we all would be one. But the head of our church is our set of rules and doctrines about the historical Jesus, so we all are divided.

When we turn to Jesus, unity comes. When a person comes to Jesus, He is the same Jesus of the Catholics, and the same Jesus of the Protestants. Christ is one, not many. But when we turn to our set of rules and doctrines, we are divided.

We have to understand the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. Paul describes the believer as an "epistle of Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone but in fleshly tables of the heart" (II Corinthians 3:3).

The old covenant is the Ten Commandments, which were engraved on tablets of stone. But the new covenant is Christ

Himself living within the heart of the believer. It is a totally different kind of covenant! The subjects of the kingdom of God are ruled not by an external law but by the internal government of the King Himself.

Paul went on to say, "Who also has made us able ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (verse 6).

What did Paul mean by the Spirit?

Many believers imagine that the Old Testament is letter and the New Testament is Spirit. Or they think that the new covenant is a more spiritual version of the old law—the law plus the Sermon on the Mount. But all of these are letter!

According to Paul, the new covenant is not a written law, either of the Old Testament or of the New Testament. It is not a spiritual interpretation of the Ten Commandments. Neither is it the Sermon on the Mount. The new covenant is not a written law at all, but it is the Spirit.

So Paul went on to explain, "Now the Lord is that Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (II Corinthians 3:17). The new covenant is an agreement God made to come and live within us personally in order to fulfill His will!

The old covenant is letter, the new covenant is Spirit.

The Lord Himself is the Spirit, and He lives within us. To be in the kingdom of God is to be joined to the King so that He rules you from within the new heart.

We can use the Gospels or any part of the New Testament in the same way people use the Old Testament. Actually, it is just the same way the Muslims use the Koran.

We read the Book, then we try to live by it. We see what our founder did, and we try to copy Him. That makes us another religion, like every other religion.

But the new covenant is not a religion!

We have a living Founder, who is alive today. He lives within us, and He in us is the law by which we live. His life is duplicated in us because we have been united with Him, made one spirit with Him (I Corinthians 6:17). That is why Paul

could say, "For me to live is Christ." Paul's life was not under his own rule, it was under the control of Christ.

The old covenant is described as a ministry of death. It was a glorious covenant because it contained many beautiful laws. But it ministered death to those who tried to keep those laws because they couldn't do it. For that reason Paul called the old covenant "the ministration of condemnation."

When Moses was given the old covenant he "put a veil over his face, that the children of Israel could not steadfastly look to the end of that which is abolished, but their minds were blinded; for until this day remains the same veil untaken away in the reading of the Old Testament; which veil is done away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. Nevertheless, when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away" (verses 13-16).

The people who lived under the covenant had a veil over their hearts.

And I have to say with sorrow, but also with hope, that for many years I too read the Bible with a thick veil on my heart. I was no better off than the people in Old Testament times because of the veil.

I saw the letter and nothing else. I didn't see the Spirit. So the letter was like a veil. I couldn't see God's intention behind the letter. I saw just the lifeless demands of the law—demands that no one has ever been able to fulfill.

Now I understand why Paul called the old covenant, condemnation and death. I tried to live by the law, and I taught others to live by it. But we always felt like failures. We could never do it! So we felt condemned, and we lived with a continual feeling of guilt.

A great many believers are terribly discouraged with trying to live the Christian life because they have the old and the new covenants mixed up. They know that under the new covenant we are not under the law, but they still try to live according to the law. When they find they can't do it, they feel

condemned.

Our churches are full of condemned Christians. A lot of us had learned to wear a mask so that we appeared to be doing all right. But behind those masks there were feelings of failure and discouragement. Many believers are in despair because they can't do what they believe they are supposed to do.

It makes me sad to see so many people trying to live the Christian life but finding that they are unable to.

But it also gives me hope. Yes, hope! Now that may seem like a paradox. But in my own life it was only when I came to the end of self-effort—when I saw that I couldn't do all the things Christians are supposed to do—that I gave up and turned to the Lord.

When a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. When we stop trying to do it ourselves and rest in Jesus, trusting Him in us to live the Christian life, we no longer are blinded by the veil. We get ourselves in focus and see clearly.

What do we see when the veil is removed?

I want you to listen very carefully to what Paul said. It is an astounding revelation! If you once can see this, your whole life will be transformed.

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai after being face-to-face with God for 40 days, his face shone. Some of God's glory may have penetrated his skin so that light actually radiated from his face! It must have been a tremendous sight to see him shine with the glory of God!

But Moses knew that the glory was going to fade away, so he put a veil over his face. Why did he cover himself with a veil? Because he understood people and their reactions, so he was very wise.

If he had come back with the glory shining from him, people would have seen him and said, "Oh, Moses is such a man of God!"

They would have practically worshiped him. But then, when the glory later faded, they would have said, "He lost the anointing!"

I don't know how long the glory lasted. Let's suppose it lasted one month. For the first week it shone brightly. How the people would have revered Moses! The second week, it shone a little less; the third week, less still; until by the end of the fourth week it was gone. What would people have thought of Moses?

We do this with our pastors.

The pastor preaches beautifully, he visits the people and shows a tremendous love for them, and the people praise him. "Oh, pastor, we are so glad to have you here...your ministry is so anointed!"

But then the pastor goes through a difficult time. His preaching doesn't seem so inspired any more. He is not as warm as he used to be when he visits with people.

"He is not like he used to be," people start to say. "He has lost his anointing!"

Now, all of this is a type of the old covenant.

When people live under the law, obeying the letter, they may go along quite well for a time. They discipline themselves and put their lives in order, so that they actually look very holy.

For instance, someone comes along to the meetings and he testifies, "Brothers and sisters, I had a tremendous experience with the Lord. He has delivered me from drugs."

This brother now looks very holy. He is doing all of the right things, so he is accepted by everyone as being very spiritual. He has the glory!

After two or three weeks, he is again in the park, smoking pot. Christ didn't deliver him from drugs at all! Actually, had we been wise we would have put a veil over his face so that nobody knew he quit smoking. The glory he had manifested was simply that of the law, and it quickly faded because the holiness of the letter is usually transitory.

After pointing to the fading glory of the law's temporary holiness, Paul goes on to show that the glory of Christ is very

different. "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (verse 18).

Instead of fading, the glory of Christ in a person's life increases from glory to glory.

The reason is simple. It is not an outer holiness that consists of conforming to what others expect of us as Christians. It is an inner holiness that springs up spontaneously, effortlessly, naturally from our core.

The old heart that was in every one of us at birth has been replaced. We have a new heart. The old man tried to be holy, but he couldn't keep it up because his heart was not holy, so the glory quickly faded. But the new man has a heart which is holy, so it is natural for him to live righteously.

The heart is our command-center, like Houston, Texas. In our old life, the one seated within us at the command-center was the god of this world. He was lord of our lives, so that sin ruled us (Ephesians 2:2; Romans 6:20).

But when our hearts turned to the Lord, Satan was ousted from his throne and his internal rule over our lives ceased. In his place, Christ Jesus came to live and reign. He is at our command-center, so that we are under the government of the kingdom of God. He gave each of us a new heart.

In the new covenant, there is no veil. We can look steadfastly at the glory of Christ without a veil to cover it. The veil was done away at the cross, so we are unveiled and He is unveiled.

Now, where do we see this unveiled glory of Christ? Where do we look for it?

Listen to Paul's words, "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord____" If you remove the veil from your face and look in a mirror, you will see the glory of the Lord! In other words, when you remove the veil of the law from your life and look into a mirror to see who you really are, you will behold the glory of Christ in your own face.

The person who is joined to the Lord under the new coven-

ant is "one spirit" with Him (I Corinthians 6:17). Two have been joined as one. So when we look at ourselves without the veil of the old covenant, we see an expression of Jesus Christ! Hallelujah!

Which Christ do we see?

The present-day Lord, the One who is no longer veiled in flesh. Not the bearded and sandaled One, but the Christ who is joined with us as one spirit and who is our life at this present moment in the 20th century.

That is why we read in Romans 5:10, "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved *by His life.*"

The death of Jesus—the shedding of His blood at Calvary—made possible our forgiveness and justification. Through it we are told that there is "no charge to answer" on the day of judgment.

But the blood of Jesus doesn't empower us to live a saved life. It is by the present-day *life* of Christ that we experience salvation as a dynamic reality.

Salvation is not a present God gives us like a gift wrapped up nicely in a package, so that we can put it on a shelf and look at it. It is not a "thing." Salvation is a life! It is to walk in a particular way, to experience a certain quality of life.

That is why Paul also said, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

To work out our salvation is to walk as a saved person, to live a saved life. It is to experience the fact of salvation on a day-by-day basis. It is to live from the new heart, to manifest the new creation that we are in Christ.

And how do we work out our salvation? How do we live the saved life?

"For it is God who works in you, both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13). Christ is our life! He is the One who impells us to do the will of God and empowers us to carry it out. It is He who generates the life in us because we are one with Him.

Paul explained: "For you are the temple of the living God; as God has said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (II Corinthians 6:16).

When we live our ordinary, everyday life, God promises that He will live through us. We are vessels to contain Him. He moves us, urges us, motivates us to do His will, so that we can say with Paul that it is no longer we who are living but Christ who lives in us (Galatians 2:20).

Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always."

This is what the primitive church understood. They had no New Testament, not even the Old Testament; they didn't have copies of the Old Testament at home to read. They just had Jesus Christ.

So they said, "Jesus Christ heals you. Come on, get up."

We say, "Read books about healing." This is because we have a theological approach based on books and meditation, instead of on life. They had the living Person; we have only a concept.

The record of the primitive church was, "And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following" (Mark 16:20).

We sing, "I'll never walk alone." We are at least being honest. We don't go alone. We go with the Bible under our arm.

But in the primitive church, they went with the Lord. He dwelt in them and walked in them; He was their life, not just a concept. That is why they moved in such great power.

I recommend that you read the Gospels all over again. Then study the veil.

After you have studied the veil, so that you are sure you understand it, pull it aside and take a look at the ascended Christ who is alive in you today. Look at yourself in a mirror, without a veil of the old covenant law—forgetting the bearded and sandaled One—and see the present-day Christ in action through you at this very instant.

"Lord, there You are, inside of me all this time!"

"Yes, here I am."

Then start to fellowship with Him. Start to have His point of view on all matters affecting your life.

Stop trying to copy the Jesus of nearly 2,000 years ago, and let the living Christ flow through your character. Begin to see His angle on things, and to think with His mind.

"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." Not liberty for license or to turn the benches upside down and to make a lot of noise. But liberty from the bondage of law—liberty from the old covenant. Liberty to be the unique expression of Christ that He created you to be.

Christ is alive today!

Look at yourself in a mirror. Get yourself in focus—discover who you are. You are an expression of the glorified, eternal Christ who lives within you. Begin to believe that about yourself and you will start to experience His life as a daily reality.