



Devotional Study Guide Journal

February 8th

The Letter That Kills¹

2 Corinthians 3:4-6

And we have such trust through Christ toward God. ⁵Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶ who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Perhaps you, like we, used to think that “the letter” that “kills” spoken of by Paul in the above passage was referring to a dry lifeless sermon, so devoid of the Spirit of God that you start to think the speaker means to slay you. Maybe it is full of uninteresting facts, or lacks enthusiasm, but for some reason, you are not getting ministered to and even feel discouraged.

Now, those sermons do exist, but this is not what Paul meant when he spoke of the letter that kills. Let’s keep reading the chapter and see if it makes more sense. WARNING: If you have never seen this before, what you are about to understand might shake you! Comments have been added to help you see it. Please read all of this carefully.

2 Corinthians 3:7-11

But if the ministry of death (This refers to the “letter that kills” about which Paul just wrote in verse 6), written and engraved on stones, (Wait a minute—what was “written and engraved on stones”? You know, don’t you? It was the Ten Commandments.) was glorious (Why does Paul use the past tense when referring to the Ten Commandments?), SO that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away,(There is no denying at this point that Paul is talking about the Ten Commandments.) ⁸ how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? (Now, we see

¹ Notes compiled by C. D. and D. H. Hildebrand

something we might not have before. Notice in verse 6 that Paul speaks of the New Covenant as opposed to “the letter.”⁹ *For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, (Yikes. Paul just referred to the Old Covenant, the Ten Commandments, as the ministry of “condemnation.”) the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. (The “ministry of righteousness” is the New Covenant.)*¹⁰ *For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. (The glory of the New Covenant excels—superabounds—the glory of the Old Covenant)*¹²¹ *For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.*

As we began to understand this passage for what Paul is really saying, many things changed in our understanding of this passage. Paul isn't talking about a boring or Spiritless sermon. He is saying that the New Covenant far excels the Old Covenant, AND to our shock and awe, he equates the Old Covenant with the Ten Commandments which were written and engraved on stones.

Christians are not under the Old Covenant. This truth is shocking to many believers who have the perhaps unstated concept that we are under both the Old and the New Covenant. That idea cannot be substantiated.

Hebrews 8:6-7,13

*But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a **better covenant**, which was established on **better promises**.⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a **second**.¹³ In that He says, “A **new covenant**,” **He has made the first obsolete**.*

When Jesus died, the Old Covenant was annulled and the New Covenant began. We are not under a mixture of Covenants of law and grace. We are under grace. Our righteousness is not by keeping the Ten Commandments. We are righteous by believing in Jesus—by grace through faith, and not by the works of the law.

Romans 3:20-22

*Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be made righteous in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.
21 But now the righteousness of God **apart from the law** is*

*revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,
22 even **the righteousness of God, through faith in
Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.***