

2Cor. 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?

Scripture indicates that letters of introduction and recommendation were normal for those who traveled in ministry or moved from one place to another. Paul is asking questions to make the Corinthians think. Based on their experience with him, did he still need a letter of recommendation regarding his authority as an apostle to be able to minister among them or a letter of recommendation from them to qualify for ministry elsewhere? The expected answer is—"No." Why? That is answered in the next verses.

2Cor. 3:2 Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men:

2Cor. 3:3 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.

The Corinthian believers themselves are living letters of recommendation of the truth and power of God's truth, the good news about salvation, as proclaimed by Paul. Paul's ministry team had effectively taught the Corinthians, and they had responded to that teaching with tender hearts that were ready and willing to learn—not with hard hearts stubbornly closed to receiving the truth; they had willingly embraced salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Their lives declared more effectively than words ever could the truth of Paul's teaching, as shown by the fruit produced by the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

2Cor. 3:4 And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward:

2Cor. 3:5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God;

Paul is basically saying that he was well aware that their effectiveness in ministry to the Corinthians was accomplished through the ministry of the Holy Spirit through him and his team—not because of abilities of their own. He knew that, as the Lord had taught His disciples, without Jesus in the person of the Holy Spirit he could do nothing.

John 15:5 I am the vine, ye *are* the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

2Cor. 3:6 ¶ 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.

"Who" – refers back to God

The Greek for *able* refers to being qualified or competent. So, Paul is saying that it is God who qualified them or made them competent teachers of the new covenant. How? Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

John 14:26 But the Comforter, *which is* the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.

Paul is clear in stating that he is a minister of the "new covenant," not the old. Through the new covenant, the believer is empowered to obey God's will as revealed in the old covenant. Under the old covenant man was confronted with his sin through his inability to keep God's commands. Paul had been a Pharisee,

one of those who prided themselves on keeping the letter of the law. Once he met Jesus, Paul understood that under the letter of the law, man was doomed to die since to break one point of the law was to break it all.

James 2:10 For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one *point*, he is guilty of all.

To break the law was to be declared a sinner, and the destiny of the sinner is death.

Rom. 6:23 For the wages of sin *is* death....

Under the new covenant Christ provides the believer with the indwelling Holy Spirit to empower him to live according to the intent or spirit of the old. Not only that, the sinner is imputed the righteousness of God in Jesus.

2Cor. 5:21 For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

I like Kenneth Wuest's translation:

"...but our sufficiency has its source in God who also made us sufficient as those who minister a testament, new in quality, not of the letter [of the law] but of the Spirit, for the letter [of the law] kills, but the Spirit makes alive."

God's law hasn't changed; but under the new covenant we are given to understand the heart of the law (as taught by Jesus in Matthew 5-7) and empowered to keep it. Jesus was very clear in stating that He was establishing a new covenant between God and man through His death.

Luke 22:19-20 And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake *it*, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup *is* the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.

Romans 8 is a companion passage to this verse, and an excerpt from that journal applies here:

Rom. 8:3 For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:

Rom. 8:4 That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

One purpose of the law was to guide us into righteous living. It provided loving guidelines, but had no power to make us obey those guidelines. Obedience was subject to the flesh, the choice of the person as to whether to obey or not—and we discussed earlier our natural response to the forbidden (cf 7:8). In His great mercy God decided to make a way for us to be able to fulfill the righteousness of the law. He sent "His own Son" to earth as a man. The word *likeness* means "resemblance, similar." He was born without the sin nature (just like Adam was first created) inherited through Adam; He was born the seed of the woman—not the man.

Gen. 3:15 And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and **her seed**; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

“for” sin – through (all over); (to “pierce”); through (as adverb or preposition), i.e. across:—beyond, farther (other) side, over.

I was a bit surprised when I looked up this word. It seems to be saying that God’s Son, Jesus, was sent in the flesh to get man beyond the reach of sin, to “pierce” the sin nature. How? By condemning sin in the flesh through His victorious life of righteousness and obedience. He was tempted in every way that we are tempted; He can truly empathize with every struggle or sorrow or frustration or with which we are confronted in this life. Yet, He responded in victory—never yielding to sin.

Heb. 4:15 For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in **all points** tempted like as *we are, yet* without sin.

Through His willing sacrifice on the cross and glorious resurrection, we (believers) can now experience victory over our own sin nature. Our choice is to walk, live our life, in obedience to the guidance of the Spirit of God that indwells us. Our desire is to live so as to reflect the character of Jesus and the righteousness of the law.

2Cor. 3:7 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:

2Cor. 3:8 How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?

In context with the previous verses, “the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones” is a reference to the tables of the law God gave to Moses; and this is further affirmed by the reference to the glory of God reflected in the face of Moses when he returned with the tables in hand. That reflection of God’s glory gradually faded with the passage of time.

Verse 8 seems to be drawing a comparison to the glory of God that can be more gloriously reflected in the life of the believer through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This glory need never fade except through the lack of submission and obedience of the individual. The Holy Spirit ministers life—not death.

2Cor. 3:9 For if the ministration of condemnation *be* glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory.

This verse continues to make a comparison to the effect of the old and new testaments in the life of the believer. My translation—“If the delivery of the law to Moses resulted in such an obvious reflection of God’s glory because of the time spent in His presence, doesn’t it make sense that the continual presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer will produce a greater reflection of God’s glory?”

2Cor. 3:10 For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth.

2Cor. 3:11 For if that which is done away *was* glorious, much more that which remaineth *is* glorious.

Paul continues to drive home his point. The giving of the law upon which the Old Testament was based resulted in an observable reflection of the glory of God

that eventually faded; it ministered death—not life. The introduction of the New Testament by and through Jesus Christ produces greater glory because it ministers life through the continual presence and empowerment of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

2Cor. 3:12 ¶ Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech:

“Plainness of speech” is a reference to boldness and confidence. Paul is basically saying that it is his hope/faith in this New Testament that empowers him (and those who minister with him) to preach so boldly.

2Cor. 3:13 And not as Moses, which put a veil over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished:

2Cor. 3:14 But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which *veil* is done away in Christ.

2Cor. 3:15 But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart.

This seems to be saying that Moses veiled his face to keep the people from seeing the glory of God disappear from his countenance. Paul is using this incident in their history to picture the inability of the people to comprehend that the old testament pointed toward the new testament that would be revealed in Christ. They understood the letter of the law without grasping the spirit of the law. And that is just as true of the people of Israel today as it was in Paul’s day. I can’t help but think of the verse in Romans 11.

Romans 11:25 “For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.”

It’s just hard to understand how the Jewish people cannot recognize Jesus as the Messiah as foretold in the old testament scripture—especially in Isaiah 53. But the truth is that they have a veil over their heart that prevents them from seeing the truth.

“...and not as Moses...” – This makes a direct connection to the previous verse in reference to the boldness with which Paul spoke. Unlike Moses, who represented the old covenant and its fading glory, Paul possessed the never-fading glory of God through the indwelling Holy Spirit as part of the new covenant.

2Cor. 3:16 Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away.

“it” = whosoever

This is a hard verse to me. After making the point that the Jewish people have a veil over their hearts, Paul goes on to say that those who choose to “turn to the Lord” will have the veil removed. Maybe the answer lies in the emphasis on the individual rather than the nation. Though the nation as a whole seems to be covered by a veil that prevents them from seeing, the truth can penetrate that veil to those who are truly seeking God. Remember—Blindness is only “in part”

in reference to the nation according to Romans 11, and scripture is clear in stating that those who seek God will find Him.

Deuteronomy 4:29 "But if from thence thou shalt seek the LORD thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul."

2Cor. 3:17 Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

"That Spirit" seems to refer directly back to verse 8, and I am reminded again of how Father, Son and Spirit are One. The reference to liberty is in direct contrast to the confines of the law. Through the Holy Spirit of the Lord, the believer is freed from the condemnation resulting from their inability to keep the law and is empowered to live according to the grace of God through faith. In Christ, the believer is declared righteous and guiltless as to the law. Instead of living in a state of constant frustration and fear because of one's inability to keep the law, the believer can live secure in the love of the Father and His assurance of forgiveness. It's like having a huge burden taken off your shoulders. He/she can live as an overcomer when confronted by temptation through the provision of the indwelling Spirit. Through the Spirit one can appreciate the benefits of the law. It identifies sin and provides guidelines for enjoying the blessings of God through obedience.

2Cor. 3:18 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.

"we" = true believers, children of God

I think Paul is saying that the glory of God is intended to shine through us without concealment of any type. As His children, we should be growing spiritually so that our image is being more and more conformed to the image of our Savior—our character is blossoming with the fruit of the Spirit. That can only happen through the ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Our hope rests in the culmination of the glory that will be ours when we receive our glorified bodies at the resurrection.

I can't help but be reminded of the words of one of my favorite songs as sung by the Gaither Quartet.

*Picture a man with no reason for living, with no hope of smiling again.
Imagine a world with no golden daybreak, enclosed by the blackness of sin.*

And the sea is bathed in beauty and glory, transformed by love's sweet embrace. The hands of the Savior erased all my sorrow and painted this picture of Grace.

The ashes and ruin that once filled the picture had vanished and faded from view. And beautiful touches of mercy adorned this picture He painted

anew.

Such peace filled the eyes of the man He created; A smile gently rests on his face. Since Jesus erased all the guilt of my past and painted this picture of grace.

How skillful the hands of the artist Who painted this picture of me. He saw with the eyes of a Master how beautiful my life could be.

Where once was a portrait of gloom and despair, This masterpiece hangs in it's place. It's signed with His blood and it's framed with His glory, this beautiful picture of Grace.