

# The Two Covenants

By David Phillips

Many people have asked why there are testaments instead of just one. The fact is, God very much intended for there to be two covenants, each fulfilling its own purpose. The Old was to bring us to Christ (Gal. 3:24) while the New is for living in Christ (Gal. 3:25). There are many, however, who do not understand this relationship.

Jeremiah sheds some light on this issue in Jer. 31:31-34. Beginning with this passage, let us see what God has said concerning this matter so that we can understand the nature of His covenants.

## The First Covenant

According to our text the first covenant refers to that which God made with Israel when He delivered them out of Egypt (See Deut 5:2, 3; 4:13). A study of Exodus through Deuteronomy will reveal the nature, content, and requirements of that covenant; that it contained instruction in righteousness, morality, justice and mercy. It also contained laws governing health and cleanliness, a pattern for civil government and contained a pattern of worship designed specifically by and for the one true God. This old covenant was given to a specific nation and was designed to govern that nation as the people of God. It was given to people who were the descendants of Abraham through whom God promised He would bring the Messiah (Gen. 26:3-5). Therefore, while living under this law the people waited for the One who would reign as their king forever and forgive the sins of the people. He would be their priest, prophet and king. So it is written in Deut. 18:18-19, *“I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.”*

Until that time, however, the people were bound to live under this first covenant. It was a system that required perfection of every person and offered severe punishment to those who disobeyed (Num. 15:32-36). It was strict because it reflected the righteousness, the glory, and the holy nature of God. It was perfect and righteous. Therefore the Psalmist wrote of this law saying, *“The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple”* (Ps. 19:7). Even the apostle Paul wrote, *“Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good”* (Rom. 7:12).

It is with this picture in mind that many people today strive to obey, as much as they can, the Old Law. Some churches believe that we should keep the food laws and the feast days. Other churches are convinced that they need to have a system of worship similar to that of the old covenant with the pomp and procession of the priests and so forth. But let us understand that those who strive to follow the first covenant in this way fail to properly answer the question, **“Why did God give us a second covenant?”**

Within the New Testament God shows us why there is a second covenant. We have noted that the first was perfect, it was holy and righteous and if any man were to keep all of the things of that law then they would also live by them. However, there was one problem: Paul, quoting from the Psalms, says in Rom. 3:10-18, *“There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there*

*is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.”* His conclusion from this passage: *“All have sin and fall short of the glory of God”* (Rom. 3:23). The law was righteous in every way, but it was lacking in one aspect essential to God’s plan for saving man, *“For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins”* (Heb. 10:4). The Old Covenant look forward to the Christ, it looked forward to the forgiveness of sins by His blood (Isa. 53), but in itself the Law of Moses did not provide for the forgiveness of the sins of the people. It only condemned those who did not keep it perfectly. Since *“all have sinned”* every person was condemned to death. Therefore Paul also shows us that, *“For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son...”*

### **“That The Offense May Abound”**

“If that is the case,” some may say, “then why did God not send Jesus to the world in the beginning so that Israel would not have to live under the law?” Paul shows us two reasons why God gave the Old Law. 1. *“To bring us to Christ”* (Gal. 3:24). It was through that Old Covenant that the lineage of Christ was kept. It was through the Jews that the Messiah would come. The law also brought us to Christ in that it taught us about the righteousness of God and illustrated how He would forgive our sins through the sacrificial system. 2. The law also shows us how desperately we need the grace of God to be saved. Jesus said in Matt. 5:3, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”* The reason for this is that man needs to be aware of just how sinful and destitute he is without God. The fact that no man could keep the Old Law perfectly demonstrates that without the grace of God even the best of men are lost. Therefore Paul also wrote, *“Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more”* (Rom. 5:20).

Therefore God gave us the Old Covenant to show us our need for His saving grace through Christ and He also gave us the promise of that Christ, *“For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect...For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins”* (Heb. 10:1, 4). In the New Covenant we are given the reality of that Grace. The New Testament replaced the Old Testament as the covenant between God and His people. So it is written by the prophet Jeremiah, *“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah -- not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more”* (Jer. 31:31-34).

### **A Second / New Covenant**

Concerning this passage the Hebrew writer affirms, *“In that He says, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away”* (Heb. 8:13). Where the first covenant was lacking, the New Covenant is perfect. Let us all understand that when Jesus died on the cross He freed all men, both Jew and Gentile, from the bondage of sin that comes through the law, as many as would come to Him. Therefore it is written, *“For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having*

*abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace*” (Eph. 2:14-15). That is to say, peace between Jew and Gentile and between man and God.

### **“Having Abolished in His Flesh the Enmity”**

We can all see the superiority of the second covenant over the first. However, let us not fail to also see what has become of that first covenant. “*Having **abolished** in His flesh the enmity, that is, **the law of commandments...**” “*Having **wiped out the handwriting of requirements** that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has **taken it out of the way**, having nailed it to the cross*” (Col. 2:14). “*In that He says, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the **first obsolete**. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to **vanish away**” (Heb. 8:13).**

When Jesus died on that cross He not only established the New Covenant through which we are forgiven, He also abolish that first covenant which once held men under the bondage of sin. When we apply this principle to the subject of Bible Authority let us understand that we who are now under this new covenant, if we seek to go back to the old covenant to justify our actions today we place upon our heads that same yoke of bondage that Jesus died on the cross in order to remove! Therefore we are warned by the apostle Paul, “*And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace*” (Gal. 3:4-5).

### **Written as an Example**

This is not to say that the Old Testament is useless for us today. For God gave it to us in the Bible for a reason. “*Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted...Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come*” (1 Cor. 10:6, 11). Our law, our covenant, our salvation is found within the pages of the New Testament. But within the Old Testament we can see the type of obedience God expects of His people. Within the Old Testament we can gain “*wisdom for salvation,*” as did Timothy (2 Tim. 3:15). But we must not use the Old Testament as our law. Only the law of Christ has the authority to govern our lives in that way.

### **Conclusion**

Have you entered into this covenant with God whereby He will remember your sins no more? If you have not been baptized into Christ the blood of the New Covenant has not made you free from sin. However, because God does not desire that you perish He invites you now to obey His gospel, if you truly believe. Therefore Jesus said, “*Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*” (Matt. 11:28-30). Will you come to Jesus whereby you can enter into this covenant relationship with God?