

# 2 Corinthians 3

by John Nelson Darby

---

*John Nelson Darby's sermon on 2 Corinthians 3 emphasizes the transformative power of the new covenant through the Holy Spirit, contrasting it with the old covenant of the law.*

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 3:1

**Topics:** "Transformation in Christ", "The New Covenant"

---

## Description

John Nelson Darby explores the profound message of 2 Corinthians 3, emphasizing that believers are living letters of recommendation for Christ, written not with ink but by the Spirit of God on their hearts. He contrasts the old covenant of the law, which brings death and condemnation, with the new covenant of grace that offers forgiveness and righteousness through the Spirit. Darby highlights that true transformation occurs when one turns to the Lord, removing the veil that obscures the glory of God. He asserts that the presence of the Holy Spirit enables believers to reflect Christ's glory and be changed into His image. Ultimately, the sermon underscores the importance of understanding our identity in Christ and the transformative power of the Spirit in our lives.

---

## Transcript

"Do we begin again to commend ourselves?" the apostle had just said. "We are not as many which corrupt the word of God"; but later on he ought to be commended by them. It did look very like commending himself, and yet there was no need, or ought not to be. It is all beautiful in a way, for there is a great deal of heart in it. "Ye are our epistle," he adds. It is beautifully simple. You are my letter of recommendation. It shews how careful he was in dealing with them. It is not like the Epistle to the Thessalonians, which is the freshest of all the epistles: a very different kind of feeling runs through it.

"Written in our hearts" still brings in that he loved them. It is all as if a person said, "Who is this Paul? Where is his letter of commendation? What kind of a man is he? He did not come from Jerusalem." Well, he says, Look at the Corinthians: that is the kind of man he is. He has been blessed to all these souls, and, more than that, they are walking well. And one of the first things he brings in is, "Ye are in our hearts," and he gives a reason, which he could not give in the first epistle, "Ye are my epistle, because ye are Christ's epistle"; they were a recommendation of Christ. That is, the saints are Christ's letter of recommendation to the world - a great deal to say; and he does not say they ought to be, but that is the place you are in, to recommend Christ to the world.

It gives you a statement of what a gathering is - the epistle of Christ - though it is true of individuals. Ye are declared to be "written, not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God": that is how it was. "Not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart," Christ engraven by the Spirit of God on the people's hearts; that is what the church is; and that, too, while they were going on so badly. He would not say, "That is the epistle of Christ," though it was true in a sense, but, "Ye are."

"Not in tables of stone." This is work written on a man's heart within; the law was a claim on a man's outside. It is a comparison of opposition; instead of getting claims from man in flesh outside him, it is Christ engraven, in the power of the Spirit, inside him. The law, written on stone, is death and condemnation, and Christ, engraven on the heart, is the ministration of righteousness. God used law to test flesh: "I had not known sin but by the law, for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet." But to get good, God does not go outside a man to claim good from what is bad, but God brings a new nature that produces the good. Man takes up flesh, but it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. But, instead of that, God gives a new nature that delights in what is holy, and writes Christ in a man's heart. And this is what makes them "the epistle." We have it in another figure at the end of the chapter, "We are changed into the same image"; and in the middle of the chapter he states what does it - "the Spirit giveth life," v. 6. Verses 7-16 are a parenthesis. "Now the Lord is that Spirit," v. 17.

318 It says "letter," instead of "law," because it is general; if one take the letter of the gospel, it would kill people. So Scripture says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." And if I meet a brother in Germany or France, I always kiss him, but when I come back to England it seems so dreadfully cold; yet the spirit of that instruction is clear, and I can act on it here as well as in France. The letter always kills. Take a particular instance: If you brought a particular lamb to the priest, which had a black spot on it, you brought a curse on yourself. I have brought a lamb without a spot, and I get a blessing. The spirit here is the mind of the Holy Spirit in the letter. If you had the letter which in the main was the letter of the law, yet the Lord is the spirit even of that, because, if it say you must have a lamb without blemish, in Him I have that. There is often a difficulty to distinguish between the spirit of a Christian and the Spirit of God, and consequently whether it should have a large or small S, because the Spirit is so connected with what is put into our hearts.

"Able ministers" (v. 6) is qualified or capable. It is one of the most absolute statements you can find. It is the activity of our minds that hinders. God uses the vessel to act on and in; and that sweeps away human understanding. It is just in the measure in which we are conscious of being mere vessels, and put confidence in nothing within us, that we are fitted to serve. God works in us to will and to do. It is not that we are mere pipes to carry something, but He acts in us and on us, and we have to take care that we give out purely what we have, taking care first, of course, what we take in. What we have to give out is really a revelation - a revelation that fits in with a certain consciousness in the human heart that there is a God, and so on; but there is a certain nature that wants God, a very important thing in its place, for there are atheists in the world. Well, the moment we see all this is revelation, it is not our thought. We never obtain anything, the moment we begin to spin thoughts out of our minds; all is spoilt then. It is the word of God we need, and this discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart. There we have God's thoughts brought to us, just as Christ Himself was sent out from God.

319 There are many such scriptures as, "I hate thoughts, but thy law do I love"; "When his (that is, man's) breath goeth forth, they perish." "The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man that they are vanity." In fact, men thinking are just like a spider spinning a web out of its own body, and thoughts are of no more worth. It is immensely important to be clear as to this. He adds, "What hast thou, that thou didst not receive?" This is

very distinct; and again, "not to think anything as of ourselves." Of course, if God acts in my mind, I think; but then they are thoughts He has given me."

"New testament" (v. 6) is the "new covenant," which we find also in Jeremiah 31; it is new in contrast with the old. It is characterised by the forgiveness of sins, and a man no more teaching his neighbour. Then the prophet says, that they shall no more say, "Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them." The two chief points are the knowledge of God as Jehovah, and the forgiveness of sins. God's part of that covenant has been done, and Israel would not take it up: so we now are getting the blessings of it, without its being made with us. Our Lord says at the supper, "This is the new covenant in my blood"; and here Paul calls it the same, saying he is an able minister of it. How could he minister it before it was made? The foundation has been laid, and we have the ministry of it. Christ shed His blood, and then the grace was proposed to the Jews; but they would not have it. Peter, in Acts 3, told them Christ would come back if they would have Him, but they would not. God gives the blessings to others, and announces them by His ministers. But the covenant is not made with anybody. It cannot, in any sense, be a new covenant with us, because we have no old one. "This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel," God says. "After those days," it is said, He puts His law in their hearts, He forgives their sins, makes them know Himself: that is the new covenant, and a very important one too.

320 We are under no covenant, though we have the blessings of it (unless you take in a way the covenant confirmed to Christ). First, there was a covenant made with Israel at Sinai, on condition of obedience - "If ye obey my voice," and they said, "Yes." Well we know how they failed. Finally Christ dies, and in dying lays the foundation of a new covenant which was, "I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them"; and "Their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more," and "They shall all know me." Now that will be made good to them, but meanwhile we are getting the benefits, the ground of the whole having been laid in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. All the spared Jews will be righteous, but not necessarily those that are born afterwards. As for Gentiles, they never had a covenant. In Isaiah and Jeremiah "my people" is Israel, and has nothing to do with Gentiles. The "blood of the new covenant was shed for many," which is not Israel only.

A covenant does not always suppose two parties. In Galatians it is only one. A covenant means any term on which God takes me into relation to Himself. The argument in Galatians is: a mediator is not of one; but God is one. Now the law was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator, and if you have a mediator, you must have two parties. But here you have only one. So now all depends on the sovereignty of God only, and therefore it is infallible.

Again, being all of grace, on a foundation of the counsels of God, it takes the character of an everlasting covenant; Hebrews 13. Under the old covenant God was testing man, and that word "old" signifies it was ready to vanish away; then we read of a new covenant - new, because another was before it; and it is everlasting because, without testing, it was settled in the counsels of God Himself. David says clearly enough, "Who hath made an everlasting covenant with me, ordered in all things and sure," because it was all of grace. In Hebrews we read, "We have an altar whereof they have no right to eat who serve the tabernacle." Nazarenes had no right to come to the altar of the Jews, when the Jews had an altar; and now we have an altar whereof Jews have no right to eat. It is the simple but thorough contrast between Judaism and Christianity, the old thing and the new.

321 Then we have another contrast: death and condemnation characterised the law in contrast with the gospel, which is the ministration of righteousness and of the Spirit. It is the presence of the Holy Ghost,

righteousness being established. The law claimed righteousness and could not get it; now, I have righteousness made out for me, and established. A righteousness being established, the Holy Ghost can come and minister righteousness. In Galatians it is characterised by the Spirit: "He that ministereth to you the Spirit," and so on. Indeed the whole blessing now is stamped with the presence of the Holy Ghost. It is what characterises the thing - the ministration of the gospel. It is the presence of the Holy Ghost, and divine righteousness, instead of condemnation and death. The law required righteousness and no lust. This must be death to a man; it is so in his natural condition. "When the law came, sin revived and I died." The old covenant was confined to the law. Only the second time it was under half grace. Moses says, "Blot me out." "No," God says, 'I shall not: everybody shall answer for himself.' That is the law in principle; yet grace is introduced. God tells Moses to lead the people, but His angel shall go first. The contrast here is, if that which is done away took place in glory, much more that which remains is glorious.

Verse 13 is a very important one, because his argument runs from that to the word "veil." It is "that the children of Israel should not look"; for "could" is not right either; it is about half-way between. The use of the Greek word differs: but here in verse 13 it is not "so that they could not," nor "that they could not," but "so that they should not," as nearly as one can say it. In the words "look to the end," the apostle took the law as so many commandments about sheep and bullocks, without ever looking beyond. Christ is really the end of it all. Moses put a veil over his face, because they could not bear to look at his face. There is no veil now; but they were afraid of the glory. The law being a ministration of death and condemnation, they could not look at that. If you connect the least glimpse of the glory of God with the law, then a man cannot look at it; just as they had before said to Moses when God spake out of the fire, "You go and speak to God for us, lest we die." The apostle takes the law absolutely here as law - death and condemnation; but the way in which it worked in Israel then was that it hindered their looking to the end of that which was abolished. So Moses put on the veil in order that they might not see the glory itself. That was before he went in to the Lord. The veil was not put on in order to hinder, but it was put on to the hindrance of their looking. "It came to pass when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him. And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come nigh him. And Moses called unto them; and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned unto him, and Moses talked with them. And afterward all the children of Israel came nigh and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And till Moses had done speaking with them, he put a veil on his face."

322 The reason they were afraid to look at Moses was because the glory was there. They could not look to the end; they did not know when they offered a sacrifice that this was typical of Christ. The "end" is clearly God's purpose in it, and this was what they could not look to. It was a glory which came requiring righteousness, and this too they could not meet. In Christ Himself you have the explanation of all these images of the law. The veil is now done away, but it is on their (Israel's) hearts still. When Moses was turned to the Lord, the veil was taken off, and so it shall be with their hearts when they are turned to the Lord. "It shall turn" (v. 16) refers to Israel's heart when this is turned to the Lord. There was no glory the first time on Moses' face because he had not been in such close intercourse with God. The whole thing is a beautiful picture of grace and law, for Moses was under grace. God says to him, "Thou hast found grace in my sight."

"The Lord is that [the] spirit" (v. 17), means that the Lord is the spirit of the Old Testament, I believe: the Lord was the real spirit of all those ordinances. It is a beautiful expression to me of what the gospel is in

contrast to law. Thus the glory itself is the proof that I am saved.

"As in a glass" (v. 18) is better left out; "we all with open face, looking on the glory of the Lord." There is no veil now on the glory of Christ, nor is there on our hearts when we believe. There is no idea of reflection in the passage: the Greek means 'looking into a mirror' sometimes, but not necessarily. I do not like the idea of Christ being a reflection. People talk of our mirroring Christ from this verse: it is all absurd; how can our mirroring the Lord change us? I look with perfect liberty, for "where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty," and I see (I do not mirror) "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," and the effect of seeing is that I am "changed into the same image from glory to glory even as by the Spirit of the Lord." The reason is plain. If the law looks for righteousness in man, man has it not, and so is afraid of the glory; the moment there is the least glory shewn out, man shrinks from it. But now the glory of God is shewn in the face of Jesus Christ, and what is that from? It is the effect of His having glorified God, and therefore God has glorified Him, and every ray of that glory is the proof that my sins are gone. "From glory to glory" means that I make progress. "Changed" is the same word as "transformed" in the Gospels.

323 "Into the same image" is a strong expression. If I have a good picture of a man, I say, "It is his very image." And such is the intended effect of this looking at the glory. We see it in Stephen when he is stoned, as he looks up and sees the glory of God and Jesus. Christ had said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"; and the view of Jesus in the glory of God draws from Stephen the prayer, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." And again, on the cross Christ says, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit"; and Stephen says, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He is changed into Christ's image. He did not say, "for they know not what they do," for this would not be true then.

---

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-nelson-darby/2-corinthians-3/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**