

THE LETTER AND THE SPIRIT

"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." – 2 Cor. 3:6.

WE must not understand this – "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" – to refer to our letter or our spirit, nor to the letter of the Word, nor to the spirit of the Word of God, nor to the letter of the Law, nor to the spirit of the Law, but to the letter of the Covenant and the spirit of the Covenant, because that is evidently what the Apostle is discussing here – "Who hath also made us Able Ministers," or qualified or efficient servants or messengers of the New Covenant. Taking the broad thought connected with the Covenant it would be this: That all the angels are in Covenant relationship with God, not through a New Covenant, but by a Covenant that is very old. Not, perhaps, by a Covenant that was expressed in so many words, but by a Covenant that was understood in that they receive everlasting life and all their blessings on condition that they be obedient to God. Such is their Covenant relationship.

Adam, the founder of our race, was similarly created in Covenant relationship with God. God's Law was written in his very heart, or his very being; and, without being specified in so many words, it was understood by him that if he would be obedient he should have everlasting life and everlastingly enjoy all of God's favors and blessings. We see that Adam failed in this. He broke the Covenant. The result was Divine sentence upon him – the death sentence – and that has followed all of his posterity because they have inherited imperfections, so that however good their intentions, their work is imperfect – all, therefore, are out of Covenant relationship with God.

In the case of Abraham, God intimated his willingness to deal at some time and in some manner with any of our race who were out of relationship merely through wicked works and not through wicked hearts or intentions. Abraham, being of the class who are in accord with God in heart, in their desire for harmony with the Divine will, was granted at once a measure of Covenant relationship in that he was privileged to be called the friend of God instead of the enemy of God. He was privileged to know of God's provisions of blessing, not only for himself, but for all who would likewise become harmonious with God. He was not given the details of this, but merely the rough outline, sketch. In due time his descendants, the children of Israel, were given a further compact with God, under which he offered to give them everlasting life if they would keep his Law, because it is written, "He that doeth these things shall live by them." This, the Apostle says, they thought would be of great advantage to them, but they found the requirements impossible for them. Therefore the Law, which was granted them apparently as a favor – and it was a favor in certain senses – "they found to be unto death," and not unto life. Later, through the Prophet Jeremiah and others, God explained to them that the fault of the Covenant was not in the Law, not on his part, but it was on their part, because they did not keep the Law, and the only way that anything could be done to their advantage would be to enter into a New Covenant through a new Mediator, a Mediator who would be able to make up for their deficiencies and to assist them in a manner that Moses was not able to do.

From that time onward God's people began to look for this new Mediator. They saw that Moses himself foretold this Mediator, saying, "A Prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me [my antitype]; him shall ye hear in all things, and it shall come to pass that the soul that will not obey that Prophet shall be destroyed from amongst the people."

All the expectations of the Jews thenceforth were for this Messiah; and by the words of the Prophets we see that God specially pointed out the coming of this Messiah, saying, "Behold, I send my Messenger before my face to prepare the way before me,...even the Messenger of the Covenant, whom ye delight in" – the one you have been waiting for, the one you have been praying for, the one you have built your expectations upon, even him I shall send, saith the Lord; but who shall abide in the day of his coming; who shall stand when he is here, for he shall be like fullers' soap, in that he will cleanse everything; he will be like a refiner's fire, in that he will purge all imperfections from those to be associated with him, that he might purify the sons of Levi, that he might offer a sacrifice acceptable to God. Israel was expecting that God would carry out all of his original proposition to make them his chosen people and use them as a channel of communicating the blessing of eternal salvation and reconciliation – eternal life, to the world of mankind – to bring all the world into Covenant relationship with God. This was called to Israel a New Covenant, because God had made a proposition of this kind to them before, namely the Law Covenant, which they were unable to keep. "This, therefore, is to be a Covenant with you anew, afresh," so to speak, a better Covenant. That is, not one better in some of its features, in its Law for instance, but better, more *favorable to you*; not more favorable in that it would require less than obedience to the Divine Law – "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, mind, soul and strength, and thy neighbor as thyself" – but a better Covenant through the Mediator it would have – a Mediator better qualified than was Moses, and an arrangement which would be more **[R4595 : page 124]** favorable for helping them out of their difficulties, imperfections, etc.

When our Lord Jesus came, he therefore was this Mediator of this New Covenant. He came for this purpose. But who of them abided in the day of his presence? Who of them were ready when

he appeared? Very few. Only the "Israelites indeed," and his teachings, his ministry, were like the fullers' soap and like the refiner's fire. He did at that time purify the sons of Levi, the consecrated ones, that they might offer themselves unto the Lord; that they might present themselves living sacrifices. Thus the Church might be a sacrificing priesthood class. And so it has been all through this Gospel Age. Having selected all the suitable material from amongst the Jewish nation, the privilege of becoming antitypical Levites and antitypical priests, largely passed to the Gentiles, to fill up from among them the number lacking of the Jews. Thus we have been brought into this class, to be a part of this sacrifice, that we might offer unto the **[R4596 : page 124]** Lord an acceptable sacrifice. All of this we understand to be preparatory to the great work of the Mediator, the greater mediation of this New Covenant arrangement.

God is now selecting the antitypical house of Levi and the antitypical Royal Priesthood. The Church in this age shall be completed, and glorified – the great Body of the Mediator will be completed and he will be ready to begin his great work. His work will be the installation of New Covenant relationship, or, as stated in other words, the institution of Covenant relationship between God and Israel anew, afresh, upon a better basis than the arrangement made through Moses, because this antitypical Priest, this antitypical Moses, will have power to forgive sins of the people, and therefore the right to restore them and to bring them up out of degradation. From the time he will take hold of his work as Mediator of the New Covenant, those under the New Covenant arrangements will have a share of this blessing and thus they will be in relationship to God and enjoying his favor, but not to the full measure, merely in and through the Mediator. For instance, when at the conclusion of this age the Lord shall present his blood a second time on the mercy-seat on behalf of all the people, he will thereby seal the New Covenant, make it operative, and take his place as the great Mediator or King of the Millennial Age. By

virtue of this application of his blood and sealing of this New Covenant he will take charge of the world of mankind and by virtue of the sealing of the New Covenant with Israel he will use that nation in a special manner, to be his channel of blessing.

The New Covenant arrangement will mean that the nation of Israel will enjoy certain favors and blessings, but that their relationship will not be with God direct, but merely with the Mediator. Then the Mediator will have the authority and the right to guarantee them eternal life and to assist them up to it and to give them all the rewards and blessings, just as though they were fully in favor with God. They will be in favor with God through him, but so far as God's Law is concerned they will still be imperfect, be under the Divine sentence, and thus kept, as it were, at arm's length from the Almighty; but he has made the arrangement that through this Mediator, this Prophet, Priest, King, Judge, all his mercy and favor will be extended to Israel. That nation, therefore, during that time, will have all these blessings and gradually begin to have restitution favors and uplifting from every evil of the present time – release from evil. The blessings will extend to other nations in that they will be permitted to come in and participate with Israel by becoming Israelites indeed, by receiving circumcision, perhaps not with hands, but circumcision of the heart. They will come into this relationship with the Mediator, this relationship, therefore, with the Father through the Mediator, and, as the Prophet declares, It shall come to pass that the nation that will not thus come to the Lord, to Jerusalem, and recognize the new relationship thus established in Israel, and take a share of it as they will be privileged to do, to that nation there will be no Divine blessing. They will be under the curse just as much as ever. That is to say, they will be under Divine disfavor just as much as ever. They will not be exposed to Satan and his machinations, but they will be subject to the various features of the penalty – death, the penalty for sin.

During the Millennial Age, then, this New Covenant arrangement, at the hands of the Mediator, will mean a blessing to all who will be under the Mediator and shielded by him from the full requirements of Divine Justice, which would destroy them because of their imperfection, and under this beneficent arrangement they will come up to the full perfection of their nature and in the end of the Millennial Age be fully able to meet every Divine requirement and no longer need a Mediator between them and the Father. And so, as the Apostle tells us, at that time having put down all sin and disobedience, having destroyed death, having uplifted humanity from death, except those who will go into Second Death, the Lord will deliver over the Kingdom to God, even the Father – not for its destruction, but because it will at that time be fully able to enjoy direct all the blessings of Covenant relationship with God, which in an imperfect condition it could not have.

Such will be the Covenant relationship in the fullest sense at the close of the Millennial Age. Mankind will be back to the same place exactly as Adam occupied at the beginning when he was created in the image and likeness of God and was called "son of God." So mankind, fully restored, fully harmonized with God, will be back in full relationship with him and they will all be subject to the Father.

As Adam was tried after he was a son of God, so these will be tried. After the thousand years Satan shall be loosed that he may test and attempt to deceive them. If after all their experience with sin they should have any lurking sympathy with it, the deception will be sure to discover this sympathy, thus determining the individual's unfitness for eternal life. By this time they must have developed such character as would bring them to the place where they would love righteousness and hate iniquity or else they could not have everlastingly this Covenant relationship with God.

We see, then, that during the Millennial Age the New Covenant relationship will be just the same or just what it will be at the end of the Millennial Age, except that it will be under the direction of a Mediator and have its limitations, because of the imperfection of humanity, while later they will be perfect.

Come back to our text, to the declaration that "God also hath made us able [qualified] ministers of the New Covenant." We see that we are now ministers of the New Covenant, servants of the New Covenant. We are serving it in the sense that Jesus served it. Jesus served it in the sense of first preparing himself to be the great Prophet, the great Priest and King – Mediator – so likewise we are in preparation, receiving our lessons and disciplining ourselves and developing in character likeness of our Lord, that we may be members of his glorious Body, members of that glorious Seed, Prophet, Priest, King, in the future. This is the sense in which we are made able ministers or able servants of it **[R4596 : page 125]** – namely, that we not only serve it in keeping our bodies under and developing the fruits and graces of the holy Spirit in ourselves, but that we do this also toward each other. The Bride makes herself ready. These servants of the New Covenant help to make each other ready. They are all members of the Body of Christ, and able ministers.

This is not an imperfect ministration; it is a ministration that is accomplishing its work, its purpose. It will actually accomplish the matter. The sacrificing that we do is all bona fide; it is not sham; and the preparation that we make is bona fide; it is not sham. In what way? In this way: We were neither ministers nor suitable to be ministers of this New Covenant when we "were children of wrath even as others," but when we heard of the grace of God, we had the blessed ear, and when we saw that glorious invitation, we had the blessed eye, and when the eyes of our understanding and the ears of our understanding comprehended this message of God's grace, speaking peace in Jesus Christ our

Lord, our hearts were of that attitude and condition that they responded. We had the same experience as our Lord. As he had the eye of understanding fully opened to know the Father's will and the obedient ear, saying, "I delight to do thy will," so also our hearts must have attained that position of desire to know the Father's will before we could in any sense of the word be pleasing or acceptable to him. And even in this condition we are not acceptable because the Lord looks beyond this and says, respecting us, You are well intentioned and your motives are good, but your flesh is weak and you are fallen. Then he pointed us to the fact that he had appointed for us an Advocate. Looking to the Advocate we perceived "Jesus Christ the Righteous," who offered to be our Advocate and to make good all of our imperfections, if we desired to join with him in his sacrifice. So we brought ourselves to the Lord. We presented our bodies living sacrifices. We acknowledged that of ourselves we are not perfect. We acknowledged that the good intentions were all that we had. We heard his grace and consecrated ourselves to the full. We gave up everything to walk in the steps of Jesus and suffer with him now that he might be glorified with him.

At the time we reached this point of consecration and desired to be associated with Jesus as able ministers, or able servants of the New Covenant, Jesus advanced to us, became our Advocate, and presented our cause before the Father, advocating it and applying of his merit to cover all of our blemishes. When he did so the Father accepted us and forthwith counted us as members of the Body of Christ, members of the Royal Priesthood – associated with Jesus as able ministers of the New Covenant, new Testament. And so we are going on as able ministers now because we are accepted in the Beloved, not acceptable under the terms of the mediatorial Kingdom of the next age, because there is no such arrangement now, and there is no such mediatorial work going on now, but we are accepted as members of the Mediator, as members of the Body of Christ. The Head of this Body having

made good our defects so that our sacrifices could be acceptable, our standing is unique, different from that of the world of mankind in the future. As able ministers, or as recognized ambassadors of God in the world, we are associated with Christ in the work which he is now carrying on, to wit, the work of gathering together the Lord's Jewels all through the Gospel Age. This is the special work that the Lord has given us to do at the present time. The Bride is to make herself ready. As soon as the Bride is made ready then the great work will begin for the world of mankind; but now our able ministry of this New Covenant is in the sense of preparing us, preparing ourselves and presenting our bodies living sacrifices, laying down our lives for the brethren – and all this, as members of the Great High Priest, is, in another sense, part **[R4597 : page 125]** of his work; or rather, as the Apostle says, "It is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." It was God that worked in Jesus that he should accomplish his sacrifice in the proper manner, and it is God that is now working in us in the same manner. He set before us a great prize. As we read of our Lord Jesus Christ, "Who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now set down at the right hand of God," so also we learn that God hath "given unto us exceeding great and precious promises that by these we might become partakers of the divine nature." By the operation of these promises in our hearts we are enabled to lay down our lives for the brethren and to copy the characteristics of our Lord and Savior, even unto death.

Now, we are qualified or able ministers of the New Covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit. The Mediator of the Covenant, of course, should be in harmony with all the terms of the Covenant. The terms of this New Covenant are the perfect obedience to God as represented in the Divine Law, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy being and with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself." Of course, Jesus is in full accord with this Law of God which he accepted as the

basis of the arrangement he would make for mankind, and all of those whom God would accept as members of his Body, as associates with him, as able ministers and servants with him of this New Covenant – all such must be in accord with the Divine Law, else how could they be servants of that Law? But now, says the Apostle, in our case we are not able to measure up to the standard of the letter of that Covenant, but we are able to come to the measure of the spirit of it, to the intention of it. And in harmony with this he says elsewhere, "The righteousness of the Law [that is, the true meaning, the true spirit of the Law], is fulfilled in us, who are walking not after the flesh but after the spirit." He does not say that we are able to walk up to the spirit, up to the Divine Law, and we know indeed that we are not able to do so, but we are able to walk after it.

As we are accepted of God as able ministers of the New Covenant, and as members of this Body of the Mediator, King and Priest at the time of our consecration, through the merit of Jesus our Advocate, so God has made provision that for any unintentional infractions of this Law, of this Covenant, on our part "we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous." He is not only an Advocate when we first come to the Father and present ourselves living sacrifices, and are accepted through the imputation of our Lord's merit, but he is our Advocate still – and we need his advocacy still, because, while we have this standing as new creatures, and as new creatures our intentions are good, nevertheless as new creatures we are responsible for the earthen vessel, the natural body, through which we operate as new creatures. We are responsible for all of its infractions of the Divine Law. Therefore, as the Apostle tells us, if we find that unintentionally, contrary to the intentions of our will, the spirit of our mind, we infract the Divine Law, we are to come with courage to the throne of heavenly grace. We are not to suppose that what our Lord did for us when we presented ourselves living sacrifices makes good our defects to the end of life. We are to understand

that he merely made good the defects to that point and that for [R4597 : page 126] every imperfection and deviation since that time we are to come to the throne of grace and obtain mercy and find grace to help. We come with courage because we have such a great High Priest, because we realize that we are members of the House of God, antitypical Levites, who include both the Little Flock and the Great Company. They are all privileged to come with courage to the throne of heavenly grace and there obtain mercy and grace to help in every time of need. Thus the "able ministers" [servants] of the New Covenant may maintain their standing with God continually, through their Advocate, "who ever liveth to make intercession for them." It is because we have this Advocate, because we recognize Jesus as our Advocate, that we may come to the throne of grace. All those come who are privileged to call God our Father for the forgiveness of those trespasses, which come day by day and which are unintentional on our part. It is then that we make apology and get forgiveness and assistance that we may be more faithful, more able to overcome in these various respects thenceforth. Thus we are qualified ministers of the New Covenant, not according to the letter of that Covenant, as it will operate during the Millennium, but according to the spirit of the New Covenant, which now operates toward us through our Advocate and enables us at all times to be acceptable to the Father through him, and to perform the service of able ministers and to abide in the Holy and to hope ultimately to pass, as members of the Body of the great Priest, Prophet, Mediator and King, beyond the second veil into the Most Holy.

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