

II Corinthians 3: 6-9

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Consider the following passage: “[God] 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” (II Cor. 3:6). Then, the *next* verse (vs 7) speaks of “**the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones.**”

Many people think that Paul is here speaking of the *Ten Commandments* being “written and engraved on stones”—and that he is saying that if we try to *obey* the Ten Commandments, then it “kills”—brings us death.

Yet, is that, in fact, what Paul is saying?

First of all, when Paul refers to “**the ministry of death**” (verse 7), that phrase is better rendered as “**the ministration of death**”—as it is rendered in the following translations: *KJV, KJ21, YLT, ASV, WYC, TMB, Douay-Rheims*. Clearer still, is the rendering in *Moffatt*: “**the administration of death.**” (A similar rendering is in *The New Jerusalem Bible* and in *Phillips*.)

Likewise, in verse 9, where it speaks of “*the ministry of condemnation,*” that phrase is better rendered as “**the administration of condemnation.**”

What Was this “administration of death written and engraved on stones”?

First, notice verse 3: “clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, **not** on tablets of stone [speaking of the Ten Commandments] but on tablets of flesh, *that is*, of the heart.” The word “stone” (here in verse 3) is from a *different* Greek word than the word “stones” in verse 7 (cited above). In verse 3, the Greek word is “*lithinai*,” which means “*formed of stones*”—whereas in verse 7, the Greek word is “*lithai*,” which refers to *whole* stones.¹

So, verse 7 speaks of *whole* stones, on which the administration of death was “written and engraved.” What were these whole stones?

As we’ll see shortly, these were *massive* stones—actually stone *walls*—on which the entire *civil law* of ancient Israel was written!

Now, The Ten Commandments are listed in Deut. chapter 5. Then, chapter 5 continues: “These words [the Ten Commandments] the LORD spoke to all your assembly, in the mountain from the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and **He added no more**. And He wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me [Moses]” (verse 22).

Yes, the Ten Commandments were **complete**. God added “no more”! These two tablets of stone were written and engraved with the Ten Commandments and nothing else.

However, God did *also* give Israel a “glorious” system of *civil law*—a system of statutes and judgments, which were *based on* the principles of the Ten Commandments.

The statutes and judgments were spoken by God to Moses in chapters 12–27 of Deuteronomy (also in Exodus chapters 21-23 and in Leviticus chapters 10-27). Moses wrote those statutes and judgments *in a book*—“the Book of the Covenant” (Ex. 24: 3-7). “So it was, when Moses had completed writing the words of this law in a book, when they were finished, that Moses commanded the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, saying: ‘Take this Book of the Law, and put it beside [“in the side of”—*KJV*] the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there as a witness against you’” (Deut. 31: 24-26).

So, Moses wrote down the civil-law code in a book, and this book was placed *in the side of* the Ark of the Covenant—unlike the Ten Commandments, which were placed *inside* the Ark.

Furthermore, not only did Moses write this civil law in the Book, we will now see that the words of that book were to be *later* written on massive stone walls.

Notice Deut. chapter 27: “Now Moses, with the elders of Israel, commanded the people, saying: ‘Keep all the commandments which I command you today. And it shall be, on the day when you cross over the Jordan to the land which the LORD your God is giving you, that you shall set up for yourselves **large stones, and whitewash them with lime. You shall write on them all the words of this law**, when you have crossed over, that you may enter the land which the LORD your God is giving you, “a land flowing with milk and honey,” just as the LORD God of your fathers promised you. Therefore it shall be, when you have crossed over the Jordan, *that* on Mount Ebal you shall set up these stones, which I command you today, and you shall whitewash them with lime... And you shall write very plainly on the stones all the words of this law’” (verses 1-8).

So, Moses instructed that this should be done at the time when they entered the Promised Land. Let’s now read where these instructions were implemented: “Now Joshua built an altar to the LORD God of Israel in Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses: ‘an altar of whole stones over which no man has wielded an iron *tool*.’ And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the children of Israel, **he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses**, which he had written” (Joshua 8: 30-32).

Yes, Joshua wrote on these massive stones the words of “the law of Moses”—or “Book of the Law,” as it’s referred to in verse 34.

What Paul Meant

Now, let’s go back to the subject of what Paul meant in II Cor. chapter 3, by his phrase “the *administration of death*, written and engraved on stones.”

For a period of time (at God’s direction), the **government** of Israel functioned as **church**

and state combined. God gave Israel a *civil-law* system of statutes and judgments—which were based on the *principles* of the Ten Commandments.

For certain, specific violations of this *civil-law* system of statutes and judgments, the church/state government **“administered” the death penalty.** Yet, this “ministration of death” functioned *only as long as* the **civil** government of Israel.

The passage in II Cor. chapter 3, is speaking of the *termination* of that system in Israel of having **a church-related administration carrying out penalties** for infractions of the statutes and judgments which God gave to Israel.

“God’s ministers **today** do **not** administer death. They administer LIFE! How? By teaching people how to escape the *ultimate* death penalty through Jesus Christ and teaching them, in Christ’s own words, ‘If you want to *enter into* life, **keep the commandments**’ (Matt. 9:7).”²

“In Romans 7:10, Paul shows that God’s *commandments* were given to bring LIFE. They only *seem* to bring death because, as he explains in verse 11, **sin deceives** people into believing that, and then **sin kills** them [as shown also in Rom. 6:16].”¹

The passage in II Cor. chapter 3, is **NOT** doing away with the Ten Commandments (God’s *spiritual* law)—the law which *defines* sin! No...the Ten Commandments should **never** be thought of as “the administration of death.” That is exactly what **Satan** *wants* us to think!

Verses 7-9

Let’s now look at verses 7-9, which *also* causes confusion: “But if the ministry of death, written *and* engraved on stones, was glorious, 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, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation *had* glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory.”

In reading the above passage, one might think that there is some close *connection* between the administration of death and the glory of Moses’ face. Actually, there is **no** connection. Rather, there is a **parallel**. In verse 7, where it says, “**so** that the children of Israel,” the word “so” is translated from the Greek word *hoste*, which “in some contexts, can mean ‘as’—as it certainly must in this case. Paul was using simile (showing similarity using ‘like’ or ‘as’). For instance, if someone says, ‘Bill stared at that glass of water like a lion stalking his prey,’ that doesn’t mean there is a connection between Bill and the lion. There is simply a parallel. So what was Paul saying? He was pointing out that, just as the glory of Moses’ face had a brilliant glory, even though it was only temporary, so the civil ‘administration of death’ at that time had a brilliant glory even though *it [too]* was only temporary. But, as he goes on to show, that pales beside the much greater, *permanent* glory of the spiritual ‘administration of righteousness’ (or commandment-keeping: ‘All Your commandments **are** righteousness’—Psalm 119:172).”¹

So, what was Paul saying in verses 7 through 9?

Peter mentioned that Paul sometimes wrote in a complicated style that was “hard to understand” (II Peter 3:15-16). With that in mind, “here is an expanded *paraphrase* of what Paul

is most likely saying in 2 Corinthians 3: ‘But if the administration of death—written in the Book of the Law and eventually engraved on massive stone walls—was glorious, even though it would one day pass away (just as the Israelites couldn’t look at Moses’ face after he had beheld God because of the glory of his countenance, even though it was *also* a mere passing glory), wouldn’t the administration of the Spirit, which remains *forever*, be much *more* glorious?’”¹

Conclusion

We have seen that when Paul spoke of “the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones,” he was *not* referring to the Ten Commandments! Paul did *not* teach that the Ten Commandments (God’s spiritual law) is no long in force. Rather, Paul taught that Christians must strive to *obey* God’s commandments! (See the article “Did Paul Do Away With God’s Law?”)

References:

1. “QUESTIONS & SHORT ANSWERS,” *The World Ahead*, July-August 1995, p.19
2. “QUESTIONS & SHORT ANSWERS,” *The World Ahead*, May 1995, p.19

(Also see similar article, by Roderick C. Meredith : “Is OBEDIENCE to God Required for Salvation?” *The Plain Truth*, Sept. 1956, pp. 15-17, 24)