HISTORICAL OR EXPERIENTIAL MATTERS

We saw in our last study that when the New Testament discusses the old and new covenants, it often does so by presenting contrasting characteristics that show how starkly different the two covenants are. Paul’s contrasting characteristics of the two covenants in Galatians 4:21–5:1 perfectly describe opposite ways that people have responded to God’s gospel-laden historical covenants. His new-covenant characterizations perfectly describe a saving response to the gospel, resulting in eternal life, and his characterizations of the old covenant perfectly describe the opposite response that leads to death. When Jesus came in history, a new historical covenant resulted; when He comes into someone’s life experientially at conversion, a new covenant experience results no matter when they lived in history.

Learning to distinguish the difference between the historical old and new covenants and the experiential old and new covenants will enable us to understand why the New Testament seems at times to be attacking, or warning against, any association with the old covenant and its law. It will resolve the tension, the apparent conflicts, described in the Introduction to this series between conflicting things that Scripture appears to be teaching about God’s covenants and the law.

In our passage for this lesson, Paul mentions the “new covenant” and “old covenant” by name and once again presents a contrasting list that characterizes how they are opposed to each other and lead to opposite eternal destinies.
Write out 2 Corinthians 2:14–4:6 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out 2 Corinthians 3:12–18. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map the chapters.
THE BATTLE OF THE CONTRASTS

The chart below lists contrasting characterizations of the old and new covenants in 2 Corinthians 3. Take some time to dwell on each horizontal contrast individually, and then on each of the two vertical columns. Note the contrasts carefully for the implications of interpreting these covenants historically or experientially. What conclusion do you arrive at based simply on these characterizations without any additional commentary? Does the text itself, given what you already know about the old and new covenants, help you determine with reasonable certainty whether this list is describing the historical old and new covenants or the experiential responses to the gospel presented in the historical covenants?

(Scan the QR code for the graphic)

Most commentaries on the covenants ascribe all the left-column characterizations to the Sinai covenant and all the right-column ones to the historical new covenant. But think about the implications of that view. It means that God intended that His Sinai covenant and law be externally responded to and that His law could not be written on “the heart” until Jesus came in history (2 Cor. 3:3). And yet it was in the Sinai covenant that God first announced His intention to write His law in their hearts (Deut. 6:6; 30:6, 11–14), and the Old Testament often testifies to His fulfillment of that promise for Old Testament believers (Ps. 37:30, 31; 40:8; Isa. 51:7; see lesson 3). In addition, it would mean that God designed the Sinai covenant to make people self-“sufficient,” to be a “letter that kills” (v. 6, NKJV), a covenant of “condemnation” and “death,” a covenant to “veil” the “heart” and blind the “minds” (vv. 9, 10, 14) of His covenant people to the perception and reception of the gospel! That is contrary to everything the Old Testament taught about the Sinai covenant. Furthermore, it would mean that none of the right-column characterizations of the new covenant could be experienced by anyone, including those in the Hebrews 11 hall of faith, until Jesus came in history!

But while these characterizations do not generally match the historical old and new covenants, they do correspond to people’s responses to the gospel presented in those covenants. An old-covenant response to the gospel results from their minds being blinded to the gospel and from failing to “turn to the Lord,” which prevents God’s law from being written in their hearts, leading to condemnation and death.

This is not to say there are no allusions at all to the historical covenants in the passage. Without doubt, the historical new covenant was “much more glorious” (v. 11, NKJV) than the Sinai covenant in that Jesus had come in the middle and had made the one and only atoning sacrifice by which sinners in every historical era could be forgiven (Heb. 9:15). Yet an experiential application can be made even with that contrast. In Jesus’ parable of the sower, the seed (gospel) fell on different soils (conditions of the heart) (Matt. 13:3–9, 18–23). A “glory” always attends the sharing of the gospel whenever and to whomever it is shared. But that “glory [is] passing away” (2 Cor. 3:7) when people reject it outright or accept it but later fall away. When it is lastingly accepted and bears fruit, it is a “glory that . . . remains [and thus] is much more glorious” (vv. 10, 11, NKJV). Hence, experiential responses to the gospel can be characterized as a “passing glory” or one “much more glorious” that “remains.”
THE “LETTER THAT KILLS” AND THE BLINDING “VEIL”

Those whose historical model of the covenants holds that the New Testament’s contrasting characterizations of the old and new covenants refer to the Sinai covenant and the covenant after Jesus came in history dutifully teach that 2 Corinthians 3:6 means that the Sinai covenant was “a letter that kills,” and the historical new covenant is “the Spirit that gives life.” With all due respect, such teaching turns the Old Testament characterization of the covenant God made with His people at Sinai inside out and upside down! (See lessons 1–5.)

The context of 2 Corinthians 3 provides a different interpretation entirely, one that harmonizes with the scriptural revelation that the Sinai covenant and the historical new covenant share the same spiritual DNA and gospel. In the preface to 2 Corinthians 3, Paul describes his preaching of the gospel as a beautiful “fragrance” to God: “We are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing” (2 Cor. 2:14). Paul preached the New Testament version of the gospel, the historical new covenant version, which included the incarnation, life, atoning death, and resurrection of Jesus as historical facts. Note how Paul describes the results of his own preaching of this superlative expression of the gospel: “To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life” (v. 16, emphasis supplied)! Did you catch that? Paul's preaching of the new covenant gospel itself brought “death” to some and “life” to others! How so? Well, even the gospel results in “life” or “death” to people depending on how they respond to it. Rejection of it or purely legalistic adherence to it represents an old covenant experience and leads to “death”; acceptance of it in faith and the obedience that results from faith represents a new covenant experience leading to “life”!

What about the old covenant veil that covers people’s hearts and blinds their minds whenever Moses and the Old Testament (Greek, “old covenant,” the translation of most modern versions, though likely not referencing the writings of Moses exclusively, but inclusively) is read, a veil that can only be “taken away in Christ” (2 Cor. 3:14)? Those who believe that 2 Corinthians 3’s characterizations of the old covenant refer to Sinai teach that this veil represents God’s Sinai covenant itself. For example, some teach that this veil is the “veil of old covenant law,” the Torah, the Sinaitic laws, Sinai itself, the Sabbath, with the Sabbath itself clearly at the bullseye of their Sinai-covenant target.

But again, what does the context teach? As Paul’s preface to 2 Corinthians 3 explained what Paul meant by the “letter that kills,” his postscript, 2 Corinthians 4:1–6, explains what his imagery of the veil means: “If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light . . . should shine on them” (4:3, 4, emphasis supplied). That is quite a different interpretation from the Sinai covenant blinding people to the gospel! Paul says it was not God who imposed the veil but Satan! And the veil itself does not represent the Sinai covenant or the Sabbath, but rather Satan’s blinding people to the gospel through unbelief!

Second Corinthians 3 does not represent contrasting historical covenants God made with His people at Sinai and with His people when Jesus came. It represents the timeless experiential contrasts between faith and unbelief, righteousness and condemnation, conversion and non-conversion, life and death. It affirms that whenever “one turn to the Lord,” the veil of unbelief is lifted and they pass from death to life, regardless of what historical covenant they lived under (v. 16). To understand 2 Corinthians 3 historically rather than experientially misses the point entirely! Second Corinthians 3 is an evangelistic appeal.
inSpect

What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Deuteronomy 6:4–6
Psalm 37:30, 31
Isaiah 51:7
Matthew 13:3–9; 18–23
1 John 1:9
Luke 15:1–32
Colossians 3:4–10

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with 2 Corinthians 2:14–4:6?

JESUS: THE WOUNDED ARTIST OF SOULS

Our passage this week has given us new imagery and language by which to tell the age-old story and admire its Hero.

Every descendant of fallen Adam is born, through no fault of their own, spiritually marred and mutilated: a veil covers their hearts that are set in stone against spiritual appeals, their minds are blinded and “made dull” (v. 14, NIV) to spiritual things, their veins are filled with ink, so to speak, they feel self-“sufficient,” though unbeknownst to them they are under condemnation and destined to death. A sinister force has maliciously engineered their baleful condition and fate.

Yet each of them had originally been designed and destined to be beautiful, spectacular, enduring, bearing the image and likeness of their Maker: forgiving, compassionate, merciful, loving, treating the whole of His creation as He would choose to be treated if He were in their place. And He has not forgotten even one of them. He is, among other things, an Artist. His severely wounded hands do not deter His plan to restore each of them to their original design and destiny: hearts sensitive and responsive to every impulse of His Spirit, finding in Him their absolutely reliable sufficiency in a world that has been hijacked by evil, His beautiful law “written [etched] . . . by the Spirit of the living God . . . on [the] tablets of [their] hearts” (v. 3, NKJV), resulting in lives of righteousness as natural as breathing, relating to God and others with no impeding veil of any kind between, and assured of eternal life in a world and universe designed for their happiness.

How does Jesus get them from the one condition to the other? By what mechanism does this transition take place? Simply by His Presence through the agency of His Spirit working among and in them.

First, He “diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place” (2 Cor. 2:14, NKJV). He exposes every human being, regardless of when or where they were born, to “the fragrance of Christ,” the true light, the gospel, in some form recognizable to them as a way out of whatever condition they are in to something better, more “right,” just, enduring (v. 15; John 1:9). He comes through another person, or the Bible or other books, a pamphlet, a dream—He has many ways, but He persistently comes with the gospel in some form.

Second, through whatever multiple means He comes, He continues drawing, inviting, wooing, never forcing, until one either dies in darkness or “turns to the Lord, [and] the veil [of unbelief] is taken away” (2 Cor. 3:16). However eventful, uneventful, or unwelcomed in some cases it may be received on this earth, whenever one “turns to the Lord” there is great celebration in heaven (Luke 15:1–32).

Third, the amazing transformation continues in earnest from marred and hopeless conditions at birth to the original design, “being transformed into the image [of our Maker] from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18, NKJV). How does our beautiful, wounded Artist accomplish such a feat? Not by force, but by His loving Presence, “by the Spirit of the Lord,” (v. 18), continuing to draw us and invite us to behold Him more that we might reflect Him more (translators are divided on whether the Greek text emphasizes “beholding” or “reflecting”; it conveys both). As we continue to behold Him, spending time with Him in study, prayer, conversation, ministry, and sharing Him with others, “the Spirit . . . [of] liberty” sets us free for our own unique personality to emerge while we simultaneously become more and more like Him, reflecting His image and glory! This is the most momentous artistic accomplishment in the universe!

This is the spiritual, experiential message and appeal of 2 Corinthians 3, which can be totally obscured by an interpretation that merely and mistakenly pits the historical old and new covenants against each other.
inSight

Review the memory verse. How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week’s study of the chapter, what are personal applications you are convicted of in your life?

What are practical ramifications of this week’s lesson to others in society?

Read more inSight from the Spirit of Prophecy at www.inversebible.org/cov07-7

REST IN CHRIST

“Consecrate yourself to God in the morning; make this your very first work. Let your prayer be, ‘Take me, O Lord, as wholly Thine. I lay all my plans at Thy feet. Use me today in Thy service. Abide with me, and let all my work be wrought in Thee.’ This is a daily matter. Each morning consecrate yourself to God for that day. Surrender all your plans to Him, to be carried out or given up as His providence shall indicate. Thus day by day you may be giving your life into the hands of God, and thus your life will be molded more and more after the life of Christ.

“A life in Christ is a life of restfulness. There may be no ecstasy of feeling, but there should be an abiding, peaceful trust. Your hope is not in yourself; it is in Christ. Your weakness is united to His strength, your ignorance to His wisdom, your frailty to His enduring might. So you are not to look to yourself, not to let the mind dwell upon self, but look to Christ. Let the mind dwell upon His love, upon the beauty, the perfection, of His character. Christ in His self-denial, Christ in His humiliation, Christ in His purity and holiness, Christ in His matchless love—this is the subject for the soul's contemplation. It is by loving Him, copying Him, depending wholly upon Him, that you are to be transformed into His likeness. . . .

“When Christ took human nature upon Him, He bound humanity to Himself by a tie of love that can never be broken by any power save the choice of man himself. Satan will constantly present allurements to induce us to break this tie—to choose to separate ourselves from Christ. Here is where we need to watch, to strive, to pray, that nothing may entice us to choose another master; for we are always free to do this. But let us keep our eyes fixed upon Christ, and He will preserve us. Looking unto Jesus, we are safe. Nothing can pluck us out of His hand. In constantly beholding Him, we 'are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.' 2 Corinthians 3:18.”

Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, 70–72.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Explain the difference between historical and experiential old/new covenants. What are the dangerous ramifications of confusing the two?

In what ways have you experienced the old covenant experientially? In what ways have you experienced the new covenant experientially?

How is the understanding of the gospel veiled in society and in the world?

How have you experienced the “glory” of the gospel?

How can you understand 2 Corinthians in your own words with your own illustrations?

When have there been clear instances where you saw the character, glory, transformative power, and/or conversion experience in people’s hearts?