

2 Corinthians 3:7

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away:

Analysis

But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away: Paul begins his argument from the lesser to the greater (Hebrew qal wahomer reasoning). The Mosaic law is called **the ministration of death** (Greek hē diakonia tou thanatou, ἡ διακονία τοῦ θανάτου)—not because the law itself is evil, but because it pronounces death on lawbreakers without providing power to obey. **Written and engraven in stones** (Greek en grammata entupōmena lithois, ἐν γράμματα ἐντυπωμένη λίθοις) clearly identifies this as the Decalogue given at Sinai (Exodus 31:18; 34:1).

Yet even this covenant of death **was glorious** (Greek egenēthē en doxē, ἐγενήθη ἐν δόξῃ). Paul references Exodus 34:29-35, where Moses' face shone with reflected divine glory (doxa, δόξα) after receiving the second tablets, so intensely that **the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold** (atenisai, ἀτενίσαι, "to gaze intently") it. The qualifier **which glory was to be done away** (Greek tēn katargoumenēn, τὴν καταργούμενην, "being abolished" or "fading") indicates the temporary nature of that Sinaitic glory. Paul will build on this: if the fading, death-dealing old covenant had glory, how much more the permanent, life-giving new covenant.

Historical Context

The Exodus 34 account describes Moses descending Sinai with the second set of stone tablets after Israel's golden calf apostasy. His face radiated God's glory so brightly that the people feared to approach. This physical manifestation testified to the law's divine origin and holiness. However, Paul interprets the fading of this glory as prophetically significant: the old covenant was never meant to be permanent. Jewish tradition highly honored Moses and the giving of the law; Paul's argument that this glory "was to be done away" would be shocking to Jewish ears, yet he grounds it in Scripture itself.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does Paul's description of the law as the "ministration of death" help you understand why salvation cannot come through law-keeping?
2. If even the temporary, condemning old covenant was glorious, what does this say about God's holiness and the seriousness of sin?
3. How does recognizing that the old covenant glory was designed to fade help you embrace the permanent glory of the new covenant?

Interlinear Text

Εἰ δὲ τὴν διακονία τὴν θανάτου ἐν γράμμασιν
if But which the ministration which of death glorious G1121
G1487 G1161 G3588 G1248 G3588 G2288 G1722

ἐντετυπωμένη ἐν λίθοις ἐγενήθη ἐν δόξαν ὥστε
and engraved glorious stones was glorious the glory so
G1795 G1722 G3037 G1096 G1722 G1391 G5620

μὴ δύνασθαι ἀτενίσαι τὴν υἱὸν τὸν Ισραὴλ εἰς
not could stedfastly behold which that the children of Israel the face
G3361 G1410 G816 G3588 G5207 G2474 G1519

τὴν προσώπου Μωσέως διὰ τὴν δόξαν τὴν προσώπου
which countenance of Moses for which the glory which countenance
G3588 G4383 G3475 G1223 G3588 G1391 G3588 G4383

αὐτοῦ τὴν καταργουμένην
of his which glory was to be done away
G846 G3588 G2673

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 31:18 (References Moses): And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God.

Romans 10:4 (Parallel theme): For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.

1 Corinthians 13:10 (Parallel theme): But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

2 Corinthians 3:6 (Parallel theme): 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 Corinthians 3:3 (Parallel theme): Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.

Exodus 24:12 (References Moses): And the LORD said unto Moses, Come up to me into the mount, and be there: and I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them.

Psalms 119:97 (Parallel theme): O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day.

Romans 4:15 (Parallel theme): Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression.

Acts 6:15 (Parallel theme): And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

Psalms 119:174 (Parallel theme): I have longed for thy salvation, O LORD; and thy law is my delight.