

Covenant or Mystery

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

"Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament;"

Table Of Contents

Introduction	2
2 Corinthians 3:6	4
Old Covenant, New Covenant, and Mystery Differences	6
Israel's Prophetic Program and Its Interruption	12
What does "Able Ministers" mean	14
Reading 2 Corinthians 3:6 Carefully	18
The "Also" of 2 Corinthians 3:6	25
Paul's Defence of His Ministry	26
Key to Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6	28
Paul's God-Given Ability	30
God is Able, Man Is Not	35
Why "Able to Minister the New Testament"	36
Why the New Testament Cannot be the Mystery	39
Why does Paul mention the New Testament?	40
Summary	51
Chart Drawing - New Covenant Timeline	52

Introduction

In 2 Corinthians 3:6, the apostle Paul writes this,

Who (that's God) 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.

For many people, this seems like a perfectly natural confirmation of what most believe, that the church, the Body of Christ today, is under the umbrella of the New Testament that was spoken of by Jesus and was prophesied long before Jesus came into His earthly ministry. The verse becomes troublesome to many people, especially those who have learned to rightly divide the word into its proper dispensations and contexts, as we're instructed to in 2 Timothy 2:15,

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

When we rightly divide the Word of Truth, we cannot help but see that we today in the Body of Christ are not, in fact, under the New Covenant which was given to Israel. Jesus came to Israel in His earthly ministry, born under the law, as Galatians 4:4 says,

But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,

If it is true that we today are not living in the New Covenant or covered by the New Testament, why in the world would Paul say we are in this verse of 2 Corinthians 3:6?

The thing is, he does not say that at all!

Most of us skim this verse without fully understanding the context in which he is speaking. We see the word New Testament and automatically assume that Paul's talking about us all being under the New Testament today.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

Before studying this issue, we should thank the Lord for letting us gather and study His word and ask for His help. Many Christians are confused about the New Covenant, the New Testament and our place in it. But even among Christians who have come to an understanding of where the Covenants fit in our dispensation of grace that we live in today, 2 Corinthians 3:6 can easily lead us into the idea that the great apostle Paul taught that the Body of Christ today is under the "umbrella" of the New Covenant.

Many of us who have learned to rightly divide the Word of truth get confused as to what Paul was actually saying in this verse.

That God made the new covenant with Israel is clear from scripture in Hebrews 8:8, Jeremiah 31:31 and many other places.

Jeremiah 31:33, God speaking,

"But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people."

Does this new covenant get fulfilled in the church, and does Paul teach that in 2 Corinthians 3:3-6 as many assume? Do the Gentiles, saved according to the revelation of the mystery, partake of the prophesied covenant in Jeremiah 31?

We have put this article together with help and inspiration from articles written by Justin Johnson of Grace Ambassadors Church of Greentown, Indiana. We hope to reduce much of the confusion in Christianity today around the Old and New Covenants and the Mystery revealed to Paul directly from Christ for you and me today.

2 Corinthians 3:6

If someone doesn't know anything about the mystery revealed to Paul, this verse never troubles them. But once we learn Paul received information that was kept secret since the world began (Romans 16:25), and that the New Covenant was promised to Israel in prophecy (Jeremiah 31:31), then 2 Corinthians 3:6 becomes a verse that can be confusing if we don't dig in and understand it.

In this verse, Paul says,

Who (that's God) 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.

That's one of only two times Paul uses the phrase "New Testament." Some think this means Paul is preaching Israel's New Covenant and that we today, in the dispensation of grace, are under that New Covenant. But difficult verses don't make clear and plain doctrine wrong. We stand on the simplicity in Christ (2 Cor. 11:3) and build by adding stone upon stone.

We're told in 2 Timothy 2:15-16,

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness.

Rightly dividing the word of truth simply means understanding the progressive, step-by-step plan that God has to deal with mankind in the past, now and in the future. One of the most important conclusions we come to when we rightly divide the Word of Truth is the clear differences between Israel's covenants and the mystery gospel given to Paul.

Despite those clear differences between the covenants and the mystery, Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 3:6 is often used to place the new creature, the Body of Christ, the Church today, back under Israel's new covenant.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

There is no reason revealed in scripture to do this, especially since doing so robs the church of spiritual blessings not found in Israel's covenants.

When Paul says he is an able minister of the New Testament, it is because of what the New Testament and the fellowship of the mystery have in common, namely, they both concern God's gracious provision (sufficiency is the word used in context).

The old and new covenants are both made to Israel, but in the new covenant, God performs where they could not.

It makes perfect sense, then, that the apostle of grace would be an able minister of the new covenant, since grace is what sets the new covenant apart from the old, and it is grace which sets the mystery apart from everything, Israel, the law and the covenants, as 2 Corinthians 5:17 says,

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

How could Paul, or you and I today, correctly teach the mystery of the dispensation of grace, now revealed, if we knew nothing of the Old and New Covenants? We need to be as Paul described in 2 Corinthians 3:6 - "Able Ministers of the New Testament". Only then can we show how critical it is to understand what the Old Testament and the New Testament are and how different they are from the dispensation of grace today.

Old Covenant, New Covenant, and Mystery Differences

The old covenant, the new covenant, and the fellowship of the mystery all describe different ways in which people receive God's blessings.

Ignoring those differences causes people to claim blessings or curses belonging to someone else, while missing blessings belonging to them. This, in turn, causes people to turn to religious behaviours they think bring about God's blessing.

What are the differences between the old covenant, the new covenant, and the fellowship of the mystery?

The Old Covenant

Let's start with the old covenant, or the Law of Moses. This law was intended to be a blessing to the world through Israel's separation and obedience.

The law was declared to be Israel's righteousness if they performed all that God instructed. It would also be a curse if they disobeyed, and it was this part that Israel would learn the hard way. They could not keep the law, and so they required a multitude of sacrifices to cover their sin.

Israel as a channel of God's blessing was not done away with by their failure to keep the law.

God had made promises to the fathers of Israel, Abraham, Issac, Jacob and King David, to make Israel the nation through which the world would be blessed. The promises of God cannot be revoked because Israel did not fulfil them by their own power.

To summarise the Old Covenant;

- Israel is a nation separate from the Gentiles
- The law was given for Israel to obey
- It was a Covenant to make Israel the channel of blessing to the world.

New Covenant

Israel was given promises from God to be the nation through which the world would be blessed. The old and new covenants were both intended to fulfil this promise. This is why both the old and new covenants are made with the house of Israel and Judah, as we see in Jeremiah 31:31 and Hebrews 8:10-11.

Both the old covenant and the new covenant include the law, priests, a kingdom, and sacrifices for sin. Both were intended to provide the blessing of the world through Israel.

Both are the subject of prophecy and were not part of God's mystery kept secret since the world began.

The new covenant was made better for Israel in that God would perform all that they could not do on their own. He Himself would be the better priest, and He would give the Spirit to cause them to keep the law, and He would send Christ to establish the kingdom.

The new covenant is merely the old covenant blessing, the promises to the fathers, made possible through the provision of God (John 1:17).

Whereas the old covenant emphasised man's performance, the new covenant was God performing for Israel what they could not. The old covenant failed to fulfil the promises, but the new would not fail, as we see in Hebrews 8:7-10,

For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second.

For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah:

Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people:

So to compare the Old and the New Covenants;

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

Old Covenant	New Covenant
Israel must perform on their own	God's grace for Israel to perform by the Spirit
Israel is a nation separate from the Gentiles	Israel is a nation separate from the Gentiles
The law given to obey	The law written on their hearts to obey (Jer 31:33)
Covenant to make Israel the channel of blessing to the world	Covenant to make Israel the channel of blessing to the world

The Fellowship of the Mystery

Since the new covenant described God's performance on behalf of Israel, many are confused by the difference between the new covenant and the fellowship of the mystery. They both require God's grace, and so many think, based on that, they are the same thing.

The difference is critical!

The new covenant is God's blessing of grace through Israel, their covenants, and their law written in their hearts. The fellowship of the mystery is God's grace given to all, both Jew and Gentile, freely without Israel, without their earthly covenants, and without their law written in their hearts.

Whereas under the old covenant God was the lawgiver, and under the new covenant God in Christ was the lawkeeper, under the fellowship of the mystery God in Christ is the law *remover*, and we see that clearly in Romans 6:14, Colossians 2:14 and many other places in Paul's epistles.

Whereas the old covenant was given to all Israel, and the new covenant was given to believing Israel, the fellowship of the mystery is for all that believe the gospel of Christ: Jew or Gentile (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:15; Col 3:11). There is no place in the one body of the mystery for a separation between Israel and Gentiles.

The old and new covenants are the subject of prophecy to fulfil God's promise of blessing through Israel, but the fellowship of the mystery was *not* revealed in any promise from God since the world began, which we see in Romans 16:25.

The fellowship of the mystery is not the fulfilment of any covenant, prophecy, or promise given to Israel. The dispensation of grace was hid in God until revealed to the apostle Paul for the church today (Eph 3:1-2; Eph 3:9-11).

Here is a comparison between the New Covenant and the Mystery;

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

New Covenant	Fellowship of the Mystery
God's grace for Israel to perform by the Spirit	God's grace to all <i>without</i> Israel
Israel is a nation separate from the Gentiles	Israel is fallen; no Jew nor Gentile in the Body of Christ
The law written on their hearts to obey	Blessing <i>without</i> the law; Not under the law; walk by the Spirit
Covenant to make Israel the channel of blessing to the world	All spiritual blessings in Christ <i>without</i> covenants for a kingdom, nation, circumcision, or priesthood.

Despite the clear differences between the covenants and the mystery, Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 3:6 is often used to place the new creature, the Body of Christ, back under Israel's new covenant.

The correct reading of 2 Corinthians 3:6, in the context of all that Paul had been teaching up until that verse, does not lead to that conclusion. Sadly, believing that we today are back under Israel's new covenant robs the church of spiritual blessings not found in Israel's covenants.

When Paul says he is an able minister of the New Testament, it is because of what the New Testament and the fellowship of the mystery have in common, namely, they both concern God's gracious provision. *Sufficiency* is the word used in the verse's context.

The old and new covenants are both made to Israel, but in the new covenant, God performs where they could not.

Once the differences between the old covenant, the new covenant, and the fellowship of the mystery are understood, then we can see and appreciate the riches of God's grace according to the revelation of the mystery.

Grace and faith were always necessary to receive blessings from God, but today grace stands alone in the fellowship of the mystery without Israel, the law, or covenants as the way God blesses the world.

Grace can stand alone because of the fellowship of the mystery of Christ, which is different from the old and new covenants.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

So it makes perfect sense that the apostle of grace, Paul, would be an "able minister" of the new covenant, since grace is what sets the new covenant apart from the old, and it is grace which sets the mystery apart from everything (Israel, the law, the covenants – 2 Cor 5:17).

Israel's Prophetic Program and Its Interruption

Christ died, rose, and ascended into heaven, and 50 days later, the Holy Spirit came on the Jewish feast of Pentecost in Acts 2.

Israel stood on the very verge of her prophetic fulfilment, where they would be filled with the Holy Spirit, and God would put his law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts.

Joel chapter 2, Jeremiah 31:31, Ezekiel 36 and many other New Testament prophecies were about to take place, heralding in the long prophesied kingdom of heaven. All Israel was required to do was believe. Believe what God said, the gospel of the kingdom, believe what the Holy Spirit had offered and believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah.

They did not believe!

They rejected God and His Word, rejected the Holy Spirit, rejected the Messiah and the apostles the messiah had appointed to preach the good news that the kingdom of heaven was at hand.

The final act of rebellion against God happened in Acts chapter 7 with the stoning to death of the devout Stephen, who gave Israel their complete history of rebellion and disobedience to God in one amazing speech.

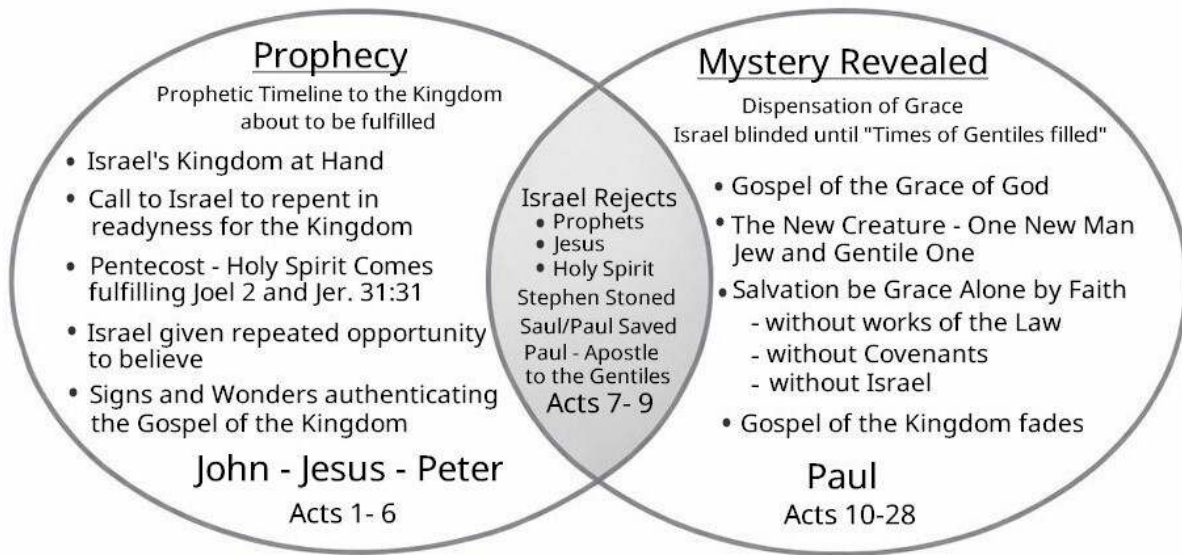
As a result of Israel's rebellion and unbelief, God interrupted the prophesied plan for the kingdom.

In Acts 9, Christ saved the great persecutor of all those who believed, Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul. Christ commissioned him as the Apostle to the Gentiles and revealed a mystery to him that God had kept secret since before the world began. Making that mystery known to all men was Paul's commission.

By Acts 28, the gospel of the kingdom had faded away to be replaced by Paul's gospel. The book of Acts is a transitional book showing this changing of God's program.

Israel had rejected the message, and salvation went to the Gentiles. That's what we see on the timeline included in this booklet and the image below.

Acts Transition



The mystery church is not the New Covenant church.

The New Covenant was promised to Israel and Judah (Jeremiah 31:31–33). Hebrews 8 quotes Jeremiah and says Christ is the mediator of that better covenant, but it is still Israel's covenant.

What does “Able Ministers” mean

So why does Paul say in 2 Corinthians 3:6, "God hath made us able ministers of the new testament?" It's because he is ministering the spiritual truth behind it — not the covenant itself. The New Covenant has two parts:

1. The letter — written laws, commandments, stones.
2. The Spirit — God writing His law in Israel's heart in the kingdom.

Paul says he "ministers not the letter, but the Spirit. The letter kills because the law condemns. The Spirit gives life because Christ gives righteousness apart from the law. Paul is not saying the Body of Christ is under Israel's covenant. He is saying his ministry is of the Spirit, not of the letter — the same contrast he teaches in Romans 7 and Romans 8.

The problem comes when people assume “New Testament” always means “New Covenant.” But Paul uses the phrase to describe the spiritual ministry, not the covenant contract. The covenant belongs to Israel. The Spirit belongs to all who are in Christ.

The clear doctrines stand:

- The mystery was kept secret (Romans 16:25).
- The New Covenant was prophesied (Jeremiah 31).
- The Body of Christ is not Israel.
- We walk in the Spirit, not the letter (Romans 7:6).
- The letter kills; the Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6).

So Paul is not placing us, the Body of Christ, under Israel's covenant. He is explaining that his ministry is spiritual, not legal. The Spirit gives life to Jew and Gentile alike through Christ's finished work, apart from the law. That is the heart of grace.

Paul says God made him an able minister of the New Testament, yet he also teaches the mystery of Christ kept secret since the world began. The New Covenant was not a mystery. It was spoken by the prophets (Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, Deuteronomy, Psalms and other places). Hebrews 8 quotes Jeremiah directly: “I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” So the New Covenant is prophecy; the mystery is not. That's the starting point.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

So how can Paul minister the New Testament and still preach the mystery? The answer is simple once you see the timeline.

- Old Testament – Christ was born under the law.
- Christ's death – Hebrews 9 says a testament begins only after the testator dies.
- New Covenant dedicated – Christ's blood (Matthew 26:28).
- Acts 2–7– New Covenant offered to Israel; Israel rejects it.
- Acts 9 – Christ reveals the mystery to Paul: salvation to all without Israel.
- Acts 28 – Israel officially set aside; salvation sent to Gentiles.

Christ came to bring salvation to Israel. He dedicated the New Covenant with His blood. Israel rejected it. Because Israel rejected their salvation, God revealed a new way—the mystery—salvation to all without Israel. That is the story of the New Testament books.

This is why Paul can “minister the New Testament.” He is not placing the Body of Christ under Israel's covenant. He is ministering the truth about Christ's work, which explains why the mystery was needed. If Paul could not minister what Christ did for Israel, he could not explain why salvation went to the Gentiles apart from Israel.

Why other positions fail:

Covenant Reformed:

They say Israel = the Church. So the New Covenant is ours. This denies the literal reading of Jeremiah 31 and forces them to say the mystery wasn't really hidden.

Acts 2 Dispensational:

They say the Church is “under the umbrella” of the New Covenant. This pushes mystery truth back into Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and Hebrews, contradicting Paul's claim that the mystery was kept secret.

Acts 28 Dispensational:

They say Paul didn't preach the mystery until after Acts 28. This throws out half of Paul's epistles and invents two bodies, two ministries, two revelations. Scripture never teaches this.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

None of these solves the problem. They avoid it.

The solution lies in the understanding of what happened in Acts chapter 9

Paul ministers the spiritual truth behind the New Covenant—not the covenant itself.

The New Covenant has two parts:

- Letter – written laws, commandments, stones.
- Spirit – God writing His law in Israel's heart in the kingdom.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:6 that he ministers “not of the letter, but of the Spirit.”

He ministers the Spirit, not the covenant contract.

The letter kills because the law condemns.

The Spirit gives life because Christ gives righteousness apart from the law.

Paul is describing the nature of his ministry, not the covenant.

Why does this matter?

If we put the Church under the New Covenant, we lose the riches of the mystery—all spiritual blessings in Christ without a covenant. A covenant is a contract between God and us. The mystery gives us Christ Himself, directly, freely, fully.

Many people know “Paul had a mystery,” but cannot explain:

- what the New Covenant actually is,
- what the mystery actually is,
- how the two relate to each other,
- why Paul quotes the prophets,
- Why do Romans 2, 3, 4, 9–11 talk about Israel?

All these questions come from the same misunderstanding.

It is not wrong to struggle with 2 Corinthians 3:6. It means we understand the difference between prophecy and mystery. Once we see the timeline and Christ's purpose for Israel and the world, the verse is no problem at all.

Paul ministers the Spirit, not Israel's covenant.

He explains Christ's work, not Israel's contract.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

He preaches the mystery, not the New Covenant.

That is the solution.

Reading 2 Corinthians 3:6 Carefully

Acts-2 teachers, who believe the Church began at Pentecost and is under the New Covenant, have no problem with 2 Corinthians 3:6. To them, mystery = prophecy, Paul = Peter, Israel = the Church, and everything is one program. So when Paul says he is a “minister of the New Testament,” they simply say, “Of course—because the Church is Israel.” No difficulty at all.

But if we struggle with this verse, it means we already know something important:

Paul's mystery is different from Israel's prophecy.

It also means we still have more to learn—and that's fine.

Many passages raise similar questions once we understand that the Word of truth must be rightly divided. For example:

- Galatians 1 — Paul preached “the faith he once destroyed.” What faith was that?
- Galatians 4 — Paul uses the law to teach an allegory.
- Ephesians 2 — We are in God's household “built on the apostles and prophets.”
- Acts 28:31 — Paul preached “the kingdom of God.” Does that mean he preached the gospel of the kingdom? No. “Kingdom of God” is not the same as “gospel of the kingdom.”

People see a word—kingdom, New Testament, Abraham, law—and jump to simplistic conclusions. They throw away everything they know about the mystery because of one verse. That's careless.

Romans to Philemon is not all about you and me!

Paul wrote thirteen epistles. The mystery is found only in those epistles, but not everything in those epistles is about the Body of Christ. Paul also explains:

- how God can save sinners (the question Job, Moses, and David asked),
- how Israel will be saved (Romans 9–11),

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

- how Christ fulfilled the law,
- how the prophets witnessed to God's righteousness.

The mystery explains how God can save all men. That truth is relevant to Israel, Gentiles, and the whole Bible. So of course, Paul sometimes speaks to Israel, quotes the prophets, and explains their promises. That doesn't mean we are under their covenant.

We are "able ministers of the New Testament" because we preach Christ.

Without Christ's New Covenant blood, there is no salvation for Israel, and without Israel's rejection of that salvation, there is no revelation of the mystery. Paul must explain both. That's why he can minister the New Testament in a spiritual way, not in a covenant-law way.

Paul says: "Who also hath made us able ministers of the New Testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit."

Notice what the verse does NOT say:

- It does NOT say, "We are ministers of the New Testament."

Right here is where you can say that this is the ultimate hair-splitting, but that hair-splitting, if not defined properly, can lead us into areas of assumptions that are a long way from the actual meaning that was intended in the whole context.

When we read that verse, we can easily conclude that we are ministers of the New Testament, but the verse doesn't actually say that.

It's possible, when reading this passage, to totally miss the words, "*who also hath made us able*"; and those words have everything to do with the context and the point of the verse.

Most of us skim over that. He doesn't say, "we are ministers of the New Testament".

The verse says,

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.

ALL those words are meaningful. When we just extract, "we're ministers of the New Testament" from the context, we can go all sorts of different directions that the chapter's not even talking about.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

We'll deal more later with the all-important four-word phrase *"not of the letter,"* which he says after he says, *"able minister of the New Testament"*. For now, we want to point out that he says *"...of the New Testament, not of the letter"*. He's qualifying something. It's not the *letter* of the New Testament that he's ministering. What does that mean?

The first word of the verse says *"who"*. Well, who's that? Who's the *"who"*? God, that's who the *"who"* is.

He's been talking about God for the last six verses. Read the passage carefully from verse one. He's talking about letters of commendation, right? Do we need letters, epistles of commendation?

In verse two, he says, *"ye are our Epistle."* You, the Corinthians he's writing to, are Paul's epistle. His letter of recommendation is the Corinthians themselves, *"written in our hearts, known and read of all men"*.

Verse 3 (2 Corinthians 3:3) continues with,
"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".

Who wrote the Epistle to the Corinthians? The Holy Spirit of God! Paul asks them, "You want proof that I'm ministering Christ?" Look at yourselves. You're the proof. You are Christians. You're saved by Christ and His grace. And *you're* the epistle of commendation. You're the recommendation letter. And who wrote that letter? Paul says, I didn't write it. Paul says God wrote it. If you're saved, you're saved by God. You're not saved by Paul. And so the letter of Christ in you, on your heart, was written by the Holy Spirit.

Paul uses that as evidence that when he ministered the gospel of Christ to them, that made him a minister of Christ, because otherwise you wouldn't have Christ at all. Paul's not glorifying himself. In fact, he says in the next verses 2 Corinthians 3:4-5,

*And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward:
Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God;*

"Not that we are sufficient of ourselves."

Our sufficiency is of God. Paul says, "I'm not able to save anybody.

And so if you're saved, it's because of God. And didn't I preach the gospel to you by which you are saved?"

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

So all that proves is that it's not that Paul is so great. He doesn't have the sufficiency, but he is a minister of Christ. And so that's an important thing to consider. Paul's talking about the sufficiency. He says God hath done it. He's done something. And in this verse, he says, God also hath made us able ministers of the New Testament. God's done something. Look at Ephesians 3:7. Paul mentions this very statement,

Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.

He says God made us able ministers in a certain way.

The focus is on ability, not membership in a covenant.

And Paul immediately qualifies that in our verse in 2 Corinthians 3:6 with the words: *"Not of the letter."*

There's a word play going on here that we need to see.

Paul says he ministers the New Testament *not of the letter*, meaning not the covenant contract, not the stone-written law, not Israel's legal terms.

He ministers the Spirit, the life that comes through Christ's finished work.

There are four rules for handling difficult verses.

1. Know the context. Don't isolate one phrase. Read the chapter.
2. Don't change the verse. Let it say what it says. Don't force it to fit a system.
3. Don't change what you already know to be true. One hard-to-grasp verse cannot overthrow dozens of clear ones.
4. Define the terms. What is the New Testament? What is the mystery? What is "letter"? What is "spirit"?

Once we define the terms, the problem disappears.

Paul is not saying the Church is under Israel's New Covenant.

He is saying God made him able to minister the spiritual truth behind it—not the letter, not the covenant, but the Spirit, because the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. So when Paul says, "who also hath made us able ministers," he means God did something. God made Paul able. God made the Corinthians able.

God wrote the epistle in their hearts. God empowered the ministry. This is the theme of the whole chapter, as it is in Ephesians 3:7. God made him a minister by grace.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

Now the point is that just because God made him an able minister of the New Testament doesn't mean he's preaching that the church is under that New Testament. A homely example would be that if you were a gardener who knows a lot about growing roses, does that stop you from growing pansies? Does it mean that every time you go into the garden, you can only ever do things associated with roses?

In 1 Timothy 1:12-12, Paul says,

And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.

And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

Paul wasn't faithful before salvation—he was a blasphemer, a persecutor and injurious. Injurious is described by Thayer's concordance as one who, uplifted with pride, either heaps insulting language upon others or does them some shameful act of wrong.

Yet Christ put him in the ministry by mercy and grace.

In 2 Timothy 1:11, Paul says,

Whereunto I am appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles.

God appointed him. God enabled him. God empowered him.

In 2 Corinthians 2:14–16, Paul says,

Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place.

For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish:

To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?

For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.

God “always causes us to triumph in Christ.”

God makes the gospel a savour of life or death. God is the one who is sufficient.

Paul is simply preaching what God wrote.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

So when we reach 2 Corinthians 3:6 and read, “*who also hath made us able ministers of the New Testament*,” we must notice the word “*also*”. God did something before this. Paul says God wrote the epistle in their hearts. God made him sufficient. God caused the triumph. God enabled him. God appointed him. **Also**, or in addition to all that—God made him an able minister of the New Testament.

This means we cannot rip the phrase “*ministers of the New Testament*” out of the verse and ignore the context. Paul is not saying, “We are ministers of Israel’s covenant.” He is saying, “God made us able ministers,” and he immediately qualifies it: “*not of the letter, but of the Spirit.*”

The whole point of the verse is God’s enabling, not covenant membership. Paul is explaining how he ministers, not what covenant he administers.

We also need to see how, if Paul did not know of Israel’s prophesied New Covenant, it would be impossible for him to write his thirteen epistles about the mystery. The mystery, the One New Man, the Church, the Body of Christ, this dispensation of grace is only a reality because of Israel’s unbelief and rejection of the New Covenant at and after Pentecost.

Paul was well able to minister the new covenant that he clearly knew so well from his incredible religious education. But now he’s delivering the revelation of the mystery that God gave to him directly through Christ, beginning in Acts chapter 9.

Paul’s point in this section is simple: God is the one doing the work.

The same God who saved the Corinthians also made Paul able.

People tend to skip all that and jump straight to the words “New Testament,” and in doing so miss the whole point. Paul, in this passage of scripture, is showing the Corinthians that his ministry is God-given, not self-made.

They questioned his apostleship, comparing him to Peter, James, and John. Paul couldn’t claim he followed Jesus for years or waited at Pentecost.

He was persecuting the church when Christ saved him. So his only proof is what God did: their salvation, the signs, the Spirit’s work, and the fact that God made him able.

Paul repeats this truth throughout his letters:

-Ephesians 3:7 — “I was made a minister... by the effectual working of His power.”

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

- 1 Timothy 1:12 — “Christ Jesus... ****enabled me****, putting me into the ministry,” even though Paul was a blasphemer and persecutor.
- 2 Timothy 1:11 — “I am ****appointed**** a preacher” of the gospel that brings life and immortality to light.

Paul didn’t earn ministry. God appointed him. God empowered him. God enabled him.

So when Paul says God “also” made him an able minister of the New Testament, the word “also” matters. It connects this statement to everything he said God already did in the previous verses—saving the Corinthians, writing on their hearts, making Paul sufficient, causing triumph. “Also” means this is *another* work of God, not a separate covenant Paul is placed under.

This leads to a key question: Who else ministers the New Testament?

Peter, James, and John did. They were obvious ministers of Israel’s New Covenant. But Paul says he also was made an able minister. That’s why he must explain the New Testament in this chapter more clearly than Hebrews does—because he understands the spirit of it through the mystery of Christ. This leads to a key question: Who else ministers the New Testament?

The “Also” of 2 Corinthians 3:6

Who else ministers the New Testament?

Peter, James, and John did. They were obvious ministers of Israel's New Covenant. But Paul says he also was made an able minister. That's why he must explain the New Testament in this chapter more clearly than Hebrews does—because he understands the spirit of it through the mystery of Christ. If Paul were preaching the same covenant as Peter, he wouldn't need to say “also.” The Corinthians doubted Paul, not Peter. Paul must show that God Himself made him able, even though his background was opposite to that of the twelve.

Some try to solve 2 Corinthians 3:6 by saying Paul wrote Hebrews. That would make the problem disappear—but it's not true. Hebrews places its author inside the Pentecostal group, and Paul wasn't there. Others try to solve it by throwing Hebrews out entirely. That's the easy way, but not the right way.

The right way is to read the verse carefully. Paul does NOT say, “We are ministers of the New Testament.” He says God made us able ministers—not of the letter, but of the Spirit and that qualification matters. He is not ministering Israel's covenant contract. He is ministering the Spirit, the life that comes through Christ.

Paul's point in this passage is that God is doing the work, not Paul. In 2 Corinthians 3, God wrote the Corinthians' “epistle” on their hearts by the Spirit. God saved them. God made Paul sufficient. God caused the triumph. God gave the savour of life and death. Then Paul says, “who also hath made us able ministers.” The same God who saved them also made Paul able.

Peter, James, and John were obvious ministers of Israel's New Covenant. When Paul met with Peter, James, and John in Acts 15, he says they “added nothing” to him. He already understood what Christ gave them. But they learned something from him—the gospel of the uncircumcision, the mystery kept secret. They knew the gospel of the circumcision; Paul knew both. So Paul must be able to minister the New Testament spiritually, because the mystery builds on and supersedes it. Without the intimate knowledge of the New Testament that Paul obviously would have had, he could never minister the mystery.

Paul's Defence of His Ministry

In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul is defending his apostleship. He warns about false apostles coming to the Corinthians with deception and lies.

In 2 Corinthians 11:3-4, we read,

But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him.

Paul fears for these people whom he had suffered so much for to bring them into the knowledge of the truth.

What were these deceivers saying?

The whole passage of 2 Corinthians 11-12 makes it obvious that these deceivers were trying to corrupt what Paul had taught them, and one of the tools they were using was defamation, defaming Paul, what Paul told them and even Paul's credentials. They were trying to belittle him and make themselves more qualified, more able to feed these Corinthians the truth about God.

Paul then answers what these people had used to turn the Corinthians away from what he had taught them.

In verse 5 (2 Corinthians 11:5), we read,

For I suppose I was not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles.

They had tried to say that Paul was no comparison to the Jewish apostles who were still preaching the kingdom gospel. He answers by saying that he was no less than these great apostles, and Galatians 2 proves that to us. The great Jewish apostles added nothing to Paul, but he taught them! He taught them of the mystery gospel of grace given by Christ to him for the Gentiles so well that the chief apostles, Peter, etc., accepted both him and his gospel.

2 Corinthians 11:6

But though I be rude in speech, yet not in knowledge; but we have been thoroughly made manifest among you in all things.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

They attacked the fact that he did not speak eloquently, like his accusers obviously did. It didn't matter to Paul because he wasn't concerned with meeting people's standards for a "polished" or "entertaining" speaker; he was concerned with faithfully preaching the gospel. Paul answers by saying, "Sure, I'm pretty ordinary at public speaking, but I know what I'm talking about."

Next verse, 2 Corinthians 11:7,

Have I committed an offence in abasing myself that ye might be exalted, because I have preached to you the gospel of God freely?

In the culture of that day, if a public speaker didn't take money for his speaking, he was often disregarded as a poor speaker, with worthless teaching, or was strictly an amateur. Paul's defamers were pointing this out, but Paul didn't care about the opinion of others when it came to his heart for preaching the gospel without being accused of doing it for money.

Then the next verse, 2 Corinthians 11:8,

I robbed other churches, taking wages of them, to do you service.

Paul is referring to the fact that he received support from Christians in other cities during his time in Corinth. He could say he robbed those other churches in the sense that, by right, the Corinthian Christians should have supported him when he ministered to their spiritual needs (1 Corinthians 9:4-11). Instead, Paul was a burden to no one among the Corinthian Christians.

2 Corinthians 11:13,

For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ.

Here, Paul comes straight to the crux.

Without sarcasm, he plainly calls his detractors in Corinth (or at least the leaders among them) false apostles and deceitful workers.

Few modern Christians want to deal with the fact that there are still false apostles and deceitful workers among us. Nevertheless, they were clearly there in Paul's day, as they are today in abundance.

Who were these deceivers?

Key to Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

To understand 2 Corinthians 3:6, we must read the first eight chapters. Paul's whole point is that God is doing the work, not Paul. God saved the Corinthians. God wrote His word on their hearts by the Spirit. God made Paul sufficient. God caused the triumph. God gave the savour of life and death. Then Paul says, "who also hath made us able ministers." The same God who saved them also made Paul able.

We can't just jump straight to the words "New Testament" and miss the point of what's being said. Paul is defending his apostleship to people comparing him to Peter, James, and John. Paul couldn't claim he followed Jesus or waited at Pentecost. He was persecuting the church when Christ saved him. So his only proof is what God did: the Corinthians' salvation, the Spirit's work, and the fact that God made him able.

Peter, James, and John were ministers of the New Testament. So Paul must also be able to minister it—*not the covenant letter, but the spiritual truth behind it. Galatians 2 shows this clearly. When Paul met them in Acts 15, he says they "added nothing" to him. He already understood what Christ gave them. But they learned something from him, the gospel of the uncircumcision, the mystery kept secret. They knew the gospel of the circumcision; Paul knew both. So Paul must be able to minister the New Testament spiritually, because the mystery builds on and supersedes it.

This is why Paul says "also." God saved the Corinthians, wrote on their hearts, made Paul sufficient—and also made him an able minister. "Also" ties this to everything God already did. It does not mean Paul is under Israel's covenant. It means God enabled him to minister the Spirit, not the letter.

Paul didn't earn ministry. God appointed him. God empowered him. God enabled him.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

2 Corinthians 11:22 tells us that they were Hebrews, and Paul answers their claim that this makes them better qualified to teach Christ than he is.

Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I.

Paul's human ancestry was more than enough to qualify him as an apostle. Not only was he the seed of Abraham, but he was also of the Israelites. Not only was he of the Israelites, but he was also of the Hebrews, meaning he was a Jew of Judean descent, as opposed to Jews who were from elsewhere.

Paul's God-Given Ability

Not a great deal is known about Paul and this is absolutely to be expected because his entire ministry is about exalting Christ and he goes to great pains not to exalt himself. As a result, he only reveals enough to make us see that he knows what he's talking about.

Paul, known by his Hebrew name of Saul before his conversion, was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin.

He grew up in Tarsus of Cilicia (Acts 21:39), meaning his parents were Judean Jews who moved to Tarsus either before or after Paul was born.

His education has two phases: his background as a Pharisee and his revelation in Christ.

Paul's religious education, before his conversion on the road to Damascus, included rigorous formal rabbinic training studying under the renowned Jewish scholar Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).

He received extensive training in the Torah, the Prophets, and the oral Jewish traditions. This gave him a razor-sharp ability to analyse scripture, debate, and articulate complex theological arguments.

Few could boast such an education.

Paul, then Saul, was a vicious persecutor of the early church, those who believed in "The Way". These believers were not known as Christians.

Believers in Christ were first called Christians in the city of Antioch, during Paul and Barnabas' ministry there. This is recorded in Acts 11:26, where Luke writes: *"And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.."*

We can maybe understand Paul's viewpoint formed from his rigorous training in Jewish scripture but just like the Pharisees and the Sadducees that so fiercely rejected Jesus as the Messiah, the arrogance of their education blinded them from the reality that was presented to them through prophecy and the signs and wonders that could only have come from God.

He was on a journey to Damascus where he intended to persecute more of the believers of "The Way" when the risen Christ intercepted him and miraculously saved him (Acts 9:3–6).

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

He then spent three years in Arabia being taught directly by Christ, (Galatians 1:17). This gave him both intellectual mastery of the scriptures (only the Old Testament existed at the time, of course) and spiritual revelation.

After his three years in Arabia receiving revelation from Christ, he met Peter and James (Galatians 1:18–19), and they confirmed the message, now burning within him and consuming him.

Christ continued to educate Paul through suffering and by his commission as the apostle to the Gentiles, a chosen instrument who would carry His name and endure so much for it (Acts 9:15–16).

Paul describes this inner schooling as Christ being formed in him (Galatians 4:19) and the Spirit revealing the deep things of God (1 Corinthians 2:10–13). From the most commonly accepted dates of Paul's letters, 1 Thessalonians was the first letter Paul wrote so there is an approximate time span of 14 years between Paul's conversion and 1 Thessalonians. Paul's education in Christ was by revelation from Christ Himself in solitary, confirmed in fellowship, and proven in obedience.

Paul knows very well that his blood ancestry and his formal Jewish education does not make him an apostle or a servant of Jesus, but his accusers either said or implied that it was important. 2 Corinthians 11:23 says, *Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft.*

Knowing the silliness of this, Paul opens his remarks here with "I speak as a fool." He's making a point to expose the foolishness of the arguments his detractors are making.

They claimed to be ministers of Christ, obviously inferring that Paul wasn't. When they used this term, it probably sounded like an honoured, privileged title, much like preachers today who say that God called them to be preachers and teachers.

Paul will also claim to be among the ministers of Christ, but he will explain that he means something far different from what the detractors meant.

They had inflated the idea of a minister to make it an exalted, privileged role. Paul had no problem with the title minister, but he had a big problem with the understanding of the title promoted by those deceivers that the Corinthian Christians had received and listened to.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

So when Paul says God made him an able minister of the New Testament, he is not claiming equality with the twelve apostles that Jesus appointed—he is claiming God-given ability to minister the Spirit behind the New Covenant, because the mystery reveals God's more excellent purpose.

Paul is not boasting in the flesh—he already said fleshly credentials mean nothing. He is showing that his apostleship is greater because God gave him a ministry that surpasses what came before. He withstood Peter to the face for that very reason.

In the following verses from 2 Corinthians 11:24 to well into chapter 12, Paul explains what qualifies him to be called a minister of Christ, and it's far different from what the detractors would claim as their qualifications.

Some try to solve 2 Corinthians 3:6 by saying Paul wrote Hebrews. That would make the problem disappear—but it's not true. Others throw Hebrews out entirely. That's the easy way, but not the right way. The right way is to read the verse carefully.

Paul does not say, "We are ministers of the New Testament."
He says God made us able ministers—not of the letter, but of the Spirit.

Paul keeps showing that God is the one who does the work, not man. Hebrews calls Christ the "author and finisher," and Paul understands why God had to give the New Testament to Israel and then give grace to all. Israel rejected the New Covenant, so God revealed the mystery, which is the abundance of His grace to all men.

In Galatians 3:2, Paul asks,

... Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?

The Galatians had the Spirit. The Corinthians had the Spirit. You and I have the Spirit if we are saved. Did God give us the Spirit because we worked for it? Because we prayed loudly enough? Because we were baptised? No. We received the Spirit by faith, not works. That is the point of 2 Corinthians 3:3—God wrote the epistle of Christ on our hearts by the Spirit.

So when Paul says God "*made us able ministers*," he is talking about God's sufficiency, not man's ability. "Able" means qualified, empowered, sufficient. The whole Bible teaches this simple truth: we can't—God can.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

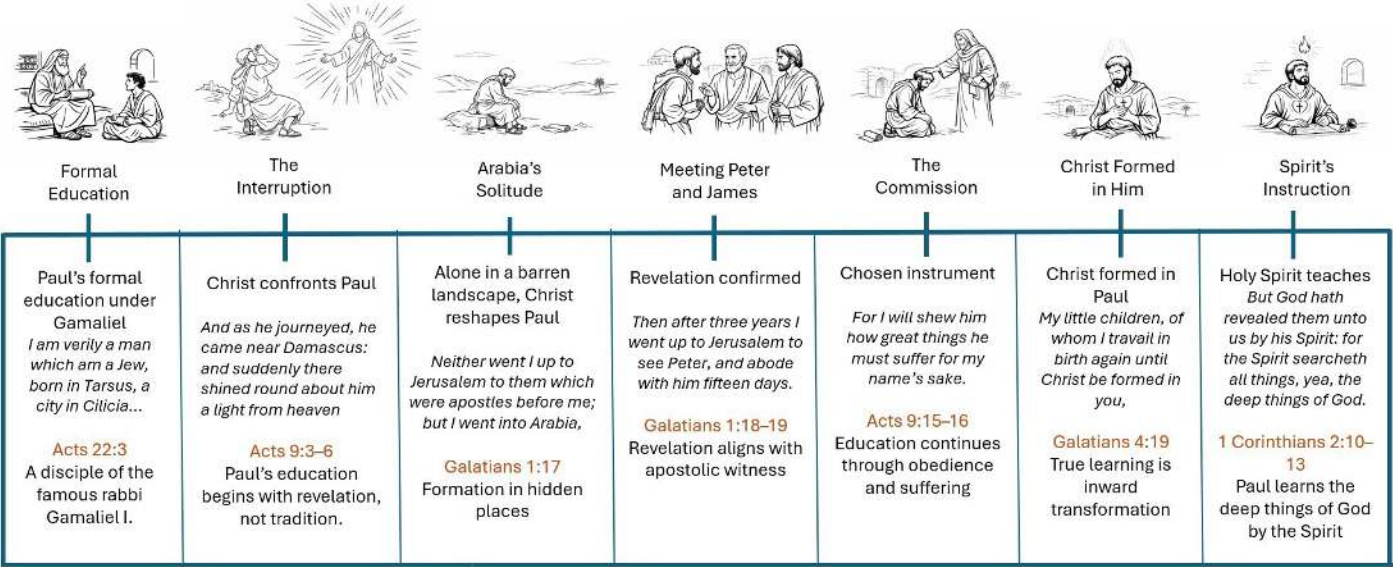
Man is unable; God is able. The law said, “Do these things,” and man said, “I can’t.” The New Covenant said, “I will give you My Spirit,” because man still couldn’t. The mystery says, “You were never given a covenant at all, yet God saves you by grace.” In every case, God is the one who does it.

This is why Paul must be an able minister of the New Testament. If he didn’t understand God’s sufficiency to save Israel, he couldn’t explain God’s sufficiency to save all men *without* Israel. The mystery builds on and surpasses the New Covenant. We understand Israel’s salvation because we understand grace, and grace is the heart of both programs.

People accuse grace believers of saying Peter was saved by works. No—nobody is saved by works. The mystery teaches that plainly. Israel had laws and covenants, but those were added things. The real reason they will be saved is God, not their performance. The Spirit does the work, not them. So Paul says we are “able ministers of the New Testament because of our knowledge of the mystery.”

Without verse 6, people would make all kinds of mistakes—thinking we should never speak about Israel’s salvation or God’s sufficiency for them. But Paul says the mystery reveals God’s will so we can understand how all things in heaven and on earth will be brought together in Christ.

Timeline of Paul's Education



Press or click on the image to open a larger version

God is Able, Man Is Not

So, the last point Paul makes is the main point of the whole passage: man is not able; God is able. The law was the administration of death because it relied on human ability. The New Covenant brings the Spirit because man cannot keep the law. The mystery brings grace because Gentiles had nothing at all. In every case, God does the work.

1 Corinthians 15:8–10,

"I am the least of the apostles... but by the grace of God I am what I am."

His apostleship is a testimony to God's ability. Your salvation is a testimony to God's ability. Your position in Christ is a testimony to God's ability. Everything you are in Christ is because He is able, not you.

That is Paul's message: you can't—God can, and He did.

Paul often speaks about Israel, prophecy, the Old Testament, and the New Testament—Romans 2, Galatians 4, Romans 9–11. That does not mean he is under Israel's covenant. It means he understands why God gave those covenants and why they were insufficient. You cannot preach the mystery unless you understand what came before it. You cannot say something was "kept secret" unless you know what was first revealed.

This raises the question: "How can we minister something we are not in?"

Simple answer: You *can* minister something without being part of it.

- A pastor can minister marriage without being inside someone's marriage.
- A Minister of Education doesn't have to be in school.
- A welfare minister doesn't have to qualify for welfare.
- An ambassador ministers to a foreign nation without being a citizen of it.

Likewise, we can minister the New Testament because God has given us higher revelation—the mystery of His will (Ephesians 1). We understand God's whole purpose, both heaven and earth. We understand why the Old Testament failed, why the New Testament was promised, why Israel rejected it, and why God revealed the mystery.

Why "Able to Minister the New Testament"

Peter, James, and John were ministers of the New Testament. Paul met them in Acts 15 and he explains the results of that meeting in Galatians 2. If Paul had no understanding of the New Testament, that meeting would have been chaos. But Paul says they “added nothing” to him. He already understood what Christ gave them. And they learned from him—the gospel of the uncircumcision, the mystery.

To preach the mystery, Paul must understand prophecy. To explain grace to all men, he must understand God’s grace to Israel. The mystery builds on and surpasses the New Testament.

You and I, like Paul, can minister the New Testament because we understand:

- Israel’s salvation is God’s work, not ours.
- The Spirit—not the law—causes obedience.
- Nobody is saved by works, not even Israel.
- The mystery reveals how God saves all men by grace.

We are not in Israel’s covenant, but we can minister it because we understand its purpose and its insufficiency.

The main point of the verse 2 Corinthians 3:6 is not the New Testament. The point is God’s ability. God saved the Corinthians. God made Paul sufficient. God appointed Paul. God empowered Paul. God also made Paul an able minister.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10,

For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

Our salvation, our position, our ministry—all testify to God’s sufficiency, not ours. That is the message of 2 Corinthians 3:6:

I can’t. God can. And He did.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

Because of the mystery, we know how God can save anyone—without the law, without Israel, without covenants. We are ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5), and ambassadors minister to places they are not citizens of. In the same way, we can minister the New Testament without being under it.

Paul could even minister the Old Testament law at times. In Romans 3:19–21, he explains that the law gives the knowledge of sin. In 1 Timothy 1:8, he says the law is good if used lawfully. We use the law to show sin, then preach grace. That's because Christ revealed to Paul the inadequacy of the Old Testament law and the purpose of the New Testament for Israel. Knowing the mystery gives us the ability to explain what came before it.

Even in this dispensation, Romans 13:4 calls civil rulers “ministers of God.” They minister law, not grace. A believer who understands grace can minister law even better because he understands sin and righteousness. This shows how someone with greater revelation can minister things he is not under.

In Galatians 3 Paul explains the law was “added because of transgressions” (Gal 3:19). He explains the law was a schoolmaster to bring Israel to Christ (Gal 3:24). He explains the law could not give life (Gal 3:21). He explains Scripture that concluded all under sin (Gal 3:22). He explains that before Christ came, Israel was “kept under the law” (Gal 3:23). He explains that when Christ came, faith became the issue. Paul can explain all this because he has further revelation—the mystery.

Faith existed before, but the word “faith” appears only twice in the Old Testament. After Christ came, faith became central. Paul draws the line at Christ, not at himself. He shows how law leads to Christ, and Christ leads to faith. That's why he can minister the New Testament: he understands its purpose and its insufficiency.

This is why the rightly dividing of the Word of Truth shows us that:

- Israel and the Church are not the same.
- We are not under the New Testament.
- But we are able ministers of it.

We can minister it because we understand God's manifold, many-faceted and varied wisdom (Eph 1; Eph 3).

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

We understand how God will bring all things—heaven and earth—together in Christ. We understand how Israel will be saved under their covenant, and how Gentiles are saved without any covenant at all.

Some try to solve the 2 Corinthians 3: 6 verse by saying “testament” and “covenant” are different words. They claim the New Testament is not the New Covenant, but the mystery. That is wrong. The New Testament is the New Covenant promised to Israel.

We need to define the terms.

Testament

A testament is a statement of will—a last will and testament. It declares how an inheritance will be given after the testator dies. A testament must be spoken before death, and it only becomes effective after death. Hebrews 9:16–17 tells us that. Jesus did exactly that: He stated the New Testament before He died (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14; Luke 22). That is what a testator does.

Covenant

A covenant is a contract or agreement between living parties. Marriage is a covenant. A mortgage is a covenant. God’s covenant with Noah was made with “every living creature” (Genesis 9), not the dead. Covenants obligate responsibility or promise.

How they relate

A testament and a covenant can overlap. A testament is written while the person is alive, and others carry it out after death. A covenant is made between living parties. They are different words, but in Scripture they often refer to the same thing when dealing with Israel’s promised blessings.

Martin Luther said, “He who stays alive makes a covenant; he who is about to die makes a testament.” That’s exactly what Jesus did. He stated His testament before dying, and His death put it into force.

Why the New Testament Cannot be the Mystery

The mystery was kept secret since the world began (Romans 16:25).

The New Testament was spoken, written, and prophesied long before Christ died.

A testament must be declared before death.

The mystery was *not* declared before Christ died.

Therefore, the New Testament cannot be the mystery.

Jesus Himself spoke the New Testament four times before His death.

Hebrews quotes the Old Testament prophets about it. The New Testament was public, prophesied, and recorded. The mystery was hidden.

Why does Paul mention the New Testament?

Paul is not redefining the New Testament. He is not saying the Church is under it. He is saying God made him able to minister it—not of the letter, but of the Spirit (2 Cor 3:6).

He understands:

- why the Old Testament law was inadequate,
- why Israel needed a better covenant,
- why Christ had to die to dedicate that covenant,
- why Israel rejected it,
- and why God revealed the mystery afterwards.

You cannot preach the mystery unless you understand what came before it. You cannot say something was “kept secret” unless you know what was revealed. Paul knew both.

Why this matters

If we confuse testament and covenant, we will confuse prophecy and mystery. The New Testament is Israel’s promised covenant. The mystery is God’s hidden purpose to save all men without Israel.

Paul can minister the New Testament because he understands its purpose and its insufficiency. He can minister the mystery because God revealed it to him. They are not the same thing.

Hebrews 7:22 says Jesus became the “surety of a better testament.” Hebrews explains that Jesus’ death activated what had already been spoken in prophecy. Psalm 110:4, Jeremiah 31, and Ezekiel 36 all declared the New Covenant long before Jesus died. So when Hebrews says Jesus became priest after the order of Melchizedek, it happened after His death, but it was stated long before. That’s how a testament works.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

So, to recap, a testament must be declared before death and becomes effective after death (Hebrews 9:16–17). A covenant is made between living parties. Death *ends* covenants, but death *activates* testaments. This is why the New Testament and New Covenant are connected: Jesus declared His testament before dying, and His death dedicated the covenant God promised to Israel.

Jesus died—but He rose again. That’s why the New Covenant can still be fulfilled. Israel thought His death ended everything, but His resurrection gave them “a lively hope” (1 Peter 1:3). So the New Testament (His will) and the New Covenant (God’s contract with Israel) refer to the same promised salvation for Israel.

Hebrews 8, 9, and 10 show this clearly. Hebrews 8 speaks of the New Covenant. Hebrews 9 speaks of the New Testament. Hebrews 10 speaks again of the New Covenant. It’s the same promise described with two words. Both are written, recorded, witnessed, and prophesied. Both concern Israel’s forgiveness and salvation.

A testament must be written. That’s why Scripture repeats “as it is written.” God wrote His promises down—Genesis 12, Deuteronomy 32, Psalm 110, Psalm 89—so Israel would know His will. A testament is a written statement of will. God said, “I will.” That is testament language. And He made a covenant to carry out that will.

Hebrews 10:9–10 says Jesus “*taketh away the first, that he may establish the second.*” The first covenant was dedicated by animal blood. The second is dedicated by Christ’s blood. Jesus came to bring salvation to Israel—that is the New Testament/New Covenant.

Israel rejected it. According to prophecy, salvation could not go to the world until Israel received it. But God revealed a mystery—salvation to the world without Israel, without their covenant, without their law (Romans 11; Ephesians 2). That is why Paul was sent.

So the New Testament and New Covenant belong to Israel. Romans 9:4 says the covenants belong to Israel. Ephesians 2:12 says Gentiles were strangers to the covenants. Hebrews 8:8 says the New Covenant is with “*the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*” Jesus said His blood was shed “for you”—the disciples who will judge the twelve tribes (Luke 22).

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

None of those passages reveals the mystery. Jesus never said His blood was shed to create the Body of Christ. He said it was shed for Israel's forgiveness under the New Testament.

Paul is not saying the Church is under Israel's covenant. He is saying God made him able to minister the New Testament—not of the letter, but of the Spirit. He understands:

- what the New Covenant promised Israel,
- why it required Christ's death,
- why Israel rejected it,
- and why God revealed the mystery afterwards.

The New Testament is not the mystery. It is prophecy. The mystery is salvation without Israel. Paul can minister both because he understands God's whole purpose.

To summarise

- Testament = will declared before death, effective after death.
- Covenant = contract between living parties.
- Jesus declared the New Testament before dying; His death activated it.
- The New Testament and New Covenant refer to Israel's promised salvation.
- Both were written, recorded, and prophesied.
- Israel rejected their covenant; God revealed the mystery.
- Paul ministers the New Testament spiritually, not covenant-legally.
- 2 Corinthians 3:6 is about God making Paul able, not about putting the Church under Israel's covenant.

This is why Paul can minister the New Testament without being in it.

In Luke 22, Jesus says He will not drink of the cup again until the kingdom of God comes. That tells us plainly the New Testament is tied to Israel's kingdom, not the Body of Christ. When He says in Luke 22:20,

"This cup is the New Testament in my blood, which is shed for you,"

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

He is speaking to the twelve apostles, the men who will “sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:30). This is Israel’s salvation program, not ours.

Churches often quote Luke 22 as if it is about communion today, but the passage is about the kingdom table, not the Lord’s table for the Body of Christ. Jesus says He will eat and drink with them in His kingdom, not in the present dispensation. So the New Testament in Luke 22 is not mystery truth. It is prophecy truth—Israel’s promised salvation.

The New Testament is Israel’s salvation in Christ—their forgiveness, their new heart, their Spirit-filled obedience, their kingdom blessings. No longer will they need to keep the law through self-discipline and self-work. God will place the law in their hearts and minds. They will do the law just as naturally as they break it today.

Jesus’ blood dedicated it. The prophets promised it. The apostles offered it. Israel rejected it.

According to prophecy, salvation could not go to the world until Israel received their covenant. The nations, the Gentiles, were to be blessed through Israel, the nation of priests, the intermediary between them and God. But Israel refused it. So God revealed a mystery—salvation to all men without Israel, without their covenant, without their law (Romans 11; Ephesians 2).

Paul ministers by the cross, not by a covenant. A testament emphasises death, and Paul’s whole ministry is built on Christ’s death and resurrection. So “testament” is the right word. He is not saying the Church is under Israel’s covenant. He is saying God made him able to minister the New Testament spiritually, not legally—“not of the letter, but of the Spirit.”

- The New Testament is Israel’s promised salvation in their kingdom.
- It was prophesied, written, and declared long before Christ died.
- The mystery was hidden and revealed only to Paul.
- Testament and covenant overlap and refer to the same promise for Israel.
- Jesus’ blood dedicated the New Covenant; His resurrection enables it.
- The New Testament is not the mystery.
- Paul can minister it because he understands its purpose through the mystery.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

- 2 Corinthians 3:6 is about God making Paul able, not about putting the Church under Israel's covenant.

The New Testament is Israel's salvation in Christ. God promised that the world would be blessed through Abraham's seed and through Israel (Genesis 12). The Old Covenant was given so Israel could be a righteous nation and bless the world. The problem was never the law—the problem was Israel couldn't keep it. The law showed the standard, but nobody met it. So God promised a better covenant, the New Covenant, which explains how He will save Israel from their sins so the world can be blessed.

This is why the New Testament is not the mystery. The New Testament is prophecy. It was promised in Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, Isaiah 45, Isaiah 46, and many other passages. It is God saying, "I will save Israel." That salvation is everlasting, not temporary. Isaiah 45:17 says, "Israel shall be saved in the LORD with an everlasting salvation." That is New Covenant language.

People ask, "How could anyone be in Christ before Paul?" The answer is simple:

They were in Christ according to the New Covenant, not according to the mystery.

Before Paul, you got "in Christ" by entering Israel's promised salvation—believing the Lord, obeying the covenant, following the Messiah. Paul says the law was a schoolmaster to bring Israel to Christ (Galatians 3:24). When Jesus came, faith in Him became the issue. That is how people were "in Christ" before Paul—in Christ according to prophecy, not according to the Body of Christ.

The New Testament was promised in the Old Testament. Isaiah 45 says God has not spoken Israel's salvation in secret. He openly declared He would save Israel. Isaiah 46:13 says,

"I bring near my righteousness; it shall not be far off, and my salvation shall not tarry: and I will place salvation in Zion for Israel my glory."

This is not mystery truth. It is prophecy.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

Jesus came to fulfil that promise. He shed His blood to dedicate the New Covenant. Hebrews 9 explains that His death put the New Testament into force. The New Covenant was promised long before the cross, dedicated at the cross, and will be fulfilled when Christ returns to establish Israel's kingdom.

Romans 11:25–27 says Israel will be saved when Christ returns:

For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.

And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob:

For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.

That is the New Testament. That is Israel's salvation, and that is Paul ministering it, showing exactly what he says he's able to do in 2 Corinthians 3:6.

So why are we saved today without Israel?

Because Israel rejected their covenant. According to prophecy, salvation could not go to the world until Israel received it. But Israel refused it. So God revealed a mystery—salvation to all men without Israel, without their covenant, without their law (Romans 11; Ephesians 2).

That is why we are not saved through Israel today.

That is why we are not under the New Covenant.

That is why we are saved by grace through faith alone.

This is why Paul can minister the New Testament without being in it—and why the Body of Christ is not under Israel's promised covenant.

Romans 11 explains this clearly. Paul says he doesn't want us ignorant of the mystery: Israel is blind in part until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in. People are being saved now while Israel is blind—something prophecy never described. Yet Paul says, "All Israel shall be saved," quoting Isaiah and Jeremiah. Christ's first coming dedicated the New Testament by His blood, but Israel's salvation will not be fulfilled until Christ returns to Zion and takes away their sins (Romans 11:27). That is New Covenant truth—all prophesied, none of it mystery.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

This shows why the New Testament is not the mystery. The New Testament was promised, spoken, and written long before Christ died. The mystery was kept secret until revealed to Paul. The New Testament has a timeline: promised → dedicated at the cross → fulfilled at Christ's return. The mystery does not. When God revealed the mystery to Paul, it was immediately in effect: salvation by grace through faith, right now, without Israel, without covenants, without law.

Think of it this way:

Old Testament:

- Covenant with Israel
- Israel must obey
- No Christ in the covenant
- Israel fails

New Testament:

- Covenant with Israel and Christ
- Christ brings salvation to Israel
- Israel will be saved in the Lord (Isaiah 45, 46)
- Salvation then goes to the world through Israel
- Israel rejects it all

Mystery:

- Christ without Israel
- Salvation to Jew and Gentile without covenants
- No waiting for Israel's kingdom
- No law, no works, no promises—just grace

This is why people could be “in Christ” before Paul. They were in Christ according to the New Covenant, not according to the mystery. Before Paul, you entered Christ by entering Israel's promised salvation—believing the Lord, obeying the covenant, following the Messiah, not according to the Body of Christ.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

Old Covenant = works

New Covenant = faith + works (James 2)

Mystery = faith alone in Christ's finished work

Israel needed Christ to save them. We need Christ to save us. The difference is that Israel's salvation is tied to their covenant and kingdom, while ours is tied to grace alone.

Law and the Heart

Old Covenant = law written on stones

New Covenant = law written on Israel's hearts

Mystery = Christ written on our hearts, not law

Grace changes the heart's purpose, not by writing commandments, but by giving Christ Himself.

The New Testament is Israel's salvation in Christ. It was promised in prophecy, dedicated at the cross, fulfilled at Christ's return.

The mystery is salvation without Israel, without covenants, without law.

People were "in Christ" before Paul through Israel's New Covenant.

The mystery is immediate, present, and not promised beforehand.

Paul can minister the New Testament because he understands its purpose through the mystery.

2 Corinthians 3:6 is about God making Paul able, not about putting the Church under Israel's covenant.

This is how Paul can minister the New Testament without being in it—and why the Body of Christ is saved by grace alone.

Romans 3 shows the difference between Israel under the Old Covenant and Israel under the New Covenant. The Old Testament was Israel *without* the Spirit. The New Covenant is Israel *with* the Spirit. When Christ died and rose, He poured out the Holy Spirit on believing Israel. That made them "Israel with the Spirit," finally able to be what God intended them to be.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

But in the mystery, we have the Spirit, and we are not Israel. We are not being formed into a nation. We are the Body of Christ. So when Paul says he ministers the New Testament “not of the letter, but of the Spirit,” he means he is not ministering Israel’s covenant legally. He ministers it spiritually—because he is not under the law, not under Israel’s covenant, and not part of their nation.

Covenant vs Grace

Old Covenant = covenant without grace (law, works).

New Covenant = covenant with grace (faith + works, Spirit enabling).

Mystery = grace without a covenant—abundant grace, freely given, no terms, no law, no national identity.

The New Covenant gives Israel grace *inside* a covenant. The mystery gives us grace *outside* any covenant. That is why Paul says salvation today is “without Israel, without the law, without the covenants.”

Grace changes the heart’s purpose, not by writing commandments, but by giving Christ Himself.

There is a relationship between the Old and New Testaments—they are both covenants, both given to Israel, both involve works, both involve the law written somewhere.

And there is a relationship between the New Testament and the mystery—they both involve Christ, faith, the Spirit, and grace. But they are not the same.

The New Covenant is Israel’s salvation in Christ.

The mystery is our salvation in Christ without Israel.

If we don’t know the difference, we will start mixing them. We will think the Church is under a covenant, or that works are required, or that the law is written on our hearts. We must know what was prophesied and what was kept secret.

Christ is in Both Programs. Christ is needed for Israel’s New Covenant, and Christ is needed for the Body of Christ.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

But the New Covenant can never explain the mystery, because the New Covenant was prophesied, and the mystery was hidden. However, the Mystery can explain the New Covenant because we need to know what the New Covenant is before we can fully understand the mystery.

A testament is written down. Israel's New Testament was recorded, prophesied, witnessed, and written. It is "of the letter." Paul says he ministers *not* of the letter because he is not ministering Israel's covenant legally. He is ministering the spiritual truth behind it—Christ, grace, the Spirit, the heart.

Romans 2 shows this clearly. Paul is talking about Israel, not the Church. He says true Israel is not just outward, "of the letter," but inward, "of the Spirit." That is New Covenant language. Paul can explain it because he understands the New Covenant *and* the mystery, where salvation is entirely of the heart and not of the letter at all.

This is why Paul can minister the New Testament spiritually, without being under it. He knows what it is, he knows what it is not, and he knows how the mystery explains its purpose.

Romans 9:6–7 shows that God identifies true Israel by the New Covenant, not just by the letter of the law. True Israel is those who have the Spirit, not merely those with the genealogy. That is New Covenant Israel.

Romans 11:26–27 says, *"All Israel shall be saved... as it is written."* Their salvation is written in the letter of the covenant: *"This is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins."* That is the New Covenant in writing—letters, prophecy, Scripture.

John 7:15 shows the Jews understood "the letter" as the written law and the written credentials. Romans 7:6 speaks of "the oldness of the letter." So the letter refers to written law, written covenant, written identity, and written prophecy.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:6 that he ministers the New Testament not of the letter. That means he is not ministering Israel's covenant legally—Israel, law, circumcision, genealogy, written requirements. Remove the letter, and what remains? Christ, grace, faith, Spirit, heart. That is the mystery. It is the spiritual side of what the New Covenant pointed to, but without Israel, without law, without covenants.

Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6

Some say, “So we partake of Israel’s spiritual blessings.” And yes, Christ is given to Israel, and we need Christ too, but the mystery includes things never in Israel’s New Covenant:

- We are a new creature,
- We are the Body of Christ,
- We have a heavenly position,
- We are blessed without Israel,
- We are saved without covenants,
- We are seated in heavenly places, not waiting for a kingdom on earth.

Israel’s destiny under both covenants is an earthly kingdom. The New Covenant promises the new Jerusalem from above coming down to earth. But the mystery gives us a heavenly position without Jerusalem. We go up; Israel’s Jerusalem comes down. That is how we can minister the New Covenant without being in it—by understanding God’s heavenly purpose revealed to Paul.

Hebrews ministers the New Covenant of the letter—prophecy, written promises, earthly kingdom, Israel’s future. Paul ministers the New Testament not of the letter, but of the Spirit—Christ, grace, faith, heart, heavenly places. That is why Paul did not write Hebrews.

Who needs Paul’s ministry in the New Testament? Not Gentiles in the Body of Christ. They were never given covenants. Paul ministers it to people stuck under the Old Testament system—Judaizers, Hebrew apostles, law-keepers—showing them the Old Covenant failed, the New Covenant is better, and the mystery is greater still.

It is all about sufficiency. The Old Testament was the letter—insufficient. The New Covenant is the letter plus Spirit—sufficient for Israel. The mystery is the Spirit alone—Christ alone—sufficient for all men.

Summary

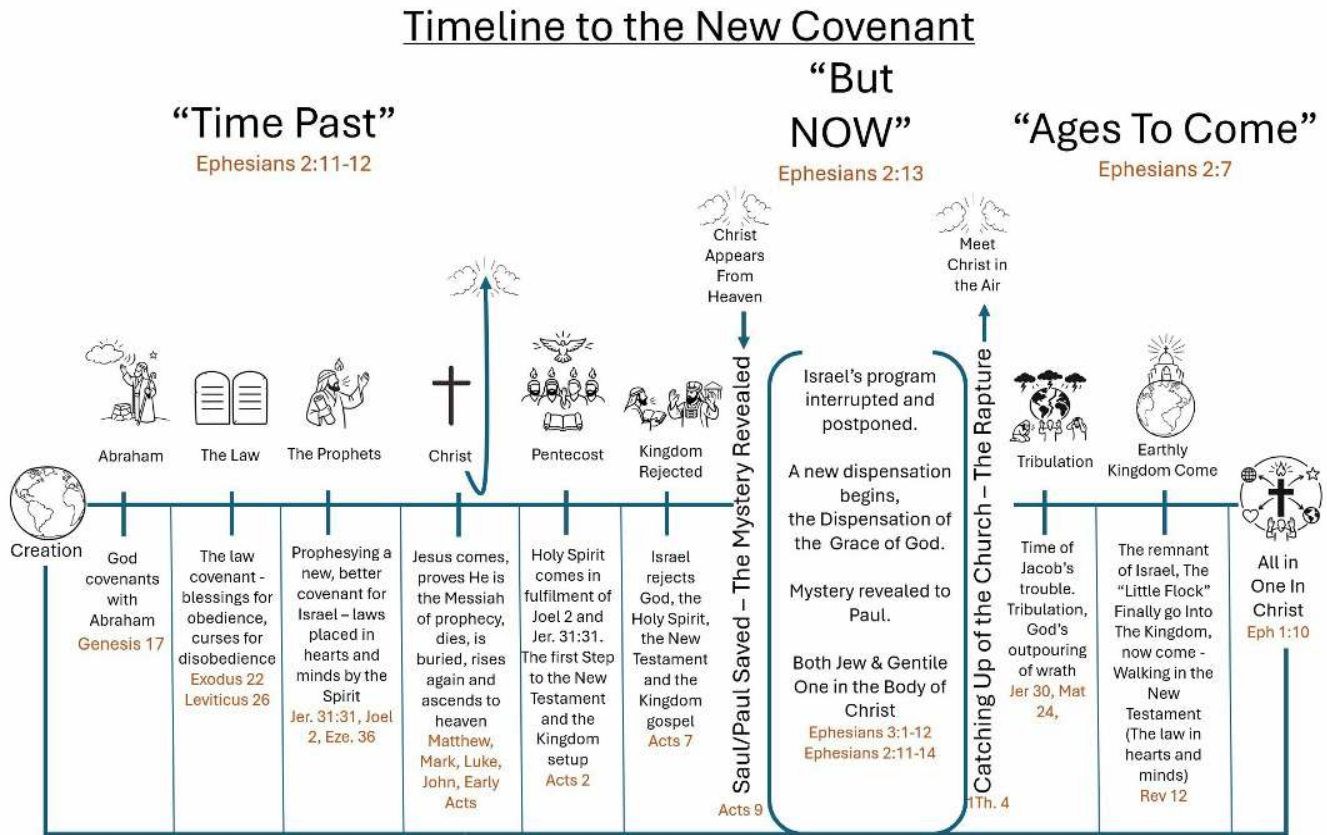
So when Paul says God made him an able minister of the New Testament, not of the letter, he means he ministers the spiritual truth behind Israel's promised salvation, from the standpoint of the mystery, showing that Christ, grace, and the Spirit are what saves—not Israel, not law, not covenants.

We today have the Spirit without Israel, without covenants, without the law. That is the mystery. So Paul can minister the New Testament because he ministers the Spirit, not the letter. The Spirit is sufficient to save. You don't need letters, covenants, or law—only Christ, grace, faith, and the Spirit.

This lets Paul show Israel's failure under the Old Covenant, the promise of the New Covenant, and the greater ministry of the mystery. He establishes the law's purpose (Romans 3:31), the need for the Spirit (Galatians 3:1–5), and Israel's future salvation by grace (Romans 9–11).

Our ministry is the Spirit, righteousness by faith, and Christ written in our hearts. That is the New Testament, not of the letter, but of the Spirit.

Chart Drawing - New Covenant Timeline



[A Click or Press on Image to open large version](#)

■ ■ ■

"Understanding 2 Corinthians 3:6" digs into the complex issue of covenant theology, revealing how Paul's message distinguishes the New Covenant from Israel's prophetic promises.

Through careful examination of scripture, the book clarifies that grace, not law, defines the current dispensation, challenging common misconceptions about the Body of Christ's relationship to the covenants.

Unraveling these truths empowers readers to appreciate the richness of God's grace and the distinctiveness of the mystery revealed to Paul.