


CHAPTER 2

LIFE IN THREE DIMENSIONS



Obedience: God's Gift

One of the ancient heresies the early church fathers dealt with was Greek dualism. Oversimplified, dualism is a worldview that believes the universe operates under simple spiritual polarities, or dualities: good/evil, light/darkness, right/wrong, etc. A great deal of theological debate exists over how much of this kind of thought influenced the New Testament writers and how much it still influences us today. It is beyond the scope of this work to delve into the matter in detail, but it affects the discussion of authority, submission, and church government.

Unfortunately for our natural mind, God's kingdom cannot be shrink-wrapped and packaged like so much sandwich meat. It does not operate on simple dualities. One of the major changes from the Old to the New Covenant is the shift away from *quid pro quo* (Latin: "this for that") simple dualities. The Old Covenant is characterized by: do this (behave) and live (receive life as a result); fail to behave (obey) properly and you shall die (be punished, be cut off from life). If you do well, you will be blessed and if not you will be cursed.¹ The blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 28 are a classic example of the Old Covenant order of things.

Authority, Accountability, and the Apostolic Movement

Television preachers and evangelists are steeped in this utterly legal and Old Covenant mind set.² They have to be. Their entire system of support depends on it. Their thinking and teaching follows Deuteronomic equations like these:

God's Word + your obedience = "blessing" (usually interpreted as health, wealth, and ease)

God's Word + your disobedience = "cursing" (failure to receive the above)

Why is this message so phenomenally popular? Because the promise of reward for spiritual effort draws the spiritually still-born and blind like maggots to a corpse. It is the age-old appeal to the carnal, fallen, Adamic nature to reward itself for spiritual energy expended and spiritual pursuits attained. The obedience and reward message that saturates the airwaves effectively keeps the "seed-offerings" and "first-fruits offerings" flowing into headquarters by using God's own Word to shamelessly appeal to the believer's self-interest and keep the organization's coffers full. The New Covenant messages of forgoing our right to our own lives, His death and resurrection in us, serving Another's purposes and plan with no regard for self-interest, will empty the TV studio or the "victory living conference" faster than yelling fire in a theater.

The New Covenant reverses the Old Covenant order. It is live (receive life/blessing) and do this (behave/obey). The New Covenant equations read like this:

Receive His blessing (life) + yield to His death and resurrection = obedient fruit

You are blessed + experience His living Word = walking in obedience

We obey because obedience is consistent with our new nature, because it is right, and because the new creation is inherently empowered

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from within to do so.³ Our obedience is not conditioned on the prospect of “reward.” If it were so, what happens to our obedience when “blessing and reward” is slow in coming or does not arrive at all? The world is *full of obedient believers* who *do not experience* health, wealth, and ease. Our obedience could cost us our life, family, finances, and reputation: hardly the “guaranteed prosperity” promised on TV.⁴

If the Old Covenant is still in effect and the television evangelists are correct, what hope do you and I have of any goodness from God when our obedience is in short supply at any moment? (For myself, a frequent state of affairs!) How much obedience do we have to muster to qualify for the blessing? Is 80% obedience enough? Is 95% obedience enough? I have actually heard it said⁵ that to access the “promises in His Word,” only immediate, complete, 100% obedience satisfies God. Allegedly, partial or late obedience is disobedience and therefore does not qualify to receive His blessing. Since only the Son of God is perfect in His obedience, the inherently blasphemous and idolatrous thinking behind this teaching is self-evident: we become as God, and reward ourselves for it at the same time!

Thank God, that the blessing of abundant grace in the New Covenant is not dependent on my obedience to His principles, but rather my faith in Him, in me, and His death and resurrection power in me. The needed blessing of the moment is always accessible through Calvary faith, not my behavioral perfections.

In the New Covenant, God is not dependent on humanity living correctly to receive His life and blessing. He secures His own interests in humanity by putting His Spirit in us as a free gift of His sovereign and unmerited goodwill. The indwelling Spirit is both the life gift and power source. Out of the life given, behavior follows. Therefore, in the New Covenant our obedience is not our gift to God, which merits His blessing. Our obedience is His gift to us, the fruit of the life we have freely received manifested in our actions.

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Now, I do not want to turn this into a theology session on the New Covenant (though God knows the church needs it), but see if this series of simple statements helps:

- Is it possible for anything from the fallen Adamic nature to satisfy God? *No!*
- Therefore, there is nothing in us, in our natural state, that desires or is able to please God. Unregenerate humanity does not love nor seek after God. *Yes*
- Therefore, in order to satisfy Himself in humanity, He must take initiation. *Yes*
- To secure His own interests, He puts His Spirit in us at conversion. *Yes*
- The new nature is now the source of our obedience to God. Where we were once unable, we are now able, due to His gift and power. *Yes*
- Therefore, since the new nature is a gift and the source of my obedience, my obedience is not my gift to God; it is God's gift to me. *Yes!*
- Therefore, I am not rewarded for my obedience because I did nothing to merit reward.⁶ It is a gift. Obedience is the fruit of love. *Yes*
- Therefore, my obedience is the fruit and overflow of a life given to me, not something meritorious of blessing. It is the fruit of being blessed. *Yes*
- Therefore, in the New Covenant, I do not try to obey God and earn blessing for good behavior but live out of His life in me, which is, as Christ's own life in me, an obedient life. *Yes*

Folks, in a few sentences this is the essence of the New Covenant, and it is rarely understood.

The New Testament *quid pro quo*, if there is one, is based on life and fruit, not a businesslike transaction of "behavior and reward." A good planting, in good soil produces good fruit—it cannot help it. A tree is

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not “rewarded” for yielding to the life that produces from within. It produces fruit because it is in its nature to do so. In the Old Covenant (and in TV preaching) human obedience was/is the condition to receive blessing. In the New Covenant obedience is the fruit of being blessed. In the Old Covenant obedience was the root of anticipated hope. In the New Covenant, it is the fruit of realized hope. In the New Covenant, God rewards the faith filled seeker⁷—someone who maintains relationship to Himself (in strength and weakness, success and failure), not the person who most perfectly obeys His principles.

Enough Already!

The advice Job’s friends gave him typifies *quid pro quo* thinking: if you do well, you prosper; if you do evil, you suffer. If you are faithful to God and follow His precepts, only blessing follows; if you don’t follow His precepts, you are cursed—bad things happen to you. It is important to note that God *rebuked* Job’s counselors for thinking that way. *We need to remember context.* Who was speaking to whom and in what context?

I once heard a TV preacher use a quotation from the book of Job to “prove” his extremely improper prosperity teaching along the line of: “If you live an obedient lifestyle (implying “seed offerings”), you can live in pleasure—any pleasure you want.” Indeed, the verse is in the Scripture.⁸ But the point the prosperity teacher failed to mention was that the source of the quote was one of Job’s comforters who were all out to lunch spiritually! God rebuked Job’s friends for thinking the way they did! It is almost as if after thirty chapters or so of simplistic and incorrect dualistic thinking God couldn’t take it anymore and personally appears in the whirlwind to *shut them up!* Just because you can find a verse in the Bible to support your view does not necessarily mean your view is correct! Jesus in resurrection and life in the Spirit are a third alternative beyond either *quid* or *quo!* I call it third-dimension living. Let me explain.