

What is the new covenant?

By Michael Harwood, August 2023

This article looks at the new way that God relates to humanity as a result of Jesus' life and death. It's not focusing on atonement for sins and salvation as much as focusing on what this new way is and how we are to live.

Over the history of Israel God made a number of covenants with his people. The two most important ones are called the old covenant and the new covenant. God made the old covenant with ancient Israel through Moses. With this covenant God gave the law to Israel and also gave directions on how Israel was to function as a country. When Jesus came he ushered in a new covenant between people and God. This covenant replaced the old one and it applies to all people, not just to Israel.

The Old and New Testaments in the Bible do not correspond exactly to the covenants. Yes, the covenants are in each respectively, but the testaments contain a lot more beyond the actual covenant.

I am writing this for two reasons: first, because there is really no clear teaching in most churches about what the new covenant really is, and second because there is a growing number of people who think that the new covenant means that we have to follow the ancient law of Moses. Again, this is because there is no clear teaching in churches about the role of the law in the believer's life.

Outline

- What is the old covenant?
- Law and relationship
- What the new covenant is not
- What the new covenant is
- Our relationship to the law
- Living in Christ

The Old Covenant

The Old Covenant refers to the covenant that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai when God gave Moses/Israel his laws to follow (Exodus 19 and 24)

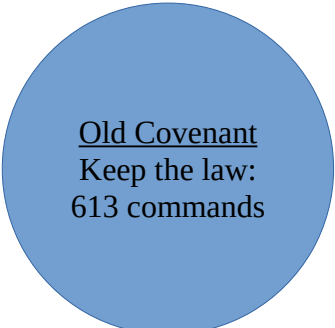
Israel promised to be faithful to God alone and to follow God's laws and God promised to bless them and protect them. That was the deal. It is laid out in many places, but summarized nicely in Deuteronomy 28:

“If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God: ...”

There were also severe penalties for breaking the covenant:

“However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you [...] The LORD will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking him.”
– Deut. 28:15,20.

The Law required Israel to worship God and only God. It had 613 laws, including the 10 Commandments. These commandments covered a vast number of topics: tabernacle/temple worship, cleanliness (vitaly important 4000 years ago), distinctive separation from other nations, morality, holiness, civil laws.



Old Covenant
Keep the law:
613 commands

Interestingly enough, the law is not an end in itself; it is the means to an end. We see this in Galatians 3:24,25 “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.”

The Old Covenant and Relationship with God

But what about the law in the Old Testament?

It's very rare to find someone being praised for keeping all the commandments. King Josiah is an example, but he is hardly mentioned at all in Scripture. “Before him [Josiah] there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him” (2 Kings 23:25). No king followed the Lord with all his heart like Josiah? not even David? Or is he talking about kings since the divided kingdom? Hezekiah was another remarkable godly king: “And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with the law and the commandments, seeking his God, he did with all his heart, and prospered.” (2 Chronicles 31:21).

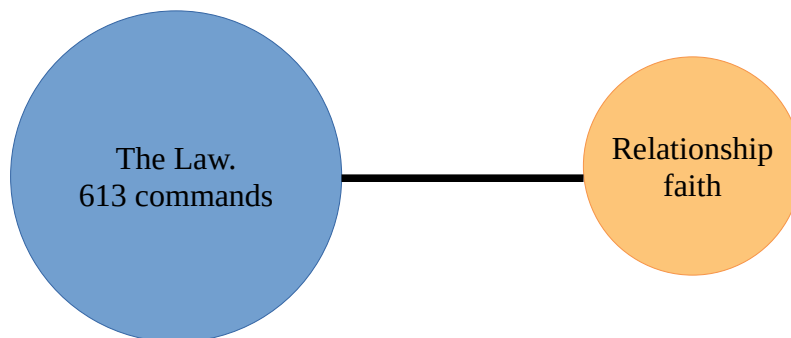
Instead of describing how people obeyed the law and kept the covenant, the Old Testament is much more interested in people's relationship and interactions with God – these are the stories we hear about. God's interaction with people was based on faith and obedience and relationship. This was true under the Old Covenant even as it is the key feature of the New Covenant.

Look up Jeremiah 6:19–20; Isaiah 1:11–15, 66:3; Amos 5:21–23. Here we see God saying that he hates their sacrifices, their offerings, their Sabbaths and feasts! And yet these are all things that God has commanded them to do. Why does he say that? Because their hands are full of blood, they have not listened to God’s words/law, they have rejected him. Psalm 51:16,17 says it well: “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; You take no pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”

So, in spite of the essential nature of the law, God is able to set it aside because he cares far more about what is in our hearts, about our motives, attitudes, character, than what we do externally. 1 Samuel 16:7 says “for God does not see as man sees, since man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” This is why the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We **always** need to get our heart right – even in the Old Testament. People can obey the law and still have hard hearts that are far from God. On the other hand, in Jeremiah 17:19-27 God makes keeping the Sabbath a litmus test of their obedience to him. It actually sounds like this is the only part of the law that God cares about, but he is really testing their heart to see if they’ll obey him.

Obedience was not just keeping the Law, but going further than that: obeying what God told individuals personally. This implies that you had to know God well enough to have a **relationship** with Him, that God would communicate with you. Enoch walked with God. God spoke regularly with Abraham; he commanded him to sacrifice Isaac and Abraham obeyed. God loved Moses: “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend!” (Ex 33:11, see also Deut 34:10). Moses was told to strike the rock once, but he disobeyed and faced severe consequences (Numbers 20:12). God loved David because of his heart (Acts 13:22). David loved God and worshipped him, demonstrating humility and genuine repentance.

Daniel may be the one person who is praised for keeping the Law: in chapter 1 he doesn’t want to eat unclean food and God rewards him. But even then, it’s his relationship with God that fills up the book. Faith is demonstrated by obedience: Naaman had to bathe 7 times to be healed. This was not part of obeying the Law: Naaman didn’t keep the Law, but he demonstrated faith by obeying God’s specific instructions to him. God spoke to Jonah, but he disobeyed. At the end of the story we see God trying to get through Jonah’s hardened heart, patiently trying to teach him. God cares about even whiny Jonah!



Thus, even in ancient Israel there is more required than merely keeping the law. Simply keeping the law was never enough. There is the law, but there is also relationship, obedience, and faith, and **all** of these are essential. This is how we see God working with people throughout history.

There are two parts, and both are necessary. In both circles we have **worship** and **love**. Worship and love are commandments, but they are also responses to God’s love and mercy, part of our relationship with God. In both circles we have **obedience** : the right circle would have obedience to extra things that God tell them to do, things beyond the 613 laws that are in the books of Moses.

We see that, in actual fact, the Old Covenant was never *only* about obeying the Law. God has always wanted a relationship with us.

Moreover, the Old Covenant was actually predicated on the New Covenant in how God dealt with sin. Hebrews 10 explains: “It [The law] can never, by the same sacrifices offered year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. [...] For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” The sin sacrifices of the Mosaic law only worked because Jesus would be coming to die for the sins of the world. They didn’t know it, but without Jesus, the law could do nothing, and the Old Covenant would be impossible for God to institute.

Features of the Old vs the New Covenant

	Old Covenant	New Covenant
Kingdom	Physical Israel as a theocracy	Spiritual , the Kingdom of God. No theocracy. John 18:36
Citizenship	Physical Ethnically Jewish	Spiritual Citizens of a spiritual kingdom, all ethnicities Phil. 3:20
Enemies	Physical Amalekites, Philistines, Aramaeans, ...	Spiritual (no religious wars) Human beings are not our enemies, they are victims of the devil. Eph. 6:12
Weapons	Physical swords, shields, slings, chariots	Spiritual prayer, fasting, the word of God. Eph 6:12-17
Rewards	Physical Blessings: prosperity, health, safety	Spiritual Blessings No prosperity gospel. Eph 1:3
Unclean	Physical things and Spiritual unclean food, dead bodies, etc.	Spiritual things only External physical things no longer make us unclean. Mark 7:18,19

The New Covenant

What the New Covenant is NOT

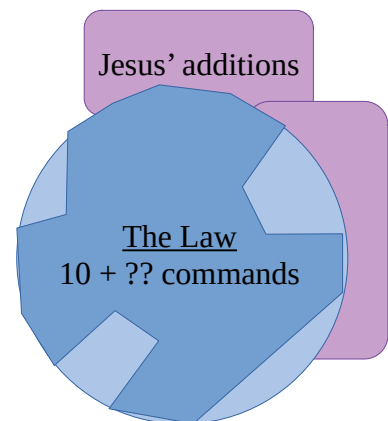
When we come to the New Testament things change dramatically regarding the Law. First of all, Jesus ignores some of it (Sabbath rules, touching lepers, touching dead bodies – these cleanliness laws require going to a priest and making sacrifices to be cleansed), then he adds a lot more to the Law in the Sermon on the Mount: love your enemies, don't lust, don't make oaths, don't call people fools, don't love money, don't worry or be anxious, don't be a hypocrite. None of these commands are in the Mosaic Law. Jesus is going beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law. We'll look at this important distinction later.

Some people think that the New Covenant is keeping the law, but only the bits that are relevant. These people end up hacking away at the Mosaic Law to find a core part that they can focus on keeping. The 10 Commandments are in, we'll keep them. The laws dealing with sacrifice have to go since there is no temple; the laws that deal with separation from other countries must be set aside too because we're no longer a theocracy; the civil laws that deal with how the nation of Israel should be run also don't apply to us today. What about the laws that mete out punishment, such as stoning people for adultery? We can't keep those either.

So this is what the Law looks like now (diagram to the right).

No one agrees on how many commandments in the Law still apply to us. It's very subjective.

And yet, many people think that this is the New Covenant: first we come to God through Christ, and then we have to keep some mish-mash of laws from the Old Testament plus whatever the gospels and the epistles tell us to do. We just keep whatever commandments we can. We'll see that the actual New Covenant is far better than this.



Jeremiah and Ezekiel : prophecies of the New Covenant

These two prophets have very important things to say about the new covenant. They are the ones to promise God's people that there will one day be a new and better covenant. It's evident that their current system of following the law, i.e. the old covenant, did not work. There was pretty much constant rebellion against God right from the time of Moses all the way through to the final king Zedekiah, with a few bright spots when there was a strong godly leader (Samuel, David). We need a new covenant that somehow takes care of our sinful human nature, the proclivity for sin, that keeps sabotaging the old covenant.

One important thing to remember is that the Old Testament prophets did not have a clear picture of Jesus and the gospel. This means that we cannot look to them to explain the new covenant while ignoring the clearer and more detailed teaching of the New Testament. For example, when Isaiah wrote about the suffering servant (chapter 53) he did not know that it was a prophecy of the messiah and that this

messiah would be God himself. We can look back at the prophecy and learn a lot from it, but it is not the full picture. The same applies to these two passages about the new covenant. 1 Peter 1:10-12 and Hebrews 11:13, 39, 30 explain this along with what Jesus said: “For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” (Matthew 13:17)

Jeremiah 31:31-33 gives us a glimpse of the new covenant:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “For this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord: “I will put My law within them and write it on their heart; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ...”

Jeremiah makes it clear that the new covenant is NOT like the old covenant. The old covenant was centred on keeping the Law. The new covenant **cannot** be about keeping the Law – that’s nothing new. The new covenant cannot be Jesus plus the Law – that’s just the old covenant tweaked.

Jeremiah attempts to describe the new covenant: “I will put my law within them and write it on their heart.” It’s not explained what “write it on their heart” actually looks like. It can’t be keeping the Law, there’s nothing new in that. It can’t mean memorizing the Law, they already had to do that. In fact the Torah already told them to write the Law on their hearts (Deut 6:6). Similarly with “I will be their God, and they shall be My people”. Israel already was God’s people and God already was their God. In fact, Jeremiah (and Ezekiel) is trying to get a deeper meaning across, but he does not have the vocabulary of the New Testament – the full understanding of grace, Holy Spirit, new creation, etc. His only reference point for covenants is the law, and so he’s trying to explain it in terms of that. The crucial point of his prophecy is that there is a New Covenant coming and somehow it will make us love and obey God in a way that the Old Covenant could not. We see that it’s something internal, a matter of the heart, not external like following the law.

Ezekiel gives us more insight: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

There is something new and amazing here – an **inner** transformation from stone to flesh. God’s Spirit will be in us and this will change our desires and motivations to be like Christ. It’s an internal metamorphosis through the power of the Holy Spirit and it enables us to have a heart that follows God’s word and keeps his laws.

A summary of the Old and New Covenants

OLD COVENANT	
Israel's Part	God's Part
Obey all God's Law (the Torah) Perform required sacrifices	Forgiveness of sin Blessings

NEW COVENANT	
Our Part	God's Part
<p><i><u>Entering the covenant: (by faith alone)</u></i> contrition, repentance, believing that Jesus is God, he died for sin in our place, and rose again.</p> <p><i><u>Remaining in/Confirming the covenant: (mandatory)</u></i> following Jesus as a disciple: radical union with him, abiding in him radical <i>agape</i> love for others</p>	Adoption into God's family Forgiveness of sin Indwelling of the Holy Spirit A new heart Spiritual gifts Spiritual blessings Eternal life

The New Covenant in the New Testament

Surprisingly, the New Covenant is not spelled out clearly in the New Testament, but then again, neither is the Trinity. We need to look at the NT as a whole.

The word "covenant" occurs 34 times in the New Testament (NIV). How often is the word "covenant" associated with us obeying the Law? **Never**. The phrase "new covenant" only occurs seven times in the New Testament!

Jesus talked about the new covenant at the Last Supper: "This [bread] is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:20, 1 Cor 11:25). This is clearly to do with his death, his blood poured out for us, but also to do with our participation in it. In Communion, we eat the bread and drink the wine, symbolically eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood. Why do we do that? What does it mean? This is explained in John 6:53-57:

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. The one who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. The one who eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains [abides] in Me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, the one who eats Me, he also will live because of Me.

This is an intimate, intrinsic, identification with Jesus. We are in him and he is in us. Jesus requires us to have an incredibly close relationship with him – **we're sharing his flesh and blood**. Unless we do this,

we do not have life. The final verse shows that the connection we have with Jesus is akin to that he has with the Father.

The part about abiding in Jesus is amplified in John 15:

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.

Do you see that? **We are either intimately organically connected to Jesus, abiding in him just like a branch must be connected to a vine, or else we are thrown away and burned.**

There is no other option such as: living a good life, serving others, or having Biblical theology. We have to be in Christ, abiding in Christ constantly. This is why we are called the **body of Christ** (1 Corinthians 12:27). Our union with Jesus is that intimate.

There are many other verses that speak of this. Galatians 2:20 is one of the clearest: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

Theosis

There’s a theological concept called *theosis* which encapsulate these ideas well, though I have a limited understanding of it.

We know that God is triune: that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit somehow are all one and yet distinct, and interact and overlap. Under the New Covenant, this intimacy of the trinity extends to us too. That’s what “theosis” refers to. We are intimately connected to God, indwelt by the Trinity, and somehow dwelling in the Trinity (and yet we do not ever become God).

- the Father is in us: John 14:23
- we are in the Father: 1 John 2:24
- the Son is in us: Col 1:27
- we are in the Son: John 14:20
- the Spirit is in us: 1 Cor 6:19, Rom 8:11
- we are in the Spirit: ?

This is the New Covenant. The triune God is actually in you and you are actually in God. This is hard to believe, but it’s the truth and it changes everything. It happens when you repent and commit your life to following Jesus, to living daily in Him. It is only possible because of God’s amazing plan of salvation, of Jesus’ substitutionary and propitiatory death. It is only possible because the Holy Spirit changes our hearts from dead stone to hearts that love and belong to Jesus.

What are the other references to the New Covenant in the epistles?

Hebrews 8:8-6,13 tells us that the Old Covenant had something wrong with it, it was inadequate and is now declared obsolete. The New Covenant is superior. It quotes the passage in Jeremiah that we've already looked at, but doesn't add any new information.

Hebrews 9:15 connects the New Covenant to the blood of Christ and to the forgiveness of sins and our eternal inheritance. Both this and 12:24 state that Jesus is the mediator of this covenant. The mediator connects the two parties. The Old Covenant had Moses going between God and the people to implement the covenant and get people to follow it. Moses was then succeeded by the priests. Jesus is our mediator, representing us to God and God to us. How wonderful, God himself becomes our mediator. "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?" (Rom 8:32,33)

The only other mention of the new covenant is in 2 Cor 3:6 which says that we are ministers of the New Covenant, and goes on to say that this covenant is not the law, but the Spirit (and refers to 2 Cor 3:3).

These passages along with the general New Testament teaching that we are not under the Law, that we do not have to follow the Mosaic law show us that when Jeremiah said "I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts" he did not mean that we have to follow the whole law of Moses (or any part of it). As mentioned earlier, Jeremiah's understanding of the gospel was incomplete and he was using the only language that he knew.

While the phrase "new covenant" is rare, the new covenant is still a core idea and it is often referred to by different terms: 2 Corinthians 3:7,8 calls the old covenant (the law) the "ministry of death" and "ministry of condemnation," while the new covenant is called the "ministry of the Spirit" and "ministry of righteousness." Romans 8:2 calls these covenants the "law of sin and death" and the "law of the Spirit of Life" respectively.

From these we see that there is a total and complete change in us under the new covenant. We have been and are being radically changed from the inside by the Spirit of God in us. We cannot live with one foot in the old covenant and one in the new (Mark 2:22).

The Law and the Christian

Just using a few passages, it's clear that we are no longer under the law (there are many more in the epistles and gospels), that we no longer have to obey the law of Moses to be righteous or to please God. However, a complete examination of the place of the law for the Christian under the New Covenant would take many pages. Here are a few brief points that are worth mentioning, but are in no way complete:

- The law convicts us and the world of sin, showing the justice of God in condemning us (Romans 3:20; 7:7-12).
- The law brings us to Christ (Galatians 3:24,25)
- The law teaches us about God, humanity, and sin, and thus is worthy of study and meditation. The commandments reflect God's nature and glory. Charles Price says this about the law: God commands "do not steal" because God is not a thief. God commands "do not covet" because God is not greedy.
- The law is part of scripture, the scripture that is profitable for *teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*. (2 Tim 3:16).

Love & Commands

But what are we to do now? How are we to live if there's no list of rules to follow, laws to keep? Jesus makes it very clear: "If you love me you will obey what I command" (John 14:15).

What are Jesus' commands? Here are the main ones:

1. Jesus replied: "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.**" This is the first and greatest commandment. (Matt 22:38-40)
2. And the second is like it: '**Love your neighbor as yourself.**' **All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.**
In Luke's version (Luke 10:25ff) the incredible parable of the Good Samaritan follows immediately so that we know exactly what it means to love our neighbour.
3. A new command I give you: **Love one another** [brothers and sisters in Christ]. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. **By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.** (John 13:34,35)
4. You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, **love your enemies** and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. (Matt 5:43)

Hebrews 11 tells us that without faith it's impossible to please God. Well, the same goes for love. The fruit of the Spirit is love, and loving God alone is not sufficient. 1 John 4 puts it like this:

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar."

Galatians 5:14 doesn't even mention loving God (it is just assumed): "The entire law is fulfilled in a single decree: Love your neighbour as yourself."

Romans 13:8-10 says the same thing:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor (see 1 Corinthians 13). Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Every occurrence of the word "love" here is the Greek *agape*, not *eros*, *phileo* or *storge*. (See *The Four Loves* by C.S. Lewis to understand what the words mean.) Jesus commands us to love, love with a radical *agape* love that loves sacrificially, that loves the unlovely, the marginalized, the dirty and smelly ones, loving the people who make our lives difficult, whom we can't stand, even those who persecute us and try to destroy us. Love everyone, always. We must love with all our heart, soul, mind and strength – how do we even do this? The only way to do this is with the supernatural love of Jesus, to abide in him, to draw our life and love from the True Vine. It is impossible to do by ourselves, in our own strength. This is what made Christianity spread through the whole Roman empire so quickly. People are attracted to this type of transformative love, not to how well someone keeps a bunch of religious laws, nor to the elegance of their theology. Being united with Christ in this manner prevents the hypocrisy that pervades all religions.

Yes, Paul provides detailed instructions to very troubled churches with multiple lists of sins to avoid (there are 11 lists of various sins in the NT), yet neither Jesus nor Paul nor anyone tells us to simply follow the law. The law is worn out; it has served its purpose. As new creations in Christ, we are not supposed to be living according to lists of sins to avoid (see 1 Corinthians 3:1-3). The highlighted verses above show that love fulfills the law.

Love and The Bride

The Bible teaches that **the Church is the bride of Christ**. (see Ephesians 5:25-27 and Revelation 21:9,10). In the Old Testament too, God portrays himself as the husband of his people (Isaiah 54:5-8, Hosea 2:16, Jeremiah 31:32). Consider a bride and groom, looking forward to beginning life together. How do they spend their time? They are obsessed with each other, and their main thoughts day and night are about the other person. They long to be with the other person, know them, listen to them, talk with them, learn everything about them. Does the groom say "here's a book with 613 rules in it – learn them perfectly and that's what our marriage is about"? No not at all. It's about total love and devotion. This is why Jesus commands us to love God and love others. That is the principal sign to him and to the whole world that we belong to Jesus. Just as a bride and groom become more like each other over the decades, we are to grow in our love and knowledge of Jesus, becoming transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory (2 Cor 3:18). Both the analogy of bride and the body of Christ very useful, rich images; and note that they are corporate analogies, not at all referring to you or me individually. We have to work out our discipleship and devotion to Christ corporately with our Christian community.

Summary

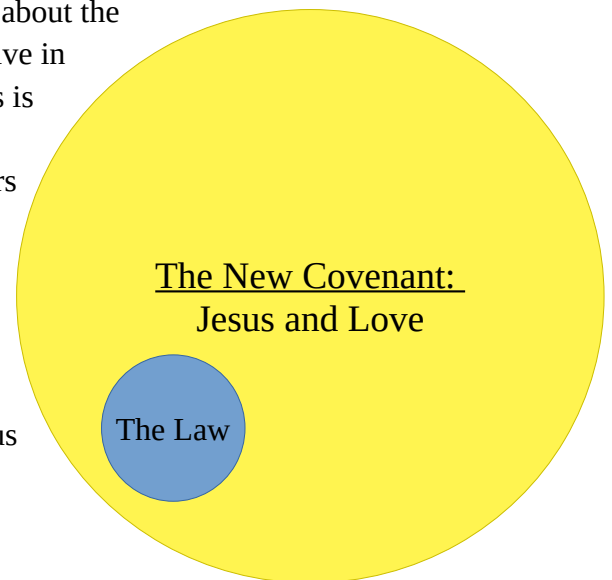
We have seen that the New Covenant is focused on two things:

1. Being joined to Christ, to the Trinity, in an intimate, dependent relationship. It is a relationship of faith, love, and obedience, that involves talking and listening, listening to the Spirit's prompting and guidance.
2. Loving others with the radical love of Jesus. We must love everyone in the same way that Jesus loves them.

It's not enough to have a deep intimate relationship with God, wonderful worship and prayer times. We have to have a life characterized by self-sacrificing love for others.

How does this connect to Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesying about the New Covenant? The holy and perfect God lives in me and I live in him. This is how my heart is changed from stone to flesh, this is how my desires for sin are crucified. How can I sin if I am walking with Jesus day by day, hour by hour? As I love others the way that Jesus loves them, it means that I am automatically keeping the laws, avoiding sin. In this way we live out the spirit of the Law without being bound by the letter of the Law. In this way our righteousness far exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees or anyone else who merely keeps the Law. This diagram shows the relationship. By following Jesus and loving others, we automatically keep the Law.

The New Covenant is so much greater than the Old one (2 Cor 3:7,8).



One final thing: Jesus is the core of the gospel, the main character in the whole Bible, the centre and climax of all history. Christians who focus on keeping rules do not understand the New Covenant. Many of them tend to lose sight of Jesus and of love. What laws do we need to keep? None. If our hearts are transformed daily by God's love, by the Spirit of God in us, then our lives will shine like stars in the darkness (read Matt 5:16; Phil 2:14,15; 1 Peter 2:12,16).

Most people find it easier to have a clear cut list of rules to follow, and other religions are based on keeping lists of rules. However, God doesn't want rule followers and he never did. We saw that even in the Old Testament, God was more interested in relationship. He wants a bride in intimate communion with him, a relationship based on love, faith, and obedience. He wants us to grow in our love and knowledge of Jesus, becoming transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory (2 Cor 3:18).

This new way of thinking, of continually, consciously, and deliberately abiding in a relationship with Jesus takes practice. The Father/Jesus/Holy Spirit lives in me and I can talk to him any time during the day. I have to bring him my thoughts and actions and then listen. I have to be honest, confess when I sin, and I have to obey when I hear God telling me to do or not to do something.

Dr. Hormoz Shariat, an Iranian pastor, speaks about this when he talks about Christians in Iran:

Persecuted Christians quickly realize that Jesus is all they need, so He is all they want. Walking daily with Jesus is not an option for them, but an acute need. For those of us who do not face the same intensity of persecution, a vibrant deep spiritual walk with the Holy Spirit may seem optional. If we do not spend time in His Word, pray regularly, or go to church, then we won't notice when an immediate negative impact [takes place in our lives]. Therefore, in our "freedom," we have to be intentional about remembering what Jesus has done for us, so that we will realize our desperate need to walk closely with him.†

This is my best understanding as of the year that I'm writing this. Over time, I might change my understanding of some parts of this.

Resources

† From "Voice of the Martyrs" magazine, VOM Canada, September 2023, page 6.

I have learned so much about this from these Christian leaders and pastors: Charles Price, Bruxy Cavey, Philip Yancey, as well as from theological discussions on Reddit.com over the years.

See the sermons "The New Covenant" (C.Price) and "Love vs Law" (B. Cavey) uploaded at <https://quarkphysics.ca/sermons.html> .

I highly recommend the small Christian classic "The Practice of the Presence of God" by Brother Lawrence.