

# Wings

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*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”  
Isaiah 40:31*



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## The Ministry of Death

For all its lofty ideals, the Old Testament law had one fatal flaw that rendered it impotent as a means of justification. That flaw turned the Law into an instrument of death.

“But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, . . . how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?” (2 Cor. 3:7-8).

In this chapter, Paul is contrasting the old covenant with the new covenant. He calls the old covenant (represented by the Ten Commandments, “written and engraved on stones”) a “ministry of death.” Later in this context, Paul also calls this covenant “the ministry of condemnation” (v. 9).

Those are harsh labels to hang on a major portion of God’s word. Especially when we consider that the old Law, compared to the moral standards of Israel’s pagan neighbors, was a model of virtue. Elsewhere Paul even acknowledged its value (Rom. 7:12). So why does he call it a “ministry of death”?

Paul provided a clue earlier in this context when he wrote, “the letter kills but the Spirit gives life” (v. 6). He was not drawing a contrast (as many do) between the *letter* of the Law and the *intent* of the Law, but between *two approaches to justification* represented by the two covenants. One approach (the

old covenant) consistently failed to justify the follower, resulting only in condemnation and death; the other (the new covenant) leads to justification and life.

But both of these covenants came from God, and share many details in common. Why is one so defective and the other so effective in saving man?

To understand more fully what Paul is saying here, it is helpful to look at what he wrote elsewhere on the same topic. In Romans, he argued that justification through the Law of Moses was not possible, because “by the Law is the knowledge of sin” (3:20); that is, “I would not have known sin except by the Law” (7:7). The fatal flaw was not in the Law itself, but in human failure to keep it. “For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me” (7:11). To the extent that Israel respected and kept the Law, they benefited from it; but no one could keep it perfectly (3:23). In practical terms, then, the Law could only condemn, not save.

The same theme is expanded in the epistle to the Galatians. Those who seek justification by the Law are under a

curse, because the Law itself declared, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in *all things* which are written in the book of the Law, to do them” (3:10; see Deut. 27:26). “All things” allows no room for error; you either kept the Law perfectly—zero mistakes—or you fell under the curse. As a system of justification, the Law did not award extra credit for good intentions, demanding instead that “the man who *does them* shall live by them” (3:12; see Lev. 18:5). It was either do or die!

That’s why the old Law is called a “ministry of death.” For all its lofty ideals, the Law was entirely dependent on human perfection for its power. If humans fell short of perfection, the only thing the Law could do was condemn.

The new covenant of Christ has the same lofty ideals as the old, but it does not require flawless performance as a condition for justification. Although it urges disciples to strive for their best, it takes into account the *faith* of the imperfect believer as righteousness (Rom. 4:5; Gal. 3:11). Justification is possible, despite our mistakes.

– David King