

REASON TOGETHER CHURCH
REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

THE STONE WAS REPLACED BY GRACE

DID GRACE REPLACE THE STONE?



2 CORINTHIANS 3:3-18

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www.ReasonTogether.Church

*Bring your questions. Open your Bible.
Let's Reason Together the Word of God.*

Aloha, church family.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Whether you have been with us from the beginning, whether this is your first visit or whether you are still deciding what you believe, I am genuinely glad that you are here.

At Reason Together Church, we do not believe honest questions are enemies of faith.

We believe honest questions can lead us into a deeper and more careful examination of the Word of God.

Our invitation is simple.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let us Reason Together the Word of God.

If you are visiting, please understand that you are our honored guest.

You are not expected to give anything.

If you are a member of another church, we encourage you to support your home church.

For those who call Reason Together Church their church home, there is a giving box available in the back.

We will not pass a plate and we will not interrupt the study to ask you for money.

The Bible tells us that God loveth a cheerful giver, so giving should never be produced by embarrassment or pressure.

Give as the Lord leads you and with the joy He places in your heart.

There is also a guest card available.

We ask only for your first name and an email address so we can let you know what we will be studying next.

Our Keiki Kids Center is available for families who would like to use it.

After the service, please remain for coffee and conversation at the Reason Together Cafe.

The coffee is free.

The refills are free.

And around here, we like to say that the refills on conversation are free as well.

Those are just a few things I wanted you to know before we open the Bible together.

Now, let us settle for a moment.

Some questions arrive because we have spent years trying to understand them.

Others arrive in one small thought and then refuse to leave us alone.

A question came to me this week about three familiar names in the Bible.

Peter.

James.

John.

The thought sounded almost like a sermon before any of the three men had said a word.

Peter is associated with a rock or a stone.

James is traditionally associated with a supplanter, someone who takes the place of another.

John's name declares that the LORD is gracious.

Stone.

Supplant.

Grace.

Could those three names be saying that the stone was replaced by grace?

That is today's Reason Together question.

Did grace replace the stone?

It is a beautiful thought.

It is memorable.

It sounds as though it should preach.

But a beautiful thought is not harmed when we open the Bible and test it.

If it is true, Scripture will make it stronger.

If part of it is mistaken, Scripture will correct it.

And sometimes the correction leads us to a truth far greater than the first thought could carry.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for allowing us to gather around Your Word.

Thank You for the questions that make us open our Bibles and look again.

Give us curiosity without gullibility.

Give us conviction without pride.

Give us humility when Your Word corrects an idea we found attractive.

Help us distinguish what a name means, what a story says and what a passage teaches.

Show us the holiness of Your law.

Show us the depth of our need.

Show us the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

And show us the transforming grace of the New Covenant through the Holy Spirit.

May every person here understand not only what grace replaces, but what grace gives.

May Christ be honored in everything taught and everything received.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Names matter in the Bible.

Sometimes God changes a person's name at a turning point in that person's life.

Abram becomes Abraham.

Jacob becomes Israel.

Simon is called Peter.

Sometimes Scripture tells us exactly why a name matters.

Matthew 1:21 says of Mary:

"And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins."

The Biblical writer supplies the meaning and connects it directly to Christ's saving work.

Matthew also calls Him Emmanuel and then interprets the name for us:

"God with us."

In Mark 3, Jesus gives James and John the surname Boanerges, and Mark explains that it means

"The sons of thunder."

When Scripture interprets a name and uses that interpretation in the story, we may speak with confidence.

But we should also understand that three different things are not always the same thing.

There is what a name means.

There is what a preacher may see illustrated in that name.

And there is what the Biblical author intended to teach through the passage.

Those three things can be related.

But they are not interchangeable.

So let us begin carefully.

Peter is the Greek Petros.

Rock or stone is a legitimate association.

Jesus Himself gives Simon that name.

John 1:42 says:

"And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone."

That much is strong.

But Peter does not mean the Ten Commandments.

Peter does not mean Mount Sinai.

Peter does not mean the entire Old Testament.

Those are possible associations introduced by the preacher.

They are not the definition supplied by the name itself.

James is the Greek form of Jacob.

The traditional association reaches back to Jacob's birth, when he took hold of Esau's heel.

Jacob's name became associated with the heel-holder or supplanter.

Supplant can carry the idea of taking another's place.

That is close enough to make the proposed picture understandable.

But we should not say that James literally means one covenant will replace another.

That conclusion is much larger than the name.

John is connected with the Hebrew name that declares the LORD is gracious or the LORD has shown grace.

That is beautiful.

That is true.

But John does not simply mean the entire New Testament system of grace.

The name tells us something about God's gracious character.

It does not by itself explain covenant theology.

So the names may create a memorable preaching observation.

They cannot establish the doctrine.

Where must doctrine be established?

In Scripture interpreted in context.

That gives us a simple test.

Does the Bible always keep Peter, James and John in the order our proposed sentence requires?

Many of us remember the familiar order.

Peter, James and John.

Matthew uses that order at the Transfiguration.

Mark uses that order.

It is natural for the pattern to stay in our minds.

But Luke 9:28 says:

"And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray."

Peter.

John.

James.

The order varies.

That does not make the names meaningless.

It does mean we should not build a hidden sentence upon an order the Bible itself does not always preserve.

Then there is the resurrection account.

The copied version of this thought said that Peter reached the tomb first and stopped at the stone, while John entered with confidence.

That sounds powerful.

It is also not what John 20 says.

John 20:3 and 4 tell us:

"Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre."

"So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre."

The other disciple arrived first.

Verse 5 says:

"And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in."

The disciple who arrived first paused outside.

Then verses 6 through 8 say:

"Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie,"

"And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself."

"Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed."

Peter did not arrive first and stop at the stone.

Peter entered first.

The other disciple arrived first, paused outside, then followed Peter into the tomb.

That disciple is traditionally identified as John, although the passage calls him the other disciple or the disciple whom Jesus loved.

We should say what the text says.

The beloved disciple arrived first.

Peter entered first.

The beloved disciple followed, saw and believed.

Why spend this much time correcting the opening thought?

Because the way we handle a small mistake teaches us how to handle the Bible.

We do not have to protect a sermon illustration from Scripture.

We do not have to pretend the text says something because the thought would sound better if it did.

Truth does not need our help in that way.

Humility is not the enemy of preaching.

Humility is part of faithful preaching.

And this correction does not leave us with nothing.

It takes us away from a fragile stone at the tomb and leads us to a much stronger stone at Sinai.

Exodus 31:18 says:

"And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God."

These were not ordinary pieces of stone.

They carried the words of the covenant.

They declared God's righteous will.

They had been written with the finger of God.

While Moses was upon the mountain receiving those words, Israel was at the foot of the mountain worshipping a golden calf.

The covenant was being violated while its words were still in Moses' hands.

Exodus 32:19 says:

"And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount."

The broken stone became the visible sign of a covenant the people had already broken in their hearts and actions.

God's commandments were not the problem.

God's holiness was not the problem.

The people had agreed to obey, then turned toward idolatry before Moses returned.

After judgment and intercession, God showed mercy.

Exodus 34:1 says:

"And the LORD said unto Moses, Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest."

The first tablets were replaced.

But notice what was not replaced.

The words were the words that had been in the first tablets.

God did not lower His holiness because Israel had failed.

God did not rewrite righteousness to make rebellion acceptable.

The stone was new.

The words remained.

And that leads to a deeper problem.

What does a second copy of perfect commandments accomplish when it is given to people with the same rebellious hearts?

The first tablets could tell Israel what God required.

The second tablets could tell Israel what God required.

But neither set could reach inside a resistant heart and give it life.

External command can reveal what is right.

External command can expose what is wrong.

External command can pronounce guilt.

But external command cannot perform spiritual surgery.

That is not because the command is weak in holiness.

It is because the sinner is weak in the flesh.

Many of us understand this problem personally.

We fail and promise to do better.

We write the rule again.

We repeat the resolution.

We tell ourselves that this time we will be different.

Sometimes discipline helps us establish a better habit.

But no list of rules can raise a spiritually dead heart.

No command can forgive the guilt already committed.

No second copy of the standard can change the person who resents the standard.

So if new tablets were not enough, what did God promise to replace?

Ezekiel 36 gives us the clearest answer.

God first speaks of cleansing.

Verse 25 says:

"Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you."

Then verses 26 and 27 say:

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh."

"And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them."

There is the stone God expressly promised to remove.

The heart of stone.

What is a heart of stone?

It is resistant.

It is unresponsive.

It can hear the command without loving the God who gave it.

It can know the words without possessing the life those words describe.

It can become religious without becoming alive.

And what is the heart of flesh in this passage?

It does not mean a carnal heart.

It does not mean sinful flesh in the way Paul sometimes uses the word flesh.

It means a living heart.

A responsive heart.

A heart made tender toward God by God's own gracious work.

Listen to how many times God says what He will do.

I will sprinkle.

I will cleanse.

I will give.

I will put.

I will take away.

I will give.

I will put My Spirit within you.

Grace is not the sinner climbing upward until God finally agrees to help.

Grace is God doing for the sinner what the sinner cannot do for himself.

Jeremiah describes the same New Covenant promise from another direction.

Jeremiah 31:31 says:

"Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah."

Verse 32 says this covenant will not be according to the covenant made when God brought their fathers out of Egypt, "which my covenant they brake."

Then verse 33 says:

"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."

The law once written outside the people will be written within them.

The problem is not solved by pretending God never had a standard.

The problem is solved by cleansing guilt, giving life and placing God's Spirit within His people.

That is the true gracious replacement.

Grace does not replace God's holiness.

Grace replaces the stony heart with a living heart.

Grace does not make obedience unnecessary.

Grace supplies the Spirit who produces inward obedience.

Before that promise was fulfilled, God gave Israel a picture of how holiness and mercy could meet.

The second tablets were placed inside the ark of the covenant.

The ark was a sacred chest in the tabernacle.

Exodus 25:16 says:

"And thou shalt put into the ark the testimony which I shall give thee."

The law was inside.

Above the ark was the mercy seat, the atonement cover, with cherubim overshadowing it.

Exodus 25:21 and 22 say:

"And thou shalt put the mercy seat above upon the ark; and in the ark thou shalt put the testimony that I shall give thee."

"And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat."

Picture it carefully.

The stone tablets are beneath.

The mercy seat is above.

And on the Day of Atonement, sacrificial blood is brought to that place.

Leviticus 16:14 says of the high priest:

"And he shall take of the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it with his finger upon the mercy seat eastward."

Law beneath.

Blood above.

God meeting His people at the place of atonement.

That is not a picture of God deciding that the law no longer matters.

If the law did not matter, guilt would not require atonement.

If sin were not real, blood would not be presented.

Mercy does not deny justice.

Mercy provides an answer to the guilt justice has exposed.

The ark does not show holiness and grace fighting one another.

It shows holiness, guilt, blood and mercy meeting in God's appointed provision.

Yet the blood of animals was not the final answer.

The earthly tabernacle was not the final meeting place.

The mercy seat pointed beyond itself.

The law and the prophets pointed beyond themselves.

And the Transfiguration directs our attention to the One in whom every promise finds its fulfillment.

Matthew 17 tells us that Jesus took Peter, James and John up into a high mountain.

There the three disciples are present.

But the event is not centered upon the hidden meanings of their names.

The event tells us where to look.

Jesus is transfigured before them.

His face shines as the sun.

His raiment becomes white as the light.

Moses and Elijah appear and speak with Him.

Moses is the great mediator associated with the law.

Elijah stands among the greatest prophetic voices.

Luke tells us what they discussed.

Luke 9:31 says they:

"Spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem."

The word translated decease carries the idea of departure or exodus.

Moses, whose life was bound to Israel's exodus, speaks with Jesus about the exodus Jesus will accomplish at Jerusalem.

Peter proposes three tabernacles.

One for Jesus.

One for Moses.

One for Elijah.

Peter is speaking when the Father answers from the cloud.

Matthew 17:5 says:

"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him."

Hear Him.

Do not place Him beside Moses as though they carry equal final authority.

Do not place Him beside Elijah as though He is merely one more prophet.

Hear the Son.

Then Matthew 17:8 says:

"And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only."

Moses is not mocked.

Elijah is not rejected.

The Old Testament is not thrown away as false.

The law and the prophets bear witness to Christ.

But Jesus remains.

Jesus fulfills.

Jesus accomplishes the saving exodus at Jerusalem.

The names Peter, James and John may have opened our question.

The Father's voice supplies the answer to where our attention belongs.

Hear Him.

Now we are ready for the passage that must control this sermon.

Second Corinthians chapter 3 does not depend upon a modern preacher's name pattern.

Paul himself brings together stone, covenant, condemnation, Spirit, life, righteousness, liberty and transformation.

Second Corinthians 3:3 speaks of believers as an epistle of Christ:

"Written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart."

Paul is not saying that writing is bad.

He is not saying that reading the Bible kills faith.

He is not saying that doctrine is lifeless and spiritual spontaneity is always safe.

He is describing the difference between covenant ministries.

Verse 6 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."

The phrase "the letter killeth" is often lifted out of context.

In context, Paul immediately speaks about what was written and engraven in stones.

He calls it a ministry of death.

Why?

Was God's law sinful?

No.

Romans 7:12 says:

"Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good."

The law is holy.

But when a holy command confronts a guilty sinner, it exposes guilt and pronounces condemnation.

A thermometer can reveal a fever.

It cannot cure the infection.

A courtroom verdict can accurately declare guilt.

It cannot transform the guilty heart into a righteous one.

The law tells the truth.

The truth it tells about us is that we have sinned.

Second Corinthians 3:7 speaks of:

"The ministration of death, written and engraven in stones."

Verse 8 asks:

"How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?"

Verse 9 says:

"For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory."

Notice that Paul does not say the former covenant had no glory.

It had glory.

Moses' face shone.

God truly revealed Himself.

God truly gave mercy.

God truly saved people by grace through faith.

But the covenant written on stone could not be the final covenant.

It exposed sin.

It pronounced condemnation.

Its priesthood and sacrifices had to be repeated.

Its glory pointed forward to something greater.

Verse 11 says:

"For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious."

This is where we must define our words carefully.

Did grace replace the stone?

If by stone we mean God's holy character, no.

God has not become less holy.

If by stone we mean the moral righteousness reflected in His commands, no.

Grace does not make evil good or rebellion harmless.

If by stone we mean the Mosaic covenant written upon tablets, the New Testament says that covenant has been surpassed by the New Covenant mediated by Christ.

Hebrews calls the first covenant old and speaks of a better covenant established upon better promises.

If by stone we mean the hard heart within us, yes.

God explicitly promises to remove the heart of stone and give a living heart through His Spirit.

That is why the sentence must be spoken carefully.

Grace did not replace holiness.

Grace did not replace truth.

Grace did not replace the need for righteousness.

Grace replaced the old covenant administration with the New Covenant in Christ.

Grace removes the stony heart.

Grace provides the Savior.

Grace gives the Spirit.

Grace produces the transformation external command could require but could never create.

Paul then speaks about the veil.

Second Corinthians 3:14 says:

"For until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ."

The veil is done away where?

In Christ.

Not through cleverness.

Not through religious achievement.

Not through discovering a hidden code.

In Christ.

Verse 16 says:

"Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away."

Verse 17 says:

"Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

Liberty does not mean freedom from God.

Liberty means freedom from condemnation, freedom from the veil and freedom to behold the glory of the Lord.

Then verse 18 reaches the destination:

"But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

Changed.

Transformed.

Not merely informed from the outside.

Not merely frightened into temporary compliance.

Changed by the Spirit of the Lord.

The New Covenant is not only a new page in religious history.

It brings life to people who could read the command but could not create the obedience it required.

Now someone may ask a reasonable question.

If believers are not under the Mosaic covenant, does God still care how we live?

Yes.

Absolutely.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:17:

"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil."

Jesus fulfilled the law.

He fulfilled its righteous demands in perfect obedience.

He fulfilled its types and shadows in His saving work.

He brought its covenant story to the destination God had always intended.

But we do not fulfill the law by presenting our performance as the price of acceptance with God.

Romans 3:20 says:

"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin."

The law gives the knowledge of sin.

It does not provide the sinner's justification.

No one in the Old Testament was saved because he kept the law perfectly.

Abraham was justified by faith before Sinai.

David knew the blessedness of the person to whom God imputes righteousness without works.

The sacrifices themselves taught Israel that sinners needed God's provision.

Salvation has always been by grace through faith in what God provides.

What is new is not that God suddenly became gracious after centuries of being ungracious.

The Old Testament is filled with grace.

Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.

Israel's rescue from Egypt preceded the giving of the law at Sinai.

David received mercy after terrible sin.

The prophets promised restoration no sinner could earn.

What is new is the accomplished work of Christ, the established New Covenant, the once-for-all sacrifice and the indwelling ministry of the Spirit in fulfillment of God's promise.

Romans 8:3 and 4 say:

"For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:"

"That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

The weakness was not a moral defect in God's holiness.

The weakness was through the flesh.

The command meets sinners who cannot save themselves.

What the law could not do, God did.

He sent His Son.

He condemned sin in the flesh.

He gives His Spirit.

That means we must reject two opposite errors.

The first is legalism.

Legalism tells us our obedience purchases acceptance with God.

It may speak about grace while quietly placing our confidence back in our performance.

It produces pride when we think we are succeeding and despair when we know we have failed.

The Gospel tells us that Christ purchased what we could never earn.

The second error is license.

License tells us grace means conduct no longer matters.

It treats forgiveness as permission to remain comfortably surrendered to sin.

Paul answers that in Romans 6:15:

"What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid."

Grace does not excuse the stony heart.

Grace replaces it.

Grace does not train us to love sin more confidently.

Grace teaches us to deny ungodliness.

The believer does not obey toward acceptance as though he is trying to buy it.

The believer obeys from acceptance received in Christ.

Grace produces the obedience it does not ask us to purchase.

But how can God remain holy and accept people who have broken His law?

How can the Judge justify the guilty without becoming unjust?

Return to the picture of the ark.

Law beneath.

Blood above.

God meeting His people at the place of atonement.

Romans 3 gives us the fulfillment.

Verse 21 says:

"But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets."

The law and prophets witness to this righteousness.

Verse 22 says it is:

"The righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe."

Then verse 23 tells the truth about us:

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."

All have sinned.

The religious person has sinned.

The openly rebellious person has sinned.

The person who knows the commandments has sinned.

The person who never learned their numbering has sinned.

Our problem is not merely that a stone tablet exists outside us.

Our problem is that sin exists within us.

Then verses 24 and 25 say:

"Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:"

"Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood."

The word translated propitiation is connected with the language of atonement and the mercy seat.

We should not force every possible shade of a Greek word into one English sentence.

But the connection is powerful and deeply Biblical.

Christ is the atoning answer to our guilt.

He is not an animal brought by another priest.

He is the Son who willingly gives Himself.

He does not enter with the blood of another.

He sheds His own blood.

He does not repeat the sacrifice each year.

He offers one sufficient sacrifice.

Galatians 3:13 says:

"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us."

Jesus did not merely tell us to try harder under condemnation.

He bore the curse.

He answered the judgment.

He fulfilled the righteousness.

Hebrews 9:11 and 12 say:

"But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building;"

"Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us."

Once.

His sacrifice does not need improvement.

His blood does not need assistance from our religious achievements.

His redemption does not wait for us to add the missing payment.

At the cross, grace is not cheap and holiness is not relaxed.

The Judge provides the saving answer without ceasing to be just.

Romans 3:26 says God is:

"Just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."

Just.

And the justifier.

Holy.

And gracious.

The cross paid the price.

The empty tomb announced that death and condemnation had not won.

Now we may return to John 20 without forcing the mistaken picture upon it.

The beloved disciple arrived first.

Peter entered first.

The beloved disciple followed, saw and believed.

The power of the scene is not that Peter stopped at a stone.

The power is that the stone had been taken away.

The grave clothes remained.

The body of Jesus was not there.

Jesus Christ had risen.

Later in the chapter, Mary sees two angels.

John 20:12 says:

"And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain."

Some careful readers have seen a possible visual echo of the mercy seat.

Two angels.

One at the head.

One at the feet.

The empty place between them where the body of Jesus had lain.

That resemblance is compelling.

It may be intentional.

But John does not say, "This was the mercy seat."

So we should label the connection honestly.

It is a possible typological echo.

It is not the foundation of the doctrine.

The doctrine has already been established by Exodus, Leviticus, Romans and Hebrews.

The echo may add beauty after the truth is secure.

It must not be asked to carry what John does not explicitly explain.

The same care is needed when we compare Sinai and Pentecost.

Exodus 32:28 says that after the golden calf judgment:

"There fell of the people that day about three thousand men."

Acts 2:41 says at Pentecost:

"Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls."

About three thousand at Sinai.

About three thousand at Pentecost.

The contrast is striking.

Judgment beside the broken covenant.

Life as the apostolic word is received and the Spirit is poured out.

It may be a deliberate numerical echo.

But Acts does not explicitly say Pentecost reversed the three thousand deaths of Exodus 32.

We may admire the resemblance.

We should not upgrade it beyond the words Scripture provides.

And once again, the certainty beneath the possible echo is greater than the echo itself.

Jesus is risen.

The Spirit has been given.

The New Covenant promise is being fulfilled.

The church receives the apostolic word.

The Spirit who gives life does not leave us unchanged.

That brings us to Titus chapter 2.

Titus 2:11 says:

"For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men."

Grace brings salvation.

Grace does not tell the drowning person to become a better swimmer before Christ will rescue him.

Grace does not tell the guilty person to serve enough of his own sentence before forgiveness can begin.

Grace brings salvation.

But grace is not only pardon for yesterday.

Verse 12 says grace is:

"Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world."

Grace teaches.

Grace says no to ungodliness.

Grace trains us to live differently in the present world.

Then verses 13 and 14 say:

"Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;"

"Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works."

Jesus gave Himself.

He redeems.

He purifies.

He creates a people zealous of good works.

Good works are not the purchase price of salvation.

They are part of the purpose for which the saved person has been recreated.

Ephesians 2:8 and 9 say:

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:"

"Not of works, lest any man should boast."

Then verse 10 says:

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

Saved by grace.

Not by works.

Created unto good works.

That is the balance.

Grace is not the reward for a changed life.

Grace is the saving gift that begins changing the life.

So did grace replace the stone?

The names Peter, James and John may illustrate the question.

They do not establish the answer.

The tomb story, when read accurately, does not say Peter stopped at the stone while John entered first.

But Scripture gives us a stronger answer.

The first stone tablets were replaced, yet the same covenant words remained.

That showed that God's holiness was not the problem.

God promised a New Covenant.

He promised to remove the heart of stone.

He promised to give a living heart.

He promised to put His Spirit within His people.

The tablets rested beneath the mercy seat where atoning blood was presented.

The law and prophets directed attention to Christ.

Paul explained that the covenant ministry written on stone was surpassed by the New Covenant ministry of the Spirit.

Christ fulfilled the law.

Christ bore its curse.

Christ shed His blood.

Christ rose bodily from the dead.

The Spirit gives life.

Grace teaches holiness.

The law could reveal the problem.

Grace provides the answer in Christ.

God did not lower the standard.

He provided the Savior and changed the heart.

And that means today's question is not only about Peter, James and John.

It is about us.

Has grace merely changed your religious vocabulary?

Or has Christ given you a new heart?

You may know the commandments.

You may agree that they are good.

You may have promised many times that you will do better.

But a second copy of the rule cannot remove the guilt of the first violation.

Religious effort cannot raise a spiritually dead heart.

We need cleansing.

We need forgiveness.

We need righteousness we cannot manufacture.

We need the life-giving Spirit.

We need Jesus Christ.

First Corinthians 15:3 and 4 give the heart of the Gospel:

"Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;"

"And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures."

Christ died for our sins.

Not for imaginary failures.

Not merely as an example of courage.

He died for our sins.

He was buried.

He rose again.

Salvation is received by repentance and faith.

Repentance means we stop defending our rebellion and turn toward God.

Faith means we stop trusting our performance and place our confidence in Christ.

We do not clean our own heart so that Jesus will agree to save us.

We come to Jesus because we cannot save ourselves.

The prayer I am about to offer is not a magical collection of words.

Repeating after a pastor does not save anyone.

Jesus saves the person who genuinely repents and places his or her trust in Him.

If that is the desire of your heart, you may pray quietly with me.

Lord Jesus,

I know that I am a sinner.

I know that I cannot save myself.

I believe that You fulfilled the righteousness I could not fulfill.

I believe that You died for my sins.

I believe that You were buried and rose again.

I turn from trusting myself and place my faith in You.

Please forgive me, save me and make me Your own.

Give me new life and teach me to walk by Your Spirit.

Thank You for the gift of eternal life.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

If you prayed that prayer and meant it, please speak with me before you leave.

I would be honored to pray with you, answer your questions and help you understand what comes next.

If you are joining us from somewhere else, you may contact us through
www.ReasonTogether.Church.

We want to help you connect with a faithful local church and begin growing in the Word of God.

For every believer, the question continues.

Are we using obedience to earn an acceptance Christ has already purchased?

Or is our obedience flowing from gratitude for acceptance received in Him?

Legalism keeps looking at the stone and asking whether we have finally performed enough.

License looks away from God's holiness and pretends grace makes obedience unnecessary.

The Gospel does neither.

The Gospel looks to Christ.

Christ fulfilled the law.

Christ bore the curse.

Christ gives His Spirit.

Christ teaches His people to walk in newness of life.

During the coming week, read Exodus chapters 32 through 34.

Then read Ezekiel 36:22 through 27.

Read Second Corinthians chapter 3 slowly.

Then read Titus 2:11 through 14.

As you read, ask one personal question.

Am I trying to write God's will upon my life through fear and effort alone?

Or am I yielding to the Spirit who writes upon the heart?

Do not use grace as an excuse to ignore what God has said.

Do not use the law as a ladder by which you hope to climb into God's acceptance.

Stand in the righteousness of Christ.

Walk by the Spirit.

Allow grace to teach you.

If you disagree with something I said today, please do not leave with the disagreement silently growing into frustration.

Bring the question upstairs.

Let us open the Bible.

Let us examine the words and the passages together.

Let us talk over coffee at the Reason Together Cafe.

The coffee is free and the refills on conversation remain free.

If a question returns on Tuesday afternoon instead of Sunday morning, you do not need to wait until the next service.

Please contact me.

I am available during the week for spiritual questions, concerns and prayer.

This church exists for more than a weekly presentation.

We want to walk together, reason together and help one another grow in Christ.

Let us close in prayer.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your holy Word.

Thank You that Your law tells the truth about righteousness and sin.

Thank You that You did not lower Your holiness when we failed.

Thank You for promising a new covenant, a new heart and Your indwelling Spirit.

Thank You for every Old Testament picture that points us toward Christ.

Thank You for the mercy seat, the atoning blood, the law and the prophets.

Most of all, thank You for Jesus Christ.

Thank You that He fulfilled the law.

Thank You that He bore the curse.

Thank You that He shed His blood and rose bodily from the dead.

Thank You that salvation is Your gift of grace received through faith.

For anyone who trusted Christ today, give assurance through Your Word and lead that person into faithful fellowship.

For every believer, expose legalism wherever we are trying to purchase what Christ has already provided.

Expose license wherever we are using grace to defend what You call sin.

Soften every resistant place within us.

Teach us to walk by the Spirit.

Make us responsive to Your voice.

Write Your will upon our hearts and produce the obedience that brings honor to Christ.

Help us remain humble enough to let Scripture correct an attractive thought.

Help us remain careful enough to label an inference as an inference.

Help us remain confident wherever Your Word has spoken clearly.

May this conversation continue in our homes, around our tables and throughout the coming week.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

The law could write upon stone.

Only grace could give us a new heart and write there.

Thank you for being part of Reason Together Church today.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Aloha Nui Loa.

Commentary Introduction

A question came to me this week after considering three familiar names: Peter, James and John. Peter can be associated with a stone. James is the English form of Jacob, a name traditionally connected with taking the heel or supplanting. John comes from a Hebrew name declaring that the LORD is gracious. Placed in the familiar order, the names seem to form a striking sentence: stone, replacement and grace. Could the names be telling us that the stone was replaced by grace?

The thought is memorable, but memorable is not the same as inspired. A responsible commentary must first separate the meaning of a name from an illustration built upon that name, then separate both from the doctrine explicitly taught by the Biblical text. Peter does have a stone association. James does preserve the Jacob name. John does proclaim the graciousness of the LORD. Yet Scripture never interprets the three names together as a coded announcement of covenant change. The order is not fixed in every passage and the proposed reading of John 20 reverses important details of the narrative.

That correction does not destroy the study. It relocates the study onto a stronger foundation. Scripture itself places stone, covenant, heart, Spirit, condemnation, glory and grace into one coherent redemptive argument. The strongest passages are Ezekiel 36:26-27, Jeremiah 31:31-34 and 2 Corinthians 3:3-18. They teach that the holy law written on stone could reveal God's righteousness but could not justify the guilty or create an obedient heart. In the New Covenant, God forgives, gives a new heart, writes inwardly and ministers by the Spirit through Jesus Christ.

The controlling conclusion is therefore more precise than the opening slogan. Grace did not replace God's holiness. Grace did not declare sin harmless. Grace did not begin in the New Testament. Christ fulfilled the law, bore its curse for sinners and established the New Covenant in His blood. The condemning ministry of the old covenant gives way to the surpassing ministry of the Spirit. The stone remains a witness to what is holy. Grace brings the sinner to Christ, gives life and begins the inward transformation that stone could command but never produce.

Commentary in Brief

The proposed Peter-James-John pattern is best treated as a question that leads into study, not as proof that settles the study. Peter's name may legitimately call stone to mind, but it does not mean the Ten Commandments or the entire Old Testament. James is related to Jacob and the traditional idea of supplanting, but it does not mean that one covenant must replace another. John reflects the confession that the LORD is gracious, but John is not the Greek noun *charis* and the apostle is not an automatic personification of the New Testament.

The order of the trio cannot carry a hidden sentence because Luke 9:28 names Peter, John and James. John 20 also corrects the proposed resurrection image. The beloved disciple arrived first and paused outside. Peter arrived later and entered first. The beloved disciple then entered, saw and believed. The removed stone was already away from the entrance before either disciple arrived. The passage proclaims the reality of the resurrection through the empty tomb and the grave clothes, not a contrast in which Peter represents law stopping and John represents grace entering.

The doctrinal center is 2 Corinthians 3. Paul contrasts the apostolic ministry of the New Covenant with the Mosaic covenant written and engraven in stones. The former ministry was glorious, holy and truly from God, yet it condemned transgressors and possessed a fading glory. The New Covenant has greater and enduring glory because Christ removes the veil and the Spirit gives life and transforms believers. Ezekiel explains the new heart and Spirit. Jeremiah explains forgiveness and inward writing. The Gospel explains how this promise is secured through the death and resurrection of Christ.

The names may raise the question. The text must answer it.

1. Names Matter, but Context Governs

Biblical names can carry meaning. Scripture sometimes makes that meaning part of the inspired argument. Jesus is named because He shall save His people from their sins. Emmanuel is interpreted as God with us. Mark reports that Jesus called James and John Boanerges and explains the expression as sons of thunder. When the Biblical writer supplies the interpretation and connects it to the narrative, the interpreter may speak with confidence.

A name study becomes less certain when the Biblical writer does not make that connection. Etymology identifies a word's linguistic background. Narrative interpretation asks what the author is doing with a person or event. Doctrine asks what the passage teaches as truth for faith and life. A similarity among names may produce an illustration, but doctrine must not borrow certainty from an etymology the passage never activates.

Four questions keep the categories clear:

- What is known? The lexical background, the actual wording of the passage and the sequence of narrated events.
- What is claimed? The proposed symbolic relationship among the names, people or objects.
- What has been inferred? The theological conclusion drawn from the proposed relationship.
- What remains unknown? Whether the Biblical author intended the relationship when the text does not say so.

This method does not remove imagination from preaching. It disciplines imagination so that a useful picture remains a picture. The authority belongs to the Word of God, not to the ingenuity of the interpreter.

2. Peter: A Stone, but Not the Tablets

John 1:42

And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone.

Peter is the strongest element in the proposed sequence. The Greek Petros and the Aramaic Cephas establish a rock or stone association. Jesus gave Simon this name and the Gospels preserve it. Yet a valid association still has limits. Peter does not lexically mean the two tablets of testimony. He does not mean the Mosaic covenant, the law as a whole or the Old Testament Scriptures.

Scripture uses stone imagery in many ways. The tablets were stone. The heart can be stone. Christ is the stone rejected by builders, the chief cornerstone and a stone of stumbling. Believers are living stones. A sealed tomb has a stone at its entrance. Because the image has many uses, the interpreter must allow the immediate context to determine which use is active. Moving directly from Peter to Sinai requires an additional interpretive step that the name itself does not supply.

Peter's role in the New Testament also resists a simple equation with old-covenant condemnation. He confessed Christ, witnessed the Transfiguration, entered the empty tomb, preached the resurrection and announced forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost. He called Jesus the living stone and believers lively stones. The apostle named Stone became a preacher of grace. The person cannot be reduced to one symbolic side of a law-grace contrast.

3. James: Jacob, the Heel and Supplanting

The English name James developed from the same Biblical name represented by Jacob. Genesis connects Jacob's birth with his grasp of Esau's heel. The traditional language of heel-holder and supplanter reflects that history. The connection is real enough to explain why the opening thought seems plausible.

Yet supplant is broader and more complicated than replace. It can refer to taking another's place, overcoming by strategy or displacing someone. The name does not specify what is displaced, whether the displacement is righteous or whether a covenant is in view. James therefore cannot function as a divinely supplied equals sign between stone and grace.

The New Testament James was not presented as an abstract principle of replacement. James the son of Zebedee was a disciple, one of the Twelve and a martyr. James the brother of the Lord became a leader in

Jerusalem. The persons and the name must not be flattened into a theological verb that the Gospel writers never assign to them.

4. John: The LORD Is Gracious

John has a rich Hebrew background. The name confesses that the LORD is gracious or that the LORD has shown favor. This is not a minor truth. Grace belongs to God's revealed character and appears throughout Scripture. Noah found grace. The LORD was gracious to Israel repeatedly. The Psalms celebrate mercy. The prophets promise restoration that sinners could never earn.

Still, John is not simply the Greek theological term *charis*. The apostle's name does not mean the New Testament as a book collection or covenant administration. Nor does every action of John become a symbolic action of grace. The Gospel of John can certainly teach grace. John 1 says that the Word was full of grace and truth and that grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. The authority of that doctrine rests in the inspired sentences, not in an imagined performance by the apostle's name.

The name contributes a true confession: the LORD is gracious. It can introduce the study warmly. It cannot complete the argument. To learn what grace accomplishes in the New Covenant, the reader must move from the name John to the words of Christ and His apostles.

5. The Order Audit

The proposed sentence requires Peter, James and John to appear consistently in that order. Several passages do use the familiar order. Matthew 17:1 and Mark 9:2 use it at the Transfiguration. Mark 5:37 uses it when Jesus enters the house of Jairus. Mark 14:33 uses it in Gethsemane. Repetition explains why the order feels fixed.

Luke 9:28

And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray.

Luke names Peter, John and James. That variation is enough to show that the sequence is not an inspired acrostic or hidden theological sentence. The Evangelists identify a close group of witnesses. Their order can reflect prominence, narrative preference or ordinary variation. Scripture never instructs the reader to translate their names consecutively.

The conclusion should be modest. The familiar order may support a memorable illustration after doctrine has already been established elsewhere. It should not be presented as evidence that God encoded covenant change into every listing of the three disciples.

6. What John 20 Actually Says

John 20:4-8

So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre. And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie, And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself. Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed.

The resurrection version of the symbolic claim says that Peter arrived first but stopped at the stone, then John entered with confidence. The text says the opposite on both points of sequence. The beloved disciple outran Peter and arrived first. He looked in but did not enter. Peter arrived after him and went into the sepulchre. Only then did the beloved disciple enter.

The stone at the tomb cannot support the proposed action either. Mary Magdalene arrived while it was yet dark and saw the stone taken away. Peter and the other disciple ran after she reported the open tomb. Neither man is described as stopping at the stone because the stone was no longer blocking the entrance. The narrative directs attention to the linen clothes, the separate napkin, the empty place and the dawning faith of the beloved disciple.

Correcting the sequence is not a pedantic interruption. The resurrection deserves exact handling. Peter's bold entrance and the beloved disciple's seeing and believing are complementary eyewitness details. The passage does not oppose an Old Testament apostle to a New Testament apostle. Both witnesses confront the same empty tomb. The Word made flesh has risen.

A possible preaching sentence may still be drawn from the correction: grace does not need a mistaken story to be glorious. The Gospel becomes stronger when the preacher lets the inspired sequence stand.

7. The Stone at Sinai

Exodus 31:18

And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God.

Sinai supplies the stone that Paul later names explicitly. The tablets carried covenant words written by God. They revealed His holy will and testified against idolatry, murder, adultery, theft, false witness and covetousness. Nothing in the New Covenant turns those sins into virtues. The problem was never a defect in God's righteousness.

The first tablets were broken when Moses saw the calf and the dancing. The broken stone visibly corresponded to a broken covenant. Yet Exodus does not teach that God abandoned His words and substituted moral vagueness. Moses later cut two more tables and the LORD wrote upon them the same covenant words. Renewal preserved the holy standard while mercy preserved a sinful people.

That history prevents a careless slogan. Stone was not evil and grace was not absent. The covenant was graciously initiated, Israel was redeemed from Egypt before receiving the commandments and sacrifice provided a God-given approach for sinners. At the same time, the tablets could state the command without creating the heart that delights to obey it. The law could expose transgression without providing the final sacrifice that removes guilt.

8. The Heart of Stone in Ezekiel

Ezekiel 36:26-27

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

Ezekiel gives the strongest Biblical statement that something stony will be removed. The object is not the moral character of God and not merely the physical tablets. It is the stony heart of the people. The heart is resistant, unresponsive and unable to produce covenant faithfulness. God promises cleansing, a new heart, a new spirit and His own Spirit within them.

The replacement is therefore internal and divine. God does not merely lower the requirement until the hard heart can pass. He changes the person. The heart of flesh is responsive to God. The Spirit causes God's people to walk in His statutes. Grace produces obedience rather than making obedience irrelevant. This promise provides a better form of the study title. In Ezekiel, God replaces the heart of stone through gracious regeneration. The result is not escape from holiness but Spirit-enabled movement toward holiness. The person who has received grace begins to desire what the stone outside could command but could not awaken inside.

9. Jeremiah and the New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that 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 that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: 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. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah identifies the covenant as new and contrasts it with the covenant made when God brought Israel out of Egypt, which they broke. The newness includes inward writing, personal knowledge of the LORD and decisive forgiveness. The law is not treated as an embarrassment to be discarded. God writes inwardly what the former covenant placed before the people.

Forgiveness stands at the center. A changed heart cannot be separated from a pardoned record. Sinners need more than motivation. They need guilt removed. Jeremiah promises that God will forgive iniquity and remember sin no more. The New Testament connects that promise to Christ's once-for-all sacrifice and priestly work.

This passage also guards against saying that the Old Testament taught salvation by human merit.

Jeremiah's promise is itself Old Testament revelation. The same prophetic Scriptures expose failure and announce divine grace. The distinction is not between a graceless Old Testament God and a gracious New Testament God. It is between covenant administrations in the unfolding plan that reaches fulfillment in Christ.

10. The Central Text: 2 Corinthians 3

2 Corinthians 3:3

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.

Paul brings the prophetic promises into direct apostolic ministry. The Corinthian believers are Christ's letter. The writing is not ink on an external document but the work of the living God by His Spirit. The

contrast between tables of stone and fleshy tables of the heart deliberately recalls Sinai and the promise of inward renewal.

Paul immediately denies that the ministers are sufficient in themselves. Their sufficiency is of God, who made them able ministers of the New Testament. The contrast is not clever preachers against rigid readers. The contrast is divine sufficiency against human inability and the life-giving ministry of the Spirit against the condemning effect of the broken covenant.

2 Corinthians 3:6

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.

The letter that kills is not a warning that careful Bible reading is dangerous. Paul is not opposing literal meaning to imaginative spirituality. In context, the letter belongs to the Mosaic covenant written on stone when it confronts sinful people apart from the life-giving work of the Spirit. The command is holy, but the transgressor stands condemned. The Spirit gives the life the command cannot create.

Verses 7 through 11 call the stone-written ministry glorious, then declare the ministry of the Spirit more glorious. Paul does not insult Moses. Moses' face shone because he had been with God. The old covenant had true glory. Its glory was fading and its ministry condemned the guilty. The New Covenant remains and exceeds it because righteousness, unveiled access and transformation come through Christ and the Spirit.

11. The Letter Kills and the Spirit Gives Life

This sentence is often detached from its argument. Some use it to dismiss doctrine, grammar or the written Bible. That interpretation defeats Paul's own practice. He reasons from written Scripture, names the stone tablets and explains covenant ministry through carefully ordered words. The Holy Spirit inspired letters that must be understood according to their context.

The killing work is judicial. The command identifies sin and pronounces the transgressor guilty. Romans says that by the law is the knowledge of sin. It also says the commandment was holy, just and good. The sinner's death does not prove wickedness in the command. It proves the seriousness of sin and the inability of fallen humanity to produce righteousness by possession of a standard.

The Spirit's life is covenantal and transforming. He unites believers to Christ, applies the benefits of Christ's work, gives new birth and begins sanctification. Paul does not say that the Spirit gives permission to ignore the will of God. The Spirit writes upon the heart, produces fruit and transforms believers into the image of the Lord from glory to glory.

The sentence can therefore be paraphrased carefully: the covenant command written outside the sinner condemns the covenant breaker, while the Spirit under the New Covenant gives life and inwardly transforms those who belong to Christ.

12. The Veil Is Removed in Christ

2 Corinthians 3:14-16

But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which veil is done away in Christ. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away.

The decisive phrase is in Christ. The transition from condemnation to righteousness is not accomplished by translating three apostolic names. It is accomplished by the Son of God. He reveals the Father, fulfills the Scriptures, bears sin and opens the way of unveiled beholding.

Paul's use of Moses and the veil is part of an extended exposition of Exodus 34. The veil does not make the Old Testament worthless. Paul repeatedly preaches Christ from those Scriptures. The problem is blindness that fails to see their goal. When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. The Scriptures are then read in the light of the crucified and risen Christ.

Verse 17 declares liberty where the Spirit of the Lord is. Liberty is not moral independence from God. It is freedom from condemnation, blindness and bondage so that believers may behold the Lord. Verse 18 defines the direction of that liberty: transformation into the same image from glory to glory. Grace frees the believer to become more like Christ.

13. Law and Grace Must Not Be Made Enemies

The Bible distinguishes law and grace without turning the holy character of God against the gracious character of God. The law reveals righteousness and exposes sin. Grace provides in Christ what guilty people cannot earn. The law cannot justify the transgressor. Grace does not justify by pretending there was no transgression. At the cross, holiness and mercy meet without either being denied.

Several errors should be avoided:

- Grace did not replace holiness. The God who saves also calls His people to be holy.
- Grace did not replace truth. John presents Jesus as full of grace and truth.
- Grace did not replace obedience. Salvation is not earned by works, but saving grace creates a people zealous of good works.
- Grace did not first appear after Malachi. The Old Testament repeatedly reveals divine favor, mercy and covenant faithfulness.

- The New Covenant is not a second attempt after Jesus repaired an unexpected failure. It is the promised fulfillment of God's redemptive purpose.

A useful distinction is that grace replaces the sinner's attempt to establish righteousness through law keeping as the ground of acceptance. Grace also brings the New Covenant ministry that surpasses the condemning old-covenant ministry. Yet God's moral purity is not replaced. In the believer, the righteous direction of God's will is increasingly expressed through the indwelling Spirit.

14. Christ Fulfilled, Bore and Established

The study becomes fully Christian only when it reaches the person and work of Jesus Christ. He did not come to destroy the law or the prophets but to fulfill. He obeyed where Adam, Israel and every other human being failed. His righteousness was not merely a teaching about righteousness. It was a life of complete love toward the Father and complete obedience to the Father's will.

At the cross, Christ bore the curse for sinners. The law's condemnation was not waved away by sentiment. The sinless One suffered in the place of the guilty. Redemption therefore magnifies the seriousness of the law even as it releases the believer from condemnation. Grace is free to the sinner because it was costly to the Savior.

At the Last Supper, Jesus identified the cup with the New Testament in His blood. The covenant promises are secured by His sacrificial death. Forgiveness is not an isolated feeling. It rests upon shed blood. Inward renewal is not self-improvement. It comes through the Spirit given by the risen and exalted Christ.

The resurrection declares that the sacrifice was not defeated by death. The open tomb is not a stage upon which Peter and John act out a secret name code. It is historical testimony that Jesus lives. Because He lives, those united to Him receive life, hope, justification and the promise of resurrection.

15. The Resurrection and Christian Confidence

John 20 gives multiple movements of evidence. Mary sees the removed stone. Peter sees the linen clothes. The beloved disciple enters, sees and believes. Mary later encounters the risen Lord. The disciples receive His appearance and commission. Thomas moves from demanded evidence to the confession, My Lord and my God.

The beloved disciple's pause outside should not be turned into a failure of grace. Peter's immediate entry should not be turned into a triumph of law. The personalities and actions are reported as part of the eyewitness character of the account. Together they confirm that the body was not lying where it had been placed.

Christian boldness does not arise because John entered more confidently than Peter. It arises because Jesus entered death and came out victorious. Hebrews grounds access in the blood of Jesus and the great High Priest. Paul grounds justification in Christ delivered for offences and raised again. Grace makes us free to go on because the risen Christ has opened the living way and the Spirit now dwells within His people.

16. Two Possible Canonical Echoes

Some connections are worth considering when they are clearly labeled as possibilities rather than proofs. The first concerns the tomb and the mercy seat. John carefully notes two angels, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had lain. Some readers see an echo of the cherubim overshadowing the mercy seat. The Gospel does not state that interpretation explicitly, so it should be offered as a possible canonical resonance. The certain claim is that the place of death has become a witness to resurrection and that atonement is accomplished in Christ.

The second concerns the number three thousand. About three thousand died after the golden-calf rebellion at Sinai. About three thousand souls were added at Pentecost after Peter preached the crucified and risen Christ and the gift of the Holy Ghost. The numerical correspondence is striking. Luke does not explicitly explain Pentecost as a reversal of Exodus 32, so the relationship should remain a qualified echo. The explicit doctrine is already strong: the exalted Christ pours out the Spirit and the Gospel brings repentant hearers into the new-covenant community.

Careful qualification does not make a study dull. It helps the reader distinguish a rich Biblical possibility from an inspired explanation. The language should signal the difference: Scripture teaches, the text strongly supports, the pattern may echo or the suggestion remains speculative.

17. What Grace Replaces and What Grace Gives

The title can now be answered with precision. Grace replaces self-reliance as the sinner's hope. The New Covenant surpasses the condemning ministry engraved in stone. God removes the stony heart and gives a responsive heart. Christ removes the veil. The Spirit replaces spiritual death with life and begins transformation.

Grace does not replace the need for truth, repentance, faith or holiness. These are not payments offered to purchase salvation. Repentance and faith are the proper response to the Gospel. Holiness is the fruit of the Spirit's work. Obedience is not the root of justification but it belongs to the life of those whom God is transforming.

Grace gives more than a second chance under the same human power. It gives Christ as righteousness, the forgiveness of sins, adoption into God's family, the indwelling Spirit, liberty to behold the Lord and the promise of final glory. The New Covenant does not merely put a cleaner tablet in front of the same dead heart. God acts upon the heart.

This is why the stronger sermon foundation is not the names of three disciples. It is the promise and fulfillment of God. The names may raise the question. Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Paul and the Gospel of Jesus Christ provide the answer.

18. A Method for Future Symbolic Studies

RTS-057 is also a study in how to study. Christians naturally notice patterns. Scripture itself contains typology, repeated images, fulfilled prophecy and carefully constructed literary relationships. The answer to irresponsible symbolism is not to deny all symbolism. It is to require textual control.

A proposed symbolic reading should pass five tests:

- Lexical accuracy: Do the names or terms actually carry the proposed meanings?
- Narrative accuracy: Are the order, actions and details stated correctly?
- Contextual relevance: Does the Biblical author activate the proposed meaning in this passage?
- Canonical coherence: Does the conclusion agree with clear teaching elsewhere in Scripture?
- Confidence labeling: Is the conclusion certain, strongly supported, possible or speculative?

The Peter-James-John idea passes part of the lexical test but fails as an inspired sequence because the order varies, the John 20 details were reversed and the Biblical writers do not interpret the names together. Its theological instinct can be redirected toward passages that explicitly discuss stone, heart, covenant and Spirit. The resulting study is both more accurate and more powerful.

A Personal Response

This commentary should leave more than an opinion about an interesting pattern. It should place several questions before the reader:

- Have I trusted a memorable religious saying without opening the passage to test it?
- Do I receive correction as a threat to faith or as an invitation to know the truth more clearly?
- Am I trying to establish my own righteousness before God through rule keeping?
- Have I mistaken grace for permission to remain unchanged?
- Have I turned to Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the law, bore the curse and rose again?
- Is the Spirit producing a living response to God's Word in my heart?

No one is justified by discovering a hidden pattern. No one is reconciled to God by admiring the Ten Commandments while remaining guilty before them. The Gospel calls sinners to repent and believe on

the Lord Jesus Christ. He saves by grace. He forgives fully. He gives the Spirit and begins a work that will be completed in glory.

If you have trusted Christ or if this study has raised questions, please speak with Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley. Reason Together Church exists so those questions can be opened with the Bible, examined patiently and discussed without fear.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your holy Word and for the grace that teaches us to handle it honestly. Forgive us when we protect an attractive idea instead of receiving the correction of Scripture. Thank You for the law that reveals Your righteousness and exposes our need. Thank You for Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the law, bore our condemnation, shed the blood of the New Covenant and rose again. Remove hard hearts. Take away the veil. Give life by Your Spirit and transform us into the image of the Lord. Help us stand firmly where Your Word is clear and speak humbly where a connection remains possible rather than certain. May grace never become an excuse for sin. May it produce gratitude, obedience and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Final Commentary Conclusion

Peter, James and John do not form an inspired code meaning stone was replaced by grace. Peter carries a genuine stone association, James preserves the Jacob name and John proclaims that the LORD is gracious. The proposed sentence goes beyond those lexical facts. Luke varies the order and John 20 reports that the beloved disciple arrived first, Peter entered first and the beloved disciple followed. The stone had already been removed.

The doctrine behind the question is established elsewhere with far greater clarity. Sinai placed holy covenant words upon stone. Israel broke covenant and the renewed tablets preserved the same words. Ezekiel promised that God would remove the stony heart, give a heart of flesh and put His Spirit within His people. Jeremiah promised a New Covenant with inward writing, knowledge of the LORD and forgiveness of iniquity. Paul declared that the stone-engraved ministry was glorious yet condemning and fading, while the ministry of the Spirit gives life and possesses surpassing glory.

Grace therefore does not replace God's holiness. It does not erase truth or make obedience optional. Jesus Christ fulfilled the law, bore its curse and established the New Covenant in His blood. In Him the veil is removed. Through Him the Spirit gives life. The believer is not left before an external command with an unchanged heart but is brought into a covenant of forgiveness, inward renewal and transforming communion with the Lord.

The opening names may still serve one useful purpose. They raise a question worth taking to Scripture. Once there, the proposed code must yield to the inspired text. The correction is not a loss. It reveals a greater truth: grace does not need us to rearrange the resurrection story. Grace shines in the crucified and risen Christ, who saves the guilty and writes by His Spirit upon living hearts.

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Bring your questions. Open your Bible. Let's Reason Together the Word of God.