

"Where A Testament Is ..."

"And for this cause he is the mediator of a new covenant that a death having taken place for the transgressions that were under the first covenant, they that have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where a testament is, there must of necessity be the death of him that made it. For a testament is of force where there hath been death: for it doth never avail while he that made it liveth" (Heb. 9:15-17).

There are many passages in the Hebrew letter which produced problems for translators and this is one of them. In this chapter the words "covenant" and "testament" frequently occur. "Covenant" appears five times in the English text (vss. 4, 15, 20); and was supplied in two other verses: 1, 18. "Testament" appears in two instances in the English translation (verses 16, 17). yet both these words are translations of the same Greek word *diatheke*. The translators of the ASV translate the word *diatheke* covenant in many other passages (7:22; 8:6-7, 9-10; 10:6) to name a few. However the translators digressed from their usual rendering of *diatheke* as "covenant" to make it "testament" in the two verses cited above. Why did they differ in this passage? Why did they not uniformly translate *diatheke* as "covenant" as they did in the vast majority of other places where the word is found? Why do other translations frequently do the same? Obviously there was a reason for the translation and that lay in what they understood the text to say. It was the translators' firm conviction that in these two exceptions "testament" conveyed a truer meaning of what the Hebrew writer meant; that "covenant" did not give as exact a thought as "testament." The integrity of the translators is shown in that they supply a footnote acknowledging that both words came from the word *diatheke*. The reason why the ASV translators chose the word "testament" in these two verses is seen in that which the Holy Spirit was revealing: a death had taken place granting unto the heirs of that testament certain benefits, certain blessing. "Covenant" does not convey to the English mind the same thought that "testament" does.

A death has taken place for transgressions which were under the first covenant. This tells that whatever promises and assurances of forgiveness those under the first covenant had; actual forgiveness did not occur until Jesus died on the cross. Two things contribute to this conclusion: there must be blood shed for remission of sins and the blood of bulls and goats cannot remove sins (Heb. 9:22; 10:4). There was not remission of sins until Jesus died on the cross. This is the significance of verse 16: *"For where a testament is, there must of necessity be the death of him that made it. For a testament is of force where there hath been death. It doth never avail while he that made it liveth."*

But, how can we explain why different ones under the first law were told they were forgiven, if their sins actually were not forgiven? There is no more difficulty understanding this than in understanding God's promise to Abraham: "*A father of a multitude have I made thee*" (Gen. 15:5). This promise was not realized until Abraham had been dead nearly 500 years. Yet, God said, "*I have made you (past tense) a father of multitudes.*" In the same place God told Abraham, "*I have given to you this land*" (Gen. 15:5) Yet, the land of Canaan did not actually become the possession of Abraham's seed until Israel entered and conquered the land 400 years afterwards. Just remember that God may "*call the things that are not as though they were*" (Rom. 4:17). God, because of his Sovereign Power, may speak of things as having already been done because, in His infinite wisdom, He knows they will be done. Abraham was the father of multitudes in promise, the realization of which took place 400 years later. Abraham was the possessor of Canaan in promise; the realization of which promise can when Israel entered Canaan 400 years later. Those under the first covenant were given forgiveness in promise, the realization of which came when Jesus died on the cross.

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