

“The Superior Glory of the Gospel”

2 Corinthians 3:7-18

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Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:4-18

When I read about Paul’s view of himself and his ministry, there is a particular image that comes to mind. It’s the young boy David as he enters the battlefield to face Goliath. From the sidelines, what do we see? A young boy who, from a human perspective, is woefully inadequate in his own strength to fight giants. But we also see stunning courage and boldness in David that springs out of his confidence in the undaunting glory and authority of God Almighty!

In a similar way, Paul readily acknowledges his own human inadequacy, that in his own strength he is powerless. Yet he has this undaunting boldness to declare the gospel because He has no doubt that the gospel provides for us the Spirit-generated, life-giving, heart-transforming power of the glory of God.

Paul is the apostle of the new covenant gospel that has been entrusted to every believer and the way he views himself and his ministry is instructive for how we should also steward the gospel message. Paul is personally weak and inadequate, but the glory of his God-given message of the new covenant is so substantive, so weighty and effective, that he proclaims the gospel with undaunting boldness.

His goal is to help us see where the gospel message stands in relationship to the glory of God (hence he uses the word glory 13 x’s in this passage). *The glory of God is the display of the greatness, beauty, holiness, and perfection of all that God is and the awe of all that He does.*

He knows the Corinthians are well aware of how the glory of God was manifested through the old covenant and how Mt. Sinai smoked as the Lord descended upon it in fire while the mountain quaked violently (Ex 19:18-19). God’s voice was like the sound of deafening trumpet as He gave his law (10 commandments) to Moses. And the people’s response to God’s presence? “All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when they saw it,

they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, “speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us or we will die” (Ex 20:18-19).

Don’t gloss over the glory of God. For sinners, the glory of God is terrifying! But for the redeemed, the glory of God is their deepest, soul-satisfying delight! They love to meditate on the depths of God’s beauty and awe-inspiring greatness. This is the difference the gospel makes in one’s relationship to God. Rather than needing to be protected from the glory of God, you become a beneficiary of His glory by being changed into His likeness.

To help the Corinthians (and us) see this, Paul lays out a 3-fold argument to demonstrate that the glory of God, as awesome as it was displayed in the old covenant at Mt. Sinai, is even more gloriously displayed through the new covenant in Christ. And then he is going to show us the superior effects of the gospel to reconcile us to the great God of glory.

Before we dive into the details of 2 Cor 3, let me summarize some background from Exodus 32-34 because it is the canvas upon which Paul paints his argument (2 Cor 3 is basically Paul’s commentary on Ex 32-34 from a NT perspective).

Background: Exodus 32-24

- While Moses was up on Mt Sinai receiving the old covenant law (commandments) from God, the Israelites were building and worshipping an idolatrous golden calf.
- God was so angry that He was ready to destroy his obstinate people, but Moses interceded for the people on the basis of God’s world-renown reputation (glory) and God relented from destroying them.
- But when Moses saw for himself the people’s sin, he threw down the tablets inscribed with the law so that they were shattered, and 3000 Israelites died that day because of their rebellion.
- And though the Israelites were not completely wiped out because of Moses’ intercession on their behalf, there were still grave consequences. God said, those who sinned would be blotted out of his book and a day of punishment would come.

- The tabernacle had been intended for God's presence to dwell among His people, but now the tent of meeting would be pitched outside the camp at a distance from the people.
- God had told Moses He was unwilling to go with them to the promised land, lest in His righteous anger He would completely destroy them on the way. But Moses pleaded for God's presence to go with them, so that His glory would be known around the earth. Ex 33 reveals Moses' heart more than anywhere else—the kind of heart God favors: In essence he says, "I want to know Your ways...I want to know You...I don't want to go anywhere outside your presence—not a single step...Lord, I want to see Your glory!" (33:12-18).
- God said, "No man can see my face and live" but He hid Moses in the cleft of a rock, put His hand over him and then caused the glory of His goodness pass by, allowing Moses to catch a glimpse of His back."
- When Moses came down off the mountain, he was so transformed by his exposure to even the fringes of God's glory, that his face radiated the glow of God's glory. And to protect the unrepentant people from exposure to the holy glory of God, he put a veil over his face and took it off only when he stood in the immediate presence of God (34:29-35). Don't miss this: Moses put a veil over his face as an *act of mercy* (to protect the sinful people from God's holy glory) but also as a *sign of judgment* (indicating their rebellious hearts were not fit to be in God's presence).¹

So, was God's glory displayed through the old covenant? Yes, terrifyingly so! Yet, as we are about to see, God's glory is displayed even more awesomely through the new covenant gospel, mediating life rather than death. And this is the backbone of Paul's boldness in proclaiming the gospel.

Now, with that background, we are going to see in 2 Cor 3:7-18 that ***the gospel can be boldly proclaimed through human frailty because of the superior glory of the new covenant's transforming impact.*** Paul highlights this in 3 ways:

1. **The ministry of death (old covenant) is surpassed by the life-giving ministry of the Spirit (new covenant), resulting in a *changed heart* (2Cor 3:7-8, 12-16).**

[vs. 7-8] Which is more glorious, death or life? Life! Remember back in vs. 6, the letter kills, meaning that the law by itself condemns us because we can't meet its righteous standard from our sinful flesh. But the new covenant imparts the Spirit's power to change our hearts and give us life. Hence Paul is comparing the ministry of death under the old covenant with the superior glory of the life-giving ministry of the Spirit through the new covenant.

So the impact of the gospel is a changed heart **[vs. 12-16]**. Paul can be more bold than Moses (who veiled the glory of his face) because the glory of the gospel does not destroy, but rather gives life by changing the heart. Notice that Moses veiled his face because Israel's heart was veiled with hardness (14). This is true of every person to this day and only way for the hardness to be removed from our hearts is by turning to Christ (14, 16). Jesus took upon Himself the ministry of death that we deserved from the law in order to give us Spirit-inhabited hearts—to give us life.

Is there an evident change of heart from the Spirit in your life so that your hearing of the word impacts your will? Or do you hear/read God's word, understanding it intellectually, but not being moved to respond from your will and heart? Hardness of heart does not mean that you can't intellectually understand what the Bible says. Hardness of heart means you don't want to go where it leads. This is why *understanding* the gospel is not your safety net—following Christ is!

2. **The ministry of condemnation (old covenant) is surpassed by the ministry of righteousness (new covenant), resulting in *freedom from hardness of heart to obey God with Spirit-empowered hearts of righteousness* (2Cor 3:9, 17).**

[vs. 9] The law of God, apart from the Spirit's enabling, results in condemnation because we cannot attain the righteousness it requires in our flesh. But under the new covenant, Jeremiah and Ezekiel explain that the

¹ Scott Hafemann, *NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, pg. 144.

Spirit writes God’s word on our hearts, changes our heart from a heart of stone to a tender heart, empowers us to obey God’s law (Ezek 11:19; Jer 31:33).

So the impact of the gospel is freedom! **[vs. 17]** When Paul says, the Lord is the Spirit, he’s not blurring their distinctive persons. He’s saying, that receiving Christ is how you receive the Spirit. Turning to the Lord (which means turning away from your rebellion) is the only means to true freedom. A specific kind of freedom—not the freedom to do whatever you want in your flesh, but freedom from the hardness of heart that keeps you pinned under condemnation. Freedom to obey God with a Spirit-empowered heart. Freedom to internalize the righteousness of Christ rather than merely striving for an external standard. Freedom to love God with all your heart.

Is your idea of freedom still doing what you please? Or are you free to pursue what pleases God? If your only sense of ‘freedom’ is doing what pleases you, you are still in bondage to self with a veil of hardness over your heart. If I may paraphrase Paul David Tripp, “[God] will not let there be peace until He alone controls our hearts. He is a Warrior-King, who will not rest [until] we are captive to [no] other king”—including ourselves.² *You are truly free when pleasing God is what pleases you!*

3. The temporary glory of the old covenant is surpassed by the permanent glory of the new covenant, resulting in progressive transformation (2Cor 3:10-11, 18).

[vs. 10-11] What Paul is saying is that the old covenant has become obsolete, having been replaced with the new covenant, and therefore the focal point of God’s glory is no longer the old testament law, but rather the unending display of the glory of God in Christ (who fulfills the law). Paul’s emphasis here is that the glory of the new covenant remains, it doesn’t fade away, so that we can continue to gaze upon God’s glory through it. And that has a particular effect of transforming us more and more into the image of Christ.

[vs. 18] Let’s take vs. 18 phrase by phrase.

- *“We all”* – The application of vs. 18 is for all believers, those who have turned to the Lord (16).

- *“with unveiled face”* – the veil of hardness has been lifted from our hearts so that we can gaze on the glory of the Lord as Moses did, personally and intimately. We can have the same kind of bare-faced boldness that Moses did to enter God’s presence.
- *“beholding as in a mirror”* – the idea here is looking into or gazing upon the glory of God that we see in the face of Christ (4:6). If you are reading the ESV, the phrase ‘in a mirror’ is not included. This is a simple translation choice for how to apply the Greek word in this particular context. But if Paul had the idea of mirror in mind, he’s probably referring to the fact that our ability to see the glory of Christ is imperfect in this life, just as mirrors in the first century made of polished metal were hazy. But Paul assured the Corinthians in his earlier letter that though we see through a mirror dimly, a day is coming when we will see Jesus face to face (1Cor 13:12). And John tell us that when we see Him, we shall be like Him for we shall see Him just as He is (1Jn 3:2).
- *“the glory of the Lord”* – the focal point of the glory of God today, is Jesus Christ. Under the new covenant, we see the glory of God not as thunder and lightning and earthquakes. We see the glory of God in the sacrificial love of His Son, who reveals through the cross that the holiness of God requires death for sin, and that the love of God extends mercy to sinners. The glory of God is most perfectly displayed in the face of Christ who is the perfect image and substance of God Himself (4:4,6).
- *“are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory”* – As we gaze upon the glory of Christ, just as Moses’ face was ‘transformed’ to reflect God’s glory so we are transformed to increasingly reflect the image of Christ. So because of Christ, instead of being consumed by the holy glory of God, we are transformed by the glory of God. The idea here is progressive sanctification—from one degree of glory to another, one degree of Christlikeness to another.

² Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*, pg. 83.

- *“as from the Lord, the Spirit”* – The transformation that takes place from gazing on the Lord is the work of the Spirit. In other words, we do the gazing, the Spirit does the transforming.

The basic idea of vs 18 is that because the glory of Christ in the new covenant is permanent (unfading), we have continuous, bare-faced access to the glory of God which increasingly restores us to the rightful image-bearers we were created to be, by transforming us more and more into the image of Christ. Your life as a Christian was never meant to be static, but a continual pursuit of having the beauty of Christ reflected in your life.

We can be bold, like Paul, in sharing the gospel because it reveals the glory of God with Spirit-empowered, life-giving, righteousness-producing power to change hearts, freeing them hardened bondage to self for ongoing transformation as image-bearers of Christ.

Has your veil of hardness been lifted?

Are you drawn to the glory of Christ, the greatness of God, the Love and mercy of Jesus poured out so sacrificially? If it is boring to you or kind of in your way, I urge you to pray for God to remove the veil from your heart.

Are you progressing forward in your growth to be like Jesus? If you find yourself at a stalemate, its time to go back to God’s word and pray, “Lord, give me eyes to see you afresh!”