

V. A Ministry of Greater Glory

October 28/29/30, 2014

2 Corinthians 3:1-18

Aim: To understand the glory of the New Covenant and appreciate the privilege of ministry which we have through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

A. New Covenant Ministry (2 Corinthians 3:1-6)

So daunting is the challenge of the ministry that Paul asked rhetorically, ‘Who is adequate for these things?’ (2:16). Who is competent to take on the monumental and eternally significant duty of preaching the Word of God and leading the people of God? In this passage he answers that question. Paul addressed this issue because his own competency as a minister was under relentless attack by the false apostles who had come to Corinth. Painfully, all through 2 Corinthians, Paul had to defend himself against the lies his enemies told about him. The false apostles sought to discredit him so they could usurp his place as the authoritative teacher and then teach their damning demonic lies to the Corinthians. To accomplish that goal, they not only viciously attacked Paul’s character but also challenged his competency as a minister.

1. Credentials for Ministry (3:1-3)

a) *Letters of Recommendation (3:1)*

¹Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?

To defuse any allegation that he was commending himself, Paul made no overt claims in his own defense. Instead, he gently rebuked the Corinthians by asking them two questions, both of which demand a negative answer. What may have prompted Paul’s questions were accusations from the false apostles that he was in fact commending himself in a selfish, proud manner.

Some at Corinth questioned the genuineness of Paul’s apostleship. Perhaps some of his critics at Corinth were saying that he and his friends had arrived in the city with no backing from others. In the eyes of these critics, their unheralded arrival would be tantamount to self-commendation. While much of what he writes answers such questions, Paul recognized that self-commendation has no place in the Christian life. We should always be suspicious when people presume to commend themselves. It is out of character for a Christian, since it is contrary to the example of our Lord Jesus.

He was not trying to prompt the Corinthians to commend him, but to make them evaluate their attitude. One meaning of *sunistanō* (‘commend’) is ‘to introduce.’ After all they had gone through together, did Paul really need to reintroduce himself to the Corinthians? Did they not know him well enough by now? Was it really necessary for Paul to start all over again and prove to them what kind of man he was?

Paul’s difficulty was that he lacked external accreditation. He was not one of the original disciples of Jesus. The Corinthians had only Paul’s word that he was in good standing with the leaders of the Jerusalem church. His only course was to reiterate that the risen Lord had called him to be an apostle and to point to his sacrificial lifestyle as legitimizing that call. Yet this easily made it appear that he was ‘commending himself.’ His dilemma was that he must either

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say nothing in his defense and allow the work in Corinth to be destroyed by default, or run the risk of the accusation that he was blowing his own trumpet.

It is generally agreed that the ‘many’ who are ‘peddlers of God’s word’ (2:17) and the ‘some’ here are the same people—it is these shady characters who use and abuse written communication. Paul’s opponents based their claims on ‘letters of recommendation.’ At that time such letters were common, and Paul himself used letters to introduce people to new congregations (e.g., Rom. 16:1; 2 Cor. 8:22; Col. 4:7-8).

It wasn’t that Paul believed that using letters of recommendation was wrong. Just the opposite. Paul often wrote recommendations himself, on separate occasions commending Timothy to others (1 Cor. 16:10-11), and then Titus (2 Cor. 8:22ff.), and then Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2), and even Timothy and Epaphroditus together (Phil. 2:19-30). The book of Philemon is, in effect, a letter of recommendation.

In their attempt to discredit Paul, the false teachers claimed that he lacked the proper official ‘letters of commendation.’ Such letters were commonly used in the ancient world to introduce people to those who did not know them (cp. Neh. 2:7; Acts 9:2; 18:27; 22:5; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 16:3). When the false apostles arrived in Corinth, they likely produced deceptive ‘letters of commendation,’ possibly purporting to have come from the Jerusalem church (cp. Acts 15:24). They used those letters to help them gain acceptance by the Corinthians. Not only did the false apostles present letters of commendation to the Corinthians, but they also sought them ‘from’ the Corinthians. Before they moved on, they sought letters of commendation from those whom they had deceived. They then used those letters to enhance their credibility with their next victims.

So who wrote these letters commending the newcomers to the Corinthians? This is one of the major unanswered questions of the New Testament. The most likely suggestion is that the signatories were extreme Judaistic Christians in Jerusalem whose emissaries, probably without James’s support, had embarked on a misguided program of capturing Paul’s churches for their own brand of Jewish Christianity. The fact that these newcomers also seek letters *from* the Corinthians indicates that they intended to use Corinth as a springboard to other Pauline churches (10:13-16).

The writing of letters of introduction or commendation has been a common practice in many societies and this was certainly true of the Classical world. It was a guarantee of the authenticity of the claims made by strangers, for human society does not change in its basic characteristics, and there were charlatans about then as there are now.

b) A Living Letter (3:2-3)

(1) A Letter That Is Read (3:2)

²*You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.*

What a novel idea—that the Corinthians were Paul’s living, breathing letters of recommendation. Prior to Paul’s coming, there was no Christian community in Corinth. In the first letter (1 Cor. 9:1-2) he referred to the Corinthian church as ‘the result of my work in the Lord’ and ‘the seal of my apostleship.’ If the Corinthians need evidence that Paul was a true apostle, let them look at themselves. The letter of the Corinthian Christians was read by all, but it was also ‘written on’ Paul’s heart, the Greek perfect tense indicating that they were permanently engraved there.

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Let us note that Paul does not write of ‘letters’ but of ‘a letter’ (vv. 2, 3). His use of the singular here testifies to his churchmanship. It was not simply the conversion of individuals that showed the authenticity of the gospel messengers, but the establishment of a church, a godly society within an ungodly.

The heart in Biblical thought is the center of inner life and the seat of all functions of the soul. It is the place to which God turns and His Spirit speaks. There at the epicenter of his being Paul has the Corinthians. They had been inscribed on his heart at the time of their conversion. And, as the Greek has it, they were written permanently on his heart, so that they could not slip away or be forgotten. The Apostle Paul didn’t need letters of recommendation from anyone. The Corinthians were his letter, and they were written on the very core of his soul, eternally. They could never be cast from his heart, much less forgotten.

The church in Corinth was an open letter of Christ to the world, a declaration of His power and love for the whole world. By Paul’s creation of this dynamic metaphor, the apostle shifted the proof of his apostleship from himself onto the shoulders of the Corinthians. If Paul is not genuine, then they are bogus. Paul is no longer on the defensive but is now on the offensive.

The test of true ministry to which Paul submitted himself is one that other ministers can apply to themselves. The confirmation of one’s ministry lies in the effects of that ministry in human lives. True Christianity is not a veneer of morality glued on to the exterior of our lives, but a profound change of heart, mind, and will that is then expressed in outward behavior.

The best commendation of servants of the gospel is the transformed lives of those who receive it through them. Their lives then become like letters. The church is like a personal letter that our Lord Jesus Christ sends to the world proclaiming what He can do in human lives. True Christian witness is the witness of transformed men and women. Our lives are to be like open letters that anyone may read, in which we testify to our Savior’s power.

(2) A Letter That Is Delivered (3:3a)

³*And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us...*

Paul had a letter of recommendation – the Christian Corinthians. But whose name began this letter? To which higher authority does Paul appeal for recommendation? Christ, the author and source of the new lifestyle of the Corinthians, authenticates and legitimizes Paul’s ministry. So Paul does have tangible attestation for his ministry. What better proof could be produced than people whose lives are so radically changed? What, by comparison, is a mere letter ‘written with ink’ on a piece of paper?

Paul took care to make sure that the Corinthians understood that he was not the author of the letter. A letter of recommendation must always come from a third party, and the ultimate third-party recommender is Christ, the Messiah Himself. By claiming Messiah as the author, Paul was able to claim higher authority for his credentials than his enemies could claim for theirs. Thus, Paul’s role was secondary, that of delivery. Since the literal meaning of ‘delivered’ is ‘ministered,’ this suggests that Christ is the author and Paul is the scribe who ministers or serves by preaching the gospel.

The apostle would never claim to be the author of that divine spiritual letter because he did not want his enemies to charge him with exalting himself. But Christ used Paul to minister to the Corinthians, and thus they actually did commend his ministry. The phrase ‘cared for by us’

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(from *diakoneō*; ‘to minister,’ or ‘to serve’) alludes to Paul’s role as Christ’s preacher; it was through his gospel proclamation that the letter came to be written.

Who then was the scribe used by Christ to pen this ‘letter’? It was Paul and his evangelistic traveling companions considered collectively, for it was not only the gospel preaching of Paul that was blessed by God to the conversion of the Corinthians but that of his colleagues as well. What ink was used so that the message could be clearly read? This was the Holy Spirit, whose work in the Corinthian Christians was so articulate and so unmistakable.

(3) A Letter That Is Written (3:3b)

...written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

God promised centuries before through the prophet Ezekiel that a time was coming when He would change their hearts (Ez. 11:19-20; 36:26). Paul’s description of writing on ‘tablets of human hearts’ was an explicit reference to Jeremiah 31:31-34, which so remarkably prophesies about the new covenant that was later inaugurated by Christ. The problem with the old covenant was that it was external. Its laws were written on stone (cp. Ex. 32:15-16). As such they provided no internal power to live them out. Of course, there were great benefits in memorizing God’s Word. But inscribing the heart was far beyond the power of unaided man. Something far more radical was needed—a spiritual heart operation.

What writing material was used? Was it tablets of stone? No, it was human hearts, for the Corinthians did not experience a superficial reformation but a deep inner change. Even so, the letter could be read by others for, Paul was clearly implying, what had been done in their hearts inevitably showed in their conduct. His reference to stone tablets suggests he was already beginning to think about the difference between the old and new covenants (for the Mosaic Law was written on such tablets), a theme which dominates much of chapter 3.

With this statement the apostle directly confronted the false apostles, who preached a false gospel that mixed Christianity with circumcision, old covenant ceremony, and legalism. The ‘tablets of stone’ were those on which God supernaturally inscribed the Ten Commandments (Ex. 31:18; 32:15-16). But the miracle of Sinai cannot match the miracle of salvation. At Corinth, God had written not on ‘tablets of stone,’ but on ‘human hearts.’ In both cases, God inscribed the same law; His standards of morality do not change. Some wrongly assume that because believers are under the new covenant they no longer have to keep God’s law. But that is not true. Being under the new covenant does not excuse believer from keeping the Law; it frees them and by the Spirit enables them to keep it. The Law written on the tablets of stone at Sinai was external; it confronted people with their inability to obey perfectly the holy, righteous, and good requirements of God and thus condemned them. But in the new covenant, God writes His law on the hearts of those He redeems. The power of the indwelling Holy Spirit enables them to keep that law, and the righteousness of Jesus Christ, imputed to them by grace, covers all their violations of it. The false apostles at Corinth were clinging to the external Law written on tablets of stone, advocating salvation by works, rituals, and ceremonies. But God’s law written on human hearts does not nullify His law written on tablets of stone.

The ministry of the newcomers, supported as it is by ink on paper, really belongs to the now superseded covenant of Moses, which was written on ‘tablets of stone.’ In contrast to the power of the ‘living God,’ that ministry is now a dead letter, utterly incapable of transforming people.

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Moses' epoch is now passed; it is gone forever, overtaken by the new age of Christ and the Spirit. The new missionaries hopelessly attempt to turn the clock back.

Paul's words encourage pastors to persevere at, and give priority to, the word of God. They should not deprive themselves of the reassurance that comes from seeing the effects of faithful ministry. Organizational and administrative matters have their place, but they are peripheral and not at the center of that ministry by which Christ changes lives from the inside out.

2. Capability for Ministry (3:4-6)

a) Confidence (3:4)

⁴*Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.*

All who engage in the ministry of the new covenant receive God-given proof of their calling. We are to have this confidence through Christ before God. This is quite different from self-confidence.

Paul's defense of his ministry was not designed to relive any nagging self-doubt on his part. The apostle never questioned that God had called him to ministry. That resolute 'confidence' gave him the courage and boldness necessary for a very difficult ministry. No obstacle, persecution, or discouragement could make Paul question his calling. Paul's confidence was not brash, arrogant trust in his own abilities. It was not self-confidence but confidence 'through Christ toward God.'

Paul has 'confidence' that these things have actually taken place, although it has nothing to do with his own personal 'competence.' Paul, it seems, has laid himself and all he has done before God and has been able, in his conscience, to declare his ministry to belong to the new covenant, to be true and acceptable to God. He makes it clear, however, that he does not minister before God or draw near to God in his own right or in his own name. It is only 'through Christ' that he has this confidence before God.

Because his confidence is 'through Christ' and not through any power of his own, and because his confidence is 'toward God,' it focuses on nothing earthly as its source or end. Paul was supremely God-confident.

The false apostles, in contrast, were self-confident and arrogant, trusting fully in their own cleverness. But they were in reality man-pleasing, insincere corrupters of the Word of God (cp. 2:17). On the other hand, the goal of Paul's ministry was, through the power of Christ, to please God. His Lord was both the source of the apostle's ministry and its ultimate goal.

b) Competence (3:5-6a)

⁵*Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God,* ⁶*who has made us sufficient...*

In 2:16, Paul, deeply aware of the seriousness of the gospel ministry, cries out, 'And who is equal to such a task?' The NIV obscures the fact that he uses the same adjective there and in verses 5 and 6 here where it is translated 'competent.'

The three occurrences of 'competence' or 'competent' refer back to his question: 'Who is equal to such a task?' (2:16). It appears that here too he is engaging in debate with his opponents. Their claim, apparently, was to powerful self-sufficiency. They regarded Paul as weak and lacking the resources of a true minister. Yet, through his ministry the Spirit of God

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fundamentally changes other human lives. Can anyone have the power, the resources, or the ‘competence’ to do these things? The answer must be no; only God Himself can be the source of such things. Of and from himself he has no ‘competence’ (or ‘sufficiency’). His competence, like his commission, is ‘from God.’

‘Consider’ or ‘claim’ is from *logizomai*, which means ‘to reason,’ ‘to calculate,’ or ‘to credit to one’s account.’ Apart from God’s power and wisdom, Paul was not adequate to rightly assess or judge his ministry.

Confidence, however, is one thing; claims of self-sufficiency are quite another. So Paul was quick to renounce any measure of self-sufficiency. Thus with a fine irony Paul asserts that his confidence was rooted in his personal inadequacy—there was no self-generated capacity in him adequate to do ministry.

By emphasizing his insufficiency, Paul is consciously alluding to Moses’ insistence of his inadequacy when God called him to lead Israel (cp. Ex. 4:10-17). Subsequently, Moses’ unparalleled leadership proved that in spite of his natural insufficiency, God made him sufficient. This pattern (human insufficiency—divine sufficiency) became the pattern for the calls of the great prophets of Israel (cp. Jdg. 6:15-16; Is. 6:5-7; Jer. 1:6-7; Ez. 1:1-3:11). When God’s call came, human insufficiency became the grounds of God’s sufficiency. If the Lord called Moses despite his inarticulateness, then no one can claim the prophets’ excuses (Gideon’s military weakness, Isaiah’s sin, Jeremiah’s youth, or Ezekiel’s trepidation), or the weaknesses we may offer, as valid reasons to duck God’s respective call. In a word, our weaknesses are part of, and the ground of, God’s call to serve Him. Our weaknesses and His strength form an unbeatable combination!

God Himself makes us competent ministers of the new covenant, and this gives us confidence. As we recognize our own inadequacy, we are in a position to discover God as the source of our adequacy.

c) Covenant (3:6b)

...to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Even though made competent, we are not made independent. The word *diakonos* translated ‘ministers’ is the ordinary Greek word for a servant.

Paul goes on to explain that his sufficiency comes from two things: 1) the sufficiency of the new covenant; and 2) the sufficiency of the Spirit. First, the ministry of the new covenant of Christ was and is a ministry of transformation. The old covenant began auspiciously, but the weaknesses soon became apparent. Though the old covenant law was good, it was an *external* ordinance, and the blood of animal sacrifice could not take away sin. So it was after generations of repeated failure, God promised a new covenant to Jeremiah, recorded in Jer. 31:31-34, which prophesied the contours of transformation. The promise of *internal* renewal (the Law within, an intimacy with God, a personal relationship with God, and true forgiveness) all prophesied radical transformation.

The corresponding promise to Jeremiah’s prophecy of the new covenant was Ezekiel’s promise of the Spirit (Ez. 36:26-27). The problem with the old covenant was that the written Law (here called ‘the letter’) provided no power to obey it because it was not accompanied by the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. The Law wasn’t bad. In fact, it was the holy, just, and

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good expression of God's will, and innately spiritual (cp. Rom. 7:12, 14). And the Law itself did not kill. Rather, it was the Law without the Spirit (the Law as 'letter') that killed. However, under the new covenant inaugurated by Christ, that condition changed for the better by means of the Holy Spirit, who enables the obedience of which Ezekiel prophesied.

Within a few verses he mentions two prominent Old Testament promises that have been realized within the experience of the Corinthians. His references in verse 3 to the Spirit, tablets of stone, and human hearts call to mind Ezekiel 36:26-27. Then, in verse 6, he refers to 'a new covenant,' which Jeremiah prophesied (Jer. 31:31-34). From his vantage point, Paul sees both promises focused on Christ and the Spirit of God. He combines the prophesies of Ezekiel and Jeremiah into one statement and refers to 'a new covenant ... of the Spirit.'

There is no doubt that such promises were made. The question is: were these Corinthian experiences of Christ and the Spirit identifiable with the ancient promises? Therefore we ask: had these people experienced the forgiveness of sins as promised by Jeremiah? Was the law of God now written within their hearts as Jeremiah and Ezekiel said it would be? The answer to these questions is in the affirmative.

Paul contrasts this new covenant with the old covenant, a covenant 'of the letter,' which, he says, 'kills.' He does not say that the law kills (the word 'law,' in fact, does not appear within 2 Corinthians). The new covenant does not abolish the law; it establishes it in the only place it will be effective – in the heart. Under the old covenant, the people did not have the spiritual resources to keep the law, or any provision for forgiveness when they broke it. The law became a finger of accusation pointed against them. Until the law had been internalized through the Spirit it remained the 'letter,' an instrument which 'kills.'

The law – that is to say, 'the letter' – can only condemn us, but the new covenant in Christ gives life by the Spirit. The written law is not replaced but the Spirit gives power to fulfill it as God intends. The difference between the 'letter' and 'the Spirit' further distinguishes the new covenant from the old covenant. Mere external adherence to the letter of the Law will not result in salvation. The difference between the old Mosaic, Sinaitic covenant and the new covenant is not a difference in moral standards. God's moral law does not change, because it is grounded in His immutable holiness. But under the old covenant, the law was external, consisting of written command; in the new covenant, it is internal, written on the heart by the Holy Spirit.

It is important to remember that Paul writes, not simply with awareness of the Old Testament, but also against a background of first-century Pharisaism, which tended to harden the Mosaic Law into a system of self-salvation. This then explains Paul's references here to the letter and to the Spirit. This has sometimes been misunderstood as a reference to literal versus spiritual interpretation of the Bible. In fact, it has nothing whatever to do with this, but everything to do with seeking to achieve salvation under the Old Covenant Law versus receiving it as a gift under the New.

These Hebrew newcomers, apparently, sought to impose the old covenant upon these Gentile Corinthian Christians. In seeking to impose the old covenant upon the Corinthians, they did not accept the radical nature, the newness, of the new covenant, or the power of the Spirit of God. Paul, however, recognized that what they advocated would mean a retreat from life back into death.

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Paul does not speak of *the* new covenant as if quite different from the old. It is *a* new covenant, that is, a new phase of the one great covenant of God with His people, which is the subject of the Bible's story. Today, many years after Paul wrote his letters, Christians of whatever race or denomination should see themselves as part of a world-wide people with whom God has made a covenant through Christ and the Spirit.

Paul had an incalculable advantage over Moses. Moses was charged to minister the Law to a stiff-necked people who would not obey it, but Paul was called to minister in the transforming power of the Spirit to a people who would be empowered to keep the Law as members of the new covenant. The dual sources for Paul's sufficiency for ministry were the new covenant's radical transformation of heart coupled with the life-changing, enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Paul's weakness and the Lord's strength—it was an unbeatable combination, as it has always been, from the least to the greatest.

God is not looking for gifted people or people who are self-sufficient. He is looking for inadequate people who will give their weakness to Him and open themselves to the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the transforming grace of the new covenant as it is ministered by Christ Jesus Himself. If God is calling you, do not hide behind your weakness. Your weakness is the ground for His calling. Follow God, and He will use your weakness as an occasion for His power.

B. New Covenant Glory (2 Corinthians 3:7-18)

This section of 2 Corinthians has two key words and 'glory' is one of them. What does it mean? The Greek word is *doxa*. Paul's readers would know this word well in its Old Testament setting, for it was used to translate *kabod*. This Hebrew word originally meant 'weight,' and so it came to be used of what was substantial in other ways. Perhaps because there is no 'weightier' subject than God Himself it then came to be employed of the disclosure of the 'weightiness' of God's self-revelation. Yet another idea came to be attached to it, however, and that is light (cp. Ps. 104:2; 1 Tim. 6:16). So the word 'glory' is very rich. The other key word in this passage is 'ministry.' 'Minister' means 'servant.' How then is the New Covenant served? In a variety of ways, but primarily by being proclaimed, for it is a message.

Having established that God 'has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant' (v. 6), he explains its glory. We often appreciate something better by means of contrast, particularly when we want to demonstrate how radically different it is.

It is universally acknowledged that Paul's teaching in the third chapter of 2 Corinthians amounts to a commentary on Exodus 32-34, the account of God's response to Israel's breaking its promise to keep the Law (especially Ex. 34:29-35). The people were correct to be so fearful of Moses' unveiled countenance because it indicated God's presence and consuming judgment. Moses therefore veiled his face to protect Israel from being destroyed. Moses' veiled mediation of God's glory permits his presence to remain in Israel's midst without destroying her. In this regard, Moses' veiling himself is an act of mercy. At the same time, the very fact that Moses must veil his face is an act of judgment because of the hardness of Israel's heart. This veil not only preserves Israel from being destroyed; it also keeps her from being transformed. This understood, Paul's defense and argument in 3:7-18 is essentially this: Moses' ministry of the old covenant did not provide Israel the immediate and continual access to the glorious presence of God that came through Paul's ministry of the new covenant. Thus Paul's ministry is more glorious!

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The former ‘ministry’ is characterized as belonging to Moses, the latter to Christ. Although both Moses and Christ are described as glorious (verse 7, 18), their glory is unequal. Now that Christ has come, Moses has no glory at all. Why does Paul, in contrasting the ministries of Moses and Christ, introduce the idea of ‘glory’ (which he uses sixteen times between 3:7 and 4:17)? The answer probably lies in the new situation in Corinth in which the Jewish missionaries are attempting to win the church over to the law of Moses. They may have claimed that Moses was equal, or even superior, to Christ, and that Christ was merely part of the covenant of Moses. Paul, in response, uses the ‘glory’ motif, teaching from Exodus 34:29-35 that Moses needed to veil his face to prevent the people from seeing its brightness. According to the apostle this was because the glory of Moses’ face was ‘fading’ and he did not wish the Israelites to see it fade (v. 13). In other words, Moses’ ministry of the law was temporary; it was not an end in itself. The law of Moses pointed to an end beyond itself and that end was Christ. By contrast with Moses, Christ’s glory, as seen by Paul near Damascus (cp. 4:6), is permanent, infinitely greater, and heavenly.

But why should the Corinthians have been attracted to the newcomers’ message about Moses and the law? If for modern people the problem with Christianity is its antiquity, the problem people had then was its novelty. People of those times venerated the past, believing that old ideas and customs went back to the gods. Doubtless these ministers pointed to Moses as a venerable figure and to their temple as an ancient institution. It would have been easy enough for the newcomers to dismiss Paul as a self-appointed, self-recommended upstart peddling a heretical, novel version of Judaism.

The problem, apparently, was that these Christian Jews, in common with unbelieving Jews, insisted that the dispensation of Moses was still current. The newcomers seem to have located Jesus within the Mosaic covenant and to have denied that he was the fulfillment of its promises of the goal to which it pointed. Paul’s response is that, since God has made a new covenant (v. 6), Christians should not be looking back over their shoulders to the old.

1. The Glory of the New Covenant (3:7-11)

These verses describe the contrast, and yet at the same time the comparison, between the two great covenants. It might seem a little surprising at first that Paul does not compare and contrast the two covenants in sacrificial terms. This is what the Epistle to the Hebrews does with great power, in chapters seven to ten. Instead, Paul concentrates on the work of the Spirit rather than on Christ’s work.

Why does he do this? Because the Pharisees tended to emphasize the outward law rather than the inner motive. The Judaizers, who were affected by Pharisaic theology and who stressed the importance of circumcision, had something of the same tendency. It was important therefore to stress the Spirit’s work in order to underline the inwardness of the gospel. The Old Covenant was engraved on stones; the New involves a work of the Spirit in the heart (cp. Jer. 31:31-34; Ez. 36:26-27). Here then it is through the Spirit that God secures the keeping of His laws.

Paul compares the glories of the two ministries here in a series of three comparisons.

a) A Greater Glory (3:7-8)

⁷Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’ face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, ⁸will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?

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First, Paul compares the old covenant adversely with the new. The former ‘ministry’ was marked by ‘death’ (v. 7) and ‘condemnation’ (v. 9), whereas the latter is marked by ‘the Spirit’ (v. 8) and ‘righteousness’ (v. 9). Both righteousness and the Spirit are received when we exercise faith in Christ.

The Old Covenant brings death, whereas the New brings life (cp. v. 6). How is it that the Old Covenant, which had God as its Author just as much as He was the Author of the New, brought death? It is not because of any defect in the Law, for this is perfect as it comes from the all-holy God. Instead, it is because of defects in us. The Law quite rightly imposes conditions on human beings, but they cannot fulfill these because of their sinfulness (Gal. 3:10-12). The New Covenant, on the other hand, brings eternal life in Christ.

The Ten Commandments, the moral summary of God’s holy law, were written ‘in letters engraved on stones’ by God Himself (Ex. 32:15-16). Because of that, Paul affirmed that the Law was imbued with God’s glory. That is, perfectly reflecting His righteous person. But unlike his legalistic opponents, Paul saw the old covenant of the Law in its proper perspective—as a ‘ministry of death.’ The Law saves no one; it only drives people to see their need for a Savior. The Law condemns sinners by defining the standard of divine righteousness.

Basic to the old covenant was God’s giving of His law. That law is a perfect reflection of His righteous and holy character (e.g., Is. 42:21). Our duty is to obey it (cp. Lev. 18:5). History and personal experience demonstrate the impossibility of perfect obedience to God’s law. As a consequence we merit God’s punishment and condemnation – we deserve to die. ‘The ministry’ of the old covenant, therefore, was ‘of death.’ ‘Carved in letters on stone’ and given with ‘glory,’ as it was, it brought about the government or rule of death because we cannot keep it. The law, therefore, shows us our need of the gospel of the new covenant. All who strive to obey God’s law as a means of gaining acceptance with Him soon discover that it is not achievable.

The Law written on stone in the old covenant, which produced death and condemnation, had the glory of God in it because it revealed His glorious nature as holy and just. The new covenant reveals God’s glory in a full manner because it not only reveals His holy nature, justice, wrath, and judgment (as did the old covenant), but it also manifests His compassion, mercy, grace, and forgiveness (cp. Ex. 33:19). And by the new covenant, the Spirit gives life and righteousness. The old covenant commands righteousness; the new covenant confers it. The old covenant made people hearers of the truth; the new covenant enables them to be doers of the truth.

The Law came with great glory. The Law’s glory was evident to all who saw Moses’ face after he came down from the mountain. It was so great that it exercised a ministry of judgment and death on Israel, which could not keep the Law for even a day! That is why the people feared to gaze upon the reflected glory on Moses’ face—and why its effect (judgment) was continually being ‘brought to an end’ by Moses’ repeated veilings of glory. Therefore, if Moses’ ministry came by such glory that it had to be veiled, how much more glorious is Paul’s unveiled ‘ministry of the Spirit’ that constantly exposes God’s people to His glory and transforming power.

Paul sees a symbol of the supersession of the Old Covenant in the story of Moses. He infers from Exodus 34 that the glory must have been fading from the face of Moses while the veil was covering it, and that this continued until such time as that radiance was renewed when he went again into God’s presence. Paul is so certain of the fact that the New Covenant supersedes the Old that he mentions the fading of its glory three times (vv. 7, 11, 13).

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b) *A Surpassing Glory (3:9-10)*

⁹*For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. ¹⁰Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it.*

Closely connected with the ideas of death and life are those of condemnation and righteousness. Why is this? Because death and life are the consequences respectively of condemnation and righteousness. God condemns sin and death is the penalty of sin (Gen. 2:17), while life is the result of receiving righteousness through what Christ has done for us.

Apart from salvation in Christ, the old covenant remained a ‘ministry of condemnation,’ of judgment, and, ultimately, of damnation. It brought people to the bar of God’s judgment but provided no means of satisfying His justice except for eternal punishment in hell. The new covenant far surpasses the old covenant because it provides what the old covenant could not—‘righteousness.’

The ‘ministry of condemnation’ refers to the effects of Moses’ ministry among Israel, following the worship of the golden calf. Paul’s ‘ministry of righteousness’ lines up with what the prophets foretold about the ministry of the Spirit (Ez. 11:19-20; 36:24-29). Today there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, as Paul declares in Romans 8. The old covenant was indeed glorious itself. But the effect of the new covenant is so much more glorious in its ministry of righteousness—the abiding locus of God’s glory is in Paul’s ministry.

Moses’ face shone with its reflection of God’s glory (vv. 7-8). The glory mirrored in his face indicated the glory of the gift that God was giving them in His law and covenant. Moses received it on behalf of the people. The glory seen in Moses’ face, however, faded, as did the glory of the law, since it served to condemn men and women because of their disobedience. Nevertheless, the glory of the law is great. It was, and is, an immeasurable gift. However, what was glorious in the old has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory of the new. It is not that the old covenant had no glory, but in comparison with the new it would *seem* as if it had none! The glory of the new covenant is a *surpassing* glory.

c) *A Permanent Glory (3:11)*

¹¹*For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.*

Paul’s second argument against returning to the old covenant is that it is now superseded. If the former ‘ministry... came with glory,’ then the latter will be ‘even more glorious’ (vv. 8, 9, 11). However, it is not merely that one ministry is superior; it is, rather, that the lesser, temporary glory of the old did not continue, but concluded, once the greater, permanent glory or the new dispensation arrived. In other words, the glory of the old has been ‘deglorified’ by the infinitely greater glory of the new. In itself the old covenant now has no glory. It is glorious now only in so far as its promises point to the glorious one who was to come. The old covenant was a temporary arrangement, whereas the new is eternal. In contrast to Moses’ ministry of glory that was ‘continually being rendered inoperative,’ the glory of Paul’s ministry is permanent—and therefore far more glorious.

Paul makes it very clear that there can be no question of the New Covenant being replaced, for its glory is ‘the glory of that which lasts.’ Like the faith, hope, and love to which he refers in his First Epistle to these Corinthians (1 Cor. 13:13), it will remain forever. This shows that in this

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covenant God has accomplished all that needed to be done. Nothing was provisional any more; everything was complete, perfect, final.

The reflected glory in Moses' face, fading as it was, symbolized the impermanence of the old covenant. Like the glory on Moses' face, the old covenant was never intended to be permanent. Its glory (cp. v. 7) was a fading, passing glory. That the old covenant was not the final revelation of God's redemptive purpose is clear even in the Old Testament. Speaking through Jeremiah, God promised a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). This new covenant is permanent.

What emerges for us from Paul's teaching is that we must establish sound principles in interpreting the ministries or dispensations of God's covenant. We cannot, like Paul's opponents, think and act as if the new had not superseded the old. These persons were but the first of many within Christian history to have confused the covenants.

Paul's three-pronged logic declares, first, that his ministry is more glorious than that of Moses because of its unlimited exposure to God's glory; second, that his ministry is surpassingly glorious because it is a ministry of righteousness; and third, his ministry is superior to Moses' because his ministry is permanent. How stunning!

2. The Greatness of the New Covenant (3:12-18)

a) *Boldness (3:12)*

¹²*Since we have such a hope, we are very bold...*

'Hope' is the confident belief that God will fulfill all the promises of His new covenant. Many of those have already been fulfilled; yet great and glorious as the new covenant is, the heart of it has not yet been fully manifested. The new covenant was ratified at the Cross, though its benefits have always been appropriated by faith, but the fullness of its hope will not be experienced until believers' future glorification.

What is the 'hope' of which Paul speaks? The previous few verses as well as those that follow leave no doubt that it is the hope of 'glory' that he has in mind. What is this glory? The 'glory of God' vividly summarizes, in a phrase, all the end-time blessings God will bestow upon His people. This is the hope of God's people.

The future is sure because God has secured it for us by establishing this covenant for us and with us. It is this strong and certain hope that Paul shares with his fellow-preachers, and it gives them great boldness as they declare the gospel.

With such a glorious hope comes boldness – the boldness of God's children in prayer. We do not have to be uncertain about God's acceptance of us; we may be assured of it. He does not receive us for our own sakes, but for His Son's.

Parrēsia ('boldness') describes courageous, confident, outspoken proclamation of the gospel, without reluctance or wavering no matter how severe the opposition.

Because of the superiority of his ministry Paul is bold. Moses repeatedly veiled his face so that the hard-hearted Israelites might not gaze at 'the outcome' (i.e., the judgment) of that which was being rendered ineffective by the veil. But Paul preached with barefaced boldness because he knew that the glory of the new-covenant ministry was not to be veiled.

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b) *Unveiling (3:13-16)*

(1) Ancient Israel (3:13-14a)

¹³ *...not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. ¹⁴But their minds were hardened.*

This passage continues to contrast the old and new covenants, though the emphasis is now on the people of those covenants. The contrast focuses on the ‘veil’ imagery drawn from the story of Moses in Exodus 34:29-35. The veil on Moses’ face’ is metaphorically said to have been over the ‘minds’ of the people of the old covenant. Paul is making two closely related points. On one hand he is referring to Moses’ own words that the people willfully failed to comprehend the meaning and significance of God’s rescue of them from Egypt (Dt. 29:2-4). On the other, Paul is implying that, because of this, God did not let them understand the promises made under the Mosaic covenant, which would be fulfilled in Christ. They did not see the glory in the old covenant that pointed to Christ.

Moses veiled himself to hide from the frightened Israelites the blazing glory that shone forth from his face (Ex. 34:30). Though the glory of the old covenant was designed to fade in the face of the more glorious new covenant, it is nevertheless a devastating, brilliant, blinding glory. As Moses had been unable to see the glory of God because it would have destroyed him (Ex. 33:20), so the partial glory on Moses’ face was too much for the people to look on. What Paul calls ‘the end of what was fading away’ symbolizes the shadowy, veiled, diminishing nature of the glorious Mosaic covenant. It was replete with types, pictures, symbols, and mystery. It could never be fully understood without the new covenant, connected to the person and work of the coming Messiah.

Paul gave the reason that the Israelites did not ‘look intently’ so as to comprehend the veiled and fading glory of the old covenant. It was not Moses’ fault, or the fault of the old covenant, but because ‘their minds were hardened.’ Hardened is a form of the verb *pōroō*, which could also be translated ‘stubborn.’ Israel failed to grasp the glory of the old covenant because of stubborn, hard-hearted unbelief.

(2) Contemporary Judaism (3:14b-15)

For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted... ¹⁵Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts.

There is a certain poignancy about verse 15, for it is based on Paul’s sad experience. The veil had meaning for his own day as well as for the time of Moses. The veil, which in Moses’ day prevented the Israelites seeing in to the glory behind it on Moses’ face, now lies over their minds preventing them seeing out to the glory in the Scriptures, which they regularly hear.

Long after Moses and his veil were no more, a veil of hardness covered the hearts of Israel. The veil was not, and is not, intellectual but rather moral—a heart-veil. The ‘veil [that] covers [Israel’s] heart’ does not refer to a cognitive inability because of a lack of a special spiritual endowment, but to a volitional inability as a result of a hardened disposition.

Sadly, Paul noted that ‘until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted.’ The old covenant remained obscured, its purpose misunderstood. People wrongly thought that they could be saved by keeping it. By lowering its moral requirements they achieved an external, superficial righteousness. But by doing so they rendered the Law’s

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purpose of revealing their sin and helplessness ineffective. Since they did not realize they were lost, they saw no need for a Savior. The veil of ignorance obscures the true purpose of the old covenant to the hardened heart. That, in turn, made them ignorant of their need for the new covenant.

Like the veil that Moses put over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it, a veil covers their hearts when the old covenant is read so that they do not appreciate the truth of their situation. They foolishly put their trust in their orthodoxy or obedience instead of trusting in God's Son. While the veil is in place, their minds are dull.

(3) New Covenant Christianity (3:14c, 16)

...because only through Christ is it taken away...¹⁶But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

It is 'only in Christ', in who the promises made under the old covenant are fulfilled and whom the apostles proclaimed (1:19-20), that the 'veil' is 'removed.' Only as Jews are persuaded from the Old Testament that the Messiah is Jesus, and turn to Him, is the veil taken away and the glory seen.

The veil that obscured the old covenant is only 'removed in Christ,' and the revelation of the old covenant in the Old Testament is mystery apart from Him. For those who come to faith in Him, spiritual perception is no longer impaired and everything becomes clear. The blessings of the new covenant come only by God's grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul tells of the removal of the veil 'in Christ.' This was, of course, his own experience on the Damascus Road and in the days that followed his encounter with the risen and glorified Christ there. His physical eyes had a darkness they had never known before (Acts 22:6-11), but his heart was flooded with light, a light he was told to pass on to others (Acts 26:15-19).

If we would receive the light of the New Covenant, we need to have the veil removed, and this only happens when we turn to the Lord. Notice that both in verses 14 and 16 the veil is said to be 'taken away,' so that, although in the Old Testament story it is Moses who removes it, in the New Testament parallel it is clearly God who takes it away.

Today those who accept the message of Scripture will go where the text leads, which is always to the Messiah who takes the veil away.

When the Holy Spirit removes the veil from our hearts, He shows us the glory of the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus uniquely brings before the eyes of our heart the glory of God, and we are enthralled and captivated by it.

c) Freedom (3:17)

¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Paul seems to be saying that the parallel to the Lord in the Old Covenant is the Spirit in the New. Whatever it means, it strongly affirms the deity of the Holy Spirit.

'Lord' can either refer to God the Father or Christ the Son. But what is emphasized here is the close identification between the Lord and the Spirit. So Moses' experience of the Lord (Yahweh) in the Tent of Meeting is equivalent to the experience of the Spirit in Paul's ministry.

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‘The Lord is the Spirit’ is Paul’s shorthand way of referring to the Lord of the old covenant as He has now more completely manifested Himself in the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in a new and spiritual covenant.

Because in this passage Paul has been writing more in terms of the inner work of the Spirit than of the atoning work of Christ, it is apt that he should carry this right through and see conversion as turning to the Spirit, that is, recognizing the need for inner and transforming divine power rather than self-effort. The Spirit brings us liberty when He frees us from the condemning, death-dealing effects of trying to find salvation through Law-keeping. Paul relates Christian freedom to the inner work of the Spirit (cp. Rom. 8:2).

The dramatic picture of Christ’s hand lifting the veil from our darkened hearts pulses with liberation and freedom and, of course, reality. Unveiled before God, Moses was liberated to love and serve God and his people. Here in 2 Corinthians, Paul’s emphasis is that the freedom to obey the Law comes from the power of the Spirit, and that this is authentic freedom.

d) Transformation (3:18)

¹⁸And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

The imagery of the veil, therefore, is central in the contrast Paul is making between the people under the old and new covenants. Moses and the Jewish people are veiled, whereas Paul and other Christian people are ‘unveiled.’ Since the veil is a metaphor for blindness, it is clear that those who are under the old covenant are blind to the glory of God, whereas those under the new ‘behold’ the glory, which they see in the ‘face,’ or person, of Jesus Christ (cp. 4:6).

The inclusive phrase ‘we all’ includes all new covenant believers. In the old covenant analogy, only Moses saw God with an unveiled face. But in the new covenant every Christian can ‘with unveiled face’ behold ‘the glory of the Lord’ revealed in Jesus Christ.

Through the inner work of the Spirit, Christians have the blinding veil removed from their faces. ‘We ... all’ implies a contrast with the situation in Moses’ day. It was only he who stood in God’s presence and received the imprint of the divine radiance on his countenance. The Old Covenant was made with Israel as a group through him as its mediator. In the New Covenant, however, although the group, the church, does not lack importance, the relationship offered gives inner knowledge of God to the individual believer. This is a wonderful aspect of the New Covenant as promised by God through Jeremiah. Now through His death for us, we may all have unrestricted access to the very presence of the God of glory. What an amazing privilege!

The word translated ‘reflect’ is an interesting one and had two possible meanings. It can signify either looking or reflecting. The context makes it quite difficult to decide between these two senses, for either of them would fit well. Could Paul in fact have been led to this word simply because of its ambiguity, and because it is true in this passage in both senses? If such ambiguity was his intention, he has penned a verse of great spiritual significance. How are we to become more like Christ? By reflecting His character. And how can we do this? By looking constantly at Him. And what does this mean in practice? It means using the means of grace; it means meditating on the revelation of Him in the Word of God and, through faith and in prayer, daily making Him the spiritual center of our lives.

The phrase ‘are being transformed’ translates a present passive participle of the verb *metamorphoō* and refers to believers’ progressive sanctification. The Christian life is a continual

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process of growing into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ, ascending from one level of glory to another.

What does it mean to be ‘transformed into His likeness’? It is certain that we do not change so as to resemble the Lord in any physical way; it is an internal transformation. How does this character transformation take place? Paul means that we are coming within the ministry of God’s word, the gospel, which affirms that Jesus Christ is the image of God and also Lord (4:2-6). We must take steps to place ourselves under the ministry of the gospel through church membership and also by personal Bible reading and prayer. Clearly the process of transformation, while ‘spiritual,’ is not mystical but educational in character. The content of the education is the gospel of Christ.

The culminating effect of Paul’s ministry is transformation. When Moses removed his veil in the Tent of Meeting and spoke with the Lord face to face, he experienced a *physical* transformation when his face became luminous. At the same time he underwent a sanctifying *moral* transformation as, being exposed to God’s presence and revelation, his character and will became so marked with God’s image that he lived in profound obedience to God’s glorious revelation and in fact delivered the Ten Commandments to his people.

Moses’ temporary exposure to the glory of the Lord worked a mighty transformation in and upon him. But the new-covenant ministry of Paul is even more transforming because our exposure is constant and continuous (there is no veil). And more, it works in the reverse order of Moses’ experience, first by effecting a *moral* transformation into God’s image as all ‘are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.’ We express the image of God by living according to the commandments, which express His nature. The change is progressive, so that willing exposure to the sunlight of God’s presence will burn His image ever deeper into our character and will. And ultimately, at Christ’s appearance, we will undergo a *physical* transformation in glory. This is what Paul’s ministry offered, and this is the grand and great difference between his and Moses’ ministry.

Our transformation is ‘from glory to glory.’ At the beginning, the believer ‘sees’ the glory with his mind as he understands the gospel and turns to the Lord. At the end, he sees that glory with his eyes as, face to face, he sees the heavenly Lord, enveloped in glory. In between the beginning and ending he ‘beholds’ the glory through the pastoral ministry of the gospel in the church. The gospel of Christ not only illuminates our darkened lives; equally remarkably, it transforms them little by little so that they increasingly resemble the moral and spiritual character of the Lord Jesus. The old covenant, by contrast, brought only condemnation and death.

Here the idea of glorification is not applied, as it is so often in Systematic Theology, to the consummation of God’s work of salvation in us at Christ’s return, but rather is an ongoing work within us, which the Systematic theologians normally designate as ‘sanctification.’ Under the Old Covenant the glory, which was very real, was nevertheless a fading glory, for it was destined to fade away once the New Covenant had come. In the New Covenant, however, the glory does not fade but rather increases. If we do look constantly into the face of Christ, we will reflect His character more and more.

For next time: Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-18.