

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And 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.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

With Unveiled Faces

January 17th, 2016

2 Corinthians 3:12-18

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 3:12. This is really the second half of last week's message. In the passage we looked at last week the Apostle Paul was talking about why the New Covenant is better. He began by talking about the ultimate blessings of the New Covenant – things like RIGHTEOUSNESS and ETERNAL LIFE. Those are really important things. Its hard to think of anything that matters more than having a right standing with God that lasts FOREVER. That's really, really important and that is a big part of what makes the New Covenant BETTER. But Paul's not done. Now he begins to focus on what we might think of as the IMMEDIATE BLESSINGS of the New Covenant. The New Covenant isn't just better because of what it will give to us in eternity it is also better because of what we have NOW. Listen to me friends, being a Christian isn't just about going to heaven – it is that – but it is also about being who God made you to be RIGHT NOW. The Old Covenant couldn't fix what was wrong with us – it just told us that something was wrong with us. The Old Covenant told us we were lost, but it didn't bring us home. The Old Covenant told us we were slaves, but it didn't set us free. The Old Covenant told us we were broken but it didn't help us heal. The New Covenant is not like that. It is a Covenant of LIFE and HEALING and POWER - RIGHT NOW for all who believe. That's obviously better and that is what the Apostle Paul is talking about in the passage we are reading this morning. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

¹² Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 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. ¹⁴ But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵ Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. ¹⁶ But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And 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. (2 Corinthians 3:12–18 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

Our Present Blessings Through Jesus Christ:

In terms of our immediate our present blessings through Christ in the New Covenant three things seem to be uppermost in Paul’s mind. First of all there seems to be an emphasis on our newfound INTIMACY with God.

1. Intimacy

Throughout this section Paul is making frequent use of a well-known story in the Old Testament. He is saying that our present situation under the New Covenant is NOT LIKE how things were in the time of Moses. Back in Moses’ day when God drew near the people ran away; do you remember that? When the glory of God descended on the mountain they were terrified – that’s the contrast; we are BOLD they were TERRIFIED. The story he is referring to comes from The Book of Exodus:

¹⁸ Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, **the people were afraid and trembled**, and **they stood far off**¹⁹ and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but **do not let God speak to us, lest we die.**”²⁰ Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”²¹ **The people stood far off, while Moses drew near** to the thick darkness where God was. (Exodus 20:18–21 ESV)

The New Covenant is BETTER because under the Old Covenant everyone but Moses had to stand far off – the people were TERRIFIED but now because of Christ WE ALL HAVE BOLDNESS. This was part of the Good News that Paul was eager to share with all of his churches. He told the Ephesians for example:

¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have

boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. (Ephesians 3:11–12 ESV)

This is what we have **RIGHT NOW** in Jesus Christ. We have **BOLD, INTIMATE ACCESS** to God because of Jesus Christ. Now, obviously we want to understand the nature of our intimacy – what does it mean that we have bold, intimate access to God? Paul illustrates that by making reference to this Old Testament story. He keeps mentioning veils that are on and then off – what is he talking about here? Well if you know your Old Testament then you remember this story. As we just read, the people asked Moses to go and talk to God and then to come back and talk to them. They set up a special tent called the Tent of Meeting where Moses could have these conversations with God. The Bible says:

³⁴ Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, ³⁵ the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him. (Exodus 34:34–35 ESV)

Talking to God **CHANGED THE FACE OF MOSES!** It made him shine with the afterglow of God's glory such that he had to put a veil over his face because even the **REFLECTION** of God's glory was frightening the people of Israel. Paul's point here is that under the Old Covenant most of God's people were afraid of God's voice! They were alienated – they were **FAR OFF** and only Moses was able to speak to God – but now, Paul says – we **ALL WITH UNVEILED FACES BEHOLD THE GLORY OF THE LORD**; he's saying: **WE'RE IN THE TENT!** We are talking to God! Because of Jesus – his death having washed away all our sins – and with the help of the Holy Spirit – all of this he says is from the Spirit – we are in the tent, right now, **TALKING to ALMIGHTY GOD.** We can do that, Paul says, because of our New Covenant graces.

Are you hearing that friend? You don't have to be afraid of God now. If you are in Christ then all your sins are washed away, God isn't angry at you, he doesn't look at you like a judge looks at a disgusting rapist or murderer, he looks at you like a father looks at his children. He wants to talk to you. He wants you to hear his voice and he wants to hear your voice. If you are in Christ then you have an intimate, **FAMILIAL** access to Almighty God.

Can I make a very imperfect and partial analogy? Most of you will know that Tuesday is my sermon preparation day. If you come to the office on Tuesday you will notice that the door

between the main office and the hallway is closed. That's to keep you from wandering back to my office. More than that, my office door is closed and if you try and come into the hallway and into my office Susan will tackle you and put you in a sleeper hold; its just not going to happen because my office is OFF LIMITS to most people under most circumstances on Tuesday. But do you know to whom that rule does not apply; ever? My children. My daughter Noa is often in the church on Tuesdays with her mommy and she knows that she can walk into my office at any time of the day on any day of the week without an appointment. She just walks in and she knows that she will always get a kiss and she knows where the candies are hidden and she comes right in and gets them – its like she owns the place. She doesn't know it but she has INTIMATE FAMILIAL ACCESS of a type that not everybody has. So it is with you. That's who you are to God. He is always glad to see you and he always has something special hidden away just for you. That's who God is to you if you are in Christ and that is something we can enjoy RIGHT NOW because of our New Covenant graces – thanks be to God.

Secondly we also notice Paul's emphasis on our newfound FREEDOM in the Spirit.

2. Freedom

We see that in verse 17, Paul says:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (2 Corinthians 3:17 ESV)

Its very important for us to understand what Paul means here by “freedom”. Obviously the word “freedom” can be and has been taken to mean different things by different people. Some folks who haven't been tracking with the argument of 2 Corinthians or who haven't taken the time to read other things that Paul wrote have taken this to mean that if you have the Holy Spirit then you can do pretty much whatever you want. Throw your Bible in the trash and just listen to the inner voice of the Spirit and off you go. That of course is a recipe for disaster and it couldn't be further from what Paul is talking about here. Remember that Paul's criticism of the law wasn't that it said something untrue about God's character or God's requirements; after all Paul said:

the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. (Romans 7:12 ESV)

The law tells us who God is and how we should live before him and with other people and that's good. The problem is that we can't do what the law says we should. That's what's wrong with the law. It doesn't enable that which it requires. So freedom in the Spirit does not mean freedom to trample on the law. So what does it mean?

I think it is helpful here to remember that Paul, as a Jewish person, had a great deal of experience with a certain type of slavery. The Jewish people had been slaves. They had been slaves in Egypt and they had been taken in shackles into exile on two different occasions in the Old Testament – so slavery was a big part of the Jewish narrative and experience and therefore whatever Paul means by freedom it has to be understood as the opposite of what Paul means by slavery.

Do you remember the story of Samson? OT scholars generally agree that the story of Samson while being literally true is also intended to illustrate the history of Israel. Samson was called to be set apart – he was under a Nazirite vow – he was given an incredible anointing in the Spirit and commissioned to an important prophetic ministry. But of course, as you know, Samson was also easily seduced and distracted by forbidden pleasures. He slept with prostitutes and he fell in love with a Philistine woman who betrayed him, cut off his hair and robbed him of his power. Samson was captured, became a slave, had his eyes gouged out and he was chained to a wheel to grind out grain and to endure the mockery of his enemies. THAT'S WHO WE ARE apart from the grace of God in Christ, that's who we are as fallen people and as slaves to sin. Paul uses that kind of language to describe our situation apart from the Gospel in the very next chapter of 2 Corinthians, he says:

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:4 ESV)

So for Paul, slavery was about blindness – the inability to see the goodness of God, and it was about powerlessness – how we are unable to do what we should – and it is about the loss of our calling. We are not now the people we were created to be. We were made in the image and likeness of God – we were meant to be UNDER GOD and OVER EVERYTHING ELSE – but look at us now, he says. We were deceived! The devil led us away from God, he gouged out our eyes, he stole our power and our calling and he mocks us and rejoices in our ruin.

That's the contrast Paul is making here – it's the same contrast he makes in Romans 6. There he says:

But **now that you have been set free from sin** and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. (Romans 6:22 ESV)

When you belonged to the devil you were trapped in darkness, futility and sin, but now that you belong to God you are producing holiness on your way to eternal life – **THAT'S WHAT PAUL MEANS HERE BY FREEDOM!** Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is **FREEDOM!** That means **OPEN EYES**; that means **POWER TO OBEY** and that means **RESTORATION TO CALLING**. Right now, because of Christ, with the help of the Holy Spirit, you are free to know God, you are free to obey God and you are free to serve God according to your gifts and calling. That's what Paul means and that's what we have **NOW** because of our New Covenant graces – thanks be to God!

Thirdly we notice Paul's emphasis on the New Covenant miracle of **TRANSFORMATION** and **CHANGE**.

3. Change

Look at verse 18; one of the sweetest verses in all the Bible. It says:

And 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. (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

The longer I am a Christian the more this verse ministers to my soul. **I DON'T WANT ONLY TO BE FORGIVEN I WANT ULTIMATELY TO BE FIXED!** I don't want only to be **REDEEMED** I want also to be **RESTORED**. I don't want to be free only from the penalty of sin I want to be free from the **POWER OF SIN** and one day even from **THE PRESENCE OF SIN**. I want to be with Jesus **AND** like Jesus **FOREVER**. I would never dare to ask for such things except that this passage promises them to me. And that is why I love it so.

Can I tell you something? And I don't say this as though I have arrived by any stretch. But the

benefit of being about half way done the spiritual journey is that you can see some things behind you even as you anticipate some things ahead. I'm 41 years old, I turn 42 next month and I have been walking with Jesus now for more than 35 years and over that time something interesting has happened to me that I think explains why this verse means so much to me. When I was 20 years old I sinned a lot more than I do now, but I cared a lot less. Do you know what I mean?

Generally speaking, as you get older in Christ and as you walk longer with Christ you sin less but you care more. As a 20 year old I would sin 100 times in a day and still sleep like a baby – but slowly but surely as the Lord has changed me, I sin less but I hate each sin way more. I grieve over sin in a way I just didn't as a 20 year old. I have loved Jesus since I was 6 years old but I have only really hated sin in the last 12 or 13 years of my life. And every year that hatred grows. I HATE hearing arrogant or unloving words when they come out of my mouth. I HATE missing opportunities to be kind or generous or evangelistic. I want to PUNCH MYSELF IN THE FACE everytime my eye wanders toward something it shouldn't. Why do I do that? I hate every remnant and reminder of sin in my flesh. And the only thing that keeps me from beating myself unconscious is this promise. I will CHANGE. By one degree of glory to the next, into the same image as Jesus Christ – THANKS BE TO GOD!

If that doesn't fire you up then you might not be SAVED. Now if you care about that like I care about that then you will want some information about how that happens. Again, the Moses story that Paul keeps alluding to is very helpful. In Exodus 34 the Bible says:

²⁹ Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone **because he had been talking with God**. (Exodus 34:29 ESV)

³⁴ Whenever Moses went in before the LORD **to speak with him**, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded,³⁵ the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until **he went in to speak with him**. (Exodus 34:34–35 ESV)

Are you seeing that? It was TALKING TO GOD that changed the face of Moses. That's what Paul means when he says:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

TALKING TO GOD CHANGES EVERYTHING! When you hear the Word of God wash over you and the Spirit works within you to help you understand it and then the Spirit of God cries out

within you saying – Abba Father! When that happens – EVERYTHING CHANGES! You are transformed by one degree of glory to the next into the same image as Jesus Christ – this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. God is going to heal you by talking to you. Just like at the beginning when the Spirit of God hovered over the darkness and God said LET THERE BE LIGHT- the Word and the Spirit of God MAKE EVERYTHING NEW. That’s what this is about – that’s the heart of the New Covenant! Its about RE-CREATION; its about God fixing us and then fixing the world so that we can be with God as God’s people enjoying God’s glory forever.

All of this is from Jesus – everything changes when you turn to the Lord. And of all of this is from the Holy Spirit. All of who God is is involved in our salvation. Because of Christ, with the help of the Holy Spirit we see the face God and we glorifying him forever. That’s the Gospel; that’s the message of the New Covenant and it is INFINITELY BETTER.

Response:

Now, I think there are three appropriate ways that we would want to respond to this marvelous text. The first response is the obvious response for the person who is hearing this for the first time. If you are just now learning about the blessings and the graces that are offered freely to all people in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then obviously you want to believe on Christ and be saved. Paul says:

when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (2 Corinthians 3:16 ESV)

He says:

only through Christ is it taken away. (2 Corinthians 3:14 ESV)

So obviously our alienation from God, our blindness and inability, our slavery to sin and the devil – all of that can only be taken away and removed through Jesus Christ. How does that happen? What does it mean to “turn to the Lord”?

Again, as is so often the case, there are Old Testament stories that help us to understand these New Testament principles. There is a story from the time of Moses about when the people of

God were bitten by fiery serpents. They began to get sick and to die and the people cried out to God for rescue and salvation and God told them to do a very unusual thing.

⁸ the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (Numbers 21:8–9 ESV)

Jesus said that this story was ultimately intended to illustrate the salvation that he came to offer; he said:

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:14–15 ESV)

Have you been bitten by the serpent? Has the devil seduced you and dragged you away into death and ruin? Has he blinded your eyes and chained you into cycles of stupid that you cannot break free from? Then look unto Christ – look unto Christ on the cross and BE SAVED! As you look a new power will wash over you. A new DRAW will take hold of you. Jesus said that, he said:

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32 ESV)

Look to Jesus. Look to Jesus on the cross. Let that vision heal you of every lie you have believed about God. Let that vision heal you of every lie you have believed about yourself. All the truth is there. Jesus on the cross tells us who God is – he is holy and he is love. Jesus on the cross tells us who we are. We are sinners but we are not disposable. God loves us and so he came to do for us what we could never do for ourselves and he came to pay for what we did do in his body on the cross. The cross says it all – the cross tells the TRUTH and the truth will set you free. So turn to Jesus. Confess your sin, lay it down and take hold of him. Receive his forgiveness and his righteousness by faith and just keep on looking until he takes you home. BEHOLD THE GLORY OF THE LORD and be changed.

If you are already a Christian, if you have looked upon Christ in the past then you know of what Paul speaks of now when he says:

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold (2 Corinthians 3:12 ESV)

Paul is saying that if you know about these New Covenant graces then you are eager and BOLD to grow in them. You can meet with God at any hour of the day. You can open his Word and hear his voice. You can fall to your knees and speak to God as a child speaks to his father. You can go in the tent, Paul says. So be eager to go in the tent – be eager to worship.

Knowing all of this should also birth in you a resolve unto mission. Paul says in the very next verse in 2 Corinthians; he says:

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. (2 Corinthians 4:1 ESV)

Yes there will be difficulties, yes we may be slandered, of course there will be ups and downs but we have been entrusted with the greatest message in the world! We are offering people EVERYTHING they've ever dreamed of! Righteousness and eternal life, intimacy with God, spiritual freedom and the power to change and to reclaim our calling – THIS IS EVERYTHING WE'VE EVER DREAMED OF! This is everything God promised and it is right here, freely offered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ! All of the promises of God are YES and AMEN in Jesus FOR THE GLORY OF GOD – what more could you possibly be looking for? This is it! This is EVERYTHING and this is the Word of the Lord.