

The Glory of the New Covenant

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Bible Text: 2 Corinthians 3:1-18

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Well, do join me in taking your Bibles and turning together in the New Testament to 2 Corinthians chapter three. It is on page 965 on the church Bible.

It is a joy for us to be back here in Tenth and to be on the Fourth of July really, I think, is quite appropriate. Try not to say anything inappropriate, but somebody handed me something just as I was coming in this morning and I promise not to wave it around too much.

But my granddaughter who is over with us from Scotland will get that later on and she will wave it around I am sure.

When we lived in London, by the way, we back on our manse, parsonage backs on to Queue Gardens and in Queue Gardens which is a famous place that visitors go to. I don't think anyone else does, but visitors go there. And in there there is a little palace and in this palace a certain King George used to go to retreat from the affairs of state, the same King George that is on the minds of people on the Fourth of July and you can hear excerpts from his diaries. And there is this brilliant insert which always causes Christie and I to laugh where he is reviewing his life and he is talking about the achievements and grandeur of the British Empire. And after he has listed all the achievements of the British Empire he adds a little footnote.

“In light of all this that has been achieved, what is the los of one or two colonies?”

If ever there was an understatement in history, I mean, really it is incredible.

But, of course, for me as a Scotsman with Scots Irish roots the New World was a new world for many of my natural ancestors and for me as a Bible believing Christian the New World opened a way of opportunity for the gospel which has now gone from here around the world. So the Fourth of July is a good day for the world, not just for America.

Well, let's read together from 2 Corinthians chapter three. And Paul is writing about his own ministry and he is going to talk now about the ministry of the new covenant.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now 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, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 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. 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. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 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.¹

Covenants. That is the theme. Covenants which structure, I suppose, most of our ordinary lives. This grand experiment in democracy that we celebrating on the Fourth of July here in America was built to some degree at least on the writing of John Locke and his view of a social contract between the rulers and the people. Governors were elected by the people. They rule with the people's consent and there is this covenant or contract or pact of agreement between them.

Pacts and treaties form the background of all our international relationships. And similarly contracts or compacts in our ordinary business dealings from day to day involve the signing of a commitment, a contract, the endorsement sometimes of a notary public to confirm the commitment. And then there is marriage. Marriage is a commitment, a contract, a covenant entered into by two people, a man and a woman, who make promises to each other, who mark this new bond publicly by making oaths and by exchanging rings in a public ceremony.

¹ 2 Corinthians 3:1-18.

Contracts, covenants are part of our every day ordinary lives.

And if the Bible is one big idea that holds together and overrides every other theme that we find there, then it is that of the covenant. But we need to add this, that the covenants we find in the Bible are different from those contracts that I have just described. The covenant that the Bible describes is unilateral. It comes from above. It is imposed by a sovereign so that although you may live in a republic with a president, nonetheless, as a Christian you live and are part of a covenant with God who is the great King, the great King of all the earth. And his covenants, his agreements with humanity are imposed upon us. They are sovereignly initiated, sovereignly administered. God sets them up. God sets the terms of his covenants.

Well, here in 2 Corinthians three Paul is talking about the old covenant, especially the covenant with Moses and the new covenant in Christ. He is arguing that we who belong to the Church today, the ministry that we share together as the people of God and that the ministers have in terms of proclaiming the gospel, is part of the new covenant ministry that we share with Paul and the early Christians and that it is superior in every way to the old covenant.

He breaks it down by using another words that emerges from these verses and that, indeed, is the word that is used most in these verses and that is the word “glory,” the glory of the new covenant.

The word “glory” comes up 10 times in these verses as a noun, a verb. And it is no exaggeration to say that throughout the Bible the glory of God has been God’s passionate concern. When he made the universe he made it for his glory.

“The heavens declare the glory of God.”² So the psalmist tells us.

And when he made man, when he made us as image bearers, he made us as the image bearers of his glory to reflect something of who he is and even this means that even non Christian people, people who don’t know God are still even in their fallen state, unredeemed state, image bearers of God though the image may be defaced as it is because of sin. Nonetheless that people are able to see something of the glory of God in other people.

Above all, God glorifies himself by uniting us to Christ and especially to Christ in his death on the cross for us. And one day he is going to glorify all his redeemed. We are going to be glorified. We are going to share in the glory that is coming, the glory of God himself.

So God is passionate about his glory. And in these verses we discover, as Paul puts together this idea of glory on the one hand the covenant on the other, he describes three

² Psalm 19:1.

things for us: a frightening glory and then a surpassing glory and then a transforming glory. Let's look at those three things together.

First of all if you look at verse seven you will see him describing a frightening glory.

“Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory...”³

You notice how he puts together those two ideas. On the one hand there is a ministry of death. But it came, he says, with such glory, a frightening glory.

One Christmas a few Christmases ago someone gave me a book entitled *A Terrible Beauty* written by a man called Peter Watson. And in that book he discusses some of the big ideas, the ideologies that emerged in the 20th century that led to great advances in civilization on the one hand and terrible destructive wars on the other. That is where the phrase “a terrible beauty” comes from, from a poem by W B Yates describing the First World War. His poem is called *Easter 1916* and the phrase from the poem that he uses, “All changed, changed utterly, a terrible beauty was born.”

And when we think of the glory of God displayed on Mount Sinai we are thinking of a terrible, frightening beauty, because the glory of God displayed on Mount Sinai is often associated in the Bible with this word “beauty.” The glory of God is the character of God, the nature of God, God at work. And it is beautiful. And the glory of God sometimes shines with surpassing light that causes people to be in awe of it, to be amazed at it because God is in himself beautiful.

And when God had Moses write down on that mountain the 10 Commandments, those 10 Commandments were a reflection of the inherent beauty of God himself.

Well you know the story. Moses comes down out of the mountain carrying those two tablets of stone on which the 10 Commandments have been imprinted. And coming down the mountain what does he find at the bottom, but the Israelites? You will remember they had made a graven idol, a golden calf and they are worshipping that calf and they are engaging in all kinds of immorality as part of the worship of that calf.

What does Moses do? Moses takes those two tablets and he throws them down and smashes them. And as they smash, the judgment falls, the judgment of God on the camp comes and tens of thousands of people are killed as the judgment of God sweeps through the camp of Israel. It was a terrible glory. It was the beauty of God reflected in the law, but he law was smashed by man's disobedience. And judgment falls and sometimes in the Bible the glory of God stands for the justice and judgment of God, breathtaking in its justice, awful in its execution in the lives of men and women.

And the reason it fell was because of the hardness of their hearts it says.

“They broke my covenant,” is God's verdict.

³ 2 Corinthians 3:7.

Moses says, “You are a stubborn people. Your hearts are hardened . You will not turn to God.”

And judgment falls and the frightening glory of God is displayed at the foot of Mount Sinai because of men’s sin.

There is a frightening glory. It is associated with the giving of the law of God.

And I want to speak to some of you here this morning and your view of Christianity and of religion is that it is primarily to do with morality and values and how you live and how you keep the law. And I want to say to you if that is as far as you go this morning all I can offer you is this frightening picture of absolute justice and terrible judgment. It is a terrifying thing to look at the glory of God reflected on his law and for that to be it, for there to be nothing else than that, but to stand there naked as Adam and Eve felt themselves to be in the presence of a holy God there in Edom, having broken the one law that he gave, having had the image of God shattered, as it were, by their disobedience and to feel the frightening Word of God, curse of God come upon them as they are thrust out of Eden and into the place of judgment.

It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of an angry God.

Now the second picture in this passage is not of a frightening glory, but of a surpassing glory. Look at verse 10. And this is the key verse here.

“What once had glory [that is the old covenant] has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it.”⁴

Now I want you to notice that Paul is not suggesting for one moment that there was no glory in the old covenant. What he is saying is that there was, there is glory in the law of God. There is glory in the character of God. There was glory under the old covenant.

When those Israelites were gathered around Mount Sinai there was cloud and smoke and fire and there was the splendor of the outshining of the glory of God. And even Moses on that mountain.

You will remember he goes back up the mountain having seen the judgment fall and pleads for Israel, pleads that God would spare Israel. And in his prayer asks, “Lord, show me your glory.”

And God says, “You can’t see my glory. You can’t see my face and live. I won’t even let you see my glory in its undiminished form. But I will pass by and my glory will pass by and as I go pass by, pass you by, I will allow you to see the afterburner of my glory.”

And that is what happened. You remember he is sitting in the rock. God passes by,

⁴ 2 Corinthians 3:10.

proclaiming his name, the Lord, the Lord, his mercy and his justice and his goodness and kindness. And the glory of God goes past and once God is passed, Moses is allowed to come out and see the after effects of the glory of God, the back part, the after burner of the glory of God.

And when he come back down out of the mountain this time with a renewed 10 Commandments in his hands the people looking at him see his face dazzlingly bright with the reflection of the after burner of the glory of the Lord. Even the reflection of the after burner of the glory of the Lord is dazzling to the eyes.

And what is the response of the people? They are terrified.

Oh, yes, there was glory in the old covenant. But there is a greater glory in the new covenant.

Here is how Jeremiah describes it in Jeremiah 31.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers,”⁵ that is with Moses.

In what way will it not be like that? Well, he goes on to explain it.

“ I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”⁶

“I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”⁷

Now this new covenant, then, has been fulfilled, says Paul. It was inaugurated by Jesus at the last supper. It was ratified the next day at Calvary by the shedding of the blood of the Son of God. And the benefits of the new covenant were proclaimed by Peter, were announced by Peter on the day of Pentecost like an attorney reading out the will. He stand son the day of Pentecost and announces to the world and especially to Jesus’ people what are the benefits that accrue to us on the basis of the covenant Jesus has inaugurated and ratified by his own blood.

And what are those benefits? Peter summarizes Jeremiah 31. They are the gift of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of our sins. These are the two great gifts of the new covenant that are promised to us as a result of the work of the Lord Jesus on our behalf.

So the benefits are greater than the benefits of the old covenant. We have the power of the Spirit to obey the law of God. We have the forgiveness of sins.

⁵ Jeremiah 31:31-32.

⁶ Jeremiah 31:33.

⁷ Jeremiah 31:34.

The old covenant could never do that finally. All the ceremony of the old covenant could never really deal with sins finally once and for all. But here they are in Christ and they are accomplished once and for all, pardon for sins and the power of the Spirit with the law written on our hearts, not on tablets of stone, enabling us to obey it.

And it wasn't just the benefits. The Mediator of the new covenant is greater than the mediator of the old covenant. Jesus is greater than Moses. This is nowhere brought to light more profoundly than in Matthew chapter five where we find the Lord Jesus taking his disciples up on a mountain. Do you remember? He gathers the 12 disciples around him, reminiscent of the children of Israel, the camp of Israel surrounding the Lord there on the mountain. And there from the mountain Jesus gives his law.

“You have heard that it was said... but I say to you...”

And on that mountain where he gave the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is not like Israel camped at the base of the mountain waiting for God to speak. And Jesus is not even like Moses who is going up and down the mountain receiving the Word from God and bringing it down to the people. No, Jesus at the mount where he preaches that sermon is seated with the representatives of the new Israel around him and he is promulgating the law.

The people who say, “I would rather have Jesus than Moses. I would rather have Jesus' word than Moses' word,” need to read Jesus. He takes the same law and he presses it closer and closer to home. He says, “Not only don't commit adultery.” He says, “If you look at a woman with lust, that is adultery.” He presses it home. He takes the law and he nails it to our hearts.

You are worse under Jesus than you are under Moses if you stick to the law.

But, of course, he came not simply to give the law. But by his act of obedience and by his death for us on the cross, to give us something more. What is this something more? He spells it out here in verses seven and eight. The new covenant is about life, not death. It is about life, not death.

Now 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, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?⁸

He is thinking back to verse six. Look at verse six.

“[God] has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”⁹

⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:7-8.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 3:6.

The Spirit gives life. There you have it. This covenant under Moses was a publication of the law of God, a transcript of the character of God held up before our eyes. It is a statement of our failure to obey God. It is a statement of my disobedience. I look at that law of God and whenever I look at it, whether I hear it interpreted by the Lord Jesus I realize that in every particular of that law, I have fallen short of the glory of God and the wages of sin is death, death.

But now in Christ Jesus what is there? Now there is life. Now there is life. This is a ministry of the Spirit and the Spirit gives life. The law kills me. It kills me literally because it pronounces my sentence. The wages of sin is death. But it kills me in my conscience because it points out my sin. But the Spirit of God in Christ Jesus speaks life into my heart.

Not only that, look at verse 11. The new covenant is about, verse nine, sorry. It is about righteousness, not condemnation. Life, not death, righteousness, not condemnation.

“For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.”¹⁰

Now that word “condemnation” there is a forensic term. It describes in this context being rejected by God finally, condemned. That means that in the same context, the word “righteousness” has to be understood in forensic terms as well, legal terms as meaning forgiveness, acquittal, vindication, justification. Put right with God. That is the status we are given in Christ. From condemnation to righteousness means from a state where I am under sentence of death I am now pronounced not guilty in the eyes of God and positively righteous in God’s eyes.

And how is this possible? Well, Paul will go on to explain in chapter five.

“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.”¹¹

How does he do this? He does this by not counting our trespasses against us. That is what that the law does. The law counts my trespasses against me. The law heaps up all of my transgressions. The law reminds me of them. The law constantly is bringing them to my attention. The law is only interested in my trespasses. But God does what in Christ? He chooses not to count your trespasses against you. Instead, what does he do?

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”¹²

But the third thing about this new covenant is that it is about something permanent, not transient. Look at verse 11.

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:9.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:19.

¹² 2 Corinthians 5:21.

“For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.”¹³

Paul comments on the fading of the glory from Moses’ face. That as Moses came down to the people the people were frightened by it. He covers it so that they will be not be frightened. There is a dispute. Is it because they... so they won’t be frightened or is it because he is signaling to them that, in fact, as sinners they cannot see the glory of God? Maybe there is a link between the veil over Moses’ face, shielding the people from seeing the glory of God even reflected on Moses’ face and the veil that hung in the temple and in the tabernacle that hides the glory of God that settles between the cherubim and the holy of holies so that people cannot enter into the presence of God and see the glory of God. Maybe there is a link there, that the glory of God is hidden from sinners.

The law came by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

That old covenant was in the process of being abolished, says Paul, even when the law was given. It was only given in a transient way. It was the school master. It was to prepare us for the coming of Jesus and for the word of the gospel.

Well, we have seen, then, the frightening glory and the surpassing glory. What does this surpassing glory do? The answer is it transforms us, verses 12 to 18.

It transforms preachers or us as the congregation or the Church in the world. It transforms us. What does it do for us? Well, it gives us hope and makes us very bold. It gives us hope that makes us very bold especially bold in proclaiming the good news of the gospel. It gives us hope because we now have boldness ourselves to enter the holy place by the blood of the Lord Jesus. We are now able to look to God and look at the glory that there is in the Lord Jesus. We are bold in that sense, but corporately we are very bold at sharing this good news with the world, proclaiming it to the world.

We don’t have to put a veil over it. The final thing has arrived, you see? Moses puts a veil over it for one reason being that this covenant is coming to an end. But this new covenant is not coming to an end. It has arrived and to prove that it is here and it is already begun its work in the lives and hearts of people like you, what is that work? Well, that work is a work of conversion, first of all. It won’t be a work of conversion to everyone. For some this new covenant proclamation will meet with deaf ears and hard hearts.

If you think of Israel, he mentions Israel here. Their minds were hardened unto this day, he says. When they read the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted. They hear the law. They don’t see Christ. They listen to the prophets. They don’t see Christ. They read the Psalms and they don’t see Christ. And it is not only Israel. If you go to chapter four, you will find it is also the Gentile world in verses three and four.

¹³ 2 Corinthians 3:11.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. 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.¹⁴

And whenever people don't see it, that is why they don't see it. But what is the Spirit's work in us? What can the Spirit do for you this morning? The Spirit can do a work of illumination in your mind. You are not a Christian. You can open your eyes to see this.

Look at this. Through Christ the veil is taken away.

Verse 16.

When one turns to the Lord the veil is removed.

Now either the Lord there is the Lord Jesus or it is the Lord God, it is the God who appeared to Moses. I think most likely that is the case. One turns to the Lord by doing what? By coming to Jesus. We come to the Lord through Jesus. That is what happened to Paul on the Damascus Road. He had rebelled against God thinking he was doing God's will. He had sat in the synagogue sabbath by sabbath and heard the law of God read and he hadn't seen that Jesus is the answer to what the law of God is teaching until on that Damascus Road the scales fall from his eyes and he sees and everybody, every man, woman, boy and girl here who knows the Lord Jesus has had the scales removed to see him.

Have you seen him?

And where that illumination takes place there is liberation. Do you see that? Now the Lord is the Spirit. Where the spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. The Lord backs up the Spirit. The Lord gives the Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of the Lord. Where the Spirit is the Lord is present and active in people's lives. Where the Spirit acts Jesus acts. And what does he act to do? He acts to liberate us.

This is a good day, isn't it? I think of liberty from tyranny. And whenever someone becomes a Christian there is liberty from tyranny, the tyranny of sin. And part of the process of the Spirit's work in our hearts and the reason for the gift of the Spirit is primarily to loosen our affections that are tied up with the things of this world that are keeping us back from progress in our relationship with God. And the work of the Spirit is to so disorientate us that no longer are we zeroed in upon ourselves, but our focus is changed until it is focused upon God.

There is liberty in Christ to resist sin. The gravitational force of sin in my ordinary human nature is such that I can maybe manage to get a few feet in the air and if you are a Michael Jordan, which shows you how old I am, who can jump higher than you maybe

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:3-4.

manage a few more feet off the ground, but the gravitational pull of sin keeps me within the orbit of sin.

But the aerodynamical power of the Holy Spirit engages my heart and enables me to overcome the gravitational pull of sin so that I am able to say no to unrighteousness and yes to Jesus.

And in that respect, you see, this new covenant gift is the gift of transformation, ultimately.

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image.”¹⁵

Into what image? Well, he has mentioned it before, the image of Christ. He will mention it again, the image of God who is Christ. Changed into his image. How do I become changed into his image? I mean, is there any practical advice here? How does this happen? Is there a switch I can flick to do this?

He says we become by beholding. To behold is to look into something, to study it studiously. What am I looking into? I am in this case looking into something as an in a mirror, but in this mirror I see not my reflection, but another’s reflection.

You know those horror movies where there is some girl putting on her makeup or some guy shaving or something? They go into the bathroom usually. They shut the bathroom thing and there is a mirror there. They look into the mirror when suddenly there is this horrific creature with a knife standing behind them.

Sorry, to scare the younger ones here.

[?] scary stuff.

But it just comes out naturally. That is my fallen human nature just coming and merging right there. It is fun to watch.

And it is a similar picture here only better, ok? Here is someone looking into this mirror and instead of seeing themselves, they see reflected in the mirror the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. And what Paul is saying here is, as we behold his image.... where do I see his image? Well, it tells us in chapter four verse three, the gospel. That is where I see his image, in the gospel.

Where do I find the gospel? This is where I find the gospel. As I look into his image reflected in the gospel, found in his Word, as I look at this, as I study it something is happening more than simply that my mind is being filled with good thoughts, that I am having one of those aha moments where I see a truth I hadn’t seen before. No, something far more important is going on whenever I come to the Scriptures. What is happening?

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:18.

What is happening is this? I, me, internally, the person I am on the inside is gradually being overcome, transformed, a work has begun within me by the power of the Spirit that is making me gradually more and more like Jesus.

Well, you say, what does that look like? What does it look like to be more and more like Jesus? Does it look like some of those scary people that I used to see in my old church when I was little that sit up front with their suits on and their glum expressions? Does it look like that lady who used to come up to my mom with all her sanctimonious language and find some spiritual phrase for absolutely everything that happened in my life?

Does becoming more like Jesus make me weird?

No, becoming more like Jesus, you see, makes you more human, because we were made originally in the image of God.

What has happened as a result of sin is that we are less human than we were. Our humanity has been debased by our sinfulness. To be renewed into the image of Christ is to be renewed in our own humanity reflecting the image of God.

Do you know these words?

Not merely in the words you say, not only in your deeds confessed, but in the most unconscious way is Christ expressed. Is it a beatific smile, a holy light upon your brow? Oh, no. I felt his presence when you laughed just now. To me it was not the truth you taught to you so clear, to me still dim. But when you came, you brought a sense of him. And from your eyes he beckons me and from your heart his love is shed, till I lose sight of you and see the Christ instead.

It is the work of the Spirit as we behold the glory of the Lord Jesus in the gospel to restore broken humanity, to restore to us the beauty of God, to root out that selfishness and work in selflessness, to root out that pride and work in humility, to root out that love of self and replace it with love for God and love for neighbor and love for enemy. It is to begin a work that is not the work of a moment or a day, but of a lifetime of making you progressively more and more like Jesus until that day when you waken in his presence and are satisfied to be in his likeness, glorified and perfected and all together, inside and out, like him.

Let's pray together.

Father, it is your great passion to display your beauty and glory in the heavens and in the wonders of nature, to have displayed the beauty of your character in your law, but in supremely in the cross where love and justice meet and now to reproduce that glory in us your people. Some of us, Lord, have a long way to go, but the work has begun and we thank you for that great hope that one day all of us here who know you will awaken in your likeness. We pray, Lord, for grace to follow through. In Jesus' strong name we pray. Amen.