

# The Greater Glory of New Testament Ministry

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2 Corinthians 3:7–18  
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The latter half of 2 Corinthians 3 is quite a passage. It's rich with all kinds of truth, history and doctrine. And I have to admit that it created quite a dilemma for me. I wanted to break it down into minute sections for perhaps six or eight. But I resisted this temptation because I didn't want its main points to get lost in the details.

Another challenge I faced is that our entire text is basically a commentary on different passages in Exodus. This means that we have two main contexts to consider.

As we delve into this, I want to begin with verse 14, which says, *But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which veil is done away in Christ.* Here Paul was obviously talking about the Jews. He was concerned for them because they were his *kinsmen according to the flesh*. In Romans 9, he even expressed his willingness to be accursed for their sake (vv. 1–3). And in our text, he says that they were just as blind in the first century, unable to see Jesus when Moses is read in the synagogues. But blindness isn't limited to Jews. It's a characteristic of everyone who can't understand God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. So, if you're in this camp today, this sermon is for you. You need to ask the Lord to remove the veil from your heart.

## Moses and the Ancient People

Let's begin with Moses and the ancient people of God.

Shortly after the exodus, the Lord confirmed his covenant with the Jews. Twice, according to Exodus 24, they promised to do *all the words which the LORD hath said* (vv. 3, 7). But we know how this turned out. Before Moses came down from the mountain with the stone tablets memorializing God's law, they made a golden calf and worshiped it with a giant orgy. When Moses saw what they had done, he smashed the tablets of stone, symbolizing their breaking of the law (Exod. 32:15). Knowing that God's anger had been kindled against them, he prayed for the Lord to spare them (vv. 11–14, 31–34). But this wasn't all. Even though the Lord accepted Moses' intercession on their behalf, he said that he would no longer dwell with them. If he did, he would have to destroy them. He said, *For I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiffnecked people: lest I consume thee in the way* (Exod. 33:3). The Lord would be with Moses, but not with them. Thus, he pitched the tent of meeting

outside the camp (Exod. 33:7ff.). Moses even saw God’s glory while he was in the cleft of the rock (Exod. 33:19–23; 34:5–7), as he continued to beg God to dwell among his people again. He said, *If now I have found grace in thy sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray thee, go among us* (Exod. 34:9).

Eventually, Moses went back up on the mountain for another set of stone tablets (Exod. 34:28), and when he came down this time, his face reflected the glory of God that he had asked to see. This shows that Moses had become, as one commentator wrote, “the mediator of God’s presence and glory.”<sup>1</sup> As the mediator, he had to wear a veil when not speaking to either party.

But what did the veil mean? Did Moses wear it because the people were afraid to look at his face? Exodus 34:30 says that the people saw his shining face and *were afraid to come nigh him*. Or was it because the brightness of his face blinded their eyes? Probably not, because he didn’t put the veil on until he finished speaking with them (vv. 33, 35). Or maybe he had to wear it so that the people couldn’t see God’s glory fade away? In our text, Paul wrote that *the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance, which was passing away*. While there may be some truth in everything I just said, the real reason for the veil is what we’ve already seen, viz., that it protected Israel from God’s judgment and destruction. Another commentator put it like this:

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.<sup>2</sup>

Why did Paul include all this information about Moses’ veil in 2 Corinthians? Remember that his opponents, who demanded that he produce letters of commendation, said that he had zero qualifications for the work. His word wasn’t good enough. Neither was the word of the Corinthians, no matter how well their transformation corroborated his claims. So, what did he do? He placed his ministry above Moses’. Moses had to wear a veil when he ministered to protect God’s people from his wrath, but Paul didn’t need one.

Consider how Paul’s ministry was superior to Moses’. Moses’ ministry was a ministry of death, but Paul’s was a ministry of God’s Spirit (vv. 7–8). Moses’ ministry led to condemnation because the law, written on tables of stone, lacked the ability to change men’s hearts, but Paul’s ministry led to righteousness. As the Spirit of God dispenses the gift of faith, which is the only instrument of

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kent Hughes *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*. Preaching the Word. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 144, cited in Hughes, 76.

justification before God, he imputes to believers the perfect obedience and righteousness of Christ so that it's as if they'd never sinned (v. 9). And again, Moses' ministry was only temporary. Verse 11 says that it's *done away*. But Paul's is permanent. Its glory is that it remains.

These superior features of the ministry of the new covenant strengthened Paul's hope and boldness in preaching the gospel. That's what he wrote in verse 12: *Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness [literally, boldness] of speech.*

## The Glory of New Covenant Ministry

We shouldn't conclude from what we've said so far that Moses' ministry lacked all glory. It didn't. Actually, it was very glorious. It couldn't be anything else because it revealed God and his justice. It taught his people what to look for in their Savior. Paul himself commented on the glory of Moses' ministry three times — once each in verses 7, 9 and 11. But his point, as we see in verse 10, is that the ministry of the new covenant is even more glorious than the ministry of the old covenant. It's a *glory that excelleth*, he said. It reveals a Christ who came and not merely a Christ who was to come.

So, to emphasize the superior glory of the new covenant, Paul identified several of its key features in the rest of today's text. Let's consider them together.

The first of these is the new covenant's unveiling. According to verse 14, the minds of the Jews were blinded, but in Christ the veil has been taken away from those who believe.

This raises an interesting point. In Exodus, the veil was a piece of fabric that covered Moses' face. The people could still see his glow, but they couldn't see it clearly. But in 2 Corinthians, Paul interpreted this to mean that the veil covered the people's hearts, so that they couldn't see Jesus until it was taken away.

Paul knew this veil intimately. Before his conversion, it blinded his heart. He also saw it in his own ministry. At Iconium, unbelieving Jews stirred up so much trouble for him that he had to leave (Acts 14:1–6). Shortly afterward, the same unbelieving Jews, along with a few from Antioch, spoke against him at Lystra. There the people stoned him, but he survived (vv. 19–20). Later, the unbelieving Jews of Thessalonica drove him from their city (ch. 17:1–10).

The veil that covered the hearts of Paul's opponents wasn't the inability to understand his preaching, but a hatred of it. Their hearts were filled with rage because Paul told them that the only path to salvation is through Jesus Christ, the true mediator of God's presence and glory.

The next feature of new covenant ministry that shows its glory is its freedom. Verse 17 says, *Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.* In the book of Exodus, Moses had a certain amount of liberty. Though God removed his presence from the camp, Moses could go to the tent of meeting and talk with him face-to-face. But nowadays, everyone who believes in Jesus has direct access to God through him. The Lord not only invites us to come into his presence but exhorts us to come boldly for mercy and grace in time of need (Heb. 4:16). He expects us to fellowship with him. Jesus said, *If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you* (John 15:7).

The liberty that we have in Jesus goes far beyond our access to God in prayer. Because of the Spirit's work — and note in our text that the Spirit's work is closely connected with the unveiling of God's grace in Christ — we have real freedom. We're free to believe in the only begotten Son of God. We're free to love him and each other. We're free to serve in holiness. And we're free to live out our salvation day after day.

The world can't understand this liberty. It defines freedom either as a license to sin or the ability to control others. Our society has increasingly given itself over to such things during the last few decades. But the world cannot deprive believers of our freedom in Christ. Even when Paul and Silas, having been beaten, were imprisoned in Philippi, they stayed awake until midnight, singing the glorious praises of our God (Acts 16:25).

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is genuine liberty.

And the last feature of new covenant ministry that towers above the old covenant is its ability to change the hearts of sinners. Verse 18 says, *But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.*

The idea here is very simple: as we gaze into the mirror of God's glory, we become more like what we see. By grace, the Spirit of God changes us, making us more like our Savior. He sanctifies us.

But what is the mirror that we're to look into? It's obviously not literal. No, our mirror is the Word of God. James wrote, *For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.*

The old covenant, if you view it solely as a system of commands and prohibitions, had no power to transform. It ministered nothing but death and condemnation. Its message was, *Cursed be he that confirmeth [or continueth] not all the words of this law to do them* (Deut. 27:26). But the

message of the new covenant is, *Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us* (Gal. 3:13). The new covenant message has the power to break through the hardest and most callous of hearts to give sinners everlasting life and peace and unspeakable joy.

And what do we see when we gaze into the mirror of God's Word? Our text says that we see *the glory of the Lord*. We see the greatness of his grace, mercy and love in saving us, miserable sinners, from complete ruin. We see God's glory in the Word because we see Jesus there. In the next chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote, *For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ* (v. 6). And the first chapter of John's gospel says, *And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth* (v. 14). Jesus came into the world to take away our sin. In him, we have everything we need.

So, when we gaze into the mirror of Scripture, we see Jesus making us what he wants us to be by his Spirit. And he wants us to be like himself. Romans 8:29 says, *For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren*.

This work of sanctifying grace doesn't come all at once. It's progressive and ongoing, beginning with the first glimmering of everlasting life in our souls and continuing until the Lord calls us out of this world. In our text, Paul said that we *are changed*, but a more accurate translation would be "are being changed." That's how the NKJV reads. We're "being transformed into the same image from glory to glory."

Earlier, I said that Paul included a commentary on Exodus in his letter to the Corinthians to authenticate his ministry. But what does this mean? If he had said something like, "Look at my work. Isn't it so wonderful? I'm doing a great job. I'm better than Moses," no one would've given him the time of day. Self-commendations have little value. But this isn't what he said. He boasted of Jesus Christ and the power of his Word because he knew that only the gospel can give life to those who believe.

And this, congregation, is the exhortation we need to hear tonight. Because we live in the new covenant era and have blessings far beyond anything Moses' contemporaries might have imagined, the ministry of the Word of God should be even more precious to us than it was to them. We live in an age of amazing grace that can save even someone like me. And that's a lot to be thankful for.

So, call on Jesus today. He hasn't yet turned away anyone who went to him in humility, seeking salvation and help. He's our gentle and compassionate Savior. Amen.