

April 11, 2021

MINISTRY AND THE GLORY OF THE NEW COVENANT

2 Corinthians 3:4-18

(6 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

If we began reading this letter of 2 Corinthians but then made ourselves stop at the end of 3:3—where our text ended last week—we may well find ourselves thinking, “Why is Paul so driven and bold in expressing his confidence as one who is a sufficient and capable minister of the gospel?” I mean, after asking the question of who is sufficient to be one who ministers the gospel, spreading the fragrance of Jesus Christ (2:16), Paul clearly answers that *he* is. He sets himself apart from others who are mere peddlers of God’s Word, noting that he speaks in “sincerity, as commissioned by God” (2:17). So, again, why is Paul so bold and driven to express his confidence and sufficiency for this task? Is it because he wants the Corinthians to be really impressed with him? What is it?

Well, if we are tempted to ask that question, we find ourselves in a good place because Paul proceeds to answer that question in our text this morning—2 Corinthians 3:4-18. He first sets the record straight that when he claims to be sufficient, he is not saying anything about his own value in and of himself. He writes, “Such is 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 sufficient to be minister of a new covenant” (vv. 4-6a). Paul makes clear that his only sufficiency is that he’s been commissioned by God, but then he opens the door for us to see why he speaks with such confident boldness. It’s because he’s a minister of a glorious new covenant. And when you know that you have something glorious to share, it’s not selfish or unloving in any way to have everyone direct their eyes to you. You might imagine, a group of people dying of thirst in a desert, when you discover over the hill a body of fresh water. And while everyone is yelling, trying to direct the group here, there, and yonder, you yell over everyone, “Listen to me!” In that moment, someone could utter, “Well, good grief, someone’s obsessed with himself and being the center of attention,” but that couldn’t be further from the truth. You need their attention because you’re about to be the messenger of some glorious news that is going to bring life and salvation to these people. That’s what Paul is telling us in this text, and in order to do so, he focuses on the glory and superiority of the new covenant that he first references in verse 6 but then spends these verses talking about. Therefore, this morning I want us to walk through his argument and see what this means for us. And let’s start where Paul starts as he stresses that the ministry of the new covenant is superior to the ministry of the old covenant.

The ministry of the new covenant is superior to the ministry of the old covenant

Now, if you don’t understand what is meant by “new” and “old” covenant, that’s okay, just hang with me, and I’ll try to explain. When the Lord brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, he made a covenant with them, meaning, he established terms for their relationship as he was to be their God, and they were to be his people. And the terms of the relationship were basically

this: God gave them commands and told them that if they obeyed these commands then they would be blessed and live, and if they disobeyed these commands then they would be cursed and die. That's a very simple explanation of the old covenant.

Now, in our text, Paul is going to reflect back on a moment in Exodus 32-34 as God was establishing this covenant with the Israelites, and he called Moses to come up onto Mount Sinai to meet with him and receive commandments for the people. God's glory was so all-consuming on that mountain that the Lord told Moses not to let any person or any animal come near it, lest they die from being exposed to the glory of God. Moses alone could go up. And as he did, the Lord gave him commandments for the people (Exod 34:10-11). And God's glory was so radiant there that when Moses came down to talk to the people—telling them God's commandments that he had given them as part of the covenant—his face shone with the glory.

That obviously sounds like quite a moment and quite a covenant if indeed Moses' face shone as he came down to speak with the people. And the basic gist of the covenant is clear—just obey all the commandments and you'll live. But here's the problem: the people were sinfully rebellious in their hearts, and these commandments did nothing to change their hearts or enable them to obey. Therefore, the covenant God made with the people on that day only served to reinforce the point again and again—as they fell short and disobeyed—that they were sinners, condemned and sentenced to death under the judgment of God. That's the old covenant that God made with the people through Moses.

But the story didn't end there. After Israel continually failed to obey God's commands and were judged—made to die in the wilderness or being driven from the promised land as an act of judgment—God told them through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel that he was going to make a new covenant with his people someday, better in every way from the old covenant that he made through Moses on that day at Mount Sinai (this is why the old covenant is called "old"). Combining the words of these two prophets, the Lord said, "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant . . . not like the covenant . . . that they broke. . . . I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to obey my rules" (Jer 31:31-32; Ezek 36:26-27). In other words, this new covenant wouldn't just be a list of commands written on tablets of stone that couldn't do anything to actually change your heart and help you obey, thereby only serving to condemn you and sentence you to death. Rather, the terms of this new covenant would consist of God giving the people his Spirit to dwell in him (causing them to obey his commands) and new hearts that would love God and want to obey him.

And when Jesus came, died for our sins, rose from the dead victoriously, and ascended back to the Father's right hand, he poured out the Spirit on his people, thus showing that this new covenant age had now come. From that time forward everyone who believes the gospel would know they were recipients of these new covenant promises of having new heart, the Spirit of God dwelling in them, and changed desires to want to obey God. That's what's true of us if indeed we've placed our faith in Christ. We all live under the blessings of this new covenant.

And Paul's point in verses 6-11 is that because he gets to minister under this new, more glorious, covenant—as he proclaims the gospel—his ministry is more glorious than that of Moses.

Paul compares these two covenants by calling the old one “the letter”—most likely because it was externally written commandments—and the new “the Spirit”—because it is exemplified by the Spirit's work of giving us life, changing us, and dwelling in us. That's why he writes in verse 6 that we are “ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” Then, in verse 7, he starts a series of comparisons between these two covenants that is marked by three “if” clauses, which we see in verses 7, 9, and 11. He writes, “Now *if* the ministry of death, carved in letters of stone, came with such a 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” (vv. 7-11).

Let's reflect on what he's saying. The reason he calls the old covenant a “ministry of death” and “ministry of condemnation,” “which was being brought to an end,” is because he is reminding us of why God gave this covenant of law with its many commands. God gave the law as a ministry. But its ministry wasn't to give life because—as we mentioned—no one had hearts equipped to obey it, and the law couldn't change their hearts. But its ministry was to show the people that they had no hope in themselves. Its purpose was to show them they were condemned and sentenced to death. Well, why call that a ministry?

The reason it's a ministry is because we're all tempted to trust in ourselves and our own works as being good enough. But God demands perfect righteousness, and none of us can achieve it. Anyone who relies on himself will be sorely disappointed at the judgement. And God knew that, so he sent his Son Jesus Christ to obey perfectly on our behalf so that we can place our faith in him and have his perfect righteousness credited to our account. That's how we're saved. But we might never be tempted to think we need Jesus if we think we're enough, right? That's where the ministry of the law comes in. By giving us command after command that must be obeyed perfectly, the law revealed we're utterly sinful, and therefore we're condemned before God and deserved to die. In other words, the law's ministry of death and condemnation was for the purpose of making sure we're not trying to rely on ourselves but instead will look to Jesus by faith as our only hope of righteousness. And so you can see why—though it sounds bad—that ministry of condemnation and death was indeed a ministry.

And Paul's point begins by noting that this very covenant, which was temporary (to be replaced by a new and better covenant to come), came with glory. That is, when Moses came down from the mountain to give the people God's commandments, his face shown with the glory of God. Therefore, his point is: if that covenant whose ministry was to condemn and sentence to death came with glory, then how much more glory do you think this new and better covenant that is brought about by the Spirit of God, brings righteousness and life, and is permanent has. Indeed,

in Paul's words in verse 10, "What once had glory [the old covenant] has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it [in the new covenant]." And that glorious new covenant is what Paul gets to tell people about—a covenant more glorious than Moses ever delivered to Israel. That's where Paul's argument begins, but he continues in verses 12-13 arguing that we should declare this glory boldly. We can say, because of Christ, we don't have to veil God's glory but can declare it boldly.

Because of Christ, we don't have to veil God's glory but can declare it boldly

In order to see what we mean here, let's continue to follow Paul's argument. Paul writes in verses 12-13, "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."

Here he's picking up on the simple fact that when Moses came down from the mountain, after speaking to the people, he put a veil over his face to shield the people from the glory of God that shone on him. After coming down from the mountain, he would go speak to God in a tent designated for meeting with God and unveil his face, but when he came out to speak to the people, after telling them God's commandments, he would veil his face again to shield them from the glory that shone on him. Why? He was protecting them.

Remember when Moses went up on the mountain, the Lord told the people not to approach the mountain, lest they die? Why would they die? It's because God is glorious and holy and the people are sinful and rebellious. This sinful people couldn't survive in the presence of a glorious and holy God. Moses himself could behold God's glory because he served as a special mediator for the people, but the people themselves couldn't. Even the glory that shone on Moses' face was more than the people could handle in a continuous fashion, lest they die. So Moses put a veil on his face. We might compare it to the veil in the temple that shielded the glory of God there. Only the high priest as a mediator could go in behind that veil, and if anyone else did they would die. So, the veil in the temple and the veil over Moses' face were protections to shield the sinful people from God's glory that would destroy them if they were exposed too long.

But Paul is saying that because God has brought about this new covenant with the Spirit, we no longer have to shield God's glory at all but "we are very bold," proclaiming his glory in the gospel to one another and to everyone we meet. But why can we proclaim God's glory now because aren't men as sinfully rebellious now as they were in Moses' day? Yes, indeed. But when you and I tell people that Jesus lived a perfect life, died for our sins, rose from the dead on the third day, and command them to repent and believe, the Spirit can—and often does—work through that gospel to actually enable them to obey what we're telling them. He'll give them eyes to see how glorious Jesus is and hearts that want to love and obey God. Do you see? The gospel does what the law couldn't do—change men on the inside, through the work of the Spirit. So we don't try to veil the glory of Christ, but we proclaim it boldly, trusting the Spirit to work powerfully so that men can see the glory of Christ and trust him, love him, and obey him. And

yet not all will see the glory we're declaring as we proclaim Christ in the gospel, which brings us to our third point.

Some hearts will be veiled to Christ's glory, but those who believe will see it

In verse 14 Paul reflects on why the Israelites couldn't behold the uninterrupted glory of God that was shining on Moses' face. He says, "Their minds were hardened." They were in sinful rebellion against God, so that their minds were hardened against understanding his purposes, ways, character, and plans. So Moses' face was veiled. But now, Paul notes, they continue to fail to see the glory of God when they read the Scriptures—even though they live in this time when God's new covenant promises are being poured out. Why?

Paul answers, writing, "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" (vv. 14-15). Now, did you notice that change? Where was the veil in Exodus 34? It was over Moses' face. Where is the veil in verse 15? It is "over their hearts." And it is only removed and taken away "through faith."

In other words, because unbelievers' minds and hearts are hardened against God, refusing to bow the knee to Jesus Christ, they can read the Old Testament again and again and never see the glory of God in it. A veil lies over their hearts, veiling the glory of God from them. And it will only be if they will bow the knee to Jesus Christ as Lord that they'll see the glory of God. To some, though we proclaim the glory of Christ in the gospel, they will not see it because their hearts are veiled through their sinful rebellion and refusal to repent.

However, others will know the freedom to gaze on Christ's glory in fullness. Paul writes in verse 16, "But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed." Now, if you have an ESV, you'll notice a footnote number 5 that if you go down tells you that in the Greek it reads "he." That is, verse 16 can be better translated, "But when *he* turns to the Lord, the veil is removed." And I actually think that's better because I think Paul is still playing on Moses here.

Moses would veil his face before the Israelites, but do you remember what he did when he went to meet with the Lord? Exodus 34:34 says, "Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out." In other words, when *he* (i.e. Moses) turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Paul is giving us a historical note. But I think the reason the ESV says "one" here is because they're rightly discerning that Paul is making a play on this. For it is also true of all of us who turn to the Lord in faith. When we do, the veil is removed. And who does this unveiling? Paul writes in verse 17, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." The Spirit who brings all the promises of the new covenant will do the work of removing that veil in our dead hearts so that we might see the glory of Christ and come to him. Some hearts will remain veiled when they hear the glory of the gospel of Christ, but others will experience the unveiling work of the Spirit, and they will see and believe. Isn't this what Luke was saying about Lydia in Acts 14:14 when he tells us, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul"? What a glorious reality we've

experienced if we know Christ—the unveiling of our hardened hearts by the Spirit. And yet there’s one more thing I want to add, as we behold Christ’s glory, we are transformed.

And as we behold Christ’s glory, we are transformed

Unlike the Israelites in Moses’ day, because the Spirit has unveiled our hearts so that we have new hearts, the indwelling Spirit, and the ability to love and obey God, we get to behold the glory of God in the face of Christ in an uninterrupted, continuous way. That’s what Paul celebrates in verse 18, writing, “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.”

In other words, just as Moses would glimpse God’s glory and be transformed so that his face shone, we get to behold Christ’s glory continuously as we look at his gospel and dwell in his presence continually, and as we do, we are being transformed into the glory that will be fully known and experienced by us when Christ returns.

You want to know why Paul is so bold about drawing attention to himself as a sufficient minister of good news to the Corinthians? It’s because he’s got a glorious ministry to proclaim, a glorious message to herald, and a glorious reality that we get to share in as the Spirit brings life to us in Christ. May we likewise find ourselves with great boldness as we hold up Christ—both to one another and to the unbelieving world—and behold his glory, in his presence, day-in and day-out until his comes. And may we thank him for that now as we come to the table. Amen.