



Gazing at Greater Glory

No. 9

2 Corinthians 3:7-18

Series: 2 Corinthians

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Text

[7] 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, [8] will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? [9] For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. [10] Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. [11] For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

[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. (ESV)

Introduction:

- Arouse Interest:
 - In an article entitled “Inflation of the American Superlative,” Jeffrey Steen describes an initial encounter he had in an American car dealership.
 - “In one example, a Volkswagen was touted as “super-premium.” With a sticky grin, a nearby car-hawker cheerfully explained that I had the option to upgrade to “super-premium-plus” or, for that matter, the clearly superior “ultimate.” It boggles the mind to think there was something beyond “ultimate,” but there was, as there needed to be, since Volkswagen had decided to begin their car lines with “premium” — the basic model.
 - There is something terrifying in this inflation of positives, comparatives, and superlatives. It is driven, in part, by the American obsession with “the best.” We have quickly learned, however, that in consumer-driven culture, marketing something

better than “the best” will do you one ... better. And what is better than best? Super-premium, I suppose.”¹

- According to Steen, the American customer is obsessed these days with finding products in superlative condition. We’re not okay with simply a good bottle of shampoo; we want the best kind of shampoo.
- And even though it can sometimes sound petty, it’s not always necessarily a bad thing to want. If you or a person you love is struggling with some physical disease, you’ll realize real quick that a good heart doctor is simply not good enough. You need the best cardiologist or the best oncologist. Frankly, there are a great deal of important aspects of our lives where good is simply not good enough.
- Surface Need:
 - When it comes to the condition of your soul, what’s the best spiritual care you can receive? When it comes to the most important questions in life-questions like where did I come from, what does it all mean, where do I go when I die, and how should I live in the meantime- where can we go to get the best quality of answers for questions like these?
 - Friend, whether you are a Christian or not, is it possible that you yourself, on matters like this, have found yourself settling for good answers instead of earnestly seeking out the very best?
 - My job this morning is to persuade everyone here that Jesus isn’t simply a good answer to life’s ultimate questions. My job is to do everything I can to persuade you that Jesus is the very best answer we have to the ultimate dilemmas of our lives.
- Orient to Text:
 - As we will see in our study of this text this morning, the Apostle Paul was dealing with a church that was starting to wonder whether or not Jesus was truly the best they could get.
 - During this time, many spiritual leaders were rising all around Corinth who were attempting to persuade the believers that their way to God, their path to enlightenment, was better than Paul’s way. And many within Corinth were tempted to believe them.
 - Here in our text this morning, Paul is not simply trying to defend his ministry. He is also trying to defend his message. And Paul’s argument against these false teachers in Corinth is very simple: **Jesus gives us the best relationship we can have with God.**
- Organizational Sentences:
 - Our text this morning is going to break into two parts. In verses 7-11, Paul is going to argue that Jesus gives us a better covenant. Then, in verses 12-18, Paul argues that Jesus gives us better clarity.

¹ Jeffrey Steen, “Inflation of the American Superlative,” *Medium*, 26 June 2016, <https://medium.com/@DeaconalChef/inflation-of-the-american-superlati,,ve-3ec38aa6217c>.

Better Covenant (7-11)

- Look with me again here starting in verse 7:
 - [7] 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, [8] will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?
- Now right away, this is a weird way for Paul to start. Right before this, in verses 1-6, Paul has been arguing that while his opponents may have physical letters of recommendation endorsing their ministries, Paul's own ministry has been endorsed by the Holy Spirit. Even though outwardly Paul looked weak, his reliance on God and faithful preaching of the gospel had been powerfully used by the Holy Spirit to bring many people, them included, to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.
- But here, Paul starts talking about Moses and the ministry of death. Why? This is a weird turn to make in his argument.
- We're not exactly sure about the details, but I think when we look at how these false teachers are described in other parts of 2 Corinthians, we can get a better sense of what Paul is after here. In 2 Corinthians 11:22, Paul argues that even if the Corinthians did compare his worldly credentials with the credentials of these pseudo-apostles, Paul's credentials would still demonstrate the superiority of his ministry. One of the ways that Paul proves his earthly credentials is by arguing that he is just as much of a Jew as they are. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:22:
 - [22] Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.
- Evidently, being a Jew brought some kind of credibility within the church in Corinth. You can see hints that some Corinthian Christians felt pressure to convert to Judaism in 1 Corinthians 7:18.
- Paul's strategy to defend his ministry, in light of these proud Jewish false teachers, is interesting to say the least. Not only does Paul affirm that he himself is every bit a Jew as they are, but here in our passage, Paul actually makes this bold claim that his ministry in Christ is actually a better ministry than the ministry of Moses in the Old Testament. And this is a strong thing for a respectable Jew to say.
- And to prove his point, Paul takes his readers all the way back to Exodus 34, at the inauguration of the Mosaic covenant. Specifically, Paul's comments here are kind of like a commentary on Exodus 34:29-34.
- A little bit of history here: in Exodus 19, God was, in a sense, physically meeting with his people at Mount Sinai for the first time since their deliverance from Egypt. His glory was on the mount, and as Moses went up to speak with the Lord, God gave him a covenant relationship to give to Israel. These were the terms and conditions for the relationship that God would have with his people. God's people would keep his law, and if they kept his law, God's presence would personally dwell in their midst. They would be set up in the promised land as a city on a hill.

An example to all the nations around them of what happens when God himself dwells with his people and they, in turn, love him and live in light of his wise rule.

- But if they failed to keep his law, if they disobeyed, God's judgment would fall on his people. They would be cursed, exiled, and die far from the presence of the Lord. This was the original covenantal terms given to Israel on Mount Sinai. And it was an amazing opportunity given to Israel. It was a good deal.
- But even as God was laying out the terms and conditions of this covenant, it became pretty clear that this wasn't actually going to work. As God was giving Moses these terms, the Israelites at the foot of the mountain were already getting into trouble. In Exodus 32, they actually built an idol and started worshipping a golden calf, claiming that this was the god who delivered them from slavery in Egypt.
- God was angry with his people. After everything he did for them, saving them, bringing them safely to this point where he would actually be with them, they betrayed him. It was like they cheated on their spouse on the day of their wedding. God was ready to wipe out the people of Israel entirely, but Moses stepped in and prayed and pleaded with God for mercy. And God did relent and spare his people.
- But by the time you get to Exodus 34, the relationship between God and his people is a little tense. God himself will no longer come out and be among his people. Instead, Moses goes into the presence of the Lord, and when he comes out, he carries the glory of the Lord in a mediated fashion in the midst of God's people. Exodus 34:29 says that Moses' face glowed as a result of his beholding the glory of God. Moses carried this glow in the midst of God's people.²
- And even this mediated glory is too much for the people of Israel. Moses actually has to wear a veil over his face to hide some of God's glory as he teaches God's people the Lord's commands.
- This is a far cry from God's original design. But this highlights the problem with the original Mosaic covenant. It wasn't that the terms and conditions that God had given were unfair. It was that God's people, like all people, were sinners. It's because inwardly all our hearts are naturally inclined to reject God and rebel against his authority. Because the Mosaic covenant couldn't change the hearts of a sinful people, it was doomed to failure from the start.
- But God didn't leave his people to despair. In passages like Jeremiah 31:31 and Ezekiel 36:22, God promises that one day, he would give his people a new covenant. He would permanently forgive all of their sins, and he would put his Spirit within his people, renewing their hearts and causing them to want to walk with him. And on that day, God would finally personally dwell in the midst of his people.
- Now, what does all of this have to do with Paul in 2 Corinthians? Well, Paul claims here in verse 8 to be a servant of the ministry of the Spirit. This is a reference to Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36. So as a minister of Christ, Paul is actually a minister of the New Covenant inaugurated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Luke 22:20).

² R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, Preaching the Word (Crossway Books, 2006).

- And as a minister of the New Covenant, Paul is actually claiming here that his ministry is better than the ministry of Moses. Why? Well, here in verses 7-11, Paul lists three reasons why the ministry of the Spirit is better or more glorious than the ministry of Moses.
- First, in verse 7, Paul argues that the ministry of Moses was actually a ministry of death carved in letters of stone. The letters of stone refer to the 10 Commandments God gave Moses on Mount Sinai. Now this is a little tricky. At the end of verse 7, it says that the glory on Moses' face was being brought to an end. This is a hard Greek word to translate. But I think the word is better understood as to nullify or disrupt. The glory on Moses' face was being hidden, nullified, or disrupted because Moses was constantly putting a veil on his face. The implication is that had Moses walked around unveiled, displaying the glory of God, the sinful Israelites around him would have died beholding God's glory.
- But the New Covenant, or the ministry of the Spirit, isn't like that. According to Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:6, the Spirit gives life. So if Moses' ministry that brought death was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry of the Spirit?
- Paul uses this same kind of logic in verses 9-11 as well. If there is glory in the ministry which brought condemnation, how much more glory must there be in the ministry which brings true righteousness to God's people? If the ministry which brought temporary benefits came in glory, how much more glorious will the ministry of the Spirit be, whose benefits last through eternity?

Application:

- Friend, if you're here today and you're thinking about what the Christian faith could mean for your life, one thing you should take away for today is that there are great benefits to the Christian life. It's not always easy to be a Christian, but there are benefits here which no other religion could possibly give you. Benefits which no other spiritual path even attempts to offer you.
 - While other religions try to teach us how to live, in Christ, God himself actually gives us new life. The Holy Spirit comes to change our hearts and give us new desires to love God and live rightly before him.
 - Other religions may teach you how to do some right things, but in Christ, God actually declares you to be righteous before him. Christ himself, through his life, death, and resurrection, pays the penalty for our sins and offers sinners like us the full benefits of his perfect life.
 - While other religions may offer some benefits for some seasons of our lives, in Christ, God offers us a restored relationship with him both now and for all eternity. As a matter of fact, every blessing God gives his people in Christ is given to us permanently.
- Brothers and sisters, if you are here and feel the temptation to wander and explore other paths or spiritualities, let me just remind you of all the benefits you actually have in Jesus Christ today.
 - You've been forgiven of all your sins. You've been given the perfect righteousness of Christ. You have the assurance that you are right with

God, and you have the hope that one day you will rise from the grave to be with God and his people in paradise forever.

- Are you sure you want to let all this go? I'm not saying you shouldn't read or study. I'm not saying you shouldn't look into other faiths or perspectives. But if you are sincerely considering abandoning Christ for some reason or another, you should seriously consider what it is you are leaving behind, and what you're leaving it behind for.
 - In Buddhism, there is no such thing as permanent happiness.
 - Islam has no place for assurance of salvation.
 - Atheism provides no hope of life beyond the grave.
- But Jesus offers all of these blessings and so much more.
- I get that none of this guarantees that Christianity is true, but it certainly seems worth finding out for yourself whether or not the claims of Christ are true or not. And we haven't even gotten to the best parts of this yet.

Better Clarity (12-18)

- As Paul continues his argument, Jesus not only gives his people a better covenant but here in verses 12-18, Paul also claims that Jesus gives his people better clarity on who God is as well.
- Paul writes in verse 12:
 - [12] Since we have such a hope, we are very bold,
- Again, Paul is contrasting his ministry with the ministry of Moses, who had to hide some aspects of God's glory for the good of his people. But Paul's ministry is different from Moses. Paul doesn't need to hold anything back.

Application

- I think this is important for us to consider in our personal evangelism. One of the reasons you and I are so often afraid to tell others about Jesus is that we haven't actually thought about just how good the good news we have really is.
- If Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, was giving out free MacBooks to anyone who would happen to come by, and you knew that your friend could be really helped by this, why wouldn't you tell them about it? Even if this person was a PC guy all the way, wouldn't the good news be good enough to persuade you to talk to them about it? Even if they did reject you, wouldn't their loss be on them for being stubborn and rejecting this offer?
- Friend, if you're a Christian here today, we should all remember we're offering people around us something way better than a simple laptop. We're giving people a chance to be right with God. To be forgiven of their sins. We're giving people the opportunity to trust in Christ for themselves, so that they can know that one day he will raise them up to be with him forever.

- We have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of when we are sharing the gospel with people. If they reject you for trying to share with them about this, that says a whole lot more about them than it does about you.
- By the way, the flip side of that coin, if you're here today and for some reason you find the good news of Jesus Christ appalling. If Jesus laying down his life out of love to save sinners somehow disturbs you for some reason, that honestly says a whole lot more about who you are than it does about who Jesus is.

Explain

- The apostle Paul addresses this kind of hardness of heart in verses 14-15.
- Picking up the contrast between the Old and the New Covenants, Paul points out that under the Old Covenant, not only was God estranged from his people, but God's people were also estranged from him. In verse 14, Paul states that the people of Israel had minds that were hardened. This isn't simply a state of ignorance. In the Old Testament, this kind of ignorance is a result of sin and rebellion. These people can't see God because deep down, they really don't want to see God.
- This is a similar condition to what Paul mentions in Romans 1:20-21 when he states that all creation clearly shows signs of God's existence, but the human heart prefers to be ignorant of God rather than acknowledge and submit to his authority.
- According to Paul, the Old Covenant was insufficient either to fully atone for our sins or address the deep-seated rebellion within our hearts. And because of these significant obstacles, God's people had always been kept at a distance from the presence of God.
- But the New Covenant is different. According to Paul in verse 16:
 - [16] But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.
- It's interesting how Paul's argument develops here. Verse 16 is a loose citation of Exodus 34:34, where Moses is said to have removed his veil when he turns to away from the people to commune with the Lord.
- But here in this context, Paul seems to be saying that when we turn to Christ, the veil on our hearts is removed, and we have the same uninhibited access to God as Moses did in the Tabernacle.
- This idea is further supported in Paul's usage of the title Lord. In the Jewish mindset, it was disrespectful to ever speak God's proper name YHWH. Instead, whenever they would read Bible verses that contained God's proper name, they would replace his name with the title Adonai, which is the Hebrew word for Lord. And then when the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the Septuagint actually replaced YHWH with the Greek word kurios, the Greek title for Lord.
- So in verse 17 when Paul calls the Holy Spirit the Lord, he's actually calling the Holy Spirit YHWH. The Holy Spirit is the same God whom Moses communed with face to face on Mount Sinai. And in the New Covenant, that same God now resides in you, in the midst of all of God's people.
- Let's take a peek at 2 Corinthians 4:5. Here Jesus is called Lord or YHWH. And how does the Holy Spirit relate to Christ? Verse 6:

- [6] For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
- According to Paul, the Holy Spirit regenerates our affections and gives us new hearts so that we can see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Application

- This is a passage where trinitarian theology is important. As orthodox Christians, we confess that there is one God, but that this one God exists in three distinct persons. And while each person is distinct from the other, all three persons are truly this one God.
- I don’t fully understand how this works. I have Bible verses to support each of these propositions, but I can’t fully wrap my mind around all this.
- But here in 2 Corinthians, I think you can start to see why the doctrine of the Trinity is so important. What's the benefit of knowing that the Son and the Spirit are the same YHWH that Moses encountered on Sinai?
- Well, it means that those of us who have turned to Christ and have received the Holy Spirit have the same access to God that Moses had when he went up the mountain.
- And for Paul, this is the greatest benefit of his gospel. Jesus not only gives us a better covenant with God, but he also gives us greater clarity on who God is. He gives us the same immediate access to the glory of God as Moses himself had.
- Paul emphasizes in verse 17:
 - [17] Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.
- What kind of freedom is Paul talking about? The freedom to know God without any obstacles standing in the way. Verse 18:
 - [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.
- Friends, this has massive implications for everyone in this room today. Whoever you are, wherever you’re at right now, you can meet God for yourself. It doesn’t matter whether you have a GED or a PhD, because Jesus Christ has paid our debt and provided for our righteousness; you and I can actually have a personal relationship with God. When we encounter God through the preaching of Christ and the power of the Spirit, we are doing something that the saints of the Old Testament could only dream of doing. We are communing with God with unveiled faces.
- And according to Paul in verse 18, those who behold God are being transformed to be like God.
- Now I know that this was a very heady and academic sermon today. So let me bring this down with some practical applications for us this morning.

- Beloved, do you want to grow in your sanctification this morning? Do you want to become the godly man or woman the Lord wants you to be this morning? Let me tell you how to get there: spend time with God.
- This is what Paul is saying.
 - Do you want to grow to be a more patient father? Spend time with your heavenly Father.
 - Do you want to grow in diligence at your job? Spend time with Christ and see how diligent he was in his ministerial tasks.
 - Do you want to grow in your prayer life? Spend time with Jesus and consider how he's always interceding on behalf of his people.
 - Do you want to grow in your fight against sexual sin? Spend time with Christ and see how he selflessly pursues a faithless and adulterous bride.
 - Do you want to grow in your courage and confidence in God? Spend time meditating on how many times God came through for his people despite impossible circumstances all throughout the Bible.
 - Do you want to grow in your contentment in life? Friend, spend time being in the love of God. Spend time at church hearing the gospel preached to you. Spend time preaching the gospel to the people around you. Spend time in God's Word meditating on the fact that God loves us and sent Christ to die for us, even when he knew we deserved it the least. Get this stuff deep down inside you.
- Brothers and sisters, in our pragmatic culture, we so quickly run to practical tips for our sanctification needs. But according to Paul, God's people primarily grow when we get to know him. When we spend time enjoying him.
- When the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to the majesty of God, we want to know him better. We want to love him better. We want to serve him better, because we become convinced that our Lord and Savior truly is the best Lord and Savior. That's how we grow as Christians.
- That's how we are able to overcome sin without at the same time falling into pride. Because at the end of the day, this isn't about us. It's gotta be about him.
- This is also amazing news for anyone here today who feels lost, who feels guilty, who feels as far as they possibly can feel from the presence of the Lord today. Friends, the good news of the gospel is that you don't have to clean up your life before you can come to Jesus today.
- Other religions may have hoops you need to jump through or standards you need to meet, but for Christians Jesus has already died the death that we deserve. He has already provided the righteousness that we need. For those who trust him, Christ has already secured our right standing before his Father forever.
- And now all Christ says to you is, Come!
 - Matthew 11:28–30 [28] Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. [29] Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (ESV)

- Friend, I don't know who you are or what you're going through, but I can tell you this: Jesus promises to give rest to everyone who will come to him. And if you want to come to the Lord today, he will have you just the way you are. And the more you spend time with Jesus, the more you will love Jesus. And the more you love Jesus, the more you'll want to be like Jesus.
- And even after a lifetime of following Jesus, there will still be so much more to learn and experience about him. The NASB translates "beholding" in verse 18 as "looking as in a mirror." Meaning that as good as this relationship with God is now, this is still not the perfect relationship God's people are supposed to have with him. Paul himself says in 1 Corinthians 13:12:
 - [12] For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.
- Friends, not only does Jesus give us the best relationship we could have with God, but according to this text, he has so much more to give. And if you're bored with God today, that probably means you haven't been spending as much time with God as you need to. There is so much more to know about God. More joys, more assurance, more wonder, more majesty to behold.
- And there's so much more transformation that can happen to us as we continue to behold the Lord today. You never know just how much the Lord can do in your life. You should never stop seeking and asking the Lord to do more.
- One day not only will we behold the Lord with unveiled faces, but Christ himself will look upon us face to face as well. And on that day you and I will be radically transformed into his image. We will fully reflect the glory of Christ because according to 1 John 3:2, we will see him as he is.
- I want you to get to know this Jesus. I want you to stick with this Jesus, not because I think my opinions are better than anyone else's, but because I sincerely believe that Jesus Christ is the best Lord and Savior any one of us could possibly have.