

“THE GLORIOUS GOSPEL” (2 Corinthians 3:7-18)

I never ceased to be amazed at the times we live in compared to all of human history. I often tell my kids how different the world they grew up is different than the one I grew up, and the world I grew up in was remarkably different than the one my parents and grandparents grew up in. One example is communication. For much of human history, communication was mostly done through messengers, and depending on the distance between two people, it could take days, weeks, or months for a message to get through to someone. A big game-changer in communication came in the 1860s with the invention of the telegraph. For the first time in history you could send a long-distance message across wires to someone in a matter of minutes. Telegraphs eventually faded from the scene when Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in the late 1800s which made it possible to communicate verbally to someone from long distance. Believe it or not, phones did not become common in homes until around 1950 or so.

When I was growing up our phone was on a party line. Anyone remember those? We shared a phone line with the neighbors up the road, and when the phone rang, we'd wait to see if it rang once, which meant it was a call for the neighbor, or if it made two quick rings it meant it was for us. If you happened to pick up the phone when your neighbor was talking, you might hear something you weren't supposed to hear, and vice-versa. Party lines were pretty archaic, but they beat sending a telegraph.

Everyone today, of course, has a personal cell phone they carry around with them everywhere they go, and for the first time in history you can not only talk to or text someone, but you can have a live face-to-face video chat. When I want to see the grandkids down in Australia, all I have to do is click a button. We're used this now, but this technology has only been around since about 2010.

The point I make in all this is that no one today sends a telegraph anymore, no one is on a party line anymore, and no one even has a flip phone. Anyone have a flip phone? When something bigger, better, and superior comes along, you wouldn't consider for a second going back to what was inferior. This brings us to our passage today in 2 Corinthians 3 where the Apostle Paul compares the old covenant of law to the new covenant of grace. One of Paul's big concerns in writing 2 Corinthians was that Jewish teachers had come into the church at Corinth after He left and were teaching people that you are saved not only by trusting in Christ, but by keeping the Jewish law of the Old Testament. Paul will argue that as great as the old covenant was in its time, it has been superseded by the new covenant.

The old covenant was defined by the set of laws God gave the people of Israel through Moses, which are summarized in the Ten Commandments. Altogether there were 613 laws, covering the moral, civil, and ceremonial aspects of Israel's life. The law was a glorious revelation of who God was and what He wanted His people to be. The problem was: No one could live up to the law, and Deuteronomy 27:26 said, “Anyone who does not do everything written in the Book of Law is cursed.”

The purpose of the law, Paul explains in Romans and Galatians, was to show us our sinful condition and how far short of God's glory we fall, and then drive us to Christ as our only hope of salvation. Christ is our only hope because He was the only person to fulfill the righteous demands of the law, and was the only one qualified to pay the penalty for our sin. When we trust Him to as our Savior, He forgives us of all our sin and accepts us as righteous in Christ. This is the new covenant, this is the gospel, and given all that it provides, why would you ever want to go back under the law?

Today we're going to look at 2 Corinthians 3:7-18, and in order to understand what Paul says in these verses, we first have to understand what happened in Exodus 32-34, because everything Paul says in these verses is based on the events of these chapters. After leading Israel out of Egypt, God brought them to Mt. Sinai where He gave them the law, and after promising to keep all that was in the law, the people very quickly broke their promise by worshipping the golden calf. Moses was so angry with the people that he threw the stone tablets of the law down, dashing them to pieces. God was also angry and declared to Moses that He was about to destroy Israel for their transgression. But when Moses interceded for his people, God relented.

But the consequence of their sin still lingered, and one of the consequences was that God's presence would no longer be with them. Moses knew he needed God's presence to be with him as he led the people, so he asked God to show him His glory... "Lord, let me see you so that I know you're with me." God is spirit and one of the primary ways He manifested His presence or His glory was by radiant, inapproachable light. Jewish rabbis called this the shekinah glory of God, whereby God revealed His divine glory on earth.

God said, "I will pass in front of you, but you cannot see my face." In other words, you can't see my full glory. To see the full glory of God would be like looking directly at the sun – it's too much – it would not only blind Moses, but kill him. God took Moses back up Mt. Sinai to receive two new stone tablets replacements of the law, and while he was there, God placed him in the cleft of a rock and passed by Him in His glory. His hand shielded Moses from seeing all of His glory, but Moses was allowed to see the afterglow.

When Moses came down off the mountain with the new tablets of the law – unbeknownst to him – his face was glowing from being in the presence of God. When the people saw Moses' glowing face, they were afraid to go near him lest they die from exposure to God's glory, so Moses put a veil over his face.

All this background helps us understand what Paul is now going to say in 2 Corinthians 3. In a nutshell he says that Moses' ministry of the old covenant – as great as it was – could not provide Israel immediate and continual access to the glorious presence of God. But, Paul's ministry, and our ministry today of the new covenant, does. When we understand the full ramifications of the new covenant, we will never want to go back to the old.

Our passage in 3:7-18 is packed with some pretty deep theology, and is divided into two sections. In verses 7-11 Paul describes three ways the new covenant is superior to the old covenant, and then in verses 12-18 he reveals four life-changing effects of living under the new covenant. Are you ready? Here we go.

In verses 7-11 we read... "Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!"

The word that stands out in these verses is the word "glory," used ten times. Glory is a word we use often in church, but is hard to define humanly exactly what it is. The Hebrew word for glory – *kabod* – was used to describe the weight or heaviness of something. If two items were put on scales, the one that weighed more was said to have more importance and value.

The old covenant under Moses was glorious and weighty – it was important because it was the revelation of God to man – and the giving of the law was accompanied by thunder and lightning and smoke and the shaking of the earth – all of which heightened the importance and weightiness of what was happening.

Paul argues that as glorious as the old covenant was, the new covenant is vastly more glorious in three ways. The first is that **it brings life through the Spirit**. He refers to the old covenant as the “ministry that brings death.” The law brought death because, like a mirror, it showed us who we really are – inside and out – and how far short of God’s holy standards we fall – and that the penalty for falling short of God’s glory, as Romans 6:23 says, is death.

Since the law leads to death it is foolish to depend on keeping the law for salvation because no one can live up to it. Galatians 3:10 says, For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” The book of James says that if you stumble and break one law, you are guilty of breaking all of the law, and breaking any of the law places you under the curse of death. This is why Paul calls the law “the ministry of death.”

The new covenant, in contrast, is characterized by the life of the Spirit. Back in verse 6 Paul said, “The letter of the law kills, but the Spirit gives life.” The problem was never the law – it was holy, righteous, and good – the problem was our inability to keep the law. The law could tell us what we must do, but it couldn’t give us the power or ability to keep it. To obey God we need supernatural enablement – we need a new heart – we need new life.

Remember when Nicodemus came to Jesus at night? He asked, “What must I do to enter the kingdom of God?” Jesus said, “You must be born again – you need the Spirit of the living God to come into your life and make you a new person.” Many people say they are Christians, but the evidence that someone is truly saved is the presence of the Holy Spirit in their life. When we’re born again, the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and gives us the power and desire to please God. We obey Him not because we have to, but because we want to. The Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives opens our eyes to the folly of sin and the wisdom of obeying God. The Holy Spirit gives us the power and enablement to obey God that we never had prior to being born again, which is why Paul says, “The law brings death, but the Spirit brings life.”

The second way the new covenant is superior is that **it brings righteousness**. Verse 9 says, “If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!” The law brings condemnation. Condemnation is what happens at the end of a trial and the jury declares the defendant guilty and the judge pronounces their punishment.

The Bible says that every person stands condemned before God because they have sinned and fallen short of His glory. Someone may protest their innocence and say, “I’ve done a few bad things – I’m not perfect – but I’m basically good.” One of the purposes of the law was to serve as a measuring stick – to give us the holy standard God expected – and to show us how far short of that standard we fall. Jesus went even deeper when He said that the standard is not just what we do outwardly, but it’s also the thoughts and motives of our heart. It’s a standard that even the best of us cannot live up to, and as James says, even one speck of sin on our record is enough to declare us guilty and condemn us to death.

The new covenant, in contrast, brings righteousness. Righteousness is standing before God, being declared “not guilty,” and being released from the penalty of sin. The only possible way we can be declared righteous is have someone be righteous in our place.

2 Corinthians 5:21 is one of the most important verses of the Bible, and it says... “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” D. James Kennedy, the well-known pastor, says he was converted at age 23 when he heard a preacher on the radio ask a question. The question was: “Suppose you were to die today and stand before God, and He were to ask you, “What right do you have to enter into my heaven – what would you say?”

Nine out of ten people would give an old covenant answer: Because I did my best, or I was mostly good. The problem with that answer is that none of us are perfectly righteous to stand before God. The only right we have to enter heaven is being made righteous by Christ. On the cross Jesus took my sin and your sin upon Himself and bore the penalty of sin for us – so that when we trust Him as our Savior, we are forgiven of all our sin and declared righteous and acceptable to God.

But that’s not all. The new covenant, number three, is more glorious than the old covenant in that **it is permanent.** Verses 10-11 says, “For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!”

Paul’s point is that the old covenant served an important purpose, and once that purpose was fulfilled, it was no longer needed. The old covenant was glorious in that it pointed us to Jesus. All the sacrifices God required of His people under the old covenant pictured Jesus – they taught the people that in order to be right with God a sacrifice for sin was required – all of which pointed to the perfect sacrifice of Christ. All of the moral laws of the old covenant – all the “thou shalt nots” – pointed to Jesus who perfectly fulfilled the law on our behalf. Once Jesus came and fulfilled the law, the old covenant was no longer needed.

Hebrews 10:1a says, “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.” Relying on the law for salvation is like having a video chat with someone, and they’re standing right next to you. The law is just a shadow of more glorious things to come – Jesus is the reality to which the law pointed.

Again, Paul makes the point that there was nothing wrong with the law – the law was glorious – it was God’s revelation to us of who He was and what He wanted us to do – but it’s main purpose was to show us our need for a Savior and point us to Jesus. Once Jesus came on the scene, the law faded in its glory. It’s like when you turn on a flashlight at night – it fills the room with light – but when the sun comes up, the light of the flashlight fades to the point you don’t even know it’s on. The glory of the new covenant – the glory of Christ is so glorious that the old covenant, in comparison, has no glory at all.

After describing all the ways the new covenant is more glorious than the old, in verses 12-18 Paul now lays out the amazing effects the new covenant has on our lives. Let’s read this whole section and then unpack what it means... “Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Paul identifies four effects of the new covenant. First, **it makes us bold**. Unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people from being destroyed by God's glory – Paul, as an apostle of Christ, shared the gospel of Christ openly and unabashedly because it offered people life and forgiveness. In Romans 1:16 Paul said, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.”

I was talking to my son Matt a few weeks ago, and every time I talk to him, he tells me some new opportunity he's had to share the gospel with people in Australia. He's a true-blue evangelist, ready and willing to talk to people anytime, anywhere. I said, “What advice or tips would you give people about evangelism. How do you start conversations?” In so many words he said, “I don't have any tips – I just wake up every morning thankful that I'm not dead or in jail and overwhelmed by God's mercy to me – that talking about Christ is natural – He loved me so greatly that I can't help but share that love with others.”

I think of the twelve disciples who cowered in fear when Jesus was crucified, but when they saw Jesus' risen and were filled with the Holy Spirit, they became evangelistic dynamos. They took off their veil of fear and let the glory of Christ shine through them. Once we've received the light, we are to shine the light of Christ to the world with boldness and confidence.

The second effect of the new covenant on our lives, and we will talk more about this next week, is that **it removes the veil of unbelief**. Paul was dumbfounded that so many of his fellow Jews had not turned to Christ after hearing the good news of the gospel. Listen again to verses 14-16... “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” (ESV).

If anyone should have been overjoyed to hear the gospel, it would be Jewish people who for so long had had lived under the burden of all the law demanded. Now that Jesus, the light of the world, has come, how could they not see it? How could they still live under the old covenant when a much more glorious way had come? The reason is that their minds and hearts were hardened. It wasn't because they couldn't understand the gospel intellectually, it was because they willfully and stubbornly resisted any way of salvation that called for them to admit they were sinners, repent, and trust in Christ instead of themselves.

Paul himself had once been hardened. He was fully immersed in an old covenant life, believing that he was made righteous in God's eyes by his devout adherence to the law. He saw no need for salvation, and was so wrapped up in his own glory that He could not see the glorious gospel of Christ. But the veil was lifted from his eyes when on the road to Damascus he was knocked to the ground and a light from heaven blinded him. God shook his world, caused him to see the light, and Paul was transformed.

The only way the veil of unbelief can be removed is through Christ. You might pray for someone for years and years to be saved and nothing happens – and then one day it does. The light of Christ breaks through. Verse 16 says, “When one turns to the Lord, the veil is lifted.” Turning speaks of repentance – where one turns from sin and turns to Christ. Whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

The third effect of the new covenant is **freedom from the bondage of the law**. Verse 17 says, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” When you trust Christ as your Savior, the Spirit of the Lord comes to live in you and gives you spiritual life. You are free from striving to obey the law in order to be declared righteous by God. Because Christ became our righteousness, we are declared righteous in Him. And we are free from condemnation, because through Christ we have been declared “not guilty.”

This doesn't mean we are free to live however we want. The new covenant does not do away with the moral standards of God's law – He still doesn't want us to steal or lie or covet or commit adultery – what's different now is that we have the power of the Holy Spirit live a life that is pleasing to God.

The fourth effect of the new covenant is **daily transformation**. Verse 18 says, “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” This verse is deep and profound.

Moses wore a veil to protect the people from being destroyed by God's glory, but when he met with the Lord alone, he removed his veil and spoke with the Lord face to face. In the same way, because of the new covenant, we can behold God's glory without being destroyed. Christ has lifted the veil of sin and darkness that keeps us from seeing God, and now – like Moses – when we behold the glory of God, we glow. Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

What's more, Paul says, is as we are exposed to the Lord's glory, we are transformed into His image. In other words, as we grow in our faith – as we read God's Word and mediate on what it says, as we pray and commune with the Lord, as we gather together as believers to worship and build into each other's lives – we change – we become more like Christ. That's the grand goal of salvation – it's not just to save us from hell, but to change and transform us into the image and likeness of Christ – something the old covenant could never do.

Salvation is really about God restoring what was lost at the fall. We are made in God's image, but His image in us was marred when Adam and Eve fell into sin. But now through the new covenant, God's image in us is being restored.

Don't miss the little phrase, “We are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory.” The literally Greek wording is “we are being transformed from glory to glory.” What does that mean? It means that the Christian life gets more and more glorious each passing day. The phrase “glory to glory” encompasses our entire Christian life, beginning the day we are saved and the veil is lifted and we see the glory of God. Glory continues each day as we learn more about Christ, as we are more and more set apart from sin, and as the Holy Spirit transforms us to look like Christ. But, as they say, we ain't seen nothing yet! The final stage of glory awaits us in heaven when we will see Christ face to face and become just like him.

What a passage, huh? I don't know that I've ever preached a more challenging and profound chapter as 2 Corinthians 3. It has used every neuron in my brain try and comprehend and there's no way to humanly unpack all that is in this chapter, but I hope you get the big picture, and that is to appreciate, relish, and run to the new covenant – and never go back to the old.

Through Christ you have been set free from the burden of keeping the law, and because He fulfilled the law on your behalf you are no longer condemned in your sin, but made righteous in God's eyes. When you trust in Christ, the veil is lifted and you see through spiritual eyes how God wants you to live – and with the power of the Holy Spirit living within you, you are enabled to live the life God wants – and the life God gives you just keeps getting better and better as you come to know Christ better, until one day you will see the full glory of God and be just like Christ. And it doesn't get any better than that!