

The Glory of the Gospel
A Christmas Meditation from 2 Corinthians 3

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Text¹ & Notes

¹Do we begin again to commend² ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation³ to you, or letters of commendation from you?

²Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men:⁴

³Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.⁵

⁴And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward:

⁵Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God;

⁶Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.

⁷But if the ministration of death,⁶ written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance;⁷ which glory was to be done away:

⁸How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?

⁹For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness⁸ exceed in glory.

¹⁰For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth.⁹

¹¹For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious.

¹²Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech:

¹³And not as Moses, which put a veil over his face,¹⁰ that the children of Israel could not steadfastly look to the end of that which is abolished:

¹ Scripture text is from the King James Version.

² The context is Paul's competence as a minister (cf. 2 Cor. 2:16). In 2 Cor. 3 he explains that the nature of the gospel ministry itself is a source of confidence.

³ This is an allusion to the custom of sending letters of recommendation from one church to another (cf. Rom. 16:1-2).

⁴ Paul and his companions needed no letter of recommendation; the existence of the Corinthian church bore witness to his authority and character as an apostle.

⁵ This allusion to the Ten Commandments inscribed on stone tablets ushers in a comparison/contrast between the old and new covenants. Paul's statement is probably based on the language of Jer. 31:31-34: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts" (v. 33).

⁶ On the law as an agent of spiritual death, see Rom. 7:7-13.

⁷ Paul is reflecting on the phenomenon narrated in Exod. 34:29-35.

⁸ The giving of the law brought about a judicial condemnation of sin. Conversely, the entrance of the gospel confers righteousness—not that we are made "good," but that we are united with Christ and given God's full acceptance in Him (cf. Rom. 1:16-17; Eph. 1:6).

⁹ According to Murray J. Harris, "So pronounced is the contrast between the two economies or dispensations that what once was rightly considered resplendent now appears scarcely resplendent at all (v. 10). "If the sun is up, the brightness of the moon is no longer bright" (M. Zerwick), or as J. A. Bengel long ago expressed it, "The greater light obscures the lesser."

¹⁰ Murray J. Harris notes that "Paul deduced that the reason for Moses's veiling or masking his face was not so much to prevent the Israelites from being dazzled by its brightness (cf. Exod 34:30, 31) as to prevent them from continuing to gaze in amazement till his face had totally lost the brilliance of the reflected glory (cf. v. 7). He was attempting to teach them, Paul implies, that the newly established order

¹⁴But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament;¹¹ which veil is done away in Christ.

¹⁵But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart.

¹⁶Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away.

¹⁷Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

¹⁸But 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 Superiority of the New Covenant

Paul's references in 2 Corinthians 3 to the old and new covenants (i.e., law and gospel) calls for a comparison between the two.

<u>Old covenant (14)</u>	<u>New covenant (6)</u>
Letter (6)	Spirit (6, 17-18) ¹²
Death (6)	Life (6)
Ministry of death (8)	Ministry of the Spirit (7)
Tablets of stone (3, 7)	Tablets of flesh (3)
Glory (7-11)	Greater glory (8-11)
Ministry of condemnation (9)	Ministry of righteousness (9)
Temporary (7, 11)	Enduring (11)
Veiled communication (13)	Clear communication (12)
Blindness (14-15)	Clear sight (14, 16-18)

The Correlation with Christmas

The relationship of this passage to the Incarnation is made clear in John 1:17: "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." The new covenant came through the death of Christ,¹³ which necessitated his birth.

The Incarnation is the foundational principle of the Christian faith. To be sure, our salvation rests on the historical reality of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1ff). The resurrection was indeed miraculous, and the sacrificial death unparalleled in human history. These events would seem incredible were it not for the miracle of the Incarnation.

God became man! God's plan for our deliverance required Jesus to take human form. He was born to die. All of the blessings that we know in the age of grace were made possible by the birth of the Messiah,

was destined to be eclipsed and pass away." According to Harris, "Moses' laudable attempt was however, unsuccessful; instead of recognizing the significance of the fading glory, the Israelites became dulled in their powers of perception. Paul finds evidence of this spiritual insensitivity in the fact that down to his own day, when the old covenant (= the OT) was read in the synagogue or the Torah studied, the ability of the Jews to recognize the impermanence of the Mosaic order was impaired. A 'veil' covered their hearts comparable to the veil that covered Moses's face. Paul could call it the 'same' veil, because in both cases a veil prevented vision, whether physical or spiritual, or because it was identical to the veil of ignorance about the transitory nature of the Mosaic economy covering the hearts of the contemporaries of Moses."

¹¹ This is the only biblical reference to the "Old Testament." The phrase refers to the law as a system governing human relations with God. It is only as this system is unveiled in written form that the "Old Testament" may be equated with the Hebrew Scriptures. Strictly speaking, it is the Law of Moses—not 39 books—that is in view (cf. v. 15).

¹² While the letter is a code, the Spirit is a relationship.

¹³ The new covenant is consistently associated with the blood of Christ (Matt. 26:28; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 9:13-15).

Jesus. The invalidation of the law and the proclamation of the gospel—good news—in its place. A personal relationship with God rather than a mere list of ceremonial and moral regulations. The assurance of unconditional forgiveness for individual moral failures. The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Knowledge of God and transformation into His image. Freedom from sin and self. Clear insight into spiritual things.

Jesus' birth was a glorious event—foretold by prophets, announced by angels, attended by widely varying representatives of the human race, and noticed by royalty. Glorious as his advent was, the effects of his life, death, and resurrection are still more glorious.

So What?

- Believe the gospel
- Share the gospel
- Praise God for the grace that He initiated in the Incarnation
- Submit to the Holy Spirit and change
- Pray for God's glory to be seen in your heart, family, and church

Work Cited

Harris, Murray J. "2 Corinthians." The Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament. Ed. Frank E. Gaebelin. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976-92. Zondervan NIV Study Bible Library. CD-ROM. Vers. 2.8. Zondervan, 2001.