

The Glory and the Paradox

2 Corinthians 3:12 – 4:6

Turn to 2 Corinthians 3, please. Our sermon today is about glory. The Bible speaks of glory often; here's a Jesus story about glory. Jesus took Peter, James and John to a high mountain, and he was changed in front of them. It says in Matthew that Jesus' face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

Luke says his face changed, and his clothes were like a flash of lightning. And in Luke it says Peter and the others saw Jesus' glory. And later they came down the mountain, and by then Jesus looked like ordinary Jesus again. It was the same Jesus, but in normal life his glory was hidden. But for a short time they saw Jesus in his glory.

Our text today is 2 Corinthians 3:12 – 4:6. It is two paragraphs, one to the end of chapter 3, and then one beginning chapter 4. These paragraphs are quite parallel, in some ways the second repeats the first, although I did not know that when I divided up 2 Corinthians.

Each paragraph ends with a strong statement about glory, the in 2 Cor 3 more about *Christ's* glory, and in 2 Cor 4 more about *God's* glory. We will begin by going over the end of these two paragraphs.

3:18 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.

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory. "We all" here shows us that Paul is not just speaking about apostles, he means all believers, including the Corinthian Christians. A "veil" in 2 Corinthians is anything that stops people from seeing the Lord's glory.

All believers contemplate the Lord's glory with unveiled faces. What is this glory of the Lord that we all see and contemplate? It sounds like some kind of spiritual vision or dream, where we see what the disciples saw on the mountain. But neither 1st nor 2nd Corinthians talk about visions, it cannot mean that every Corinthian believer had those experiences.

The contrast in gazing at the Lord's glory is with unbelievers. They don't see the glory of Christ. All believers see it and contemplate it, but unbelievers have a veil on their hearts (3:15), and their minds are blinded (4:4), so they can't see the light. But what is the light, the glory we see?

I will tell you a story you know. I will read to you a paragraph; for most of you there's nothing in this paragraph that you don't already know.

God sent his Son Jesus, born of a woman. Jesus served and obeyed God, he was arrested, and he suffered much and was deeply humiliated, and he died for our sins. He was buried, but God raised him on the third day, and gave him all authority in heaven and on earth. That's why we call him "Lord." And for forty days he was seen repeatedly by his followers, and then he was taken up to God. He is there now, with scars in his hands and his feet, and he is also with us every day, the Holy Spirit brings him to us. And when God is ready, Jesus will come back, the dead in Christ will be raised, and we will all be with the Lord forever. End of story.

You know this story. Every Corinthian believer knew that story. Believers everywhere know that story, then and now. It is also called "the gospel." That is the most important story that exists on this planet. If any human was to know only one story, for everyone is the same, that's the story.

That story IS Christ's glory. That story makes Christ glorious. And IF we know that story, and we know it is real, and that it's the most important story, and if that story guides us and shapes our lives, THEN with unveiled faces, we are contemplating the Lord's glory, we are soaking ourselves in his glory, retelling this gospel to each other, and using it to make sense of things.

3:18 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.

We all ... are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory. Here is what Christ did: Christ obeyed God and he served God, and he suffered, because he knew God would raise him from the dead and honour him. We are being transformed into his image.

Seeing the light of the gospel story, and making that story the most important thing not about only Jesus' life but also our lives, that changes us. And WE become people who obey God and serve God and suffer, because we know God will raise us and honour us.

We become more like Christ. And as that story, is Christ's glory, we also become more glorious ourselves, because we become more like him. *We are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory.* And this slow but glorious change in us comes from the Holy Spirit.

Let's review the gospel story: God sent his Son Jesus, born of a woman. Jesus served and obeyed God, he was arrested, and he suffered much and was deeply humiliated, and he died for our sins. He was buried, but God raised him on the third day, and gave him all authority in heaven and on earth. That's why he's "Lord." And for forty days he was seen repeatedly by his followers, and then he was taken up to God. He is there now, with scars in his hands and his feet, and he is also with us every day, brought to us by the Holy Spirit. And when God is ready, Jesus will come back, then the dead in Christ will be raised, and we will all be with the Lord forever. That's the gospel that the apostles announced.

Let's read 2 Cor 3:12-18, the whole paragraph, and then we'll move to the second paragraph. Remember that a veil is something that hides God's glory.

3:12 *Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.* ¹³ *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.* ¹⁴ *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.* ¹⁵ *Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.* ¹⁶ *But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.* ¹⁷ *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom [from the veil].* ¹⁸ *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.*

The paragraph is built on rather flexibly on Exodus 34:29-35 - *When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.* ³⁰ *When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him.* ³¹ *But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them.* ³² *Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai.*

³³ *When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face.* ³⁴ *But whenever he entered the Lord's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded,* ³⁵ *they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord.*

For Paul, the Jews still in his own day have the same veil on their hearts. The veil blocks the glory of God. If the Jews would read Moses without the veil, they would see that in Christ we find the lasting glory of God. As Moses took the veil off when he went to speak to the Lord, so believers in Christ can see the glory of Christ (and of God). Paul had this veil on his own heart for a long time.

Let's go to the end of our second paragraph, 4:4-6. 4:4 *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

It says here that Christ is the image of God. Here's how it works. In the Bible, God himself is invisible. He is spirit, not physical material, cannot be seen. When John in Revelation sees God's throne, he does not see any shape on it, just colours and lights.

If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus. Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Col 1:15. In the beginning of Hebrews it says Jesus is the exact representation of God's being. The exact representation. We tend to think that Jesus is a little different than God the Father, Jesus the Son is more like *this*, and God the Father is more like *that*.

This is *always* a mistake. To the NT writers, it is naïve and foolish to think we could imagine a more accurate picture of God than what we get by learning about Jesus the Son. We all do it, I do it, it's plain wrong. Christ is the image of the invisible God, the exact representation of his being.

Let's read 4:6 again. *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

“The gospel.” That’s that short Jesus story we’ve been talking about. Unbelievers cannot see “the light of the gospel,” they cannot see that this story is even true, much less the most important story on this earth. That story is “the light of the gospel, that displays the glory of Christ.”

This repeats what we talked about in 3:18, that the gospel story is what we all gaze at, and that story is the glory of Christ that we all see. And 4:6 ends, “who is the image of God.” This story turns out not only to be *Christ’s* glory, this story is also *God’s* glory.

God has done other impressive things than what are in the gospel story. But the gospel story is the greatest thing God has done. The gospel story is also the high point of God’s glory.

Now let’s read the last three verses of our second paragraph. 4:4-6 *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. ⁶ For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.*

Third sentence of the Bible, Genesis 1, God said, “Let there be light.” That God made HIS light shine in OUR hearts, to give US the light of the knowledge of God’s glory. What is “the light of the knowledge of God’s glory”? It is that same gospel story. Remember back two verses to 4:4: “they cannot see the light of the gospel.”

God’s glory is displayed on the face of Christ. That gospel story is the glory of Christ, it is the “light of the gospel” that God makes shine in our hearts. God’s glory is displayed on the face of Christ, we read. If we want see God’s glory displayed, look at Christ. If we want to see Christ’s glory displayed, look at the remarkable gospel story. That gospel story is Christ’s glory, which is also God’s glory.

Now, let’s step back a bit. We will change directions. We’ve had three paragraphs in a row about glory: 3:7-11 (last week), 3:12-18, and 4:1-6. The glory of the new covenant, the glory of the gospel story, the glory of Christ and God, and we ourselves changed into ever increasing glory.

This Scripture is setting us up for a paradox. A paradox is a statement that seems to make no sense, it contradicts itself, but if we think a bit and someone explains it, it turns out to be true. A paradox seems at first to be impossible, cannot be true, but then can see that it is right.

We had a paradox a couple weeks ago. Paul write, “Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s victory parade.” This does not make sense. How can you be thankful when you are led as a captive in someone else’s victory parade? Good question. That’s what makes is a paradox. But it turns out also to be true. That’s a paradox.

The emphasis on glory is the first part of the paradox. We are part of the glorious new covenant. We all with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, which we see in the gospel story. And as we gaze at this glory of Christ, we ourselves slowly become more like Christ, which means our own glory is increasing. God shone his light in our hearts, so we could see the glory of God himself, displayed on Christ's face, which means displayed in the gospel story.

The second part of the paradox is relentless human weakness and troubles. Let's read the three verses beginning at 4:7. *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.* ⁸ *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;* ⁹ *persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.*

We have this glorious treasure in jars of clay. Our bodies and our minds are the jars of clay. They had cheap jars, something made out of poor clay and just set beside the fire to dry and harden, not put in kiln. They broke easily, but they were cheap, you just got another.

The paradox is that everything this Scripture said about glory is true, and it all happens in humans with weak bodies and minds, whose lives are full of trouble and distress.

By the word God and by the Holy Spirit, we have seen Christ's glory, and we have seen God's glory, and we live in this glory, and we become more glorious ourselves, and this all happens in humans with weak bodies and weak minds, whose lives are full of trouble and distress.

And the apostles, more than any others, lived in this paradox. They knew the gospel, and they knew it was Christ's glory and power, and they had so much trouble and distress. Paul says, "we were harassed at every turn, conflict on the outside, fear on the inside" (2Co7,5).

Christians get off the path in two ways here. One, we become triumphalists. If all this about glory is true, and it is, then it makes no sense that we would have weakness and have trouble and distress. There has to be a way to believe and claim victory and leave the distress behind.

Good luck with that, my brothers and sisters, but I warn you that it did not work for the apostles themselves, in their own lives, and that is the path to disappointment and heartache. There is a lot of real healing in the gospel, the kind of healing and love and honesty and acceptance can bring. But watch out for books and seminars that where the speaker says: "if you will do these God things like I did, he will bless your life like he blessed mine."

The other way we get off the path is that we cannot get past the ordinariness of our lives. We can see that we have weak bodies and minds, and regular trouble and distress, conflict on the outside and fear on the inside. That's clear, no getting away from it.

AND SO we decide there is no glory in the gospel, the glory of the new covenant is faded into nothing, there is no glory on the face of Christ, or at least it can never be seen by us, and we certainly are *not* becoming progressively more glorious ourselves.

EITHER we cannot make peace with how much glory there is, it is a childish exaggeration, living in the gospel of Christ is not that glorious, because life is too ordinary, too many troubles.

OR we cannot make peace with the regular weakness and distresses, if there's that much glory there has to be a way out of the troubles, to conquer them and leave them behind. For the apostles of Christ, there was no way to get out of either side of this.

4:3-7 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God, and not from us.

Amen.