

05. 2 Corinthians 3:7 – 4:6



2 Corinthians 3:7-16

In the light of his experience of the Risen Jesus, Paul reflects on a story from Exodus, seeing deeper meanings in the inspired text.

1. Exodus 24:15-18 Moses ascends the mountain

‘Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.’

2. Tired of waiting the Israelites constructed a golden calf and worshipped it. God is angry. Moses pleads with God (Exodus 32:1-14)

3. Moses comes down with the 10 commandments, sees the calf and breaks the tablets (Exodus 32:15-19).

4. Moses goes up the mountain again and is instructed:

‘Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people’ (Exodus 33:3).

5. Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” And the LORD said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but **my face shall not be seen**” (Exodus 33:18-23).

6. Moses ascends the mountain again: 'He was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments' (Exodus 34:28).

7. 'Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that **the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God**' (Exodus 34:29).

'Moses put a veil on his face, but whenever he went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him' (Exodus 34:33-35).

2 Corinthians 3:7-11

Now if the ministry of death chiselled in letters on stone tablets came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses' face because of the glory of his face, a glory set aside [covered by a veil], how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory! Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory; for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has what is permanent come in glory!

Moses pleads with God to remain present to his people in spite of their sin (worshipping the golden calf). God listens to Moses, but cannot reveal his glory directly to the sinful people for that would mean their destruction. So he reveals his glory to Moses who will mediate his presence to the people. The reflected glory on Moses' face authenticates his word as the word of God, but even this reflected glory causes the people to be afraid. The veil with which Moses covers his face is God's merciful way of making it possible for him to dwell among a sinful people, through the ministry of Moses, without compromising the divine holiness. At the same time, it preserves the people from suffering the full effects of their sinfulness.

The narrative in Exodus 34 is about God's presence mediated through his authorised minister. The symbolism of the veil is carried over into the curtain veiling the holy of holies. God is present among his people, but necessarily veiled. Hence the longing of the people to see the face of God and the promise that one day 'you shall see and be radiant' (Isaiah 60:5). Paul is comparing God's revelation through the ministry of Moses with the new revelation through Paul's ministry. His claim is that the glory revealed through his ministry is greater, not less.

First of all, Moses' ministry was one of 'death' and 'condemnation'. As explained in relation to verse six, this is not a criticism of God's revelation through Moses. Rather, it is a statement about the hardness of the hearts that refused to welcome it. Paul's ministry is a ministry of 'justification' for through it we are united to God in a communion of life.

Secondly, God's revelation through Moses was 'chiselled in letters on stone tablets'. This speaks of God's fidelity and the essential permanence of God's word. However, God's revelation through Paul is a ministry 'of the Spirit', written, as Paul has already stated, 'on tablets of human hearts' (3:3).

Thirdly, the ministry entrusted to Moses 'came in glory', as was demonstrated by the transfiguration of Moses' face. The ministry entrusted to Paul came in 'abounding glory', 'greater glory' - as is dramatically portrayed by Paul's disciple Luke in the scene of Jesus' transfiguration (see Luke 9:28-36).

Finally Paul says of the glory seen on Moses' face that it is 'set aside'. In verse ten he is saying that the greater glory of what he earlier called 'the new covenant' is such that the glory of the old covenant is 'lost' (much as the light of the stars cannot be seen in full sunlight). However the expression 'set aside' goes back to what happened at the time when Moses had to put on a veil to cover his face. As noted earlier, the veil was necessary to set aside the glory, because God's unveiled glory would have destroyed those who had preferred the golden calf to God. The ministry entrusted to Paul is not set aside. It is 'permanent' for reasons that Paul is about to demonstrate in the following passage.

2 Corinthians 3:12-13

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the outcome [τελος] of the glory that was being set aside.

Exposed to God's gaze their hardened hearts could only have faced condemnation and death. Hence the veil.

Paul's ministry is to proclaim the good news that God, through Jesus, is giving sinners his own Spirit which can change their hearts so that they can be in communion with the Holy One and gaze upon the face of God by gazing on the unveiled face of Jesus.

The 'old covenant' is no longer the place to which we are to look to find God's glory revealed. The new covenant, the covenant promised long ago, is now being proclaimed. The glory that came with the ministry of Moses had to be 'set aside', rendered inoperative by the veil, lest the 'condemnation' brought about by the people's hardness of heart should lead to their 'death'.

What is being proclaimed through the ministry of Paul is something that remains. One cannot read that statement without hearing an echo from Paul's earlier letter which described love as that which remains (1Corinthians 13:13). The ministry of the new covenant is the ministry of God's saving love.

2 Corinthians 3:14-15

¹⁴But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in the Messiah is it set aside. ¹⁵Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts.

Paul's opponents are arguing that the failure of the Jews to accept Paul's proclamation is proof that his ministry is not authentic. Paul points out that this failure to open their hearts to God's revelation has been there from the beginning. It is also the subject of many a prophetic accusation.

The only one who can remove the veil is Jesus and the only way that a Jew can receive a new heart is 'in the Messiah'. they are still not listening to Moses! What Isaiah said is still true: 'these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me' (Isaiah 29:13). If they listened to Moses, they would welcome Paul's ministry for they would recognise that through it God was offering them the promised Spirit who would give them a new heart.

2 Corinthians 3:16

When a person turns to the Lord the veil is removed.

The text which Paul is analysing clearly states: ‘whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off’ (Exodus 34:34). A Jew who wishes to have the veil removed must do what Moses did: **turn to the Lord**. How? By looking for where the activity of the Lord (the Spirit) is revealed. God promised through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart’ (Jeremiah 24:7). It is only through the active power of God’s saving love that a Jew can receive this new heart, and, as the Corinthians know from their own experience, the Spirit is given through Paul’s ministry of proclaiming the gospel. With the gift of the Spirit and a new heart they will at last be free to hear God’s word and to obey God’s will; and ‘obey the commandments of God is everything’ (1 Corinthians 7:19).

2 Corinthians 3:17

Now the Lord is the Spirit

and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror (εἰκων).

Jesus is the 'mirror', the 'image' of the Lord and when 'with unveiled faces' we contemplate him, we see there 'the glory of the Lord.'

2 Corinthians 3:18

Seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror all of us, with unveiled faces, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Paul concludes with a beautiful description of the essence of the Christian life of all those who welcome the proclamation of the gospel, Jews and Gentiles. Christ is the Wisdom of God, 'a breath of the power of God, a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty, a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness' (Wisdom 7:25-26). Jesus is the 'mirror', the 'image' of the Lord (see 4:4,6), and when 'with unveiled faces' we contemplate Jesus, we see there 'the glory of the Lord'.

As Moses was transformed when he went into the presence of God, so are we. For us Christians, however, for ‘**all of us**’, it is into Christ that we are transformed. It is the Spirit of the Lord who causes this transformation (see Romans 8:11,13-15), for it is the Spirit who is ‘the source of your life in Christ Jesus’ (1 Corinthians 1:30). Paul is its minister.

The redeeming, healing and saving love of God revealed in the heart and on the face of Jesus, invites us to look upon him with faces unveiled. Daring to believe the good news proclaimed by Paul, we contemplate Jesus and are bathed in his light. He gives us his Spirit who purifies our hearts. The Lord God, whose glory we contemplate on the face and in the heart of Jesus, is the Spirit who purifies our hearts, and transforms them into Jesus' heart and mind. It is in the Christian life of the minister of the new covenant, and in the Christian lives being lived in their own community, that the Corinthians are to see the radiance of God's glory.

2 Corinthians 4:1-2

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not grow slack. We gave up any idea of hiding things (which would be shameful); we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

From the very beginning of his apostolic ministry Paul determined not to try to attract people to the gospel by any means other than the power inherent in the gospel itself. He is determined never to falsify the message to make it more palatable. It would be shameful to hold back elements of the good news that people might find challenging and off-putting. Once again (see 2:17) he insists on his openness in stating the truth. He does so in the presence of God and in such a way that it should be obvious to anyone who observes his practice without bias.

2 Corinthians 4:3-4

If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of the Messiah, who is the image [εἰκὼν] of God.

Jesus is the true Adam, the one who shows what a human being was always meant to be: made in God's image (see Genesis 1:26-27). Jesus is 'a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness' (Wisdom 7:26). In the words of an early Christian hymn: 'He is the image of the invisible God ... for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:15,19).

2 Corinthians 4:5-6

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus the Messiah as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.

For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' (Genesis 1:3) who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah.

We recall Paul's exhortation to the Galatians: 'through love become slaves to one another' (Galatians 5:13). Also his words in an earlier letter to the Corinthians when he says that in order to win more people to Christ 'I have made myself a slave to all' (1 Corinthians 9:19).

Out of the darkness of the cross, shines the face of Jesus resplendent with the glory of God, for in the weakness of death Jesus revealed that the only true power is that of love – God's faithful love, given to the end. It is on the open statement of this truth that Paul's defence of his proclamation of the gospel rests.

Paul has been accused, it seems, of preaching himself. Is this because of his exhortation that they imitate him (1 Corinthians 4:16; 7:7; 11:1)?

His reply is that he, a slave of the Messiah (1 Corinthians 7:22), has become their slave as well. He is dedicated heart and soul to them. He is giving his life in their service that they may be transformed by their obedience to the gospel and may come to see God's glory in the face of Jesus.

The passage we have just studied is among the most beautiful and most powerful passages of the whole of the New Testament. We are being invited by Paul to contemplate Jesus on the cross, and to see on his face the glory of God. Paul believes that if we do this we will be transformed into the very image of God that we contemplate.

We are reminded of the same invitation offered us by John when he tells us to look upon Jesus, his heart pierced with the lance, and to see the water and blood flowing from his side (John 19:31-37), knowing that ‘from his breast flow fountains of living water’ (John 7:38), seeing in his heart the source of the Spirit (John 7:39).

We are invited, like Thomas, not just to look upon the one we have pierced, but actually to put our finger into his wounds and our hand into his side (John 20:28). The wounds are the wounds of the world that is loved by God (John 3:16). We are invited to commit ourselves to his mission, and this commitment will open our eyes and our heart to be able to say with Thomas: ‘My Lord and my God’ (John 20:28). Our faith, like that of Paul, will shine in our hearts. Nothing will be able to veil it. In this way we will give to each other ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah’.