

Christ's Glory in Us

2 Corinthians 3:1-18

This passage is one of the most important in the whole 2 Corinthians letter. In it, there is clearly set forth what might be said to be the superiority of Jesus Christ for faith and life. But we must ask in what ways, and how so? First some background, and then let's consider three key concepts that the apostle Paul sets out in these verses.

Some back story: Paul explicitly makes a contrast between the old covenant--specifically the Law of God in the Old Testament, written on "*tablets of stone*" (vs.3)--with the New Covenant that has come into the world through Jesus Christ and made us all "*ministers*" of the Gospel (vs. 6). He speaks of this New Covenant made real to us by the Spirit, and "*written on tablets of human hearts,*" (vs. 3). Paul contrasts the two covenants--saying the Old Covenant Law resulted in a "*ministry of death,*" (vs. 8) and "*condemnation*" (vs. 9)--since the Law by its specifics identifies our sins and condemns us. But the New Covenant in Christ is--and has brought--a ministry of "*justification,*" "*life,*" and "*glory*" (vss.6-9). All that needs some explanation!

The phrase "New Covenant" is Christian terminology, but the phrase itself comes from the OT prophet Jeremiah some 600 years before Christ. In Israel's history at that time, the nation was faced with imminent exile to Babylon, for its many years-long failure to live up to the requirements of the Old Covenant Law. The prophet Jeremiah spoke of God promising to enact a "new covenant" (Jer 31), a new arrangement between God and his people. The old covenant was the one made by God through Moses, but for all its good instruction, its "glory," it didn't have the power to make the people everything God longed for them to be. The New Covenant to come, he says, will have

two major effects. One, it will finally and fully deal with people's sins for good, bringing "forgiveness" and reconciling us to God. In Jeremiah 31:34b, God says, "*For I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*" Two, it will effectively empower people--US--to live as God intends. Jeremiah spoke of it as God "*putting his law into their hearts,*" into their central and vital being. The Old Covenant couldn't do this. It was instruction from with-out. The New will do so, for it is instruction from within. Again Jeremiah 31 (vss. 31-34a), "*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant... It will not be like the [old] covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them out of Egypt...which they broke...but I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...for they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest, says the Lord.*" This New Covenant, then, was brought into effect by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. And it accomplished something quite different from the Old Covenant under the Law. Rather than obligating us to a list of rules and regulations, the New Covenant first obligates us to accept the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as the sole means by which we are reconciled to God--so faith in what He's done for us--and then, we are to submit to and depend upon the leading of the life-giving Spirit of Christ as obedient followers of Christ--so faith for living as intended.

That's back story. Now three key ideas: One: Paul says to the Corinthian Christians that they are "*letters of Christ,*" written not with ink as a conventional letter, but by the Spirit of Christ. Why that idea? As a college professor, I wrote letters of recommendation for graduating students into further degree programs or specific jobs. In Paul's situation, what he is saying is this: If you want to know what I am about, what

my ministry and teaching and faith in Christ are about, then look at the church in Corinth. He told them in 1 Corinthians (11:1), *“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”* You want to know about Paul and the Gospel, look at Corinthian Christians--Not letters on paper, but letters in persons, living letters or embodiments of Christ. That is quite a sobering thought. But Paul was willing to say--with both a certain humility and also challenge to them-- *“you are my letters of recommendation. You!”* You may have heard it said, *“You are the only Bible someone may read.”* Yep.

It's a powerful image. The Corinthian Christians reflect him. More importantly they are to reflect Christ. They are nothing less than the result of God's own “writing” or “life giving” into their hearts, the result of the God's New Covenant enacted in Christ Jesus. So he says, *“our competence [as ministers of God] is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of Spirit; for the letter kills (meaning Old Covenant on stone tablets), but the Spirit [of Christ] gives life.,”* (vs. 5-7). That right there must cause us to consider ourselves--each of us--as not only given ministry for the Gospel, but how each of us think about ourselves as ministers, for we each one are so to think of ourselves. Maybe you've seen on church signs posted, and rightly--Pastor, followed by one or more names; then Ministers: *“All the members of this church.”* It is both a grace and a calling we have as Christ's people. We're all, using Paul's image, letters of recommendation. Such is something of Christ's Glory in us.

Second, Paul speaks of a great contrast between the lesser glory of the old Covenant Law, and the superior, surpassing, enduring glory of the New Covenant of faith in Christ Jesus--a contrast so great that the lesser one--the Old Covenant--he speaks of “a

glory now set aside,” (vs. 7), and the glory of the New Covenant “*permanent*” (vs. 11). Apparently, there were some Corinthian Christians who just didn’t see the superior glory or surpassing advantages of the New Covenant in Christ. They taught that even if one believes in Christ, one is supposed to abide by and keep the laws of the Old Covenant. They understood the Law as the continuing way to know and serve God. They were fine with Jesus as the Messiah, but they found the specifics of the law for morality and under-standing life and practice preferable to the New Covenant way of faith and guidance by Christ’s teaching and Christ’s Spirit within them. Perhaps they were used to this way of thinking, and coming to terms with the teaching of Christ and holding his life and way before them was just too much, too challenging. They preferred familiar and comfortable religion. Perhaps the Law--as they understood it--allowed them their prejudices.

We might think it odd they thought this way, but it isn’t really. Look around. Listen to people. There are lots of folk who prefer aspects of the Old Testament Laws and prescriptions to the teaching and life of Jesus--be it certain laws in the Law about other peoples, moral practices, or the way God is described as dealing with Israel--as the people of God--versus her enemies. They find sympathy in the language of vengeance, even obliteration that one can certainly find in places of the Old Testament, from the Law to the Psalms, and elsewhere. Writer Kurt Vonnegut noted once, “*For some reason the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. But often, with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course that’s Moses, not Jesus. I haven’t heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere.*”

But Paul won't let them have their religious status quo. Paul's point is that with Christ there is an awesome change, an abiding glory, a superior way that God has made for us. Paul's uses the event of Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai with a veil over his face and the people not wanting to see the reflected glory from God on his face. While glorious, it was a fading glory. It has no comparison with the glory revealed in the Gospel, the message of grace in Jesus, through which God's Spirit is powerfully at work to bring forgiveness, life, justification, and reconciliation in the place of death and condemnation. Paul preaches a superiority of faith and life that puts Moses and the Law in the shade, so to speak. Paul wants them--and us, too, if need be--to find the real, abiding glory in Christ and his way, and to discover God's power by the Spirit of Christ, to be "*an imitator of Christ,*" (1 Cor 11:1) and again in the letter to the Ephesians, "*Be imitators of God ...and live in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God,*" (Eph 5:1-2).

The former pastor at our Fifth Ave. Church in New York City tells a powerful story of Christ-likeness that he witnessed in the church there. A certain member in his church was an alcoholic. It was quite bad, and he had lost his family due to it. Nevertheless, hoping to hear a word of hope, he went to the 11 pm Christmas Eve service. He took his place in a pew. Soon, a family of four sat in the pew in front of him. Seeing them, he felt deeply his loss, and decided he would leave and get a drink. As he headed for the door, he ran into the pastor. He asked him where he was going, and he answered honestly, "*to get a Scotch.*" The pastor said, "*You can't do that, Jim. Where's your sponsor?*" Jim said, "*It's Christmas. He's in Minnesota.*" They went into the vestry, just off the sanctuary, to talk, and Jim explained how he was feeling and

why. The pastor left his alcoholic friend with a fellow pastor there and then went into the sanctuary to begin the service. After his welcome, he said, *“I have one final announcement. If any-one here tonight is a friend of Bill Wilson”*--one of the founders of AA, which everyone in AA knows--*“would you step out for a moment and meet me in the vestry?”* From all over the sanctuary--and a full church on Christmas Eve--men and women, some younger and some older, even some college students, arose and made their way to the vestry to be with Jim. Jim was not going to be alone that Christmas Eve. The pastor commented, *“While I was preaching in the sanctuary about the Incarnation, the Word was becoming flesh in the vestry.”* *“Be imitators of Christ,”* Paul says. Again, Christ’s Glory in us.

Now third, Paul speaks of our “freedom.” We just celebrated the freedom we enjoy as Americans, a great freedom for which we should be thankful and be thankful to those who sacrifice to protect it. But as wonderful and enjoyable as it is, it’s not the freedom of salvation, that is, God’s salvation in Christ. There are--and there always have been--people who have not enjoyed freedoms the same ways we as Americans do, but nonetheless have known a greater freedom, the freedom that comes in Jesus Christ. This involves the freedom that comes in the wonderful knowledge of the forgiveness of sins, and with it our freedom to forgive others. It is the freedom that comes with knowing oneself as *“a child of God,”* even when the powers of the world--and sometimes even some Christians--do not accept it or treat others accordingly. But here Paul speaks of a freedom that results in nothing less than our transformation into the likeness of Christ.

In this final part of the passage, vs. 12-18, Paul again revisits the story of Moses

and Israel at Mt. Sinai, and his having to put a veil over his face so the Israelites could not see the shining glory of God on his face, which made them afraid. Here, Paul's point is that unlike the Israelites who were by the veil prevented from seeing the glory on Moses' face, we DO see God's glory--God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6). And to "*see God's glory*" is to know him, as the prophet Jeremiah put it--"*all will know me, says the Lord.*" That revelation breaks upon us in Christ. "*And all of us with unveiled faces,*" says Paul, "*seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being trans-formed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit,*" (vs. 18). He speaks of the fact that God intends a growing transformation to happen within us, so that we become more and more like Him who is our Lord--that we become as He himself was and is.

And with Christ comes this gift of freedom: "*Now the Lord [Jesus] is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom,*" (vs. 17). A key aspect--for Paul anyway--is his understanding of freedom. A conventional understanding of freedom--even an American understanding of freedom--is one has the freedom to do and to choose whatever one wishes for himself to fulfill one's life-- "*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*" But that is not the definition of freedom for the Christian. It's not really correct in other ways, too. But for the Christian, freedom is to be and do as one is meant to be and do. It's a kind of discovery. The Christian finds that real freedom is to be and to do as God has revealed to us in Christ Jesus. The OT Covenant Law was always only temporary. Paul even calls it a "*custodian until Christ came,*" (Gal 3:24). It was only part of the Story that comes to its conclusion in Jesus.

Yet, Paul is saying here, the freedom for which we humans crave is that which we

discover in Jesus Christ as Lord and his way. Because as we ever gaze upon the Lord--seeking him, considering him, his life, death, and resurrection to Lordship, his way of living and acting, his obedience to will of God--we discover that we are not afraid or merely dazzled, but we are being changed, ever so by degree, into his own likeness because the Spirit of the Lord is at work in us. And the task of every Christian--for we are all, remember, in the ministry of the Gospel--is to be an agent of this new, and renewing/ transforming covenant life. That means an honesty, a boldness sometimes, a straight forwardness (*"Let your Yes be Yes, and your No be No!"*), and the promise to find life's true freedom in the doing and likening to Jesus. As well, we are to see in each other's faces, as we all behold the Lord, the grace and life-giving presence of Jesus himself among us.

There is a little story that captures something of this hope of glory--meaning our growing into Christ-likeness. There was once a colony of grubs, the wormy-like larva of some bugs. This colony lived at the bottom of a swamp. Occasionally, one would get the urge to swim to the surface and disappear, never to be heard from again. Whenever this happened, the others would question and wonder among themselves. So one day they decided to enter into agreement. The next one in their colony that felt the urge to leave would return and tell the others what it's like above the surface of the water. It wasn't long before one of them felt the need to depart. She swam to the surface, crawled out onto a lily pad and in the warmth of the sun went to sleep. As she slept, her outer shell broke apart and out emerged a beautiful, colorful dragonfly. Soon she was soaring above the waters, taking in the beauty of the bright new world in a bright new way. For a moment, she was sad as she remembered the promise she had made to her fellow grubs

below. But the sadness was quickly exchanged for joy when she realized that they too would make the same journey, they too would experience the glory waiting for them.

Christ's glory in us. Glory now, and to come, you see.

16th century Martin Luther, echoing 5th century Augustine, said, "*Love God and do as you please.*" In the "beholding" of Christ do we both find the love of God for us and so love for him, and in the beholding of Christ do we find what it is to do what pleases, not only to God, not only others, but even ourselves. Our true freedom is found as we--like Christ--serve others. The Gospel surprises and delights us with the good news of our acceptance by God in Christ. Therein is the true status we crave as human beings. And with that assured acceptance by God--even as we are continued works in progress--we can be about what we are meant to about--reaching out to others in service. It's what Paul has in view in the next chapter when he says, "*we carry in [our] body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies,*" (2 Cor 4:10).

Again, Christ-likeness--Christ's Glory in us. Let's hear it the prayer of Francis of

Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me put love;
Where there is resentment, let me put forgiveness;
Where there is discord, let me put unity;
Where there is doubt, let me put faith;
Where there is error, let me put truth;
Where there is despair, let me put hope;
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy;
Where there is darkness, let me bring light;
O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in forgiving that we obtain forgiveness;
It is in dying that we rise to eternal life.

Amen.