
The Fading Glory

2 Corinthians 2:14-3:18

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Introduction Illustration: an old, water-stained, parchment as the backing on a painting turns out to be an authentic, original, hand written copy of the Declaration of Independence.

The Book of Galatians has been full of the dire warnings against returning to the works of the Old Covenant for salvation or transformation. It would be easy then to conclude that the Old Testament then has little value.

This is evident in the way it is treated.

This is evident in how little it is preached.

This is evident in how childishly it is taught.

Yet, here is what God's Word says: (2 Corinthians 3:7-11)

Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

This is a startling statement: the Old Covenant is full of fading glory. It is eclipsed by the fulsome glory of the New Covenant.

Here, Paul is making a defense and giving a description of the New Covenant minister. How we serve as ministers is shaped by the relationship between the Old and New Covenants.

As we transition from Galatians to our next study, I want us to think about the glory of the New Covenant and its ministry. We will do this in anticipation of taking up Exodus as our next study. <<Comment: This is a change in our pulpit planning. After thinking about Exodus this past week at the conference, seeing how Genesis, Galatians and 1 Peter are interacting, I am contemplating taking up Exodus next instead of Daniel. Yes, we will come to Daniel. But just not yet.>> So we will need to think about the glory of the Old Covenant in Exodus – how it is glorious and why it is fading and how it is the backdrop for the superlative glory of the New Covenant.

Commissioned by God**(2:14-17)**

The ministry we do is one that is centered on Christ who has commissioned us.

Conquered by Christ**(v.14)**

We are being led in the triumphal procession of Christ the King. We are not the victorious soldiers. We are the conquered slaves. The reference here is to the Roman general returning from his wars with his conquered enemies in chains. Thus, we are being led forth for death. We are being led out to die.

Aroma of Christ**(v.15-16)**

In a change of metaphor, the New Covenant minister is the aroma of Christ. We are compared to a perfume. The label on the bottle is the Cross. The perfume is called "Death to Life". We are the same aroma to both the saved and the lost. Among those who are being saved, we are an aroma of life. Among those who are perishing, we are an aroma of death.

Speak for Christ**(v.17)**

So this is a very big challenge. We are led out to die, to be the aroma of Christ and His cross. We are do to so with integrity, purity and clarity. Who then is sufficient or competent for these things? We are. We are sufficient to die. We are sufficient to be the fragrance. We speak for Christ.

Commended in Ministry**(3:1-3)**

The New Covenant ministry is commended and has credentials.

Not by Human Credentials**(v. 1)**

Paul's ministry and authority was being challenged. The false apostles and teachers in the church at Corinth were systematically undermining Paul's apostleship and thus authority to speak for Christ. They were challenging his credentials and standing. Where was his authority? Who had ordained him? Why did he have a job outside the church? How could he have such a rough time and be opposed by so many good people? After all, isn't the New Covenant minister supposed to be a glorious as the New Covenant ministry?

The false apostles and teachers were carrying around credentials that gave them credibility and authority. They gave each other certificates and ordination papers. They approved each other and wrote long letters commending each other. Some went so far as to forge letters of commendation from Paul. How does Paul answer this?

But by Transformed Christians**(v. 2-3)**

New Covenant ministers are commended by the lives transformed by their ministries. People are his letter of commendation. God's work in and through people shows that his ministry is approved by God.

The work of God that commends the New Covenant minister and ministry is a ministry, not in tables of stone but in human hearts. It is the work of the Christ through the Spirit. Ah such lovely writing! The false teachers and apostles are glorying in the tables of stone, the Law. They are glorying in the words written in stone and on papyrus. But this

is a shift back to the Old Covenant. The New Covenant is about new hearts. It is about the Spirit God indwelling. It is about transformed lives. What the New Covenant is supposed to produce becomes proof that a valid and authoritative New Covenant ministry is taking place.

Competent as Ministers

(v. 4-6)

The ministry of the New Covenant requires competence. Do not hear this to be saying that God uses us in spite of our inadequacy. That may be true and may be true from other texts; but not this one.

Confidence in God through Christ

(v. 4)

All who serve Christ in the New Covenant do so with confidence in Christ. Our confidence to serve is not in our own flesh, but in Christ. It is a Christ centered focus and confidence. This is instead of a confidence in the natural principles of the world, the Old Covenant. Our confidence in God through Christ rests in all that He has done and is doing in and for His people.

Capable by God through the Spirit

(v. 5-6)

Our confidence arises from His making us capable. We, in ourselves, the Old Covenant in itself, the flesh in itself, are not capable to carry out New Covenant ministry. So those who want to minister according to the Law or the world or the flesh will fail in spiritual things.

We have been made capable to give life through the Spirit. This is why it is not a ministry of the law, the letters carved in stone. The ministry of the Old brought death. It condemned. It announced and executed a sentence of death. Rather, ours is a ministry of the Spirit. It is able to impart life. And that life is imparted through the instrumentality of people, of believers, of the servants of the New Covenant.

This is what our ministry does – it is life giving. If our ministry becomes a ministry of the Law, glorious though it was, it will only bring death. But we are ministering, we are speaking in Christ. The effect then is transformed lives through the regenerating life of the Holy Spirit *imparted through our ministry*.

Consummate in Glory

(v. 7-11)

Now, we must understand the massive and consummate glory of the New Covenant and its ministry. How do we know that?

In the Ministry of Condemnation

(v. 7-9)

The Old Covenant was so glorious that its primary minister, Moses, face was so bright with its glory that he had to veil his face. Moses' face was reflecting, in the darkness and dimness of sin, the brightness of the worth, weightiness and wonder of God. When he came down from the mountain, Israel asked that he wear a veil to hide its brightness and its glory. Now, this does not mean that Moses was glorious. It means that Moses reflected the glory of God whom only His back parts were seen whose law he had received.

So, here is the “how much more.” If that was glorious, that ministry of death, fading away as it was, how much more is this ministry of the Spirit in life. If the ministry of condemnation was great, how much more the ministry of righteousness? Do you see it? If a Timex is great, then how much more a Skagen? If a Skagen is great, how much more a Rolex?

What Galatians says you cannot go back to and be saved by, was in fact so glorious that it lit up the face of Moses. So, how much more glorious is this permanent ministry of the Spirit?

Overshadowed by the Superlative

(v. 10-11)

Well, here it is. The present glory is so great that it overshadows that old glory. The candle was glorious in the darkness. But the 50,000 watt lamp sends the candle into the shadows. We are grateful for candle. But we live in the bright lamp. Why would you turn off the lamp and live with the candle?

It is overshadowed in glory because it is not fading but is permanent. The glory of the New Covenant and its ministry is that it will never fade, it will never fail. So the New Covenant servant ministers in something that will never ever become dim. We, along with Paul, serve in the bright glory of Christ mediated through the New Covenant.

Courageous in Exercise

(v. 12-18)

So, what does this mean for daily life and ministry? Is the exhortation then to be confident and capable? Yes, but in a most unexpected way?

Unlike the Veiled Moses

(v. 12-13)

Paul says that since all this is true, we, New Covenant ministers and people, having this kind of hope are very bold. But what is this boldness? Is it brashness? Pushiness? Is it just speaking up even when it is inappropriate? Is it merely courage like facing the dangerous dog while holding a frightened child and not giving way?

No, this is a boldness unlike the veiled face of Moses. The first purpose of the veil was to hide the brightness of the reflected glory on Moses' face. The second purpose for the veil was to hide that fact that even on Moses' face, the glory faded. He kept on wearing the veil so that Israel would not lose hope as they watched the brightness fade. The hidden fading brightness was unseen and unobserved because their hearts were hardened.

To the Veiled Hearts

(v. 14-16)

With sinners, but more particularly in Paul's day with the Jews, the veil remained. Now Moses was long gone. There is no face to reflect that glory. There is no veil over the face of Moses. Now the veil is over the hardened hearts of unbelieving Jews and Gentiles to the same effect. The veil on the heart keeps them from seeing, even as they read the Old Covenant that the glory has faded. They keep on thinking that it is as or even more glorious than the New. So they keep pointing to it and calling people to it.

But, when one turns to the Lord the veil hiding the fading glory of law and works and the flesh is taken away. There is a distinct turn away from a fading glory to the supreme and superlative glory.

With Unveiled Faces

(v. 17-18)

Now, we are gazing on the glory of the Christ of the New Covenant. We do so through the whole Bible. We are not yet beholding Christ directly. Yes, our hearts are unveiled. But the glory of Christ is seen *in the Word of God*. The glory of the face of Jesus Christ is seen through the Bible. The glory of the Old Covenant and the superlative glory of the New Covenant are that they show us Christ. So, there is a great value in reading, studying and preaching the Old Testament. There, those in Christ, see the glory of Christ.

Therefore, it is my aim whether we are in Daniel or in Exodus or anywhere else, to see, show and savor the glory of Christ there. We have been planning for Daniel; but we will probably shift our attention to Exodus. After thinking about this week, hearing the counsel of the men who went to the conference and seeing the glory of Christ in small snapshots I am planning now to take us through Exodus. There, the glory of God in delivering and dwelling with His people foreshadows so much of our redemption. I know that many were anticipating starting Daniel. I know that what is actually being hoped for is eschatology. But the surprise is that all dealing with the Old Testament as New Covenant believers is eschatology. Exodus shows us in all kinds of types, themes and illustrations how the Redeemer comes and the Ruler reigns. Yes, we will come to Daniel and the series of books as originally planned. But not this year. It simply makes sense: Genesis, Galatians, 1 Peter (evenings) and now, Exodus.

Seeing the glory of Christ through the whole Bible transforms us. As we gaze on Him through the Bible, we are transformed into the image of Christ as from glory to glory. Two things may be intimated here. Our transformation is actually progressive glorification. Or, we are being transformed by moving from the glory of the Old Covenant through to the glories of the New Covenant. Either way, we will be changed by seeing the glory of Christ in the glory of the old, fading as it was and in glory of the new, superlative as it is.

So this transforming power in beholding Christ emerges as boldness. The boldness is brightness – more and more reflecting the glory of Christ.

Conclusion

Do we gladly embrace the truth that we are not being led as conquered servants in the triumphant train of the Lord Jesus Christ? Are we looking for ministry to be glorious and good and great? Or are we willing to be led out to our death so that Christ will be exalted whether by life or by death?

May we hold fast to the Word as the New Covenant ministry of the Spirit in the hearts of people. There is much that would distract us from the centrality of Christ through His Word and Spirit. There are many attractive substitutes for Word ministry – may we be a people who will revel in Christ in the Word publicly proclaimed and privately ministered.

Seek to show the surpassing glory of Christ by being a fragrance of Christ everywhere. Recognize that to the perishing, you will stink. To those being saved, you will be a sweet incense and fine perfume. Yet it is the same fragrance. It is Christ.

Learn your Old Testaments. See Christ therein. See His great glory there. We study the Old Testament so that we will see the variegated glories of Christ shining through their pages. We do not read them as Jews. We do not read them as though we were a synagogue. We read them as Christians. We see Christ in them because He is in them. We do so because Christ taught that He was in them. We do so because the New Testament saw Christ in them. So while the Old Covenant itself fades, its remaining glory to be seen by believing and unveiled hearts is the very glory of Christ.

May we be transformed by seeing the glory of Christ all through the Bible. The transforming power of beholding Christ emerges from the pages of the whole Bible. We are transformed from glory to glory as we see Him there. Want to grow and change? Want to reflect Christ to others? Gaze on Him in the pages of your Bible.

Listen to the grand and surprising conclusion to this: “Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart” (2 Corinthians 4:1). We will not quit. We will continue on. We will be servants of God and ministers in the New Covenant. No matter what others may do, will see the glory of Christ through the whole Bible. We will uphold preaching, teaching and the personal ministry of the Word as transforming us. We will be transformed by the power of beholding Christ. We will not lose heart, even unto death.