

2 Corinthians 2:12-3:18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Corinthians 2, verse 12 to 3, verse 18. When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there.

So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.

For we are the aroma of Christ to God, among those who are being saved, and among those who are perishing. To one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts to be known and read by all.

[1 : 0 1] And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit.

For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 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. Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end.

[2 : 1 5] But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts.

But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. Our passage, which begins at the end of chapter 2 of 2 Corinthians, starts with an image of Christ as a victorious Roman general leading a triumphal procession.

Paul and his fellow missionaries are like willing captives following in the train of the victorious Christ. Like the incense that would accompany such a victory procession, Paul and his fellow missionaries are like the aroma of the knowledge of Christ, diffused wherever they go, both among those who reject and among those who accept the message.

The aroma of the knowledge of Christ also ascends to God, bringing the sweet smell of Christ to him, like the sacrifices of the old covenant. This aroma has a dual effect upon human beings.

[3 : 28] For some, it produces life as they respond in faith, while for others, it yields death as they reject it. Paul expresses how serious and weighty his ministry is here. He recognises that such a ministry is beyond human sufficiency.

It is God alone who is the sufficiency of Paul and his companions for their work. In 2 Corinthians chapter 3 verse 1 to 4 verse 6, Paul provides a deftly theological and richly intertextual defence of his apostolic credentials, which seem to have been called into question by his opponents at points.

To anyone who might suggest that he needs letters of recommendation, Paul counters with the fact that the Corinthian church itself is his letter of recommendation. It's a letter written by Christ himself on tablets of flesh, rather than on tablets of stone.

This alludes to the new covenant theme of God's writing on human hearts and replacing stone with flesh. In Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34, Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their guard, and they shall be my people.

[4 : 54] And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour, and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

And in Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 26 to 27, And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and be careful to obey my rules. This supports Paul's reference to himself and his missionary companions as ministers of the new covenant, of the life-giving spirit, rather than of the death-dealing law.

Richard Hayes observes of this. Paul's intertextual trope hints, in brief, that in the new covenant, incarnation eclipses inscription. The new covenant is enfleshed, rather than inscribed.

And its ministry centres not on texts, but on the spirit-empowered transformation of human community. Paul is not challenging scripture itself here. For Paul, scripture is a dynamically living and life-giving word.

[6 : 04] Rather, he is challenging any ministry that is merely one of a disembodied text, without the power to affect transformation. To elaborate his case, Paul turns to Exodus chapter 24, as a passage that provides a powerful illustration of the nature of the glory of the old covenant.

In Exodus chapter 34, verses 29 to 35, When Moses came down from Mount Sarniai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone, because he had been talking with God.

Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them.

Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sarniai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

Whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining.

[7 : 14] And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him. The Old Covenant and its ministry were not without glory. The face of Moses, the great mediator of the Old Covenant, radiated with such dazzling reflected glory that the Israelites could not bear to gaze at it.

However, this reflected Old Covenant glory pales in comparison with the surpassing glory of the New Covenant. The temporary and transitory glory of the Old Covenant is now being eclipsed by the enduring glory of the New.

Even if a ministry of condemnation displayed such glory, the ministry of New Covenant righteousness should be expected to exhibit an overwhelming splendour. Paul writes that Moses covered his countenance with a veil, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end or the telos of what was transitory.

The term telos has been taken by many to refer to the cessation of the supposedly fading glory of Moses' face. When Richard Hayes argues that we should interpret the term as referring rather to the goal or the purpose of the transitory covenant, he rewords Paul's argument in the passage as follows.

The veil on Moses' face hid from Israel the glory of God, which Moses beheld at Sinai, a glory that transfigured him. Israel could not bear looking at the transfigured person, and concentrated instead on the script that he gave them.

[8 : 37] That text, too, bears witness, in a more indirect or filtered manner, to the glory, to the person transfigured in the image of God, who is the true aim of the old covenant. For those who are fixated on the text as an end in itself, however, the text remains veiled.

But those who turn to the Lord are enabled to see through the text, to its telos, its true aim. For them the veil is removed, so that they, like Moses, are transfigured by the glory of God into the image of Jesus Christ, to whom Moses and the law had always, in a veiled fashion, pointed.

The old covenant, then, was a covenant of veils, hiding the glory of God, the veil of Moses, the veil of the tabernacle, the veil upon the law. The ministry of Moses, both the man and the text, was one of concealment, providing only glimpses of the glory that it harbored.

The glory was present, but was not manifest. The new covenant is a covenant of the removal of veils, the removal of the veil of the temple, the removal of the veil upon the text, and the unveiling of God's glory face in Jesus Christ.

It is also characterised by openness. What was formerly hidden and concealed is now declared freely. Paul's use of Moses in this chapter is a phenomenally dexterous deployment of biblical metaphor.

[9 : 55] It's a juxtaposition of similarity and dissimilarity to considerable illuminative effect. While drawing a sharp contrast between Old and New Covenant and their respective ministries, the brilliance of Paul's argument is seen in the way that he discloses the deep affinity between Moses and the new covenant, presenting Moses as a witness to the glory of Christ, anticipating the unveiling to come.

As Paul's argument unfolds, we begin to see that while Moses may be a symbol of veiling, more fundamentally he is a symbol of unveiling, a point that surfaces in verse 16.

Moses' act of entering God's presence and removing the veil becomes paradigmatic for the experience of Christian believers. We all, who with unveiled faiths look upon the reflected glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory.

However, what was intermittently experienced by Moses in the Old Covenant is fundamentally and enduringly characteristic of the new. When Moses turned to the Lord, this is an allusion to chapter 34 of Exodus, verses 34 to 35, he removed the veil from his face.

While the precise reference of the Lord might seem to be ambivalent here, without clear Christological meaning, in light of Paul's description of Christ in the verses that follow, the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, etc., I believe it's not inappropriate to give it full Christological weight.

[11 : 25] That is to say, Paul may be suggesting here that the one whose glory Moses saw was Christ himself. Paul's use of Exodus chapter 34, then, is not just a clever allegorical repurposing of the Old Testament text to illustrate a theological point, but is justified by the deep reality shared by Moses and New Covenant believers.

The glory that Moses saw was the glory face of the Son, the glory face that has been disclosed in Jesus Christ. As with Moses, those who turn to Christ, in repentance and faith, are transfigured by the sight of his glory, with the effect of renewing them into his image.

Meredith Klein has written, Glory is again to the fore when the scriptures speak of man's recreation and God's image. The renewal of the divine image in men is an impartation to them of the likeness of the archetypal glory of Christ.

The mode of the impartation of Christ's glory in image renewal is described according to various figurative models appropriate to Christ's identity, either as spirit lord or as second Adam.

Man's reception of the divine image from Christ, the glory presence, is depicted as a transforming vision of the glory and as an investiture with the glory. Moses is the Old Testament model for the former and Aaron for the latter.

[12 : 41] The end, or the telos, of the Old Covenant was the glorious renewal and transfiguration of humanity in the image and likeness of God.

Moses manifested this glory quite visually, but he had to veil it for a people who weren't ready for it. In Christ, we see both transfigured humanity and the glory face of God himself, which is the telos of all previous revelation.

There is a pivotal move in Paul's argument in verse 14, which Hayes describes as follows. In verse 13, Moses is the prophet and lawgiver who veils his own face.

In verse 15, Moses is the sacred text read in the synagogue. The single intervening transitional sentence tells us that the veil over the minds of the readers is the same veil that Moses put on his face.

How can that be so? Because Moses, the metaphor, is both man and text, and the narrative of the man's self-veiling is at the same time a story about the veiling of the text.

[13 : 54] A crucial implication of this is that the veiled glory of Moses is not just the glory of Moses the man, but also the glory of the Old Testament scriptures that he stands for.

Although Paul's earlier contrast between inscription and incarnation may have led some readers to expect that he was about to associate scripture with the veil concealing the transfigured humanity, he makes the critical move of associating scripture not with the veil, but with the glorious face of Moses that lay beneath it, having carefully developed the multi-layered metaphor of the veiled Moses, Paul's stage is now set for the dramatic unveiling.

Richard Hayes remarks again, The rhetorical effect of 2 Corinthians 3, verse 16 is exquisite, because it enacts an unveiling commensurate with the unveiling of which it speaks.

The text performs its trope in the reader no less than in the story, and the final elegant touch, the trope is performed precisely through a citation of Moses.

Moses' words are taken out of Exodus chapter 34, verse 34, unveiled and released into a new semantic world where immediately they shine and speak on several metaphorical levels at once.

[15 : 07] Thus, rather than merely stating a hermeneutical theory about the role of scripture in the new covenant, 2 Corinthians chapter 3, verses 12 to 18, enacts and exemplifies the transfigured reading that is the result of reading with the aid of the spirit.

In other words, Paul uses the example of Moses' veiled face as a text that can be unveiled to show us the glory of Christ beneath. Paul's argument, which has been steadily building throughout the chapter, now erupts into a magnificent crescendo.

The face of Moses, the face of the law, is no longer veiled when he turns, or when we turn, to the spirit Lord, the giver of liberty. For those who turn to Christ in repentance and faith, the scripture is now seen to be the mirror in which we perceive the glory of the Lord himself.

Through gazing steadfastly at the glory revealed in that mirror, we ourselves are transformed into the likeness of the one revealed there by the spirit of Christ, from glory to glory.

As our reading of scripture is transformed in this new covenant manner, we ourselves are transformed by our reading to bear the same image of the glory of Christ that we perceive within its mirror.

[16 : 17] The telos, or the purpose of the scripture, the transformation of humanity, is thereby achieved in us as the veil is removed from our hearts, enabling us to perceive the glory of the Lord that fills it.

The figural and Christological reading of scripture that Paul exemplifies here involves a sort of transfiguration of the text as the glory of the Lord is encountered within it.

What had formerly been veiled is disclosed and opened up in Christ, revealing his radiance throughout all its pages. The mirror of God's glory precedes a greater revelation yet to come, when we will see Christ face to face.

The transformation that we currently experience is a partial one. It's produced by a mediated encounter. It will be surpassed by the direct vision which it anticipates and promises.

Seeing Christ himself will be the means of our transformation. As 1 John 3, verse 2 says, When he is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

[17 : 18] There are times in our experience when we witness something truly and arrestingly beautiful. Some natural sight, for instance, that takes our breath away. Or a piece of music that is truly remarkable and transcendent.

And on those occasions, we are transfigured by the beauty that we witness. Our faces open up. Cynicism, fear and doubt and distrust wash away. And we light up with joy, awe, wonder, hope and love.

And we start to see things around us in a very different light, with a radiant glow to them. This is but a limited illustration of the way that we will be transfigured when we see the glory of Christ himself.

It gives us the faintest glimpse of the great transfiguration that awaits humanity and all the creation in the age to come. And all of this is produced by the Spirit who communicates a freedom from God to us.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which Paul discloses the intense interrelation between the messengers of the Gospel, the content of the Gospel and the recipients of the Gospel in this passage?