

**2 Corinthians 3:4-18**  
**(Exodus 34:29-35; John 1:9-14)**  
**“The Letter Kills, but the Spirit Gives Life”**

## **Introduction**

Paul has just used several pictures to remind us that our life in Christ will probably not appear victorious to the world around us, except to those who are also being brought to life through Christ. We are in this world's triumphal procession, not as victors riding in the chariot, but as prisoners led behind to be sacrificed in the arena. The fragrance of our sacrifice is the smell of death to the world, but the aroma of life to those who are being saved. And the letters of recommendation that will finally matter in the day of the Lord are not written with ink, but rather are written on the hearts of those whom God has entrusted to us.

But now, he changes the image to remind us that what awaits us is nothing less than glory. We do not face a final defeat, but a glorious consummation of history; and the reality of that victory and the glory of our victorious Lord, are meant to shine into our lives and reflect from us even now. While the world watches its triumphal processions that in the end lead only to death, our eyes are to be fixed on the glory that is coming, a glory that will never fade away.

Sadly, such talk is far removed from the experience of many Christians. Many of us approach the Scriptures, many of us approach worship, with our hearts and minds veiled. We wonder why this invitation to experience the reality – the presence, power and glory of God – is so far removed from our experience. In these verses, Paul makes three crucially important points about the essential difference between the old and new covenants and about the relationship between God's Word and God's Spirit. And, as we shall see, these points raise a question that is key to understanding and experiencing life in Christ.

## **Body**

- 1. God's Word cannot regenerate us (that is, give us new life) apart from God's Spirit working in us (3:3-8).**

*Only God's Spirit can make us new by giving us new hearts. This is what theologians call regeneration, or being born again.*

This is the thought behind Paul's contrast between letters engraved on stone and letters written on human hearts. Paul is drawing on several Old Testament Scriptures: obviously, we think immediately of the Ten Commandments inscribed by the finger of God on tablets of stone.

But Paul also has in mind the words of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Each uses language close to Paul's in describing a new covenant that God will establish with his people. Jeremiah says, "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33). Using similar language, Ezekiel describes the new covenant in these words: "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them. I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19). And again he says,

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

The key thought is this: when God's Word comes to a person who has not been made new by God's Spirit, it is like a seed falling on stone: it will not penetrate and bring life. The stony heart must be made flesh; it must beat with the passion of God's own life within us for us to receive it.

## **2. God's Word cannot justify us (that is, make us right with God) apart from God's Spirit working in us (3:9-11).**

*Only God's Spirit can remove the sentence of condemnation under which each of us is born, and replace it with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. This is what theologians call justification: that is, having all of our sin and guilt exchanged for the righteousness of Jesus Christ.*

It is interesting how effectively Paul can with just a few words capture the entire scope of salvation. He describes first what God's Spirit does *in* us by giving us a new heart, a heart that hates evil and desires the things of God, a heart that repents of sin and turns in faith to Jesus Christ.

Now he describes what happens as a result of that turning toward the Lord in faith. We are not only forgiven, but have the righteousness of Jesus Christ credited, as it were, to our account.

Most of us, I think, fail to apprehend this great truth in such a way that it brings us proper confidence toward God and toward people. Paul is being challenged here and responds that his confidence is entirely in what Christ has done for him. And if you are God's child, and are overwhelmed by your own tendency to wander from the Lord, to love him half-heartedly and to be slow to keep his commandments, then realize that his love for you and his

acceptance of you as his child rests solely on what has been done for you by his Son.

**3. God's Word cannot sanctify us (that is, make us spiritually mature) apart from God's Spirit working in us (3:12-18).**

*Only God's Spirit can work deeply in us the slow, lifetime process of becoming more Christ-like. This is what theologians call sanctification: that is, conformity to the character of Jesus.*

While we are only accepted and loved and made competent in Christ, God does aim to renew us from the inside out. As we gaze at him, his aim to transform us "into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (3:18).

This is why it is so important not to over emphasize our beginnings in Christ: we are not meant to remain spiritual babies forever. The Christian life is meant to be a life of ever-increasing conformity to Christ. It doesn't just happen, but requires the same sort of diligence that we expect in any area of growth, from the development of a well-formed and healthy body, to the educating of our minds. So, also, our souls must be tended.

**4. The obvious question, then, is this: How are we to experience this empowering work of the Holy Spirit in us?**

*The key is this: the meaning of the unveiled face.*

Our hope of experiencing the glory of the new covenant blessings of new life, forgiveness, and conformity to Christ, rests on our comprehension of this point. Our salvation consists of union with Christ, in which Christ gives us his Spirit, and his Spirit unites us to him. Apart from this divine work of grace, God's Word remains to us a dead letter, able only to convict but powerless to save. It is God's Spirit that makes God's Word "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12).

Why do you study God's Word? Do you want it to comfort you, to keep you, to help you, to make you wise or good or strong? It may do all of those things, yet never make you new, and if you approach God's Word only for these reasons, then you approach it with a veiled face.

The Israelites wanted Moses to veil his face because they did not want to see even the reflected glory of God. His face was uncovered while he spoke God's Word to them, but then he would veil his face, because even the reflected glory of God frightened them. It demanded too much, offered too much. They

wanted to keep things dim and manageable. *They wanted everything that God had to give them except an intimate relationship with him.*

A few commentators also argue that Paul makes an additional point here, that Moses veiled his face because he did not want the Israelites to see that the glory on his face was fading away. If that interpretation is true, it illustrates the tendency we all have to talk better than we live, to speak God's Word as faithfully as we are able and contend for truth, but then to try to cover the truth about ourselves, that our lives do not always shine as brightly as when we are speaking of the things we most believe.

However, the clear meaning of the text, and the central point that Paul makes is that the old covenant believer possessed God's Word, but not God's Spirit, and so lived under a sense of condemnation and death, relieved only by the types and shadows of the Temple service and sacrifice. But we, who have been given the Spirit of the risen, conquering Christ as our possession, are able to live in the light of the glory of God and to reflect that glory to those around us. Whatever else that means, it at least means this: the love with which we have been loved has captured us and is transforming us into people who love others as Christ has loved us.

## **Conclusion**

Why are we here this morning? When we study the Scriptures, what are seeking? When we come to the Lord's Supper, what hunger are we looking to satisfy? Is it to get God to bless our plans for the coming week? Is it to get help with a particular problem we are facing? Do we come seeking healing, or strength or wisdom? Make no mistake, we come for all these reasons, and the Lord receives us even as Jesus did during his earthly ministry. Yet how many were healed only at one level, but failed to realize the real gift he had come to give. How many today are oblivious of the fact that the living God invites us to know him, to walk with him, to practice the intimacy of his presence wherever we are. Are our faces still veiled in his presence?

How is the veiled removed? "Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away ... because only in Christ is it taken away" (3:16,14b). We cannot turn to him without turning away from sin, rebellion and self-worship. When we turn away from the fading glory of what this world counts as treasure, and turn to him whose glory is from everlasting to everlasting, we begin to be transformed into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another. We increasingly become those whose lives reflect the glory of the living God. Is this what you desire today? I can tell you on the authority of God's Word that this is what lies beneath all of your other longings. As Augustine saw clearly so very long ago, "You, Lord, have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find they rest in you."