

The Glory of the New Covenant

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[0 : 00] Well, it's great that you can join us today, whether here or at home. My name is Mark. It's a great joy to have you join us and sit under God's Word.

Now, remember when there's a new invention, when that happens, do you remember the very original model of that invention? So, for example, the original television, like, I think that's pretty original.

Very first model. Or the original Apple computer. Or the original mobile phone. Now, some of you might even be old enough to remember when it first came out.

And thankfully, some of you are not here. Otherwise, I could point you out, but you're safe at home. But when that happened, even though it sort of seems rather old now, there were lots of oohs and ahs, weren't they?

Compared to the TVs and the computers and the smartphones today, they're hardly anything impressive. But back then, it was considered revolutionary.

[1 : 12] People were amazed at what it could do. You know, the people who had them with the envy. Had people coming from everywhere to your house to watch TV.

Imagine. I suppose that was the original watch parties, probably. Well, the same could be said about the old covenant, which God gave to Moses at Mount Sinai. When it was first given, as we saw in Exodus today, it was attended with much glory.

Three times in that passage, it recorded that Moses' face was radiant, which is what Paul picks up on here. So in verse 29 of Exodus 34, we read, When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant, because he's spoken with the Lord.

When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near to him. And then again, if you skip to verse 34, we read, And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant.

His face was simply reflecting God's glory by being in his presence. But the reason Moses was in God's presence was to receive the law, God's word.

[2 : 34] That's why when he speaks to the people, it's always to tell them what he had heard. So a critical aspect of the covenant was to obey God's commands.

And hence, Paul associates the glory reflected on Moses' face with the covenant and the law. And as we see in Exodus 34, when Moses spoke to the people to give them the law, his face was still radiant with that glory, the glory of God.

And so Paul ascribes glory to the old covenant. After all, it was indeed glorious, for it came from God. It's associated with his word and his presence.

And such was the magnificence of that glory that Moses had to put a veil over his face, so as not to blind the people otherwise. And so what we're meant to do in response to the old covenant is actually to go, ooh, and wow.

And yet when you line it up alongside the new covenant, it's like putting the latest LED TV against the original TV, or the iPhone 13 against the original mobile phone.

[3 : 47] There's simply no comparison. But you see, the glory of the new covenant, as Paul is now going to describe, is not seen visually.

Not yet at least. Which is why Paul has to explain why it's a better covenant, or more glorious. Well, how is it more glorious? Well, Paul makes three points from verses 7 to 11.

Each follows a similar pattern. He names a particular attribute of the old covenant, and then he says the new is correspondingly superior to it. And so if the old covenant is still glorious, despite being inferior, then how much more the new should be even more glorious?

So verse 7, we read, Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that this Christ could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?

If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness? For what was glorious has no glory now, in comparison with the surpassing glory.

[5 : 01] And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts? So the first comparison, if you look at your outline, is between the ministry that brought death compared with the ministry of the Spirit which brings life.

This we saw last week with the words that Steph reminded us of, the latter kills, but the Spirit brings life. How so? Because the law brings only God's requirements, but the Spirit gives us the power to fulfill them.

As a consequence, the second comparison is made. The ministry of the old covenant brought condemnation because Israel failed to obey the law. But the ministry of the Spirit brings righteousness, first because Christ himself fulfills the law on our behalf, but also with the Spirit now in our lives, we have the law written in our hearts.

We obey the law by faith rather than as a mere obligation. And lastly, the third thing, Paul says that the old covenant is transitory, whereas the new covenant is here to stay.

It will last. Now, the old covenant may have felt permanent, given that it was in place for thousands of years. But in God's plan, it was only ever transitory.

[6 : 26] It was there to prepare Israel for the real thing when it comes. It was only a shadow of the ministry of the new covenant. And when the new finally comes, then the old passes away.

And yet, despite the limitations of the old covenant, it was so glorious that the people could not look steadily onto Moses' face.

And so, if that's the case, Paul says, how much more glorious would the new covenant be? It's sort of similar, if some of you have probably seen on TV, those naval and battlefield training exercises that, you know, the defense forces sometimes conduct.

You know that when they fire those live ammunition, no real targets are destroyed. They're just shooting blanks, really. But there's still a lot of shock and awe, isn't there?

And so, when you imagine, wow, that's just mock battle. What would a real battle look and sound like? Even more shocking and awesome, right?

[7 : 32] And that's what Paul is saying with the new covenant. The new covenant is going to be so much more glorious than the old, even though the old is so glorious that we can't even look onto Moses' face.

Except, when you think about the new covenant, and you think about Paul, the minister of the new covenant, that's not what it looks like, is it? If you put Paul side by side with some of the old covenant preachers, or even against the establishment in Jerusalem, the temple, how imposing the temple was if you were there, and the so-called esteem of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, and how they spoke and dressed and all that, where is the glory in Paul's ministry?

Where is the glory in his suffering and hardship? Where is the glory, given that he says he's being pushed to the despair of life? Well, as I said before, the entire book of 2 Corinthians revolves around the paradox of the Christian faith.

God's power in human weakness, as it says on the slide there. So Paul now proceeds to show where the glory of the new covenant lies. Not in the visible glowing of someone's face, but in the transforming power of the new covenant.

And so this is what we find in the next section, the last section, verses 12 to 18. But Paul cleverly uses the idea of Moses' veil to explain it.

[9 : 01] He says that in Christ, the veil is taken away. The veil, you see, is that piece of clothing that symbolically signaled Israel's failure to truly understand what's at the heart of the covenant.

They hear the words of the law. They may even know the commands by heart. As many of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law will, but deep down, they didn't get it.

They didn't see that the way, they didn't see that the old covenant was really pointing to the new covenant. They didn't see that it is in Jesus that the fulfillment of the law would come.

They didn't see that what's required isn't self-righteousness, but faith and repentance. So at the heart of it, they didn't get it. And so Paul says that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the

preaching by the apostles of this good news, the gospel, in the belief of those who hear and by the Spirit believe in Jesus, this veil is finally lifted.

They can hear now the words of the old covenant and truly get it. Together, all of this, Paul calls the ministry of the new covenant. And this is the ministry that we each have been the recipient of.

[10:19] For when we believe in Jesus, we participate in this new covenant. Firstly, as recipients, then afterwards, when we minister, as ministers of the new covenant as we serve the Lord.

And so, Paul then now talks about the impact that this has on us. The first impact, as Paul puts in verse 14, is that our minds are illumined.

In verse 14, it says that their minds were doubt when the old covenant is read, talking about Israel. Not that they cannot understand it intellectually, but rather that it did not produce the faith that God sought.

So they got it, in one sense, but they didn't get it, because it did not produce faith that God required. Now again, if you look at some of the heroes of the faith in the Old Testament, it doesn't mean that no one in Israel had that faith.

After all, if you read, you know, rather to the Hebrews, he commends some of them, doesn't he? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, these had a living faith in God.

[11:27] And yet, as a whole, Israel, the people, didn't have that faith. And this was particularly so for the people in Jesus' time. For if they did, and of course some of them did, like the apostles, they would recognize Jesus as the Messiah, which was revealed in the Old Testament.

So this illumination of the mind that Paul speaks of here is the understanding of faith. It's the ability to hear God's word and see how it truly applies as God intends.

And friends, this only occurs by the work of the Spirit in our lives. Every time we open the Bible, as we're doing now, we need the Spirit to open our eyes to understand it.

And so if you're listening to this right now and you're not yet a Christian, if you're struggling with who Jesus is and what He demands of you, then even though you might not know if God exists or not or who Jesus really is, then I encourage you to say to Him, God, this may be a short and a dark, but if you are there, then I humble myself before you and submit to your Spirit so that you can lift the veil from my eyes.

Help me to understand who you are and give me the faith to believe in your Son, Jesus. If that's you, then let me encourage you to pray that.

[12:51] As for the rest of us, well, we're not different either, are we? Each time we read the Bible, whether as a group or as an individual, we need prayerfully to recognize that we need the Spirit to work so that our minds are illumined.

It's not about how smart you are or how hardworking you work on the text. It's about asking God to illumine your mind by His Spirit. And when the Spirit works, then the second impact is that we're free.

We have freedom in the Spirit. Now the reference to this is in verse 17. Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Now this can be a little bit confusing at first. I think the Lord here is a reference to God. God has revealed Himself in the Old Testament under the Old Covenant. And as it turns out, He's the Triune God.

But to the people of the Old Covenant, they knew Him as the Lord, Yahweh. Now in the New Covenant, Paul says that the Lord comes to us in the person of the Spirit.

[13:57] That is, the Spirit helps us to know the Son Jesus and through Him the Father. But it is the ministry of the Spirit in our lives that enables this.

If you like, our experience of God is in the person of the Spirit. And so I think this is what is meant by the phrase, the Lord is the Spirit.

It's not saying that only the Holy Spirit is the Lord, but that our encounter with the Lord, the Triune God, is through the Spirit. It is the Spirit that unites us as Christ's body.

It is the Spirit that draws us into fellowship with God. Hence, the grace that we say sometimes at the end of the service, it's actually taken from the very end of this letter.

It says, May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit being with us, fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

[14:59] It's such a contrast, isn't it, to the old covenant where the people are so terrified of the glory of God that they tell Moses, Look, you go and meet Him, we don't want Him too close because we're afraid.

But now, by contrast, with the Holy Spirit, God is among us and with us and in us. You know, God can't get any closer as it were.

And as Paul now says, where the Spirit of the Lord is and He is now among us, I have to say, there is freedom. Again, this is not a personal freedom or autonomy.

Not like Mel Gibson on the next slide in Braveheart shouting freedom before they're all charged to their death. Instead, it's about being able to hear the promises of the new covenant and instead of being condemned by our failure to obey it, actually finding joy and hope because Christ has fulfilled it for us and we can obey Him.

And so for us as Christians, when we read the Word, it's a very freeing thing. We take delight in God's Word. There is a sense of anticipation and excitement when we come to study God's Word.

[16:16] Now I know MasterChef isn't on at the moment so there's a lack of MasterChef. Actually, Celebrity is still on. Anyway, but many of you would be familiar with the Mystery Box Challenge, right?

For some contestants it's the dreaded Mystery Box. Have I got a slide of that? They're afraid of what they might find under the cover and what the challenge is going to be.

But for others, they love the Mystery Box Challenge because it allows them to be inventive, you know, show their creativity, push them to new culinary heights.

And that's the way for those of us who have freedom in the Spirit, isn't it? We are not afraid of lifting that box or opening God's Word to see what new heights the Spirit will take us to in our understanding and our obedience.

How we will grow in maturity and understanding as the Spirit illumines our mind. What insights will God give us, you know, for our lives when we open God's Word? How will He do that impossible thing in our lives and make us godly and Christ-like, which He will?

[17:24] That's the freedom that we have when we are in the Spirit, we have the Spirit, and when we come to God through His Word. And that's the third and final impact that Paul refers to here.

For as we gaze into the Lord's glory discovered in His Word, then the Spirit transforms us into God's image. That is, after all, God's intention with us in creation.

All the way back in Genesis, if you recall, God made us male and female in His image. That image got tarnished by sin when we rebelled against Him, but now in Christ, God redeems us and He restores us back to that image, even better than that, actually.

Because this image is now an inner transformation. It's not just superficial or merely natural, but spiritual and supernatural. Because by God's Spirit, we take on God's character.

And this is a radical transformation. We are talking about holiness and godliness, such that we respond with righteousness, even under pressure, or continue in faith and dependence on God, even through suffering.

[18:39] How is that all possible when humanly we may be pushed to a breaking point? Well, only because it comes from the Lord, Paul says, who is the Spirit. It comes by the sustaining and transforming power of the Spirit.

And at the end of the day, can you see then where the glory of the new covenant lies? not in the face of, you know, simply Moses, but in each of us, actually, as we are transformed into God's image with ever-increasing glory.

And here's the comparison with the old covenant. When the people looked into Moses' face, radiant from being in the Lord's presence though it was, it was veiled. And as it were, even as they looked, nothing happened.

Their minds were dull. Now, the glory didn't transfer over, did it? On the other hand, when we read in verse 18, as we now gaze into the Lord's glory through the knowledge of His Son, by the Spirit, through the Word, when we respond with faith, we are transformed into God's image.

And as we do, the glory of God rubs off onto us. We become radiant with God's glory. glory. And Paul will say more of this next week.

[19:59] It's not that, you know, now as I look on you all, you have this shiny face, physical shine. I know when I was a, you know, teenager, I was shiny because of all the pimples and perspiration and oils on my face.

It's not that kind of glory. Although I have to say, some of you naturally have a cheerful disposition, so perhaps there's a sort of radiance there. But this glory is seen rather in our faith and in our maturity.

And so, look around. I know some of you here are masks, all of you here are masks, but you're back home in your watch parties. Have a look around because what you're seeing is the glory of God at work.

It ought to be an encouragement and a joy for you that when you minister to others, when they start demonstrating faith and godliness, that's a little of God's glory radiating through with their lives. It's like that aroma of life that Paul talked about last week or the letters of commendation from Christ, not last week, two weeks ago, or next week, the treasures in clay jars as we shall see.

[21 : 10] But all of that is the power of God shining through, isn't it? Even when it appears to be within unassuming vessels like us. So what is Paul's response in all this?

Well, he says all the way back in verse 12, he's bold and so should we be. And back in verse 4 last week, he had confidence in his mystery and so should we.

We don't lose heart, but we press on in what we're doing as a church, as individuals, because in the gospel of Jesus, we have the real thing.

we have a lasting treasure. We have something that grows in us, the glory of God. So let's keep drawing closer to it and let's keep spreading the word so that others can do the same.

Let's pray. Father, thank you that in Christ the veil is taken away. We can see you in your full glory by the Spirit. Thank you that through him we are being transformed into your glory in ever-increasing measure.

[22 : 20] Help us not to lose heart, but to maintain our confidence in the ministry of the new covenant. In the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.