

The Glory of the Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] You may like to have open the Bibles at page 938 to the passage from 2 Corinthians, the end of chapter 2 and into chapter 3.

And let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your powerful word and pray that your powerful spirit will write it in our hearts so that we may bear fruit to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we ask this in his name. Amen. Well, just up from the Colosseum in Rome, there is an arch. In fact, there are a couple of arches.

There's one just near the Colosseum, Constantine's Arch. But a little bit further up into what is called the Forum, the old ruins of Rome, there is another arch. And it's a very significant arch.

It's the sort of arch that you could easily walk by and just sort of pay cursory attention to without realising its significance for the Bible. I think it's a slightly smaller arch than the one right next to the Colosseum.

[1 : 0 1] But it's significant for biblical history because it commemorates the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD under the Roman general Titus. And on this arch, you can see prisoners, Jewish prisoners in procession.

And one of them is carrying a great big menorah candlestick, the seven-branched candlestick that is a typical symbol of Judaism. And represents, in effect, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 AD.

Now, the Romans are no different from other nations. They would have processions to commemorate great victories. And in their processions, they would have their soldiers, banners, there'd be music, there'd be incense burning as an offering to the gods.

They would probably have a few token prisoners as well who'd be part of the procession. We do it in Australia, but we call it sport. So we have ticker-tape parades of victorious football teams and all the other sort of majorly consequential things that happen in our country.

But defeating Jerusalem, this arch shows us, was regarded as a very significant victory for ancient Rome. They didn't think, oh, this is just a little tinpot town that we've just knocked over.

[2 : 2 0] They thought this was so significant that they built this arch and had this great procession, of course, to commemorate it. Those who were here last Sunday morning will remember that Paul was almost in despair of his life.

He said, I'm in anguish, I'm in distress, I'm suffering, I'm afflicted on every side. Almost to the point of despairing of life. And we could almost be excused for reading that Paul is conceding defeat, in effect.

Giving up as a Christian minister and preacher of the gospel. As though it's all too difficult and all too hard. But that is not, in fact, the case. And when we get to today's passage, we realise the bigger perspective that Paul has.

Even though he's suffered, and even though he's in affliction and anguish, in all sorts of emotional ways, physical ways, and so on, Paul sees the progress of the gospel that he's such a significant part of as being like a victory procession.

It's almost as though he sees the gospel moving from Jerusalem up to Antioch, into what we call Turkey today, then into Europe finally, and to Philippi, and then down in Greece to Athens and Corinth, as though it's one great big long victory procession.

[3 : 41] He says in verse 14 of chapter 2, Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him.

This victory procession image that Paul uses doesn't have incense burning as a fragrant offering, but rather the gospel itself is like a fragrant offering. And the preacher and minister evangelist of the gospel is actually the fragrant offering of the gospel to others.

The smelly preacher, so to speak, with the fragrance of the gospel for other people. Now aromas and smells and fragrances are often quite powerful.

It's why we spend so much money on aftershaves and perfumes and all those sorts of things. It's why people get excited about aromatherapy, whatever that is.

I've yet to work that one out. Sometimes smells evoke strong memories. Just recently I was on holidays in Arabia for a few days, and as I walked back one time to the hotel, passed some rubbish bins at the back of some, or next to sort of coffee shops and restaurants, and the smell reminded me of school camps somehow.

[5 : 05] I'm still not quite sure what it was, but on two separate occasions I walked that way, and both times I thought, there's something about this smell that reminds me of our school camps down at Phillip Island. Whatever it was, the rubbish.

Of course, some aromas make your mouth water. So you walk down Ligon Street or something like that just before dinner time, and you've got the nice smells coming out of all the restaurants and cafes and coffee and so on.

Of course, people differ which aromas they actually like and what different aromas do for them. And in these verses, as Paul moves from the victory procession to the aroma image, he recognises that the same aroma of the gospel that he, in a sense, himself carries as the preacher of the gospel has two different impacts on people.

So he says in verse 15, we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. That is, we are the same aroma by being preachers of the gospel.

But the effect differs. Verse 16, to the one, a fragrance from death to death, to the other, a fragrance from life to life.

[6 : 20] You see, the gospel actually has very different and virtually diametrically opposite effects on people. The same gospel will lead those who are being saved, those who respond with faith, it will lead them to life.

But for those who reject the gospel, who meet the gospel with unbelief, it actually, in a sense, confirms their destiny towards eternal death rather than eternal life.

The same aroma is the aroma of life to some, the stench of death to others. You see, the Christian gospel divides humanity in two.

There's no middle ground of uncertainty or doubt. Either it's met with faith that leads to eternal life, or the Christian gospel is met with unbelief, which confirms people's destiny towards death, unless, of course, they change later.

And that's why Paul says at the end of verse 16, who is sufficient for these things? That is, this is such a weighty responsibility to be a minister of the gospel because the impact is eternal in its consequence with either life or eternal death.

- [7 : 43] Now, part of this is the argument of Paul in response to those who are seeking to criticize him or sideline him or diminish his role as a minister and apostle.
- And as we saw last week, there are those who are coming to Corinth who are claiming that they are, in fact, teaching the truth and that Paul, in fact, well, he's not got it right.
- And so Paul here is defending himself, but at the same time teaching what is actually the ministry of the gospel properly. Who is sufficient for these things?
- He says, what a weight of responsibility. Therefore, in the light of that, he says, in verse 17, we're not peddlers of God's word like so many.
- And what he's referring to there are those who might be orators or speakers who would travel around the Greco-Roman Empire and charge money for what they say.
- [8 : 42] And often what they say is just full of hot air, really. Sort of displays of rhetoric, philosophy, and oratory. And people would pay. They'd earn their living. They'd charge money for that.
- Also, the word peddler, which has got a very negative connotation, has got the sense of somebody who might trade in things, but with the sense of trading in something that's been tampered with.
- It's a bit like when you go to Bangkok or some of these big Asian markets and they'll have genuine fake Rolex or genuine fake Nike shoes or something like that.
- I mean, they're not the real deal. They might even be made in the same factory, some people claim. But they're not officially those brand products. They're cheap imitations. And very often these shops make no disguise of the fact that they are genuine fakes.
- They're not the real thing. Or it's the sense of peddling is of somebody who will come around and sell you, say, wine, but it's actually been diluted with water.
- [9 : 47] It's not the proper product. Or they'll sell you salt, but it's actually got chalk mixed in with it as well. That's the sort of comparison that Paul is drawing in this verse.
- He's saying, I'm not coming around peddling a gospel for my own gain. I'm not selling it. I'm not charging you to speak the gospel. But nor am I peddling you a diluted or tampered gospel.
- I'm not bending it to win people's favor. It's too weighty a responsibility to preach the real gospel. Because the real gospel divides humanity into two to life and to death.
- So Paul says, rather than being a peddler, in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.
- That's the weight of responsibility for a Christian preacher, in effect. As if they are standing in God's very presence accountable to God himself for preaching the true gospel.
- [10 : 51] Not tampering it, diluting it, not watering it down, not adulterating it with other substances, and not doing it for personal gain either. Often when somebody would travel in the ancient world, often perhaps as a speaker or orator or just a general traveller or trader, they would carry with them a letter of recommendation.
- So if they've come from Athens to Corinth, they might have a letter of testimony from somebody in Athens saying, you know, Fred Bloggs, he's a speaker, a philosopher, he's a good man, listen to him. Or something to that effect.
- When I went to England to live 15 years ago to do my PhD, I took with me a letter of recommendation from the Archbishop of Melbourne so that I would be licensed as a minister as it turned out in the Diocese of Gloucester in England.
- And even though I could have rolled up to the bishop's office with a clerical collar on or something like that or maybe even shown him an ordination certificate, actually to have a letter of recommendation is what was needed as a mark of being in good standing in the Diocese of Melbourne.

Well, that would have happened in the ancient world as well. It still happens today, of course. It seems that some are attacking Paul for not having such a letter of recommendation. As though they're saying to the Corinthians, you Christians, you've been beguiled by this Paul.

[12 : 13] I mean, he didn't even come to you with a letter of recommendation. So Paul begins chapter 3 in response to that criticism. He says, are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we?

You yourselves are our letter written on our hearts to be known and read by all. Paul is saying, I don't need a letter of recommendation from somebody in Jerusalem or Antioch or wherever.

You yourselves, you Corinthians, you're the letter. If you want to see whether, in effect, God has stamped my ministry, look at yourselves.

Paul was the one who started the church in Corinth, remember. It's been a troublesome church and there's been correspondence to and fro subsequent to him starting that church.

But he's saying, in effect, you Corinthians are believers. The work of God is evident in your life. That's the evidence that I'm a preacher of the gospel. That's my letter of recommendation.

[13 : 21] That's actually what matters most. Not a bit of paper, but seeing the evidence of God at work through me in your lives is what he's saying to the church in Corinth.

I don't need a letter. You yourselves, your church, the church in Corinth for all its problems is in effect my testimonial. So he goes on in verse 3 and says, and you show that you are a letter of Christ prepared by us.

It's actually, notice how he says it's not a letter by us. He's a minister who's been an agent of that, but it's actually you are a letter of Christ.

That is, it's Christ's work in you, not even Paul's work that testifies to the validity of Paul's ministry. An issue that he'll develop in verses that follow. Written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God.

See, what matters is not a bit of paper that says you were baptized or married in this church or confirmed or something like that. Not a letter to say you're a member of a church. But in God's eyes, what matters most is that Christ has worked in their hearts.

[14 : 28] That the letter is written not with ink, but on their hearts by the spirit of God, the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what Paul is referring to.

And Paul has confidence about them. He says, such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us.

Our competence 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, but the spirit gives life.

Now, most of us would say that Paul was a highly competent minister of the gospel. His track record is astonishing. The churches that he started through modern day Turkey, Greece, and the ones that he pastored later on in Rome and so on.

The letters that he wrote which stand in scripture itself. There's no doubt about the competence of Paul. But Paul says, I'm not claiming a competence of myself.

[15 : 33] This is not a boast about me. It's like as we saw last Sunday morning. My boast is in God's work. Any competence I have comes from God. Notice that Paul doesn't move too far into a sort of false modesty and say, I'm not competent at all.

He recognises that there is competence but it comes from God. He acknowledges that but he doesn't boast in himself. That's a very humbling lesson I think for preachers and ministers.

It's humbling because in effect it's God's work that does anything that's of lasting value. Not the preacher, the pastor, the minister, the vicar, whatever.

So I find that a very humbling lesson to remember. that any competence that I have is actually given by God. Any competence that any of us have in Christian life or ministry is actually God's gift.

Not so much to us as to the church as a whole. And so the glory goes to God. It's also a liberating message I find as a preacher. So that though it doesn't absolve me of responsibility to study hard and do the best I can and preach as well as I can and so on, in the end what matters is God's work not mine.

[16 : 52] And so that's liberating. It doesn't all become my burden in a sense as a preacher and pastor. But also for those of us who are just members of the church it's a timely reminder too that our faith depends on God's work in us not on a particular minister or assistant minister or youth minister or pastor our reliance is on God and the person is simply in a sense the object or the channel of God's ministry to us and God will still minister and channel ministry to us regardless of the person that's involved and regardless of their competence or lack of competence as well.

well this discussion by Paul as he's in a sense expounding the nature of his ministry and the validity of it because God's worked through it leads him into a slightly different issue but one that again responds to some of the criticisms levelled against him.

It seems from this letter and we'll see it more clearly later in the letter that those who've come to Corinth and are trying to diminish Paul's role and say we are the apostles not Paul they're ones who are running a sort of what we might call a back to Moses program that is it seems that they have a much stronger or higher view that the Old Testament is remaining binding over believers and so the law of Moses is how we are meant to live and so in a sense it's putting down the work of Christ and sidelining that Paul now having said about the validity of his ministry in a sense moves naturally on to maybe in a subtle way deal with that sort of issue as well as he in a sense unfolds the nature of Old Testament and New Testament and how they relate together in Christian ministry he says he says then at the end of verse 6 the letter kills but the spirit gives life now we need to be very careful here that what he means by the letter he doesn't mean the

Old Testament as though it's bad and it kills he doesn't mean in itself the law of Moses in the Old Testament as though that itself is bad and kills he doesn't necessarily mean or he doesn't really mean either that we live under the letter of the law as living under the spirit of the law as though they're different things sometimes people use those sorts of expressions that's not it either the difference that he's making what he's saying is that the whole ministry of the law of God in the Old Testament actually only leads ultimately to death not because it is bad or it is evil or anything like that but because human beings are sinful that is the law of the Old Testament actually exposes our sin but is powerless to deal with it and that's where it's the law of God's spirit that actually does what the Old Testament can't do well let's see how

Paul explains this in the next paragraph in verse seven he writes and he's speaking here again of the ministry of death the ministry of preaching in effect simply the law of Moses but not the law of Moses itself it's rather that whole ministry and he's referring back here to the first reading we had today to Exodus chapter 34 Moses and Israel at Mount Sinai receiving all the laws and the Ten Commandments he says he says if the ministry of death chiseled in letters on stone tablets that is referring to the Ten Commandments written by God on stone came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses face because the glory of his face a glory now set aside or abolished or fading let me just explain what's being said here in the Old Testament Moses was in the presence of God receiving the law and came down the mountain his face shone with the sort of reflected glory of God the word glory is the sort of shining that comes from a manifestation of

[21 : 16] God's presence so Mount Sinai was covered with a cloud that symbolized the glory of God and then Moses face shone with a sort of reflection of the glory of God what Paul is saying that in the Old Testament the giving of God's law is actually symbolized in glory it's actually an expression of God's glory it's not a bad thing it's a glorious thing in effect and we see that back in the Old Testament as Moses face shone when he came back down the mountain and met with the Israelites to pass on to them the glory of the law the Old Testament you see is glorious but then we find three statements in verses that follow how much more glorious in effect is the ministry of the New Testament that's in effect the comparison it's not bad good comparison Old Testament bad New Testament good it's not Moses bad Jesus good it's Old Testament glorious New Testament even more glorious so see verse eight the first of these comparisons how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory that is the

Old Testament ministry came in glory how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory here the contrast is between the ministry of death and the ministry of the Spirit the one that leads to death and the one that leads to life and then in verse nine another comparison if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation much how much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory now here the contrast is between the words condemnation that is the Old Testament leads us to condemnation it tells us that we fail God's standards we don't love God with all our heart and we don't love our neighbor as ourself we know that in the light of those two standards let alone the rest that we fall short of God's glory we stand condemned if that ministry is glorious the word condemnation is now contrasted with in our translation justification literally the word righteousness now the word here is a deeply theological word we often use the word justify as though it gives an excuse for something that's done but in theological language to be justified by God means to be declared righteous our sins forgiven it is a wonderful word rich in theological meaning so don't sort of think in terms of justification as though

I've got to give justification for something I've done wrong that's not what it means really rather that God declares us just or righteous in his eyes our sins forgiven and that comes through the death of Jesus in our place on the cross all of that is suggested by just that one word so Paul is saying the Old Testament is a glorious ministry even if it doesn't actually do anything powerful to save us it leads us to condemnation even more glorious is the New Testament ministry of the death of Jesus for us and the giving of his spirit that ministry is even more glorious because it deals with our sins takes away the condemnation and guarantees for us the promise of eternal life the third contrast is in verse 11 for if what was set aside came through glory how much more has the permanent come in glory that is the Old

Testament laws of Moses and that ministry was a temporary thing oh yes it lasted a few hundred years but it's just temporary it's there as a deliberate stage of God leading to Jesus Christ the fulfillment of the Old Testament as we saw last week last Wednesday night if that ministry which was glorious was only temporary how much more glorious is the permanent ministry that's the emphasis in verse 11 it's even more glorious because the ministry now of Jesus is not going to be set aside there's not going to be a third testament to come one day it's the final word of God and it's even more glorious if you asked a little child whether there are any stars in the sky at the moment my guess is they would say no take them out at night when the sky is dark and they say yes there's some stars but they all go in daytime now I think my understanding of these things is pretty weak but I think it's true to say there are still stars in the sky out there that is but we don't see them why don't we see them not because they're not there but because the greater light of the sun means that effect the difference between old and new the older like the stars shining at night glorious but when the brighter glory of

Jesus and the spirit come that first glory and first light is fading away in a sense unable in a sense to be seen by comparison with the greater glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ Paul says in verse 10 indeed what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory that is in itself it remains glorious but a greater glory that outshines it has come and that's the gospel of Jesus and a powerful gospel applied to believers by the spirit the problem of the old is not in itself but in human beings indeed the old testament makes that very clear time and time again the people have hard hearts stubborn minds they're sinful in their hearts they're prone to sin the gospel or the rather law of

[27 : 21] Moses is not met by obedient faith but rather sin Paul reflects that here as well in the next few verses he says since then we have such a hope we act with great boldness not like Moses who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside but their minds were hardened that's the problem the old testament looked forward to the time when minds would not be hardened time time and again the old testament recognized that the weakness of the old is not within itself so much as because it's met by sinful people and Paul is saying not only is the case in old testament times but as he goes on to say in verse 14 indeed to this very day when they presumably referring to

Jewish people who are not believers hear the reading of the old covenant that same veil is still there since only in Christ is it set aside that is he's saying that people without Christ in a sense they're still their minds are darkened as they read the old testament law indeed he says in verse 15 to this very day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds but when one turns to the Lord the veil is removed again again I think Paul is elaborating on what he said in chapter one we saw on Wednesday night all the promises of the old testament find their yes or their fulfillment in Jesus Christ the old testament looked ahead with longing to the time when the law would not just be out there on tablets of stone but rather our human hearts that are sinful would be changed by the glorious and powerful gospel of

Jesus Christ and the giving of his spirit that's what Paul is saying has now happened and come in Christ it's when people turn to Jesus Christ that they receive the power of God's gospel in their minds and hearts their minds are no longer dark and the veil is removed they begin to see and understand Paul is saying the law is good but it's only powerful and effective in you when the gospel of Jesus and his spirit in effect write that law in our hearts and that's done for those who've turned to Christ for those who are believers it's done already Paul's arguing a couple of things here he's arguing that Christian ministry is ministry that is validated by God's spirit as indeed Paul's ministry is validated by the Corinthian church but he's also showing at the same time a bit of a response or apologetic back to those who are criticizing him and saying let's go back to

Moses he's not saying no the Old Testament is bad get away from it saying that's good it's glorious but there is a glory glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ of his death and resurrection and the giving of his spirit in the Old Testament the glory of God was seen in the face of Moses when he came to meet with people but in the New Testament the glory of God is reflected not on sunburnt faces but on hearts that are being changed and transformed morally into the likeness what he says in the last couple of verses the Lord is the spirit and where the spirit of the Lord is there is freedom we're not separating here God the father son and spirit they're all working together is actually what Paul is perhaps stressing in summary and all of us with unveiled faces seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another for this comes from the

Lord the spirit he says there that Christians believers all of us who are believers in Christ are being transformed you see it's not the case that we believe in the Lord Jesus and all of a sudden the veil is taken away and bingo our heart is changed and now we are perfectly obedient and faithful to every law of God you and I know that that's not true some of us have been Christians for a long time some for decades but still we know we ought to know we still sin we still fail that's not because of something weak about the gospel it's because the effect of the gospel is a continuous effect we are being transformed bit by bit day by day week by week year by year when the Lord Jesus returns it's being transformed gradually that Paul is emphasizing here that is Christians are work in progress in effect we're gradually being molded into the image or the likeness of the

[32 : 49] Lord Jesus Christ Paul uses the image of being reflected in a mirror in these verses as though we're gazing on that final day at God's glory and it will actually be like a mirror reflecting back the glory that God has worked in our lives it'll be an astonishing day he's talking here not about transformation in knowledge the accumulation of knowledge but rather that our character and behavior become more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ it's because the law is no longer out there on tablets of stone or in a scroll or book but God's spirit has taken it and put it into our hearts changing our hearts bit by bit it's a slow job painfully slow sometimes but Paul is anticipating here that on the final day it will be a completed job and on that day we will be perfect in Jesus presence I know there are people who come to

Holy Trinity because they like the preaching people tell me that and have done for a long time the issue is not whether you like the preaching the issue is whether you're being transformed by the ministry of God's word that's the issue are you becoming more and more like Jesus Christ the beginning of this year compared to the beginning of last year can you see how you've grown more like Jesus through the ministry of God's word or do you just let it go in one ear out the other are the fruit of God's spirit becoming more evident in your life that is as you continue to mature as a Christian are you becoming a person more full of love of joy of peace are you becoming more patient more gentle are you becoming a kinder person are gospel priorities beginning to infiltrate your decisions more and more your decisions of time and money and so on is confident hope a growing feature of your life even suffering is heaven becoming more of a certain reality is generosity selflessness and servant life becoming a stronger more dominant theme in your life they're the sorts of questions to be thinking about perhaps at the beginning of the year how is

God's word by God's spirit transforming you can you look back over one year and see how God has been chiseling away taking off little bits so that morally you look more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ will he continue to do that in you in the year to come on the final day you and I will stand perfected in the presence of God when I think about that day I anticipate that I will be overcome by the change because so far am I from the likeness of Jesus Christ it will be an astonishing completion of a transformation on that day and if you're honest perhaps in your own lives you'll think similar sorts of thoughts I imagine that on that day I will look at myself and think wow what a job what a transformation

I imagine that you'll look at yourself and think the same sort of thing wow what a transformation in my life we'll look at each other and think gosh look at Paul Barker he's nothing like he was on earth wow what a change and God will look at us and say wow what people but we won't boast and think that's my job look what I've done to myself we will say what a job that the Lord has done in each one of us the glory belongs to him the glory will belong to him it'll belong to him for eternity well let's pray our heavenly father we pray finish then your new creation pure and sinless let us be let us see your great salvation perfect in eternity changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place there to cast our crowns before you lost in wonder love and praise amen

Lord peace ■■■ May Lord say to the Lord so