

The Unlikely Glory of Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, folks. Let me add my welcome to Dan's. If you are joining us for the first time here, let me give you a catch-up. We're in 2 Corinthians. Paul, the Apostle Paul, had planted a church in Corinth several years before writing this letter to Corinthians.

And Corinth was probably the most multicultural city in the ancient Near East. It was this melting pot of subcultures and religions and lifestyles and philosophies. And it was a very tolerant society. They liked diversity. It was a society that stressed individualism. The big goal was upward mobility, a lot of intellectual pride, a massive sports subculture there. In many ways, this city was like the ancient version of San Francisco or Boston or Vancouver. So into that society, Paul planted a church. And he planted it. He stuck around for about 18 months. And then he left it with the local leaders so he could continue to plant more churches, which is a great plan. Anyway, while Paul was away, though, some self-proclaimed super apostles turned up and they brought with them letters of recommendation. So they had all the right external credentials, but in their hearts, they were not really that different to the society around them. We know this because the gospel they preached wasn't countercultural. It reflected the culture of the day. They preached the health and wealth gospel, and it was a gospel that people wanted to hear.

They lapped it up. Instead of being called to a life of endurance and sacrifice and love in the midst of adversity, the new leaders promised a life of personal power, a religion as a way to achieve your goals, a life free from pain. And these guys knew how to sell it too. They were physically and rhetorically impressive. So these super apostles knew though that what they had to do was they had to undermine Paul's authority. So shortly after arriving at the church, they began to attack Paul's leadership and they said things like this. They go, well, he's not very good at speaking and he doesn't charge money for his sermons. And you know, you pay for what you get. He's not very remarkable physically and he has all these problems. Things keep going wrong for him. He gets beaten up. He gets jailed. He gets whipped. Changes his mind all the time. I mean, he can't be hearing from God. Surely if he was, these things wouldn't happen, would they? Paul and his ministry are weak, they said. Weak.

So these past few weeks, we've been looking at how Paul has responded to these false teachers. And he's been saying things like this. He goes, what you guys don't get is that, yes, I am weak.

I am weak. But it's in my weakness that God is glorified because it's in my weakness that God has shown to be sufficient and merciful and strong and worthy. Now this week, he steps up his defense with a claim that would have sounded just outrageous. Absolutely outrageous to many people's ears here.

[3 : 22] It's in verses 7 to 11 there. Paul's claim is this. He says, my ministry, which you guys think is weak, my ministry is more glorious than that of Moses. Now I think if there were Jews in that congregation, that's crazy talk. I mean, Moses was their most famous father. He was the guy that led them out of slavery in Egypt. You know, the big iconic sort of salvation moment of the Old Testament. He went up the mountain. He met with God. You don't get bigger than Moses. My ministry is more glorious than Moses, though, he says. Now the congregation is most likely mostly Gentile, though. But still, Moses was really well known and loved and respected in kind of weird ways, though. Like in pagan witchcraft and spells and stuff, they would invoke his name because they thought he was a very powerful sort of guy, mostly because of his encounter with God on Sinai. So both Jews and Greek culture.

Moses, he was a man above men. He was a legendary figure. And Paul, this church planter, says, my ministry is more glorious than Moses. How can he say that?

He can say that because his ministry was the ministry of the new covenant. It was the ministry of Jesus. And Paul, in this passage, he explains why the ministry of the new covenant is more glorious than the ministry of Moses, the ministry of the old covenant. So let's have a look at verses 7 and 8 first there. Now, he gives lots of reasons why it's more glorious. I'm just going to hit two of them, okay? So verses 7 and 8, let me remind you of what they say. Now, if the ministry of death, carved in letters of 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? So if you're sort of new to Christianity, what this is referring to is God led Moses to lead his people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. And they're in the desert. They come to Mount Sinai. God's presence descends on Mount Sinai. It's thunder and clouds and lightning. It's a pretty spectacular kind of scenario here. It's the presence of God. Moses went up the mountain.

God hit him in the cleft of a rock. And Moses just saw the tail end of the presence of God go by. And that was all he could really handle. And he comes down with his two stone tablets, which are the commandments of God, the 10 commandments, which we read early this morning.

God's law. Moses' face was changed as a result of being in the presence of God. His face kind of shone with God's glory. So, wow. I mean, that sounds amazing, right? That's incredible. What an incredible situation. And yet Paul here, what does he call that? He calls that the ministry of death.

[6 : 21] And in verse 9, the ministry of condemnation. Why does he call it those things? Well, as I said, the tablets contained the 10 commandments. The commandments were God's stipulations. Here's the thing, though. Commandments that no one could keep completely. So the ministry of law is this.

Here is God's standards. Here they are. But they came without the spirit, which transforms people's hearts so that they would desire to keep them, which is what we prayed this morning after the commandments. Incline our hearts. So all the law could do was point a finger and say, you fall short. Here's God's standards. You fall short. The commandments just exposed us. He explains it further in verse 9. For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. So it says, if there was glory in that ministry, if it was still glorious, how much more glory is there going to be in a ministry that brings righteousness to people? Okay, first though, first thing to deal with, how can there be glory in condemnation? What does Paul mean by that? If we define glory as God's characteristics on display, there's probably a fairly decent definition there, God's characteristics on display, the 10 commandments, what are they displaying of God? Well, they're displaying God's holiness.

But the result of being exposed to God's holiness is condemnation, because we know we're not living up to those standards. Which is why the Israelites couldn't even look at Moses' face, which just had a bit of an afterglow on it. Now, as a sidebar here, again, if you're new to Christianity, and this whole idea of God judging, condemning is distasteful to you, just as a sidebar here, I want you to know, this is not God's favorite thing that he does. I don't know how else to say it. This is not God's thing that he's all about. There's this great passage in Isaiah 28, and the passage is mostly about how God is going to judge Israel. But there's this verse here in 21 which puts it in perspective.

The Lord will rise up, as he did in Mount Perizim, he will rouse himself, as in the valley of Gibeon, to do his work, his strange work. It's talking about God judging people. His strange work and perform his task, his alien task. I love that phrase, his alien task. Judgment is God's alien task.

It is his strange work. Judgment is foreign to God's deepest desires. His proper work, what he does, what he does that, not what he does best, what he does that best expresses his nature, is to give life, is to give mercy, is to extend grace. That's why the ministry of Paul, the ministry of the Spirit and righteousness in verse 9, that's why Paul says it's more glorious than Moses' ministry, because it's closer to God's heart. It's a better expression of who God is.

[9 : 41] God's. Another reason why Paul describes it as his ministry is more glorious than the ministry of Moses. Look at verse 17 and 18 here.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit is, there is freedom, and we all with unveiled faces beholding the glory of God are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. Folks, why is Paul's ministry more glorious than Moses? Another reason? Because Paul's ministry, in his ministry, he could promise something that Moses couldn't promise. He could proclaim something that Moses couldn't. He could promise transformation. Paul said, we can change and be more like Christ. It describes it here, from one degree of glory to another. The Holy Spirit, it comes into our hearts. It does a work. And the word there in Greek, transformed there, is literally, it's metamorphosis. That's a big promise.

You know what one of my problems is? Is I forget this. Maybe you do as well. Forget that this is part of the promise of God.

Transformation. It is very easy to truncate the gospel. And we truncate it down to forgiveness. But there is a lot more, isn't there? There is forgiveness. Of course there's forgiveness. It's absolutely necessary.

But there is also a promise of new life. God says that he will make all things new someday when he returns. But that actually, that newness, that reimagining, that recreating, that actually starts now when you become a Christian. And the Holy Spirit is God's promise. It's God's down payment on that promise that we can change from degree to degree. Now, how does it happen? The passage tells us, it says it happens as we behold the glory of God. And this means as we behold Jesus, as we consistently put Jesus in front of us, God can transform our hearts.

[12 : 09] I have a friend who walks with folks who are addicted to pornography. And he said, there are many things that these guys can do to help themselves, right? They can be part of accountability groups, which are wonderful things, great things. He says, we can put measures in to control their access to the internet. Fantastic. You should do that if this is a problem.

But my friend says these things tend to have short-term or limited success. He said to me, you know, the thing, this is just last week I had this conversation. He said, the guys that really kick the habit, the guys that actually beat this are the ones who have brought themselves to Jesus, who have beheld Jesus, and their hearts have been transformed. He said, those are the guys that get past this. Folks, let me ask you directly. Have you forgotten the promise of Christian transformation?

Are you in sort of a holding pattern? And it's week by week. I come. Forgiveness. Thank you. Forgiveness. Thank you. Forgiveness. Thank you. Have you forgotten the promise of transformation?

I mean, I don't think we tend to forget it in sort of our secular kind of life, if I can put it like that. I mean, there's lots of ways we try and change ourselves. We can up-school with a degree or certification. We can learn to think better, be more positive, you know, talk to a coach or a counselor or something.

That's great stuff. We can reinvent our look. Clothes, makeup, haircut, go crazy, you know. There's nothing wrong with that stuff. But real heart change, real heart change, change we actually need, only occurs when we come to Jesus continually. I think our society is very big on change that goes about this deep.

[14 : 04] But God, through his Holy Spirit, wants to do a deep inner work in you. My daughter, Bea, who I brought to church this morning, she's downstairs.

She was born with a very serious, she has Down syndrome, and she was born with a very serious heart condition. It's called, she had two holes in her heart, and she had called what was called an atrial ventricular septum defect.

So we have two chambers, and instead of having one valve over each chamber, working those chambers, it was kind of like one malformed valve trying to cover both chambers. And they said without any intervention, she would live for about six weeks.

There was heart surgery planned for when she was three months older. There was something to do with the sort of the fibers in the heart or something, whole stitches better when they were about three months old. We basically had to try and keep her alive for three months.

And she wouldn't feed because she was just so lethargic. And so we'd wake up in the middle of the night with these icy cold, what do you call them, like flannels, I call them in New Zealand, like face cloths, right?

[15 : 14] Put them under cold, cold water, put them on her body, try and shock her into waking up so we could feed her at nighttime. It didn't work. Eventually we had to feed her through a tube, so put a tube up her nose into her stomach, and feed her with a bag.

She was on lots of drugs to try and keep her alive. And she had three months. She had surgery. She went in on a Monday, and the surgery was brutal.

And this poor girl, she had like 10 tubes sticking out of her when she first came out. And we'd go in there, and one of us would give her a cuddle. And the other person had to pick up all the tubes.

It was just a brutal, brutal time. Anyway, home on Thursday. So surgery on Monday, home on Thursday, and it was incredible.

It was like, literally, she was completely transformed. They repaired her heart, and she was transformed from this baby that did look like a baby that was dying to this vibrant, alive infant.

[16 : 18] And if you see her running around later on, she's got plenty of life in her. And I remember thinking at the time, like, goodness, what an incredible picture of transformation, of spiritual transformation.

She was dying. Folks, we, without Christ, we are dying. And I think what we can do is we can sort of, what happens is we can sort of push back on the inevitable.

You know, it's like, B, we kind of gave her drugs to try and keep her alive, but it was all temporary. It wasn't, it wouldn't sustain her. What we actually need is heart surgery. We need God to get in there and change our hearts.

And yet we, we, I think we strangely forget that. And the gospel becomes just forgiveness, just forgiveness each week.

Don't let that happen, folks. Let me remind you where we are in this sermon. I'm going to speak for about two more minutes here. These false teachers came into Corinth. They're trying to undermine Paul's authority.

[17 : 39] He says, my ministry as a Christian minister is more glorious than Moses. It's so good. In verse 10, he can say this. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because the glory that's of, the glory that surpasses it.

The gospel of the new covenant is so precious and so good and so powerful and so wonderful for you. The promises are so great. It's God's holiness, but a spirit which can transform your hearts.

It's so good that it makes the old one look like nothing. It is totally eclipsed the old one. Now, the obvious question here, I think, and I'm just going to speak for another minute here, is, is, if in the passage, Moses' ministry was glorious, but Paul's ministry is infinitely more glorious, because, of course, why is Paul's ministry in Corinth met with a yawn from some people?

False teachers look at him, and what do they see? They see weakness. Well, the answer's in verses 14 and 16. 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.

Yet to this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Look, they look at Paul, and they don't see God's glory, because their minds are hardened.

[19 : 02] So these guys, they didn't experience the glory of Christ, because they have a veil over their face. The result, the result of that, is they have this weird, culturally informed, half-pie, kind of pseudo-Christian thing going on.

They basically take Jesus, and they shove him into their own paradigms. And in the case of the false teachers, it's a faith that looks more like, it's more informed by culture than it is by the scriptures.

So, of course, when they look at Paul, what do they see? Unimpressive man, unimpressive ministry. Yet through the lens of the gospel, it is a ministry that is more glorious than the ministry of Moses.

Let me finish. Passage highlights two dangers for us. I'm just going to name them and leave them with you. Two dangers.

One, that we have a Christian life, that we become like these false teachers. We have a Christian life that is more informed by our culture than it is the scriptures. Two, number two danger, a Christian life that has forgotten the promise of transformation, where we exist in a holding pattern.

[20 : 15] Folks, in both these cases, the solution is bringing yourself to Jesus. Bringing yourself to Jesus consistently, constantly. Amen.