

The Veil is Taken Away

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[0 : 00] Last Friday, I conducted a wedding, and for a minister, that is a very solemn and a very special occasion when two people come together in marriage. It's also, quite rightly, a very joyful occasion. It's a great privilege to be part of the celebrations of two families as the man and the woman take vows and as their union is solemnized and is confirmed in a marriage service.

Jesus himself joined in the celebrations at Cana in Galilee when he received an invitation to that wedding. Wedding service is actually a very simple procedure. In fact, the only necessary element in a wedding service is the promise on the part of the bride and groom and the declaration of marriage. But there's a whole list of other things that are traditionally done at weddings, each of which has its own significance, but sometimes that significance has been lost. One of these is the fact that, for the most part, a bride wears a veil until the moment that she becomes united with her husband. That's the moment, as part of the wedding service, that the veil is lifted away.

I tried, over the past few days, to try and find out what the significance and the history of that lifting of the veil is, and it's quite interesting because apparently it depends on what culture you come from. For some cultures, it was the veil. The veil signified the keeping away of evil spirits. Well, that certainly is not our culture. But for the most part, it symbolizes the transition, the point in time at which that young girl or that girl changes from being a single person to a married person. And of course, the same is true for the bridegroom himself. That moment of transformation, it's a moment when both of them reach the end of a chapter in their lives and they enter into a new chapter. There's a new beginning, a new start, and they are no longer two but one. It's a hugely significant moment. So whatever precisely the veil represents, it's done at the moment of transformation, that moment when the two become one. If I was to read verse 16 of this chapter, it almost sounds like a wedding service, doesn't it? When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. And if you read it like that, you're not too far off. Because what takes place when someone turns to the Lord is something absolutely amazing.

And it is, the Bible tells us, it is like a marriage, where a person reaches the end of the life that they once had without the Lord. The Bible actually tells us that that person dies.

And it's also when that person becomes united spiritually with the Lord evermore to be with him. That's the moment of what we call conversion. Sometimes a person is not even aware of that moment. But nevertheless, what is said is absolutely true. When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. But I wonder what specific veil the apostle is talking about when he describes this moment of conversion, this moment of coming to faith in Jesus Christ. In order to answer that question, you have to go back further into the chapter and ask, what is the apostle talking about? And it very quickly becomes apparent. Now the apostle is talking, he's making a comparison between the old covenant, the old testament, and the new covenant that was brought in by Jesus Christ. He's making a comparison between what God did in the old testament and the new testament, the old covenant and the new covenant. Or rather, that he puts it elsewhere, the law of God, the law of what we call the law of Moses. But in actual fact, we have to be very careful when we're talking about the law of Moses, because it really was the law of

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God that you read about in Exodus chapter 20, summarized by the 10 commandments. But the reason we call it the law of Moses is because it came through, it came via Moses, via the leadership and the mediatorship of Moses. That's why we call it the law of Moses. But it's the law of God. Now, Paul is making a comparison between the law in the old testament and the gospel in the new testament that came to us through the Lord Jesus Christ. And here is where he brings in the idea of the veil, that when someone comes to Jesus in faith and puts their trust in him, then a veil is taken away. In order to understand what that veil is, we have to try and understand it in the old testament context. What he's specifically referring to is the chapter that we read before, Exodus chapter 34. And if I can just give a word of explanation as to what happened. First of all, Moses had spent 40 days up the mountain receiving the law, which was written on tables of stone. But as he came down that first time with the tables of stone, he discovered that the Israelites, instead of faithfully waiting for him, they had sunk into the most sinful idolatry. They had built a golden calf and they were worshipping and celebrating this golden calf and worshipping it as their God. And there and then there occurred the most massive, probably the greatest crisis that ever occurred during the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan.

Now, when, to get a long story short, God called Moses up after God had dealt with that situation, God called Moses up the mountain a second time. And for the second time, he gave him the law because he had broken, he had broken the tables of stone the first time he came down the mountain. He broke them on the ground and they became destroyed. The second time then Moses went up the mountain, God gave them to him again. But this time Moses had prayed something really special to the Lord. He had said, Lord, show me your glory. And God had literally appeared in some form. We're not exactly sure what form it was, but God had appeared to Moses in such a way that God saw something of the glory of God. Now, the effect that that had on Moses was, as we said to the children earlier on, was that Moses' skin, his appearance, his face began to glow. Not just a glow. It wasn't just a kind of a redness or something like that. It was, it was the most amazing, amazing manifestation of the glory of God. And the effect that it had on those who saw him, once he came down the mountain, everyone who saw him, they ran away in fear. They were awestruck by what they saw because they recognized what this was. This wasn't some kind of natural phenomenon. They had never seen this before. This was a first, this was a one-off, the first time they'd ever seen someone's appearance changing in this incredibly majestic way. And they knew perfectly well where that appearance had come from. And they knew well that they weren't just looking at some form of Moses. They were looking at the glory of God reflected in Moses. So what Moses did was he took a veil and he covered his face.

I'm not sure what that veil was, whether there was two holes in it or whatever. I don't know. But it was a veil that served as a barrier so that for the most part, the children of Israel would not see his shining face. Except, and the only time he took it off was on two occasions. One was when God required him to stand in front of the Israelites and announce to the Israelites his commandments. When he did so, he would have to take the veil off his face so that as the people listened to God's law and his commandments, they would see the radiant face of Moses and they would know with what authority he was speaking.

That's the first occasion he took the veil off. The second occasion, the only other time he would take the veil off was when he went into that very special tent, that tabernacle, where he would meet face to face with God.

And because he had direct access to God, he was able to take the veil off and there was this meeting between Moses and God. That was what was unique about Moses. He knew God face to face. And it's in this respect that we regard Moses as a type or a prefiguration of Jesus as Jesus was the one who was with God and who came from God as our mediator. Moses prefigured the Lord Jesus Christ because he knew God face to face. And that was the only other occasion when he would take the veil off.

[9 : 41] Now, I have to correct just a slight misunderstanding. In my Sunday school class, I was always taught that Moses would wear the veil when he spoke to the people. And I was always taught that it was to protect the people. It was because they were scared of him. It was because God felt sorry for the people.

He didn't want them to be frightened of his face. So he wore a veil to protect them from seeing his face. And that was because the authorized version says that he wore the veil until he stopped speaking with them.

That's not correct. No disrespect to my Sunday school teacher. I learned 99.99 things were perfect in Sunday school. But as always, and I'm sure that's the same with any Sunday school, there are just little incorrections in some places.

And it's only recently that I discovered this. And this is how, of course, how the ESV puts it, that puts it in the right way. That it was the very opposite. That Moses, it was when Moses spoke to the people that he took his veil off.

So the veil wasn't to protect the people from being frightened when they saw his face. The veil was worn at the very opposite occasion when Moses spoke to the people. And the whole idea was that they would be left with no mistake as to who it was that was speaking to them.

[11 : 20] The voice piece was Moses, but the originator of the command was God. And the glowing, radiant face of Moses, the glory in the face of Moses, was to show the people in no uncertain terms that he spoke with all the authority of God.

The question then remains, why then did he put the veil back? Why did he then, if that's the case, and he spoke to the people without the veil on, why then did he put the veil on?

Again, why, what was the need for the veil? And there, here is where the message of the Apostle Paul comes in. I want us to see this morning that there are three things that Paul brings to our attention in the veil.

The covering. A covering which originated with Moses' face, but actually went on to represent something much more profound and something much more, a deeper problem within the hearts and the minds of the Israelite people and the Jewish people.

And it's also a problem that we suffer from as sinful human beings when we're confronted with the gospel. That's the whole point that Paul is bringing to our attention as well.

[12 : 46] The first problem was this. The veil signified something incomplete. Look at chapter 3, verse 10, what Paul says.

In this case, what once had glory had come to have no glory at all because of the glory that surpasses it.

Then verse 13. Moses 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. Something was being brought to an end.

And that's what I said before, the Old Testament. The giving of the law was a temporary measure. The Old Testament was temporary to prepare God's people for the coming of Christ.

But even then, when God gave the law to people, there was a spectacular display of his majesty and his power and his glory.

[13 : 54] So there was absolutely no question of where his word came from. Not only in the radiant faith of Moses, but also when you go back to Exodus chapter 20, when God gave the Ten Commandments in the very first place, there was thunder and there was lightning.

There was the voice of God. The whole place trembled. And people could see the extraordinary fire that was at the top of the mountain. And even then, even though it had come from God, one day it was going to give way.

It was going to come to an end. The Old Testament was going to come to an end by the coming of Jesus Christ. In fact, anyone who read the Old Testament properly ought to have been able to see the incompleteness of the law.

And here is Paul telling them that even with the radiant face of Moses, this was a radiance that was fading away because of the glory, the complete glory that was going to come in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me just give you a few examples of what Paul is saying here. Because this is something that we come across in day-to-day life. When a new version of something replaces the old, the old one gets put away.

[15:16] We're living in a world where new versions and new editions are replacing old ones all the time. When I was a young boy, I remember I used to be very interested in cars.

And I remember when I was a very young boy, the car to have was a Ford Zephyr. And most of you can't even remember what a Ford Zephyr was.

Some of you have never seen one. But that's my point. And when I was a boy, I can tell you, if anybody had a Ford Zephyr, he was really something. He was an object of envy and desire.

I remember a family friend of ours had a Ford Zephyr. And after I pleaded with him through my parents, he eventually took me out around the block.

I still remember it. I still remember the feeling of going into this branch. I still remember the kind of envy. Why did my dad not have a Ford Zephyr? Well, it was because he was a minister and he couldn't afford a Ford Zephyr.

[16:16] But that was it. It was the car to have was a Zephyr. It even had a radio. And I remember asking him to turn the radio on.

And that was it. Because it was the latest. There was something, in human terms, truly glorious. And I remember when it came out and all the marketing and all the adverts and everything, this was the car to have.

Now, I just don't know people wouldn't even recognize one if they saw one in the street. Why? Because it's been replaced. It's come. The old version has become obscure.

They would laugh at you, unless you were a collector. They would laugh at you if you drove or if you chugged along in one of these things today, compared to what is new.

Let me give you another example. When you go out at night time in a full moon, the moon sometimes seems really bright, doesn't it? You go out for a walk sometimes. You don't even need a torch. But if you were to stay out all night until the sun rose the next morning, and if the moon was still there, as it sometimes is, the rising of the sun would outshine the moon altogether.

[17:27] So the moon just, you almost can't see it anymore because the sun has obscured the light of the moon. It happens in such, it happens in so many different ways.

When the new comes in, the old is obscured. And here is Paul saying that even although God's law came with all the spectacle and glory of Zinai, that God's intention was never that it would remain forever, but that it would be replaced by the permanent, the complete, the coming of Jesus Christ and the gospel.

The second thing that the veil signified was that there was a barrier between man and God. There was a barrier between man and God.

I have no doubt that when God's law was given to the people of Israel that they took it at first, they took it seriously. And I have no doubt that when they saw, when the people saw the radiant face of Moses, as the Bible tells us, there was a measure of fear.

And yet, there was a barrier between them and God. And here's where the answer to the question, remember the question I asked earlier on, why was it that if the radiant face of Moses represented God's authority among the people, why did he keep it on all the time?

[18 : 57] Well, I believe the answer is this. Because if he had, if he had left, if they had been able to see the radiant face of Moses all the time, they would have got used to it.

That's what they did anyway, wasn't it? You remember how God spectacularly rescued them from Egypt? Nobody could have been left in any doubt whatsoever as to who rescued them from Egypt.

Can there be anything more dramatic than the dividing of the Red Sea? And to allow them to go all the way through the Red Sea over to the other side?

Can there be anything more dramatic than what they saw? They heard the voice of God on the top of Mount Sinai. They heard his voice himself. There could be no mistake.

Could there be anything more dramatic than the cloud, the glory cloud, in which God himself led his people across the Red Sea and through the wilderness? It was there every day for them to see.

[20 : 04] There could be no mistake. And yet within days they were complaining and grumbling and sinning against God and worshipping a golden calf.

Why? Because they got used to the presence and the glory of God. Isn't that awful? And isn't that an indicator of what we truly are as sinners, sinful beings?

And does that not describe ourselves today? Today is one of the fundamental marks of sin in the human heart that he treats God with such complacency.

How much thought have we given to God today? Even if you're a follower of Jesus, how much thought have you really given to God today? Is it not true that even as followers of Jesus, we're inclined to go through a whole day without even giving him a moment's thought?

Isn't that awful? And I say that as someone who's guilty of it myself. Just as guilty as you are. And that's part of what being a sinner is all about.

[21 : 08] In fact, that's where it begins. We begin by the loss of consciousness of God. If we really took seriously what we believe, then we would be going through every single day and we would never be losing sight of God and his presence with us.

Even when we think about what the Bible tells us, what Jesus was thinking about that on a Wednesday night at the moment, how Jesus promised that he would send the Holy Spirit and he would be in you and he will be with you forever.

How much time do we ever give to remembering the presence of the Holy Spirit with us from day to day? That's what sin is.

Sin is the refusal. It's the neglect. It's when we neglect God. And if you're not a Christian today, how much time do you give thinking about the reality of God?

And is it not the case that sometimes you do? There are moments in your life where you're forced to really think seriously. I'm thinking, for example, of a funeral.

[22 : 10] When you're standing at an open grave, how can anyone not think seriously? Surely it's impossible not to think seriously.

And yet, I very often stand at an open grave and within moments of the burial, I can hear people talking about what's been in the Gazette and the latest news and what's happening with their garden or their car.

That's what the Israelites were doing. They got used to it. They became complacent. And that's what we do as well. And that's why God had to safeguard his own authority by making Moses put a veil over his face so that they could not see him ordinarily except when God had something to say to them so that they would not become complacent.

Because the fact, the reason we become complacent is because there's a barrier between us and God, isn't there? And whenever you start really thinking about God, is it not the case that you're just trying to get away from that thought all the time?

You're trying to fill your mind with something that will distract you away from having to think about the most fundamental issue of all time. Can I stop you at this point in time and say, what about taking another course of action?

[23 : 45] What about instead of running away from him, what about stopping and coming to him? That's what Paul describes in this verse. When one turns to the Lord, you haven't. The problem today is that you haven't turned to the Lord, is it?

You've been going away from him your whole life. And despite everything that he's been saying to you in your life, all the warnings he's given to you, all the reminders he's given to you, you've kept on running.

Oh, I really hope, I so hope that even today, that you will stop and that you'll turn to the Lord. Because that's where the real answer lies, in turning to the Lord.

Third problem. The veil signified the people's blatant and willful blindness. Verse 15. Even to this day, Paul says, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts.

Why was that? Because, in a strange kind of way, by making Moses wear a veil, God was actually telling the people something about themselves.

[24 : 54] He was saying, Moses wears a veil because you have a veil over your hearts. There is a barrier, there's a blindness which you are, which you are, because instead of doing and reacting as they ought to have, they were determined to keep themselves as far away from God as possible.

And that was true even when Jesus came into the world. You know, one of the biggest mysteries to me is how it was possible to watch Jesus raising the dead, changing water into wine, walking on the water, healing the deaf, and how it was possible to listen to him, the kind of teaching which obviously displayed the authority of God, and how they came to the conclusion that instead of worshipping him and recognising him for what he was, they hated him with such a vengeance that they crucified him at Calvary.

Calvary was not just an injustice. An injustice is an awful thing, isn't it? When an innocent man is put to death for something he didn't do. It's one of the most awful things we can ever witness in this world, injustice.

This went beyond injustice. When Jesus came into the world and where it was obvious to anyone, it was obvious to people like Nicodemus, we know that you are a teacher sent from God because no one could do the things that you do unless God was with them.

Have you ever went down, have you ever gone down Nicodemus' road? Here is a man who sensibly with an open mind takes a look at the life of Jesus and he asks, who is this man?

[26 : 54] Have you ever done that? With an open mind, looked through the gospels and said, how can I explain this phenomenon in human history where the single person, and it's not as if there's a whole bunch of people in history that have done the same thing.

They haven't. This man stands alone. He stands alone in human history as being the most unique person that ever walked the face of the world.

Read about him through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and ask what the disciples ask. Who is this man? Because it's only by coming to terms with who he is that will come to terms with our relationship to him.

The problem is that the Pharisees, they were so caught up with their own religion they couldn't afford to live, they couldn't live without it. They were so accustomed to their own habits and their own traditions, their own dress codes and their own ways in which they believed that they, by observing all of these little points of their own laws, the laws that they had created by themselves.

They believed that they were pleasing God and the fact was that they weren't. They believed like so many people nowadays, well, I'm not the best person in the world but I'm not the worst either.

[28 : 22] I am Mr. Average so therefore, surely, things will be okay with me. I was talking to someone recently and I was asking her about this and she said, she said, I know I'm not the best person in the world but I'm not that bad either.

That's what many people think, isn't it? But when a person turns to the law, to the Lord, rather, in the gospel, they discover for the first time in their lives wrongdoing and sinfulness in their life that they never ever thought were there in the first place because only God can show you what you really are on the inside.

Because we go through life, don't we? And we assess ourselves. Instead of asking God to search us and know us the same way as Psalm 139 and the psalmist did, instead of doing that, we make up our own assessment and we judge ourselves and we compare ourselves to other people, the people that we read in the newspapers, the murderers of this world instead of asking the Lord to judge us and to assess us.

But when someone turns to the Lord in verse 16, all of a sudden the veil is taken away and we begin to see ourselves as we really are.

But when someone turns to the Lord through Jesus, we begin to see God as he really is. The God of power and the God of justice and the God who cannot look at sin and yet the God who is merciful, ultimately merciful and loves to forgive and is so loved the world that he gave his son Jesus into the world so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

[30 : 19] And so I want to ask you today, are you wearing a veil? Is there a blindness that still keeps you separate from God?

A blindness to what you are in yourself and a blindness to what God is in himself. A blindness in which you keep on running and running and running away from God. Is it not time to stop and to turn?

I love the way that the apostle uses that word turn because it's a word that's used all over the Bible to describe when a person comes to the point where they say enough is enough.

I can't live like this anymore. I am a, I'm living a hopeless, helpless, bankrupt life and I need God. I've never ever realized this before but I realize right now that I need God in my life.

And you turn to him like the thief on the cross and you say Lord have mercy on me. Remember me when you come into your kingdom. Like the Pharisee who went into the temple, like the publican rather who went into the temple and said Lord have mercy upon me a sinner.

[31 : 31] That's what it means to turn to the Lord. It's not just to feel sorry for yourself and it's not just to feel, not even feel, feeling sorry for the wrong things that you've done. It's a turning to the Lord.

That's what Paul says. You don't just turn away from wrongdoing but you turn to the Lord. Why? Because only God can save you. Only God can change your life. Only God can take away the veil, the covering, the barrier that stands today between you and God.

And so that you too will be able to say with a changed life, in verse 18, we all with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image.

Today, do you come here with a veil and do you go out with a veil? You know, it's possible like a wedding for you to come in with a veil covering your understanding and for you to go out the other door with a veil being taken away.

That's the kind of change that God can bring about in a person's heart. Let's pray. our Father in heaven, we thank you for your word to us and for the depths of your word.

[33 : 03] And I pray, Lord, that you will give us understanding of what we truly and really are. We confess, oh Lord, the extent to which we believe in ourselves that we're better than we really are.

But your word makes clear to us that we need Jesus. We need his cleansing. We need to be brought to see that there is only one power on earth and one person on earth that can save us and can bring us to your kingdom.

We pray, Lord, that you will bring that person to us and bring us to that person, Jesus Christ. Bring us in faith, we ask. In his name, Amen.