

2 Corinthians 4

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 June 2013

Preacher: Rev Iver Martin

[0 : 00] Turn with me to the second of these readings, 2 Corinthians chapter 3, verse 7, page 1161, 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and verse 7.

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?

For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

Over the course of the next four weeks, and I know that the last one is into the holidays, and those of you who are away and you wish to hear what has to be said, then, of course, there's always the website. Over the course of the next four weeks, I'd like to do a short series or a short study entitled The Glory of the Gospel. I'm going to divide it into four, and during those four weeks, we're going to be going through chapters 3 from verse 7 to chapter 5 down to verse 10. And the title of these is going to be as follows. At each time, each sermon will make a comparison, or rather, it will recognize the comparison which the Apostle Paul is making between one thing and another. There's nothing like if you're trying to explain something, if you can compare it with something else, it can be explained in much more power and detail, and it has a much greater impact. So, tonight, I want us to look at how Paul compares the glory of the gospel with the glory of the Old Testament. That's the chapter we've just read and the passage that we've just read from 7 to verse 11. Next week, God willing, I'm going to address myself uniquely and exclusively to anyone who is not a Christian, who hasn't yet come to faith in Jesus Christ. Now,

I'm going to talk tonight to those of you who aren't Christians, and I hope that we'll all benefit from us. I hope we always do from the Scripture, from the Bible. But next week, I want us to look at the comparison between the light of the gospel and the darkness of unbelief. Now, I'm going to make a very, very clear statement right now, and I'm not trying to be melodramatic. I'm just trying to be truthful. Next week, I will tell you why you are not a Christian. I will tell you in plain and simple terms. I'm not trying to point the finger. I'm not trying to pull the wool over anybody's eyes. I'm not trying to oversimplify what you might think is a very complicated thing. In actual fact, it's not complicated at all. And what we'll see next week, God willing, is a plain and simple answer to the question, why are you not a Christian? You might say, well, there are a whole heap of reasons why people are not Christians. If you ask that question to 20 different people, you get 20 different answers.

[4 : 25] Not so, according to the Bible. Whatever reason that you might come up with as to why you might not be a Christian, the Bible has one reason. And I'll tell you that, God willing, next week.

I'm not going to tell you what I think. It's not my opinion. I'm not here to give you my opinion. I'm here to tell you what God tells us in the Bible. And in the next chapter, He tells us, in no uncertain terms, why you are not a Christian. And if I've annoyed you, perhaps that's a good thing.

Many as a person has started on the road of faith by being annoyed. I'm asking you tonight, are you annoyed at me or are you annoyed at God? There's a big difference.

You're perfectly entitled to get annoyed at me. You are not entitled to be annoyed at God. But part of our sinfulness means a hostility and a conflict in which you're provoked to an anger and an annoyance by the very words of God Himself. Well, let me ask you this. Please don't let that put you off.

Please don't be put off. Because if you really want to know what the gospel is all about, you have to discover what you are in the eyes of God. And unless you discover what you are in the eyes of God and why you are what you are in the eyes of God, you will never discover the marvelousness of what God has done for us in sending Jesus Christ. So, as well as finding out next week why you are not a Christian, we will obviously also go on to God's remedy for why you are not a Christian. And so, I hope that we will discover and unearth the great truth of what Jesus did so that who knows that if you're not a Christian tonight or next week, who knows? But that might change by the power and the grace of God.

[6 : 43] So, if you know someone and they want to know the answer to the question, why am I not a Christian, then tell them to come next week. Because that is the question that we're going to be asking and, I hope, answering next week. There's no hope about it. It's plain and simple. In the Bible, it is beyond any doubt whatsoever as far as if you're going to accept the Bible as God's Word.

Now, the next week, we're going to be doing another comparison, and we're going to be looking at how Paul compares the power of the gospel itself compared to the weakness of those who carry the gospel, those who preach the gospel, and those who gossip the gospel and who witness and who tell other people the gospel. And we're going to look at how the paradox between the great power of the gospel and those who God has chosen, not the great people in the world, not the powerful people in the world, but the ordinary people in the world, to carry the gospel and to take it and to witness for him.

And lastly, between chapter 4.16 and 5.9, Paul is going to make a final comparison, and that is the dawning glory of heaven compared to the fading glory of this present world. And we're going to be looking ahead to what God has prepared for his people in heaven itself to the place, and particularly the kind of body that you and I will possess if we believe and if we live and die in the Lord Jesus Christ. We're going to be looking at what kind of body is there going to be? Paul answers that question in chapter 5 in 2 Corinthians. So, I hope I've interested you tonight to come back on these four tonight. Well, obviously, you're here tonight, but then there's three other weeks where we're going to be looking at this whole series and this whole theme of the glory of the gospel.

Well, tonight we're going to be looking at that first comparison then, the glory of the gospel with the glory of the Old Testament. I'm going to begin with a very simple statement that we've all heard before. And the statement is this, they just don't make them like that anymore. You often hear it, you've heard it, everyone here tonight has been in a conversation with someone, and you're discussing something that you've maybe just bought, and you're disappointed in it. And someone will say to you, usually an older person will say, well, they just don't make them the way they used to make them in the old days. And it can apply to a pair of shoes, it can apply to a shirt, it can apply to a car, or it can apply to a house. You very often get it in terms of building a house. You ask somebody who's been in the house building business for the last 40, 50 years, and he'll tell you that there's a world of difference between the way that they build houses now compared to the way that they built them in those days. And you'll often get, more often than not, I think, when you're in that conversation, it goes something like this, it says, the old was better. Whatever way, whatever methods we have of construction and manufacture or whatever design, people will tell you the old was better.

It lasted longer. It was more magnificent. It was more expensive, I know, but it was better in so many different ways, more robust, and so on. But what if it's the opposite?

[10 : 26] What if the old wasn't better and the new is? That's Paul's message to the church in Corinth.

And he makes the statement, he's arguing this passage for a particular reason, because, and the reason was this, I have to stop here and I have to tell you that Paul was not popular. We get this impression of the Apostle Paul that he was always popular everywhere he went. Crowds of people came to hear him, and he was always successful every church that he went to. That's a myth.

And very often in the New Testament, you get the distinct impression that all was not well with various churches. It's the same. The same was true with Galatia, but it was also true with Corinth.

And what used to happen in those days doesn't happen so much now. The church was so young, and it was so unstructured. We can rely on our experience and our theology and our learning throughout the generations. But of course, in those days, the church was just new. They were still feeling their way around. And what used to happen is that the church, of course, was much smaller even than this group of people tonight. And they would be meeting in someone's house. And maybe there'll be 20, 40 people. And a group would come in from elsewhere, and they would start questioning what the church believed. And they would start questioning the Apostle Paul. And this particular group that had infiltrated the church in Corinth, they had managed to win people over by bad-mouthing

Paul. And they told people that he really was a fraud. He wasn't the genuine article. When he went around from place to place, he didn't have a letter of recommendation. That was the qualification in those days, rather like a CV is today. Paul didn't do CVs. He didn't have letters of recommendation.

[12 : 42] He was well known throughout all the churches. But this group of people said, why are you listening to him? What does he know? They were asking questions like, maybe Paul is in this for the money.

After all, look at him. He's not particularly impressive, is he? He's not a very good speaker, is he? He's not big and good-looking and charismatic. And I mean that with a small c.

He's not particularly impressive. He wasn't. He wasn't the kind of guy that would strike you as having a great deal of authority if he was to preach in this pulpit. You would think, well, is that all?

No. We would imagine that he would command the respect and the attention of all of us instantly. No, no. That's not the way it worked. The Apostle Paul was actually a very ordinary person. And that was the point that this group were trying to make. They were trying to divide the church by saying to them, you want to listen to us instead of the Apostle Paul. This man is not the genuine article. And their message was this. We belong to the past. This gospel that you've come to believe in, it's really not very impressive, is it? When you compare it with the Old Testament, to what our forefathers had in the Old Testament, now there is religion in its impressive form.

If you want to look up to somebody, you don't need to bother looking up to Paul, but let's think about Moses centuries ago. Now let's talk about him. Here was a man of God. When he went to meet with God up the mountain, he came down again, and his face was shining like the sun. That's what we think the genuine article should be. That's what we think should accompany when the God's Word is really preached in all its power. Something should be happening.

[14 : 40] There should be a display of glory in some way. These people, of course, they were rooted in Judaism. They were Jews, or at least they were partly Jews. We're not quite sure who they were, but it's quite clear that their minds went back to the Old Testament, and they wanted to hold on to the past. They couldn't cope with letting the past go and fixing their attention only and their faith only on Jesus Christ. They had to hold on to the past. And if it didn't, if the gospel didn't bear resemblance to what they were used to in the past or what the Old Testament told them, there was something wrong. And they said, no, no, we don't want this Paul fellow. We think he's a fraud, and we think you shouldn't be looking. Let's think about Moses because of who he was and because of what God did through him. Now, there is no question that Moses in his day was a terrific man of God. No question whatsoever. The Bible makes that very, very clear. And yet, he was a man that God raised for his time.

He was no longer there. Now, God was doing better things even than he did at the time of Moses. And so, Paul, he goes into this argument in which he makes three comparisons between what Moses was, or what there was in Moses' time, and what Jesus is, and what the gospel is. And he does this in order to press home the point that everything that they are laying hold of has now faded away. It's in the past.

And in actual fact, if they really understood what God was saying through Moses, they would have recognized the greatness of what God is doing now in Jesus Christ. Now, the first of these comparisons is this. Verse number seven, Paul says that he talks about the ministry of death, and he says this, If the ministry of death, read this with me, carved in letters of stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of his glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Now, he's making a comparison between two things.

Two ministries. Two ministries. He's making a comparison between the time of Moses, which he calls the ministry of death and condemnation. I'll explain that in a wee minute. With the ministry of the Spirit and righteousness. That's the New Testament. That's Jesus. And what he did on the cross in his death and his resurrection, that's what he calls the ministry of the Spirit and the ministry of righteousness. That's what Jesus did when he died on the cross and rose again on the third day. He poured out his Spirit and he gave us his own righteousness. He declared us to be righteous in his sight. Now, why does Paul call the time of Moses the ministry of death? That's what he's talking about.

He's talking about how the Israelites had been taken, led by Moses out of Egypt, and how they gathered around this mountain called Zinai. Moses had gone up the mountain, and the reason was to get the law so that God would give him his law summarized by the Ten Commandments. That's why Paul talks about the ministry of death carved in letters on stone. And he recognizes that it came with glory.

[18 : 47] I think we saw this recently. We were looking at that passage in Hebrews when we talked about the thunder and the lightning and the voice of God to the extent that the people of Israel, they told God, they pleaded with God not to say any more to them. But what Paul particularly focuses on here is the shining face of Moses, which those infiltrators were saying that they believed was a sign of God's presence and God's glory and his authentication. That's what Paul should have. But Paul is saying, no, no, no, you've got this wrong. You're going back to a time which actually brought about death and condemnation. Now, how was that? Well, God's law, the Ten Commandments, let's just talk about, let's just keep it simple and talk about God's law as the Ten Commandments. It was God's demands on his people. This was the way in which God was telling his people how they should live. That's why the

Ten Commandments are so important in every age and in every culture. That's why they're so important for you and I. Because if you want to know tonight how God wants you to live, that's where you start.

You go to the Ten Commandments. You shall not, it begins with God, you shall not have any other God before me. You shall not make to yourself a graven image, an image of anything that is heaven above or the earth beneath or the water. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Nobody can argue that these constitute God's way of living for him. That's what God expects of us. That's what he expected of Israel. So far, so good, until you come and try to live them.

As soon as you try to live them, you discover one awful, horrific fact, and that is you can't. You cannot live the Ten Commandments. You ever tried? And I'm talking about perfection.

[21 : 01] Because God demands not only that we keep one commandment, but he demands that we keep them all perfectly. Perfectly. Every single one. Thought, word, and deed, 24-7 throughout the whole of our lives.

God cannot but be perfect in his demands. You might feel well on average, on balance. I think I keep them more than other people do. I think I'm not really too bad at keeping. That's not the question.

The question is, do you keep them all? Do you keep them 100% thought, word, and deed? Have you always kept them? If not, the Bible tells us the wages of sin is death. That's why Paul says it's a ministry of death.

It's a ministry of condemnation. Because having failed to keep even one of the commandments, I stand condemned, and so do you. That's why Paul says it's a ministry of death. The problem is, of course, that we don't think like God. Of course, that's the problem in any case. When it comes to wrongdoing, isn't it true? Let's just stop for a moment. Is it not true that when it comes to wrongdoing, how do you define wrongdoing? Well, for the modern person, he or she defines wrongdoing in this way. Well, there's a scale of wrongdoing, isn't it? Oh, there's a scale of, so let's say one to five. And we call it this. The scale of one to five is this. There's, at the one hand, there's trivial. Then there's the inappropriate.

And then there's the irresponsible. And then there's the unacceptable. And then five is the downright intolerable, isn't it? That's the way people talk. Don't let's talk about what is right or wrong in God's eyes, but let's just reason this out together according to how we might think of things in a civilized society. And when a person is guilty of something trivial, then, hey, there's no big deal.

[23 : 21] When a person does something inappropriate, then a word in their ear. When a person does something irresponsible, then possibly a warning. When somebody does something downright unacceptable, there has to be consequences. That's the way we think, isn't it?

God says the wages of sin is death. God says the wages of sin is death. And it's because there's such a world of difference between the way we think and the way God thinks that there is such a problem with a person coming to terms with the Bible, because that's what they have to come to terms with. Trust me, you will have to come to terms with it either now or later, because we are all accountable to God. And every imperfection, what we call our imperfections, is punishable by God. Not me that says it. God says it. You see, we think it's unreasonable. The reason why you think it's unreasonable is because you are not God.

The choice you have tonight is you either give up your thinking in favor of God's thinking and accept what He says and ask what God has done to save us from our sin, or we carry on stubbornly refusing to believe and refusing to listen to God. Isn't that the case? Isn't it? It's rather like if you can think of a factory tonight where, let's say, a factory that makes vases. And this factory is the most famous vase factory in the world. It produces the most expensive vases in the world. It's been around for centuries. It's a household name. If you bought one of these vases, if you could afford it, you would take it home. You would never, ever bring it back to the shop with an imperfection, because imperfection is never, ever there. And the reason for that is because the vases are made by the very finest craftsmen and women. The name on the vase is tied up with the perfection of the vase. If there's an imperfection in it, then the name of the factory is brought into disrepute, and it's no longer the perfect vase.

Can you imagine how these vases are made? They're not made in a conveyor belt. They're started off at the very beginning, and the potter on his wheel, he is the very finest of potters, and he makes it to exactly the right shape and size. Then it goes on to the next stage, and I don't know how you make it, but I guess you fire it, I suppose. We used to do these things in school. I wasn't very good at it.

But then you fire it, and then you paint it, and your painting is done by only the very best craftsmen and women who you can find. They've served in this company for years, and they know exactly what to do. But at the end of the process, there's an inspection, inspection. And there's an inspector who comes before this vase can leave the factory. It has to be inspected, and he goes over it with every single minute detail with his magnifying glass.

[27 : 07] Every single detail has gone over. And if it's not absolutely perfect, it cannot leave the factory.

What happens is, if he finds one flaw, he takes his hammer, and he destroys it.

That's what perfection means. God cannot be anything but perfect. Otherwise, he is not God. If he's not perfect, he cannot be God. And if he doesn't demand perfection, he cannot be God. You see, you can't fault my logic. What I'm saying is what the Bible tells us. The soul that sins, it shall die. Now, if we were at that process, and we saw that vase, and he was just about to hit it with his hammer, you'd say, wait, wait, wait, wait, hold on now. Wait a minute. I'll give you 300 quid for it. You don't need to charge the whole amount. I'll give you 300 quid. You don't need to say anything. Just turn a blind eye, and I'll slip you 300 quid so that I'll have this vase in my house. That's not the way it works. That's the way we are to God. You say to God, but surely it doesn't really matter. It does matter.

It has to matter to God. That's why Paul says it's the ministry of death.

And that's why you have to come to terms with this awful, horrific fact about ourselves, where we stand in condemnation to God before you ever come to discover the gospel.

[28 : 54] The gospel is that God knows we stand condemned, and yet, and God sent his son into the world to save us from that condemnation. You see, God's law, whatever it did, it could not save us from our sin.

It had to be Jesus. No ordinary man or woman could ever take our place and take our punishment because that ordinary man or that ordinary woman, they were sinners themselves. It had to be God himself becoming a man, taking our nature to himself, being born in Bethlehem and growing up and going to the cross and willingly giving himself on the cross so that by his punishment and by his death, our condemnation, that death could be removed. And so that God would forgive us, set us free from the condemnation that the law insisted upon.

And then there was, I'm running out of time, and then the second contrast Paul makes is what we might call, it's found in verse 10, and he says this, he says this, what once had glory, indeed in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because the glory that surpasses it. Now, what Paul is saying here is something very simple. He's saying, I'm not denying for a moment that there was glory in the Old Testament. Those times when the children of Israel, they shook at the presence of God, and when God spoke to them, and when the face of Moses shone, and when there was all the priests, and everything that they did, their robes and their garments, they spoke of the glory of God.

But in actual fact, when you come to think of it, says Paul, majestic as that was, impressive, and truly, truly impressive as those days were, there were nothing compared to what God was about to do in Jesus Christ, and the glory of God, that God revealed in Jesus Christ. The shining face of Moses was nothing compared to what Jesus did for us, because in actual fact, the shining face of Moses, whatever else it showed them, it could never save them from their sin. Let me ask you this question. If God was going to do something really glorious, and when we talk about the glory of God, we're talking about how he reveals himself to us. That's the glory of anything. I suppose over the last week or two, we've been looking at glory in, as we remember, the Queen's 60th anniversary from when she was crowned 60 years ago, 1953. And I'm sure you all watched the program that showed the crowning, the coronation of Her

Majesty the Queen, 1953. And even the black and white film reel, it really does give the impression of pomp and ceremony. It must have been fantastic. It must have been absolutely amazing to have been there. And even people who they talked to who were there, they still remember it. They couldn't forget it because of the glory of the occasion. That's the best we can do to create our own glory. Usually, usually has something to do with kings and queens and royalty. That's the best we can do. Can you imagine what God's glory is? Can you imagine being able to see God in his majesty? We couldn't even begin to imagine. One day we will. If you're in Christ tonight, you die in Christ, God promises us that one day we will see him as he is in all his majesty. And if that isn't a good reason to be a Christian, I don't know what is. If God tonight was going to show us what he really can do, the best thing that he's ever done, the greatest event, the greatest achievement that God has ever brought about, what do you think that would be? Do you think he would transport us to the farthest reaches of the universe, maybe take us outside the universe and show us, if that was possible, the entirety of the universe that he has created by the word of his power and all the ways in which the planets and the stars and different galaxies, they interact with each other and the movement that there is and everything that the scientists can't get their heads around, he might do that. That would be utterly spectacular, wouldn't it?

[33 : 44] I'm sure we would all love to see that. He might show us some of the aspects of creation in this world that we haven't even begun to understand. That would be spectacular as well. But that's not the greatest demonstration of the glory of God that there ever was. If God, and I kid you not, if God right now was going to show us the greatest, most spectacular event that he has ever brought about, he would take us to Calvary, and we would see him hanging in agony on a cross. That is the single greatest act that God has ever done.

It looks pathetic, doesn't it? That's why Paul spoke about the foolishness of the gospel. From one point of view, it just doesn't make sense. How could this possibly reflect the majesty and the power of God? And yet that is exactly what it does. Because God, as one of us, hung on the cross and gave his life for us so that our condemnation would be taken away, and so that we, our hearts and our lives would be changed, and we would be transformed into a new creation. That's what God can do for us tonight.

God can change you. He can take away all, not only the imperfection, but the disgusting filth that you know you're guilty of. Deep down inside, we all pretend that we're so respectable.

But deep down inside, if we knew, if we were to stand before God tonight, you and I both know that we wouldn't have a leg to stand on unless, unless he has forgiven us, and that we've stood in the righteousness that God can give us in Jesus Christ.

Well, the last thing I was going to speak about, I see the time has gone, was in verse 11, just a very, very quick glance at it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. Paul is making very clear here that the New Testament, the gospel, the good news of Jesus having come into the world, he has overshadowed, he has outshone everything that was in the past, and how foolish it was to try and, to try and run back to the past, to try and grasp something just because they think it's, because it means something to them. No, says Paul. We have to see everything in terms of what Jesus has done for us, and how Jesus has surpassed, and how great the gift that he can give to us. And it's a gift that no one can ever take away from us. Once your sins are forgiven, they're forgiven forever. We can never go back into being guilty. Once God removes our sin from us, once he changes our hearts, and creates within us a clean heart, and gives us everlasting life, and raises us to newness of life, no one can separate us from that love by which he has done that. This is forever, Paul says. The Christian life is forever. God is forever. Jesus is forever.

[37 : 56] forever. What Jesus can do for us, takes us all the way through the rest of our lives, however short or long that might be, but it will take, he will take us beyond that, into eternity, to be with himself in the place that he has prepared for us. Life extends beyond death. What God can do for us, no one can ever take away. The gospel is the most secure place I can ever think of tonight. It's the most secure place that there could ever be tonight, in a world full of uncertainty, where all kinds of questions, and where you ask one person what they think life is all about, and they give you some meaningless, incoherent answer. You ask another person, what's life all about? And they say, well, I think that life is about this. And you say, I don't know where to turn.

Well, I'll tell you tonight where to turn. You turn to God through Jesus. You turn to the Bible. The Bible has the answer. Not just has the answer, but has the power in which our lives can be turned around. How can God turn around our lives when we turn ourselves in? Have you turned yourself in to God tonight? You know how, when there's somebody on the run, and when they're looking for someone, the police are looking for somebody, when there's an appeal put out all over the country to that person to turn yourself in? That's what God is asking us to do tonight. Don't run another step. Turn yourself in once and for all. Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you once again for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We thank you, Lord, for what you have done out of your extraordinary love for a lost world. We are part of that lost world. We know it. We know it deep down in our hearts. We need to listen to you.

Perhaps this is something which is new to some of us this evening. We pray, Lord, that you will stay with us, and that you will give us to stay with you, and that you will continue to open up our hearts and draw us to read the Bible and to ask the most important questions we can ever ask.

We ask that you will work within us to your glory and to your praise. In Jesus' name, amen.