

# Beholding the Glory with Unveiled Faces

*2 Corinthians 3:1–18*

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## Setting the Stage: Paul, the Corinthians, and the Super-Apostles

We are currently making our way through the book of 2 Corinthians. The letter was written in the gap between Acts 20:1, where Paul departs for Macedonia, and Acts 20:2, where he travels on to Greece. Because of a deep conflict between Paul and the church at Corinth, he had gone to Macedonia from Ephesus, where he waited anxiously for Titus. Titus eventually arrived with word that the church had repented and was longing to see Paul again (2 Corinthians 7:5–9). Paul rejoices and is comforted by this news, and that comfort and joy are what gave rise to 2 Corinthians. Where 1 Corinthians was written to address problems in the church, 2 Corinthians is, at its heart, a letter of comfort.

But because of the conflict between Paul and the congregation, there are things that still need to be addressed. Chief among them is the problem of outside teachers who had come to Corinth claiming a higher authority than Paul and encouraging the church to distance themselves from him. This, of course, was the source of much of the tension to begin with. And so in these opening chapters, Paul takes up that conflict directly and works through the pain it has caused.

We do not know precisely who these teachers were. In 2 Corinthians 11:5 and 12:11, Paul calls them, with unmistakable sarcasm, “super-apostles” — people who had arrived in Corinth carrying letters of recommendation and other credentials designed to demonstrate their importance, especially in contrast to Paul. My own reading is that they are very similar to the people Paul describes in detail in Galatians 1 and 2: teachers coming from the Jerusalem church to the congregations Paul had planted, insisting that gentile believers needed to follow the Jewish law in order to be genuine followers of Jesus. They were preaching what is called “works righteousness” — the idea that a person is saved not by Christ alone, but by Christ plus works. Second Corinthians 3, our passage today, is a direct confrontation to that teaching. It is a direct confrontation to the belief that anything we do can contribute to our salvation. That is why I believe these super-apostles are cut from the same cloth as the troublemakers Paul addresses in Galatians.

Near the very end of chapter 2, in verse 16 — the passage we looked at last week — Paul asks a piercing question: “*Who is sufficient for these things?*” “These things” refers to God’s work in Paul and through Paul. In other words: is there any merit, any personal accomplishment,

anything in Paul himself that credentials him or makes him fit to be a follower of Jesus, let alone commissioned by God to speak in Christ? The super-apostles have come to Corinth insisting that they are more worthy than Paul to preach the gospel — just look at their letters of recommendation.

In verse 5 of our passage today, Paul answers that question plainly: no one is. No one is sufficient. Nothing that comes from us contributes to our salvation. All our sufficiency is from God. He does it all. Christ alone is worthy. And this understanding of God's sufficiency is directly tied to understanding grace — because if God is truly sufficient, if he does it all, then our salvation is by grace alone. If we must add to what Christ has done, it would mean that God is not sufficient. But he is. And the implications of that sufficiency unfold throughout chapter 3 across several dimensions: Paul's own credentialing, the nature of salvation, how we read Scripture, what genuine fellowship with God looks like, and how a person is actually transformed. All of these things, in 2 Corinthians 3, are anchored in the sufficiency of God given to us through the work of Christ and by the indwelling of his Spirit. With that in mind, let us begin.

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## A Different Kind of Letter (vv. 1–6)

*Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?*

Notice the tension in that opening verse. The super-apostles had brought letters of recommendation to prove they had been commissioned by God. So where are Paul's? What evidence will he offer that he has been called and credentialed to preach Jesus? How will he show that he is worthy? Here is his answer:

*You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

In the Old Testament, the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel each looked forward to a day when a new covenant would be made. In that new covenant, Jeremiah promised, people's sins would be forgiven and they would *know* the Lord — not merely know *about* him, but know him (Jeremiah 31:31–34). Ezekiel added that the Lord himself would put a new Spirit within his covenant people, turning hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, a Spirit who would lead them in the ways of God (Ezekiel 11:19–20; 36:26–27). When Paul says in verse 3 that this letter is “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets

of human hearts,” he is reaching back to those prophecies and saying plainly: they have been fulfilled.

If you want evidence that the gospel Paul preaches is legitimate, that he has genuinely been commissioned by God to speak in Christ — the proof is not found in a letter of recommendation from the Jerusalem church, though he has that (see 2 Peter 3:15–16). It is not found in the miracles he has performed, though he has performed many. It is not even found in his sufferings, though he has endured much. Paul’s credentialing is not going to be found in Paul. It is found in the Spirit of God at work in the lives of the Corinthians themselves. Exactly as Scripture prophesied, and now fulfilled. *You*, Corinthians — your changed lives, your hearts of flesh where there were once hearts of stone — you are the letter that proves what God has done in and through us.

Paul then states the principle that underlies everything that follows:

*Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

This is one of the most important and profound truths in all of Paul’s writing. Please hear it — *shema* — hear it and take it to heart.

“The letter” is Paul’s way of speaking about the law, and whenever the law is under discussion, so too is the question of works. The old covenant was a covenant of works, and it was never sufficient to give life. That is why Paul says the letter kills. Works righteousness kills. Legalism kills. Trying to earn our way into heaven kills. But there is a new covenant — not of the letter but of the Spirit — and this covenant gives life.

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## **The Fading Glory and the Surpassing Glory (vv. 7–11)**

In verses 7 through 18, Paul unpacks what he has just said in verse 6, and he does so by drawing on a remarkable image from Exodus 34 — the account of Moses descending from Sinai with his face shining from his encounter with God.

*When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him.*

And because of that fear, Moses would put a veil over his face. Now listen to how Paul uses that story to explain what has happened in the new covenant under Christ and how it differs from what came before.

*Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on 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?*

Note what Paul calls the old covenant here: the “ministry of death.” He is not saying the law is bad. The law is good — even glorious, as the blinding radiance on Moses’ face makes clear. The law is glorious because it reveals the holiness of God. But when sinners encounter the law without the Spirit, the only possible outcome is condemnation. The law cannot do what it demands. It shows you the standard, and then it shows you that you are not it. That is why Paul calls it the ministry of death. It is a faithful diagnosis. But a diagnosis is not a cure.

*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.*

Pause here and consider what Paul is saying in the context of Corinth. The super-apostles have arrived preaching a gospel of works righteousness: to be saved, you need Jesus *plus* the law — do this, eat that, don’t associate with those people. But the law has no power to save. It is good and glorious in that it has the power to show you what sin is; that is precisely why Paul calls it the ministry of condemnation. No one enjoys when a warning light comes on in their dashboard, but those lights are important. The law works like that. And the law is also glorious for another reason: it always pointed forward, to a righteousness that would come after it, a righteousness that would fulfill it. And that future righteousness has now come. It is the gospel.

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## **The Veil and Its Removal (vv. 12–16)**

*Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who 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.*

Notice what Paul is saying here, because this is critical. He has used the phrase “being brought to an end” twice now, in verses 11 and 13. I take this to refer to the old covenant of law — the old way of relating to God through personal attempts to fulfill his righteous demands. And he

asks: what was the *outcome* of what was being brought to an end? He has already answered that question twice. The outcome was death and condemnation. It was that outcome — the terrifying revelation of a God so holy that sinful human beings could not survive in his presence — that made the people afraid and caused Moses to veil his face.

To say it another way: the people saw the holiness of God reflected in the radiance of Moses' face. They saw a God so righteous and so holy that they could not stand in his presence. That is what the law revealed — the holiness of God, and the utter inability of sinful men and women to draw near to him. That is what terrified them. They were not asking Moses to move closer; they were asking him to stay far away, back up on the mountain, where he belonged and they did not. And so the veil was placed, to shield them from what they could not bear to see.

Paul is also doing something here that reaches beyond Moses' literal veil. He is pointing to the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the tabernacle — the place where the shekinah glory of God rested, just as that glory rested on Moses' face. No one could enter and stand in the presence of that glory except the High Priest, and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. God's glory dwelt among his people, but the people could not come near it. A veil of separation stood between them and him.

And then Paul makes the application that strikes at the very heart of everything the super-apostles are teaching:

*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. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.*

Anyone today who seeks to approach God through works righteousness — anyone who reads the Bible as a list of rules and laws that must be kept to earn a place with God — that veil of separation remains. The only way this veil is removed is through Christ. *Only through Christ is it taken away.* And it is taken away, verse 16 tells us, when one turns to the Lord.

How does one turn to the Lord? Here is how: you stop trusting in your own sufficiency and begin trusting in his. You confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that Jesus is Lord — that he alone is the fulfillment of the righteous demands of the law, a righteousness that he gives to you in exchange for your sin. For those who believe upon Christ, the veil is removed, because they enter into the presence of God not on the basis of their own righteousness, but his.

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## Beholding and Being Transformed (vv. 17–18)

And what happens when that veil is removed?

| *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*

Freedom from what? Freedom from the veil. Freedom from condemnation. Freedom from a religion of distance. We are no longer kept out. We are brought in. The Spirit of God dwelling in you is not only the fulfillment of Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's prophecy — it is God himself in you, the one by whom you *know* him. And it is in knowing him that your life is changed.

Which brings us to one of the most important verses in the entire New Testament:

| *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

Do you see what has happened? Moses veiled his face. But we — we with unveiled faces — behold the glory of the Lord. Not at a distance. Not through a curtain. Not once a year through a High Priest. We behold him. And here is what that beholding does: it transforms you. Not by your striving. Not by your rule-keeping. Not by the letter. The Spirit does it. You look at Christ — his holiness, his grace, his sacrifice, his resurrection — and the Spirit uses that beholding to make you look more like him. From one degree of glory to another.

This is sanctification. This is how you change. Not by adding more to what Christ has already done, but by beholding him. It is in the beholding that the Spirit of God transforms you. This is the new covenant. This is what the super-apostles could never give with their letters of recommendation and their lists of laws. Only Christ can do this. And he is doing it — in every believer, at every moment, from one degree of glory to the next, until that day when we are fully in his presence.

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### Application: Living with the Veil Gone

Let me close with a few applications from this passage that I want to leave with you to think and pray about.

**Stop adding to the gospel.** Examine your own heart. Is your assurance of salvation resting on Christ alone, or have you quietly added something to it? Your church attendance. Your moral record. Your family heritage. The veil remains for anyone trusting in anything other than Christ. Rest in his sufficiency alone.

**Turn to the Lord.** This is the verb of verse 16: “*the veil is taken away when one turns to the Lord.*” Maybe you have attended church your entire life but have never turned. You know the songs. You know the stories. You know how to bow your head when the prayer starts. But the veil is still there, because you have never moved from knowing *about* him to turning *to* him. Church attendance is not the turn. A Christian family is not the turn. Agreeing that the Bible is true is not the turn. The turn is when you stop trusting in your own sufficiency — your record, your effort, your respectability — and rest entirely on Christ’s. Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. The veil does not lift for the curious. It lifts for those who turn. If you have never turned, turn this morning. He is not far. The Spirit who lifted the veil for the Corinthians is the same Spirit who is at work right now. I invite you to turn to him.

**Read your Bible differently.** The law was never meant to be a ladder you climb to God. It is a mirror that shows you your need, and a signpost pointing you to Christ. When you read the Old Testament, look for him. When you read the law, let it drive you to grace. Read it with an unveiled face.

**Understand how you change.** Sanctification is not about striving harder. It is about beholding more. Spend time with Christ — in his word, in prayer, in worship — and trust the Spirit to do in you what you cannot do for yourself. Behold him. The transformation follows.

**Live in freedom.** Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom — and that means something concrete for how you live. It means you are no longer living under the weight of condemnation. When you sin — and you will — you do not have to wonder if God is done with you. The veil is gone. You run toward him, not away from him. It means you are no longer performing for God’s approval, because you already have it in Christ. You do not pray to earn his attention; you pray because you have it. You do not serve to make God love you; you serve because he already does. It means you are no longer living at a distance, treating God as a faraway sovereign to be feared and appeased. He is your Father. You know him. The Spirit of God lives in you. That is not religion. That is relationship. So stop living as though the veil is still there. It has been torn away. Enter into the presence of God.