

God's Transforming Glory

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[0 : 00] Thanks very much, Julia. Good morning, everyone. Can I repeat the welcome was given at the beginning? And can I perhaps particularly welcome those who've joined us on live stream or watching video later or listening to the audio recording?

I've got a reason for doing that this morning. As Kate had told us earlier, the funeral service for Donald McMillan is this Thursday. Most of you, I'm aware, have never met Donald, but he'd been a member of our church family since the 1930s, since before the Second World War. He was an elder of the church for more than 30 years, and for most of that time, he also was chairman of the elders' meetings. But I will remember Donald particularly as someone who served humbly and faithfully.

If there was something to be done and he could do it, Donald would do it without fuss, often unseen by everyone except God. He was a wonderful role model, particularly to my generation. Donald hasn't been able to be with us for the last few years, except very occasionally at the breaking of bread on Sunday morning. There was COVID, then his wife Audrey was very ill, and Donald himself has been very unwell.

[1 : 10] But Donald watched this service every Sunday morning, and he liked to talk about it. It kept him in touch with the church. It made him feel still part of the church family, that he could worship with us and that he could learn with us.

So this morning, a big thank you to those who make that possible, for those who do the video recordings. And as I said, a particularly welcome to those who are not able to be with us, but are watching us online.

Now we're looking today at 2 Corinthians chapter 3. It's quite a difficult chapter, so I want to do a few things before we get into the passage, just to help us to understand what it's about.

I want to begin with a story. It's a story you may be familiar with, but I think it will help you to see where we are going this morning. In the village of Boya in Spain, in 1930, a local artist called Elias Garcia Martinez painted a picture on the wall of Jesus, the image of Jesus in a crown of thorns. The title is Echiomo. Oh, it was Jesus before Pilate. Over the years, this painting deteriorated. And particularly because they had quite bad damp on the walls of the church, eventually it really became quite bad.

[2 : 32] And there were processes in place to get it restored when a local woman decided she would do it herself. An 81-year-old woman called Cecilia Gimenez.

She decided that she would do the restoration. And this is the bit you may remember having seen in the past. It turned out really badly. There is a good happy ending to the story because this painting and the church became a tourist attraction and it raised quite a lot of money for the church and the local economy.

But what I think that illustrates to us is if you've got an image and you're trying to restore it to its former glory, you need the right person doing it.

If it's the wrong person, it's liable to turn out really badly. And that's really what this passage today is about. We're leading up to the end, verse 18, where it talks about the image of God.

Now, right back at the beginning in Genesis, when God created humans, he made them in his image. But that image has been marred by our sin to the point of being in many ways almost unrecognizable.

[3 : 47] And over the time in the Old Testament, in the law given through Moses, the people who tried to keep that law, they couldn't do it. Because of their sin, they couldn't restore themselves to be in the image of God.

And Paul says in this chapter, and we'll come to it right at the end, that we are restored into the image of God. We are being conformed more and more to the image of God through the work of the Holy Spirit and through focusing our attention on the Lord Jesus and thinking about him.

So the image can be restored, but it can't be done by our own efforts. It can only be done through God's Spirit. So that's where we're going.

Before we get into the passage in detail, let me also give you a couple of keys to help us understand it, to open up the passage for us. And the first key is Paul's purpose.

If you get any passage in the Bible, it's good to think, well, why was this passage written? What is the point of it? And Paul's purpose in writing basically most of the book of 2 Corinthians, but certainly the early chapters, was to counter some people who had come along and who were trying to do him down.

[5 : 07] Now, Graham's presented that to us over the last few weeks. People were coming and saying, well, Paul is not really committed to the churches. He keeps changing his mind. He's not really that good a messenger for God.

And we have that continuing in this passage. The people who had come were by and large peddling Jewish traditions. They were trying to get people to go back to the law. They were presenting themselves as people who had mystical experiences.

And they were expecting the church to give them money to pay them for what they did. And they looked at Paul with some disdain. I like the description that Jonathan Lamb gave of this.

He said they viewed Paul as little more than a clown, a manual worker, an amateur speaker, a buffoon who didn't even charge for his services.

And these people had come into the church and they were putting Paul down. And he wants to defend himself. But perhaps more significantly, they were also denying Paul's teaching.

[6 : 13] They were saying it's not enough, as Paul says, to have faith in Jesus and to be forgiven by God. You've got to obey the Old Testament law.

You've got to do things to earn God's favour. They were trying to impose Jewish regulations and Jewish practices on top of the gospel that Paul preached.

And Paul is countering these people in this chapter. The first six verses, largely about his credentials. The remaining verses of the chapter, and indeed through into chapters four and five and beyond, are a defence of his teaching and a presentation of how more glorious the message of the gospel of Jesus is than anything that is in the Old Testament.

So that's key one, Paul's purpose. The second key is that in this chapter, Paul draws some parallels. He takes things from the Old Testament and he compares them with what is happening now with his ministry.

And he does that, I think, in two main ways. He compares himself and Moses, not overtly in some ways, but it definitely is there in the passage. Moses was the messenger of the Old Covenant, of the law that God gave the people on Sinai.

[7 : 34] He chose to communicate it through Moses, giving him the tablets and Moses would go in and meet with God and come out and talk with the people. Paul says that he also is a messenger of a covenant, that he is bringing the people God's new covenant.

Today, Corinthians first learned the gospel message from Paul and so he was the messenger of God's new covenant through Jesus. And if the people who had come into church were accusing Paul of incompetence, then Paul says, yes, I would be incompetent, but I've been made competent through the Lord Jesus.

So Paul can present God's message and does it, unlike Moses, he does it without in any way hiding the God's glory. Then the second bit of the parallels is between the letter and the Spirit.

In other words, the Old Testament, God said to his people, here is a list of things you have to do. If you do these things perfectly, you will be justified before me.

And in practice, no one could do it. So Paul said, the letter of the law, that just brought death. And the parallel now, Paul says, is that under the new covenant that God is bringing, it comes through the Spirit and does not depend on our efforts, we have the Spirit of God in us, revitalizing us, giving us life and enabling us to serve God.

[9 : 07] So bear these two keys in mind as we go through. I think they do help us to understand the passage. But let's get into it now. I've divided it into four sections and each of these sections is based around something that Paul tells us about the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit, of course, is part of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that great mystery and yet that wonderful truth that there is one God in three persons.

And the Holy Spirit is the person who is with us and can help us in our lives now. So we're going to look first at the transforming spirit and that's in verses one to three.

Paul's being accused of boasting about himself without any corroborating testimony. The people who had come into the church had come with letters of recommendation.

Perhaps from the Jewish leader or something like that. They come with letters that says, these are people you should listen to. They're going to tell you what you need to know. And they were saying, look at Paul.

[10:15] He didn't have anything like that. He just came and he preached and there was no one behind him. There was no one giving him a recommendation to you. Now letters of recommendation were very common in those days.

Perhaps less common now in churches although I think they could be used a lot more than they are. If someone moves from one city to another, for example, quite good if their old church could communicate with their new church and let them know how they have served and been part of the fellowship.

But Paul didn't believe he needed something written down on paper as a letter of commendation or recommendation to the Corinthians. Paul said, my letter of recommendation is written on the heart. It's not something that's written with pen on paper. It's written by the Spirit on heart. In other words, what Paul is saying is that the Corinthians were his letter of recommendation because their lives and their hearts had been transformed by God's Holy Spirit.

If we went back and read in 1 Corinthians chapter 6, Paul described what many of the Corinthians were like before they became Christians. He says they were sexually immoral, they were idolaters, they were drunkers, they were swindlers and a whole lot more besides.

[11:36] They weren't what you might call good people. And yet, through the gospel that Paul preached, the gospel of the Lord Jesus, through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, the Corinthians had been changed.

Not that they were perfect, you correctly pick that up if you go through 1 and 2 Corinthians, but they had been changed from what they were and they were still being changed by the Holy Spirit.

And by questioning Paul's credentials, actually they were questioning their own salvation because what Paul had brought them was the message that had changed their lives as they came to faith in the Lord Jesus.

He didn't need a letter of recommendation because the Corinthian Christians themselves were his recommendation. I have to take a pause there and we'll ask this question again at the end of the service.

If your life was a letter that people could read, what would it say? What would they read about it? It's about your faith, about your love for Jesus, about what he has done in your life.

[12:43] We'll come back to that at the end in the questions, but just leave that to think about and to mull over for a while. Let's move on though into the second part of the passage and I've called this the life-giving spirit.

It's verses 4 to 6 of the passage. Paul is writing with confidence. And he says in that confidence it's not a kind of spiritual one-upmanship, I'm better than you.

Rather it is because he's been made competent to be a minister of the gospel through the spirit of God. In verse 3 he talks about tablets of stone that were given to Moses.

Verse 6 he talks about the letter of the law and the life that comes through the spirit. So Paul says the letter of the law brings death but the spirit brings life.

The old covenant, the agreement, the commitment that was made between God and the people in Moses' day was a mutual commitment where God's requirements were laid out in very precise detail and the people committed to obey them.

[13:52] And then they found they couldn't. it was impossible. The standard was just too high and their inability to keep it Paul says led to death.

Contrast that with the situation now. Paul says we have the spirit now. We have the Holy Spirit who is with us who can lead us to Christ and can help us grow in our faith.

And we're not dependent on our own efforts because if we're Christians if we trust in Jesus then God is at work in our lives and anything we achieve any competence that we have we owe to him

and not to ourselves.

I think that's another very good reminder. We are completely dependent on God for any good that comes from what we do. It's an antidote both to pride and to discouragement.

Perhaps your experience has been similar to mine. At times I feel that I'm doing pretty well that God is with me as I speak or as I serve in the church and I'm tempted to think well that's my efforts I've done really well I've worked hard at it.

[15:07] Other times things don't go so well and I get quite discouraged and think well am I really up to the job here should I be doing whatever I'm serving in.

Both attitudes are wrong. If things go well it is because God's spirit is with us it is empowering us and is using us.

And if we think things are going badly well we don't know. We may be inadequate we are inadequate of ourselves but God is able to take and to use our failures and our weakness and to bless others through it.

We are called to serve to serve faithfully and to serve in the power in the strength that God gives us.

There's no question of how we feel after it or whether we feel we've done a good or a bad job.

The Holy Spirit is the enabler he's the life giver and if there is to be anything that comes from our service for the Lord Jesus it is through him.

[16:12] Okay so that's the first part of the passage where Paul is defending himself personally against the attacks made against him. Let's move on and again we have two headings in the second part of the chapter which is about Paul's message and particularly the means by which it comes.

I've called the third section from verse 7 to 11 the glorious spirit and hopefully you can see that if you've got it in front of you. So we're going back in the next section of the passage to Exodus chapter 34.

If you get the chance when you get home it would be worth reading Exodus 34. It very much is the background to what's happening here. Moses went up the Mount Sinai. He went up twice.

The first time he came down and the people had brought a golden calf and Moses threw down the commandments he'd been given and the people suffered God's wrath for what they'd done.

Moses went back up again pleaded for the people that God would save them. God in his mercy relented and Moses came down and because he'd been in the presence of God when he came down his face was shining.

[17:19] So shining that the people were afraid to come to him. That shows I think that Moses the covenant that was given through Moses the message that was given to Moses was a glorious one.

It's easy for us to say well the law it's gone it's passed what really matters is the gospel and to an extent that's true but we mustn't put down the law in the Old Testament.

What God gave to the Israelites was glorious. It was a representation of his holiness and his greatness and the standards that he lived to.

Even though it led to death Moses' face shone as he'd been in the presence of God and as he was able to present something of the character of God. But how much more glorious says Paul is the ministry of the Spirit.

If the old ministry if what came through Moses just resulted in death because people couldn't do what they had to do how much more glorious is the ministry now of the Holy Spirit that gives us life.

[18:28] It's also more glorious because it brings righteousness and not condemnation. And here's the heart of the Christian faith. Paul will expand on it in later chapters.

No one except Jesus could keep the law perfectly. So everyone was condemned. But Jesus has taken the punishment for our sins so that those who trust in him are made righteous and we can live more righteously by the power of the Spirit.

So the ministry of the Spirit that brings justification and righteousness is so much greater than the ministry of the law which condemns us because we can't keep it.

And then finally in this section Paul reminds us that the glory that Moses had was temporary and the glory of the law was in that sense temporary too.

It's lost its glory. A good analogy I read was if you look at the sun and the moon. If you go at night in a clear sky the moon looks really bright.

[19:40] If you go out again in daylight and you see the sun you can't even see the moon. The level of brightness is so much greater with the sun than the moon.

God's glory in the Old Testament shone bright. God's glory in the New Testament shines even brighter. So bright that eclipses completely the glory of the Old Testament. As Paul says, the letter kills but the spirit gives life. Let's move on then and look at the final section from verse 12.

And I've called that the liberating spirit. Now again let me remind you of Exodus chapter 34.

Israelites have left slavery in Egypt. They're going through the wilderness.

They've been there for 40 years. They're still fairly early stages in that. Moses goes up saying I try to get the commandments. He comes down the second time with a radiant face having witnessed the glory of God.

[20 : 49] And the people are so terrified with that that Moses has to put a veil on his face to cover it. And Paul tells us though the Old Testament doesn't that part of the purpose of that veil was so that people wouldn't see that the glory was fading.

That the shining of Moses' face would gradually diminish until he went again into the presence of God, took the veil off, his face again took on the glory, the shining countenance, he came out again and he put the veil on.

So the shining represented the glory of God, it was evidence to the people that Moses had been into the presence of God and that what he was relaying back to them was what God had said to him, it was the instructions that they needed to obey.

But now, says Paul, things are different. There is no need now for a veil. There is no need now to hide the glory of God.

Paul and his fellow evangelists, he says, we can be bold. We can be confident that we are able to go out to the people and without veiling anything to present to them God in all his fullness, in all his greatness, in the wonder of what comes through Jesus.

[22 : 13] The glow in Moses' face faded just as the law faded. But the glory of Christ has superseded that and it will never fade. There is no reason, says Paul, to be bashful about this.

So in verse 12, he says, we are very bold. In Romans chapter 1, Paul says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew and then to the Gentiles.

God says, says Paul, there is still a veil. And the veil isn't on our side of those who are preaching the good news. The veil is on the hearts of the hearers.

Many Jews, says Paul, are blind. Their minds have been made dull, he said. They can't understand the truth of the gospel. And what appears obvious to some of us as Christians in the Old Testament refers to Jesus.

They just can't see it. They're still living in darkness. And of course, it's not just Jews who are in that position. So many people today in our society who have no time for the Christian message, for the gospel, for God at all.

[23 : 29] They have been blinded. They have the veil over their hearts. And unless that veil is removed through the power of the Spirit, then it will remain. But, says Paul, when we turn to the Lord, when we do put our trust in Jesus, the veil is removed, and we can observe God's glory, and we can share in it.

And that brings us to the glorious climax of this chapter. Now, just as a point of detail, when we come to verses 16 to 18, I think when it refers to the Lord there, it's not specifically referring to Jesus.

I think in the context, it is the Yahweh of the Old Testament, although obviously everything that we have is through Jesus. So, in verse 17, Paul says, when Moses encountered the Lord in the tent of meeting, we encounter him through the Spirit.

And that encounters liberating for us. It frees us from the bondage of sin. It frees us from the hardness of heart that we had.

It frees us to be obedient to God through the work of the Holy Spirit. And so then in verse 18, Paul says, like Moses, we can view God's glory with unveiled faces.

[25 : 02] Only Moses in the Old Testament, in the account in Exodus, only Moses could go into the presence of God, take the veil off, and experience the glory of God.

When Moses came back to the people, they saw a little bit of the reflected glory, but even that was then hidden as the veil was put on. We, though, have unveiled faces.

We, if we're Christians, if we know the Lord Jesus, we can gaze on him, we can wonder at who he is, and at all that he has done for us, and we can recognize and experience his glory.

And as we do that, says Paul, our lives are transformed. We are transformed into the image of God with ever-increasing glory.

That image, as I said, which was spoiled through our sin in Genesis is now being restored through the work of the Spirit and through for those who have faith in Jesus.

[26 : 07] And it comes about as we understand better and as we contemplate the Lord's glory and see what it means to be in his image. How do we do that? Well, we moved a few verses to chapter four, which I think Graham will be speaking on next week.

Chapter four describes Jesus as the image of God. God and we are transformed into the image of God as we observe the one who is truly the image of God who is God with us.

John says in his gospel, no one has ever seen God, but God the one and only Son who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father has made him known.

Our transformation begins when through the prompting and leading of the Spirit opening our hearts to God's word. We recognise that we don't win God's favour by our own efforts, by being a set of rules, by living in a certain way.

We only find God's favour through faith in Jesus who died on the cross to take our sins and make us righteous. That is the beginning of the transformation.

[27 : 18] The transformation continues as we contemplate the Lord's glory, particularly as revealed in Jesus. If we're Christians, we should be spending time daily with God's word, we should be meditating on it, we should be seeking to learn more about the Lord Jesus and his life and his death and all that he means for us.

And as we do that, the Spirit continues the work of transformation and makes us more and more like Jesus. And the transformation will be complete one day.

One day when we go and see him face to face and we become like him in every way. That's the experience of these lovely fellow Christians who have recently gone to be with the Lord Jesus.

They are now with the Lord they love. If we have our trust in Jesus, then one day when he returns or when we pass through death, we will go to be with him forever and we will be totally transformed.

We will be without sin. We will be like Jesus. As Charles Wesley put it, change from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.

[28 : 45] So to conclude this morning, my challenge to you is where are you on that journey of being transformed by Jesus? Some of us perhaps haven't done the first step.

We haven't come to realise that only through Jesus is there hope. That we can't do it by ourselves. Only through trusting in the saving work of the Lord Jesus and dying for us on the cross can we be right with God.

If that's you, please this morning consider that Christ died to save you and that you can have peace with God through him. Put your trust in him. Maybe for some of us that work of transformation seems to have stalled a bit.

Yes, we're Christians, yes, we've come to our trust in Jesus, but actually our lives aren't really progressing very much. We're just static, maybe even going backwards in our faith.

In that case, the challenge is to again contemplate the Lord's glory, to look on Jesus, to follow his example, to trust him through the Spirit to continue the process that began at your conversion.

[29 : 57] And for all of us, wherever we are, let's lift our eyes. Let's give thanks for the glory that God has revealed to us through Jesus Christ, and thanks that is accessible to us and come before him with unveiled faces to see his beauty and to be changed to be like him.

So let's pray together. As we gaze on your kingly brightness, so our faces display your likeness. Ever changing from glory to glory, mirrored here, may our lives tell the story.

Shine on me, shine on me. Father, we pray that indeed you will through your Spirit shine on us, that we may see the glorious glory to the Lord Jesus, that as we do, that we may be transformed to be more like him, to be in his image.

If we have not already trusted him for salvation, help us to realise that the only way is through Jesus, not through our own efforts. And if we are Christians, help us to grow in him, to grow like him, as we contemplate his greatness.

We thank you for your presence with us this morning. We pray for the coming week, particularly pray for the funeral service on Thursday, that that will be a fitting tribute to Donald, but more than

that, that it will bring glory to the Lord Jesus.

[31 : 23] We give you thanks and ask for your continued blessing. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.