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 2 Corinthians 3:12-18
 Fourth Message
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THE NEW COVENANT: NO MORE VEILS

Almost daily we hear of the failings and scandals surrounding celebrities, politicians and athletes. The media pounces on the latest episode like a shark attacking its prey. We listen to talk show hosts and commentators discuss the details. Tarnished public figures hire veilers and handlers and spin doctors to salvage their image. Often we are left with conflicting reports and information. We just want someone to speak the truth plainly.

The same confusion often surrounds conversations about God, church and religion. There is endless debate about what is true and not true, what is important and not important. We hear conflicting information and perceptions, but we just want someone to speak the truth plainly. This highlights one of the major differences between the old covenant and the new covenant, the difference between confusion and clarity.

Our study continues on the lifestyle and ministry of the new covenant, set out by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians. Last week we noted several comparisons between the old covenant and the new covenant. The old covenant is characterized by condemnation and death. It affects only external behavior, never the heart, and its glory is only temporary. The new covenant is characterized by righteousness and life. It works to change the heart through the Spirit and its glory is everlasting. The old covenant came in glory but the glory of the new is so much greater, it is as if the old had no glory. The exhortation last week was to realize how foolish it is to return to the old covenant.

In the rest of chapter 3, Paul continues to contrast the two covenants, expanding on the theme of glory, which we saw introduced in the text last week. The apostle's message has powerful implications for our spiritual life.

Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart (2 Cor 3:12-15)

Here Paul is drawing a contrast between himself and Moses, between the old covenant and the new. The difference centers on veils. Glory was our key word last week; veil is our key word today. Veil-related words occur six times in the text.

The backdrop to our study is Exodus 34:29-34. When Moses received the old covenant from God on Mt. Sinai, he descended the mountain with his face glowing, causing great fear among the Israelites. We don't know why they became fearful. Knowing that no one could look at the face of God and live, perhaps they were afraid that looking at the glorified face of Moses would have the same result. In any case, they asked Moses to put a veil over his face to hide the brightness of the glory. The result was that they could not see the end of what was being abolished.

Paul alluded to the same thing in verse 3:7: "the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was." The suggestion is that the glory began to fade like a suntan, but because of the veil, the Israelites couldn't see that.

Paul applies the story of Moses and the metaphor of the veil to the old covenant in general. In the same way that Moses' face was veiled so that the Israelites could not see the temporary nature of his glorified face, so too a veil lies over the old covenant so that people cannot see the temporary nature of its glory. Paul says that the same veil remains over the heart. It is caused by a hardened mind and leads to spiritual blindness.

Note the parallel nature of verses 14 and 15 and their three repeated ideas: until today, old covenant/Moses being read, and mind/heart being hardened/veiled.

A veil conceals or hides something. The veil here conceals the fact that the glory of the old covenant was temporary and fading; that it was being abolished; that it was intended to be replaced by the new; that it was pointing to a permanent and greater glory in Christ. The old covenant was going to be "outglorified and thus deglorified by the greater and permanent glory of Christ and the Spirit."¹ People who live in the old covenant develop veiled minds and hearts. They develop hearts of stone and become blind to the greater glory revealed in Christ.

Paul is in contrast to Moses and the new covenant to the old, because nothing is hidden or concealed. The apostle says he is very bold ("open" might be a better word) in how he lives and what he says. The reason is because of the hope of the new covenant, the hope of a greater, permanent and surpassing glory in Christ. Based on this hope he speaks plainly about how the old covenant has been superseded by Christ. This is what got Paul into so much trouble in Corinth and elsewhere. His forthright teaching created conflict with certain teachers

who wanted to maintain aspects of the old covenant and thus live a veiled life, counting on the temporary glory of the old covenant to be permanent.

The phrase “until this very day” is very appropriate, because what was true of Israel is true in the church today. To this very day the veil remains over the old covenant. This means that when a denomination, church or spiritual community becomes obsessed with law, rules and traditions, the result is a veiled gospel. People no longer can see the glory of God revealed in the face of Christ. This is why they are confused about God; why a church community becomes the ministry of death, not the ministry of Spirit and life; why a church community can appear phony; why people develop hard and rigid hearts, and why Christians seem stale and boring. This is why people aren’t coming to Christ, why they stop coming to church, and why they are spiritually blind. Living in the old covenant keeps us in the dark and hides the glory of God.

There is a secondary application to what Paul is saying here. It’s possible that Moses was pretending that the glory wasn’t fading from his face. I don’t think this is the primary point, but it is true nonetheless. People who live in the old covenant tend to put on a veil or mask, giving the impression that they are experiencing the glory of God when in fact they are not. They portray themselves as having their act together, following the commandments and growing spiritually, while all the time they are dying inside. In the words of Simon and Garfunkel, “I know I’m fakin’ it/I’m not really makin’ it.” The old covenant leads to a concealed life.

John Fischer wrote a song about this called “Evangelical Veil Productions.” Here are some of the lyrics:

Evangelical Veil Productions—
Pick one up now at quite a reduction!
Got all kinds of shapes and sizes,
Introductory bonus prizes!
Special quality one-way see-through
(You can see them but they can’t see you).
Never have to show yourself again.

Just released a Moses model.
Comes with shine in a plastic bottle.
Makes you look like you’ve just seen the Lord!
Just one daily application,
And you’ll fool the congregation.
Guaranteed to last a whole week.

In the old covenant we close off our hearts, concealing who we are on the inside. We feel guilt and shame, we build walls and barriers and become self-conscious and fearful. This is the manifestation of sin, which began in the garden when Adam and Eve covered themselves with fig leaves. This is how we will live when we are depending on our own resources for life. God’s people are not intended to live this way. We are meant

to live open and transparent lives, trusting that God will supply what we need.

So how does the veil get removed? How can we begin to see the truth clearly and partake in permanent life-changing glory, living open lives? Paul tells us that the veil is removed in Christ, that “whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.” He actually says this twice in the text. Verses 14 and 16:

But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. (3:14-16)

Verse 16 is very similar to Exodus 34:34: “whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with Him, he would take off the veil” (34:34)

“Turning to the Lord” is the language of conversion. Here are some examples of how this word is used elsewhere in the New Testament:

And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord. (Acts 9:35)

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:21)

and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God...” (Acts 14:15)

For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God. (1 Thess 1:9)

When I ask my 3-year-old grandson to do or not do something, he often reacts by running away. This is our normal reaction to God’s voice: we turn away from him and go in the opposite direction. Have you been turning away from the Lord lately? Paul entreats you to turn to the Lord instead.

This means repenting of your sin, turning away from idolatry, and turning to Jesus as your Lord and Savior. The implication is that only the Lord can remove the veil. We can’t do it ourselves. Without Christ we will live a muddled, confused life, or a false and inauthentic life in the old covenant. Either way, we won’t be able to see God clearly.

But when we turn to the Lord we become the unveiled, new covenant people of God. Spiritual sight replaces spiritual blindness. A heart of flesh replaces our hard heart. In verses 17-18 we learn that removing the veil has dramatic results:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit. (3:17-18)

There are three results of turning to the Lord and living in the new covenant. First, we receive the Spirit. Paul is not say-

ing that the Spirit is equal to the Lord, but, rather, that he is associated with the Lord. They are two different persons of the Trinity who have the same goal. The Spirit is the Spirit of the Lord. Christ is the Lord of the new covenant of the Spirit.

Second, we have liberty. We are set free from the letter of the law that condemns, kills and enslaves. We are freed from trying to earn righteousness by the law through our own strength. We are freed from the law of sin and death. We are freed from veils and pretending. We are freed to live on an entirely new basis in which everything comes from God and nothing from us. Because the Spirit writes the law on our hearts we are free to keep the “law of Christ” (Gal 6:2) and the “royal law of liberty” (Jas 2:8,12), whereby we go beyond the letter to truly love and forgive.

Third, we begin a process of transformation. The word is metamorphosis. Webster defines it as “a change of physical form, structure, or substance especially by supernatural means; a striking alteration in appearance, character, or circumstances.” This is the process by which a caterpillar becomes a butterfly or a tadpole becomes a frog. When we turn to the Lord we don’t just get our act together and change a few things about ourselves. We become completely different, a new creation. Transformation is the process by which Christ is formed in us. Paul uses this same word in Romans when he says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (12:2).

We could summarize all the comparisons between the two covenants that we have discussed in chapter 3 with this chart.

Old Covenant	New Covenant
Based on law/performance	Based on the Spirit/trust
Change is external (tablets of stone)	Change is internal (human hearts)
Resources are from self	Resources are from God
Ministry of death (flesh)	Ministry of the Spirit (life)
Ministry of condemnation (guilt)	Ministry of righteousness (acceptance)
Temporary/fading glory	Permanent/surpassing glory
Concealment (veils)	Boldness/Openness
Enslavement	Freedom/Transformation

I want to conclude by expanding on this process of transformation.

The agent or means of transformation is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Lord. We cannot transform ourselves through self-effort. This is the problem under the old covenant, which cannot change the heart. “The Spirit of God reaches into the spirit of the person to do the core of his work. God has not called us to something without enabling us to do it. There is a divine person, the Holy Spirit, continually at work in us, who acts directly on the deepest parts of us, our human spirit.”²

The end or goal of transformation is to grow into the same image, that is, the image of Christ who reflects both the glory of God and the image of God. Man was created in the image

of God, but in the fall mankind has been corrupted. It is impossible for us to recapture this original image, but when we turn to the Lord we become a new creation and begin a process of becoming like him, of recapturing the image we were designed to bear. We grow from glory to glory, from an initial glory when we turn to the Lord to a final glory of becoming like our glorified Lord.

Transformation is a lengthy process, a journey or pilgrimage. It involves “process, action, movement, change, experiences, stops and starts, variety, humdrum and surprises.”³ This process will last our entire life. We will never arrive or become perfect in this life. But we should be making progress towards the final outcome. We should not be living in a cycle of sinning, feeling guilt and shame, confessing our sin and experiencing forgiveness.

Transformation is a messy process because our lives are messy. We are a complex mixture of intellect, will, emotions, attitudes, memories and perspective on life. There is no easy formula or clear-cut path. The journey takes us to many interesting places, with surprises, detours and dead-ends. This means that any church community where people are transparent will be messy as well. But this is often where God does his work—in the mess of life.

The process of transformation will take us through several stages, and there are several models that describe the stages in our journey. We begin by discovering God, being converted and experiencing his love. There are many reasons why we turn to the Lord. Next, we move into a community where we find answers to our questions and learn about God and the Bible. We begin to feel like we are part of the community. Next, we start serving and using our gifts. We begin to take risks and take on a leadership role. This can be an exciting time.

But somewhere along the line we will face a crisis: a job loss, a death, a breakup or divorce, a loss of faith, a major transition. These events are usually external and come as a surprise. They can devastate us and knock us off our feet. But God uses these times to take us on a deep inward journey where we come face to face with him and with our deepest fears. We are forced to die beyond what we can imagine, to accept what we would never want to accept, and to let go of the things that are most precious to us until we abandon ourselves to God. If we are willing to go through this process we begin to live a life of love that comes from deep within ourselves.

We can become stuck in the process of transformation. We can slip back into the old covenant. We can become upset when people don’t respond the way we want them to. We can burn out because we are depending on self-effort. We can gain our identity from who we are in the community. We switch from church to church and never plant ourselves. We refuse to accept what God has for us and live in resentment and anger. It is important for us to be aware of getting stuck instead of just getting used to it.

While the Spirit is the doing the work of transformation, we are not passive in the process. The verb “transformation” is passive, meaning that God is the one doing the work through the Spirit. But we don’t just sit around and wait for things to happen. We must intentionally put ourselves into places and relationships that will give God the opportunity to work. We don’t buy a plant and put it in a dark basement. We plant in a place where it will grow and flourish. We face important decisions every day as to where we plant ourselves.

Finally, a major factor in the process of transformation is looking at the glory of God in the face of Christ. This is the text: beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord with an unveiled face. Jesus reflects God’s glory like the moon reflects the light of the sun, or like a mirror reflects an image. The veils have been taken off. We now can see clearly the glory of God revealed in the new covenant. That is no longer a fearful proposition but a transforming experience. This is what Jeremiah declares, “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them” (Jer 31:34).

We love to gaze at nature because creation is beautiful. In it we see the glory of the Creator. The same is true to a much greater degree in Jesus. Gazing into his face is what keeps us moving in the transformation process. Jesus is not here in person, but because the veil over our hearts has been removed we can see him with the eyes of our heart. We can see him clearly in Scripture or in the face of another person. This is why we come to church, why we share fellowship around the table or go on missions trip: we behold the glory of God in the face of Christ. All of this is possible because there are no more veils.

**“The LORD bless you, and keep you;
The LORD make His face shine on you,
And be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up His countenance on you,
And give you peace.” (Num 6:24–26 NAS95)**

¹ Paul Baenett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 189.

² Richard Averbeck, *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* (2008, Vol. 1, No. 1, Biola University), 28.

³ Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich, *The Critical Journey* (Salem, Wisconsin: Sheffield Publishing, 2005), 5.