



A GREATER GLORY

Catalog No. 1222
2 Corinthians 3:7-11
Third Message
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March 1, 1998

Waiting for angry words to sear my soul,
Knowing I don't deserve another chance;
Suddenly the kindest words I've ever heard
Come flooding through my heart.

These words which we just sang capture the truth that we are looking at in this series as ponder afresh the wonderful implications of living in the new covenant. However, the words are difficult for some of us to sing, because we were raised in angry families. Mealtimes were either silent or sarcastically noisy. In his book, *Connecting*, Larry Crabb shares a story about a young man who came from an angry home. He told a counselor that down the street from him there was a big house with a front porch where, as he put it, a happy family lived. When he was about ten years old, he began excusing himself from the dinner table as soon as he could. He would go down the street and crawl under the porch of that house and sit there, listening to the sounds of laughter. The counselor asked the young man to imagine that the father invited him into that happy home to sit with them at the table; and to imagine that while he was sitting with the family, he spilled his glass of water, and the father said with delight, "Get him some more water and a dry shirt. I want him to enjoy this meal." He wanted to get the young man to hear the father laugh, to imagine the father enjoying his presence.

I want to say to you this morning that real change only begins when you hear the Father laugh. Until you experience the character of God, all change will be merely temporary and external. This is the essence of what we will see today in our passage from the apostle Paul's Second Corinthian letter.

In our text, Paul uses a word picture, the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai and the subsequent conduct of Moses with the people of Israel, from Exodus 34, to help illustrate the difference between the old and the new covenants. Moses had spent forty days on the mountain, receiving from God the Ten Commandments and the spelling out of the law. When he came down to tell the people what he had seen, his face radiated the glory of God from being in his presence. As we will see, Paul calls attention to the glory of Moses' face. Second Corinthians 3:7:

But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how shall

the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? (2 Cor 3:7-8, NASB)

Contrasting the old and new covenants, the apostle uses the word "glory" sixteen times between verse 7 of chapter 3 and verse 17 of chapter 4. What does Paul mean by this word? My friend Dave Roper shared a story once about how he came across an unopened crate while he was visiting a museum. A Greek text inscribed on the crate had the words, "This was his glory." It was the same Greek term that is used in the New Testament for glory, *doxa*. The text on the underside of the box listed the man's contributions to his city, his assets, etc. It corresponded to what we call an obituary. This helps us understand what is meant by that term "glory" in the New Testament. What it signifies, essentially, is worth. In the Old Testament, glory carries the idea of weight and heaviness. The word has the same connotation in the NT. Thus when the NT talks about Christians having glory, it is referring to our ultimate value.

Here then are the two glories: the face of Moses, and, later in the chapter, the face of Jesus Christ. Both are exciting, but one much more so than the other. They stand for the two covenants or arrangements by which human life is lived. Both have power to attract, but one is a fading glory while the other is eternal. The unredeemed world lives by looking at the face of Moses. The Christian can live by either, but never both at the same time. It is always one or the other. So in the true Christian's life the activity of each moment derives its value from whether he or she is, at that moment, symbolically looking at the face of Moses or at the face of Jesus Christ.

A covenant is an agreement between two parties that forms the basis upon which all further relationship rests. According to Paul, there are two covenants at work in human life, and these two covenants are the basis upon which men and women approach God. One is the new covenant, which Paul describes as "nothing coming from me; everything from God." This is in direct contrast to the old covenant, which could be described as "everything coming from me; nothing coming from God."

These two covenants have always been in operation. As a pastoral staff we are studying the book of Genesis. At a recent meeting I was struck by the fact that both of these covenants were in operation way back in Genesis. Adam was created by God as the perfect man—man as God intended him to be. Everything Adam did was accomplished by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

He brought all of the divine resources to whatever task was required, his work in the garden, his naming of the animals, etc., because this is how we were created to function—to be the dwelling place of God.

We see this also in the life of the Lord Jesus, whom the Scripture calls the Second Adam. He lived his life on earth in the new covenant. In fact, he said, “The Son can do nothing by himself” (John 5:19). Jesus tells us repeatedly that whatever he did or said was not done out of any energy or might of his own, but, as he plainly put it, by “the Father, living in me, who is doing his work” (John 14:10).

That is how Adam lived before the fall. However, one day, in collaboration with his wife, he made that deadly choice, and as a consequence, the new covenant ceased to be active in his life and the old covenant began to operate. Of course, it wasn’t called “new” then; it was the only arrangement for living that Adam had ever known. And the old covenant was not “old” to him. It was totally new, something he experienced only after he had chosen to disobey God.

In his book, *Authentic Christianity*, Ray Stedman writes:

Since everyone who has ever lived since Adam was made in the image of fallen Adam, we can understand something of what happened when he ate the forbidden fruit. The Spirit of God was immediately removed from his human spirit. Adam retained a memory of the relationship he once enjoyed, but it was left darkened and restless, filled with guilt and fear, and unable to contact the God it knew existed. This is why Adam and Eve immediately hid themselves. They realized they had no defense against attack, and that they were naked. Every human being is born into this same condition. The human spirit longs for God but is afraid to find him. We are restless and unhappy without him, but fearful and guilty before him. That is the agony of fallen humanity.

Now the law, the old covenant, has a legitimate purpose, and that is to show us how sinful we really are. When we try to be good through self effort we can see how miserably we fail. In one of Chesterton’s books, Father Brown says that no one knows how bad they are until they try to be good. That is the purpose of the law: it appeals to self will. People say they can do a certain thing, but when they set out to do it, they fail. When they realize how ugly and selfish they are, only then are they driven to grace. That is why in Galatians, Paul calls the law a schoolmaster. It isn’t a mentor, or a gentle teacher. It is a harsh schoolmaster who lays the law on us and says, “If you want to be good, you have got to be as good as God is.” That is what drives us to God’s goodness: his forgiveness and his enablement.

The difficulty facing believers in every age is that we don’t move from the old to the new covenant. We prefer the law to grace. We are more comfortable responding to the living God in an external rather than an inter-

nal way. We can’t understand a God who pays the same amount to a servant who works for one hour as he does to one who works a full day; a God who leaves a flock of ninety-nine sheep to look for one. The new covenant doesn’t make good economic sense! We like the challenge of doing our best, and we cover up and lie about it when we fail.

In these verses, Paul gives us a number of contrasts between the two covenants, these two arrangements for living. Though his language sounds a bit complicated it is really very simple. Verse 7:

But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how shall the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? (3:7-8)

Paul says there is a kind of glory, a kind of attractiveness about the old covenant. That is symbolized here by the brightness of Moses’ face when he came down from the mountain top with the tables of the law. It was God, not Moses, who made his face to shine. As Ray Stedman said, “It was grace, not grease.”

But God also made it fade, because he wanted to teach something by that. Moses’ glory was a fading phenomenon, a symbol of something that every one of us has experienced at one time or another. All of us are drawn to show how much we can do with what we have. Athletes say, “Give me a chance to show what I can do. Let me at it.” Businessmen say the same thing: “I’ve been trained for that. I’ve got the skills. I’ve got the gifts. Let me show what I can do.” We like to make a good impression, to our own credit, because we are the ones being glorified.

We can draw an analogy between the old covenant and basketball. I coached a high school basketball team this season, and the boys practiced hard and set goals for themselves. They want to be able to do what they could not do last year: jump a little higher, shoot with a higher percentage of success, etc. When the players do well and the team wins, they have a rush of enthusiasm that is delightful to watch. Competition is glorious. Making demands of yourself and seeing improvement is wonderful. But, even the best players miss shots about half the time. No team wins all of its games. There is always somebody better. We have momentary, mountain top experiences, but all too often there are missed free throws, ball control errors and team losses.

Sports can be very exciting, but they are not a basis on which to live life. The desire to compete and succeed is not enough. Games are replete with statistics and, like the law written on stone, statistics testify to performance. Someone always scores more points; some team always wins more games. You can’t build a life on a foundation as demanding as this. The old covenant calls forth great effort, but it stands ready to judge the smallest failure.

Paul refers to the feeling of attractiveness in that. But the record of history shows that everybody who tries to live on that basis ends up a day late and a dollar short. It doesn't work. After a while things become boring and routine, and death sets in. That is what Paul is describing. He calls the ministry of death a fading glory; it does not last. But when you discover a new principle, the principle of God-dependence—that in using your native skills, abilities and training, God nevertheless will be at work—then you experience an excitement and a glory that is greater than the one you feel when you want to show off what you can do. Thus it will not be you but God who will accomplish things.

There is another contrast. Verse 9:

For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory on account of the glory that surpasses it. (3:9-10)

Everybody who tries to please God by self-effort always discovers that he never quite makes it, because he never knows when he has done enough. Paul calls the old covenant a ministry of condemnation. Condemnation results from trying to do it on our own resources, by our own efforts. But the new covenant, in contrast, is a ministry of righteousness.

Righteousness here is the opposite of condemnation. It means being fully accepted, having a sense of being approved by God, of being honored and cherished by him. In the new covenant, this is where we get our worth. It is a greater glory. God gives us a standing of worth. We don't have to earn it, because we start with it. God tells us already in the new covenant, "I have loved you. I have forgiven you. I have cleansed you. You are my dearly beloved child. I intend to use you; you are part of my program; your life is significant. There is nothing more you can add to that. Now, on that basis, with the security of that acceptance, go back to your work." And we go on with a sense of approval and security.

Do you feel that sense of approval this morning? Do you understand that there is nothing you can do to make God love you more, no amount of spiritual calisthenics, no amount of study or knowledge, no amount of crusading on behalf of righteous causes? And there is nothing you can do to make him love you less. God already loves you as much as an infinite God can possibly love.

Psychologists say that the only way we can function is by knowing that we have that sense of approval. We all know the destruction that happens when a parent withholds affirmation from a child. We continually need that sense of being approved, accepted, loved and cherished. That is the new covenant.

Isn't that a greater glory than the feeling of trying to earn your way to God and feeling guilty because you did not quite make it? This is so little understood in

Christian circles. I know of churches where pastors feel they have not preached a good sermon unless people go away feeling guilty. There are people who say to me "Gary, I feel so bad, so guilty. That was really a great sermon!" That is not necessarily a sign of good preaching. Certainly there is a place for godly sorrow, but as we sang this morning, "It is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance." That is where God starts. He starts with acceptance and security and love, and says, "Now, on that basis, begin to operate!"

God wants to bring grace, comfort, reconciliation and healing to you. And that love comes first as forgiveness. The only way we can know grace is through weakness. That's the hard part, because we don't want to admit we have needs. We don't want people to know what we're like inside, to know what our home life is really like and how inadequate we feel. God knows all of this, and he still loves us.

Brennan Manning tells the story of an Irish priest who came upon an old peasant kneeling in prayer by the side of the road. The priest said to the man, "You must be very close to God." The old man looked up and said, "Yes. He is very fond of me." That is how God feels about us: He is very fond of us. The apostle John never refers to himself by name in his writings. Instead, he calls himself, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." What a wonderful way to think of himself! Imagine introducing yourself by saying, "I am God's beloved." That is what you are. That is how God feels about you.

And now the final contrast. Verse 11:

For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory. (3:11)

Here Paul draws a final contrast between the temporary and the permanent. The old covenant produces that which fades away, but the new covenant produces that which is permanent. When Moses came down from the mountain with his face aglow, he found that relatively soon it disappeared completely, never to be recovered. But the glory of the face of Jesus Christ never changes. A flashlight contributes nothing once the sun comes up. In the same way, once the greater glory becomes manifest, the old covenant fades away.

Paul is probably thinking about himself, looking back to the days when he counted on his background and skill, his sharp mind and dedicated heart for success. He is saying, "I have come to understand that God at work in me can do so much more than I could ever have done. Christ's work in me is far more effective beyond anything I could ask or think. All the glory I once felt coming from the challenge to my self-effort is nothing but a pile of manure (that is the term he uses), compared with the glory of God at work in me. It has lost all its splendor. I don't try to psyche myself up in order to accomplish something for God. I know that even in my feeblest weakness, God is able to work through me, and that is what I count on. What happens as a result is far more thrilling and adventurous than anything that

ever happened before.”

I want to close with these words from Brennan Manning:

The only way to survive is to know that God loves me as I am and not as I should be, that He loves me beyond worthiness and unworthiness, beyond fidelity and infidelity; that He loves me in the morning sun and in the evening rain, without caution, regret, boundary, limit or breaking point; that no matter what I do He can't stop loving me. When I am really in conscious communion with the reality of the wild, passionate, relentless, stubborn, pursuing, tender love of Christ for me, then it's not that I have to or I got to or I must or I should or I ought; suddenly, I want to change because I know how deeply I'm loved!

I have a good little friend, a 55-year-old nun named Mary Michael O'Shaughnessy who has a doctorate in theology. She has a banner on her wall that says, "Today, I will not should on myself." One of the wonderful results of my consciousness of God's staggering love for me as I am is a freedom not to be who I should be or who others want me to be. I can be who I really am. And who I am is a bundle of paradoxes

and contradictions. I believe and I doubt, I trust and I get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty if I don't feel guilty. Aristotle said we are rational animals. I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer. It is the real me that God loves. I don't have to be anyone else. For 20 years I tried to be brother Teresa. I tried to be Francis of Assisi. I had to be a carbon copy of a great saint rather than the original God intended me to be. My 70-year-old spiritual director, Larry Hine, gave me a word from the Lord that he heard once from a black, evangelical preacher in Georgia. "Be who you is, because if you ain't who you is, you is who you ain't."

The biggest mistake I can make is to say to God, "Lord, if I change, you'll love me, won't you?" The Lord's reply is always, "Wait a minute, you've got it all wrong. You don't have to change so I'll love you; I love you so you'll change." I simply expose myself to the love that is everything and have an immense, unshakable, reckless, raging confidence that God loves me so much He'll change me and fashion me into the child that He always wanted me to be.

That is the glory of the new covenant!

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