

2 Corinthians 3:7

The Ministry of Death and the Ministry of the Spirit

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:7 — 4:1

“But if the ministry of death in letters, graven in stones, began with glory, so that the children of Israel could not fix their eyes on the face of Moses on account of the glory of his face, a glory which is annulled, how shall not rather the ministry of the Spirit subsist in glory? For if the ministry of condemnation be glory, much rather the ministry of righteousness abounds in glory. For also that which was glorified is not glorified in this respect, on account of the surpassing glory. For if that which is annulled was introduced with glory, much rather that which abides subsists in glory.

Having therefore such hope, we use much boldness, and not as Moses put a veil on his own face, so that the children of Israel should not fix their eyes on the end of that which is annulled. But their thoughts have been darkened, for unto this day the same veil remains in reading the old covenant, unremoved, which in Christ is annulled. But unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil lies upon their heart.

But when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, looking on the glory of the Lord with unveiled face, are transformed according to the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Lord the Spirit.

Therefore, seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not.”

The Parenthesis — Verses 7 Through 16

Verses 7 through 16 should be looked at as a parenthesis. If one reads verse 6 and goes immediately to verse 17, the thing flows right on, about the place of the Spirit: “For the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life” — and then, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” In the intermediate section, one gets an expansion on the difference between the letter, which has to do with the old covenant, and the Spirit who gives life.

The letter here is not the text of the New Testament — that does not kill. It is really the law, which writes the sentence of death in the conscience. That is what the man of Romans 7 says: “The commandment came, sin revived, and I died.” He did not physically die, but the sentence of death was written in his conscience. That is a function of the law. The law demands, and the law kills.

The Law — Ministry of Death

In verse 7, the ministry of death in letters engraved in stones is the law as given under the Mosaic covenant. It is called the ministry of death because it requires righteousness, and man cannot meet the claims of the law; therefore the law has a sentence, and the sentence is death to the one who does not perform it. There is much uproar in the country over the removal of references to Christianity from public and governmental places, including the Ten Commandments. Many Christians look at the law as a way of sanctification — but that is not the basis of sanctification as presented in the New Testament. As far as the law goes, this is what it is and what its function is: the first man was placed under it, and it made sin exceedingly sinful.

The law changed sin into transgression, because sin was in the world before the law was given. Sin is lawlessness — its basis is self-will, and man expressing self-will from the fall onward is sin, whether there was a positive transgression or not. Those of Romans 5 sinned, it says, “not after the similitude of Adam’s

transgression.” Adam transgressed because he had a definite command and went against it. Subsequently sin followed, but through self-will and not against a specific prohibition. Sin can exist without a specific command. But once the law was given, there was much transgression, because the prohibitions in the law took the working of sin and brought it into bold relief in the form of transgression. The character of sin as lawlessness was not changed, but it was exposed.

It does not say that the ministry of death in letters was itself glorious. But it was introduced with glory and was part of a system in which glory was present: the glory cloud, Aaron’s rod that budded, the tabernacle set up, an approach to God in an external way established. God vouchsafed his presence among his people, so there was much glory there. And even in Moses’ face when he received the law, the shining out indicated the power of the presence of God in which he had received it. All that comes from God is good. But any glory connected with that system is now done away.

It would be hasty to say simply that the law is done away — that is a popular Christian notion, sometimes based on the thought that the handwriting of ordinances was nailed to the cross. But that is not exactly the same as saying the law was nailed to the cross. The law was never nailed to the cross. The law sits right where it was. It was the Mosaic system that was done away, the system as such, not the law itself. In 1 Timothy we read that there is a lawful use of the law. It continues its condemning work without the Mosaic system being enforced, because that was annulled. The great signal of its annulment was when the veil in the temple was rent from top to bottom. God was patient until AD 70, when the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem, removing the last vestige of the temple service — a governmental visitation, as indicated in the parable where God sends his forces to destroy those murderers and burn their city. But as to the system having any force before God, it had none from the moment of the cross, as signified by the rending of the veil.

The Mosaic system could not subsist before God once the work of redemption was accomplished. One cannot have redemption accomplished in a system owned of God that supposes redemption is not accomplished — for sins are made remembrance again every year under the old order. The completed work of redemption ends the whole system. So all the glory connected with it is removed.

The Ministry of the Spirit Subsists in Glory

Verse 8 introduces the ministration of the Spirit. This means more than that it is a spiritual ministry in a general sense; what subsists now is the ministry of the Holy Spirit himself. The Holy Spirit has been sent down on account of the accomplished redemption that brings the old covenant, the old system, and the trial of the first man under it to an end. Redemption does that. From Christ's work, his resurrection and ascension into glory, flows the coming down of the Holy Spirit and a new ministry now in force. This ministry subsists in glory.

The new covenant is brought into view here, not with the idea that Christians are now under it, but to draw the contrast between a gracious covenant and a works-and-performance covenant. The Mosaic covenant was the latter; the new covenant is strictly gracious. Paul says “we are able ministers of the new covenant” — he means the grace of it, the new covenant grace. When God acts in the new covenant, it will be on a totally different principle from his acting under the old covenant. The Abrahamic, Davidic, and Phinean covenants are also gracious covenants, and they will all be fulfilled in the new covenant. But the contrast drawn here is specifically between one ministry and another — a covenant of works and now a ministry of grace.

Verse 10 states that the glory that was there in that system is “not glorified in this respect, on account of the surpassing glory.” God is now fully told out. The old is simply eclipsed by the blaze of the glory of the new. If the reality has come, why would anyone practice the shadows? To understand the shadows is one thing; to

practice them is quite another. There is a portion of those who profess the Lord's name who have that persistent hankering after the old system — some of them do not even believe in the Trinity. They have not gotten into the delivering power of what Hebrews sets forth. But here it is clear: it is an eclipse.

In verse 11, it speaks of the two things: one which is done away and one which subsists. There is no reason from Scripture to believe that this will not subsist eternally. The fruits of the cross, the ministry of the Spirit, the effects of it — they are eternal. The fruits of the work of Christ in the formation of the church will always remain, always abide, always subsist in glory. Ephesians 3 says: “unto him be glory in the assembly to the ages of ages.” The glory of God attaches eternally to what the Spirit is doing now. And Colossians 1:27: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” If this glory is going to eternally subsist, then seeing we have such hope is indeed a wonderful thing to have before the soul. What God is doing now is of eternal consequence.

The Veil on Moses' Face — The Veil on the Heart

Verse 13 contrasts with chapter 4 verse 6, which speaks of “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Moses put a veil on his face. What a stark contrast with what we get in connection with the shining forth of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. There is no veil on him, and no veil on us. The thought of our oneness with Christ, our being united to him as the head in heaven, is implicit in this: there could not be a veil in between to in any way cloud the light of the glory. We are one in him.

The word “steadfastly” in verse 13 is also instructive. There is a glory that God desires that we should steadfastly look upon. The children of Israel could not steadfastly look on the end of that which is annulled. But Stephen, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing. The whole situation is completely changed with the new order

consequent upon the cross.

The veil in the temple was a two-way signifier: to the worshippers it said that the way into the holy of holies was not yet made manifest. Now it is. Ezekiel's millennial temple has two-leaf doors, not a veil — signifying increased access for the earthly people, but not the same as ours. We have no veil and no doors. We have boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus. The veil is not reconstituted, because the veil signified that the way was not yet made known and established. That it now is means the veil cannot come back.

When It Shall Turn to the Lord

Verse 16 says, “When it shall turn to the Lord, the veil is taken away.” The “it” is somewhat striking. The last thing referred to was the heart: “when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart.” So when Israel's heart shall turn to the Lord, the veil is taken away. That has to do with the removal of the veil from the heart of Israel, when Israel is brought into its blessings under the new covenant — earthly blessings, including the spiritual blessing that their sins and iniquities will be remembered no more. Jeremiah 31:18 gives us the voice of Israel in that day: “I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus: Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke. Turn thou me, and I shall be turned, for thou art the Lord my God.” It is not a turning of themselves, but looking to him to turn them. None of it is Arminian. God's sovereignty is acknowledged — but that does not remove man's responsibility. God commands all men everywhere to repent, and man is responsible to obey. That the Lord must do the work is true; that this excuses inaction or presumption is not.

Liberty — Freedom from Self to Do the Will of God

Verse 17: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” This does not mean freedom for the flesh to do what it wants. One

would be surprised how people use the word liberty. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty — freedom from self to do the will of God. It does not mean freedom for self to do what it likes. That is what the man of Romans 7 was crying to be delivered from: the bondage of self. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty from that bondage — the power to do the will of God. The Spirit quickens and brings us into righteousness before God; he is the Spirit of liberty. He presents to us the Lord in glory as the one we are to behold. And through that beholding we are transformed into the same image.

Transformed from Glory to Glory

What a man fixes his heart on has a formative effect upon his character. This is known to men in the world as well as to Christians. If a man loves power, he keeps going after power and becomes a certain kind of man. If he loves wealth, he keeps going after wealth. The object determines the direction. And here, looking on the glory of the Lord, we are transformed into the same image from glory to glory. Occupation with him has this transformative effect.

The law never made a man like itself. But the Spirit's work in us, with Christ as our object, is to make us more and more like him. The flesh never changes: a man may put a check on certain tendencies and hold himself in, but when provoked it comes out. With Christ there is an actual transforming work going on in the soul. It is not by conscious effort on our part — it is “even as by the Lord the Spirit.” It is by fixing our eyes steadfastly on himself, as Stephen did, being filled with himself. He is full of grace and truth. That is how this is produced in our hearts.

Mr. Darby remarked that we can make even the love of God a ministry of death — by making his love a rule of life. We actually make it a ministry of death to ourselves. It says, “Keep yourselves in the love of God.” That is not saying, keep making God love you. It is like saying, keep yourself in the sunshine: it does not

mean causing the sun to shine. The sense is being in the love of God, the warmth of it. No veil on our hearts, no veil on our face, no veil on Christ. No veil has nothing to hinder the apprehension of his glory. The only veil, if we speak of it that way, is the one we put there ourselves, by not entering into the fullness of what we have been brought into.

“Therefore, seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not.” — 2 Corinthians 4:1

We all, looking on the glory of the Lord with unveiled face, are transformed — from glory to glory.