

“Two Glories”

Exodus 34:29-35 • 2 Corinthians 3:1-18

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Raise your hand if you want to go to heaven when you die. Some of you didn't raise your hand. Why in the world are you going to church if you don't want to go to heaven? That is the point of all this, you know. Surely you're not just here for the cookies. So let's try that again. Raise your hand if you want to go to heaven. That's better. Now, keep your hand up if you want to go this morning. That's different, isn't it?

Actually, it's not different. Dallas Willard used to say, “If you want to go to Heaven, now is the time to do it.” He wasn't suggesting that you end your life today. What he meant is that we are invited right now to live in the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven. You can live today in the new reality that God has created.

As we make our way through Second Corinthians, we are taking kind of a large chunk today – all of chapter 3. In this chapter, Paul is saying the same thing to the Church in Corinth that Dallas Willard said. He compares and contrasts the two great eras God's redemptive history, the old and the new, the old covenant and the new covenant, and he shows them and us that the new era, brought about by Jesus, is far better than the old one. The problem is that they are still acting according to the old ways that are going away. You and I often do the same thing, which is why it's so important for us to study this.

Paul is still arguing against his detractors. At the end of chapter 2 he reminds the Corinthians that he is commissioned by God to speak, unlike the false apostles that he calls “peddlers of God's Word.” One of the issues was that some of these false apostles came with letters of recommendation. It would seem that the detractors were questioning why Paul didn't have similar letters. These letters of recommendation were very important in those days. There was no kind of identification, no other way to find out if someone who showed

up was genuine. So they would get letters from someone that the people would know or recognize in order to prove their identity.

But Paul had previously spend a year and a half living with the Corinthians, teaching them about Christ. In 1 Corinthians 4 he says that he is their spiritual father. A father certainly shouldn't need a letter of recommendation to visit his children. Paul then turns things around on the Corinthian Christians and says that *they* are his letter of recommendation. The fact that they believe in Christ, that there is a church there, is the evidence of the authenticity of Paul's ministry.

Paul says that they are in fact a letter written by Christ himself. Paul and his fellow workers are just the messengers. This letter, according to verse 3, is “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” Paul is pointing us back to the Old Testament, to Jeremiah 31, where God promises a new covenant that would be brought about by Christ. He says that this new covenant won't be like the old one that the people repeatedly broke. This one would be better. Jeremiah 31:33 says, “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

The point here in 2 Corinthians is that God has kept his promise. The new covenant has arrived. It is written on *their* hearts. It's written on *our* hearts. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who has commissioned Paul and his fellow workers to be, as he says, “ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” This is a contrast between the old and new covenants. The problem with the law was that it was external. It can tell you what to do

and not do but it can't change your heart. The law can't make you want to keep it. In fact, in Romans 7 Paul says that it's when we learn God's law that we really learn how to sin.

Verse 6 says, "For the letter kills." We sometimes talk today about the letter of the law versus the spirit of the law. In other words, what is a law intended to do as opposed to the unintended consequences of following that law to the letter. A good example is the post office. Like all federal employees, it's illegal for postal workers to strike. But they have discovered that they don't have to strike. Instead of a strike, all they have to do is follow all the regulations concerning mail sorting and delivery. When they do that mail slows down to a crawl. So most of the time they work within the spirit of the postal laws but not the letter of the law.

In Reformed theology we talk about the 3-fold use of the law today. The Ten Commandments serve as a mirror, a fence, and a signpost. As a mirror, the Commandments show us our own sinfulness. They remind us that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. As a fence the Commandments continue to show us what God expects, and for most of us that keeps us mostly on God's path. And as a signpost they show us that we need a savior in order to be right with God. You can't just clean up your life and expect things to be fine. The Ten Commandments point you to Jesus, who perfectly kept the law. When you are united with Christ you receive the benefits of his perfection.

Paul then applies this contrast between the letter that kills and the Spirit that gives life to the old and new covenants. He uses the example we heard in our Old Testament reading from Exodus 34. In that passage, Moses has come down the mountain after meeting with God. He has the two tablets of the Ten Commandments and he begins to tell the people what God has said. What Moses doesn't know is that his face is glowing brightly. He has been changed by being in the

presence of God. We get another glimpse of this phenomenon at the transfiguration of Jesus. Matthew 17:2 says that Jesus' face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light." And then Moses and Elijah, also glowing we would assume, were standing there talking with Jesus.

Paul is basically saying that it was a sign of the glory of the old covenant that Moses' face was glowing. But that old covenant, even then, was coming to an end. He says that as great as it was, it was still a "ministry of death" and of "condemnation." He's not saying the old covenant was bad. Just the opposite. But the era of life under the law could not bring life. But if that old covenant that was so limited had such great glory, can you begin to imagine how much more glory the new covenant in Christ has? "For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory."

The point he's trying to make is that when you are united with Christ, your life will be transformed even more than Moses' face. When you follow Jesus with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength everything changes. Jesus has called you to live in the Kingdom of Heaven. The Holy Spirit has united you with Christ making it possible for you to live in the Kingdom of Heaven. He also makes it possible for you to read the Bible and see Jesus there. Verse 15 says that for those who have not yet trusted in Christ there is a veil that keeps them from understanding the Bible fully. But as verse 16 then says, "But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed," and as verse 17 tells us, that gives us great freedom. We think freedom comes from doing whatever we want. Real freedom comes from doing what God wants, from training to be like Christ.

This chapter ends with these words: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." Dallas Willard said if you want to go to

heaven, today is the day to do it and you go to heaven by becoming a student of Jesus, putting into action what He said to do. He said, "Trust Him enough to think the things He said to do should be put into practice. Then we come to know the Kingdom of God. Think well enough of Jesus to trust him. then you know by

experience the reality of God's kingdom." When you and I read what Jesus said, and then do what He said to do, we are living in the new covenant, the new reality brought about by Jesus, the ministry of the Spirit. Why would you want to live any other way?

Amen.