



The Image of God
2 Corinthians 3:12-18
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Pentecost has come and gone – the Church has been given life through the gifting of the Spirit. Praise be to God for we are a new creation.

But what does that mean? What does it mean to be a new creation that finds its life in the Spirit?

Last Sunday, utilizing Paul’s letter to the Romans, we named that life in the Spirit means we are adopted into the family of God as co-heirs of God’s eternal glory. We are, as a family, united as one Body of equal participants through the gifting of the Spirit.

If last Sunday was about our collective identity, this Sunday, we are focusing on our individual identity.

As the apostle Paul planted, formed, created, and led the new Christian faith communities of the first century, much of his early teaching was offered in response to the experiences of the early church. His letters, from Romans, to Galatians, to the Corinthians ... his letters were written in response to the events, actions, experiences, and beliefs of the early converts to the faith.

For example, here in 2 Corinthians, look for a moment at chapter 2. Beginning in verse 1, we read, “So I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained?”

Paul had evidently heard that his visits were unappreciated by members of the Corinthian church. He spends a good deal of the first two chapters addressing this concern about his visitation to Corinth. He seems to be hurt by their lack of welcome. ... His writing here, as in most places, is reactionary. He’s responding to what he has experienced, or heard, is happening within the community.

As we get in to chapter 3, Paul’s jadedness from the first two chapters continues to carry over. Beginning in verse 1, Paul writes, “We do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? v

... Such is the confidence that we have through Christ towards God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit.”

Paul is making the claim that he doesn’t need the favor of the Corinthians to know that his teaching and preaching – his ministry – is worthwhile. His confidence doesn’t come from the church, it comes through Christ and the Spirit which gives life.

After stating this opening claim about the source of his confidence, he is going to expand his teaching into a larger theological claim, stating this confidence is something each individual should have who lives in the Spirit.

In verse 12, his “we” expands from him and his travelling companions to the whole of the Christian body. What he’s about to offer is a theological treatise for those who claim faith in Christ. This theological claim is based on the events of Exodus 34, a section of story that every faithful Jew would likely have known by heart. If we do not know this story, of Moses and the veil, we will need to quickly recap that story so that Paul’s explanation will make sense.

In Exodus 32, Moses brought down from Mount Sinai the first set of stone tablets inscribed with God’s covenantal law. Reaching the foot of the mountain, he found the Israelites had built themselves a golden calf. Moses, in a fit of anger, threw the tablets on the ground and broke them. So, in Exodus 34, Moses goes back up the mountain and God tells him to do it again. He again inscribes the law on two tablets of stone, and Moses again carried them back down the mountain.

Beginning in verse 29, the story offers that as Moses came down the mountain the second time, unbeknownst to Moses at the time, his face shone brightly because he had been talking with God. The Israelites feared coming near him due to the shining skin of his face. Moses called to them, and they eventually went to him that he might explain the commandment given by the Lord on the mountain. When he finished his explanation, Moses put a veil on his face to conceal the glow of his skin. Anytime Moses went to speak with the Lord, he took the veil off. Coming back to the people, he would face the Israelites in the full glory of his glowing face to speak on behalf of the Lord, and then he would veil his face again.

The story, as told in Exodus, seems to indicate that Moses covered his face to hide its radiance from the Israelites. It was a long held belief that one could not look into the face of God without dying, and so, if Moses’ face was the reflection of God’s radiance, perhaps one could die just looking at Moses. Exodus seems to indicate that the veil was used “to abate the fears of the Israelites over the intensity of Moses’ shining skin.”ⁱ

Paul has a different take on this text. Our reading today, coming in 2 Corinthians 3:12-18, offers Paul’s theological adaptation of Moses’ veil.

He begins in verse 12, “We have such a hope, that we act with great boldness – not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of glory that was being set aside.”

The end of glory? ... Glory that was being set aside?

Paul doesn’t seem to think that Moses was hiding the radiance itself; Paul indicates that Moses was hiding the loss of radiance.

Admittedly, I was a bit confused myself when I first read this text. What was Moses trying to hide, if not the radiance itself?

Professor of Theology, PHEME PERKINS, offers this explanation: “The reading implies that Moses concealed a fading glory so that the Israelites would not recognize that the Torah was as time-bound as the laws of other nations.”ⁱⁱ ... Father Frank Matera expands these thoughts, offering, “Moses must

have placed the veil on his face so that Israel would not stubbornly gaze on what was destined to be abolished with the coming of a new covenant.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, Moses’s face lit up like the sun after being in the presence of God. As he returned to speak to the Israelites, his face radiated with the glory of God, as he was tasked with being the conveyer of the covenant – the law. Paul’s take on the veil is that after Moses had delivered God’s message in the full radiance of the glowing skin, he veiled his face so that he might hide the diminishing glow of his skin, which was an indicator of the fading glory of the law – the covenant. He would only allow the Israelites to see his face in the immediate moments after being in God’s presence, so that they could only see his face radiating so brightly. Should they see the diminishing light for themselves, they would know the old covenant was on its way out, to be replaced with a new covenant to come.

Paul believed that the radiance diminished under the veil as a sign that the legal covenant, the written law, the Torah was eventually to be rewritten in the person of Christ when a new covenant was established.

Back in 2 Corinthians, picking up in verse 14, we read, “[The Israelites’] minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant (the law of the Torah), that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds.”

As Paul makes his argument, he uses Moses’ veil as an allegorical example for the whole of the Jewish community experience. Just as Moses used a veil to hide the diminishing light of the covenantal law in Exodus 34, so too, Paul claims, does a veil fall over the minds of those who think the historic law is what offers life today. Even as they hear Moses’s story being read, a veil is there, which limits one’s ability to fully see the glory of God.

Paul, naming the limitations of the law, offers the promise of the new covenant. In verse 16, he says, “when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

This idea of freedom in Christ is one Paul returns to time and time again. He says in Galatians, referring to the two covenants – the old and the new – that one results in slavery and the other in freedom. He says in Romans that believers have been set free from sin. He seems to equate the veil of the old covenant, the written law, as that which shackles one from fully seeing the glory of God in Christ and receiving the freedom of life which comes only through Christ. Christ is the new covenant, the marker of a change in policy, the indicator that God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves even when the law gave us guidance.

And then comes Paul’s final proclamation in verse 18. “All of us,” he says, “all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as through reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”

What Paul believed we could not see in full through the old covenant because of veiled faces, he believes can be fully seen in Christ, because of the Spirit.

It was a common belief in the first century that one was what they touched (kind of like the saying, you are what you eat). They believed that if you touched a leper, you would become unclean like a leper. If you touched the dead, you would become unclean like the dead. If you touched anyone or anything unclean, you would become as unclean as the thing you touched.

But with Jesus, things changed. “The contagion of holiness and healing was so powerful that when Jesus touched the unclean, they got infected with his glory, with his life. They became clean and Jesus stayed clean.”^{iv} This is the promise Paul makes for any who come near to Christ, who, like Christ, find themselves living in the Spirit. Christ says, that filled with the Spirit, we begin to radiate the glory of the Lord, from one degree of glory to another.

That we, should we pause long enough to look in the mirror, might see the glory of God in our own reflection. That we, as members of God’s adopted family, might see the literal image of God looking back at us from the glass on the wall.

And look at Paul’s words, because, while I don’t know about you, this means something to me. Paul says, “all of us *are being transformed.*” We are *being* transformed.

I often make this claim about our mission statement, which I think is so wisely worded. We are *making* a place for everyone to know God’s love. We are *making* a place for everyone to know God’s love. Just like, we are *being* transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another. This is ongoing work. This is work that isn’t yet finished. God is still working in our midst – God is still working to transform you and me. “The Corinthians may not be the perfect image of God’s glory, but Paul knows that God has not abandoned them.”^v

We may not have the most glorious and unblemished of pasts, but God is still working in us. We may not have always made the best decisions, but Christ is still transforming us. We may have a history we don’t like to talk about, but the Spirit is renewing us and continuing to call us children of the risen Lord. God is still working in our midst to proclaim a glory that is greater than might claim for ourselves. Life in the Spirit means being transformed, being shown, being called, being identified, being gifted, and being included as those created in the Image of God.

Christ in the Spirit removes the veil, that we might see the glory of God in our midst, a glory that declares our worth. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Robert Warden Prim. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Pheme Perkins. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frank J Matera. *II Corinthians, A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

^{iv} Scott Hoezee. <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu>. Retrieved June 3, 2021.

^v Carla Works. <http://workingpreacher.org>. Retrieved June 3, 2021.