CONTEMPLATING THE LORD’S GLORY

2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6

Key Verse: 3:18

“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

Who do you look like? People get fascinated by this question when they see a picture of our parents, or, when a new baby is born. As we all know, some people don’t care what they look like, while others care way too much, right? But this is a question we Christians should always be asking ourselves: Who do I look like? And what we should really mean is: “Do I look like Jesus?” In today’s passage Paul uses a passage in the Old Testament to explain how all Christians can be changed by seeing the glory of Jesus. We want to learn how we can experience this change, and what happens to us when we do. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

As we’ve seen thus far, because some people have been criticizing him, in this letter Paul has been defending himself and his ministry. In 3:3 he said that the changed lives of the Corinthians were a defense of his ministry. He said he was “competent” as a minister because God made him competent (3:4–6). Now in 3:7–4:6 he repeats the word “ministry” five more times, and the word “glory” ten times. Though ministry can be so hard, Paul was convinced that it is glorious. What did he mean?

To begin with, in 3:6 Paul introduced the ministry of the new covenant. The old covenant means God’s law given through Moses. Paul said it was “of the letter,” meaning that people had to strictly follow the written code (cf. Ro2:29; 7:6). He also said that the old covenant “kills,” meaning it depends on our efforts, points out our sins and shows us how much we deserve God’s wrath. In contrast, the new covenant which came through Jesus is “of the Spirit.” In this new covenant, the Spirit gives us life. Paul continues with the contrast.

Read 3:7,8. Here Paul says the old covenant ministry brought death, but also, that it “came with glory.” What’s he talking about? He’s referring to when Moses came down the mountain the second time with the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments (Ex34:29–35). The glory of that moment was special. Why? Because Moses’ face was radiant; it was shining, so much so that the people were afraid to look at him. Today’s passage is based on that event. To Paul, Moses’ shining face has a special meaning to Christians. In verse 8 he says the ministry of the Spirit is even more glorious. In verse 9 he says Moses’ ministry of the law brought condemnation, whereas Jesus’ ministry of the Spirit is so much more glorious because it brings righteousness. Here, “righteousness” does not mean self-righteousness, but having a right relationship with God. In verse 10 Paul says in comparison with Jesus’ surpassingly more glorious ministry, Moses’ ministry actually no longer has any glory. In verse 11 he says Moses’ glory was “transitory,” because the radiance on his face wore out after a time, but Jesus’ glory is so much greater because it lasts.

Why is Paul spending so much time making this contrast? It seems some Jews had come from Jerusalem to Corinth to discredit Paul and his ministry. They were saying the law of Moses was way better than what Paul was teaching. So by contrasting the old covenant with the new, Paul is refuting their idea. With the ministry of the new covenant, we don’t need the old covenant any more.

Read verse 12. What “hope” is Paul talking about? It’s the hope of what he just mentioned, “the glory of that which lasts” (11b). It’s the eternal glory of Christ, who one day will come again and redeem not only us and our bodies, but also all of creation (Ro8:18–25). In verse 12 Paul also uses the word “we.” Who is he talking about? He’s talking about all Christians. We all have this hope, and it makes all Christians “very bold.” So what does it mean to be “bold”? In Greek the word literally means to have the courage to say what we really think, to be frank. Paul was known to speak and write with great frankness (7:4a). His boldness was another reason people were criticizing him (10:1). Paul explains that his boldness came not from his human character but from his hope of glory in Christ. In fact, we all need to ask God for this boldness so that we can really live as Jesus’ witnesses among resistant people (Ac4:29).

Look at verse 13. Here Paul says that we Christians don’t have to hide who we are, like Moses had to do. He had to veil his face so that the Israelites wouldn’t see how its radiance was passing away. Maybe he was afraid that if they saw that, they wouldn’t respect him anymore. But because the glory of Jesus remains with us, we have nothing to hide from anyone—we can be who we really are in Christ, no matter who we’re with.

Look at verses 14,15. Here Paul develops another symbolic meaning of the veil Moses had to wear. He says it’s a veil that covers people’s minds and hearts. This same veil makes people dull towards the word of God, Paul says, to this day, even though they hear it. It’s the veil of sin, the veil of pride, the veil of rebellion against God. With this veil, they can’t understand God’s word. They can’t see what it really means. They can’t see the reality of its glory in Christ. This is what made the Jews reject Jesus, even though they heard God’s word so many times. How can this veil be removed? In verse 14b Paul says, “…because only in Christ is it taken away.” How does that happen? Read verse 16. What does this mean? Here Paul is talking about repentance, real repentance, repentance from the heart. When we sincerely repent and turn to Jesus in faith, the veil over our minds and hearts is taken away. But how? Read verse 17. When we repent and believe in Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit (Ac2:38). It’s the Spirit of the Lord who removes the veil from us. It’s the Spirit who enables us to understand the deep things of God (1Co2:7–10). The Spirit of the Lord gives us freedom, especially freedom from the veil, from not understanding God’s word, from not seeing the glory of Jesus.

Read verse 18. Paul begins, “And we all…” Moses having God’s glory reflected on his face was unique among all God’s people. But in Christ, all believers can have this experience, even more fully than Moses did. It’s truly amazing! How can we have our faces radiant with God’s glory? The key, Paul explains, is to “contemplate” the Lord’s glory. The Greek word is literally to look into a mirror. In our world there are mirrors everywhere, and people are very used to looking into them at themselves. But can you imagine living in a world with no mirrors, and then suddenly finding one? And in that mirror you see your own reflection? You’d be fascinated, or maybe horrified? You’d be thinking, “So that’s what I really look like?” Many of us would probably say, “Yikes!” In ancient Greece there was the story of an impossibly handsome man named Narcissus, who happened to look into his own reflection in the water one day. He got so intrigued that he froze there and turned into a flower. Not a good thing. The point here is not to start looking at ourselves in the mirror, but to start looking at Jesus with such a genuine interest. To contemplate Jesus means to be fascinated by his glory, to really want to know him better.

We live in a pragmatic culture. People want to produce results as quickly as possible. This focus makes our lives intensely busy. We don’t want to waste any time, especially sitting around just thinking. But according to this verse, contemplation plays an important part in our spiritual growth. As sinners we tend to contemplate many things about ourselves, secretly: What if I became rich? What if I could change my appearance? What if I could fulfill all my heart’s desires and do whatever I wanted? Honestly, our inner thought world tends to be obsessed with self. As Christians we need to start contemplating the glory of Christ. But how? The whole Bible actually points to him, so we should start reading it carefully, asking God to show us how each passage might reveal more of Jesus to us. We should take the time to meditate deeply on the glory and greatness of Jesus. We should spend time in prayer, asking God to reveal more and more about Jesus to me, to think more about him, to know him better and better. Even Apostle Paul, who knew Christ so well, said that he wanted to know him more (Php3:10).

The next part of verse 18 says, “…are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory…” In Greek the word is literally “transfigured.” It’s the same word used to describe Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. It’s the word “metamorphosis,” and it means to be fundamentally changed, like a caterpillar into a butterfly. The more we look at Jesus and ponder his glory, the more we’re changed. Changed into what? It says here “into his image.” We actually start looking like Jesus! It’s not about physical appearance but about his character. What about it? Later in 10:1 Paul mentions having “the meekness and gentleness of Christ.” Though Jesus is the Son of God, who shared glory with the Father before the world began (Jn17:5), he is so gentle and humble in heart (Mt11:29), gentle and humble enough to be with people like bruised reeds and smoldering wicks (Mt12:18-21). During his earthly ministry he was so genuinely loving and tender toward wounded people, in order to bring them healing. But in our sinful nature we don’t have such a meek and gentle character. They say that to make it in this world, we’ve got to be tough. But to be useful in gospel ministry, we need to grow in the image of Christ. To do so, we shouldn’t despair about ourselves and give up, but keep contemplating the glory of Jesus. It also says here, “with ever-increasing glory.” In Greek it literally says, “changed from glory into glory.” What could that mean? It means growing deeper and deeper into the glory of Jesus. If so, then what’s the main aspect of his glory? The glory of Jesus is best seen in his cross. His cross revealed his obedience to the Father. His cross revealed his great humility. His cross revealed his forgiveness toward his worst enemies. Most of all, his cross revealed his saving love. He gave his own life to save sick and unworthy sinners like us. Changed from glory into glory means growing more and more in a love as great as his.

How can such a change in us actually happen? The last part of verse 18 says, “…which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” We can’t produce this change, but the Holy Spirit can. It’s not automatic, though. Sadly, such a wonderful change doesn’t happen often enough in Christians’ lives. Why not? Because we’re still depending on ourselves, not the Spirit. We’re not listening to the Spirit’s gentle leading; we’re insisting on our own will, our own ideas, our own desires. But if we keep turning to Jesus, keep contemplating his glory, keep asking the Holy Spirit’s help, God promises us this glorious inner change.

In 4:1 Paul says that because God in his mercy gave us such a glorious ministry, we do not lose heart. In verse 2 he says that seeing the glory of Christ has a powerful effect on our inner lives. It helps us renounce our secret and shameful ways. It helps us quit trying to deceive or manipulate people. It gives us the confidence to set forth the truth plainly to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. In verses 3,4 Paul mentions the veil again. Here he says it’s used by “the god of this age,” meaning Satan. Satan wants to blind people to the light of the gospel so that he can keep them under his rule. In contrast, in these verses Paul emphasizes “the light of the gospel.” It displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (4b). It’s a light that Paul himself experienced. When he was a Pharisee he was so rebellious toward God. He was so concerned with his own glory, so self-righteous, so spiritually blind that he was persecuting Jesus’ people. But when he experienced the light of the gospel, he was changed. He began to see the grace of God in Christ. He became like a gentle and loving mother (1Th2:7,8) instead of an angry monster. His preaching became focused on Jesus Christ as Lord, and it made him a humble servant for Jesus’ sake (5).

Read verse 6. Here Paul especially defines “glory” in terms of “light.” This is a theme throughout the Bible. God’s glory is that he first created light to penetrate the deep darkness (Ge1:3,4). In fact, God himself is light (1Jn1:5). And Jesus is called “the light of the world” (Jn8:12). The gospel of Jesus, the good news, gives us the light of God. It shows us the way back to God out of all our sin and condemnation. It frees us from all our inner darkness, all our doubt, fear, guilt and fatalism. Instead of seeing God’s angry face, we now can see the face of Christ, which is full of the greatest love for us imaginable. Seeing his face gives us the greatest inner peace and healing. It also fills us with the light of God. When we’re filled with the light of the gospel, we reflect Christ in this dark world.

Read 3:18 again. May God newly inspire us to spend quality time contemplating the glory of Christ. As we do, may we start to look more and more like Jesus. May God work in us through his Spirit to reflect the glorious light of Jesus to people around us living in darkness.