



PAUL FLASHES IMPRESSIVE CREDENTIALS	
2 CORINTHIANS 3:1–6	33
PAUL HUMBLY GIVES ALL CREDIT TO GOD	
2 CORINTHIANS 3:4–6A	34
IMPORTANT THOUGHT ABOUT THE NEW COVENANT	
2 CORINTHIANS 3:6B–18	34
THE GREATER GLORY OF THE NEW COVENANT	
2 CORINTHIANS 3:7–18	35
PERSONAL APPLICATION – 2 CORINTHIANS 4:1–18	37

“The glory of the New Covenant is that it gives us ‘the right reason’ for wanting to live God-pleasing lives.”

.....

PAUL CELEBRATES THE GOSPEL MINISTRY

In some commentaries, this next section has the title: “The Great Parenthesis.” Paul abruptly breaks into the narrative with a complete change of topic. He takes the role of a cheerleader and calls on his reader to join him in a celebration of the Gospel ministry. Up to this point, the contents of this letter had been a bit depressing. Paul may have sensed this and decided it was time for something a bit more “upbeat.”

A FAVORABLE OUTCOME IS A SURE THING!

2 CORINTHIANS 2:14–17

After Coalition Forces began the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and ground forces started a steady move toward Bagdad, President Bush confidently declared that “the outcome is sure; we just don’t know how long it will take.” In these verses, Paul confidently states a similar thought about the campaign to defeat the forces of evil and to liberate human beings from sin, death, and the tyranny of evil. He calls upon his friends in Corinth to join him in celebrating this great truth. He asks them to give a rousing cheer along with a resounding declaration of thanks to Him, “who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere” (v. 14).

As Paul contemplated the beauty of knowing that the venture to which he had dedicated his life was destined to be successful, the imagery of a “triumphal procession” came to mind. While his readers would easily connect with this imagery, we very likely could use a little help to get the full significance of the symbolism.

The “triumphal procession” mentioned here, refers to the typical victory parade for a conquering ruler’s homecoming. Citizens by the thousands would turn out for the exciting event. They brought flowers to scatter on the pavement ahead of the entourage. Those who could afford it brought incense and spices that they burned as expressions of thanks to their gods, and to add to the festiveness of the occasion.

Continuing with the imagery of the “victory parade,” the apostle Paul gives it a special twist. In the military victory parade, the aroma of crushed flowers on the roadway and the burning spices and incense can trigger two kinds of emotional responses. For all who are on the side of the victorious king — the aroma would be exciting and joyful. It meant that the war was over. Life could return to normal. But there were those for whom the aroma would have just the opposite effect. Trailing behind the victorious generals and troops were the POW’s — soldiers of various ranks from the armies of the vanquished, some chained to chariots, some even in cages. There was nothing pleasant about the aroma that filled their nostrils. It only served to heighten their mental anguish as it reminded them that judgment awaited them and was drawing ever closer with each whiff of perfumed air they breathed.

It was sad, but true, that something so beautiful could mean something so radically different, depending upon the individual relationship to the king who is celebrating the triumph. So, as God looks down on the triumphal procession, the scene is a “bittersweet” experience. Paul says of himself and of those who share in the Gospel ministry, “We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing” (v. 15). As the aroma of incense in a secular triumphal procession can mean different things to different people, so the Gospel can have a totally different effect upon different people. Like the victory parade, “To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life” (v. 16). Those who respond to the Gospel are a source of joy to God. Those who turn their backs on Christ are a source of real pain and heartache to the loving Father in heaven, “Who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4).

Paul can’t help but comment on the tremendous responsibility all this represents so he figuratively throws up his hands and says, “And who is equal to such a task?” It reminds him of the situation with which he had to deal in Corinth. The false teachers used a clever “sales pitch” to get people to “buy into” teachings that were not consistent with what Paul had taught them. Paul referred to them as “peddlers” or “hucksters,” terms that his readers knew had negative connotations. What a contrast this was to Paul’s style: “In Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God” (v. 17b).

.....

These people were “living proof” of the authenticity of Paul’s ministry. Their transformed lives were impressive evidence that his ministry in their midst was “of God.”

.....

PAUL FLASHES IMPRESSIVE CREDENTIALS

2 CORINTHIANS 3:1–6

Paul begins this new section with the question: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?” Paul says, “again” because earlier in the letter he had said something similar (1:12ff). It may be Paul’s way of letting these people know that he is sensitive to the fact that self-commendation really doesn’t carry much weight. Remember, this had been one of the charges that his opponents had leveled against him. Evidently, these slick operators came to the Corinthian congregation armed with impressive “letters of recommendation” from people who lived in a center of international trade. It would be standard protocol checking references for doing business with a stranger. This may very well have been the “sticking point” for the member of the congregation who had taken a stand with the interlopers. It was true. Paul had not presented any letters of reference when he first came to Corinth.

The apostle meets this criticism head on. He says (3:1): “Do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation?” The structure of the sentence in the Greek makes it clear that Paul believed that the answer to the question was a resounding, “No!” Then he goes on to explain why he didn’t need such letters.

With a masterstroke of his pen, Paul makes this very “personal” for his readers. He explains that he didn’t need any written credentials. He had something far more impressive. “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone” (3:2). These people were “living proof” of the authenticity of Paul’s ministry. Their transformed lives were impressive evidence that his ministry in their midst was “of God.” With such credentials, who needed any letter of “recommendation”?

Paul takes this concept and lifts it to an even higher level when he writes in verse three: “You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God.” When Paul pointed to their changed lives as a testimonial to the legitimacy of his ministry, he wanted them to know that this was really a letter that Christ actually wrote. Paul was the human instrument, but their new life had come about because Paul had faithfully proclaimed to them to “write” a letter of recommendation from God Himself, endorsing the ministry of the apostle. It was a letter not written on perishable parchment of flimsy papyrus with ink that fades. It was in God’s

“handwriting” — written by the Spirit of God upon the hearts of believers. Paul is, in effect, saying to his detractors: “You want credentials, I’ll show you credentials! How about a letter of reference from God Himself?”

The terminology that Paul uses here provides him with a perfect segue or lead-in to a discussion of the New Covenant. The reference to “tablets of stone” point to a “watershed event” in the history of Israel — the giving of the Ten Commandments, “inscribed by the finger of God” on stone slabs (Exodus 31:18), which Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai. The people of Israel entered into a covenant with God. He would be their God, and they would be His people.

Paul saw all this as a foreshadowing of the terms of a completely new relationship that would be in effect after the Promised Savior arrived on the scene. Paul reminds them that this was not something he made up. The great prophet Jeremiah had written: “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel...I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts” (31:33). Paul says that the New Covenant is now in effect, “Written... not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (3:3). People of the New Covenant will do God’s will “from the heart.” They do it because, with Christ dwelling in them, it comes “naturally” to them.

PAUL HUMBLY GIVES ALL CREDIT TO GOD

2 CORINTHIANS 3:4–6A

Having set forth these remarkable credentials, Paul wants to make certain everyone understands clearly the dynamics involved in all of this. These credentials gave him confidence in his ministry. But now he lets everybody know that this confidence is not from himself. He is

“equal to the task” (2:6), he says, only because “God has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant” (3:6a). The American Bible Society’s English Version gets to the point with its translation: “God gives us what it takes to do all that we do.”

IMPORTANT THOUGHT ABOUT THE NEW COVENANT

2 CORINTHIANS 3:6B–18

Apparently, the false teachers who came to Corinth took issue with what Paul had taught to the people regarding the “New Covenant.” In chapter 11:22, Paul refers to them as “Hebrews.” These “carpetbagger” teachers evidently passed themselves off as “super” teachers who gave pre-eminence to the Old Covenant which God had made with His people at Mount Sinai. Before his miraculous conversion, Paul had been an avid proponent of this covenant, even to the point of leading a campaign to exterminate any Jew who taught otherwise. In Philippians 3:4–5, he describes himself as a “super-Pharisee.” He sincerely believed that he could win God’s favor by striving to keep “the letter” of the Law. He realized that no matter how hard he tried, it just wouldn’t work! So he declares, “for the letter kills” (3:6). When people use the Law hoping to establish a favorable relationship with God, the Law itself will condemn them, because no one can keep it perfectly. Those who encourage people in their improper use of the Law are, therefore, engaged in a “ministry of death.”

In contrast, the ministry of the New Covenant begins with the acknowledgment that as glorious as the Old Covenant was, one thing it could not do was to provide salvation. The New Covenant, however, proposed a relationship with God, which is based on God’s grace, which offers full and free immunity because of what Jesus accomplished for us on Calvary. In

• • •

*The ministry of the New Covenant brings
with it the remarkable dynamic of being able
to empower individuals to live a life that is
productive in doing things which please God.*

• • •

response to the unbelievable love which God showed by coming to our rescue like this, a genuine love for God and a powerful desire to please Him generates within us. We are anxious to do what He would like us to do — not to win His favor, but because we know that we already have it! This dynamic defines the New Covenant.

THE GREATER GLORY OF THE NEW COVENANT

2 CORINTHIANS 3:7–18

Paul's exuberance for the Gospel ministry continues in this section. The background for what Paul writes here is Exodus 34:29–30, which describes things that happened to Moses in connection with his receiving the Ten Commandments from the hand of God. Paul writes that after Moses had been in the very presence of the Almighty, there was a glow about him. The glow was so bright that "the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory" (v.7). All of this served to reinforce Moses' claim that he had truly been in the presence of God. Paul makes the point that when Moses delivered the tablets of stone which formed the basis for the Old Covenant, the event was accompanied with spectacular and dramatic splendor.

In his attempt to get his people to appreciate the greater glory of the New Covenant, Paul appeals to them to "put their minds in gear." He tells them to stop and think about this. "If the ministry that condemns people is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness?" As wonderful as the Ten Commandments are, they have no power to enable people to observe them. The ministry of the New Covenant brings with it the remarkable dynamic of being able to empower individuals to live a life that is productive in doing things which please God. They aren't trying to get something from God. G.K. Chesterton's observation is quite apropos here: "Is not this life's highest treason to do the right thing for the wrong reason?"

The glory of the New Covenant is that it gives us “the right reason” for wanting to live God-pleasing lives.

In verse 10 and 11, Paul ratchets up his effort to get his readers to appreciate the Gospel message that he had proclaimed to them. He suggests that they might recognize that by comparison, the glory of the Old Covenant is completely blanked out by “the surpassing glory” of the New Covenant. It’s like the time of the month when the moon is full and the night sky is bright. However, when the sun comes and is high in the sky, you no longer see the moon. So it is with the New Covenant, which is so amazing and glorious that it leaves the Old Covenant without any glory by comparison.

The temporariness of the Old Covenant of the Law was symbolized, as Paul says, in the fact that the reflected glory on Moses’ face was fading (vv. 7, 11). Paul reminds us here that Moses was aware of this. In fact, he says Moses “put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away” (v. 13). He wanted them to hold on to the first impression they had received, so their sense of awe and wonder, would be retained, leading them to be more ready to submit to the Law of God.

Speaking of “veils,” Paul adds the thought that “to this day the same veil remains when the Old Covenant is read...even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts” (vv. 14–15). This veil keeps the Jewish people from seeing that the glory of the Old Covenant was fleeting. What was true then is still true today, not only of the Jewish people, but of all who expect to gain God’s favor by the things they do.

There is something that can take away this veil, Paul says. “...only in Christ is it taken away” (v. 14). When this takes place, Paul says in verse 17–18, some great and wonderful things start to happen. When Christ the Lord comes into our hearts, we receive the life-giving Spirit. The bondage and guilt of the Law are removed. And even more important, the power and presence of God which accompanies the New Covenant will reflect in our quality of life. We are made partakers of the glory of Christ and will be “transformed into His likeness, with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (v.18).

Pretty awesome isn’t it — this New Covenant!?

PERSONAL APPLICATION

2 CORINTHIANS 4:1–18

Lord of my life and God of my salvation, thank You for the apostle Paul, for his determination to bring the Gospel to as many people as possible during his relatively short life on earth. And, especially for the magnificent example of faith and loyalty that he was. Help me to be more like him. In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen.

Review

1. In chapter 3 (vv. 7–18), Paul used the concept of the “veil” in several ways:
Why did Moses put a veil over his face immediately after he came down from the mountain (v. 7)?

Why did he keep the veil over his face (v. 13)?

In verse 15, Paul gives the reason for the inability of the Jews of his day to see the glory of God in Jesus. Where does Paul say the veil is?

How is the veil removed (v. 16)?

What happens to us when we stand before God without any “veil” (v. 18)?

2 Corinthians 4:1

2. What does Paul say moved God to commission him to be an apostle, even though he had once been a notorious persecutor of Christians? (See also: 1 Corinthians 4:15; 1 Timothy 1:12–16; Ephesians 3:7–8)

Can you identify with any aspect of Paul's conversion (Ephesians 2:4–5)?

As you consider the role that God gave to Paul, do you see any similarity with what God expects of you?

What over-riding truth does Paul say enables him not to “lose heart” in spite of the many “disheartening” experiences that came his way?

2 Corinthians 4:2-6

3. In verses 2 & 5, Paul tells about his “style” of ministry. What did he say was his goal?

What did he “renounce?”

What learning is here for us to remember when we witness to Jesus?

If the Word of God is so powerful, why doesn’t it “get through” to some people (vv. 3-4)?

Whose power, does Paul say is involved when the Gospel of Christ is held up in all of its purity (v. 7)? (See also Romans 1:16)

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

4. The apostle Paul continues trying “to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (v. 7). What does he use as an “object lesson” to help them “get the picture”?

Explain how you think this analogy helps to clarify the truth that Paul wants them to understand.

5. Paul emphasized the importance of God’s power in the message he proclaimed. Verses 8-9 illustrate the same thing in the experience Paul had. In the first column list the four circumstances which describe Paul’s vulnerability; in the second, how God’s power rescued him.

1.

1.

2.

2.

3.

3.

4.

4.

6. Paul (vv. 10–11) took this thought one step further. He faced the threat of death just about every day. With whom did he share this experience?

Jesus died. But what does Paul say was the result of Jesus' death?

Paul faced death to his body all the time as he pursued his ministry to them, but in verse 12, what blessing does he say came to them?

2 Corinthians 4:13–18

7. Why didn't Paul just keep quiet?

What else, involving the Corinthians, kept him going (v. 14)?

According to verse 15, what was his ultimate goal?

-
8. When Paul compared the eternal blessings that his faith would bring him, how did he refer to the heap of troubles that came his way on earth and on what did he "focus"?

What lesson do you learn from this?
