

The Greater Glory of Paul's Ministry

2 Corinthians 3:7-8

Part 1

In **2 Corinthians 2:16-17** Paul had contrasted his sincerity and his companion's sincerity in ministry with his opponents insincerity in ministry, accusing them of peddling the Word of God. And then what did Paul do? Paul believing that his opponents in Corinth, in light of what he had just said, would attack him as being an egotistical braggart given to self-commendation went on to say in **2 Corinthians 3:1-3** that he did not need to commend himself; nor did he, unlike his opponents, need any written letters of commendation from anyone in order to be received by the Corinthians as a true and effective apostle of Christ and His gospel. And why was this? It was because they themselves, the Corinthians, were his living, breathing letters of commendation.

When Paul had come to them with the gospel of Christ they were pagans, but now they were followers of Christ. Yes, they were struggling but they certainly were not what they once were. They had been changed. And because they had been changed through the gospel that Paul had preached, they had become his living, breathing letters of commendation written by Christ, not with ink on tablets of stone but rather with the Holy Spirit on the tablets of their own hearts. This is what he said in **2 Corinthians 3:1-3**.

When Paul referenced Christ writing on their hearts with the Spirit in **2 Corinthians 3:1-3**, he, in effect, introduced the thought of the new covenant that was promised to the nation of Israel through the prophet Jeremiah in **Jeremiah 31:31-33**.

Paul made this clear in **2 Corinthians 3:4-6** when he identified himself and his companions as servants of the new covenant, a ministry which they were not adequate for but which God made them adequate for.

The fact that God had made Paul and his companions adequate as servants of the new covenant introduced another reason why they, in contrast to their opponents, did not need written letters of commendation. And what was that reason?

Their ministry as servants of the new covenant was far more glorious than their opponent's ministry. This will be spelled out for us in great detail in **2 Corinthians 3:7-18**, the passage that we will begin to explore this morning.

It is universally accepted that Paul's teaching in 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 amounts to a commentary on Exodus 32-34, the account of God's response to Israel breaking its promise to keep the Law.

Therefore, in order to understand Paul's commentary, we will need to take a rather lengthy but necessary trip back to **Exodus 32-34** and consider the events that are recorded for us there.

Israel, in **Exodus 19:8** and **Exodus 24:3**, had twice promised before Moses ascended Mount Sinai that they would keep all the words of the Law, but before Moses, according to **Exodus 24:3-7**, could descend from Mount Sinai with the divinely inscribed tablets, Israel had already broken its promise by worshiping Aaron's golden calf.

God then told Moses while Moses was still on Mount Sinai that He was prepared to destroy the nation of Israel. But Moses pleaded with God to spare them, and **Exodus 32:14** tells us that in response to Moses' prayer that God changed his mind.

And then what happened? **Exodus 32:19** tells us that after Moses descended from the mountain and saw the sin of the nation of Israel with his own eyes he angrily smashed the stone tablets to pieces at the foot of Mount Sinai and then directed the tribe of Levi to apparently kill those who persisted in their sinful ways. The number of those killed by the Levites was approximately 3,000 which the Lord Himself added to according to **Exodus 32:35**.

But this was not the only consequence for their sin. Though God, in response to the intercession of Moses, had chosen not to annihilate Israel, He also told Moses that He had no intention of continuing to dwell among them (Exodus 33:1-3).

He made this clear in **Exodus 33:1-3** when God told Moses that He would not go up with them to the land that He had promised them. He would send an angel before them to make it possible, but He Himself would not go with them, or in other words, the visible manifestation of His presence would no

longer be with them as they continued their journey to the Promised Land as He had been before. And why was this?

According to **Exodus 33:3**, He would not go with them because they were an obstinate people and He might destroy them on the way if He maintained the same intimate presence with them in the future as He had in the past.

And how did the people respond? They were extremely distressed and went into mourning. And how did Moses respond? Moses established “**the tent of meeting**,” not “**the tabernacle**” because that had not yet been constructed, but rather the “**tent of meeting**” outside of the camp of Israel. We see this in **Exodus 33:7**. Why did Moses do this? Why did he establish the tent of meeting outside the camp of Israel?

He did this because, I believe, he was afraid that if he went into the tent of meeting, if it were in the camp of Israel, that when God visibly manifested Himself at the doorway of the tent, which he apparently fully expected, that judgment would once again fall on the nation of Israel, if the tent of meeting were inside the camp of Israel.

And certainly he had good reason to be concerned about this for Israel were sinners and had sinned greatly against God and as of yet had not been fully reconciled back to Him. This is why Moses put the tent of meeting outside of the camp of Israel.

And what did Moses want to say to God in this tent of meeting? I am sure there were many things, but very high on the list, I am quite confident, was God’s planned departure from among them.

Let me ask you a question. If you were Moses, knowing that God still wanted you to lead the nation of Israel into the Promised Land but to do it without Him, what might you be tempted to do if you were Moses?

How about a little begging? And this is exactly what Moses did. He pleaded with God in **Exodus 33:14-16** while in the tent of meeting that God’s presence would, in fact, go with them even though he knew that the nation of Israel would be exposed to the danger of God’s wrath being poured out upon them in judgment as God had warned Moses in **Exodus 33:3**. But even

in spite of this Moses asked what he asked. And did God grant Moses' request? Yes, He did.

Though God planned to remove Himself from among the people of Israel because of their sin, He relented based on the intercession of Moses in Exodus 33:12-17.

So then, what did Moses do after God had told him that He had relented and that He Himself would accompany Israel into the Promised Land? Moses then asked to see His glory! Wow! What a great prayer request. He wanted to know God better. May we have this same appetite!

And did the Lord indicate that He would do this? Yes, once again God responded to Moses' request giving him detailed instructions how this would be done in **Exodus 33:18-23**.

Doing what God told him, Moses prepared two stone tablets similar to the ones he had destroyed in anger and once again ascended Mount Sinai where God did, in fact, reveal His glory to Moses in the way that He said that He would. And after His glory had been revealed to Moses in the way that He said that His glory would be revealed, Moses once again asked God not to remove Himself from among the children of Israel but to again accompany them as they went up to the Promised Land as He had done prior to them coming to Mount Sinai, which God once again confirmed that He would do. God then once again supplied to Moses the Law that Moses then recorded on the tablets that he had brought with him to Mount Sinai.

Moses then descended from Mount Sinai and as Moses descended with the Law there was a very big surprise awaiting him and those who would later encounter him. Let me now read for you **Exodus 34:29-35**. **“It came about when Moses was coming down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the testimony were in Moses' hand as he was coming down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because of his speaking with Him. (30) So when Aaron and all the sons of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. (31) Then Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the rulers in the congregation returned to him; and Moses spoke to them. (32) Afterward all the sons of Israel came near, and he commanded them to do everything that the Lord had spoken to him on**

Mount Sinai, (33) When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. (34) But whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would take off the veil until he came out; and whenever he came out and spoke to the sons of Israel what he had been commanded, (35) the sons of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone. So Moses would replace the veil over his face until he went in to speak with Him.”

God, in response to Moses' repeated requests for the Lord's glorious presence to continue to be manifested among the children of Israel, made Moses himself a visible manifestation of that presence (Exodus 34:29-35).

Now do we understand why the people were afraid to come near to Moses? They were afraid to come to Moses and to be confronted by the manifestation of God's glory radiating from his face in the same way that they would have been fearful to approach the tent of meeting when the pillar of cloud was present for fear of judgment, knowing that they themselves were sinners and were not worthy to stand in the presence of God or even in close proximity to the visible manifestation of God.

Were the people of Israel correct in this judgment? Absolutely! The people of Israel were correct to be so fearful of Moses' unveiled face because it indicated God's presence and consuming judgment. This is why Moses' veiled his face according to **Exodus 34:29-35**.

Moses' veiled his face to protect Israel from being destroyed. And we must add that is the only reason he veiled his face. His veiling was not, as some suppose, to hide the fading glory but rather simply to protect Israel from Judgment. Therefore if we understand this in this way, then we certainly should understand why Moses' veiled his face.

Let me read something that Scott Hafemann wrote. “Moses' veiled mediation of God's glory permits his presence to remain in Israel's midst without destroying her. In this regard, Moses' veiling himself is an act of mercy. [But then he goes on to say] At the same time, the very fact that Moses must veil his face is an act of judgment because of the hardness of Israel's heart. This veil not only preserves Israel from being destroyed; it also keeps her from being transformed.”

If we understand these events in this way then we will be able to understand the point of Paul's commentary in **2 Corinthians 3:7-18** which is essentially this: Moses' ministry of the old covenant as described for us in **Exodus 32-34** did not provide Israel immediate and continual access to the glorious presence of God but only a sense of foreboding and fear of impending judgment, but Paul's ministry of the new covenant did not only provide immediate and continual access without any sense of foreboding or fear of judgment, it also provided a certain confident expectation of transformation thus making Paul's ministry far more glorious than that of Moses. And that, as we will discover, is the point of Paul's commentary on **Exodus 32-34** in **2 Corinthians 3:7-18**.

Now we are ready with this background to consider **2 Corinthians 3:7-18**. In order to study this passage we will be dividing it into two parts. The first part will be "**The greater glory of Paul's ministry**" in **2 Corinthians 3:7-11** and the second part will be "**The surpassing effect of Paul's ministry**" in **2 Corinthians 3:12-18**. This morning we will just begin to consider "**The greater glory of Paul's ministry**" in **2 Corinthians 3:7-11**. And obviously we will not be able to complete but we will begin.

So let us now begin by reading these verses. "**But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, (8) how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? (9) For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. (10) For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. (11) For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.**"

Paul, in order to highlight the greater glory of Paul's ministry of the new covenant in **2 Corinthians 3:7-11**, provides us with three different comparisons between the new and old covenants. So, what is the first comparison?

The first comparison was this: The ministry of death compared to the ministry of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:7-8). "**But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his**

face, fading as it was, (8) how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?"

So, what is the ministry of death in **verse 7** referring to? The ministry of death is the Law. How do we know this? We know this because the very next words, **"in letters engraved on stones."** And what would the letters engraved on stones be referring to? The letters engraved on stones would be referring to the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai and then delivered to the nation of Israel as we saw in **Exodus 32-34**.

So why did Paul call the Law the ministry of death? The Law was called the ministry of death not because it was designed to kill, but because it did kill by exposing sin and pronouncing the judgment of death upon it (Romans 7:12-13). Let me read for you **Romans 7:12-13** and see if this is not so. **"So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. (13) Therefore did that which is good [or in other words, the Law] become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was [What?] sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful."** The Law was called the ministry of death not because it was designed to kill, but because it did kill by exposing sin and pronouncing the judgment of death upon it. The Law cannot save anyone. In fact, the Law will inevitably condemn all those who do not come to saving faith in Jesus Christ to eternal damnation. And this is why the Law is called the ministry of death.

But even in spite of the fact that the ministry of death, or in other words, the Law came with deadly consequences for all those who trusted in it for salvation, it did, in fact, come with a certain manifestation of glory.

Let us continue to read the verse. **"But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory..."** And what glory was this specifically referring to? Let us continue to read the verse. **"But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was."**

And why could they not look intently at the glory of Moses' face? They could not do because **"of the glory of his face fading as it was."**

So, what does this mean? This should not be a difficult question to answer in light of what we have already considered in **Exodus 32-34**. They could not do this because Moses had veiled it. Though this might be clear from our translation it should become clear when we consider the word translated “fading as it was.”

The word translated “fading as it was” (KATERGEO) when it was used by Paul meant, “to make of no effect” “to make powerless.”

In other words, the glory on Moses’ face was continually being brought to an end or cut off in regard to its effect by the veil that Moses had put over his face. This is what it meant.

And was this a good thing? Absolutely! For if the glory on Moses’ face had not been continually brought to an end in regard to its effect, those looking intently at his face could have easily died in the presence of that particular manifestation of God’s glory.

Paul, having commented on the glory associated with the coming of the ministry of death, will now communicate through a question what he believes should be obvious about the ministry of the Spirit and the glory associated with it.

Let us now read **2 Corinthians 3:8**. **“How will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?”**

So, what did Paul communicate through a question about the ministry of the Spirit that he believed was obvious? Paul, through his use of a question in 2 Corinthians 3:8, communicated that whatever glory might have been associated with the ministry of death would be far exceeded by the ministry of the Spirit.

So, what exactly is the **“ministry of the Spirit?”** The ministry of the Spirit is a life-giving ministry that provides lost sinners not only a new heart, upon which the laws of God have been written, but also the resources to live them out (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

The glory associated with the ministry of death revealed God in His judgments to be holy and just, but the glory associated with the ministry of

the Spirit through the proclamation of the gospel of Christ not only reveals God in His judgments to be holy and just but also to be loving, merciful, gracious, compassionate and forgiving through the gift of life that He has made possible through faith in His Son.

May God give us the grace to appreciate the glory of the new covenant and the boldness to proclaim its message.