
2 Corinthians

Lesson 4

“2 Corinthians 3”

Objective: To explore the ancient text of 2 Corinthians in order to understand more fully and completely the call of God for us today as we seek to live out our lives in service to the Kingdom of God, to His glory, His Honor and His will. These ancient texts can challenge us, and inspire us, to live life more fully as participants in God’s story of redemption and love. At the core, the hope and desire for doing this study is that we will be continually transformed more fully and completely into useful instruments in the hands of God for bringing His message of love and compassion, and life to every creature.

Materials: The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate. It is also our hope that each person will bring to the discussion and class times the things that God has placed upon their heart through their unique journey as people seeking the face of God and the life He seeks to bring.

Procedures

1. To explore biblically and logically what matters most to God in order to understand how we are to live. This will entail exploring the background of these texts in order to understand more fully their intended meaning for their original target audience.
2. We will also seek to explore how these ancient texts, addressed to ancient peoples, should, and must challenge us today in our walk of faith and obedience to the will of God.

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 - 3.** We intend in each instance to offer some practical suggestions as to how the call of God, through His Apostle, Paul, calls us to live our lives in such a way as to reflect our confident hope and expectation in the power of God. We seek the face of God.

As we begin this study we need to realize that we pick up at chapter 3 with a continuation of where Paul left off in the last chapter where he was talking to his audience about his sincerity as a person sent from God and presenting his work as one standing in the very presence of God. He is still defending himself and his ministry. In the ancient Roman world communication was far from easy, or quick. In this world, often letters of recommendation gave communities some sense of surety when someone came into their midst that they did not know from some faraway place. Early Christian itinerant preachers apparently made use of letters of recommendation. It appears that at times even Paul used such letters (cf. commendation of Phoebe, Romans 16:1-2). His reference to “some” perhaps needing letters of recommendations would seem to point to other traveling preachers coming to Corinth at some point in time. This has perhaps been part of what has exacerbated the issue at Corinth between Paul and the church there.¹

The central issue that Paul is concerned with in 2 Corinthians is that of his apostolic authority. That authority is

Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, in the Smyth & Helwys Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2009), p. 93.

being challenged by at least some at Corinth. As Paul seeks to convince them not only of his authority, but also of the nature and source of his authority he is going to use this metaphor of a letter of recommendation that was often carried by the one who was being commended. Since this was something that was familiar to his audience they could relate to this. There are a number of things important for us to keep in mind as we unpack Paul's densely packed sentences here: 1. The one carrying the letter was not the author of the letter. 2. The authority of the one who wrote the letter is of crucial importance to those receiving it. Why else would they receive such a recommendation?²

This might leave us today to contemplate our views of authority. We live in a time that takes great pride in challenging authority, any authority, and this can often leave us in a situation where the only authority we seem to accept is our own opinion. In doing this we have returned to a perspective that is not new. In the Book of Judges we find these words: **In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their**

² William Baird, "Letters of Recommendation: A Study of 2 COR 3:1-3," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80:2 (1961), pp. 166-172.

own eyes.³ Perhaps it is the case that seldom do human beings depart from this perspective, but as Paul seeks to make clear this is a false view. There is indeed authority in the universe and that authority comes through God to those he chooses to designate. Today there is attack after attack even on the authority of Scripture and as Paul defends his role as an Apostle of Jesus Christ he also defends the authority of what he writes through that authority. What authority are you willing to accept today?

As Paul moves from verse 1 to verse 2, he follows traditional imagery regarding letters of recommendation in that he is the bearer of this letter that is not written by himself. He bears this letter written on his own heart (the RSV accepts an inferior reading here making it read “your” heart when it should read “our” heart). It is a letter (the one written upon the heart of Paul and his companions in this ministry) that is open to be read by all who are open to reading it. In verse 3, Paul connects what is written to Christ as the author of this letter. The one then commending Paul is Christ with a letter written upon Paul’s and his companions own hearts. It is perhaps at this point that Paul is

³ Judges 21:25, NRSV.

reminded of the imagery of the prophets with regard to the giving of the old law as written on stone tablets and the contrast of this with the law that was prophesied to be written upon the heart (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26-27).⁴

In all of this intricate, and perhaps for us difficult imagery, Paul's concern is to continue in his quest to convince his audience of his apostolic authority. This is authority ascribed to him by God and written not upon stone as the law was, but upon human hearts. This could only be accomplished by God and therefore the mission that Paul is expected to undertake is one that is commissioned by God and can only be accomplished by God. The Corinthian Christians themselves have in fact become an affirmation of the divine origin of Paul's mission and of his authority to carry out what God has called him to accomplish. To deny this fact is to in effect to deny the reality of their own conversion and reception of God's Holy Spirit. It is to deny that their hearts have indeed been transformed by God. This letter that Paul speaks of is no literal letter; the Corinthian church itself is the content of the letter; Christ is its author; Paul and his

⁴ William Baird, "Letters of Recommendation: A Study of 2 COR 3:1-3," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80:2 (1961), pp. 166-172.

companions its couriers; it is written upon their hearts by the Spirit of God. This is a new Sinai experience, but instead of stone tablets the Corinthians have the writing of God on their own hearts. Therefore what commends the mission of Paul is his divine commission which is embodied by the fact that he has received the ministry of the new covenant.⁵

As we move to verse 4 and following, we need to keep in mind that the reference here is to what has just previously been discussed. Paul and his companions are confident of the commission that they have received from God (verse 4), but this confidence is then qualified in the following part of the verse. Their confidence is rooted not in themselves and their innate abilities it is rooted in Christ and is directed toward God. They claim no competence as coming from themselves (Verse 5). It is here that we finally reach the destination that Paul has been driving toward from 2:16 where he introduced the question of “Who is competent for these responsibilities?” The key concept here is “not that we are adequate in ourselves, ... but our adequacy comes from God.” This could possibly be an allusion to Joel 2:11b:

⁵ William Baird, “Letters of Recommendation: A Study of 2 COR 3:1-3,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80:2 (1961), pp. 166-172.

“Truly the day of the LORD is great; terrible indeed—who can endure it?” NRSV. This would reflect the fact that in the divine presence man is infinitely frail and finite compared to God and the only proper attitude is one of humility.⁶ Paul reflects this humility even as he defends his authority.

As we come to this point we need to be reminded that this section actually covers the verses from 2:14-3:6 where Paul is clearly on the defensive and has a deep desire to demonstrate the validity of his apostolic ministry. This is done in a context where his motives and authority are clearly under scrutiny and suspicion. Those who are his detractors are challenging his competence, motives, and authority as we have said before. What is at stake here is more than merely a personal attack on Paul: Underlying the debate over ministry for Paul, as it so often is for us today; is does his ministry have divine authority and approval? People today, as in the day of Paul, desire to follow God and in this quest they seek assurances. Paul’s answer is that God has launched a victory campaign, of which they are the first-fruits and his final victory and the culmination of his campaign are assured.

⁶ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 40 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), pp. 52-53.

The opponents of Paul, that had come into the midst of Corinth, likely regarded themselves as servants accredited by Christ and by contrast to their ministry, Paul's ministry looks feeble and ineffectual and so he launches his robust defense against them.⁷

Who has the final say these usurpers, or Paul?

In his defense he makes it clear that his own character is sincere, he draws as a witness the Corinthian converts who are his testimonial and in contrast to external testimonies he appeals to the inner working of God's own Spirit in the lives of the Corinthian Christians themselves. They know the power of God which has transformed their lives. He makes it clear that he, and his companions, are not adequate because of anything inherent within them, but due to God's enabling they are adequate, and the only endorsement that truly passes muster is that given by God Himself.

At 3:7 Paul begins a series of arguments that use a number of different techniques. One of these is an ancient rhetorical technique that argues "from the lesser to the greater." The reasoning in this technique is that if something is true of the lesser

⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, p. 55.

of something, it is more true of the greater. Here Paul will compare the glory of the “ministry (διακονία) of death” with the glory of the “ministry (διακονία) of the Spirit.” In undertaking this comparison he offers an extensive and creative commentary on Exodus 34:29-35. Paul’s arguments make use of “a challenging, daring, and uncommonly free reinterpretation of Exodus 34.” As this argument begins, we find that the “letter” that kills in verse 6 is further defined as “the ministry of death engraved in letters on stone” in verse 7. We are certain that Paul here is referring to the Law of Moses given to the Jews. He says that this Law came in “glory,” as a matter of fact so much “glory” (the glory is the shining of Moses’ face) that the Israelites could not look into the face of Moses because of the glory (verse 7).⁸

As he continues his argument, Paul indicates that the “ministry of the Spirit” came with far more “glory.” He indicates this using a rhetorical question that anticipates an answer in the affirmative.⁹ In the story from Exodus 34 when Moses came down from the mountain he was not aware of the fact that his face shone and when the Israelites saw him they were afraid to come near

⁸ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 69-70.

⁹ **how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?** NRSV.


him. They were awestruck by this phenomenon. The declaration of Paul that the Law came in glory is based on the fact that it came from the presence of God. Anything that came from the presence of God is touched by His glory and thus that Law, that came from God, is glorious. Paul clearly loved his Jewish heritage and had been a devoted follower of the Law, but through the coming of Jesus he had come to see that though the Law was glorious it in reality ultimately brought death. It offered no remedy to the bondage of sin and death. He also realized that it created division and enmity between people.¹⁰ It divided Jews from Gentiles.

If there was indeed “glory” in the Law that was derived from coming from God then how much more “glory” in that which actually brings the promise of life, justification, and freedom from condemnation. By comparison one is far more glorious than the other. One brought us part of the way along the path needed. Without the realization that there is a need for help, seldom if ever, is it accepted by the one who does not even realize the danger they are in from something. The Law made us aware of our need. It made us aware of the danger that we faced. Paul’s

¹⁰ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 70

argument is that the message of the Gospel is far more glorious than the Law. The Law leads us to a greater understanding of God and His vision for humanity, but it does not provide a way out of the death that it reveals is our lot. Moving on into verse 10 Paul indicates that what once seemed so glorious as it shone brilliantly against the blackness of ignorance and the darkness of misinformation and speculation now is paled in comparison with the “ministry of the Spirit” which shines with a blinding brilliance. This brilliance is more brilliant because it is a permanent solution to the problem created by sin and death. It promises permanent life.

What Paul describes here is meant to show his readers that the Ministry of the Spirit far eclipses the “ministry of death” that before seemed so brilliant and enlightening. There is no real comparison. It appears to me that in using this illustration he may also be taking a shot at those who are in opposition to the ministry of Paul. If that is the case then it would appear they were Judaizers who were seeking to supplant the message of the Gospel with something of a lesser value, a lesser brilliance. This tendency was an issue in the first century as it continues to be



even into the twenty-first century. This happens when we fail to understand the role of the Law and especially its place now that the Gospel message has come. Paul is not saying that there is no value in the Law, but he is stating very powerfully that something far more powerful and permanent has come to replace that which brought death and was not a permanent solution for salvation.

As Paul then moves into verse 12, he expects his audience to concede that his point has been driven home sufficiently for them to understand that they are now participants in this greater glory and from this fact to recognize their great hope. In his argument, Paul is indicating that though Moses had to put a veil over his face in order to hide something they do not (Moses hid the fact that the glow faded over time). They act with a greater boldness than did Moses who received the Law from the hand of God Himself. We learn from Paul that the glow that shone from Moses' face faded over time and that veil which was thought to protect the people from something that induced fear, in fact deceived the people. Moses did not share the fact that the glow faded, he kept this from the people and so in this instance he was less open with the people than Paul was being with the Corinthians. Paul is by

contrast being open and forthright and there is nothing for him to hide as the glory of the message that he shared with them is permanent, truly glorious and fully revealed. There is much debate regarding whether the glow faded, or did not fade, but at present the best scholarship seems to believe that this what Paul is stating in this part of his argument here.

At verse 14, Paul moves ever onward with his argument indicating that the minds of Jews were somehow hardened (veiled) and this hardening is linked to the veil that Moses wore and became a veil concealing the truth from those who read the Law, the Jews, even up to the day of Paul. He indicates that the only way for this veil to be set aside is “in Christ.” He reasons, in verse 15, that this veil continues to lie over the minds of those who read the Law, which now is referred to simply by the appellation “Moses.” At verse 16, he ascribes the solution to this dilemma as being to turn to the Lord in order to have this veil removed. It is in turning to the Lord that the remedy comes, and as always we still have questions. Who is the Lord and what does it mean to turn to him? Paul anticipates our question of who and answers it in verse 17 telling us the Lord is the Spirit.

This abrupt identification of Lord with Spirit deeply unsettles interpreters who desire to reconcile it with their trinitarian doctrine. We must recognize that our modern trinitarian views were not those of Paul and have been developed through the ages and often convoluted by our scientific, Western, Greek, ideologies in such a way that our questions distort and shroud the message of Paul with the new veil of our modern questions, musings and preconceptions. The term “Spirit of the Lord” (πνεῦμα κυρίου) is common in the Septuagint as the Greek rendering of “the Spirit of Yahweh” (רוּחַ יְהוָה). The Spirit of Yahweh is also seen as the breath of life in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Psalm 104:29-30¹¹). The Spirit, for Paul, is a transforming power that is at work bringing the new covenant community to life. For Paul it is impossible to overstate the significance of the Spirit for the life of faith.¹² This Spirit brings new life as it did in the beginning (cf. Genesis 2:7).

The result of the Spirit of the Lord is that, “There is freedom,” the question that jumps to our minds is freedom from

¹¹ When you ignore them, they panic. When you take away their life’s breath, they die and return to dust. ³⁰ When you send your life-giving breath, they are created, and you replenish the surface of the ground. NET.

¹² Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 77.

what, or to do what? Perhaps it is the case that Paul wants us to ask such questions and that such questions challenge us to look deeper for meaning. There is an ancient story of freedom:

Great spiritual teachers often use stories to help us see. This story is a good one about the freedom of the Spirit: A king had two servants to whom he gave questionable orders. The first one obeyed, was promoted, and rewarded. The second one refused and was thrown out of the king's court. The first servant went on to live very well. When he later had an opportunity to check on the second servant, he found him living in a hovel eating gruel. The first servant said, "If only you would learn to do the king's bidding, you would live in luxury as I do." The second servant replied, "If only you would learn to love the taste of gruel, you'd live in freedom from the king as I do."¹³

In our context it appears that Paul might be leading us to think of freedom from veils, hardness of heart, blindness of the mind, and therefore to be able to grasp what God is doing in the world. God is granting the opportunity for freedom from death, freedom for the Gentiles to become children of God, freedom from a need to hide, or be deceitful, freedom from the old patronage system, and freedom from having letters of recommendation, freedom from slavery and so much more. Perhaps Paul means for us to think of all of this

¹³ John Shea, *The Legend of the Bells and Other Tales* (Chicago IL: ACTA Publications, 1996), pp. 105–106.

and more as we let the Spirit unleash our hearts and souls in a new era of revelation.¹⁴

Verse 18 presents unique challenges for us to understand, but it is important for us to remember the context not only of this chapter but of 2 Corinthians as we launch into this section. Throughout 2:14-7:4 Paul's stance is highly defensive. This defensiveness appears to have come from suspicions that focused on Paul's efforts to collect funds for the saints in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). There is the indication throughout 2 Corinthians that at least some in the Corinthian community suspected Paul was nothing more than a fraudulent peddler of the word who was out to line his own pockets. After all Paul was not one of the original disciples who followed Jesus during his lifetime.¹⁵ Keeping all of this in mind Paul elaborates his role and the powerful impact that the Gospel message has on its followers. This power comes through God's Spirit, which initiates a transformation as we come to see the glory of the Lord, here undoubtedly a reference to Jesus Christ as it is into his image that the Christian is being transformed. This transformation does not come through the agency of man, but through the power of the life-

¹⁴ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 77-78.

¹⁵ Paul B. Duff, "Transformed "from Glory to Glory": Paul's Appeal to the Experience of His Readers in 2 Corinthians 3:18," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 127:4 (2008), pp. 759-780.

giving Spirit of God. This is the source of Paul's authority as an Apostle of Jesus Christ and is its proof.

Paul's audience has not only been witnesses of this life-giving, life-transforming power, they have been participants and therefore as Paul has alluded to before they themselves are evidence of his authority and apostleship. In this Paul creates a powerful argument for his case while at the same time continuing to challenge his audience not simply to recognize their place before God; he challenges them to continue to be transformed more fully and completely into the very image of the Lord. We are to fulfill the destiny for which we were created as image-bearers of our God. The veil has been lifted and we should be able to see clearly the destiny for which we were ultimately created. We are called to become the very image of Christ giving our lives selflessly and relentlessly to those in need as Christ did for us.

Synopsis

This section of 2 Corinthians continues Paul's defense of his ministry and of his authority. Here that defense intensifies and perhaps reveals to us some of the issues that are causing concern in Corinth. It appears that some itinerant preachers had come into Corinth, who were Jewish and were challenging Paul's authority as an Apostle and his ministry in general. Paul launches a detailed and powerful defense of both issues. And as part of this defense he presents a challenging and provocative opposition to the Law of Moses in comparison with the message and ministry he proclaimed at Corinth. He uses an ancient rhetorical technique that reasons from the lesser to the greater and though he admits that the Law of Moses was glorious he indicates that that glory is minor compared to the glory of his message and ministry. One left the adherents ultimately with death, while the other brings permanent life and therefore has permanent glory.

Paul indicates that he and his companions in this ministry have a boldness that does not come from anything inherent in them, but due to the Spirit of the Lord who is the source and power behind their ministry. Their ministry is one that brings

freedom along with a greater glory than the Law of Moses. Paul uses the experience of the Corinthians as evidence of the validity of his ministry. The transformation of their lives is evidence of the work of the Spirit and therefore proof of the activity of God in their ministry. They have already begun the process of transformation into the “image” of the Lord Himself. All of this is evidence for the hand of God being involved in the ministry of Paul and his companions.

Questions

1. What are some things that you see as having authority in your life?
2. How do you evaluate what has authority in your life?
3. How does God affect how you live your life? Why?
4. As you listen to preachers and teachers how do you assess their authority?
5. When you meet a new person what are some things that you do in order to get to know them? Why?
6. What do you think the role of the Law of Moses was? Why?
7. How do you assess sincerity in other people?
8. How do you evaluate your own sincerity?
9. What is the role of the Spirit in your life?
10. What does the Spirit look like in your life?
11. What would you say would be some of the attributes of a person who was going to become the “image” of Christ?
12. How would you describe your views of authority?

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- 13.** What does it mean to transform your life?
 - 14.** What are some things that inhibit people from transforming into the “image” of Christ?
 - 15.** What are some ways that your community can help you in this transformation process?