

## 2 Corinthians 3:7-18

<sup>7</sup>If the ministry that brought death (which was engraved in letters on stone) came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look directly at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face (though it was fading), <sup>8</sup>how will the ministry of the spirit not be much more glorious? <sup>9</sup>For if the ministry that brought condemnation has glory, the ministry that brought righteousness has even more glory. <sup>10</sup>In fact, in this case, what was glorious is no longer very glorious, because of the greater glory of that which surpasses it. <sup>11</sup>Indeed, if what is fading away was glorious, how much more glorious is that which is permanent!

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, since we have this kind of hope, we act with great boldness. <sup>13</sup>We are not like Moses, who put a veil over his face, so that the Israelites could not continue to look at the end of the radiance, as it was fading away. <sup>14</sup>In spite of this, their minds were hardened. Yes, up to the present day, the same veil remains when the Old Testament is read. It has not been removed because it is taken away only in Christ. <sup>15</sup>Instead, to this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts. <sup>16</sup>But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. <sup>17</sup>Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup>But all of us who reflect the Lord's glory with an unveiled face are being transformed into his own image, from one degree of glory to another. This too is from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

## Which Mountain?

### I.

He had been up on that mountain once before. He had received tablets of stone, cut and inscribed by the very hand of God himself. When he had come down the mountain, however, he saw his people, the People of Israel, dancing around a Golden Calf, and proclaiming it to be their god who had led them out of slavery in Egypt. In disgust and anger, he had smashed the precious tablets on which God had written his Law.

God told Moses: "Cut out two stone tablets like the first ones. On these tablets I will write the same words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. <sup>2</sup>Be ready by morning, and come up to Mount Sinai in the morning. Present yourself to me there on top of the mountain" (Exodus 34:1-2, EHV).

Moses did just as God instructed him. He chiseled out two blank tablets of stone and carried them up Mount Sinai to meet with God. He stayed up on the mountain for 40 days, just like the first time. As he met with God, Moses listened again to God's Law—the Covenant, or agreement, God was making with his people. In the process, Moses was permitted by God to be in the presence of more holiness than a sinful human being can endure.

The First Reading for today tells us that when he came down this time: "Moses did not realize that the skin of his face was shining because he had been speaking with the LORD" (Exodus 34:29, EHV). He was in the presence of so much glory that Moses' face glowed with the reflected glory of God.

When they saw the spectacle, the people were afraid to even come close to him. Finally, at Moses' insistence, they *did* come closer, and Moses told them all about the Lord's commands. "When Moses was finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face" (Exodus 34:33, EHV).

Why do you suppose he did that? No explanation was given in the First Reading. We were just told that, after that, every time Moses met with God he took that veil off; then, after his meeting ended and he relayed God's Word to the people, he put the veil back on.

Paul tells us the reason for the veil: "...so that the Israelites could not continue to look at the end of the radiance, as it was fading away" (2 Corinthians 3:13, EHV).

Paul called the Law Moses received on Mt. Sinai: "The ministry that brought death (which was engraved in letters on stone)" (2 Corinthians 3:7, EHV). How could he call God's perfect and holy law a ministry that brought death?

God's perfect Law demands perfection. No human being is perfect. No human being is *capable* of being perfect—not even close. Without perfection, there is death. The Law from Mt. Sinai is incapable of helping human beings achieve perfection. In the final analysis, Paul says, it is a: “Ministry that brought condemnation” (2 Corinthians 3:9, EHV), because no one is able to live up to the admirable goal of perfection.

Thousands of years after Moses' trip up Mt. Sinai the same problem exists with the law. Perfection is still demanded, and no one can meet it. Paul said: “Instead, to this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:15, EHV). What Paul said is still true. The Formula of Concord, one of our Lutheran Confessions, says it this way: “Merely preaching the Law, without Christ, either makes proud people, who imagine that they can fulfill the Law by outward works, or forces them utterly to despair” ([Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration, art v, par. 10](#)). In other words, you begin either to think you are doing pretty well and can achieve salvation on your own, or you sink into despair, knowing that you have *not* been completely perfect, and will go to hell.

That was the problem with Old Testament Israel. They struggled to try and obey God's Law, but their obedience was always imperfect. The Pharisees imagined they had developed a system by which they *were* able to keep it, but they failed. People today do the same thing; they insist they have been “pretty good,” and hope that God will take that into consideration when he weighs out the good and bad of their life. But the law demands that we “be perfect,” not that we “try really hard.”

The same veil that covered Old Testament Israel who could not be perfect covers the heart today when you are deceived into thinking that if you try really hard, something will come of it. Mt. Sinai simply doesn't lead to salvation.

## II.

There was another mountain in today's readings: the Mount of Transfiguration. In the Gospel we saw Jesus take Peter, John, and James with him as he went up on the mountain to pray.

For months—years even—the disciples had come to know and understand some things about Jesus. They believed him to be the Messiah—the One promised by God to be a prophet like Moses—even *greater* than Moses. Eight days before they went up the mountain with him, Jesus had said some troubling things about what that might mean. They hadn't really wanted to hear it.

Up on that mountain, “While [Jesus] was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothing became dazzling white” (Luke 9:29, EHV). In contrast with the troubling news Jesus had told them the previous week, this day they saw his glory. It was incredible! *This* was the kind of thing they were hoping for from their Messiah!

As the three came back down with Jesus, there was probably a little more bounce in their step than usual. They had known who their Master was for some time now, and now they had been allowed to see a verification of the glory they *knew* was his.

Still, the Mount of Transfiguration was *not* the mountain which would supersede or fulfill the glory Moses first saw on Mt. Sinai.

## III.

We're almost ready in our church year to start the season of Lent. We will watch Jesus as he prepares for the final battle against sin, Satan, and death. It will all culminate on Mount Calvary. What we will see there won't look glorious at all.

Jesus will hang in pain. Soldiers will mock him and spit on him. Passers by will taunt him and tell him to prove that he is the Christ, the Messiah, by coming down from the cross on which he is being crucified.

Paul writes: “If the ministry that brought condemnation has glory, the ministry that brought righteousness has even more glory” (2 Corinthians 3:9, EHV). Moses' face when he came down from Mt. Sinai reflected glory, even though the Law could not bring glory for the people.

Jesus hanging on the cross looked anything *but* glorious; but there, from the cross, he called out “Tetelestai!” “It is finished.” The very word used to mark a bill “paid in full.” All the sins of the world—your sins and mine—all the misdeeds that God’s glorious law condemned so righteously—were wiped away by the glory of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus.

“Indeed, if what is fading away was glorious, how much more glorious is that which is permanent!” (2 Corinthians 3:11, EHV). Jesus’ ministry that brought righteousness, the ministry of the cross, has much more glory than the glory that shone on Moses’ face. *That* ministry has even more glory than the glimpse Peter, John, and James were allowed to see on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Paul said: “To this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts. <sup>16</sup>But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (2 Corinthians 3:15-16, EHV). The Law does not lead—can not lead—to salvation. Those who try to be saved by keeping the law have a veil over their hearts.

The whole point of the Law was to make the people realize they were unable to keep it perfectly. God’s system of sacrifices for sin was given to them as a means by which they could recognize that their only recourse was to rely on God’s mercy. The sacrifices pointed ahead to the glory Jesus would complete on the cross.

Those who look to Jesus on the cross, who hear him say “Tetelestai!” “Paid in Full,” find the veil taken away. The rules of God’s Moral Law are not *rescinded*, but Jesus kept them all in our place. The punishment for breaking the rules has not been *removed*; Jesus willingly suffered the punishment for those sins as he hung on the cross. Those who look to Jesus realize they are saved by faith in him alone.

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17, EHV). Mount Calvary brings freedom from the condemnation of the Law, and freedom from eternal death. Mount Calvary is the mountain that shows the true glory of Jesus.

#### IV.

“But all of us who reflect the Lord’s glory with an unveiled face are being transformed into his own image, from one degree of glory to another. This too is from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18, EHV).

Peter, John, and James were pretty excited as they made their way down the Mount of Transfiguration. They had been privileged to see a glimpse of Jesus’ glory.

What about Paul? What about the Corinthian Christians? What about you and me? We have seen the glory of Jesus on Mount Calvary—the glory which won our salvation. That glory puts a bounce in our step. That glory makes us excited.

That glory transforms us from one degree of glory to another. Each Christian continually grows toward a greater and greater understanding of Jesus and his amazing grace and love for all people.

Moses reflected the glory of God’s perfect and holy Law, but that glory could not save a sinful people. The disciples saw Jesus display his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, but that was only a glimpse into what was really coming.

The fullness of God’s love and glory were displayed in Jesus dying on the cross on Mount Calvary. That’s the mountain that really brought us glory. Now we reflect that glory so that others might learn of Jesus’ love for all, even as we wait to be taken to our heavenly glory, the glory of Mount Zion in the New Jerusalem. Amen.