

Transformed by the Spirit

Date: 5 July 2020, 4th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's online

Series: God's Power in Our Weakness

Texts: Exodus 33:7-11, 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:7-18

What does it mean to be human? Have you ever asked that question? Maybe you've thought about it in a more personal way - What am I here for? You may not know the answer to that question, but if you're anything like me, you'll know that you are not all you could be and you're not where you should be. Bound up in the meaning of our existence is the goal or purpose of life. What are we meant to head towards? Wealth, pleasure, even family seem too small a goal for the human spirit. The African theologian St Augustine famously wrote: "O God you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you."¹ The Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "The chief end [or goal] of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." If that is our goal, how do we get there? Well, the destination determines the journey. This morning we are going to explore how we rest in God and also move towards him.

We pick up 2 Corinthians at the point where Paul has begun a long section explaining what Christian ministry and the Christian life looks like. In our text for today, 3.7-18, Paul contrasts the ministry of the old covenant with the ministry of the new covenant. How does this relate to our question of the purpose and path of your life? We'll get there, but to understand what Paul says, we need to step back to our Old Testament reading, Exodus 33 & 34. You might remember that God rescued his people Israel from slavery in Egypt through the prophet Moses, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. God went before Israel in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God met with Israel at Mt Sinai. But it was only Moses who went up and spoke with God. Incredibly, Moses asked God, "Now show me your glory", and God said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence."

On Sinai Moses saw the glory of God. God gave him the Law, on tablets of stone, and he brought it down to the people. From our readings we discover that as the people travelled they had a special tent, called the Tent of Meeting, where Moses would go and speak with God. When Moses first came down from the mountain and when he would come out of the tent - his face was radiant from having met with God. While his face was shining with the reflected glory of God, he would tell the people God's laws. What is fascinating is that after he had spoken to the people he would put a veil over his face. Why? The text says the people were afraid to come near him because his face was shining. But that is not the reason for the veil. Rather it was so that they would not see the glory fading from Moses' face.

Paul uses this story to contrast the ministry of the old covenant given through Moses with the new covenant brought by Jesus. Read with me 2 Corinthians 3:7

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, 8 will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1

glorious? 9 If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! 10 For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. 11 And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Why did the old covenant, the Law, engraved on stone, bring death? Paul tells us in verse 9 - because it is a ministry that condemns. Paul tells us in Romans and Galatians that the Law is good, even glorious. It shows us right and wrong. It tells us how to live. Lots of people I speak to think that this is all Christianity is about - a set of ethics, a moral code. And if that were all, then the argument that all religions are the same, they all teach you how to be a good person, well, it would be true. Even with the common ground between the moral codes of the world's faith traditions, the moral law of Moses, the 10 commandments is surely the most sublime. But whatever moral code you hold yourself to - the 10 commandments, the 4 noble truths, the communist manifesto - Paul says, Law condemns. Why? Because Law cannot change the heart. Left to ourselves we despair at how far we fall short of it. Or, worse still, we become proud at how much better than others we are at keeping it. Either way Law condemns. We need hearts of flesh.

Paul goes on, verse 12, *Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.*

What is that hope? It is the ministry that brings righteousness, because the Holy Spirit is at work to change us from the inside out. Paul continues his illustration with the radiant face of Moses.

13 We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. 14 But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. 15 Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.

Again this is a complex metaphor that takes some unpacking. But this text is crucial for understanding how to read the Old Testament, the first half of the Bible. The old covenant given to Israel through Moses was always intended to point to Christ. Back in chapter 1 Paul said, "No matter how many promises God has made they are "Yes" in Christ." Jesus is the key without which you cannot understand the Old Testament (and the New for that matter). And it's not just understanding. The Bible is meant to be lived, not merely understood. But apart from Jesus, a veil remains over your heart when you read it. Only as we see God's love for us in Christ will our hearts be warmed to respond in love and obedience, not out of pride or guilt or fear. And that brings us to the final verses.

16 But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Augustine famously battled with sexual addiction. He wrote,

I ... was bound .. by the iron of my own choice. ... By servitude to [desire], habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. By these links ... connected to one another [like a chain], a harsh bondage held me under restraint.²

Our hearts are made for God, but we try to fill them with created things, rather than the Creator - wealth, pleasure, status, work, even family, or our own sense of righteousness. They can come to blind us and bind us. But to turn to Jesus and accept him as your Saviour and Lord is to receive both sight and freedom. We cannot make them. They are given by the Spirit of the living God.

And so at last we come to how we can find both rest in and movement toward God. In short it is to gaze upon the face of Christ. The Greek word translated “reflect” literally means to look in a mirror. Moses met with God in the tent of meeting, but the glory faded from his face. St John writes, *the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. We have seen his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*³ And Paul says, that as we contemplate the Lord’s glory, as we gaze on the glory of Father in the face of Christ, unlike Moses the glory shining from our faces will not fade, but only increase. The Holy Spirit will transform us to be more truly human, that is to be like Christ.

This is why our mission as a church is to see people drawn to the Light of Christ, be transformed by the light of Christ and sent out to shine the Light of Christ. Because this is God’s purpose for each one of you: that you would meet with Jesus and gaze upon his glory, and that in so doing the Holy Spirit would transform you to shine with all the brilliance of Almighty God. Do you want that? Then come to Jesus. Gaze on his beauty, his goodness, his compassion, his gentleness, his power, his anger, his righteousness, his humility, his suffering, his death, his resurrection, his love.

² *Confessions*, 8.5.10

³ John 1.14