**The glory of Christ and the new covenant**  24/10/21 dkm

Read: Exodus 34:27-35, 2Corinthians 3

Text: 2Corinthians 3:7-18

Psalms: 23old, 40:1-8, 27:7-14, 117

At the front of my house is a solar powered light. After a sunny day it shines brightly in the night, although it begins to dim by morning. As dawn breaks, the dim light of these solar lights becomes useless. I can see my way around without the help of these lights. And then the sun comes up with such powerful light that I cannot look into it. The sun fills every dark place with light.

If we think of light being glory, the solar powered lights represent Moses and the old covenant, and a glory that is passing away; some commentators refer to the moon as this dimming light. The light of the dawn represents Jesus and the new covenant, and the light of the full sun represents Christ in heavenly glory, glory which we have not yet seen, but will do so when Christ returns. Three apostles were given a glimpse of Christ in his heavenly glory on the mount of transfiguration (Luke 9:29-31).

The apostle Paul does not draw upon a natural analogy, at least not in this passage. Rather, he draws upon the story of the shining face of Moses as an analogy of the passing glory of the old covenant. He has already started comparing Moses and the old covenant, to Christ and the new covenant, declaring himself to be a minister of the new covenant, and by implication, his opponents in Corinth as ministers of the old covenant.

This analogy stemmed from him defending himself against the written letters of commendation that these newcomers brought, most likely from the church in Jerusalem. They were letters written on papyrus, effectively on tablets of stone (3:3). Tablets of stone were at the heart of the old covenant; God gave these to Moses on the mountain. When Moses came down from the mountain carrying these tablets (for the second time), his face shone such that he had to put a veil over his face when talking to the people (Exod 34:29f). From this story Paul teaches about the surpassing and continuing glory of the new covenant, as well as the taking away of the veil in Christ. Our subheadings are: ‘A greater glory’, ‘A veiled glory’, and ‘An increasing glory’.

**1. A greater glory**

The old covenant mediated by Moses, ‘written and engraved on stones’, was a ‘ministry of death’ (3:7). Paul had just written that ‘the letter kills but the Spirit gives life’ (3:6). The covenant written on stones was not a failure- it was never meant to save. The old covenant was meant to reveal sin: ‘the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith’ (Gal 3:24).

By revealing sin, the law condemns sin and effectively kills. It was and is necessary to reveal sin, and God’s wrath upon sin and sinners, as a prerequisite to salvation, salvation by faith. There is no salvation in the law (Gal 2:16). God knew that no human being was able to keep the whole law. So Paul calls the ministry of the old covenant the ‘ministry of condemnation’, in contrast to the ministry of the new covenant which is the ‘ministry of righteousness’ or acquittal (3:9).

The law delivered by Moses is important in that it reflects the character of God and his purposes. God is holy, and the ‘law is holy, and the commandment holy, just and good’ (Rom 7:12). To this extent the law is glorious. Remember the power and glory of God revealed on Mt Sinai. The people trembled and pleaded with Moses that God not speak to them directly, ‘lest we die’ (Exod 20:20). Paul takes us to a later incident when Moses came down from the mountain after spending a second period of forty days in the presence of the Lord. ‘The Lord spoke to Moses face to face’ (Exod 33:11). The effect of Moses being in the presence of the Lord was that when he came down, the skin on his face was shining (Exod 34:29); no further description is given, but the effect was to fill Aaron and others with fear, such that Moses had to put a veil on his face.

Paul uses the shining face of Moses to picture the glory of the old covenant. There was no doubting the glory of the old covenant- Paul makes no attempt to dismiss this glory. What he does is declare that the glory of the new covenant is greater, much greater. He refers to the new covenant as the ministry of the Spirit rather than the letter, the ministry that gives life and is therefore more glorious.

Not only is the glory of the new covenant greater, it is enduring; it is not a glory that fades away. The fundamental weakness of the old covenant was that it was passing or fading away (3:7, 11, and 13). Paul makes this point by again referring to the shining face of Moses. Moses writes that whenever he went in to speak with the Lord he took the veil off his face and that he came out with his face shining again- this is what the apostle Paul understands anyway when he writes of the ‘glory of his [Moses] countenance which is passing away’ (3:7). The Greek term translated ‘passing away’ or ‘fading away’ (NIV), or ‘brought to an end’ (ESV) refers to ‘non-physical destruction by a superior force replacing it, e.g. light destroys darkness’. So my analogy of a small solar-powered light becoming useless as dawn breaks is appropriate. In the night those lights are great, but with the dawn of a new day they become useless. ‘The glory of the sun does not deny the glory of the moon but certainly surpasses it’.

Under the old covenant man was left a convicted sinner, but under the new covenant he is put right with God, the demands of the law having been satisfied in Jesus who inaugurated it. The glory of the new covenant is greater or more excellent. Moreover, this glory remains and is not passing away like the glory of the old covenant.

**2. A veiled glory**

As Paul starts talking about the hope, the freedom, and the joy that he boldly proclaims in the gospel of Jesus Christ, he is drawn back to the picture of Moses with a veil over his face. This veil was not just hiding the glory of his shining face but the fading nature of this glory: ‘Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away’ (3:13). The veil hid the fact that the glory of the old covenant was coming to an end.

Paul then pictures this veil being transferred to the hearts and minds of many reading the OT. The veil stopped them seeing that the old covenant was coming to an end; indeed the law itself, and especially the prophets, pointed to this end, to fulfilment in the person of Messiah or Christ (e.g. Jer 31)

‘The veil is taken away in Christ’ (3:14). Christ is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets, as Jesus himself declared (Mat 5:17, Luke 24:44). The apostle Paul knew all about the blindness with which the Jews read the OT, especially the Pharisees. As a Pharisee, a man zealous for the law, he went all the way to Damascus to catch and condemn Jews who were not following the Law of Moses as the way of salvation. His ministry as a Jew was a ministry of condemnation and death. Contrast the new man Paul, the preacher of the gospel. He was still travelling to distant places to preach in synagogues but to preach a message of hope, the message of righteousness or justification in Jesus Christ.

The change from Saul to Paul demonstrates the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. Paul does not point to his conversion at this point in his letter, but on the Damascus Road he saw the dazzling glory of the risen Christ, and felt the power of the Holy Spirit changing his heart and his life. He experienced the veil that blinded him being taken away in Christ (3:14-16). As Paul preached in synagogues he rejoiced in seeing the veil lifted from the hearts of elect Jews, but disappointed it remained ‘unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament’ with others (3:14).

Disappointment turned to disgust and anger when he heard of men coming to the church at Corinth with a teaching that effectively reimposed the veil. We must be alert to men and women in the church today who still want to revive the glory of the old covenant, a glory that not only passed away, as Paul declares numerous times in this passage, but has passed away because it is eclipsed by the more excellent glory of the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.

The veil that was on the face of Moses is taken away in Jesus Christ (3:14). There is no veil on the face of Jesus because, by the Spirit of God promised by the prophets (Ezek 36:27), those who turn to Jesus can comprehend his glory. Three apostles saw his ‘unveiled’ glory on the mountain, and the apostle Paul saw him on the Damascus Road. We see his unveiled glory in reading his word and praying in the spirit. We will not see the fullness of his glory however, until he returns and we are changed. Then the twilight will give way to the full and dazzling light of the sun/Son.

**3. An increasing glory**

In the closing two verses of this chapter, Paul writes about the Spirit and the Lord. Is ‘the Lord’ Yahweh, the Lord to whom Moses turned? Yes and No! He is the same Lord but now revealed in his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. When one ‘turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away’ (3:16), and the ‘veil is taken away in Christ’ (3:14).

The new covenant is spoken of in terms of the ‘Spirit giving life’, back in verse 6, while here in verse 17, the Spirit gives liberty or freedom. In the new covenant there is no deadness of the letter but life and liberty in the Spirit. The veil has been lifted in Christ so that in the new covenant we see with unveiled faces, yet the glory of the Lord is such that we see in a mirror dimly (1Cor 13:12). The glory of the Lord is such that, as we cannot look at the midday sun directly, we cannot see the fullness of his glory. For the present we see his glory as reflected in a mirror; this ‘reflection’ may also refer to us reflecting the glory of the Lord in our person and our life (3:18 NIV).

While we cannot gaze upon the glory of the Lord in this life, we will when he is fully revealed and our transformation is completed (1John 3:2). For the present, we are ‘being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord’, or ‘from the Lord, who is Spirit’ (3:18). In Romans 12:2 Paul writes of believers being ‘transformed by the renewing of your minds’. Having been justified in Christ by the Spirit, we are now being sanctified by the same indwelling Spirit of Christ. This process of sanctification includes the process of glorification (Rom 8:30), the ever increasing glory of a gentle and quiet spirit (1Peter 3:4), the process of growing in knowledge and grace revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is our inner beauty and glory that is changing, that is increasing as we draw closer and closer to our Lord. Our outward appearance will not change till Jesus returns in heavenly glory. This inner beauty, this ever increasing glory, is a reflection of the glory of the Lord, as mentioned. The closer we draw to Him, the more we will radiate his glory among those who are being saved.

We may find it difficult to grasp these glorious truths, but we must at least turn away from the written letter that kills and towards the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit who gives life. Moses would have endorsed the words of John, the last of the prophets, when he said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29). The picture of the veil and the shining face of Moses is summed up in the words of John the Baptist, ‘He [Jesus] must increase, I must decrease’ (John 3:30). To God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and praise forever and ever, amen.