

Christian Hope is Glorious!

(2 Corinthians 3:7–18) 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, transitory though it was, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? ⁹ If the ministry that brought condemnation was 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 transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts! ¹² Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. ¹³ We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing 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. 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 all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

In Christ Jesus, who gives us life unending, dear fellow redeemed,

Twenty-two hundred years ago a Roman playwright wrote: “Where there's life, there's hope.” In other words, as long as you are alive, there is hope that your situation may improve. If you're sick, maybe you'll get better. If you're sad, maybe you'll cheer up. Because we tend to think of hope in this way, as something that's possible, but not at all certain, we may struggle to properly understand the concept and meaning of the Christian's hope as Paul speaks of it in the Scripture before us today where we learn that Christian Hope is Glorious! 1) because it is unfading; 2) because it is transforming.

Paul tells the tale of two kinds of hope by contrasting the ministry of Moses with the ministry of Christ Jesus. To accomplish this, Paul focuses on one specific aspect of Moses' work. This is necessary because in so many ways, Moses himself was a picture of the coming Christ. But there is an element of Moses' ministry that is very different from that of Jesus. Moses was God's appointed lawgiver. Twice Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God. The second trip was made necessary after Moses smashed the tablets of the law in reaction to the Israelites sin of worshiping the golden calf. After pleading with God to forgive the people, Moses reascended Sinai, where God inscribed the Commandments on a new set of tablets. It's at this point that Paul picks up the account in 2 Corinthians.

Paul begins by telling us that whatever comes from the hand of our glorious God, is by reason of the Giver, a glorious thing. In other words, those Ten Commandments, engraved in letters on stone come to us with God's glory attached to them. They are glorious. And yet, notice how Paul characterizes the ministry associated with The Ten Commandments. He calls it “**the ministry that brought death.**” Two verses later he makes it clear that he's talking about eternal death in hell when he refers to the giving of the law as the “**the ministry that brought condemnation.**”

Why say such things? Paul makes it sound like the Commandments should come with a warning from the Surgeon General stamped across them. Is Paul trying to scare us? Absolutely he is! Let me give you some background. It seems that a group of preachers had come to Corinth insisting

that Paul was not telling the people the whole truth when it came to preaching a message of salvation. Given Paul's response, it's not hard to imagine that these self-appointed apostles were telling the people that they must pin their hope of heaven, as least in part, to their ability to keep the Commandments. Why else would God have given them his laws in such glorious fashion through the great lawgiver, Moses?

Why indeed? Paul sets out to explain, not by disparaging the law or discrediting Moses—not at all. In fact, Paul reminds us that Moses' face beamed with God's glory as he read God's Commandments to the people. The problem is not with God's law. The problem lies with us. We have a sin problem. The law brings death to us, not because God laced every commandment with a deadly dose of fentanyl, but because the holy law of our holy God demands that we be holy if we hope to live with him in his holy heaven. The law is very clear on this: the unholy must perish forever. **“The one who sins is the one who will die.” (Ezekiel 18:20).**

That's not the message we want to hear. But it is the message we need to hear and think about all the time. Why? Because, by nature, we have a very unhealthy fixation on God's Commandments. Like those false preachers who came to Corinth, we often operate under the faulty (and damning) opinion that the Commandments can help save us. You know what I mean. Think of how often you use the Commandments to try to grade your relationship to God, not by comparing yourself to him, but to your neighbor. We like to grade on a curve, don't we, deciding that if, in our own estimation, we're doing better than most of the people we know (we keep a civil tongue, we try hard not to gossip), God will give us a passing mark. And if we're not doing so well today, we can always try harder tomorrow. Where there's life, there's hope. Right? Wrong.

That's not the way it works. That's not the purpose of the law. God gives us the law to kill any notion we might have that we can help make ourselves right with him. We can't! There's no way! Any attempt to do so is spiritual suicide. So where does that leave us? If God's glorious law were his last word to us, for all intents and purposes our lives would be over. We'd have no hope. But the law isn't God's last word to us. He who is love personified has spoken a better, more glorious word that is the heart and core of a better, more glorious ministry – **“the ministry of the Spirit” – “the ministry that brings righteousness.”**

This isn't some new ministry that is part of some new plan that God has for us. This was his saving plan all along, one illustrated in the life and work of Moses. It's true that when Moses read God's holy law to God's people, his face reflected God's glory so brightly that the people had to look away. But then what did he do? When he finished reading the law, **“Moses...put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away.” (2 Corinthians 3:13).** Rather than letting the people fixate on the glory of the law, Moses covered his face. He wanted to show the people that the law's glory is transitory. It's fading glory. Again, not in the sense that there is something wrong with it, but in the sense that it pales in comparison to the glory of the gospel. Paul explains: **“If the ministry that brought condemnation was 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.” (2 Corinthians 3:9-10).** Comparing the glory of the law to the gospel is like comparing a penlight to the sun in the sky.

Christian, in just these few short verses from God's inspired Word, Paul proclaims the greatest life-giving, life-altering news we will ever hear: Our hope, our Christian hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness! Think of what this means! Hope is often described as a feeling of expectation, a desire for something good to happen, even if it's not certain. I can say to you, “Let's hope for beautiful weather this week!” But since none of us controls the weather, all we are doing is wishing for nice weather. But what if we could control the weather? What if we program the days ahead to be sunny and 72 degrees? Now our expectations and desires will come true. Our hope becomes a sure thing. This is the way it is with our Christian hope because it is built on the unfailing promises of our never-changing God who controls everything!

God gave us his glorious Law to show us how impossible it is to save ourselves. He did this, not to drive us to despair, but rather to prepare our hearts for the wonderful news that what we can't do ourselves, Jesus has done for us. We can't keep the Commandments to God's standard of perfection, but his Son could and did! What is more, Jesus gives us all the credit for his holy life. He has deposited every last ounce of his righteousness into our spiritual bank account. This means that from the moment God brought you to faith, you've been shining in his eyes with the same glory of Jesus that we glimpsed today on the holy mountain.

Here's something else you should know – unlike that glory that Moses radiated, yours never fades. This is what it means to be God's child by faith in Christ. You don't go in and out of God's favor. By faith, you are his holy son, his holy daughter every second of the day. Christ has paid for your sin with his holy sacrifice, and he has covered you with his perfection. This is why you can be so bold as to say that God is for you and never against you. This is why you can believe and say that heaven is your home. This is your hope! It's a sure thing because Jesus took care of everything. He descended the Mount of Transfiguration with you on his mind. For you, he carried his cross up another mountain, the one called Calvary. It was there that he bore the entire burden of your guilt. It was there that he, condemned in your stead by God's holy law, paid in full the wages of your sin with his suffering in hell. Have you ever seen anything so amazing? The world looks at the cross and sees a crude instrument of torture. We gaze at the cross and see the radiant glory of God's saving love, hidden there in plain sight.

Hold onto this vision dear friends. Don't ever fall back into the thinking that you need the Commandments to help get you to heaven. That notion only serves to throw a veil over our heart. It makes our mind dull, says Paul, and it robs us of the confidence and certainty that are ours only in Christ. This may sound like an easy thing to do, but as you know from experience it's not. Why? Because we don't see in ourselves the righteousness that God credits to us. We see our sin instead – so much of it. Again and again, we fail to be the people God declares us to be. The devil jumps on this fact. He throws the Commandments in our face: "Try harder! Be better!" he shouts. And of course we want to be better. And we can be, not by snapping to attention as the law barks its commands. No, Paul holds before us the better way, the only way to become more Christ-like. He reminds us that Christian Hope is Glorious because it is transforming.

Paul writes: "**Now the Lord is Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.**" (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). Christians, we hold on to the vision of Christ's glory by spending time in his Word together here in his house, by receiving his body and blood in the Supper, and by contemplating his gospel promises in group Bible studies (small and large) and in our daily devotions. In all these places and ways we peer into the glory of Christ's boundless love for us. And as we do, Jesus fills us with the glory of his Spirit's power. By this power we are set free from sin's guilt and Satan's grasp. We don't stop sinning, not on this side of heaven, but in Christ, we live a life of repentance. We forgive and are forgiven. We live in the power of Christ's resurrection, always rejoicing to know that yesterday's sins are buried in Christ's empty tomb and because they are, today brings us the opportunity to start a new life. Tomorrow will afford the same opportunity as will all the days God gives us on earth. That's because his Spirit is busy transforming us, day by day, to shine always more with the glory of Christ's love, love that God will use to draw people closer to us and closer to himself through us. This is where God's law comes into the picture, not as a means to earn heaven, but as the "thank you" guide that shows us how to reflect our gratitude for God's grace in the love we show to him and our neighbor.

Twenty-two hundred years ago a Roman playwright wrote: Where there's life, there's hope. Today, God's Word flips that notion upside down and teaches us that where there is hope, Christian hope, there's life now and forever after. Amen.