

Unveiled Faces Beholding Christ and Transformed by the Holy Spirit

May-June Sermon Series

Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

May 23, 2021

TEXT: 2 Corinthians 3:1-18



Good morning, Beloved. This is Pentecost Sunday. In the Old Testament, this marks the fifty days from Passover to Pentecost. In the New Testament, this is the interval between Good Friday and this Sunday. Does it feel like a long time ago? Does Easter feel like it's in the rearview mirror? Let's be honest. I think it does for many of us because we live in a world that makes much of every minute, hour, and second. But, that's the interval that Jesus had with the disciples after His resurrection, explaining to them the nature of the Kingdom and the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was Pentecost Sunday, and Jesus' first act as exalted Lord was to pour out the Holy Spirit on a community, on a group of people, who began to proclaim God's mighty works and deeds to people of diverse nations. When the Holy Spirit comes upon a group of people, filling them with the presence of God, they are altered, they are changed, they are transformed. They are empowered for witness. They begin to speak boldly about Christ. They are a people who have a zeal for holiness and commitment to God that is pulled forward by the presence of the Holy Spirit. They are a people who seek renewal in their families and workplaces and in their neighborhoods and communities. And that's what we see at the moment at Pentecost. We see them as the reality of Pentecost starts to radiate out into the world, and I want to ask you this morning: "What would it look like when the Holy Spirit fills a community?" What would it mean if the presence of God dwelt among a group of people? Where would the Holy Spirit lead, guide, and direct such a people? How would the ministry take shape that was filled with the Spirit and led by the Spirit?

We are given a window into that reality in our text this morning. Second Corinthians 3 is an

intricate passage. It is dense, so I am going to need you to really stay with me. It's an important passage, and I want us to really be gripped by the theological vision of this passage, because this passage illustrates for us what happens when the Holy Spirit comes on a group of people and changes them by the presence of God. If that can happen in ancient Corinth, an urban, unreached, unrestrained society, that can happen in Cincinnati. If that happened in the first century, it can happen in the 21st-century. If that is the characteristic outcome of the gospel's being proclaimed, then this is what we should expect. What we see, first, is that the ministry that is fueled and driven and shaped by the Holy Spirit changes people's lives in very real and evident ways. In 2 Corinthians 3:2, Paul says:

“You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.”

When you think of yourselves this morning, this text invites you to see that the reality of ministry, the fruit of ministry, is not a headcount. The fruit of ministry is not a building. The fruit of ministry is a group of people that can be known and read. Paul seems to indicate that the way that you live, speak, dream, hope, spend, and relate to each other is visible and people are reading us. As they read, what do they discover? In 2 Corinthians 3:3, he says:

“And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

The way that people live—and it is a result of a ministry that's filled with the Holy Spirit—is that they live in such a way that it reflects that they have received a letter directly from Jesus Christ, written with your life.

Let me give you just a small moment of exegetical euphoria for me this week. The verb that is used here is the verb for ministry. It's the verb for “deaconing.” It's what serving Christ does. It's what ministry does—serving Christ to write letters with people's lives. They're written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. This is a breathtaking image. That means that you and I are called to serve in such a way that the Spirit of God is at work writing letters with human lives. They are written, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. We have an image that allows us to enter into Paul's mental map and spiritual vision. We need three key Old Testament passages to orient ourselves to what we see before us. These are some of the most important Old Testament passages for understanding the New Testament.

The first is Jeremiah 31:33 where the Lord says to Jeremiah:

“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

There it is. That's the imagery of divine agency, of God writing on the heart. This comes from Jeremiah 31.

The second is Ezekiel 11:19. Ezekiel was the great prophet of the exile. He saw that sin took us into exile and what would happen next. It was our hard heartedness that causes us not to obey God, and so, when He acts again in this great act of renewal and restoration, God says:

“And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,”

Part of the glory of God's new activity in the world is an activity that opens up our chest cavity, metaphorically, takes out this hard heart and replaces it with a fleshy one, with a beating one. Hard hearts are unwilling to respond to God; fleshy hearts are willing. Hard hearts are resistant; fleshy hearts are ready. Hard hearts are closed to God; fleshy hearts are open to what He's doing. God says He's going to be performing open heart surgery on you and me, and with your new flesh, your new fleshy, beating heart, the Lord says: “I am going to be writing on the tablets of your heart.” As a result, in the next verse, in Ezekiel 11:20, we read:

“. . .that they may walk in My statutes and keep My rules and obey them. And they shall be My people, and I will be their God.

The third of the great Old Testament passages that help us understand what Paul is describing is Ezekiel 36:26. I think that this passage is perhaps the most important passage for understanding how Paul is thinking of his missionary labors. That's how important it is. The Lord speaks again:

“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

We see here again that heart surgery: “I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” How does that happen? How do you get open heart surgery? How do you get remade, alive? The Lord says: “I will put My Spirit within you.” When the Holy Spirit comes into a group of people and their heart begins to beat anew, alive, and they're responsive to God, then they start to obey God with their lives. It is beautiful; it is evident; and people can read it like the best letter they've ever received. Do you know that feeling? It's rare these days when you get a handwritten letter. It is nice to get a thoughtful email. It is nice to get a thoughtful text. But there's something about a handwritten letter, isn't there? You open the seal and you sense the care. What about a living letter? What about a living letter that's alive? You can read it and you can hear the voice of the sender and see their heart for you. The Lord is saying to us: “I'm going to do open heart surgery and write My Word on your heart, and you will live in a new way.”

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:4:

“Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.”

That is a weighty “such.” That word “such” right there means the vision of the Old Testament prophets is at hand. Such is the confidence that what the Lord said He would do, He is doing through Christ. This is a glorious ministry. There's really nothing more important in this world to be involved in. It's a change in humanity that cannot come about through human agency, and anyone who's tried to produce change in someone else knows this. Change happens, Beloved, by the arrival of the Holy Spirit into lives. It is not possible to accomplish through human agency verse. In 2 Corinthians 3:5-6, Paul says:

“Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a New Covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

There it is, this New Covenant promise—not of the letter but of the Spirit. The letter kills; the Spirit gives life. The New Covenant is the reality promised by the prophets of God—removing the heart of stone, putting in a beating, fleshy human heart, with God's Word written on it and lives that are changed. That's on. It's on in ancient Corinth; it's on as Christians radiate out, bearing witness and testimony to Jesus Christ throughout North Africa, Asia, Africa, and into Europe. And that's just in the first century. It's on as the witness of Christ radiates out in the world to this day, and this ministry is glorious.

The ministry of the New Covenant is of a divine glory that produces transformation and change in people. The glory of the New Covenant is so sweet. It is so beautiful. It is so precious that Paul launches into three *qal vehomers* in a row. If you've been around here for a while, you know, and you've acquired a taste of, the *qal vehomer*. It's like the argument Jesus makes in the Sermon on the Mount when He says: *“If God so clothes the lilies of the field, how much more will He clothe you?”* If God takes care of the flowers, He is going to take care of you. That's the move from “the light to the heavy.” That's the first hermeneutical rule in rabbinic reading of Scripture. The first of Hillel's seven ways to read the Bible is this one. Paul's teacher was Gamaliel, a student of Hillel, and that's why Paul is trained to think this way. He is so pumped about the glory of the New Covenant ministry. What's better than one *qal vehomer*? Three, because you want to see that what we're about, what this church is called to be about, is glorious. It is absolutely glorious, and so when you think of the glory of the covenant, the first picture that should come to your mind is the glory of the living God descending on Mount Sinai as 600,000 of us are gathered at the base and the visible glory of God comes with cloud and fire and we all hear God speak. That's overwhelming! In fact, it was so overwhelming, that most of our ancestors said: *“We're going to stay back here, and, Moses, why don't you go?”* But, Beloved, that is an option that's not available for us in the New Covenant. That's where this text

is going.

The first *qal vehomer*: Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:7-8:

“Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?”

The Old Testament came with glory, how much more the New? That's the first one.

The second *qal vehomer*: Paul continues in 2 Corinthians 3:9:

“For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.”

If there was a glory of the divine presence filling the sanctuary, the tabernacle, and yet that ministry led to condemnation and a conviction of sin and to exile, will not the ministry of righteousness far exceed it? That's the second one.

The third *qal vehomer*: Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:11:

“For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.”

The Old Testament plan and purpose, the prophets in the Old Testament, said there was a new creation, New Covenant coming. Paul's said if that which was coming to an end, if it was not permanent, if there was glory there, how much more is the glory in the New Covenant that remains? The covenantal bond that is made between the living God and you and me in the blood of Jesus Christ endures forever. When Jesus gathered with the disciples in the Upper Room, He broke bread with them and He said: “This is My body broken for you,” He lifted the cup and said: “This is it. This is the New Covenant in My blood poured out for you.” There is never coming a different other arrangement than that. It is permanent. It's a permanent set of wedding vows between God and His people and it is glorious. Its glory changes us. It emboldens us.

In 2 Corinthians 3:12 there is a powerful conclusion that's drawn:

“Since we have such a hope, we are very bold.”

My sermon manuscript says: “MASSIVE THEREFORE!” There's a massive “therefore” in that verse. The ESV says “since.” I would've translated it “therefore.” Therefore we have this hope. This is the open-heart surgery hope, the hope of having God's Word written on our hearts, the hope of being filled with the Spirit and obeying Christ. That hope, we have it, and we

experience it in Christ. And so we have boldness. What is that boldness? It's a boldness to come before the presence of the living God without fear. It's a boldness to come and gaze at the face of our heavenly Father. It's a boldness to behold the beauty and the radiance of the Son of God. It's a boldness to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to be received in the presence of the King and to be changed. It's a boldness of the New Covenant that is different from the reality of what Moses was required to do. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:13 that it is a boldness:

“. . .not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end.”

Paul is referring to that great narrative of Exodus 32-34 that is an interlude in Scripture between the description of the construction of the tabernacle and its execution. It's also the interval of the sin of the golden calf, which is so painful and devastating. As Moses is up on the mountain and he enters into the cloud of glory, the Lord spoke to him face-to-face, and as he was doing that, the people were at the base of the mountain constructing an idol and reveling. This text invites us to share, not the experience at the base of the mountain, but this text invites you and invites me into the experience of Moses to come all the way. It's a boldness of access, to come before God without fear. Moses would take the tent and pitch it outside the camp. The Lord would speak to him face-to-face and His glory was revealed and seen. It was in this encounter, that Moses saw the glory of the living God and heard His name proclaimed as recorded in Exodus 34:6:

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

And when Moses came out from that tent of meeting, his face was shining with the reflection of the glory of the living God. And when he came out from the sanctuary, the people were afraid to come close to him because of the glory. And so he veiled his face. Moses functioned, if you will, as the tabernacle himself. That's what I want you to imagine.

One of the great blessings in my life is being married to an Old Testament scholar, and my wife Christine gives ten hours of lectures on Exodus 32, 33, and 34. I came home this week and I said: “I'm preaching on this passage. Can you give me the bottom line? What's going on?” She said: “Moses is functioning as the tabernacle. He's mediating the presence of God. The hard heartedness of the people couldn't bear the radiant glory.” I said: “What does this mean for 2 Corinthians? I think I'm following you.” She said: “It means in Christ the veil was taken back and were invited all the way in.” You see, forgiveness is permanent by the blood of Christ. The New Covenant is real; it's been launched. The veil, shielding us from God's glory, is pulled back in Christ, and you and I are invited in to see the greatness and the glory of our heavenly Father, and we don't have to leave. When you see Him, there is none more beautiful, none more majestic, none more holy, none more loving, and so we come in with unveiled faces. Paul longs

for his kinsman, and for all who hear the gospel, to have the veil taken back. He laments the reality of his kinsman that to this day, for many of them, the veil was still there, but in 2 Corinthians 3:16, he says:

“But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.”

It's like that sublime moment in the wedding when the bride comes in and the groom melts just as she processes. Then the veil is lifted. Whenever you turn to the Lord in repentance, and when we turn to Jesus Christ, that veil is removed. Then as Gordon Fee says in 2 Corinthians 3:18, this passage soars:

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

It soars as we all with unveiled faces behold the glory of the Lord, and then something remarkable happens as you see the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and you gaze upon Him. You start being transformed and His glory begins to change you into His image. It's like a restoration of the Garden of Eden: Adam made in the image and likeness of God, and in Jesus Christ, we come in and we see Him as a forgiven people granted access to our Father, and we are remade and restored.

I want you to take hold of that small word in 2 Corinthians 3:18—ALL, because this isn't something for people in formal ministry. This is for everyone in the New Covenant: We all, with unveiled face, see His glory and we are transformed. That's what happens when a ministry is filled with the Holy Spirit. Human lives are changed and become like living letters written with the hand of God, not on tablets of stone to be stored in the ark of the covenant, but written on the tablets of living, beating, human hearts that begin to obey Christ. It's a profound, personal transformation to become more like what we're designed to be, reflecting the glory of God. The glory then flows out in two profound ways through a holy community. These are declared in the chapters that follow.

The first is that we change in 2 Corinthians 4 by becoming a people who have received the light of the glory of God and have seen it in the face of Christ. We become bold and convictional in our conversation and speech. We are people who openly declare the truth of Christ. We don't keep it back. That's one of the things that happens to us as people filled with the Spirit. We are letters written by God, but then those letters are published and we become people who speak of Christ courageously and boldly.

The second thing that happens is in 2 Corinthians 5. We realize that this ministry of reconciliation is entrusted to us, and we become ambassadors of Christ. When we see Him in

His beauty and His glory, we are transformed into His image. We become bold, clear, and convictional in our speech, and we see ourselves as God's making His appeal through us as His ambassadors in the world. This happened in Corinth, and it happens whenever God moves among the people. It happened at Pentecost. It happens where the gospel spreads. We were very grateful last week to be in Boston and to celebrate our daughter's graduation from college. I was a very proud dad. My wife was asked to read the Scripture in the commencement ceremony, so she was robed up and processed. In my favorite picture that was taken, you can see Christine and Salome and Jonathan, and I'm just trying to keep my balance. I was so proud of them and we went out for graduation dinner that night in a town called Newburyport. In our family, every moment is a teaching moment. We were celebrating graduation and were pulling in to have dinner right on the waterfront in Newburyport. As we were getting close, I called out: "Okay, what famous preacher is buried in Newburyport." Jonathan said right away: "George Whitefield." I said: "Where is he buried?" "He is buried under the altar in that church right over there." George Whitefield came to the United States when it was just a set of colonies, and he preached with the gift that God gave him to over 10,000 people at a time. He preached in the Boston Commons, and 10,000 people gathered there. Benjamin Franklin was interested to know if he could actually hear George Whitefield without amplification at the back of the Boston Commons, so he went to hear him preach. He heard him and realized he could really hear him. George Whitefield died while he was conducting a set of sermons in Newburyport. What you do with a man God has used to preach Christ to sixty percent of the colonists? You bury him under the altar, under the pulpit. And that's where he is buried. The United States changed in the wake of Whitefield's preaching, a great revival swept through our country. It became known as the Great Awakening, and this awakening to God is documented best in the letter that Jonathan Edwards wrote to a pastor in Boston named Thomas Prince. Edwards described what happened when the Holy Spirit came on his community. I encourage you to read this whole letter, but I want to highlight, as we close, what Edwards says happened:

"The Holy Spirit came upon the community, and there was first a more seriousness in attending worship. People started coming to church. There has been a great alteration among the youth with respect to their conversation, their songs, their relationships. There's also been a great alteration among old and young, with respect to what he calls 'tavern-haunting.' People just stopped going to the bars and started going to church." That would be a welcome change.

He talks about George Whitefield's preaching and the great alteration that happened in the congregation—from a preacher's perspective. He says:

"The congregation was extraordinarily melted by every sermon, and they were in tears for a great part of the sermon time in New England. There was a great alteration in the town, both a revival of professing Christians and awakenings of those who had not yet known

Christ. The people were greatly affected with a sense of the greatness and glory of divine things and love, joy, and compassion to others. There was a new revival of concern for the poor in the community.” (Although he adds parenthetically that “we haven't quite reached the level of the Gospels, yet.”) He says:

“The town changed so much that it even affected the town Council meetings. Before this happened, there was a real partisan spirit in the town. The division of the town into two parties had been our bane. There were arguments over common lands. There were mutual prejudices, jealousies, and debates. The Holy Spirit came, and now it's changed.”

May the Lord bring another Great Awakening, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and the glorious New Covenant ministry that we all share together.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.