

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Looking at the Face of Jesus, Part 1

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 3:18-4:1

Code: 47-22

It's a real joy for me this morning to take you back to 2 Corinthians chapter 4 where we left off in our study of this tremendous epistle. It continues to yield more truth and more riches to me than ever I expected. And I find, as I often do, but particularly in this epistle that it's difficult to get out of one verse into the next just because of the depth of all that is there. And this morning we're going to start a series, really, as we get in to chapter 4 that I've titled, "Looking at the face of Jesus...Looking at the face of Jesus."

Let me read you starting at the end of chapter 3 with verse 18 down through verse 6 of chapter 4...2 Corinthians chapter 3 beginning at verse 18, "But we all with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory just as from the Lord the Spirit. Therefore since we have this ministry as we received mercy we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the Word of God but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God; for we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bondservants for Jesus' sake, for God who said light shall shine out of darkness is the one who is shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

Life even for the noblest Christian is difficult, it's just the nature of being a fallen person in a fallen world. In fact, I suppose it's safe to say that the more devoted to Christ we are the more difficult life gets. Second Timothy 3 tells us that all who will live godly will suffer persecution. Jesus said in this world you shall have tribulation, be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. Our Lord never promised anything other than trials, troubles, difficulties, pressures and temptations for His own.

But at the same time He did promise never to leave us and He did promise never to forsake us and He promised in all of our disappointments and all of our struggles and trials and all the chaos and confusion of life to be a present help, He promised to intercede for us as our high priest and to have the Holy Spirit do the same. He promised to carry our burdens, to love us, to strengthen us. In fact, He promised that in the depth of our deepest weakness we would find His greatest strength.

And so it is that we are born to trouble as human beings and then we are born again to trouble as Christians. In fact, it seems to be that after you become a Christian there's more trouble because before you were saved you were a part of the trouble and now that you're a Christian you fight the trouble. That's how it is for a Christian, we have to face the world that is hostile to us all of a sudden, the system that is hostile to us, Satan who is the god of this world, the god of this age is hostile to us and all of his purposes work contrary, and even our own unredeemed flesh is hostile to us and life just is fraught with trouble.

How do we deal with that? How are we supposed to triumph in that? How are we supposed to ride above that and keep moving forward?

Well there's an answer really and the answer is given in this passage and it comes to us not out of the treasury of divine inspiration alone but out of the experience of the Apostle Paul. And what he is writing here is not just that which was dispensed to him by the Spirit of God to be written, but that which was poured through his life by his own experience. And so what we have here is not just theology but we have here the experience of a man who knew because he had applied these truths in his own life. The great truth that rises out of this text is this truth of looking into the face of Jesus, looking at the face of Christ. In chapter 3 verse 18 we are beholding. In chapter 4 verse 6 we are again looking into the face of Christ. This section begins with a vision of the glory of God in verse 18 and it ends in verse 6 with another vision of the glory of God. In verse 18 it is a vision of the glory of God given in the mirror that reflects God which is the Scripture. And we're told in verse 6 that that which reflects God most clearly in the Scripture is the face of Jesus Christ.

I have said since I first began the ministry here 26 years ago that the most important theme in the Bible is the glory of God. And we have circled that viewpoint and we've intersected and we've hit dead on and we have discussed it and talked about it every way imaginable in our years of study of the New Testament, and it continues to ring true that what the Christian life is all about is understanding and experiencing a revelation of the glory of God. That is, to understand the fullness of who He is. And the text here tells us that as believers we can see that unhindered, unobstructed and absolutely clearly in the mirror which God has given to us which is the Word as it reflects to us the image of Jesus Christ. Never is the glory of God more manifest than in the face of Jesus Christ. That statement at the end of verse 6 in chapter 4 is the key, the knowledge of the glory of God comes in the face of Christ.

The Apostle Paul found that not only to be a great truth theologically, but a life sustaining truth practically. And he learned that the only way to live your life in a troubled world is to maintain focus on Christ. In fact, in Hebrews chapter 12 we are reminded that if we are to be effective as believers, if we are to live the Christian life in a victorious way, if we are to run with endurance the race that is set before us, Hebrews 12:2 says we must fix our eyes on Jesus. It is a simple thing but that is the sum and substance of Christian living, it is a preoccupation with Jesus Christ. And we've said that

obviously through the years because it is such a recurrent theme in Scripture. But here it comes to us in the context of a fresh, a fresh experience in the life of the beloved Apostle Paul. He has learned that if he is going to see God in the midst of all of the difficulties of life, he will see Him in the face of Jesus Christ who obviously is revealed to us in the Word of God.

So verse 6 of chapter 4 becomes the key...seeing the glory of God in the face of Christ. And so we've entitled the series, "Looking at the face of Jesus." That should be the preoccupation of every Christian all the time. We're going to see as we go through these verses the richness of this as it impacts our own lives.

Before we do that, let me just remind you of the depth of trouble which Paul was experiencing so you'll understand how important this issue really is. At this time in his life I think it would be safe to say that he was as troubled or more so than he had ever been in his ministerial experience...at least there's no other period of time in his ministry when we feel him so expressively talking about his difficulties. There were times when apparently things weren't quite as bad as they are behind the scenes in the writing of 2 Corinthians. And you get a little feeling for this. Without going into a lot of detail that we've already covered, you get a feeling for this if you just hear what he says as he moves through the book.

Go back to chapter 1 for a moment. He says in verse 3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort who comforts us in all our affliction." And then in verse 5 he talks about his suffering. In verse 6 again he talks about being afflicted. So he starts out at the very beginning saying he thanks God that God comforts him in his affliction and in his suffering.

To what degree was he suffering? Well down in verse 8 he says, "We were...in the middle of the verse...burdened excessively, our affliction was beyond our strength so that we despaired even of life." In other words, he thought life was over he was going to die, that was it, he was at the end. Verse 9, "We had the sentence of death within ourselves and then God who raises the dead...verse 10...delivered us from so great a peril of death and He will yet deliver us." He was suffering all kinds of affliction, all kinds of difficulty even to the point where he thought his life was over. He was burdened beyond his own ability to cope with it.

Down in chapter 2 and verse 4 he reminds them of a prior letter that he had written and he says, "Even then out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears not that you should be made sorrowful but that you might know the love which I have especially for you." He was a sad man. He was burdened with sorrow. His heart was aching near to the breaking point. He was weeping. Down in verse 13 of chapter 2 he says, "I had no rest for my spirit." He was troubled. He was disturbed and distressed.

And over in chapter 4 where we are this morning, go down to verse 8. He says, "We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. We who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus sake." And verse 12, "Death works in us."

Now you can see that he was on the brink of death all the time. Life was as hard and as difficult as it could possibly be. Verse 16 of chapter 4, "Our outer man is decaying." Verse 17, he talks about the momentary earthly light affliction that caused him to look into heaven for the things that are eternal. Over in chapter 6 and verse 4 he sort of catalogs the things that he had endured, afflictions, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, sleeplessness, hunger. And then down in verse 8 he said, "I've had it all, glory and dishonor, evil report, good report, I've been regarded as a deceiver and as yet true as unknown yet known, dying yet behold we live, punished yet not put to death, sorrowful yet always rejoicing, poor yet making many rich." I mean, he had it all, up and down. In the midst of it all was this constant unending trouble and difficulty.

Over in chapter 7 and verse 5 he says, "When we came in to Macedonia our flesh had no rest, we were afflicted on every side, conflicts without fears within." And then in verse 6 he even admits he was depressed. I mean, life just wasn't going the way he had expected it to go.

Over in chapter 11 is that really important summation of his troubles as he says in verse 23, "I have been in far more labors and far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death, five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes, three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I've spent in the deep. I've been on frequent journeys and dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, the city, the wilderness, the sea, false brethren...labor, hardships, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst without food, cold and exposure and even the pressure of concern for all the churches."

Did you ever spend a day with somebody who complained all the time? It's a little depressing, isn't it? And Paul doesn't usually do that. But in this letter it's just one long complaint. And what that tells us is that this was really deep in his heart, this really was overpowering his human strength. Humanly he was depressed, he was beyond his ability to cope. Too many disappointments, not the least of which was the defection and character assassination going on in the Corinthian church which he loved and to which he had given nearly two years of his life in person-to-person ministry and much other time in prayer and letter writing. And his burden, his heart-breaking grief was stated in chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians and verse 3, "I'm afraid lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness...listen to this...your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of Christ."

Paul's message was so simple...Jesus Christ. The simplicity and purity as the NAS said it and others have added, "of devotion to Christ." That's all the Christian life is, it's devotion to Christ, it is simple, it is pure, it is clear, it is not complicated. And we'll say more about that next week because the reigning...the reigning Jewish form of religion was hopelessly complex and the reigning Gentile form of philosophy, a pre-Gnostic kind of mysterious secretive religion was hopelessly complex...and here came Paul into the world of Jewish complexity and the world of Greek and Roman complexity with this utterly simple statement about faith in Christ and devotion to Christ as being the beginning and the end and everything of Christianity. And they mocked his simplicity. We'll see more about that next time as we learn that the false apostles were probably getting the people enamored with these concepts of secretive hidden mystical knowledge and mocking Paul's simplistic plainness. And so he was fearful that the people would be deceived, that there was something beyond the simplicity that is in Christ. But there isn't anything beyond, there's nothing more. That's all there is. Christianity is nothing more, nothing less than devotion to Jesus Christ. It's looking into the face of Jesus, that's what it is. It's a relationship. Starts that way and it will end that way. And it's that way all through the middle.

The beloved Apostle was being accused. He was facing the false accusations, unjust criticisms and people defecting from their relationship with him and their trust in his word and therefore the Word of God, there was rebellion in the Corinthian church, unfaithfulness and it threatened those whom he loved most and his heart was broken over it. So all in all I think it's safe to say as we go back to chapter 4 that we're meeting Paul at the lowest of low times in his life when he really doesn't feel like he's a match for all of his troubles.

We can identify with that. There are times in our lives when it all seems to overwhelm us, it's all beyond us. We can't get a grip on it. We don't think there's any real way to solve it. We get weary of constantly dealing with the struggles and the failures and the issues of life and the disappointments that keep coming our way, the inability to be what we ought to be and to have the people around us be what they ought to be so life can be what it should be. We meet Paul at that very, very time. He's the champion of all Christians and yet he's in the thick of trouble. The glory of the new covenant ministry notwithstanding, as he described it in chapter 3, it doesn't mean that he's not going to face trouble...just the opposite.

But the wonderful thing about it is it didn't destroy him. He didn't leave the ministry. He didn't chuck the faith. He didn't try to go to a quiet place and just sit and sort of soak in his sorrow. This was the worse possible kind of assault. It didn't only come from the outside, it came from the church and that's what hurt him the most. Those whom he loved the most have the greatest ability to inflict pain upon you, as you know. And that which comes from inside the church that attacks you is even more painful than all that comes from outside the church because you pour your life into people, you love them, you nurture them, you teach them, you give them opportunity to grow, you build friendships of

trust with them. And then when they stab you in the back, the pain of that is greater than any other pain because love is at issue here. And wounded love is the deepest pain. And here came the very people whom he loved so deeply and they criticized his judgment, they assaulted his integrity, they questioned his honesty, they doubted his teaching. This is the worst possible situation for a preacher with integrity because he doesn't understand how this could possibly happen because his heart is so pure. He had loyally exalted Jesus Christ, he had preached the new covenant gospel unwaveringly, he had watched it transform lives, he had lived a godly life before the people...how in the world is he going to deal with the unjust attacks at the heart of all that he is and all that he lives and preaches for?

Well the answer to how he handled it is in this text. And it's not only the answer for Paul, it's the answer for you and it's the answer for me. And the answer is simply this, that he kept his eyes on Jesus, that he never got diverted from the simplicity of devotion to Christ. He never got away from what his faith really was. He never took his eyes off Jesus, he fixed his eyes on Jesus...the author and finisher of his faith. And that's what sustained him. I mean, that's how it all started, wasn't it? On the Damascus Road, only he was on his way to that city to persecute the Christians that were there and throw them in prison and perhaps execute them...as he was marching along on the road to Damascus with his entourage, carrying in his pouch some letters from the officials in Jerusalem to indicate that he had a right to perpetrate his crimes against Christians there in Damascus, so it was all legal. On the way he is struck blind by a blazing light and the light which blinded him on the outside isn't nearly as important as the light which enlightened him on the inside because in the moment that he became blind on the outside, he became seeing on the inside. When the light went out on the outside, it went on on the inside. And he came to the true knowledge of salvation and that's what he describing in Philippians 3 when he says, "I counted everything that I had achieved in the darkness as rubbish when the light went on." He said I had put all my hope in the fact that I was circumcised the eighth day, that I was of the nation Israel, that I was of the tribe of Benjamin, that I was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, that as touching the law I was a Pharisee, that as to zeal I persecuted the church, that as to the righteousness which is in the law I was found blameless. I had counted that all as gain. I met Christ, I saw it all as loss, skubalon, filth, I saw it as garbage, refuse, dung, manure, whatever you want to call it...because the light went on and I really saw God and I saw Him in the face of Jesus. That's what salvation is.

He had gone through that immense transformation on the road to Damascus and the light went out on the outside and he was blind physically, but he could see spiritually. And he saw the shining of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He understood who Christ was. He understood that He was God revealed, that He was God in flesh, that He came to die and to rise again for salvation, that He was the Messiah, the Savior, the King who would bring a Kingdom. And he came out of that experience completely enlightened, completely understanding, with a clear view of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and spent the rest of his life preaching that gospel. That's how his life started. That's how his Christian life started. He passed from darkness into light. He was taken out of the kingdom

of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son, as he describes it to the Colossians.

And frankly, that's not just his experience. And that's what's so wonderful is the experience of every believer. Every one of us who has come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ has come to the place where we can now fully look into the face of Jesus Christ and see the glory of God revealed. No matter how dark the night around us might be, in the face of Jesus Christ there's light. Some people choose to look at the darkness which is pretty foolish when you can turn and look at the light, isn't it? That's a...that's a remarkable reality of the new covenant. You understand that? In the old covenant no matter how noble the saints were, and you can read a list of the noblest of them in Hebrews 11, no matter how noble, how great their faith, how loyal they were to the King, no matter how willing they were to suffer terrible, terrible persecution and hostility, to bear the reproach that came against them, no matter how much pain even to the point of death they suffered, no matter how they were tortured or sawn in half and all the things he talks about in Hebrews 11, they sustained their faith in God through all of that and the amazing part of it is they couldn't see God clearly. God to them was seen in symbols. God to them was seen in types and pictures and analogies. But they really couldn't see the glory of God fully revealed. Moses got a little glimpse of the glory of God but he couldn't see the full glory of God. And when he went down to see the people, he had to veil his face. They were living in a veiled time. There were certain vagaries and certain obscurities in the old covenant time, as we pointed out in our series in chapter 3. And even the best of Old Testament saints were looking into what was being told to them, and looking into what they were reading and seeing what they were doing and trying to comprehend it...even the prophets, it says, searched what person or what manner...what manner of person or time these things they wrote signified...what is this about? They couldn't understand it. At the end of Hebrews 11 it says all of those people even though they endured all of that were not made perfect. They never really came to full maturity. They never came to full understanding. The veil never was off. There was always something hazy and shady and shadowy and obscure and dark.

But Paul says when you come to Christ in the new covenant, the light goes on and you see the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. And as long as you look at the face of Jesus Christ, the full blazing glory of God is made visible to you. And when you see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, it is enough to sustain your faith through anything. That's the point. It's enough to give you reason to trust.

That's why I've said through all of the years of ministry at Grace Church, the most important thing that will ever happen in your life as a Christian is an increasing understanding of the nature of God because that's how you live your life. You live your life and you are able to deal with the issues of life by how you understand God. And the place to see God most clearly is revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. So the new covenant has allowed every believer the same privilege...to look fully into the face of Jesus and see the glory of God. And so that becomes the focus of our life and Paul's concern is that somehow Christians might get distracted from simplicity of devotion to Christ and they might get

off on other stuff, which, believe me, they did and still do. So we ask the question then, as a kind of a proposition which we'll answer in the next few weeks, how can a disappointed, discouraged, assaulted, troubled believer maintain joy and confidence in the midst of his trials? How can we maintain hope in the midst of all the chaos? And the answer is by looking at the face of Jesus and seeing in the face of Jesus the revelation of the glory of God. All you need to know is who your God is. And there's no better way to see who He is than in the face of Christ.

Oh the Old Testament saints knew about their God. They could look at Mount Sinai and read the history of what happened there and know their God was a just God, a fiery God of judgment. They could look at the story of Moses in the water that came out of the rock and the manna and know that God was a God of supply and a God of resource and a provider God. They could look at Noah and his family and know that God was a God of grace. They could look at David and know that God was a God of mercy and loving kindness. I mean, they could see things about God but there was always a bit of an obscurity and it was always bits and pieces and pictures here and there. But when Christ came, God was manifest. And Jesus even said, you remember, to the disciples, "Wait a minute, have you been so long time with Me and you don't know that if you've seen Me you've seen...whom?...the Father?" Don't you know? Can't you see?

Now let's look into the face of Jesus with Paul here and we're going to find that it's...it's a very, very important look because of what it produces. Number one, it is a clarifying look, it is a clarifying look. Verse 18, "But we all with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord." Stop right there.

All Christians living in the new covenant time have the veil off. Nothing is between us and the vision of the Lord. It's like looking into a clear mirror, reflecting the glory of the Lord with no obscurity, no veil, nothing hindering. We all have full access to God's glory revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. Oh that's marvelous. All we need to know about God, all we need to know about His beauty, all we need to know about His character, all we need to know about His love and His loyalty, all we need to know about His mercy and His grace and His power and His care for His own, all we need to know about His ability to supply, all we could ever need...all of that is demonstrated in Christ, isn't it? Do you want to see compassion? Look at Christ. You want to see wisdom? Look at Christ. Nobody ever spoke like He spoke. You want to see compassion, as I said? Look at how He cared for the people who were poor and those who were sick and those who wept. Do you want to see power? Look at Christ, look at Him heal, and look at Him cast out demons and raise the dead. You want to know what God is like? Look at Jesus, there all of the pictures that were all over the place in the Old Testament come together in one life and they mingle in the perfection of the incarnate God. And we see it all in Him. Never is God more clearly revealed than in the face of Jesus Christ. God, Hebrews 1 says, "Who at sundry times and diverse manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets has in these last days spoken unto us by His Son." By His Son, and who is His Son? He is, says the writer, "The radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature."

You want to see the glory of God? Look into the face of Jesus. You're going through a trouble and you want to know whether you're going to make it through this, you want to know if there's a resource? Look at Jesus. In Jesus you'll see the glory of God revealed and you'll find plenty to trust, plenty of reason to have confidence. You want to know what God is like? Look at Jesus. God is most clearly revealed in Him. Never before was there such a clear view of God as there is in Christ and we see Him clearly. Whatever...whatever those heroes of the faith were in Hebrews chapter 11 apart from the vision of Christ, we ought to be more...more faithful, more enduring, more strong, more loyal, more devout. Your new life in Christ began with a look, you saw Christ, you saw in Him God revealed, you saw Him for who He really was and that was a saving sight. You were enabled by God's mercy to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus. You embraced Him as Lord and Savior. That wasn't the end, that was just the start. The justification that occurred in your life, the conversion, the salvation was because you had a clear vision of Christ and you acknowledged Him for who He was and submitted your life to Him. And that was the means of your salvation and that's also the means of your sanctification in ever increasing vision of Christ. You continue to look into His face.

There's no big secret in the Christian life. There aren't some...some hidden meaning somewhere, there aren't some mystical things that are only for the initiated such as the Greek philosophers used to say. Christianity is simply stated, it is looking into the face of Jesus and seeing the glory of God revealed. If you want to know what God wants you to be, look at Jesus. That's why years ago a man wrote a book called *In His Steps* and said the Christian life can be boiled down to this, walk as Jesus walked because He will walk consistent with the purposes of God for He is God Himself.

So that's how we are sanctified. And ultimately when we're glorified we're going to be made like Christ. We're going to become godlike in that sense. Until we see Him finally face to face and since we saw Him so clearly at the moment of salvation, the middle ground of sanctification is just a matter of looking at the face of Jesus and seeing the glory of God revealed in His face. God is clear to us in Christ. There's no veil there, there's nothing to obscure the glory of God, nothing to obscure the revelation of His attributes, nothing conceals who He is. It's all clear in Christ.

You know, there's something available about God to every man. Romans 1 says that everybody looking at creation, looking at the things that are made can say there is a God, He's a powerful God. You can know something of His attributes and His Godhead and His eternal power, but that's sort of an incommunicable kind of thing to know about God. To really know the personal side of God you have to see Him in the face of Jesus Christ. As long as you gaze on Him you'll find the clarification of all that God is. And when you understand all that God is, that He is sovereign, that He's in control of everything, that He's loving and merciful and wise and knows all, what's to fear? What's to be concerned about? That He's a God of absolute truth who will keep His promise never to put you through anything you're not able to endure, but always make a way of escape. And that no matter how difficult life is, His promise is that the goal of the difficulty is to make you more like Christ. What

a wonderful purpose.

So there's no reason then to suffer through the difficulties of life and be defeated unless you don't understand who God is. And if you don't understand who God is, you're not looking at the face of Jesus Christ. So no wonder Paul says my burden is that you're going to be deceived and lured away from the simplicity of devotion to Christ which is the Christian life. In Jesus you see love and mercy and grace and wisdom and compassion and care and strength. And the better you know Jesus, the better you know God. The better you know God, the less likely you are to be troubled by the things of this life. It's a clarifying look. Here's the Apostle Paul in the midst of all of these troubles, keeps his eyes fixed on Jesus Christ and it just makes everything clear...everything clear. Even trials are meant to strengthen you. Even trials are meant to make you weak in your human strengths so God's power can be manifest through you. He learns all that as He looks at Christ...Christ who Himself suffered worse trouble than any human will ever suffer and yet in it all fulfilled the purposes of God which brought about eternal glory not only for Christ but for all who are in Christ. So it's a clarifying look if you'll just look at the face of Jesus, makes everything clear cause in His face you see the glory of God revealed.

Secondly, it's a transforming look...it's a transforming look. Back to verse 18 again, at the same time we are being transformed into the same image. As you gaze into the face of Jesus Christ, as you look at the glory of God revealed in the face of Christ you are changed into the very image into which you look, moving you from a lower level to a higher level and an ever higher level of glory and that is the work, he says, of the Lord the Spirit, or the Holy Spirit. So it is a transforming look. As you keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith, as you never move from the simplicity of devotion to Christ as Christ is the focus of your life, as you gaze ever and always at the glory of God revealed in Jesus and you do that in the Word, the gospels of the New Testament reveal Jesus Christ in the history of His life and ministry, the epistles reveal Jesus Christ as they explain the meaning of the gospels. It's all Christ. And then the book of Revelation, the glorious return of Christ. Everywhere you look you see the glory of Christ. And as you gaze at His glory the Holy Spirit changes you into the very image you're looking at, moving you from one level of glory to another. That means moving you higher up the ladder, if you will, of Christ's likeness.

And that's what we've been saying in our study of verse 18 before I went away that the whole goal of the Christian life is to become like Christ. Paul says in Philippians 3, "This one thing I do, forgetting the things that are behind, I press toward the mark, or I press toward the goal." What is it? It is the prize of the upward call. What's the upward call? When we go to heaven. What's the prize of the upward call? When we go to heaven we'll be like Christ. That's the prize of the upward call. So if that's the prize of the upward call. So if that's the prize of the upward call in heaven, that's the goal of life here, he says. Since my ultimate end is to be like Christ, that's my goal in Christ. I just want to be like Him. And how do I become like Him? By being so singularly devoted to Him, so focused on Him that the Spirit of God just changes me into His image.

It's a tremendous truth. We as believers are said by Paul to be headed toward the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ. Paul said to the Galatians, "I'm never going to be satisfied until Christ is fully formed in you." If you say you belong to Christ, John said you ought to walk the way He walked. That's what it's all about. I mean, they called the believers at Antioch Christians because they were like Christ. I wish that were true today. They call us Christians because that's the technical term to define our religion. I wish they called us Christians because we were like Christ more than we are.

So it is the very preoccupation of the Christian to look into the face of Christ and there to see the glory of God revealed. And as we do that it is both a clarifying look because we see what God is really like which gives us reason to trust Him in every situation. And we are then transformed into the image into which we look. Tremendous truth.

And then thirdly, and we'll just give a brief part of this point and we'll finish it next time, looking into the face of Jesus is a strengthening look. Let's look in to chapter 4, the first verse, it's a strengthening look. "Therefore since we have this ministry as we received mercy, we do not lose heart." Paul says in spite of all of this stuff going on I don't lose heart. He uses "we" here as sort of an editorial "we." It deflects a little bit away the personal nature of this defense so that people don't feel he's just defending himself, it's a little softer way to refer to himself, a little more humble expression. So he says so we don't lose heart. He found that even though he had suffered so profoundly he didn't lose heart. The verb "to lose heart," it really means, it's a pretty strong term, it means to be brought to a place of cowardice, to abandon oneself to cowardly surrender. Paul says we haven't surrendered.

Look at verse 1, "Therefore based on the glory of the new covenant gospel, since we have received this glorious ministry, since we understand the glory of the new covenant, we received this ministry," then he throws in the little phrase, "as we receive mercy we do not lose heart." How could you lose heart when you're ministering the new covenant, he says. No matter what the trouble is, no matter what the disappointment, no matter what the problems or the pain, when you consider the glory of the new covenant how could you ever lose heart? When you realize that the long-awaited reality of new covenant truth, the long-awaited veil-lifting message of forgiveness and righteousness in Christ. He says since we have received this ministry by the mercy of God we can't lose heart. In other words, the task is too noble, the cause is too great. And when he kept his eyes on Jesus he was strengthened.

It's not an issue of pride with Paul. Never an issue of pride. In fact, he says we have this ministry, he uses the verb *echō* which means to possess, a very personal term. But he says we have it as we receive mercy. It's not something I earned, it's not something I qualified for, it's not something that God was looking for the noblest of men and gave it to me when He found my inherent human nobility...no, no, never an issue of pride. I didn't choose this ministry. I didn't win it by my ability or

my performance. I received it by mercy. And mercy is a form of condescension. Mercy says you're not getting what you deserve. Mercy withholds judgment. God should have destroyed me, instead He gave me this ministry. Paul never ceased to be overwhelmed by that...never ceased. He says in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 in his earlier letter to the Corinthians that this ministry was given to him and he was not worthy. He says if I preach the gospel, 1 Corinthians 9:16, oh I have nothing to boast of for I'm under compulsion. This is nothing for which I can be commended. Verse 17, "I have a stewardship that's been entrusted to me." Colossians 1 verses 23 and 25, "I was made a minister." Acts 20:24, "The Lord made me a minister." He gave me this ministry, I didn't choose it. In fact, he says in 1 Corinthians 15:9 and 10 to the Corinthians, "I am the least of the Apostles, I am not fit to be called an Apostle, by the grace of God I am what I am." And when he was writing to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1 he says, "The Lord put me into the ministry and I was a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor and yet I was shown mercy."

Paul says, "How could a man ever give up? How could a man ever lose heart? How could a man ever quit? How could a man ever become despairing when he had such a privileged calling and it was all by mercy? Why should I expect ease? Why should I expect worldly success? Why should I expect fame and expect people to accept me and acknowledge me? Why should I gain popularity and why should I be extolled and honored? I am a wretched, wicked, violent sinner and I have this ministry by mercy and it is such a privileged ministry of all the ministries conceivable that anyone could ever have throughout all the ages of God's redemptive history to be a preacher of the new covenant is the greatest. I was given this ministry by mercy. I don't deserve it. It is beyond me. I'm under compulsion. But what a privilege." There's no place in his heart for self-exaltation, self-promotion, self-protection. There's no place for self-esteem. Sovereign, divine mercy came to him and it was the same thing that saved him, just as it saved you. Think about it. What a privilege you enjoy and I enjoy. You're in the new covenant by mercy. You've been given the ministry of reconciliation, that is calling others to new covenant faith by mercy. And when you get to the point where you feel a little weary in your well doing, or you feel like you aren't getting what you deserve, or life isn't treating you the way it should treat you...remember this, that you are a new covenant believer and you have been given the highest privilege in the universe by the mercy of God and you don't deserve any of it. That alone ought to be enough to make you a thankful person no matter what else goes wrong.

We do not lose heart. The great privilege of belonging to God by mercy, the great privilege of proclaiming the glorious new covenant truth by mercy, knowing you deserve absolutely nothing but hell is enough to strengthen him, he says, through his suffering. It's enough to know that God has been merciful to me. And he said to the Galatians in Galatians 6:9, "Let us not lose heart in doing good for in due time we shall reap if we don't grow weary." Don't lose heart. You are so privileged. You're a new covenant Christian. That can't be said of everybody. Don't lose heart.

And then to the Ephesians he said, Ephesians 3:13, "I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf for they are your glory." He even says don't lose heart because I'm suffering, it's all for your benefit. God has a purpose in it all. And he always understood the humility of it. He always understood that he didn't deserve anything anyway.

It grieves me so much when ministers get discouraged and depressed and grieved and feel like things aren't the way they ought to be in their ministry. And they sometimes have these nervous breakdowns, or whatever they call it. They get stressed out or they call it "burn out" or whatever it is. The Apostle Paul couldn't understand that because he never could even get over the idea that he would be so privileged to be called a new covenant believer and then to be a new covenant preacher, that in itself was all by mercy. What right did he have to expect anything else? Scripture repeatedly emphasizes the fact too that true preachers are called and sent by God and they are humbled by that reality. Boastful pride and pomposity and self-centeredness among preachers is either a momentary sin or the evidence of an uncalled and ungifted man. And here is Paul's great thought here because the ministry and the calling and the circumstances of my life were given to me by God through mercy and not of my own choosing, but mercifully I've been called to this privilege. We do not lose heart.

So, if you're going to live your life as a Christian and you're going to triumph over difficulty, you need to gaze into the face of Jesus. And as you do you'll find it's a clarifying look. You'll see God revealed and you'll see enough about God in the face of Jesus to trust God through anything. It is a clarifying look. Not only that, it's a transforming look. It's going to shape you into the very character of Christ. And it's a strengthening look. As you look at the glory of Jesus Christ you're going to realize the privilege you have of even naming His name, even being one of His own and even speaking His gospel truth. And that privilege alone should be a strengthening look. Much more to come next time. Let's pray.

Father, again we are grateful for the confidence we have in Your Word. Life is serious, eternity is even more serious. It would be terrible to wander through this life and not have any idea of what was right, more terrible to think about the future and not know how to deal with it. Thank You for Your Word. Thank You for the great reality of Your truth that directs our attention to Christ that the saving look redeems us and the continual look sanctifies us, until that day when we have the glorified look and we become like the one into whose face we have gazed. May we never be led astray from the simplicity of devotion to Christ and may we gaze ever at His glory, we pray in His name. Amen.

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