

So how are you getting on with 2 Corinthians? Last week we saw Paul telling these Christians in Corinth about gospel ministry. As we looked at 2 Cor 2:12-3:6 we saw that gospel ministry is about people, is a matter of life and death and is from God.

However, one thing we should know about Paul's letters is that there is always a reason for them. This letter speaks to issues in the church in Corinth.

In a couple of weeks time I will be off on sabbatical for three months. I have been asked am I concerned about the church while I am away. The answer is yes. You see Gordon Randall will be looking after things in terms of the services while I am away. Now, knowing Gordon, during that time he will tell you that I'm not the great minister some of you think I am, that I don't know the Bible as well as others, that I'm not an extrovert like he is, that I'm not a feely person like he is and that I support a rubbish football team. He'll get Richard Turnbull the previous Minister to come and he will preach well. By the end you will be thinking well that Ian Bentley is not up to much we're better off with Gordon.

Now this is all tongue in cheek and I am hugely grateful for the fact that Gordon and with him Ruth Randall and the wardens have made it possible for me to take time out. However, it may begin to help us to see what had happened in Corinth. Paul had been there and established the church through the preaching of the gospel. However others like Apollos had come in as a great orator and people were thinking well Paul is not up to much. Then Jewish Christians had come and, just as we saw in the letter to the Galatians, were saying that Paul's message lacked any note of the Jewish Law. The effect was to undermine Paul's ministry. So he wrote this letter with the purpose of showing that his ministry was not only valid but the only true ministry. Yes his message was new it was of a new covenant, a new way with God, but that new way was built on the old covenant God had made with his people but was better than that old way. As such he wanted these Christians to continue to follow Jesus and not go back to the old allegiance to the law. That he saw was a ridiculous idea.

Did you ever have a ghetto blaster? I know some people used to walk around with these massive radio/tape players on their shoulders. Then people changed to personal tape players, much smaller but still only with one tape in them. Today with an MP3 player the size of a playing card you can have thousands of songs available. Would we go back?

Paul's point here is that this gospel ministry, which he has just spoken about, and which you and I share, is a better a more glorious ministry than that which some of his detractors had, which was centred on the Jewish Law, and so people should stick with that ministry, message and its messengers such as Paul , Timothy and Titus.

In these verses he shows why this message and ministry is better than the message of the Law.

1. It brings life v7-11

As you look at these verses can you see the comparison Paul was making between the Jewish Law which was being promoted by some in Corinth and the gospel message he was preaching?

The heart of it is there at the end of v6 “the letter kills but the Spirit gives life”. If they sought to live by the letter of the Law it would bring death, see v7 “if the ministry that brought death which was engraved on letters of stone”. Then if they sought to be right with God through obeying the law they were doomed to failure, v9 “if the ministry that condemns”.

Paul says here what he said in Galatians that there is no way the people in Corinth then or people in Chineham today can be made right with God by obeying his law. We just can't do it.

Now Paul recognised that the giving of the law was glorious. It was a great moment in the history of God's people, which is why he keeps using the word glorious. However he knew that the glory was temporary, he speaks of it fading, v11, because he knew that the role of the Law was temporary.

As we saw in Galatians the Law was there to lead people to Jesus.

I was with my grandchildren a week or so ago and I watched as my little granddaughter struggled with a toy. In the end she realised she could not sort it out and turned to me and said “Granddad do it”. In one sense that was the purpose of the Law. It showed God's people then and now how God wants us to live but also shows us that we can't live up to God's standard. We can't be right with God by our own effort .We have to turn to God and say “God do it” and God has done it.

This is the message of the gospel Paul had brought to Corinth. The gospel offers us, through the death of Jesus, a way of forgiveness for the times we have failed to live up to his standards.

Through that forgiveness this new message v9 brought “righteousness” that is it makes us right with God – what we can't do by obeying the law God the Father has done in Jesus through his death on the cross.

This new message of Paul was more glorious than the old message of the Law because it brought life and acceptance with God. That offer is permanent, v11.

I can still remember the moment I understood that acceptance with God is through the cross of Christ and the weight that was lifted off me. No longer did I have to struggle to be as good as the Christians I kept meeting. No longer did I have to struggle to be good enough for God. No longer did I have to feel a failure, a sinner, a reject. No God told me that through the death of Jesus I was forgiven and restored as his child. What message could be more glorious than that?

The gospel message and ministry is better than the message of the Law because it brings life and because

2. It removes the veil v12-16

Moses was the one who received the Law, and the tablets of stone with the 10 commandments on were the heart of the Law God gave to his people. When Moses came down the mountain with the law his "face was radiant" (Exodus 34:29). So much so that he wore a veil so people would not see the radiance also v13 so people would not see the radiance fade. The veil hid the glory of God, that is God's visible presence, from the people. The veil hid God as it were from the people. Paul here uses that idea in a wider sense.

Have a look at v14, "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". Can you see what Paul is saying here? He is saying that under the old covenant by following the law people could never really see and know God. But Jesus has removed the veil. In Jesus we see God and begin to know God and his will and purpose.

So, as we saw in 2:14, the gospel "spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of God." Jesus as it were lifts the veil so that we can see and know God.

I have heard of people being blindfolded by family members, led to a car, driven round for a while, then taken into a room where the blindfold is removed and they see lots of family and friends who greet them for a special birthday. When the blindfold is taken away everything becomes clear.

In faith terms Paul himself had had that kind of experience. He was a Pharisee, holding firmly to the law of God so much so that he persecuted Christians. Then, on his way to Damascus to seek out and arrest Christians, he saw a light which blinded him and forced him to his knees. From the light came the voice of Jesus. Still blind Paul or Saul as he was called then, was led into Damascus and a man named Ananias was sent to him and when Ananias spoke to Paul, "Immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptised." (Acts 9:18)

For Paul the veil had been removed and he saw Jesus and his baptism was a sign that he had changed sides. From that point on his task was to tell others about Jesus that they too may, as it were have the veil lifted, know God and follow Jesus.

Let me ask you, the friends here, those who will read this on the website and those of you listening to this download, has the veil been lifted for you? Have you come to a point in life where you have seen Jesus as saviour and through him know God the Father?

If not then let me again encourage you to take a serious look at Jesus, read a gospel, talk to a friend and ask them "why are you a follower of Jesus?"

It is to Jesus we must look because, as Paul says here in v16, "But whenever anyone turns to Jesus the veil is taken away". Jesus opens up God to us and us to God.

Friends this is important because as we have just seen the gospel message brings life. So it is important that we look seriously at Jesus.

Just over a month ago we celebrated Christmas and I really enjoyed the service, not just because I had my eldest grandson helping me – I know that when I am away Gordon Randall will say “well at least while he’s away no more stories of grandchildren!” – but the example we get from the wise men that “no trouble is too great in our search for truth”. Those wise men made such a great effort to find out the truth because it mattered.

I’m aware that the internet is a great source of wisdom about medical ailments and not just for doctors. I know people will have symptoms and go online to find out what is the matter with them and what can be done to help them. Perhaps you have done it yourself. It is a search to help them get better. Friends the gospel doesn’t make us better it brings life and life eternal should not our search for this truth be even greater?

The gospel message and ministry is better than the message of the Law because it brings life, because it removes the veil and because

3. It transforms us v17-18

The Law could only show them and us where we have gone wrong. It can’t make us right and it can’t change us. If we look at these verses we see a different picture through the gospel and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I think if we look at these verses we see three effects of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian.

a. freedom v17 – freedom from what? I think it refers to a freedom from the letter, that is from the law. It is what I said earlier that when I came to faith I felt a weight taken off. It was no longer a matter of trying to please God by being good. Obeying the law will not make me right with God and I am freed from that.

b. “with unveiled faces” we “reflect the Lord’s glory” v18 – last week I asked you “do you smell” as we looked at being the fragrance of Christ and spreading his aroma in the world. Today I ask do you reflect God’s glory as you go about your daily life? Tomorrow in the work place whether that place is in the home or elsewhere will people see something of Jesus in you? Will people be drawn towards Jesus because of the way you respond to them, the integrity of your lifestyle, your servant attitude, your gracious speech, your willing forgiveness, your caring touch?

It is a big ask isn’t it? No wonder, as we saw last week, Paul himself asked “who is equal to such a task?” (2:16). Many of us know that we are certainly not up to it and that often our lives at work let down the gospel rather than enhance it. Paul may be able to say that “we reflect the Lord’s glory” but I don’t.

c. we are being transformed v18 – here is the hope, “ we are being transformed into his likeness”.

The work of the Holy Spirit is to take the raw material of you and I and shape us into the likeness of Jesus. It is a gradual work with many failures and mistakes along the way. This is our only hope to be

able to reflect God's glory because we cannot say "I am going to do better today" that is the same as living by the Law. No day by day our prayer should be that God would be working in us by his Holy Spirit to give us a desire to reflect his glory and to enable us in every situation to live his way. That is being transformed.

In v12 Paul wrote "Therefore since we have such a hope we are very bold". Paul was bold to speak the gospel because he saw what the gospel could do. The gospel is glorious as Paul says because it removes the veil so that we see and know God in Jesus. It makes us right with God the Father through Jesus and it transforms us to make us like Jesus.

What greater gift can God give us than this and what greater thing can we do for our friends and our contact people than to open the way of Jesus to them?