

Bold Ministers

Devotional Reading: [Deuteronomy 31:1–8](#)

Background Scripture: [2 Corinthians 3:1–18](#)

[2 Corinthians 3:5–18](#)

⁵ Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. ⁶ He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

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.

Key Text

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 3:18

Hope in the Lord

Unit I: Experiencing Hope

[Lessons 1–5](#)

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the nature of the hope to which Paul refers.
2. Explain the transformational change that is to occur as one matures in faith.
3. Make a plan to push toward that transformational change personally.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

A. A Pile of “Glory Stuff”?

B. Lesson Context

I. Paul’s Expertise (2 Corinthians 3:5–6)

A. Source: God (v. 5)

B. Focus: New Covenant (v. 6)

No “False Choice” Here!

II. Paul’s Interpretation (2 Corinthians 3:7–11)

A. First If-Then Argument (vv. 7–8)

Faded Glory?

B. Second If-Then Argument (vv. 9–10)

C. Third If-Then Argument (v. 11)

III. Paul’s Application (2 Corinthians 3:12–18)

A. With Face Covering (vv. 12–15)

B. Without Face Covering (vv. 16–18)

Conclusion

A. The Few

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

a fortiori (*Latin*) eh four-she-or-eye or ah four-she-or-ee.

apostolic ap-uh-*stahl*-ick.

Colossians Kuh-*losh*-unz.

Corinth Kor-inth.

Corinthians Ko-*rin*-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Introduction

A. A Pile of “Glory Stuff”?

An adult Christian was overheard commenting on a certain confusion he experienced when watching various televangelists as a child. He would occasionally hear a preacher say, “Give glory to God!” The child wondered about the meaning of this imperative. All he could think of was a pile of this “glory stuff” somewhere, and he was supposed to go there, get a double handful of it, and offer it to God. But didn’t God have enough glory already? How was it possible to give him more than what he already had? And what was this “glory stuff,” anyway?

Such childhood thinking eventually was replaced with adult thinking, of course (compare [1 Corinthians 13:11](#)). But a certain element of the question remained to be addressed: How does the concept of “glory” come into play as we live before God in a fallen world? The apostle Paul has the answer.

B. Lesson Context

By AD 57, the year that Paul wrote the letter we call 2 Corinthians, he had developed a multiyear relationship with the church he had planted in Corinth. He had established that congregation on his second missionary journey of AD 52–54 ([Acts 18:1–11](#)). Bible experts recognize this letter as the most difficult to understand among all 13 of Paul’s epistles. This letter and others to the church in Corinth (see [1 Corinthians 5:9](#); [2 Corinthians 2:3–4](#); [7:8](#), [12](#)) reveal that Paul had stayed in touch. Such was the nature of his church-planting ministry.

The letters of 1 and 2 Corinthians show a congregation troubled on several fronts. Challenges to Paul’s apostolic authority aggravated those troubles, and his letters to that church feature responses to personal criticisms leveled at him ([1 Corinthians 9:1–2](#); [2 Corinthians 10:10](#); [11:5](#); [12:11–12](#); etc.). Therefore, Paul used much ink in 2 Corinthians to defend the legitimacy of his apostolic calling. Indeed, the more than 500 words of [2 Corinthians 2:12–3:18](#) set the stage for longer defenses of his apostolic ministry later in the epistle. Today’s lesson covers a majority of those 24 verses.

I. Paul’s Expertise ([2 Corinthians 3:5–6](#))

A. Source: God (v. 5)

5. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.

As Paul further explores the nature of his apostolic ministry, he uses a word that is translated *competent* and *competence* several times in this letter (here and in [2 Corinthians 2:6](#), [16](#); compare also [1 Corinthians 15:9](#); [Colossians 1:12](#); and [2 Timothy 2:2](#)). In so doing, he makes clear that although he has confidence in the results of his ministry ([2 Corinthians 1:15](#); [2:3](#); [3:4](#)), it is God who must have the credit, not Paul and his fellow apostles. Any sufficiency is from *God*. This “credit where credit is due” acknowledgment is also reflected in [2 Corinthians 2:17](#) (compare [1 Corinthians 15:10](#)).

What Do You Think?

If God makes us competent for the work he desires of us, what responsibilities are we left with as a result?

Digging Deeper

What verses support your answer?

B. Focus: New Covenant (v. 6)

6. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

The English words *minister* and *ministers* occur four times (here and in [Colossians 1:7](#); [4:7](#); and [1 Timothy 4:6](#)) as a noun in describing the leadership function of those commonly designated today as “pastors.” These ministers were tasked primarily with preaching the Word, while other leaders—commonly called “elders”—attended primarily to non-preaching tasks of caring for the church (example: [James 5:14](#)).

The *new covenant* ([Hebrews 8:6](#), [8](#); [10:16](#); [12:24](#)) was always part of God’s plan, as several Old Testament passages suggest. Particularly clear on this point is [Jeremiah 31:31–34](#), which reads in part, “I [the Lord] will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” The covenant foreseen by Jeremiah was brought into being by Jesus himself (see [Luke 22:20](#); [Hebrews 8](#)).

A primary feature of the old covenant—the Law of Moses—was that it brought death in condemning people as lawbreakers ([Romans 2:27](#); [7:5](#); [1 Corinthians 15:56](#)). This was through no fault of the law; the benefit of following *the letter* of the law was learning God’s ways, not earning salvation. The new covenant, by contrast, *gives life*. Therefore, life under the new covenant is connected with *the Spirit*, a concept introduced by Jesus (see [John 6:63](#)) and stressed by Paul (see [Romans 2:29](#); [7:6](#)).

No “False Choice” Here!

On March 23, 1775, legislator and orator Patrick Henry delivered one of the most famous speeches in American history. The American colonies were on the verge of revolution, and colonial legislators were trying to decide how to respond to a series of British policies deemed oppressive, intolerable, and coercive. While there is some doubt about the exact wording of his speech, most agree on its fiery ending: “I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”

While Henry was certainly talking about fighting the British in a revolution, his statement bears an ironic resemblance to today’s lesson text. There are only two options when it comes to one’s standing before God: death from the letter of the law or life in the Spirit of God through Jesus.

In the study of logic, we are careful to note what is called “the fallacy of the false choice.” This is where a limited set of alternatives are offered from which to choose, when in fact, other, unstated choices are available. Neither Patrick Henry nor the apostle Paul was guilty of committing this fallacy. Henry had decided that there were only two ways his life could proceed; it was either death or liberty,

nothing in between. Paul’s view was the same, from a spiritual rather than an earthly perspective. Make no mistake: there is no alternative, no third or fourth choice available. How do you keep yourself from slipping into a “half and half” fiction in this regard?

—C. S.

II. Paul’s Interpretation

(2 Corinthians 3:7–11)

A. First If-Then Argument (vv. 7–8)

7–8. 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, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?

Paul now begins a series of conditional “if-then” statements, a style of argument that also goes by the designation *a fortiori*, meaning “from [the] stronger.” This type of logic is well documented in the ancient literature of Jews and Greeks. The argument is formed when the truth of a greater assertion is based on a lesser reality that is commonly agreed on. In other words, this kind of argument takes the form of “if such and such is true, then so and so must be true as well.” Often the word *then* does not appear in this kind of argument, but its intent is understood to be present nonetheless. In the case at hand, the force of the word *then* occurs just before the phrase *will not*.

Paul often walks a tightrope when he talks about the old law (the old covenant of the Law of Moses). He knows that the new covenant—the *ministry of the Spirit*—is far superior to the old one—the *ministry that brought death* (see [Romans 7:10](#)). But that doesn’t mean that the old covenant was defective or had failed in some way ([9:6](#)). Indeed, the old covenant of law was flawless in what it was intended to accomplish: establishing God’s expectations in no uncertain terms ([7:7](#); [Galatians 3:24](#)). This left Israel with no excuse regarding knowledge of sin. It’s reasonable that in creating humans in his own image ([Genesis 1:26](#)) God would expect us to be holy because he is holy ([Leviticus 11:44–45](#); quoted in [1 Peter 1:16](#)). That expectation resulted in God’s giving his requirements for holiness not just to the *Israelites* but to Gentiles as well ([Romans 1:18–20](#); [2:14–15](#)).

But what constitutes a holy life? That’s the question that the old law answered in terms of a code of behavior. That body of law was so important that it was *engraved in letters on stone* ([Exodus 32:16](#); [34:1–5, 28](#); contrast [Romans 4:15](#); [5:13](#)). Contrast that with our modern expression “it’s not written in stone” when we want to stress that a document is just a first draft or that it is otherwise changeable. If anyone *could* keep the law perfectly, that person would have led a perfectly holy life. A person is not made holy by the corruptible things or the tradition of the elders. One is made holy by the precious blood of Christ ([1 Peter 1:17–22](#)).

[Exodus 34:29–35](#) is the touchstone for Paul’s illustration regarding *the face of Moses because of its glory*. The point of contrast is that the radiance of Moses’ face, like the covenant he had received, was temporary. It faded with time. By contrast, the new covenant doesn’t fade ([1 Peter 1:3–4](#)). God would not replace something “more” glorious with something “less” glorious!

What Do You Think?

What biblical examples come to mind when you consider the glory of the Spirit's ministry?

Digging Deeper

What examples can you give from your congregation?

Faded Glory?

A brand of denim jeans called “Faded Glory” hit the marketplace in 1972. Various articles of clothing under that brand name can still be purchased today. The success and longevity of this apparel line is curious at first glance since the name *Faded Glory* has a negative connotation. Things that are faded are in a state of deterioration; whatever glory was once present has become hard to discern.



Visual for [Lesson 2](#). As you close class time, ask learners how this statement can impact their witness this week.

Perhaps the attraction lies in being a contrarian—one who relishes doing something different

than the majority of people would do. Today, we still see for sale new denim jeans of various brands that are sold “distressed,” with intentional rips and holes.

I have no favorites when it comes to brands of denim jeans since I don’t own any and never wear them. I have a contrarian mindset on many things, but not the Bible. I don’t want to be the one in [James 1:11](#) who fades away. Instead, I embrace the inheritance and crown that will never fade away ([1 Peter 1:4](#); [5:4](#)). This means I must reject any substitute. And to be able to do that, I must be able to recognize the danger (see [Romans 1:25](#); [2 Thessalonians 2:1–12](#); etc.). Have you trained yourself to do so?

—R. L. N.

B. Second If-Then Argument (vv. 9–10)

9–10. If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory.

Paul moves to his second “if-then” conditional statement. Again, the word *then* isn’t explicitly used, but its force is understood to be present nevertheless, just before the word *how*. The point about the *glory* of the old covenant in relation to the glory of the new covenant is essentially the same as in [2 Corinthians 3:7–8](#), just considered above. What’s new here is the introduction of parallel descriptions: the “ministry that brought death” in [3:7](#) is the same as the *ministry that brought condemnation* here in describing the old covenant ([Deuteronomy 27:26](#)). And the “ministration of the Spirit” in [2 Corinthians 3:8](#) is the same as the *ministry that brings righteousness* here in describing the new covenant in Christ. Therefore, the new covenant is superior because those who merit condemnation for sin receive instead imputed righteousness because of Christ ([Romans 3:21–22](#); [2 Corinthians 5:21](#)).

B. Third If-Then Argument (v. 11)

11. And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

This is the third and final “if-then” argument that contrasts the old covenant (*what was transitory*) with the new covenant (*that which lasts*). As above, the word *then* does not appear as such. But its force is understood to occur just after the comma. The law could not make humanity perfect because of the weakness of the fallen nature ([Psalm 19:7](#); [Romans 8:3](#)). It was meant to reveal that which is best, salvation by faith in Christ. In him sin was condemned in the flesh, and the righteous requirements of the law were accomplished ([8:4](#); [Hebrews 7:19](#); [10:1](#)).

III. Paul’s Application ([2 Corinthians 3:12–18](#))

A. With Face Covering (vv. 12–15)

12. Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.

Hope is an important theme for Paul. Indeed, he uses the noun and verb forms of that word more than 60 times in his 13 letters! Certainty derives from hope. A person with a sincere hope of finishing a race has a significantly better chance of doing so than someone who enters the race convinced that he won't be able to finish. In Paul's case, his hope reveals itself in his boldness (compare [Romans 5:4–5](#); [8:24–25](#)). Imagine how ineffective Paul's message of the gospel would be if his voice conveyed the lukewarm overtones of “maybe,” “perhaps,” and “possibly”!

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.

[Exodus 32–34](#) continues to be Paul's source of illustration to demonstrate the superiority of the new covenant over the old. Specifically, the reference here is to [Exodus 34:33, 35](#). The illustration and its intended effect on Paul's first-century audience are essentially the same as in [2 Corinthians 3:7–8](#) above, but with the detail of a *veil* added. We know it was some face covering, but it is difficult to determine exactly what it was made of, its shape, etc.

14–15. 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. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.

The Scriptures often use figurative language to describe a lack of perception. Such language often involves the senses of seeing and hearing. Considering the word *made dull* in the verse at hand, we see the same word used in [Romans 11:7](#) and [2 Corinthians 4:4](#). Hearts are said to be hardened in [Mark 6:52](#); [8:17](#). Blindness and hardening are mentioned together in [John 12:40](#). Hearts and ears are said to be “uncircumcised” in [Acts 7:51](#). These are just a few examples—the list goes on and on.

All this speaks to spiritual insensitivity. A person with this self-inflicted disposition may refuse to hear physically; consider [Acts 7:57](#), where people used their hands and loud voices to drown out and not hear Stephen's testimony. They refused to hear it both spiritually and physically. Regarding the two verses at hand, Paul's opponents were doing their best (or worst?) to retain the *veil* that had *Christ* has *taken away*. How foolish!

B. Without Face Covering (vv. 16–18)

16. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

Paul says the same thing in [Romans 11:23](#), using an agricultural comparison: “If they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.” The way this happens is when hearts turn *to the Lord*. It's not enough merely to turn away from sin; that's only half the solution. The full solution is to turn to the Lord in repentance ([Luke 1:17](#); [Acts 9:35](#); [1 Thessalonians 1:9](#)).

What Do You Think?

What veils prevent nonbelievers from coming to Christ today?

Digging Deeper

Do you have a role to play in taking the veil away? Why or why not?

17. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

The phrase *the Lord is the Spirit* reflects [Isaiah 61:1](#), quoted by Jesus in [Luke 4:18–19](#). Both passages stress the *freedom* or liberty that Christ has brought. In contrast to the Israelites, who most often had a human leader mediating between them and God (compare [Hebrews 8](#)), Paul’s audience had access to God through the indwelling Spirit. Paul stresses that it is through the Spirit that they have freedom. Through the covenant of the Spirit, they were liberated from the veil. Unlike Moses, they did not have to place a veil over their face. The same face that Paul turned to the Lord was the same face that the people were able to see. Because now the glory never wears off.

When set alongside passages such as [John 8:32](#); [Romans 8:2](#); [2 Corinthians 13:9](#); and [Galatians 5:1, 13](#), we get the full-orbed picture of the nature of this freedom.

What Do You Think?

What other verses help you define what it means to have freedom in the Spirit?

Digging Deeper

What popular definitions of freedom might hinder either experiencing or understanding freedom in the Spirit?

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.

Unlike the glory of the old covenant that was only given to Moses, the benefits of the new are available to everyone in Christ. In this sense, we can see at least a glimpse of the Lord’s glory. Even so, our current view of him is not crystal clear given that we yet view him as a reflection in a mirror (compare [1 Corinthians 13:12](#)). We do not yet have the full view that we will eventually be blessed to have: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” ([1 John 3:2](#)).

Even so, our reflected view is sufficient in this life for conforming us ever more closely to the *image* of the Son of God ([Romans 8:29](#)). Could there be any greater tragedy for choosing not to do so? See [2 Corinthians 4:4–6](#).

What Do You Think?

Have you experienced any “growth spurts” in your transformation into God’s image?

Digging Deeper

What pitfalls might a believer experience if he or she found all growth in the Spirit to happen quickly or dramatically?

Conclusion

A. The Few

The larger context of [Exodus 34](#)—the source of Paul’s illustrations regarding glory—is the sin of the Israelites in chapter [32](#). From [Exodus 32:9](#) to [34:9](#), the Lord characterizes the people as “stiff-necked” four times. The face covering Moses needed is noted only after Moses returned from the mountain a second time, following the incident of the golden calf. Thus that great sin was answered with a sign of great holiness: the radiant glory of Moses’ face, which needed to be covered.

But despite the greatness and holiness that that radiance symbolized, another episode of glory, the advent of Christ, was yet to be. Some 15 centuries later, Christ arrived in God’s perfect timing. Few, if any, people expected him in the way he came. And relatively few allowed him to remove the veil from their hearts so they might see him clearly.

And so it is yet today. Think of someone who believes that he or she will have no problem getting into Heaven because he or she is basically “a good person.” Whether consciously or unconsciously, that attitude comes from a salvation-by-works mentality. Such thinking often presents itself when a person compares himself or herself to another who is relatively “more evil.” But that’s not how salvation works; that is not the criteria for entrance. Those stuck in this mode of belief have a veil they refuse to remove. They need to encounter the great veil-remover, Jesus Christ ([Matthew 27:51](#); [Mark 15:38](#); [Luke 23:45](#)).

How will you seek out someone who is lost in this way this week?

B. Prayer

Thank you, Heavenly Father, for the lesson’s perspective on what is true and necessary. Deliver us from the worldly mindset that repeatedly tries to take our thoughts captive. May we be alert to spiritual blindfolds that we willingly put on so readily and easily. This week, provide us with opportunities to help remove the veil from someone’s heart. We pray as your servants in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Be unveiled.

Be bold.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Write the following sentences on the board:

After sunrise, streetlights are useless.

The enemy of the best is the second best.

Form learners into groups of four to discuss the two sentences. Ask class members to think of examples from history, current events, or everyday life to illustrate why the sentences are true. Make a transition by saying, “Today we will look at a vital truth that echoes the truth of these two statements. It is a truth that changes lives for eternity.”

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Two Paraphrases” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Allow no more than one minute for learners to complete as indicated. Use the second of the two paraphrases to lead into the lesson.

Into the Word

Have two class members alternate verses in reading aloud today’s lesson text, [2 Corinthians 3:5–18](#). Then assign one of the following activities to each group formed earlier. As time allows, you can have groups complete more than one activity.

Activity 1—Covenants Compared

Distribute handouts (you create) with the terms *Old Covenant* / *New Covenant* as headers of two columns. Include the following instructions: “Compare and contrast [Exodus 24:1–8](#); [34:29–30](#) with [2 Corinthians 3:5–18](#). Record similarities and differences under the appropriate heading.”

Activity 2—Which Is Better?

Distribute handouts (you create) with the following instructions: “Create a devotional that emphasizes the benefits of living under the New Covenant. Use [2 Corinthians 3:5–18](#) to list points to be made before writing the devotion.”

Activity 3—Regarding Veil and Curtains

Distribute handouts (you create) with these instructions: “Compare and contrast the veil of [2 Corinthians 3:5–18](#) with the curtain in [Matthew 27:51](#); [Mark 15:38](#); and [Luke 23:45](#). What does each one signify that the other does not?”

Allow at least 10 minutes for groups to complete their tasks before reconvening for whole-class discussion. Give each group an opportunity to share its conclusions.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [2 Corinthians 3:18](#). Talk through how the verse fits into the conclusions you just discussed.

Into Life

Whole-class brainstorming. Pose this question: “When people looked at Jesus, what did they see?” List responses on the board. After a few responses, categorize the replies in terms of what the people saw *physically* and what they perceived *spiritually*. Be sure to interject [Isaiah 53:2](#) at an appropriate point in the discussion. Explore how these conclusions underline how unbelievers still see or perceive

Jesus today. Ask for examples of modern “veils” that cover their hearts.

Next, pose the following questions (write them on the board) for potential application of [2 Corinthians 3:18](#). Allow for responses to each question before asking or revealing the question that follows it. (Larger classes can distribute handouts to small groups.)

- 1—How does the image of transformational change in [2 Corinthians 3:18](#) relate to that noted in [Romans 12:2](#)?
- 2—What are some ways to recognize the Spirit’s desire to change us?
- 3—What can we do to open ourselves to that work of the Spirit?

Option. Distribute copies of the “I’m Changing!” activity from the activity page. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less before sharing with a partner.

Close with a time of silent prayer for transformational change.