

The Light of the Gospel

2 Corinthians 4:1-6
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The ministry of the new covenant soars above the ministry of the old covenant in just about every way. The latter ministers death and condemnation, and lasted only a short time; the former ministers the Spirit of God and imputed righteousness, and abides forever. Paul couldn't have highlighted the difference between the two more than he did in verse 6 of today's text. He said that new covenant ministry is God commanding the light of the knowledge of his glory to break through the darkness of our sin and display the wonders of redemption in Jesus Christ.

In today's text, Paul helps us see what this means for the day-to-day ministry of the Word. It had a specific application to his work in the first century, which we'll see in a minute, but it also has implications for today's preaching, whenever and wherever it takes place.

Manifesting the Truth

Chapter 4 begins with Paul explaining his ministry. Having elevated his work above Moses', whose face had to be veiled because of the people's sin, he expressed confidence in moving forward and not fainting. He held back nothing that needed to be said, but fulfilled his ministry faithfully, energetically and joyously.

But it wasn't just the greater glory of new covenant ministry that motivated Paul. He had also experienced God's mercy. He said so in verse 1: *As we have received mercy*. No word describes his transformation better. He thought he was going to Damascus to serve the Lord, pledging to exterminate the church of Jesus Christ, but in reality he was on the road to hell, just like everyone else. Ephesians 2 describes his condition: *he walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience (v. 2)*. By nature, he was a child of wrath. But the Lord had mercy on him, keeping him both from Damascus and everlasting damnation. The Lord did even more than this for him. He made Paul a preacher of the incorruptible glory of God and a pattern of faith to everyone who would believe through him. After describing his previous life as a blasphemer persecutor, he wrote to Timothy, *Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting (1 Tim 1:16)*.

God's mercy had a profound effect on Paul's service. It gave him the courage to speak the truth without fear of consequences. According to verse 2, he *renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God*. This sharpens the already obvious contrast between Paul and those who opposed him. His opponents were dishonest, hiding precious truths from God's people. They were also opportunists, altering the Word of God to make it more palatable. But Paul didn't do any of these things. He preached only what the Lord gave. He said, *For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you* (1 Cor. 11:23). He let the truth speak for itself. And in the end, that was all he needed. It was the only commendation that mattered.

Paul knew true believers would understand this. Their consciences would confirm everything he said and did in the service of Jesus Christ.

The Hidden Gospel

By the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, he knew many people would never accept his ministry. He acknowledged this in verse 3: *But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost*.

This observation has two obvious applications. The first is a general theological statement, viz., that the gospel remains hidden from certain individuals. John said something similar when he related the effects of Jesus' ministry in his gospel. He wrote, *But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: that the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them* (John 12:37–40).

Did you catch everything John said here? First, he cited a historical fact. A lot of the people who heard Jesus teach and saw his miracles didn't believe in him. Then he explained why they didn't believe. He said, *They could not believe*. And why couldn't they believe? John answered this by quoting the prophet Isaiah, who announced that God himself had blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts (Isa. 6:9–10). Isaiah wrote these words after he saw God's glory — the Lord exalted on his throne and surrounded by seraphim. He understood and believed what happened, but he knew others wouldn't. Our text adds that those who don't believe remain lost.

The second application of verse 3 is more specific. The gospel Paul preached was hidden specifically from those who opposed his ministry, as their rejection of the truth shows. They were

lost. So, why would the Corinthians pay any attention to them? They shouldn't because they had nothing to offer.

But who is it that blinds the eyes of men to the truth of God? John and Isaiah both said that God does, just as Exodus acknowledges that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. But verse 4 of today's text says that *the god of this world*, i.e., the devil, blinded their eyes. So, which is it?

The right answer is both. God did it by his eternal and unalterable sovereign decree. There was zero chance that anything else could have happened. But Satan also did it to overthrow God's plan. As verse 4 says, he doesn't want the light of the gospel to shine in their hearts. He put a veil over men's hearts to keep them from seeing the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Thus, what God did with a good design, the devil did with an evil design. He did it willingly because he's opposed to everything holy and good. And because he acted according to his own nature, God will also punish him for it. This is what my theology professor, Dr. Rudolph, used to call "the true validity of secondary agents." Secondary agency is real. It's not a façade to cover up some imaginary injustice or wickedness in God.

This applies to our sin, too. Just because our sin was ordained by God doesn't mean that we can blame him for it. The fault is entirely ours. We sin. We deserve the punishment. God himself doesn't sin. He doesn't encourage sin in his creatures. Nor is he ever tempted to sin.

There's something curious about verse 4, though. Paul called Satan *the god of this world*. Is the devil really a god? Ephesians 2:2, likewise, refers to him as *the prince of the power of the air*. Is he a prince? Is there an ultimate duality in the universe — a good God and a bad god, vying for supremacy? Dr. Rudolph used to represent this philosophy as two circles next to each other. One circle is God, and the other is the devil, the world or whatever else men worship as god.

Is this the way the world operates? Of course not. There's only one God. The prophet Isaiah wrote, *O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: thou hast made heaven and earth* (Isa. 37:16). However, the Bible also recognizes that men make gods out of just about everything. Paul said, *For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him* (1 Cor. 8:5–6). The gods men make for themselves are just demons or evil spirits. When the Israelites forgot that God found them and sought to replace him with other gods, Moses said, *They sacrificed unto devils, not to God; to gods whom they knew not, to new gods that came newly up, whom your fathers feared not* (Deut. 32:17). Paul also reflected this when he wrote, *But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God* (1 Cor. 10:20).

Our text identifies the devil as *the god of this world* because that's what unbelievers think he is. This is accommodation. But the devil is now chained and held captive in the bottomless pit (Rev. 20:1–3), where he can no longer prevent the preaching of the gospel. His ability to deceive the nations is not what it was before Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection.

Knowledge of the Glory of God

The only thing that conquers spiritual darkness is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul's adversaries had other ideas. They apparently believed that preaching themselves would be just as effective. But Paul preached Jesus. And just as Jesus came to serve our needs, Paul became a servant to the Corinthians for Jesus' sake. This explains why he would go back to them time after time, knowing how unbearably difficult it would be. He dealt with all their silliness because they needed the light of the gospel.

When the light of the gospel shines, it changes everything. The next chapter of 2 Corinthians says, *Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new* (v. 17). And verse 6 of today's text gives the theological background for this stupendous change. Paul compared it to God calling the light out of darkness in Genesis 1. It teaches us three things.

Our first and most obvious observation is the transformation itself — changing from darkness to light. In Genesis, before God said, *Let there be light*, there was no light anywhere. There wasn't even a "where" for light to shine in. The only light was God himself. But when God spoke, light appeared. The same thing happens to believers when the gospel shines into our hearts. Before it, we have nothing but darkness. Jesus said, *But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!* (Matt. 6:23). Jesus came to drive this darkness away. Matthew 4:16 says, *The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up.* And now because of his work on our behalf, we're children of light. Paul admonished us to *walk as children of light* (Eph. 5:8).

Our second point, which is just as important and obvious as the first, is that only God can bring light out of darkness. Only he can light shine where there was none. He created light in the first chapter of Genesis. And he makes the light of the gospel shine in our hearts today.

Third, the Lord uses the same means to bring forth light in both cases. In Genesis 1, he spoke and light, which hadn't existed previously, came into being. He created it out of nothing. And when the light of God dawns on our souls, it's only because he spoke the Word of life to our souls. He gave us the gospel.

And fourth, I would be reprehensibly remiss if I failed to identify what the light of the gospel is. What is the light that shines in our hearts? Our text says that it's *the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*.

In the Old Testament, God revealed his glory in several ways. One was the glow of Moses' face when he came down from the mountain. We can only imagine what he must have looked like. But he had to cover his face because God was angry with his people and threatened to destroy them. But today we can see God's glory in the face of someone far greater than Moses. We see it figuratively in the face of Jesus Christ — the second person of the Trinity, one who is himself by nature very God of very God, one who thought it not robbery to be equal with God. We see God's glory in all the great doctrines of Christianity. And yet, there's no veil shielding us from our Savior. We don't need one. Moses' intercession for the Israelites was only partially successful, but Jesus' is perfectly so. He redeemed us to God, and now there's nothing to keep us from our heavenly Father. We stand before our God clothed in our Savior's righteousness, covered by his blood and alive to holiness because he rose from the dead.

The darkness that once filled our hearts was unspeakably horrible, but words cannot adequately describe the light that shines in us now. It's the light of our Savior's work on our behalf — full, perfect and complete redemption by the blood of God's Son.

This week, as you reflect on the things we've talked about, I want you to consider two specific questions.

First, has the gospel of Jesus Christ shined in your heart? If not, you're still blinded by the devil. Plead with the Lord to take the veil away and let you see the Savior in all his glory.

Second, do you value the preaching of the gospel as much as Paul did? For him, it was everything. Knowing the depths of his depravity, he could only marvel at the grace and mercy the Lord had shown him. As a preacher, his only concern was to be faithful to the message. He needed it himself, and he wanted others to have it, too. How much you value the gospel will be shown in your response — how often you attend church, the joy you have in worshiping God, how much you contribute to home and foreign ministries, your prayer and devotional life, and much more. Does the truth of God commend you, as it did Paul?

Paul wrote these things to urge the Corinthians to move forward in their walk with the Lord. We should do the same. Let us exhort one another all the more as we see the day quickly approaching (Heb. 10:25). Amen.