

**Faded Glory**  
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**2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2**

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, **13** not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. **14** But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. **15** Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; **16** but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. **17** Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. **18** And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

**4:1** Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. **2** We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

**A LETTER TO A TROUBLED CONGREGATION**

Paul had a turbulent relationship with the church in Corinth. He believed that the Corinthians had great gifts for ministry, but he also believed that those gifts were being diminished by their actions.

They condoned immorality.

They were divided over leadership.

They were not compassionate toward the least and lost among them.

And, above all, they had an inflated sense of their own importance. Instead of glorifying God in Christ, they glorified themselves. (I'm afraid these problems are all too familiar in the church today.)

In response to the crisis in this church Paul wrote his first letter to Corinthians. In that letter Paul tried to correct their theological and moral errors, and promised to visit them in person soon. (1 Corinthians 16:5-6)

We don't know exactly what happened on this visit, but we do know enough to say that it didn't go so well. In fact, it was a painful visit in which the apostle's authority and character were severely questioned. And what really hurt was the fact that none of the Corinthians came to his defense.

In response to this painful visit Paul wrote a “painful letter” that has not been preserved. But, despite that difficult time of conflict, Paul planned a third visit the church at Corinth and what we call the second letter to the Corinthians was in preparation for that visit.

We can infer from this letter that the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians is still very rocky. The first chapters speak about reconciliation (1-9), but then the latter chapters take on a harsher tone (10-13). Perhaps this is in response to a report from Titus that those who were leading the Corinthians astray have once again assumed the reins of power. (They referred to themselves as “super apostles.”)

So, what’s an apostle to do in a world filled with “super apostles” who glorify themselves and lead the people astray? How can we break through the veil of self-promotion so that the glory of God does not fade from our presence?

That’s what all three of our Scripture lessons from the lectionary are about. And in order to really understand Paul’s argument from Corinthians we have to consider all three of these passages.

## MOSES AND THE VEIL

The first lesson comes from Exodus. (Exodus 34:29-35)

Moses ascends Mount Sinai and receives the commandments from the Lord. And since Moses was in the presence of the Lord his face reflected that glory. Even the reflected glory of God was too much for the people to handle so at first they ran away from Moses.

(I wonder if the people ran away from this glory because their own tawdry actions toward a certain golden calf stood in marked contrast to the holiness of God’s law and presence.)

Perhaps. But, their sinfulness did not overcome the power of God’s glorious and gracious law. Moses called out to the people. They came near, and Moses told them what God had commanded.

But, then Moses did something unusual. He covered his face with a veil, and he kept that veil on until the next time he went in to talk with the Lord.

That way the people knew when Moses had been talking with the Lord. They would could see the glory on Moses’ unveiled face.

When the people saw that the veil had been removed they knew that Moses had been talking to God, and he had more to tell his people.

The glory of God was unveiled. The glory of God was revealed in the face and the message of Moses. Then Moses would put the veil back on and wait for the next revelation.

## ELIJAH

God continued to reveal Himself through Moses. And then God revealed himself through the ministry of other prophets.

One of the greatest of these prophets was Elijah. Elijah, you'll remember courageously confronted the prophets of Baal, and God was so pleased with him that he did not die. Elijah was taken directly to heaven.

(This happened much to the chagrin of Elijah's protege Elisha, who was very reluctant to take up the prophetic mantle. And, by the way, the fiery chariot did not swing low to pick Elijah up. The fiery chariot kept Elisha from reaching his prophetic mentor. Apparently sometimes the glory of God separates us as well as bringing us together.)

Anyway, because of Elijah's unique ministry and place of prominence among the prophets and because of his ascension into heaven, people began to say that when the Messiah comes, he will be preceded by the prophet Elijah.

The stories of Moses and Elijah are about those rare times when the glory of God is revealed. That glory is hard to look at. Often it is the light of judgment and uncomfortable change.

## FADED GLORY AND SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

And that divine glory fades. Over the years the word of the Lord becomes rare among God's people. Oh, they remember the word. They preserve it very well with their traditions and their meticulously maintained scrolls.

But, the old stories just don't have life any more. It was like God's people were wearing a veil that kept them from seeing the glory of God in their midst. It was like they were blinded to the message and hope that God has given them.

Then Jesus comes, and things change. According to the Scriptures, Jesus does not teach like the other religious leaders. He teaches as one who has authority. (Matthew 7:29) Somehow the power and glory of God are revealed in what Jesus says and what Jesus does.

And yet, despite all that, for many the veil remains. The power of God's word and the hope it brings are kept under wraps. Some reject Jesus, and sometimes even Jesus' own disciple are blind to what He is saying.

The people needed a word from the Lord. The people needed to see the glory of God and be changed by it. Hints of that glory are revealed in the gospel lesson. (Luke 9:28-36)

## HIGH UPON A MOUNTAIN

Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a high mountain. And, on that high mountain Jesus is praying. (By the way the Scripture does not say the disciples were praying. We'll get to what they were doing in a minute. But, suffice it to say that only Jesus was praying.)

And while Jesus prays his appearance begins to change. Luke tells us that the appearance of Jesus' face begins to change and his clothes become dazzling white. It's like the good old days when Moses talked face to face with God and reflected God's glory. It's like the good old days when the powerful prophet Elijah proclaimed the word of the Lord.

As a matter of fact, right on cue, Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. They are talking about the departure Jesus is about to accomplish at Jerusalem. (In other words they are talking about Jesus death, resurrection and ascension.)

Now the disciples knew about all this. Before they went up the mountain Jesus made a prediction concerning his death and resurrection. And he told everyone who was following him that discipleship would come at a price. The cost of discipleship would be the cost of self-denial.

And more than that, Jesus said that were people standing there who would not taste death before they saw the kingdom of God. (I wonder if Jesus was referring to Peter, James and John because eight days after he said this they go up this high mountain where Jesus is transfigured.)

## WEIGHED DOWN WITH SLEEP

Peter, James and John may have seen the kingdom of God in the transfiguration of Jesus and the arrival of Moses and Elijah ... but just barely. Luke's gospel does not portray the disciple as praying. They were instead "weighed down with sleep." The glory of God is revealed in Jesus. The greatest lawgiver and the greatest prophet come to attest to this glory.

And what is the stance of the apostles?  
They are weighed down with sleep.

This reminds me of the Garden of Gethsemane.  
Jesus asks the disciples to keep watch and pray, and what do they do?  
They fall asleep.

There is definitely a veil over the disciples' eyes when it comes to the glory of God in Jesus. But, even the sleepy disciples wake up enough on this mountaintop to notice that something has changed with Jesus and that he with some powerful strangers.

And apparently Peter is able to perceive that these two strangers are Moses and Elijah because just as they are about to leave and the vision of glory is about to fade Peter says, "Jesus, this shouldn't end. This glory shouldn't fade. Let's make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

Peter's answer to faded glory is to make a shrine that lasts forever. You can see this approach in the Holy Land. Every major moment in Jesus' life is marked by a shrine including, ironically, the transfiguration. It's located on Mt. Tabor in Israel.

There's a chapel devoted to Moses, a chapel devoted to Elijah and of course, the rest of the church is devoted to Jesus.

That's interesting. God told Peter that the important thing was not to build fancy buildings but to listen to Jesus.

And yet ever since it seems like we have been doing the exact opposite. Our church buildings have become more and more elaborate.

We have a hard time listening to Jesus. It is as if we were asleep. It's as if some sort of veil has covered our eyes preventing us from perceiving the real glory of God as revealed in Jesus.

The Bible tells us that the disciples kept silent about what they had seen. Maybe they kept silent because they just didn't understand what it all meant.

The true glory of God is only seen in the words and witness of Jesus. And when we do things that go against that word and witness, a veil is placed over our eyes, and the glory of God fades.

## LEARNING TO LISTEN TO JESUS

I think that's the message Paul was giving the troubled church at Corinth. The reason they do not see Jesus and perceive the presence of His Spirit is that they do not listen to Him.

The original glory of God's presence was accompanied by the law. The law was meant to be an expression of God's grace. And yet, for the disobedient the law, those tablets of stone became a source of condemnation. (2 Corinthians 3:7-8)

But, despite the disobedience of God's people, the law was still an expression of God's glory. God gave His people the law so that they might live a life that was meaningful and righteous.

The law was glorious, but, Paul tells us, the glory that came in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ was even greater.

God's glory had faded for God's people because they did not correctly understand the proper use of God's word.

They could not fulfill the law perfectly and thus claim to be righteous. And their attempts to live a righteous life led to a self-righteous and legalistic approach. This blinded them to the glory of God's presence.

For example, instead of seeing the Sabbath as God's gift, a day of rest, they turned it into a day filled with unnecessary rules and regulations. On more than one occasion, Jesus pointed out this misunderstanding by healing on the Sabbath.

But, they could not accept what Jesus had to say. They were blind to the presence of God in Jesus, and they were blind to the true meaning of the law.

Just as the veil prevented the people from seeing the glory of God fade on the face of Moses, so the people's misunderstanding of the law prevented them from seeing God in their own lives.

The glory had faded for God's people. They were asleep to the promises and unaware of what was happening around them. God came to his people in Jesus, but they did not recognize him.

#### FADED GLORY IN THE CORINTHAIN CHURCH

Paul does not make this "faded glory" argument to criticize the Jews. (If you want understand Paul's anguish about and hope for his people, the Jews, read the ninth chapter of his letter to the Romans.)

In fact, this passage is not really about the misunderstanding of the Jews at all. Paul uses the faded glory argument to warn the Corinthians.

Just as God's people misunderstood and misapplied God's law so the Corinthians had misunderstood and misapplied the grace of God as revealed in Jesus. They had turned the grace of God into an excuse for conflict and loose living. They said, "God will forgive me. He's in the forgiving business."

And their misunderstanding of the gospel had nullified its power. A veil was over their eyes that prevented them from seeing that they had once again become captives to sin.

What was the answer to their dilemma?

They needed to take off the veil of cultural captivity and see Jesus clearly. They needed to listen to Jesus.

If they would do this, then they would be free.

They would no longer be bogged down by their self-righteous and self-serving ways.

Instead they would be transformed daily by the Spirit of Christ. Just as Christ was transfigured on the mountain, so they would be transformed a little bit more each day.

The glory would not fade.  
The glory would grow. (2 Corinthians 3:16-18)

Paul closes this section by reminding the Corinthians that this had happened in his own life.

His ministry with the Corinthians was due to the mercy of God.

The blindness of the Corinthians and their stubborn ways tempted Paul to lose heart. But, the mercy of God in Christ kept him going. The apostle took heart in the fact that he told the truth about the gospel in good times and bad.

He would not allow himself to become a captive of culture, and he trusted that in the end the truth of God's world would prevail. (2 Corinthians 4:1-2)

## THE CULTURAL CAPTIVITY OF THE GOSPEL

The cultural captivity of the gospel is still a big danger in our world. Instead of listening to what Jesus says, we are often tempted to listen to other voices, voices that distort the gospel message.

These "super apostles claim" to have the final word when it comes to religion and morality. But, when you listen to Jesus, you find that their message does not proclaim the truth. It places a veil over the truth.

It would be easy to criticize specific political and religious leaders at this point.

But, that would lead us in the wrong direction. Quite often misguided political and religious leaders are merely reflections of our own thoughts and beliefs.

The real question that we must ask is this: What is the veil that keeps *us* from seeing the glory of God? What keeps us from listening to Jesus? I thought about this question and came up with a list based upon today's lessons. (I wanted to come up with a top ten list, but alas I could only come up with eight.) Here they are:

## REASONS THE GLORY FADES

1. We worship other things. (The Golden Calf Syndrome)
2. That leads us to the second reason we cannot listen to Jesus and see the glory of God. If we worship something other than God, the presence of God becomes a source of condemnation instead of a source of grace.
3. We do not want to hear what God has to say. (The Ten Commandments put limits on the lives of God's people, and Jesus said that if anyone wanted to follow him,

they had to deny themselves and take up a cross. Both of these messages are not popular in our culture.)

4. We fail to set aside time to seek God's presence. (Jesus often set aside time to pray, and brought his disciples along with him. We need to do the same thing.)
5. Faith becomes a means of getting what we want instead of doing what God wants. We want to promote our own kingdom instead of God's kingdom.
6. We are embroiled in controversy and use our faith as a weapon instead of a means of grace. This was what happened in the Corinthian Church and many other churches.
7. We do not really trust in the power of God's word. We must have faith in the promises and goodness of God in order to really take those promises seriously.
8. And finally, the eighth reason God's glory has faded in our lives is that we really are following someone other than Jesus. We listen to the voices of those "super apostles" who claim to have the truth instead of listening to Jesus.

Has the glory faded in your life?

Do you feel far from God?

Do you feel like there is veil keeping you from seeing the presence of God?

I would suggest that one thing you can do is look up this sermon on our website and re-view this list I've made. Maybe some of these reasons for faded glory will strike a chord.

But, there's something else that we do each month that helps us restore the joy of God's salvation. We take communion.

When we realize once again that in Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven, when we realize once again that his body was broken for us and his blood was shed for us, then all these things that keep us from seeing the glory of God's grace tend to fade away.

Our lives become an expression of gratitude for the mercy of God.

And day by day we are transformed by that grace into a reflection of of God's glory.

May God help us listen to Jesus today and experience his presence as He leads us in this gracious meal.

May that glory never fade.

Amen.