

OUR GOD AND HIS GOSPEL

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By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
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Let's Begin

A.W. Tozer once said, "The message of the gospel... is the message of a new creation in the midst of an old, the message of the invasion of our human nature by the eternal life of God and the displacing of the old by the new."

Chapter three is special. At no other juncture in Paul's writings does he clearly state what Tozer meant by the Gospel being an "invasion" into our human nature, transforming us, freeing us from our old lives and giving us new lives than in 2 Corinthians 3. Paul declares Christians to be "the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God" (v. 4). Imagine it! Believers are letters written by the Spirit of God!

As we explore this chapter together, note the simple outline as our guide:

- I. The Giving of the Gospel (vv. 1-6)
- II. The Glory of the Gospel (vv. 7-18)

I. The Giving of the Gospel (vv. 1-6)

Paul opens chapter three with thoughts which are actually a continuation of chapter two. There he writes, "For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ" (2:17). Paul's concern clearly focused on *how the Gospel is to be spoken*. After distancing himself from those who "corrupt the word of God," he maintained the church of Jesus Christ must embrace the Gospel with "sincerity." Hence, for Paul, there were two ways to speak the Gospel.

The first way was to speak the Gospel with *impurity*. Impure preaching is corrupted preaching. The term "corrupt" comes from a Greek word, the root of which means "huckster." Oftentimes, merchants were base and dishonest men who deceived unwary customers, hoping to make profits on phony goods. Paul likens men who preach the Word of God impurely to men who peddle worthless wares to unsuspecting people. Preachers who water down the Word of God to make the Christian life either more appealing or "easier" to accept are sending souls to hell!

The second way to speak the Gospel is with *sincerity*. The term "sincerity" is the English translation of the Greek word *eilikrineia*; it literally means "clearness" and denotes exactly the opposite of corrupt—*purity*. The term often described the results of being examined under the intense light of the sun. No Gospel preacher may please the Lord Jesus who lacks purity in heart when he stands with the Word of God in his hand. Indeed no Gospel witness who lacks purity when he or she testifies to a personal salvation experience may please the Lord. Sincerity is basic; sincerity is necessary.

Second, after focusing on *how* the Gospel is given, Paul focuses next on *where* the Gospel is given. He writes, "Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some *others*, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you? Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: *Forasmuch as ye are* manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart" (vv. 1-3).

Reflection Connection

Were your life placed in the chapters of a book, what would people read? Could others read about God's grace, His love, your redemption? Be prepared to talk about this with the entire study group.



Letters of recommendation in the business world are common. When considering a candidate for a particular job, most employers view letters of recommendation as helpful. Even most churches are impressed with strong recommendations for candidates seeking ministry positions.

On the other hand, the Apostle queries whether the Corinthians needed recommendations from other people for his ministry among them. Think about it for a moment: it was pretty ridiculous for them—a church he planted and served as pastor for almost two years—to request letters of approval!

Paul takes their absurd expectation as an occasion to reveal a fundamental truth concerning the Gospel he preached: *the Gospel preached in sincerity and accepted in truth is written upon the heart of the recipient who believes*. And, what exactly does this mean? It means two things in particular.

First, it means an *inward change* takes place as a result of the Gospel written on our hearts through faith. Recall Paul's metaphor of an "epistle" which was, at the moment of conversion, "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God." The Author of this living letter was the Lord Jesus Himself. We are His letters. The penman who transcribed the letter was the messenger, the preacher. However, he did not proclaim his own message. Instead, the message was written in Divine ink, the ink of the Spirit of God. Whenever a person receives Christ as Savior and Lord, his or her life becomes a recording of the Spirit.

*We are
His letters.*

Second, it means an *outward credibility* takes place as a result of the Gospel written on our hearts through faith. Paul said the person converted to Christ becomes a letter of the Spirit "read and known of all men" (v. 2). The church is a corporate document, a public display for all to see. Just as pagan gods sprinkled the city of Corinth over, so the Corinthian church was visible for others to examine. No Christian lives a private life, void of public scrutiny. Moreover, the single way *outward credibility* is maintained, is through the *inward change that is a result of the Gospel written on one's life by the Spirit of God*.

Someone said it well, "The only Bible some people ever read is the life of a professing Christian." What kind of testimony are you? Tragically, far too many Christians offer such a sub-Christian life for others to read. Indeed many do not get past the first chapter!

After focusing on *how* the Gospel is given and *where* the Gospel is given, Paul now focuses on *why* the Gospel is given. He writes, "And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency *is* of God; Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (vv. 4-6). In the last chapter, Paul inquired who was sufficient to live the Christian life (2:16). His answer to the question is now clear; God is our sufficiency (v. 5). We are but instruments, or as Paul says, "able ministers."

In addition, when the Apostle places letter in contrast to spirit, he is not referring to literal words vs. the spiritual message. Rather he is speaking of the



law on tablets of stone vs. grace on the tablet of the heart. In other words, he is referencing the difference between Old Testament law and New Testament grace. No one was ever saved by the law. Law cannot save; law can only condemn. Law produces guilt and issues justice. On the other hand, spirit produces life and issues mercy. The Gospel God gives is a saving, redeeming Gospel. Jesus Christ brings resurrection life!

II. The Glory of the Gospel (vv. 7-18)

Elsewhere, Paul described the Gospel as “the glorious gospel” (1 Tim. 1:11). When we speak of a person’s salvation experience, we call it a *glorious* experience. Why? The answer must be because salvation is from beginning to end a salvation by God’s marvelous grace. The second half of chapter three describes precisely why the Gospel is glorious.

First, the glory of the Gospel is a *transcending* glory. Paul explains, “But if the ministration of death, written *and* engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which *glory* was to be done away: How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious? For if the ministration of condemnation *be* glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory. For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth. For if that which is done away *was* glorious, much more that which remaineth *is* glorious” (vv. 7-11).

When we speak of a person’s salvation experience, we call it a glorious experience.

For Paul, the Gospel of grace was in every way superior to the law. He speaks of the law as a “ministration of death” which was “engraven in stones.” And, while he does not deny the giving of the law was “glorious” (cp. Ex. 34), in comparison to the Gospel, the law was but a fading reality. The difference between law and Gospel is the difference between moon and sun.

Using three contrasts, Paul explains why the Gospel’s glory is superior. The first contrast is between *death* and *life* (vv. 7-8). While the law is an undertaker, which deals with corpses, the Gospel is a birthing center, which deals with newborns. The second contrast is between *condemnation* and *justification* (v. 9). The former leads to eternal death and separation from God forever. The latter—justification—leads to eternal life and heaven with God forever. The third contrast is between *passing* and *enduring* (vv. 10-11). Paul spoke of the present as something “to be done away” (v. 7). The glory on Moses’ face was temporary, a fading glory which resulted in fear. Moses wore a veil so the people would not see the fading nature of law. However, the glory Jesus Christ brings cannot fade away. For eternity, His glory remains steadfast and sure.

Second, the glory of the Gospel is a *transforming* glory (vv. 12-17). Paul continues, “Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech...Now



Reflection Connection

Reflect on the glory of God displayed in your life. How do others see the glory? Are there any things in your life which veils God's glory from shining through? Explain.

Golden Greek Nugget

Paul speaks of the law as “engraven” in stones (v. 7). “Engraven” is the English translation of the Greek term *entypoō*, which literally means “to enstamp,” “to carve.” Paul is surely referencing the Ten Commandments being engraved by the finger of God. In Paul’s day the term was used by the Greeks who referred to elaborate inlay carved into wooden tables. Similarly, God carves into our hearts His own stamp of approval, branding us forever as His children. Owned by Him, the entire world knows it by the lives we live.

the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (vv. 12, 17). The Gospel is glorious, Paul insists, because of its transforming power! When a person is saved, the Lord changes his or her life forever. Glory is placed into the believer’s life (cp. Col. 1:27).

The transforming glory the Gospel brings to the believer *begins in salvation* (vv. 12-17). Paul references Moses’ dealings with Israel when he descended from the mount (Ex. 34). The presence of God changed his countenance so radically, he wore a veil. However, according to Paul, the veil was to cover the fading glory rather than glory’s brightness.

Similarly, the veil is still covering people’s hearts today. In other words, their “minds” are “blinded” (v. 14). The result is callousness, a loss of understanding. Unbelievers cannot see the glory of Jesus Christ. Only the Spirit of the living God can remove the veil for people to see the wonder and glory of the cross and the salvation Jesus gives through it. Moses went into the presence of God and the veil was removed (v. 16). The same is true today. When a person comes to Christ, the veil is taken away.

The transforming glory *continues in sanctification*. Paul writes, “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, *even as by the Spirit of the Lord*” (v. 18). In one flawless sweep, Paul explains the believer’s progress in the Christian life, our growth in Biblical righteousness.

The glory was reflected on Moses’ face. However, the glory was only skin-deep, so to speak. The glory of Jesus Christ—the glory written by the Spirit on the human heart—is an inner glory, a glory displayed in character. When a believer is saved, a new capability of understanding is written on the heart. He or she may “behold as in glass” the mirror of God’s Word (cp. Acts 7:55-56). Hence, we are changed (Rom. 12:2), transformed by the glory of Christ Himself. In addition, this is a lifelong process—“from glory to glory,” as the Apostle puts it.

Unbelievers cannot see the glory of Jesus Christ.

Wrap Up

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is glorious! It possesses a transcending glory, a transforming glory. In addition, the glory is one which is eternal. It never fades away. The greatest thing of all is, the glorious Gospel which we find in Scripture is a Gospel of grace, a Gospel given to us by God Himself. We cannot earn its blessings or gain, in our own efforts, its glory. Instead it is a glorious Gospel of grace. God gives the Gospel and all the blessings it bestows on the one who believes. Will you today believe the Gospel? Will you turn from your sin and trust Christ?

