

# Session 5

## THE IMAGE OF FREEDOM

*2 Corinthians 3:12-18*

### Memory Verse

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

– 2 CORINTHIANS 3:17, CSB

## The Image of Freedom

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** Sanctification means being transformed into Christ's image, including freedom from condemnation for sin.

An article posted by Psychology Today in August 2014, entitled “Monsters in the Mirror: No Really, Literal Monsters,” investigated a phenomenon known as the Troxler effect. The Troxler effect has to do with how the brain reacts when one's attention is strictly focused on a particular point for an extended period. The article's author, Maclen Stanley, explained:

*These surprising results beg the question—how can staring into a mirror possibly cause our faces to shape shift into unknown and potentially terrifying deformations? The answer lies in our brain's penchant for selective processing. In simple terms, our brains can only handle so much information at a time. Right now, as you're reading this article, you probably aren't noticing the feeling of your clothes against your skin, the pattern of your breath, or any of the delicate sounds around you. Your brain simply turns a blind eye to these various stimuli in order to better focus on what it deems most important (right now, these words). Our sense of sight works no differently. When faced with an abundance of visual stimulation, only some of which is considered relevant, our brains will tune out the non-relevant parts.*

*This phenomenon is termed the Troxler Effect, discovered long ago in 1804 by a physician and philosopher named Ignaz Troxler. It is this effect that underlies many of the optical illusions you can find on the Internet. Stare at a red dot in the middle of a circle for long enough and suddenly the outside circle fades away and disappears. This is because your brain has deemed the outer edges irrelevant and it has lessened its processing burden by simply fading it out of our perceptual domain.<sup>1</sup>*

What a person focuses on intently has incredible power to obscure everything else around it. For the Christian, focusing on the right Object is fruitful and glorious. The opposite is equally tragic and destructive. Being transformed into the image of Christ necessitates that the person of Christ be the consistently central focus of the Christian's life.

**?** Describe a time in your life when prolonged, deep focus on one thing was required. How did you prepare for the prolonged focus? What sort of distractions do you remember threatening your concentration?

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**?** What items or activities can help a person keep Jesus as a focus throughout the week? What is your experience with this? What differences can you tell in your attitude or perspective when you miss those prompts?

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## Session Summary

In this week's session, Paul wrote to the church in Corinth regarding the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant in Jesus' blood. To highlight the dramatic difference in the new covenant, Paul pointed to the difference between the veiled glory Moses experienced and the lasting glory of Christ that believers experience through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Within that abiding glory, Christians are transformed into the image of Christ.

### 1. The Veiled Glory of Moses (2 Cor. 3:12-14)

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is his most disjointed letter to any of the churches to which he wrote. Shifts in tone and focus are abrupt, reflecting the long history of Paul's sometimes combative relationship with the Corinthian believers. Between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, there was at least one other letter referred to as the "severe letter"

(2 Cor. 2:3-4), in which Paul strongly confronted a number of matters over which the Corinthians were slow to repent, and also defended his own apostleship from critics. While 2 Corinthians was intended to express relief for the growth of the Corinthian congregation, Paul still strongly appealed to a small group of unrepentant individuals who had fallen victim to Judaizer false teachers. Those false teachers advocated the necessity of adhering to certain Jewish customs in addition to following Christ, in order to be proper Christians. So in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul contrasted the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, strongly stating how the ministry of Christ and those who follow Him is more glorious than that of Moses.

In the verses immediately prior (vv. 7-11), Paul began his argument of comparative glory. Paul utilized Exodus 34:29-35, which tells of Moses' face glowing from the glory of the Lord after meeting with Him. Paul's argument was for the surpassing glory of the "ministry of the Spirit" over the "ministry that brought death" based on the fact that the old was set aside for the sake of the new. This is the context of the phrase, "Since, then . . ." in verse 12. Because believers in the New Covenant have such a hope of future glory, or glory that is yet to be fully realized, they can act with great boldness. This hope that is unique to believers of the New Covenant is based on the permanence of the glory of the new covenant.

**?** What would you say is the overall impression the Bible gives readers about Moses? What passages come to mind when you answer? How does it make you feel to know, then, that the covenant for Christians today is infinitely greater than that of Moses?

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**?** Application: How should the Christian's relationship with Jesus serve as an abiding source of boldness and openness in gospel conversations? How would you explain the "hope for future glory" in Christ to someone? Why do you think it's important to have a clear idea of what that glory is?

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Reading through the pages of the Old Testament, Moses was referred to as a friend of God, with whom God spoke face-to-face! For the New Covenant Christian to have a greater hope for glory than Moses during the Exodus 34 account would have been difficult for an Israelite to hear; it was equally difficult for Paul to say at one point in his life. According to Paul Barnett, Paul “suggested (by implication) that they [Israelites] had no hope, since whatever ‘glory’ there had been in that covenant, it was veiled from them. Now he will emphasize the dire circumstances of the people. Their hardened minds were responsible for their blindness to the eschatological glory.”<sup>2</sup> Paul used Moses’ veil as a metaphor for the Israelites’ spiritual blindness. Due to the hardening of their minds, they were unable to perceive that the ministry of Moses (including his glowing countenance from being in God’s presence) was pointing forward to the surpassing ministry of Christ.

## 2. Finally, Seeing Clearly (2 Cor. 3:15-16)

In verse 15, Paul repeated a significant amount of what he had written in verse 14 in order to set up a contrast between those who have turned to the Lord and those who have not. As Barnett explains, between the two verses, “in common are (1) until today, (2) when the old covenant/Moses is read, and (3) their minds/hearts are veiled. . . . Paul had good reason to speak in this dramatic manner. He himself had sat in the synagogue Sabbath after Sabbath listening to the reading of the old covenant/Moses, but blinded to its glory, which pointed toward Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Paul understood at a painfully first-hand level what it meant to be blinded to Christ through the hardening of his mind. After all, the manner in which the Bible reader is introduced to Paul is as he was mentioned holding the coats of those who stoned Stephen for his proclamation about Christ. The very next mention is Paul’s pursuit of anyone who claimed the name of Christ.

The element that ties verses 15 and 16 together is the use of “today.” Paul underscored the present condition. What he highlighted with Moses from centuries earlier was still in effect thousands of years later and on the other side of the Messiah’s coming. The veil was still in place for all those who had not turned to the Lord. They could not understand the richness of the promises of the Old Covenant pointing to Jesus until their eyes had been opened by Jesus.

**?** Consider the life of Paul. For his critics, what impact do you think it would have for Paul to be able to speak of the veil over the heart from his own experience?

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**?** Application: Describe a time in which you engaged someone in a gospel conversation and it seemed they had a veil over their heart. How does Paul's explanation here help/encourage Christians to continue having gospel conversations, regardless of the responses of others?

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The only solution for the veiled heart that is hardened to the things of God is turning to the Lord. Interestingly, in his own experience, Paul had the blindness in his own life removed by an encounter with Jesus that left him physically blind. But when Ananias touched his eyes and the scales fell off, he saw with more than physical eyes. Paul desired the same experience for those still veiled. Barnett says, "Paul is saying, in effect, that only as Israelites turn to Christ, on the basis of the preaching of the gospel, will they discern the inner meaning and glory of the old covenant. Apart from Christ those who remain under that old covenant remain veiled to the eschatological glory to which it pointed."<sup>4</sup>

### 3. The Image of Freedom (2 Cor. 3:17-18)

Paul called the Lord "Spirit," which was in contrast to the Old Covenant that was described earlier as "ministry that brought death, chiseled in letters on stones" (v. 7). While the Old Covenant that had been fulfilled and surpassed was now, effectively, dead, the New Covenant was a "ministry of the Spirit" (v. 8). The Spirit connected the New Covenant with the living God who gives life and freedom.

The freedom that Paul mentioned does not refer to some sort of personal license to cast off restraint now that the consequences of death have been destroyed by Christ. In fact, this sort of moral carelessness and licentiousness was one of the issues with the Corinthian church that Paul had rebuked throughout his history of correspondence with them. Barnett explains that this freedom was "from the 'condemnation' arising from

inability through ‘the flesh’ to keep the Law of God. Furthermore, it is a Spirit-empowered freedom . . . The new covenant as promised by the prophets was not a covenant of lawlessness, but a covenant under which the people would be moved by the Spirit to ‘follow [God’s] decrees and be careful to keep [His] laws.’<sup>5</sup>

**?** How is “freedom” often defined in our community? What similarities or differences do you notice between that and Paul’s definition?

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**?** Application: How does having the veil lifted, so to speak, help Christians in becoming like Christ? Who in your life models walking with Christ most consistently?

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Verse 18 serves as a summary of the section in 2 Corinthians that starts in 2:14 dealing with New Covenant ministry. Paul used a verb translated as “looking,” which occurs only in this verse in the entire New Testament. Paul intentionally phrased this verse to communicate what it meant to be transformed into the same image. Barnett explains that Paul’s verb meant that New Covenant believers saw the glory of the Lord indirectly “as it were, in ‘the face of Jesus Christ.’”<sup>6</sup> Such a transformation was to be a morphing into the moral and spiritual likeness of the glorified Christ. Barnett continues, “It is transformation into that Christ-likeness which will be ours in the end time, when He will be the ‘firstborn among many brothers’ (Rom. 8:29).”<sup>7</sup>

The transformation as described by Paul was to be from “glory to glory.” With all of the mention of glory in the passage, the procedural use of the term here could be confusing. What Paul had in mind were the boundaries within which the transformation was to occur—a beginning and an ending. The first glory, then, was the day of salvation for the Christian in which, as Paul mentioned earlier, “turned to the Lord.” This is the moment in which the Christian’s face is unveiled. The latter glory, then, at the conclusion of the transformation is that future moment of Christ’s Second Coming in which the Christian will be glorified in Christ.

## Conclusion

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians addressed incredibly grand theological topics. These verses offer great insight for Christians today.

First, the hope of Christians lies solely in the permanence and presence of Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit. While those words may seem overly theological, they are crucial. The only source of hope for the Christian is the truth that Christ will never leave or forsake him or her.

Second, persistence in gospel conversations is crucial. Until someone "turns to the Lord," he or she cannot appreciate the depths of truth that believers are so invigorated by. Since Scripture is clear that no one can come to God unless the Holy Spirit draws him or her, sometimes even the most clear explanation of the gospel does not lead to immediate salvation. From the human perspective, this can be very frustrating and even heartbreaking. Yet to a certain degree, this is to be expected. Be faithful!

Third, the transformation of the Christians begins at salvation and is finished in eternity. For the Christian, as long as he or she draws oxygen, the Holy Spirit is still moving toward Christlikeness. Further, there are no life stages or life circumstances that pre-empt the call to transformation. Christians are called to transformation during all the demands of life, until we see Him face-to-face.

Fourth, holiness matters. Christians pursue holiness out of gratitude to the One who provided that holiness which no person could earn or deserve on their own. The freedom that accompanies such grace must lead to transformation under the leading of the Holy Spirit.

 Why is it important for the Christian to remember that the Holy Spirit of God is always with him or her? How might this affect daily living?

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**?** In what area of your life do you perceive the Holy Spirit prompting you toward growth in Christ most right now? Who prays for you and with you as you pursue transformation? Describe a time when the prayers and encouragement of another were helpful to you in the transformation process.

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**?** Who are you currently praying for to have the veil of spiritual blindness removed? How can you engage them in gospel conversations this week? Who have you given up on with whom you might need to rekindle a conversation?

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**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Christ's atoning work provides freedom from condemnation for all who call Him Savior.

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** The Spirit-empowered freedom believers enjoy allows them to follow Christ and continue His ministry in the world.



# FOR NEXT WEEK

## The Image of Righteousness

### Main Passages

- Ephesians 4:17-24

### Session Outline

1. Farewell to the Old Life (Ephesians 4:17-18)
2. Contrasting the Old Life and the New Life (Ephesians 4:19-21)
3. Living the New Life (Ephesians 4:22-24)

### Memorize

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

- 2 Corinthians 3:17, CSB

### Daily Readings

- Monday - 2 Corinthians 3:12-18
- Tuesday - Galatians 5:1
- Wednesday - John 8:31-36
- Thursday - Galatians 5:13
- Friday - Romans 8:1-4
- Saturday - 1 Peter 2:16

### References

- <sup>1</sup>Stanley, Maclen. "Monsters in the Mirror: No Really, Literal Monsters." PsychologyToday.com. Accessed 3/30/2019. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/making-sense-chaos/201408/monsters-in-the-mirror-no-really-literal-monsters>.
- <sup>2</sup>Barnett, Paul. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid.