

## Lourdes Bible Studies



## 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians

### *Written on the Heart*

#### **Read 2 Cor 3:1-3**

It seems that Paul's opponents in Corinth have questioned his authority and credibility. Perhaps these opponents (Paul calls them "super apostles" in chapter 11), brought their own "letters of recommendation", a common practice, and were asking why Paul had not done the same. Paul's answer that the Corinthians themselves are his letter of recommendation strikes on two levels. The first is that Paul is the founder of the Church at Corinth, so if the Corinthian church questions Paul's legitimacy, they also call into question their own. Paul's love for and pride in the Corinthian church is well expressed in his first letter: "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are *you* not my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

The second part of Paul's response can only be appreciated when we understand his image of the letter having been written on hearts.

#### **Read Jeremiah 31:31-34**

Here in Jeremiah, the sign of the "new covenant" will be the law of God written on the heart. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God offers a similar prophecy: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and be careful to observe my ordinances."<sup>2</sup>

Israel's problem from the first was a heart problem<sup>3</sup>; they had the law, and many blessings besides, but the heart was corrupt. Jeremiah and Ezekiel conceive the problem as one of the law being written, but not enfleshed within Israel.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:2 (emphasis mine)

<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 36:26-27

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6, Psalm 4:2, 78:8, Jeremiah 17:1,9

<sup>4</sup> See Richard B. Hays *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* Yale University Press, New Haven, CT. 1989 pg. 129

Paul is clearly evoking both Jeremiah and Ezekiel; his mention of the Spirit and his contrasting of stone tablets with fleshy tablets. It is important to note that the “stone tablets” are the Ten Commandments; Exodus and Deuteronomy refer to the 10 commandments being written on tablets of stone.<sup>5</sup> With the outpouring of the Spirit of God through his ministry, Paul appeals to the Corinthians own experience – “is not the law written on your hearts”?

If we consider carefully what Paul is saying, his claim is quite striking; that within this small and chaotic church within Corinth, God’s promise to give mankind a new heart *has been fulfilled*. Paul’s confidence is such that he sees this *communio* as a letter that can be “read by all”, an enfleshed communion of love, visible to the world.

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*Describe what the differences might be between a church where the law of God is written, and one where it is enfleshed. How do you think a Church becomes a place where Christian love is embodied and not merely explicated?*

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Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger articulates this reality better than anyone:

The Church is *communio*; she is God’s communing with men in Christ and hence the communing of men with one another – and, in consequence, sacrament, sign, instrument of salvation. The Church is the celebration of the Eucharist; the Eucharist is the Church; they do not simply stand side by side; they are one and the same.<sup>6</sup>

The church *has* teachings and buildings and service projects; but she *is* communion; this is her deepest identity, and where there is no *koinonia*, the church cannot be herself. In connection to the Eucharist, it might be helpful here to note that what transforms the bread into the body of Christ is the *epiclesis*, the calling down of the Spirit. Similarly with us, unless God’s Spirit transforms us, there can be no communion – the Church of God is created and renewed only with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who enfleshes the Gospel in the hearts of men and women.

## *Sufficiency from God*

### **Read 2 Cor 3:4-6**

What makes Paul credible as an apostle is not qualifications, but the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which Paul assumes the Corinthians have experienced firsthand. Notice that in this passage, Paul explicitly ties together the Spirit, and the New Covenant, reinforcing his allusions to Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36.

## *Letter & Spirit*

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 31:18, 34:1, 34:4, Deuteronomy 5:22

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1987 pg. 53

Here we come to one of the most misunderstood passages in the New Testament. Depending on your translation, 2 Cor. 3:6 says something like: “the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life”. During the polemics of the reformation (and the wars that have followed), this passage has been enlisted to drive a wedge between on the Spirit and law in general, as well as to condemn the mosaic law of the old covenant; which is hastily equated to Catholic views of “works”.

St. Paul’s point is more subtle. Significantly, Paul does not use his normal word for the Old Testament law, which is *nomos*, rather, Paul uses *gramma* – meaning letter, document, or as the RSV translates: “written code”. Richard Hays helps us to avoid misreading the text:

The term *code* also might be taken to imply that the problem with the old covenant is its narrow, legalistic character, which is not Paul’s point in 2 Corinthians 3. The problem with this old covenant is precisely that it is (only) written, lacking the power to effect the obedience that it demands. Since it has no power to transform the readers, it can only stand as a witness to their condemnation. That is why Paul remarks aphoristically, “the script kills, but the Spirit gives life” As Paul’s earlier allusion to Ezekiel 36 and 37 indicates, the life-giving power of the Spirit is shown forth precisely in the creation of the enfleshed eschatological community. That is the sense in which the Corinthians are a letter from Christ: they are a living instantiation of the word of God.<sup>7</sup>

Hays uses some technical terms in the above passage, but his insight is clear, the Holy Spirit creates new hearts, a new communion of men and women, who love God’s law and keep it; something the old covenant was powerless to effect. This communion of love in the Spirit is the Church in her deepest identity.

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*Have you seen attempts to create Christian communion that fail?  
How can 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians help the Church to become more fully herself?  
How do we as individual Christians find real communion with others? Are there conditions?*

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This explanation is strengthened when we look at other places where St. Paul uses the term *gramma*:

In both texts [Romans 2:27-29 & Romans 7:6] the point is that possession of the written prescription of the Law is of no value for salvation if not accompanied by obedience to what the Law teaches. In Rom. 2:27 mere possession of the Law apart from obedience (*dia grammatos*) leads to or is the instrument by which transgression of the Law results in judgement.<sup>8</sup>

Here we see directly a source of the assertion of the Church Fathers that “the Law was given that grace might be sought, grace was given that the law might be fulfilled.”

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<sup>7</sup> Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 131

<sup>8</sup> Scott Hafemann *Paul, Moses and the History of Israel*. Paternoster Biblical Monographs Waynesboro, GA 2005. Pg. 177

## Greater Splendor

### Read 2 Corinthians 3:7-11

Paul now moves to compare his ministry with that of Moses; and here we should again here that Moses, like Paul, was inadequate for the mission God gave him. However God's movement in history moves from lesser to greater, from shadow to reality. Notice also that Paul speaks of the dispensation of condemnation – this is simply a reiteration of “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”. It is not that the old covenant was bad, but that it couldn't effect what it demanded.

There is a detailed background to what Paul is saying, and we need to know at least part of the story.

### Read Exodus 34:29-35

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*Why do you think Moses put a veil over his face?*

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Twice in the section we read a moment ago, Paul says that the glory on Moses' face “faded” (3:7, 3:11). In Exodus however, we are never told that the glory on Moses' face faded. The Greek word Paul employs here is *katargeo*, again, Richard Hays comes to our assistance. “The verb *katargein*, which recurs in verses 11, 13 and 14...does not mean ‘to fade.’ It is a word that Paul uses with some regularity, and in his lexicon it always means to nullify, to abrogate, to invalidate, or to render ineffectual.”<sup>9</sup>

So Paul doesn't really say that Moses' glory faded, but that it was nullified or rendered ineffectual; this begs the question – why would his glory be nullified?

### Who shall enter the Presence of God?

The key to understanding why Moses veils his face is that God's presence is salvation for the upright, but destruction for the wicked. There are a host of biblical passages testifying to this reality (e.g. Gen 3:14, Ex. 3:5, Is 6:5-7, Ps. 24, Heb 12:14, Lk 5:8). The story of Moses veiling his face follows in sequence after Israel's worship of the Golden Calf in chapter 32, and although all of Israel was supposed to encounter God, now his presence must be mediated through Moses. Even the glory of Moses face is dangerous for Israel following their idolatry. Scott Hafemann comments:

In her “stiff-necked” condition Israel cannot encounter the glory of God without being destroyed. But Moses also wears the veil in recognition that the covenant has been restored in spite of their sinful state...<sup>10</sup>

Moses' veil marks his *mediating* role between God and his people. Israel cannot bear God's glory on the face of Moses because of her sinfulness, and this is what was being “rendered ineffectual” – the

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<sup>9</sup> Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. 133-4

<sup>10</sup> Hafemann, *Paul, Moses and the History of Israel*. 231

veil allows for God's glory in Israel's midst while mercifully preserving her from destruction in her sinful state.

*From one degree of glory to another...*

### **Read 2 Corinthians 3:12-18**

In the new covenant, the veil is taken away (which has echoes of the temple veil being torn from top to bottom...but that's for another time), which means we no longer need it.

In the new covenant, the Spirit of God has enabled us to truly become what Israel was always meant to be, and in turning to Christ, all of us, (not merely one prophet) encounter the glory of God. Notice how the Glory *changes* us. With the outpouring of the Spirit, we are freed to become like Christ, to be his presence in the world, to leave our old life behind.

After a long study, Balthasar has the final word:

God's glory, as it appears in the world – supremely in Christ – is not something static that could be observed by a neutral investigator. It manifests itself only through the personal involvement whereby God himself comes forth to do battle and is both victor and vanquished. If this glory is to come within our range at all, an analogous initiative is called for on our part. Revelation is a battlefield. Those who do battle on it can only be believers and theologians, provided they have equipped themselves with the whole armor of God. (Eph. 6:11)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo Drama IV: The Action*, 12