

“Fortunate Ministers”

2 Corinthians 3:1-18

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Now, we have a peculiar problem facing us in our text this morning. In my judgment, the burden of Paul’s remarks is quite simple and straightforward, but it is usually missed and another interpretation is placed on his words. That interpretation, deeply mistaken in my opinion, derives not so much from what Paul actually says so much as from what commentators *think he must have meant*. And their opinion as to what Paul must have meant is due to a longstanding prejudice against the Old Testament, the first thirty-nine books of the Bible, and the law of God contained therein, a prejudice that has been deeply fixed in much of Christian thought from the time of the church fathers.

I worked on this text for many months back in the mid-1970s, as part of the research for my dissertation. I have lived for some 25 years now with what I came to believe then was a much more sensible account of Paul’s actual words and an interpretation that did not openly conflict with what Paul says elsewhere in his writings. In that time I have read the work of many others on the same text, talked with many others about the right interpretation of 2 Cor. 3, and the result of all of that is that I am more certain of this interpretation of Paul’s language than I was when I first seriously studied the chapter years ago.

However, the debate over the proper interpretation of the chapter leaves me with a problem when it comes to preaching it. I could simply ignore the problem and tell you what I think as if it were what you would find in any commentator you might think to read. But, I want you to know what others say about the text, in part, precisely because I *don’t want you to think that way about the chapter*. It is almost as important to me that you *not* take the common view as it is that you take the one I am going to set before you as Paul’s meaning.

But how should I present the case? That is a problem. The text is complicated by a series of interpretative problems, on each of which has been spilt a sizable quantity of ink through the years. I could take four or five Sunday mornings and work through the text line by line and deal with each problem in turn. But, if I did that, I’m sure that I would lose most of you, bury you under a mountain of detail, and accomplish little of real use. So, what I propose to do is to give you a broad outline of the two viewpoints on the text and then summarize the main questions of interpretation. You will have to keep consulting the text as we go. This is not going to be quite like most sermons here on a Sunday morning, but the problem is created by the text and the history of its interpretation.

In general then, one interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3 has Paul contrasting his ministry with the inferior ministry of the Old Testament, of Moses in particular, and, as it were along the way, taking a swipe at his opponents in Corinth – the Jewish teachers, the false teachers, who had showed up recently to undermine Paul’s influence and message and against which 2 Corinthians is written – by linking them (this is Paul’s strategy according to this interpretation), he links them to the outdated, antiquated message and ministry of the Old Testament. The problem then, with those bad men in Corinth, is that they stand with Moses instead of with Christ and his apostle!

No! No! A thousand times No! Read Paul's letters from beginning to end and you will never find him teaching that there was something inferior about Moses' message. It was nothing more nor less than "the gospel" as the author of Hebrews also says. Moses' message was Paul's message about salvation through faith in Christ, as the great apostle explicitly says in Rom. chapter 10. And, he never criticizes the judaizers because of their loyalty to Moses and the law of God. Paul is more loyal to Moses and to God's law than they are! His argument always and everywhere is that *if they were truly loyal to Moses and the law* they would be supporters of his gospel preaching. They would be champions of the gospel freedom for the Gentiles as he was. Their problem was not, in Paul's view, that though their understanding had been the correct one for 1400 years, the coming of Jesus Christ had changed things and they weren't getting with the new program. Never! Paul never says that! Their problem according to Paul was that these people were not listening to their own Scripture, they were not listening to Moses, they were not being faithful to the Word of God, the message of which had *always* been from the beginning salvation by grace, justification by faith, and the redemption of sinners solely by the blood and righteousness of the Son of God.

What Paul says in 2 Cor. 3, I suggest to you is something very different. What Paul says in 2 Cor. 3 is simply that *he has been more fortunate* than Moses. Not because he has a better message to preach; he never says that and he doesn't say it here. But because it fell to him to preach it to a community from which many responded in faith. Moses had the misfortune to preach the gospel to an unbelieving generation. And, along the way, by making this point, Paul takes a swipe at the false teachers in Corinth by linking them to the long history of Jewish unbelief. They are just like the Jews of Moses' day, who hear the gospel, who spoil it, who corrupt it, who add to it, subtract from it, misshape it by their lack of living faith in Jesus Christ. In 11:4 of 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks of these false teachers as bringing "another Jesus" and "another gospel," which certainly suggests that these teachers were bringing a message that was in some ways similar to that message taught by the judaizers among the churches of Galatia and to which Paul responds in his great letter to the Galatians. And this had been his point in that letter. The judaizers were not like Moses, they were like unbelieving Israel.

So, what precisely is Paul saying in 2 Cor. 3. Well, first of all, as always in interpreting a passage of the Bible, you take note of its context. What is Paul talking about in this entire section? As everyone notices, there is a change in tone at chapter 2:14 and the verses that follow, the verses we considered last Lord's Day morning. Prompted probably by the report that Titus had brought from Corinth that the Corinthians, by and large, had responded well to Paul's letter (the letter we know as 1 Corinthians), a response that Paul was very much in doubt about, there is a spontaneous outburst of praise and thanksgiving and confidence and joy on the Apostle's part. Praise and confidence. The larger context in this part of the letter, from 2:14 to 7:14, is a description of Paul's ministry and his confidence in the results of that ministry in Corinth, his joy in his assurance that these people really have closed with the Lord Jesus Christ, have been made new creatures in him by living faith. In 2:15-16, as we saw last week, he speaks of the double effect of gospel preaching: the salvation of God's elect and the condemnation of those who will not believe. But the Corinthians were among the former, the elect, and to them he had been not the aroma of death, but the aroma of life. That's Paul's happy confidence.

He returns to the very same thought at the end of this particular passage, on the far side of 2 Cor. 3, when in 4:2-5 he speaks again of this double effect of the gospel. Even in his ministry, he admits, the gospel is sometimes veiled and he is sometimes an aroma of death. That he was not in Corinth is what he is talking about. What is more, though it would take too long to demonstrate this, there are many connections of thought and vocabulary between the argument of chapter three and the paragraphs that come immediately before it and after it. In other words, this idea of the gospel's double effect, of being an aroma of life or an aroma of death, is something of an inclusio: it begins the argument and it ends the argument and in so doing it tells us what the argument in between is all about. Paul's gospel is sometime veiled and people won't believe and he has to shake the dust of his feet off against a town or a people; but it also produces light in those who are being saved, and it has produced that light in the hearts and lives of the Corinthians. You'll notice that all through this passage Paul uses the first person plural – we, us, and our – he is including the Corinthians in everything he is talking about regarding salvation.

That leads us to what I think should be our general understanding of Paul's point. When Paul is contrasting his ministry with that of Moses, he is not differentiating the two ministries in terms of their message or their character – one more legal and one more gracious as you often hear. The message and the content were the same. They were both preachers of the gospel of Christ. He makes that clear enough. Jesus makes it clear enough in his teaching. No, the difference between the two ministries was rather *their effect, their outcome*. Moses preached – his listeners wouldn't believe, he and his ministry were an aroma of death. Paul, on the other hand, at least in Corinth, preached and his listeners believed, at least in large numbers. He had seen new and eternal life in Christ bloom in that pagan city. He and his ministry had been an aroma of life. That is the basis of the joy and confidence with which he speaks in this entire section of the letter. Titus' report had laid his fears to rest: his Corinthian converts really were saved, they really would come through this difficulty, Christ had really been written upon their hearts.

The chapter begins with Paul arguing that, far from needing letters of recommendation – which apparently the false teachers had come to Corinth armed with, and then had made a point of wondering why Paul did not have any such letters himself – far from needing letters of recommendation, *the Corinthian believers themselves were Paul's letter of recommendation*. They were the proof of his divine commission, of his authority as a preacher of the gospel, of the Spirit's working in and through his ministry.

That is why he is and can refer to himself in v. 6 as a minister of *the new covenant*. In the Bible, "new covenant," a term taken from Jeremiah 31:31-34, refers to real salvation, real faith, real forgiveness as opposed to the situation that prevailed in Jeremiah's day when the people, by and large, though they belonged to Israel, though they were circumcised, though they were religious, though they were offering the sacrifices proscribed in the law of God, though they certainly thought themselves saved, they were not saved because they did not have living faith. Jeremiah's complaint at the end of chapter 9 of his great prophecy is that his whole ministry is being conducted for a people who are circumcised, but uncircumcised. They had the outer rite. They lacked the living reality. They were not in true covenant with God. The new covenant is true salvation as opposed to its false imitation in the church. The new covenant is what Moses had but what his contemporaries did not; it is what Jeremiah was a participant in but had his

contemporaries were not. It is what the believers in Corinth had been ushered into but what the false teachers in Corinth had never had the experience of.

In v. 14 we have the only mention of the term “old covenant” in the Bible. And there it is mentioned in connection with the unbelieving Jews who do not believe the gospel because their minds are made dull and their hearts are covered with a veil so they cannot see the glory of Christ. The message is everywhere they look in the pages of their scriptures, but they just don’t get it. Their hearts have not been opened. These folk read that history, the history of Israel in the wilderness, the history of the broken covenant, her unbelief, her rebellion against God, and still they don’t get it. People in Israel, the people of the Jews in Jesus day, they looked back on the wilderness as their golden age. Can you believe it? They really did! They saw that as the summit of their history as a nation when the Bible made perfectly clear to them that that was an unbelieving generation that stood under the judgment of God for her want of faith. Still, today, they do not realize that it is by faith and not by works that one is made right with God. That is the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant: the difference between people in the church who think themselves saved when they are not, people who have the outward form of faith and belong to the church but do not really love the Lord and whose sins are not really forgiven, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, people who have come to Christ with true and living faith and received the forgiveness of their sins and the promise of eternal life. This is, by the way, the same difference between the two covenants that Paul elaborates in Galatians 3 and 4.

Paul is not talking about the difference between what we call the OT and what we call the NT, he is talking about the difference between people who, though they are in the church, are not saved and people who are saved. We have the old covenant with us today as surely as Jeremiah had it in his day and as surely as Paul saw it in the judaizers of his day. How many people in the Christian church today, of those 2 billion people, one-third of the human race who call themselves Christians, how many of all of those people who have received the sacrament of baptism, how many of all of those people who, if when asked, will say they are “Christians,” how many of them have true and living faith in Jesus Christ? How many of them are in covenant with the Lord and are walking in fellowship with him? How many of them are in possession of the salvation purchased by the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ? All who do not, who do not have this living faith in Christ, surely the large majority, are people of the old covenant, not people of the new – the broken covenant, not the living covenant that God establishes with us when we believe in his son.

You see, in Paul, the contrast between “old” and “new” which appears at several different places in his letters in regard to different things, is never a contrast between Moses and his epoch and Christ and his. It’s never a contrast between an earlier epoch in the history of salvation and a latter one. It is always a contrast, an absolute contrast between death and life, between no salvation and salvation, between the wrath of God and peace with God. When Paul speaks of the “old man” he doesn’t mean the believer in the Old Testament, he means the unsaved man, the man who is still in his sins. And when he speaks of the “new man”, he is talking about the man who has been made a new creature by the spirit of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul uses this contrast between old and new always with the same sense, the same burden as he uses it here.

All of that is confirmed by the very important contrast that Paul likens to the contrast between the old covenant and the new covenant, the contrast between the letter and the spirit, which is introduced in v. 6: “the letter kills, the spirit gives life.”

The interpretation of that contrast between letter and spirit is a very important piece of the interpretation of the chapter as a whole because Paul links that contrast to the others he makes throughout the chapter, because it comes both at the beginning of his argument and at the end, and then because we find the same contrast between letter and spirit in other places in Paul’s writings and so it is easier for us to determine what he means by it. We can compare one text with another. The contrast between the new covenant and the old covenant is the same as that between the spirit and the letter. And what is that contrast?

Again there are, broadly, two different interpretations. One sees the letter as a reference to the law and spirit as a reference to the gospel. Sees the letter as a reference to the legal religion of the Old Testament revealed to Moses and the spirit as a reference to the more spiritual gracious administration of the New Testament. The law condemns and the spirit gives life. The law is associated with the old, outdated and antiquated epoch and the spirit with the new epoch introduced by Christ and his apostles.

The punishing problem with this interpretation is that in Paul, very clearly, the law is only death and condemnation *for the unbeliever*. What is more, as Paul clearly says many times, the ministry of the law to kill and condemn, is a ministry that it continues today. If the law condemned and killed the unbeliever in Moses’ day, it does no less so in our day. Through the law comes the knowledge of sin Paul says to a largely Gentile audience in his letter to the Romans. It did so in Paul’s own life as he tells us in Romans 7. The law killed him so that Christ could make him alive again. And the law has killed – either by killing self-confidence and leading to faith in Christ or by publishing the condemnation of those who will not believe – it has killed through the ages ever since. As one scholar puts it: “The problem...is not that the law of God is B.C. in time, but it is B.C. in faith. Man must...turn by faith to Christ, or his reading of Moses and his obeying of the law will be all veiled.” He will never get it. He will never understand what he is being told. He will never see its implications for his own life and for his own salvation. The simple fact of the matter, and one that that interpretation has never at all adequately dealt with, is that if by “the letter kills” in v.6, Paul means the law of Moses and the epoch of Moses and the religion as it was revealed by Moses, then how was anyone saved in the days before the coming of the Son of God? If Moses’ message was a message of death, than how did anyone find life?

No, Paul doesn’t think Moses’ message was a message of death except that in this particular case it happened to be because no one believed. There are two ways to look at the law and the gospel, and those two ways can be referred to as “the letter” and “the spirit.” The letter is the law and the gospel separated from faith and from grace, the whole message of the Bible denatured as it were – twisted, corrupted, made into something very different from what it actually is – the message that is believed, in fact, by the largest number of people who call themselves Christians today and who occupy the seats of Christian houses of worship every Sunday of every week of

every year all over the world. That's the letter. The spirit is true salvation through faith, the true renewal of the heart and the mind and the life that the Holy Spirit alone can bring.

You see, Paul thinks the ministry of the letter, Moses' ministry, he thinks it was a good ministry. It came with glory, as he says in vv. 7-11, proving that the Lord was in it. Because the message was the right message, the true law of God and the true gospel of Christ. *It had glory all over it!* But it was "letter" because the people turned that message – as generations have ever since – into a way of self-confidence and self-assertion and self-salvation. They did it in the wilderness in Moses' day, they did it in Jeremiah's day, they did it in Jesus' day – why, after all was it the church the institution that crucified the Lord of Glory but that they had so corrupted and so misunderstood the message that had been revealed to them in the word of God. And now again, immediately upon the establishment of this new generation of the church the same error, the same corruption, the same old covenant was making its appearance again. It is nothing wrong with what Moses taught, Paul taught the same thing; the problem was with what the people, in their unbelief, did with Moses' message. Fact is, the same thing happened sometimes with what Paul taught, he admits that. But he has hopes that to the Corinthians he has been a minister of the spirit and not of the letter.

Finally, there is the matter of the glory on Moses' face. What about that? Well, you remember the account from Exodus 34:29-35. Moses would go into the Tent of Meeting and there he would converse with the Lord. The Lord would reveal something he wanted his people to know and, because Moses was in the very presence of God and speaking to God, when he came out of the tent of meeting his face was shining with the reflected glory of God. He would deliver to the people whatever message it was God had given to him, and then he would put a veil over his face so that God's people could not see the glory. Now, first of all the NIV says that the glory on Moses' face was fading. It says it three times: in v. 7, in v. 11, and in v. 14. You don't read anything in Exodus 34 about the glory on Moses' face fading. You don't read in the Bible anywhere about the glory of God fading on Moses' face. The KJV didn't say that the glory of God faded on Moses' face. Most commentators agree that there is nothing here about fading glory. The word the translators have rendered fading is an important word in Paul, it occurs 25 times in Paul's letters, usually in very important theological arguments, it has already occurred several times in his Corinthian correspondence. It never means "fading." Never elsewhere in the NT does it mean fading. There are a number of linguistic scholars who point out to us that there is no instance anywhere in the known use of this word in the Greek language of the ancient world in which it ever means "fading". Such is the power of prejudice. Paul must be saying, they reason, something about the inferiority of the OT. There must be some difference between the glory of Moses' ministry and the glory of Paul's and that must somehow be reflected. Hence the idea that the glory was fading on Moses' face. I don't doubt that eventually the glory faded on Moses' face. I don't believe he went around for the rest of his life with a veil on. It eventually passed away. That point is never made in the Bible and it's certainly not made here in 2 Corinthians 3. The reason they couldn't see the glory was because Moses covered it with a veil. In each one of these three passages, verses 7, 11 and 14 is not that the glory was fading, it was that the glory was done away with, it was cancelled, it was covered with a veil. The reason people couldn't see the glory on Moses face, was because he covered his face. He would let them see it while he was giving them God's Word, but as soon as he was done, he covered it up. Why?

Well, it gets a little complicated here, but hear me out and actually interestingly this is the one major piece of the interpretation that is not controversial anymore. Pretty much everyone accepts this. The word translated “bold” in v. 12 – where Paul says that because of his ministry, because he knows that his ministry has had this saving effect in Corinth, he can be very bold, he can speak very openly, because he knows they are a believing people. That word “bold” is a Greek word that was taken over from Aramaic. That is to say it has no Greek origin, it's just the transliteration of an Aramaic word. It simply makes the sounds with Greek letters of the sounds of the Aramaic letters. And it's a word that was frequently used in Aramaic as a synonym for a proverbial expression, “to uncover the face” or “to uncover the head.” In Aramaic, to “cover the face” is a sign of shame, mourning, reproach while “to uncover the face” is a sign of confidence and freedom. We have that contrast explicitly, by the way, at the end of the chapter in vv. 17-18. “Covered face” – shame, reproach; “uncovered face” – confidence, freedom.

What Moses did in covering his face, which we can figure out simply from the narrative of Exodus itself, was to rebuke and reproach the people for their lack of faith. They had no right to the privilege of gazing on the glory of God because they were unbelievers. It was an enacted judgment upon the people when Moses covered his face. You know Romans 3:23: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The *NEB*, the New English Bible, interestingly, renders that text: “for all have sinned *and have been deprived of the divine splendor*.” That's what Moses was doing. He was depriving the people of Israel from the glory of God. He was acting out how their faithlessness would eventually deprive them of God's glory. On account of their unbelief, they had no right to it. In v. 13 it doesn't read as the NIV has it. It reads: Moses put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at what he had abolished, what he had cancelled, what he had done away with, that is, what he had done away with by means of a veil. To gaze on the glory of God is a privilege that belongs strictly to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

What Paul is saying is that Moses preached to no happy effect. We know that anyway from many texts in the Bible. That generation was unsaved because unbelieving Paul has already told us in 1 Cor. 10 and Hebrews 4 tells us that as well. Paul, on the other hand, especially in Corinth, preached to a very happy effect. Multitudes were saved. And they, the fruit of his ministry, are the proof of his ministry, his letter of recommendation. Those false teachers who have come, they are just like the Israelites. They don't get the gospel. They are churchmen, they are religious, to be sure, they're zealous, no one doubts it, but they don't have living faith and belong, not with Moses, but with the wilderness generation, just as did the generation that rejected Jesus Christ himself when he, the Messiah, came among his own and they never saw in him the glory of God because their hearts were veiled.

Now, this is a great reality in the world and in our day. The Bible actually is much less taken up with unbelief in the world than it is taken up with unbelief in the church. And there has always been a great deal of unbelief in the church. That is the background, the fact of the history of Moses and his ministry, the background and the fact of the ministry of the Old Testament prophets. It accounts for so much of what they have to say. It was the background and the fact of the Lord's own ministry. It was so with the reformers in their day, the men of the Great Awakening and it is today with many. I have friends who pastor in the church of Scotland and

every Sunday week after week, year after year they get up in their pulpits and they preach the Word of God to a congregation of “Christians” of whom they believe only one or two is actually saved. They are not sure any of the elders on the church session are actually saved, but they are all members of the Church of Scotland. Paul feared, had feared that such was going to be the story in Corinth, but Titus’ report had alleviated that fear and given him great joy and.

We all know and are deeply embarrassed and humbled by the fact that the Christian church has been the cause of so much evil in the world, so much suffering, so much injustice, so much cruelty. C.S. Lewis once wrote, “If ever the book which I am not going to write is written, it must be the full confession by Christendom of Christendom’s specific contribution to the sum of human cruelty and treachery... We have shouted the name of Christ and enacted the service of Moloch.” [*The Four Loves*, 49] But, without a doubt, the largest part, not all, but the largest part of that evil that has been done in the name of Christ and by his church was done because so many in the church and in the leadership of the church were not Christians at all. They didn’t have the life of Christ or the love of God in their hearts. They were participants in an old covenant, not a new one.

This reality that Paul is talking about, his fortune and Moses’ misfortune, are everywhere the story of Christian history. Have you ever heard of Richard Greenham? He was a celebrated Puritan pastor and author. He served a parish near Cambridge for twenty years in the last part of the 16th century (the late 1500’s). He was a diligent and faithful pastor. He would rise at 4 a.m. to preach a morning sermon day-by-day through the weekday to his flock as they left for the fields and their day of work. He was a gifted man. His godliness and insight as a Christian counselor attracted folk from all over England. Yet, in spite of his faithfulness and giftedness, in spite of the success he enjoyed in ministering to others through his books and when people came to him from afar to speak with him about their lives, his ministry among his own people was virtually fruitless. He said to his successor after 20 years, “I perceive no good wrought by my ministry on any but one family.” Others said, “Greenham had pastures green, but flocks full lean.” Interestingly, some years later in the middle of the 17th century revival came to that parish and many were saved, but not during Greenham’s time. His was a ministry of the letter not the spirit because his people did not respond in faith. He was the smell of death to them and not the aroma of life.

How real this is. How important to face this reality of unbelief in the church. How right for me to remind you from time to time that belonging to the church, coming to these services means nothing if you do not believe in, if you do not live in fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ in love and gratitude.

There are two houses of worship here and they meet at the same time every Sunday. Did you know that?.

Wherever God erects a house of prayer,
The Devil always builds a chapel there,
And ‘twill be found upon examination,
The latter has the largest congregation.

So said Daniel DeFoe, the author of Robinson Crusoe, speaking of the English church in his day. It is not so here in this congregation I rejoice to say. It was not so in Corinth. It was Paul's great relief and happiness to *know* that from Titus. But that is not to say that there are not some among us here this morning who belong to the Devil's chapel that meets when we come to the house of God.

What is it for you: the old covenant or the new? Moses' with his veil, or Paul without? The letter or the spirit? Religious as the Jews were in the first century, deeply religious as many of them were, sincere in their religion as they were, zealous for it as they were, they never really took seriously the simple fact so plainly revealed in the word of God that most of their ancestors, for all of the privileges God had lavished on them, were unsaved people and fell under God's judgment. We're being told this time after time in the Bible precisely so that we will not make the same mistake. This was such a major emphasis in our Savior's preaching. Do not think you are saved when you are not because there is no mistake easier to make nor one made by larger multitudes of people in the world or even in the church. You know it is a possibility, surely. Have you ever taken that issue very carefully to heart? And how do you know?

You know it by the love that is in your heart for God and Christ, by your gratitude for their grace and mercy to you, by your very real desire to serve the Lord with your life and your definite and observable steps to do so. You know it by the fact that you can say honestly as God is your witness that the Lord Jesus Christ is the supreme personality and figure in your existence. And, perhaps, you know it by the shudder that passes down your spine from time to time when you realize that God might have left you in your sins as he has left multitudes of others no less deserving than yourself and not sent Christ to die for you and redeem you from sin and death. Do want at last to gaze on the glory of God? Is that the supreme interest, prospect, aspiration of your heart someday to open your eyes and behold the glory of God. Be entirely honest with yourself. Could you be among that company, that great company of church-goers who are at the last deprived of God's glory? It's hidden away so that they will never see it. Ask the Lord to show you if you are only presuming on his salvation and not really in possession of it. And tell him then that you will do anything, you will sacrifice anything, your pride, your pleasures, your name, your reputation, anything, anything so that you will have true salvation and not its pale imitation. Ask him to write his law on your heart, to give you pure and living faith in his Son and make you a participant in the new covenant, a new man, a new woman, singing a new song. Amen.