

2 Corinthians 3:1-4:6

“The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Hab 2:14)

“For in him every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes.’” (2 Cor 1:20)

- 1) This passage at first appears to be a string of disconnected ideas. Paul moves from letters of recommendation to Jeremiah’s prophecy of the new covenant (31:32-33; see also Ezek 36:26), to dependence on God, again to the new covenant, to the glory shining from Moses’ face and the glory of the new covenant, etc.

What is clear is that Paul is constructing an elaborate contrast between old and new, between his opponents and himself. The attached handout shows the contrasted pairs. How do you see the contrasts related to the opponents connecting with those related to the covenants?

- 2) The typical reconstruction of the context is this: The church Paul founded is complaining that he puts himself forward and is apparently pressuring him to use letters of reference like his opponents (3:1). Paul refuses to accept support from them (1 Cor 9:6, 12), as his opponents are doing (2 Cor 2:17), for fear of being entangled in a client-patron relationship.

Paul could, at this stage, have been “all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:19-23), shown flexibility, and done both of these things. Obtaining letters would have been easy, and Paul had himself written recommendations for others, such as Phoebe (Rom 16:1) and Tychicus (Col 4:7-8). It was also Paul’s practice to accept support from other churches, so why not here? Instead, he flouts expectations, refuses support, and tries the much harder balancing act of advocating for himself without boasting.

Why do you think Paul takes this approach here? What does he risk, and why?

- 3) Paul tells the Corinthians, “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all” (3:2). Like it or not, the measure of our ministry is to large degree the effect we have had on those God has put in our lives. Were we good role models for our children? Did we promote unhealthy attitudes at church with casual coffee-hour negativity? When leaders were needed, did we set a good example, rising to the occasion?

What people in your are your letter of recommendation being written by your current actions?

- 4) The highest concentration of the word “glory” and its variants in Paul’s letters is found in this passage. “Glory” translates *doxa* with connotations of praise, renown, splendor and honor. (*Doxa* is also sometimes translated “image”). This word is both rich and slippery:

- It’s associated with **fire and light** – “the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain” (Ex 27:17; also 16:10; 33-34)
- It’s associated with **creation** – “The heavens are telling the glory of God” (Ps 19:1)

- ...and especially **man**—“For a man... is the image and glory of God” (1 Cor 10:7), though through the fall “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23)
- It’s associated with **salvation**—“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low... Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed” (Isa 40:4-5)
- It’s associated with **the resurrection**—“So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is... sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory.” (1 Cor 15:42-43)
- The church is glorified as it **imitates Jesus**—“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image/ glory (*doxa*) of his Son” (Rom 8:29)

What does glory mean here? How does it relate to Paul’s authority as an apostle?

5) Moses’ face shines as a result of glimpsing God’s glory, a revelation which followed Moses’ decision to advocate for the sinful Hebrews at the bottom of the mountain (Ex 33:12-23; 34:29-35). Jesus shines with the same glory in his transfiguration when he turns his face south toward Jerusalem and his death (Lk 9:28-36). In Jesus’ high priestly prayer he asks God to glorify him in his sacrifice (Jn 17:1-5). Our glorification also comes through suffering: “...we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 4:10-17).

a) Paul has emphasized the suffering he’s shared with the Corinthians (1:7) and his sufferings as an apostle (2 Cor 2:14; 1 Cor 4:9). How does all this talk of new-covenant glory (3:7-11) fit in with Paul’s argument?

b) The Greek playwright Aeschylus wrote,

He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain, which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.”

How is his perspective different from Paul’s?

6) Pastoral candidates are sifted using letters of recommendation, interviews, resumes, etc. Do we also look at the “letters” of their past congregations? If not, why not?

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Fun fact: “If you go into an art gallery and look at pictures of Moses painted a few hundred years ago, you may see that he has little horns on his head. That’s because the Latin word for ‘veiled’ is very like the Latin word for ‘horned’, and people who read the Bible in Latin became confused and thought it was saying that Moses had horns on his head.” (Wright, 35)

Fun quote: “That veil with which Moses covered his face, when publishing the law, was the **emblem of a stupidity** that would come upon that people, and would continue upon them for a long period.” (Calvin)

The Parallel Structure of 2 Corinthians 3:1-4:6

	Them	Us
<i>Paul's opponents</i>	Peddlers, charging support (2:17)	Renounced the shameful things that one hides; refusing to practice cunning or falsify God's word (4:2)
	Use letters of recommendation (3:1)	"...we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God" (4:2)
	Commending themselves (3:1; by implication)	Proclaiming Jesus as Lord (4:8)
	Experts seeking patronage	Proclaiming themselves "your slaves for Jesus' sake" (4:7)
	Ministers of death (3:7) and condemnation (3:9); "for the letter kills" (3:6)	Ministers of a new covenant; "the Spirit gives life" (3:6) and "freedom" (3:17)
	Blinded by the god of this world to the gospel, which to them is veiled (4:3-4)	God "has shone in our hearts the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (4:6)
<i>Old and New Covenants</i>	Written on tablets of stone (3:3)	Written on human hearts (3:3)
	Possessing a glory in Moses, now set aside (3:7, 13)	A greater, permanent glory (3:10-11)
	Minds hardened (3:14) and veiled when reading Moses (3:15)	Veil removed when reading scripture (3:16)
	Unable to look upon the glory shining in Moses' face (3:7)	Having "unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, ...transformed into the same image" (3:18)

Leader's Introduction:

In this chapter Paul deals with a sticky catch-22. Since he's been away, strangers bearing letters of recommendation have arrived and inveigled their way into positions of power. We can infer that they are either Jews or Jewish Christians. And they seem to operate in the standard model of traveling teachers (e.g. itinerant Stoic philosophers) of the day: they ask for payment for their services.

For his part, Paul sought to avoid charges of peddling the gospel by accepting no support from the Corinthians. But at the same time his heart is invested in collecting for the poor and persecuted in Judea, and he doesn't want to give that up.

Paul is asking for money, but not for himself, which is ironically suspicious: the better the teacher in Paul's day, the more patronage he could command. But Paul knows that to accept patronage from the Corinthians is to put himself in their pocket.

And Paul bears no letter of recommendation. Later in the letter he lists his *bona fides*, but here he stands on principle. He founded their church, led them to the Lord, and doesn't need to prove himself to them with letters from others.

So on one hand we learn in this chapter how to navigate some turbulent waters. But Paul is not content to simply appeal to his authority. Rather, he grounds his defense to a practical problem in eternal truths, giving us greater insight into these truths as he does so.