

2 Corinthians

Leon L. Combs, Ph.D.

Chapter Three

2Cor 3:1 “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?”

Among the lies about Paul that were circulating in the church at Corinth were probably lies that he had arbitrarily changed his travel plans to suit himself and that he was a spiritual dictator who was self-righteous. Here he is answering two questions about himself with a resounding no. He has previously affirmed that he is an apostle appointed by God (2:17; 1Cor4:15, 16; 11:1; 14:18; 15:10) and, as such, God is his judge. Paul is not disparaging the use of introductory letters for he wrote some (Rom 16:1; 1Cor 16:3, 10, 11; 2or 8:16-24) and he had obtained one from the high priest at Jerusalem when he was persecuting the church (Acts 9:2; 22:5). But his situation had changed when he was reborn and he was now an apostle and, as such, he had the authority to write such letters. His opponents probably carried such letters from the Pharisaic portion of the Jerusalem church who still proclaimed the necessity of obeying the Law for salvation.

2Cor 3:2 “You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; 2Cor 3:3 being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.”

Now he explicitly answers his questions. He had previously answered one question:

1Cor 9:2 “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.”

God had worked the miracle of rebirth through the proclaiming of the Gospel by Paul and so these people had new hearts and their faithful service to Jesus Christ allowed people everywhere to “read their hearts”. Are our hearts an open book to the world about the truth of Jesus Christ? It is true today that a preacher is not required for God to use His Word but in Paul’s time there was no canon of Scripture. I was born again via the Word of God when I was alone in my study reading John 14-16 but I had previously had about 28 years of exposure to the Bible although the Word had not been preached properly and not with authority. Some might object to this statement of mine by using:

Rom 10:14 “How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?”

But when Paul wrote these three questions there also was not a canon of Scripture for all to read. Of course the world and the church still needs preachers and teachers but the Word is now available for all to read. God works through His Word, both written and spoken. When interpreting Scripture remember context; the meaning cannot mean what it did not mean; and the

history, culture, and philosophy of the time when it was written. God had changed these people's hearts by writing His Word upon them:

Jer 31:33 "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord, "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Heb 10:16 "This is the covenant that I will make with them After those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws upon their heart, And upon their mind I will write them," He then says,

2Cor 3:4 "And such confidence we have through Christ toward God.

2Cor 3:5 Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God,

2Cor 3:6 who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

Paul's confidence is not on himself but on the actions of God through Jesus Christ. He knows that he did not save anyone from the wrath of God but God had made him adequate for his mission of bringing the Gospel message to the people. Paul was born again on his road trip to Damascus and chosen as a messenger:

Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

Acts 9:17 And Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Acts 9:18 And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he arose and was baptized;

Acts 9:19 and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus,

Acts 9:20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

The Law cannot save anyone because nobody can obey it.

Gal 3:10 For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them."

Rom 7:9 "And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died;

Rom 7:10 and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me;

Rom 7:11 for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.

Rom 7:12 So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

Rom 7:13 Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

Rom 7:14 For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.”

So the letter of the Law reveals that we are spiritually dead but the Holy Spirit brings life to the dead man’s spirit:

Eph 2:1 “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,”

Eph 2:3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Eph 2:4 “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,

Eph 2:5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

Eph 2:6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus,

Eph 2:7 in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

2Cor 3:7 “But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was,

2Cor 3:8 how shall the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?”

Shame on us in the modern church for not giving God great glory when someone is born again! We are so blessed to be in the church age as God continued to reveal Himself progressively through the ages. Paul is referring here to the giving of the Law as described in Exe 34-29-35 when the people were so awed at the presence of God in giving the Law to them through the mediation of Moses that they could not even look steadily at the face of Moses whose face held a mere reflection of the radiance of God. Today we have a more complete revelation of God through the life and work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. If you have ever been blessed to be in the presence of someone being born again you know what an awesome occasion it is. If you are a child of God you then know of your own rebirth miracle. I experienced a glow of light at my rebirth and some people who were not Christians even wondered at my countenance and peaceful attitude. Were they seeing a bit of a glow in my face? We should all often take time to reflect on the miracle of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us and in others. We should never take for granted such miracles and we should never fail to give God the glory for every such event. I am convicted of being guilty of a rather cavalier attitude around such wondrous acts of God.

2Cor 3:9 “For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory.

2Cor 3:10 For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory on account of the glory that surpasses it.

2Cor 3:11 For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.”

Someone said something like: “If the sun is shining, the glow of the moon is no longer so bright”. During the light of the day we can also see very few stars. The old covenant was significant but in comparison with the new covenant it is much less a glorious event. The Jews gave much significance to the old covenant even when they thought they could obey it. The fading of the glow of the face of Moses is symbolic of the fading of the glory of the old covenant. With the advent of the new covenant we should give God such glory as to make the former glory only a memory.

*Heb 13:20 “Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord,
Heb 13:21 equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”*

**2Cor 3:12 “Having therefore such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech,
2Cor 3:13 and are not as Moses, who used to put a veil over his face that the sons of Israel might not look intently at the end of what was fading away.”**

It is critical to understand that the veil on the face of Moses was not to shield the people from the glow but to not let them see that the glow was fading. We should then never veil our face but should let the light shine.

2Cor 4:6 “For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Matt 5:16 “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

**2Cor 3:14 “But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ.
2Cor 3:15 But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart;
2Cor 3:16 but whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”**

These verses are so powerful and meaningful to me for I also had a veil over my heart that prevented me from hearing the Word of God. If you are a child of God then you too once had that veil over your heart. But God had such great mercy by acting on me, a sinner, to give me life and simultaneously remove the veil. Now I, and you, can know the reality of the Word of God and apply it to my mind and actions. Before the removing of the veil there was no difference to us between reading Plato and reading the Bible. Today there are many synagogues and churches where the veil is still functioning. We do not depend upon the eloquence or charisma of a preacher but only upon Jesus Christ:

John 1:17 “For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.”

Gal 3:22 “But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”

2Cor 3:17 “Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. 2Cor 3:18 But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

We must not take verse 16 alone but in relationship to verse 15 (for better understandings always remember to read as though there are no verse numbers). He is not saying that Jesus is the Holy Spirit but that turning to the Lord Jesus Christ brings action from the Holy Spirit. The words after the semicolon also explain the beginning of the sentence for the Holy Spirit comes from the Lord Jesus Christ. The new life in Jesus brings a new existence as children of God:

Rom 8:15 “For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!”

Rom 8:16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

Rom 8:17 and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.”

As children of God we no longer are in bondage to sin. Before our rebirth everything we did was sin.

Rom 14:23 “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.”

Nobody has any faith until God gives his allotment to him:

Rom 12:3 “For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.”

After being transformed into children of God we are now being further transformed in our actions here by the renewing of our mind:

Rom 12:2 “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Phil 2:12 “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling;”

There are three phases to salvation: justification, sanctification, and glorification. Our justification and our glorification are purely works of God (monotheistic) but our sanctification is a cooperative work between the individual child of God and Him.

Praise the Lord!