December 17/18, 2022

Glory To the Newborn King

A Reason to Sing Series

2 Corinthians 3:1-18

Pastor Jeff Petersen

Well, as I mentioned, we're one week out, and I've got a strange question for you this morning. What is Christmas? Now what I mean is, what are we actually hoping for in Christmas? I mean, I hear people say all the time, "I hope you have a great Christmas." But what does that actually mean? What are we actually hoping for next weekend? I think if we could get inside people's hearts and minds, I think that most people are hoping for some sort of extraordinarily special feeling. Probably coming from being together with family, from traditions, food, events, music, beautiful lights, all coming together in a perfect way to create some sort of magical moment sometime next weekend. I think that's probably what we think of when we think of a great Christmas. And Jesus? Oh, yeah, Him too, of course. Well, in one of my favorite classic Christmas shows, the main character is struggling with Christmas. And he is not having any sort of magical moments probably because most of the people around him think that he is a blockhead. But fortunately he has a good friend who understands what Christmas is really all about and is able to gently set him and everyone straight. So let's take a look.

(*Video Clip*)
Charlie Brown: I guess you're right, Linus, I shouldn't have picked this little tree. Everything I do turns into a disaster. I guess I really don't know what Christmas is all about. Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?
Linus: Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about. Lights please? And there were in the same country, shepherds, abiding in the field keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. They were so afraid. And the angel said unto them, "Fear not. For behold, I bring you tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For onto you was born this day in the city of David, a Savior, Jesus Christ, the Lord. And this should be a sign to you, you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." That's what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown.[1]

(*Applause*) Got some other fans in the room. You know, I heard about a conversation someone had recently. They were talking to someone who lives here now, but who used to live in an another part of the world. And they were talking about Christmas, and they said, "Oh, we love to celebrate Christmas. We love everything about it. We just don't do the Jesus stuff." You know, if we miss what Christmas is all about, it is quite possible that we might still have a magical moment next weekend, but it won't make one bit of a difference in our lives come December 26th. In the Charlie Brown Christmas, it ends with the gang all coming together singing a Christmas carol. They sing, "Hark the herald angels sing; Glory to the newborn king." Glory to the newborn king. That's what the angels proclaimed as they filled the night sky on that first Christmas and appeared to the shepherds in that verse Linus just quoted for us from Luke chapter 2. Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace

[1] Melendez, B. 1965. A Charlie Brown Christmas. United Feature Syndicate.

among men with whom He is pleased. Glory to the newborn king. That's what Christmas is all about. It's also about that glory, coming and changing you and me and bringing us to a place that that glory by the power of God's Spirit might flow through us to bring light into the darkness and hope to those who despair. And that is a reason to sing. But just how does that happen? Well, that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have your Bible with you, let's open together to II Corinthians chapter 3. II Corinthians 3. Now I'm gonna be straightforward at the beginning here to tell you that II Corinthians 3 is anything but a tried-and-true classic Christmas text. But I believe it is a powerful picture of what Christmas made possible. Let's look at it together. The context of II Corinthians 3 is actually Paul defending his apostleship. He's writing to his beloved church in Corinth, and he has been under attack so he's defending himself. And it begins in chapter 3 verse 1 saying,

> **Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men, 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.** (*NASB, II Corinithians 3:1-3)

So Paul is writing to this beloved church and he says, "Do we need some sort of a letter of recommendation to continue our ministry with you?" He says, "Of course not. You are our letter; you are written on our very hearts; our ministry as we have cared for you, and then poured into you reflects who we are and what we are about." And then Paul uses some really interesting language that is going to be really important as we go through the text. He says, "That letter was not written by ink, but with the Spirit of the living God." He says, "It wasn't written on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts." Paul is beginning to take their focus to something that's going to be important as we go through the rest of the text. Verse 4:

> **Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.** (Vs. 4-6)

So Paul talks about his confidence and he says, "We have confidence through Christ, first toward God. But we also have confidence in coming to you in our ministry, but that confidence does not come from us." He rightly proclaims, "We have no adequacy within us, our adequacy comes from God. God is the source of our strength. God is the source of our hope. God is the source of the light and the truth that can come through us. If anything good comes through us, it is because of the work of God." And then Paul, in verse 6, points out that why did God made us adequate and for what did He make us adequate. He made us adequate as servants of a new covenant. And then he starts to use some of this language again. He says, **not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.** And here Paul is beginning to highlight the glory of the new covenant. And if you study Paul through the book of Romans, you are going to see that Paul makes a very clear argument when he talks about the old covenant. The old covenant is that law that God gave, and we think of when he gave the 10 commandments and the other laws to the nation of Israel when they were in the Sinai. And Paul is speaking back to that. And in Romans he makes it very clear that that Law was good. Yet here he speaks of it as the letter that kills. Well, in Romans Paul makes it clear that because of the coming of the law, we have become aware of our sin; we see that we do not measure up to a holy God. Through the law, we see what God is like. We see His character, we see His nature, we see His Holiness, we see His goodness, and then it reflects to show us ourselves. And Paul makes it crystal clear that through the law, no one can be made righteous because in the flesh—in our own strength,

in our own power—we are completely inadequate to fulfill the law of God. And so this beautiful, wonderful law actually becomes an image of a letter that kills. And now Paul contrasts that with this new covenant.

Notice twice he speaks of this covenant: it is of the Spirit, and the Spirit gives life. And this, my friends, is how Christmas changes everything. Because everything changed at Christmas with the coming of Immanuel, God incarnate, God in the flesh, God dwelling among us. Coming to live among us as Bryan talked about last week, humbling Himself, leaving His glory above, and becoming one of us. And growing up among people; growing to show the glory of God to demonstrate what God is like; to proclaim the kingdom of God. And all leading up to the cross when God in the flesh would literally give Himself; His very life for you and I. And then on the third day, to be raised again to give us new life, to give us new hope. And 50 days later would be Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And Jesus literally said to his followers it was better for them if He went away. How could that possibly be? Because He knew that would usher in this new covenant in the Spirit; this new reality of life in the Spirit. So here Paul is trying to help us understand just what we have in Christ, and what we have in the life in the Spirit. Verse 7,

> **But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not looking intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?** (Vs. 7-8)

So here again, Paul is making this contrast. Notice he talks about the contrast of the ministry of death and the ministry of the Spirit. But notice what he says in verse 7, he is using imagery that can be a little bit confusing. What's he talking about? This ministry of death engraved on stones coming with glory. And then he starts to say these things about Moses' face. Well, he is taking us back to Exodus 34. He is taking us back to this incredible time when God called His people out of Egypt, and He was making them His people, and He calls Moses up to the top of Mount Sinai. And Moses spends 40 days and 40 night's meeting with God, and God gives the law and writes it on tablets of stone. And then an incredible thing took place. When Moses came down from the mountain, unbeknownst to him, being in the presence of God had literally transformed him physically. And so, as he's coming down, the people begin to see him, and the face of Moses it's glowing; literally glowing and with intensity that causes the people to step back. That's what he's talking about here. This coming of this first covenant, this old covenant was with glory; so much glory that literally the face of Moses just shown. Now that is incredible; that's incredible glory.

You know, I often think about those days in the Old Testament. You think, "Oh man, why don't we get it like that?" You know, here they are; they're going through the wilderness; God's doing these miraculous things to provide for them. And oh, by the way, He is continually leading them by this pillar of cloud by day, pillar of a fire by night. And this manifestation of God has been called the Shekinah glory of God. And so when Moses came down, it said that his face reflected this Shekinah glory of God. Can you imagine if we experienced that? I mean, I've never seen that happen. Now, there was one time a number of years ago, where someone who was sitting high in the stadium seating told Bryan, after the service, they thought they saw the Shekinah glory in his face. We later realized it was just the stage lights bouncing off his head but, it's a whole different thing, really. But imagine seeing that kind of glory. Well, don't miss the point of what Paul is saying. He says, "That glory as great as it was, was fading." And then he says in verse 8, "How then will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?" Perhaps your translation says *far greater glory*. Wow. Really? That's what Paul's saying. That old covenant that ended up just bringing death—**for the wages of sin is**

death—is so much less glorious than this new covenant—for **the gift of God is eternal life**. That old covenant was written on tablets of stone, but this new covenant, this new ministry, is written on the heart by the Spirit of God. It is the ministry of the indwelling Spirit. And the reality is that Moses would go and be in the presence of God and while he was with God, his face would shine. But then it would begin to fade. And then Moses, when they had the tabernacle, would go back to the presence of God, and he would meet with God, and he would shine again. The end of Exodus 34 tells us but then it would fade away.

Brothers and sisters, do we realize what we have in Christ? The presence of God is always right here with us! The indwelling of the Spirit means that you and I have access to God 24/7. We are never—if we are in Christ—apart from Him, and we can turn to Him and behold His glory any moment of any day. And God wants us to see far greater glory in what we have in Him. Paul ups the ante in verse 9,

> **For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.** (Vs. 9-10)

So he speaks again of the ministry of condemnation and the ministry of righteousness and the former came with glory, but *this* ministry is abounding in glory. The work of the Spirit in and through the church is a ministry, abounding in glory. And then in verse 10, he uses hyperbole in saying, "It's like that old glory was no glory compared to the new glory." It reminds me of what Paul says in Philippians when he's talking about all that he's done, all that he's accomplished in life—his resume and his achievements—and he looks at all of that. And then when he came and found Christ, he said, "Compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, everything else might as well just go in the trash." And that's the imagery here. This glory that God has for you and I through the ministry of the Spirit, is so glorious. It's like all that happened in Sinai is no glory at all. Oh, and besides, again, because in verse 11, that glory was fading. This glory surpasses it because this glory does not fade. Once again, we have access to the presence of God continuously if we will but turn to Godward and experience His goodness. And because of the glory of this ministry, because of the directing, indwelling, and empowering Holy Spirit, then in verse 12, he says,

> **Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech…**

We have such a hope that God has given us in Christ and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we can come boldly before the throne of grace. We don't have to be like all of the people of Israel who stepped back at the glory of God; we can come to the presence of God to receive mercy, to be strengthened by Him with His Spirit. Strengthening us in the inner man and going out with His Spirit working through us with boldness to speak of the goodness of God; to speak of the light of God in the midst of darkness; to speak of the hope in Jesus in the midst of a world filled with despair. We have the opportunity for a ministry of boldness where we are experiencing the glory of God, and that glory is flowing through us to change a lost and dying world.

> **Having such a hope we use great boldness in our speech, and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. 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. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.** (Vs. 12-16)

The image here that Paul is now using, is that because of the hardness of the hearts of the people of Israel, there was not only a veil that Moses would put over his face—which he did because of the Shekinah glory. But there was also a veil which was over their hearts, due to the hardness of their hearts. And Paul uses that imagery to say, "Still today when that law, when that old covenant, is read and proclaimed, people don't get it because there's a hardness to their hearts. And in an earlier letter to this same church, he said in I Corinthians 2:14, "A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them." No one comes to the Father unless He draws them. But as we pray for the people that God has put in our world, and as God draws them and works in their hearts, bringing them toward Christ, something miraculous takes place. This veil of hard heartedness can literally be removed. And how is it removed? Verse 14, it's **removed in Christ**. And so we have this bold ministry that God has given to us. And why? Because of verse 16. Because whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Whenever someone understands the good news of Christmas, of Easter; whenever someone comes to saving faith in Jesus Christ, the veil is taken away and they are made alive by the Spirit once again. That means Christmas changed everything. And because of that Paul then tells us a little bit of how this ministry works. Verse 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.** (Vs. 18)

In verse 18, Paul talks about two things. He talks about beholding God, and he talks about becoming like Him. First he says, "We who are in Christ; we who have the Spirit of God; we do not have that veil. We come before Him and we behold Him in His glory with unveiled face." And he uses an interesting word picture. You know, there's something that is probably in common, even though there are very, very different people in this room, something probably in common of every single one of us every day. Every person in this room starts the day by looking in a mirror. At some point, we got to get this mess together and we look in the mirror. And sometimes we gaze into the mirror and we behold ourselves. And for a lot of us, the longer we stare in the mirror, the more we see the things we do not like. We don't like to look at ourselves, we begin to think negatively of ourselves, at least of our physical selves. Now there are others who are blessed to be able to look in the mirror and go, "Wow, look at that!" But let me just say, if we spend our time beholding ourselves in the mirror, what's the outcome? Well, if you happen to be one of those beautiful people and you spend time beholding yourself and working on yourself in the mirror, probably the outcome in your soul will be an increase in pride. If you happen to be like the rest of us when you look in that mirror and you wish there were things that looked differently, probably the outcome in your soul will be insecurity. Neither of those are what God wants for you. Neither of those set us free to be the people that God wants us to be. And that's what verse 17 is all about. The Lord is Spirit. And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. There is freedom.

In John 8:32, we're told, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." This word here is the same word from Galatians 5:1 which says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." Freedom for what? Freedom from what? Freedom from bondage, freedom from sin, freedom from death, freedom from all of the insecurity and all of the things that bind us and keep us from being free to experience the goodness of our God. And oh, God's desire for you and I is that we would be set free in our hearts and our minds that we might behold His goodness and be set free by it. What if we

started each day spending a whole lot more time beholding Him rather than beholding us? What do you think would happen if we started each day looking at God and seeing just how good He is? Reflecting and realizing that God has never once been afraid. That God is never anxious. That there's nothing that's going to happen in that day that will surprise God or shake God. What if we spent time beholding the fact that God is infinitely good, infinitely kind, full of peace, full of joy? What if we thought about this is the kind of God so filled with love, that He wouldn't stay in His glory above but would come at Christmas? What if we beheld His glory, and then we began to think about how He sees us? What if we started that day realizing that you are one in whom God delights? If you're in Christ, you are one in whom the Spirit of God dwells. You are a beloved child, a treasured possession. We are a royal priesthood. What difference would it make if we began our days, and throughout our days we sought to behold God's glory? You think anything might start to change? Do you think anything might start to reflect from us? And so he says, "We behold His glory and we are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit." As we behold God, as we seek God, we begin to become more like God, ever increasingly seeing His glory and beginning to reflect His glory as we seek the Lord indwelt by the Spirit. This is what our God has for us and the impact can be incredible.

You know, I've flown over the country of Afghanistan a number of times, and I always am struck when I look down during the daytime at what a barren wasteland it is. But I also have flown over at night. And I'll never forget the first time that I was flying over Afghanistan, we're about 40,000 feet, which means that's like seven and a half miles in the air. And I look out the window and it is complete darkness. But then I see something of a flickering. I wonder, "What is that?" And I keep looking, and I keep looking, and finally I realize it's a single campfire in the middle of the Afghan wilderness. And in the midst of such darkness, it is shining brightly. So brightly, I can see it from seven and a half miles in the air—one little campfire. You think your life doesn't matter? Do you understand that you are one in whom God dwells and delights? Do you understand that God wants you to behold His glory, and through you to reflect His glory to a lost and dying world? Even one of you in this room, one single solitary follower of Christ can shine in such darkness with a light that can be seen by so many if we go into this world showing forth the goodness and the love of God.

But let's change the illustration. My parents lived for about 10 years out in Las Vegas. Interesting place to live. My dad was a car dealer. My mom was a cocktail waitress…I'm kidding. They worked for a church. (*laughter*) But we would go out and visit them. And so we'd be traveling, and it's a long trip. And when you're driving to Las Vegas, you are driving through the middle of nowhere; it is the desert. And I remember sometimes at the end of a long day—we'd be getting there at night—I remember the first time that I experienced getting toward Las Vegas, we had really just gotten into Nevada, and I started to see something in the sky. And I thought, "What is that?" It was kind of this little glow. And I wondered, "What is that?" We drove miles and miles and miles, and I saw more of a glow, and more of a glow. And I began to realize, "Oh my goodness, that's the lights of Las Vegas!" And from hundreds of miles out, you could see a glow in the sky. And we'd get closer and closer, and it would get brighter and brighter. So bright that you thought for sure it's over the next rise, but it was not. And you go farther and farther and farther. And finally, you come over this hill and *bam*, it's glorious. The entire valley lit up. That, my friends, is a picture of the church. That's what God wants to do through us. He wants to light up the sky, light up the dark, light up this despairing world through us together.

And that is why Christmas is such a good time to think about the glory of God because Christmas reveals the glory of God. Glory to God in the highest. Glory to the newborn King. You know, we love to think about the wonder of the baby in the manger. And it's such an amazing thing to consider the

incarnation. And as Bryan talked about last week, what a strange way to save the world—God becoming a babe in a manger. You know, it's been a long time since we've had a baby in our home at Christmas time; 22 years since our youngest was having his first Christmas. Well, I'm looking forward to next weekend of having a baby by the tree with us once again, as we are going to have the first Christmas for our grandson, Olly. And because he's awesome, and because I'm a grandpa and I can, I want to show you a few pictures. (*laughter*) So, this is Olly, the son of Josh, our oldest and Victoria. And what a delight it has been to get to know this little person. These pictures were taken at Thanksgiving. As we sat there, and I literally watched our entire family be captivated by Olly. Everyone just loving this little guy; enjoying this little guy; delighting in this little guy. And here's the thing—he's never done anything for any of us. We've got to do everything for him. I oh how I have been reminded of the love of our good, good Father, who looks at you with the light. Who so longs to be gracious to you. Well, this week Cynci and I had another adventure. We watched him overnight for the first time a couple of nights. She was all in of course, she watches him every week. She's great with him. I was terrified. I told my daughter-in-law, "I'm scared to death but by faith, we'll give it a try." And that first night there was some stress. Not for Olly; he did great. In fact, he was sleeping like a baby. But Cynci and I, we were awake much of the night, I was kind of wondering, when's the next shoe gonna drop? And she kept getting up to go check on him. She's like, "There's nothing going to happen to this precious little guy, not on my watch." We're just taking care of him.

Well, the next morning, he and I are having a little conversation. We're hanging out together and I start to think about Christmas. And I'm looking at little Olly and I'm thinking, "What would it have been like to be Joseph and Mary?" Oh, my goodness, Olly's wonderful, but he's just a baby. What if he were the newborn King? God incarnate with another king literally trying to kill him. I can't even imagine what it would be like. But I'm reminded through that of just who Jesus was. He wasn't just a beautiful babe. And at Christmas we can't just keep him in the manger. We need to think about the glory of the King who became a newborn; for Jesus was not only a wondrous and wonderful newborn, He was the newborn who grew up to be the Savior of the world. And He has been from eternity past, He is today, and He shall be for all eternity to come, the one who rules and reigns as King. That is our God.

So let me ask again. What is Christmas? What are you hoping for this weekend? A magical moment with 'all the feels,' as they say? Sure, those are great. But let us not forget, there is so much more that we have in Christmas. For our glorious God left His glory above to come as a babe, to grow as a man and show the glory of the Father; to die on a cross and rise again to give us a glorious hope; to rise from the dead, ushering in a new covenant, one in which we can behold His glory. And as we do, by His indwelling Spirit, we can actually become like Him and then we can bring His glorious hope to people in despair; His glorious light to people in darkness. Christmas changes everything, because Jesus changes everything. And our hope for Christmas need not only be a magical moment next weekend that will quickly fade away. Our hope can be to experience His goodness, His life changing and world changing goodness, every moment of every day, all throughout the world. Him changing us more into His glorious image. Him shining through us to bring His glorious hope. That's what Christmas is all about. And that is a reason to sing. Hark, the Herald angels sing; glory to the newborn King.

> *Jesus, thank You that You came as a babe in the incarnation. Thank you for the wonder of Christmas. Oh, our God, may we also be captivated by the nature of You being a glorious King. May we see the glory of the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the glory of Pentecost, the glory of the new covenant, the far greater glory that came because You came. May we not fail to understand what we have in Christ, and may we behold ourselves less in*

the mirror and behold You more, being transformed into Your glorious image that we might be used by You to bring Your glorious hope. That is a Christmas that matters. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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