

# The Ministry of the Gospel

2 Corinthians 3:17-4:6

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Way back in the 1990's, a youth leader in Holland, Michigan had an idea to help the students in her youth group to think about living out the Gospel. She took a phrase made famous by a pastor in 1896 and put it on a bracelet. **The phrase was "What Would Jesus Do?" and the bracelet had the initials, "WWJD" printed on them.** Well, the idea caught fire and soon every youth group in the country was handing them out. I wore one for many weeks. And that bracelet did help me think about Jesus' call upon my life to live like Him.

As an aside, Charles Sheldon's book, *In His Steps*, is not sound doctrine. Pastor Sheldon had a social gospel emphasis so his use of the question, "What would Jesus do?" was more of a moral improvement message instead of a salvation through Jesus message. The Gospel does not tell us what we must do FOR GOD to gain God's favor; the Gospel tells us what God has done FOR US to give His favor to us.

Yet I do find WWJD helpful for the follower of Jesus who has been born again by the Spirit through faith in Jesus. **This question brings us to the present action of God's Spirit upon our souls.** The Spirit's action upon a disciple is to transform us into the image of God's Son. **Becoming like Jesus is God's agenda for His people!**

**When we believe in Jesus as our Savior and King, God places His life in our soul.** So we become a people who long for more than a correct theology . . . long for more than a reformation of our morals . . . long for more than the addition of religious rituals . . . long for more than a belonging in a loving group of people. **The true disciple of Jesus longs to become LIKE Jesus.** We long to think like Him, to behave like Him, to talk like Him, to work like Him, to love like Him. We want to love the things He loves. We want to hate the things He hates. We want to build the things He is building. We want to tear down the things He is destroying. We want to respond to evil the way He responds to evil. We want to pursue the good the way He pursues the good.

**So here is the big question: How? How can I become more like Jesus?** What a vital question to ask ourselves! Our passage today helps us pursue God's agenda for our lives

\*This is not a transcript of the sermon. It is a manuscript the pastor used to preach the sermon.

**Main Idea: God uses the ministry of the Gospel to give sight to our souls so that we see God's glory. The soul that sees God begins to become like Him. The more we see the more we will grow. The more we grow the more we will see.**

God's purpose in saving us is more than granting us forgiveness of sin and to secure for us a home in heaven. **God's purpose is also to restore our spiritual sight so that we can see His very Person and share His life.** This vision of God is the beginning, middle and end of the Christian life.

Before sin entered the world, God's created us in His image with a singular purpose. That purpose is simply that we would know Him, see Him, enjoy Him, commune with Him and worship Him. Yet sin robbed us of our spiritual sight. Being blind to God, we cannot fulfill the purpose for which we are created!

So the first matter that Paul brings to us is God's gift of spiritual sight to all those who believe the Gospel.

*"For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3:6 [ESV](#))*

**Paul is affirming that the Law can convict us of our sin, but it cannot give us spiritual life.** If we wish to have spiritual life, God's Spirit must act in love toward us. Only the Holy Spirit can bring the life of God to our dead soul.

Paul continues an explanation of the Spirit's working through the ministry of the Gospel of Jesus. **He contrasts the old covenant of the Law with the new covenant of the Spirit.** He uses the ministry of Moses to show the superiority of the ministry of Jesus.

*7 Now if the ministry of death, (carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, 8 will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? 9 For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. 10 Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. 11 For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory." (2 Corinthians 3:7–11 [ESV](#))*

Here Paul takes us back to the scene on Mt Sinai where God displayed His glory to Moses and to the people.

*"Exodus 24:12 The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for*

*their instruction.” . . . Exodus 24:15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. . . . Exodus 24:17 Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Exodus 24:18 Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.” (Exodus 24:12–18 [ESV](#)).*

After Moses came down from the mountain, the LORD continued to meet with him. Moses set up a tent outside the camp and when he entered the tent a pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent. The people would see that Moses was meeting with the LORD and they would rise up and worship the Lord at the door of their own tents. Remember that the people were at Mt Sinai for 11 months. So this was a frequent occurrence.

*“Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.” (Exodus 33:11 [ESV](#)).*

One of the effects upon Moses in these encounters was that the skin of his face would shine with glory. His face reflected the glory of God so others around could see some of God’s glory in Moses’ face. When people saw Moses’ shining face with God’s glory, they afraid and backed away from Moses. (cf Exodus 34:29-33) They knew that it was dangerous for sinful people to approach God. So Moses put a veil over his face to hide the glory of God that was radiating from him.

*Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses’ face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.” (Exodus 34:34–35 [ESV](#))*

**God is a God who is willing to show His glory!**

**Truth: Under the old covenant only Moses saw the glory of the Lord. Under the new covenant we all are invited by Jesus to ascend the mountain and see the Lord.**

*15 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. 16 But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (2 Corinthians 3:15–16 [ESV](#))*

Jesus is the One who removes the veil so that we can see God for real! **We do not look at God like an astronomer looks at a star. We are a people who look at God like a person does his best friend. We know Him!**

**Here is the personal question:** Has the veil been removed from your heart? Do you see God and His glory in the face of Jesus? Do you know God?

**Truth: Every person who comes to Jesus in faith receives the blessing of seeing the glory of God.** Every true Christian knows that God is good, loving, powerful, righteous, holy and eternal . . . not only because the Bible TELLS us so, but because God has removed the veil of blindness from our hearts and we see Him for who He is!

**There are many appropriate ways for a Christian to talk about his/her conversion. Someone might say,** “I repented of my sin and received Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior.” **Another might say,** “I came to Jesus in faith and He forgave me of all my sin.” **Another might say,** “I have been adopted into God’s family through faith in Jesus.” **Another might say,** “I have been born again by the power of the Holy Spirit.” **Another might say,** “I have been justified through faith in Jesus and His atoning death for me on the cross.” All these expressions and more are good, right and true of the experience of a child of God.

Here in 2 Corinthians 3-4 we find another key description of the experience of the true Christian. ***I was blind to God’s glory, but God opened the eyes of my heart and now I see Him as wonderful and worthy of worship. I know Him as the LORD who loves me. I know Him as my Father whom I can talk with and count on to care for me.***

*“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (2 Corinthians 3:17 [ESV](#))*

The Christian life under the New Covenant is freedom. Freedom FROM the ravages of guilt and condemnation that our sin placed upon us. Freedom TO the joy of seeing God with an unveiled face!

Some may be saying, “I do not think that I have seen God and His glory the way you are describing! How can I experience this?” Let us jump ahead for a moment to 2 Corinthians 4:6:

*"For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6 [ESV](#))*

To help us understand HOW we might experience this work in our hearts, Paul takes us back to Genesis 1. He says, "Remember that God spoke and the worlds came into being. Remember that creation had NO PART in bringing itself into being. God acted alone."

Yesterday I read a portion of an interview with Harrison Ford. They asked him about his religion. He said, *"I think nature and God are the same thing."* To which I reply, *"Harrison, you are a talented actor, but you are blind to God and His glory. You have no comprehension regarding who God is. You have no experience of seeing the true God. You would not say such a foolish thing if you did."*

Harrison Ford is thrilled to see the fingerprints of God all throughout nature, but he is blind to the Person who left those fingerprints. **Tragically, many believe the irrational notion that creation created itself. God tells us why people believe that:**

*21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." (Romans 1:21–23 [ESV](#))*

#### **Again, 4:6:**

*"For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6 [ESV](#))*

**Paul compares the action of God in giving physical light to the dark world with the action of God in giving spiritual light to the dark human heart.** He says, "Just as God in power said, "Let there be light" and there was light. **So God says to the person whose heart is blinded by Satan and sin, "Let there be light" and there is light.** God uses the instrument of the preaching of Jesus to bring light to His elect.

**In short, obtaining a vision of God's glory requires God to act in power upon our soul.** We do nothing to participate in God's miracle. Now we can ASK for God to do this miracle! And God promises to hear us when we ask in faith. But we can do nothing to bring it about. **Our ability to see God's glory comes to us by an act of God's sovereign grace alone!**

**Truth: The vision of God becomes the foundation for everything else in our Christian walk.** Everything we are and do as worshippers of the living God flows

from our experience of seeing God for who He is! **How does the vision of God help us day by day?**

## **The Vision of God's glory . . .**

### **1. Transforms us.**

*"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18 [ESV](#))*

Underline the two words: "We all". The Corinthian church had some "problem children" on the membership roll. But Paul speaks to this church and says, "We all". **This beholding the glory of the Lord is NOT for a special class of super saints.** Any doctrine that separates God's people into HAVES and HAVE NOTS is not Gospel. The Gospel brings all of the blessings of God us EVERY person who believes in Jesus. Every believer experiences the joy of seeing God . . . seeing Him for who He truly is. **Though there are degrees of seeing, yet there is the common experience of seeing God** as good, as loving, as merciful, as wonderful, as holy, as righteous, as all-wise, as all-powerful, as a God whom we can trust.

**And what happens when we behold the glory of the Lord?** As we see God, we are "being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." **Four observations:**

1. **This transformation is real.** Real life people with real life problems experience this change of becoming like Jesus.
2. **This transformation is progressive.** The transformation is not completed in one short moment of time but slowly grows from one stage to the next stage of growth all through the life of the child of God.
3. **This transformation is Christ-centered.** The transformation imitates the character and qualities of Jesus.
4. **This transformation is a miracle from the Lord.** This transformation is not the result of our labors or efforts. We are not passive in this transformation, but if the Spirit is not operating in our life no amount of discipline, effort or willpower will bring this process about.

I have found that many soft-hearted Christians are concerned thinking, "I am not sure if I am being transformed into the image of Jesus!" Friends, remember that

Moses did not know that his face shone with God's glory. The people had to tell him.

**Principle: The person who is being transformed into the image of Jesus is often the last one to realize it.**

Let us not be discouraged if we see that we have such a LONG WAY to go before we arrive at a place of Christlikeness. One day the work of God in your life will be complete.

*"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2 [ESV](#))*

Until then, let us be encouraged to press forward in the Spirit's work of transforming us into the image of Jesus. I love the testimony that others gave about Peter and John.

*"Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus." (Acts 4:13 [ESV](#)).*

**If you ask the question, how can I grow to become more like Jesus?** The answer will be that we need to see the glory of Jesus. **That vision is transformational. Yet growing and seeing are also reciprocal.**

*"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." (Matthew 5:8 [ESV](#))*

**Principle: The more we see the more we will grow. The more we grow the more we will see.**

Question: Are you more like Jesus this year than you were last year?

Illustration: Growth charts. Principle: Healthy children grow taller each year.

Imagine that you kept a growth chart for daughter from 1-5 years of age. Each year you are pleased by the physical progress she is making. In year 6, no growth. Do you think, "Well, we had five good years and then ignore it?" No. You thank the Lord for the five good years and then you begin to investigate . . . you talk to a doctor to see if anything can be done to help him or her. We are right to make

assessments of our growth in Christlikeness so that if we have an illness, we will be motivated to go to our Great Physician with this concern!

## The Vision of God's glory . . . transforms us.

### 2. Strengthens us.

*"Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart." (2 Corinthians 4:1 [ESV](#))*

Remember that Paul experiences intense opposition and suffering as the result of participating in Jesus' ministry. He has often been tempted to quit . . . to give up on the work that God gave him to accomplish.

*"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself." (2 Corinthians 1:8 [ESV](#))*

Later in this letter, Paul will list some of the specific hardships that the ministry of the Gospel brought into his life:

*24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches." (2 Corinthians 11:24–28 [ESV](#))*

What keeps Paul from saying, *"You know what? I know a little island where I can go to retire. It is time to let others do this work. I have done enough."*?

Here it is: *"Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart." (2 Corinthians 4:1 [ESV](#))*

Friends, whatever pain we might endure as the result of serving the Lord, the reward of seeing God makes the hurt seem trivial.

Paul knows that he does not deserve the blessing of knowing God and helping others to see Him too. **He knows that only God's mercy opened the door**



to his feast on God Himself. In view of this overwhelming gift from the LORD, Paul says, “We DO NOT LOSE HEART.” We do not quit on God.

**Truth: The strength we receive from seeing God is MORE than enough to enable us persevere in the faith!** These momentary troubles are nothing compared with the joy of seeing God now and forever!

Friends, when we feel like quitting our service to God, our worship of God, our love for His church, our resolve to resist this world’s squeeze . . . let us return to the Gospel of Jesus to behold afresh the glory of the Lord.

**The Vision of God’s glory . . . Transforms us. Strengthens us.**

### **3. Purifies us.**

*“But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.” (2 Corinthians 4:2 [ESV](#))*

**Truth: No one can behold the holiness of the Lord without hating his/her own sin and turning from it.** The grace of God does not lead us away from a righteous life, but toward it. A true vision of God will convict us of every disgraceful way that opposes God’s righteous standards and then lead us to live a life of simple obedience to Jesus.

Paul is defending his apostleship against false apostles. These false apostles knew nothing of seeing the glory of the Lord. They were serving in the church for their own glory and status. **And because they were not motivated by the glory of the Lord, they used all sorts of methods to attract hearers to the church.**

They “practiced cunning”. They were willing to do anything in order to win people to their side. They used methods in ministry that we expect from Hollywood in order to draw crowds. **They did not possess the life giving power of the Spirit so they replaced it with the power of illusion and pleasure.** They appealed to the desires of the natural man to grow the church. In their ministry planning sessions they asked, *“What do people want? Let us give them that.”* **Their ad campaign, “Let us make church fun again!!”** Any deceitful practice was justified by two words, **“It works.”**

**They “tampered with God’s word”.** The term “tamper” is used in Greek literature to describe the corrupting of wine through adding inferior, less expensive ingredients. Here, the false teachers were “watering down” the Gospel of Jesus. They avoided those parts of the Gospel that offended the audience.

**They hid those offensive parts and only proclaimed the pleasant parts of the Gospel.** They used verses of scripture for their own selfish ends. They made the Bible appear to say what it does not say. **They twisted the meaning of scripture so that people thought they were hearing God’s Word when in reality they were hearing the opinions of man.**

Paul says, “We could not practice cunning, nor tamper with God’s word. Not after we have seen God! He is too pure for us to labor with impurity in our hearts.

**Principle: Our vision of God will define our methods in ministry and our manner of life.**

**The Vision of God’s glory . . . Transforms us. Strengthens us. Purifies us.**

#### **4. Guides us.**

*3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (2 Corinthians 4:3–4 [ESV](#))*

The false apostles were using Paul’s integrity against him. They were saying, “Hey, if Paul’s message is so life giving and powerful, why do so many among your family and friends turn away from him. You cannot ask them to come to church when Paul is preaching! He will embarrass you. The people will leave offended. How can that be from God?” These false apostles all had marketing degrees.

**They believed that any church leader who did not overcome consumer resistance to the message should be replaced by someone who could.**

**Both Jesus and Paul often alienated people through their preaching.** We are wise to imitate them.

Paul gives the explanation for WHY the message he proclaims IS BOTH POWERFUL AND YET INEFFECTIVE in the lives of some who hear it. The god of this world has

blinded the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the glory of Christ. Satan and his minions labor to persuade people that the Gospel is false, fake, fiction. Satan uses false teachers like the false apostles in Corinth. Satan also uses man's desire to hear a message that appeals to his own opinions about life. Satan labors to keep people in the dark.

No one can persuade another person to believe the truth of Jesus. This is a spiritual work that God alone can perform. By nature everyone refuses to believe the Gospel. **Satan uses peoples sinful self to blind them from seeing the glory of God in the Gospel of Jesus.** They listen to the message about Jesus and they shrug their shoulders saying, "Nothing important to see here!" **The problem is not in the Message of the Gospel. The problem is the heart of the hearer.**

**Application: If you hear the Gospel of Jesus and do not see God, you are being blinded by the evil one. Plead with God to open your eyes so that you may see Him. Plead with Him to show you His glory!**

*"For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." (2 Corinthians 4:5 [ESV](#))*

When we see the glory of God through the Gospel of Jesus, we will not be satisfied with any watered down Gospel. **If you asked Paul, "Hey, Paul what are you planning to preach?"** Paul is not thinking about the needs of the audience and saying, "I think I will do a series on marriage, finances, parenting, depression, or sex. That will interest people." Paul is thinking, *"I am going to preach about Jesus. Only the message of Jesus possesses power to lift the veil off of blind eyes so that people can see God. If I preach Jesus, He will lead His people to health in every other topic."*

**Truth: A gospel that does not offend is a gospel that does not open the eyes to the glory of God.**

Every true sermon proclaims Jesus . . . it proclaims His Person and His work . . . He is God of very God. He is Savior. He is Lord. He is our Prophet, Priest and King. He died upon the cross as a sacrifice for our sin . . . He bodily rose the third day and ascended into heaven. He will return in power and glory to rule over all the earth.

Without Jesus at the center a sermon may be filled with moral conviction, sage advice, winsome encouragement or sound truth, but it is not the Gospel and it will not help us to see God. And seeing God is the whole point of everything!!!

**Main Idea: God uses the ministry of the Gospel to give sight to our souls so that we see God's glory. The soul that sees God begins to become like Him. The more we see the more we will grow. The more we grow the more we will see.**

What is heaven? It is a place where we will see the glory of God fully and enjoy Him fully. The person who has Christ will go to heaven when they die, but if a person will go to heaven when they die, they will have heaven come to them before they die.