

WHO IS THAT MASKED MAN?

by Ray C. Stedman

We are nearing the season of mask-wearing, Halloween, and some of our children, at least, will be putting them on. In the radio program, *The Lone Ranger* (who was known as "The Masked Man"), some of us who are older remember how thrilled we were when we heard that call of, "Hi-ho, Silver!" to the beat of the *William Tell Overture*, and the invariable question, "Who was that Masked Man anyway?" And, we were distressed a couple of weeks ago to learn that the Supreme Court has ordered that The Masked Man has to take his mask off. The Lone Ranger cannot wear it anymore!

But in Verse 12 of Second Corinthians, Chapter 3, Paul tells us who "The Masked Man" of the Bible is. It is Moses.

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendor. {2 Cor 3:12-13 RSV}

It is obvious that the apostle is dealing here with this veil as a symbol. God loves to teach with symbols. His favorite teaching method is to use a visual aid, a kind of symbol of truth which he holds up before us to instruct us. The "mask," or veil, which Moses wore is a symbol of the old covenant, that is, the Law, the Ten Commandments, with their demand upon us for a certain standard of behavior. Also, it is a symbol of our natural, typical response to the Law -- to try to obey it, either to the point of convincing ourselves that we have achieved it, or to the point of giving up and rebelling against it.

When Moses came down from the mountaintop, we learn that his face was shining, and that brilliant face of Moses becomes the symbol of the attraction, the glory, that there is about trying to keep the Law of God. Every one of us has felt that attraction at times. We know what it feels like to have some opportunity given to us to show what we can do and to respond to it. We feel a quickening of our blood when we feel certain demands we think we can meet, and we want an opportunity to show that we can. An awful lot of people can get very excited over that kind of thing today in the realms of music, sports, politics, and various other areas of human endeavor. That is all symbolized by the glory of Moses' face.

But it was a fading glory, Paul tells us. He himself has found something even more exciting. It is what he calls the "new covenant," a new way of living, provided by God in Christ. This gives us not only a right relationship with Christ right from the very beginning (not something we have earned, something given to us), but also it gives us the excitement of expecting God to work with us and through us so that when we do ordinary, normal things, God will be at work and great things will happen as a result. Now that is exciting.

I like the way one of the newer translations renders some of the verses just before this section, where the apostle is comparing these two covenants.

Compare the giving of the rules with the reception of the Spirit. The presentation of the rules, which result in death, was so brilliant that the Israelites could not look directly upon Moses' face because of the glare of the presence of God. And yet the rules he received were destined to pass away. Won't the gift of the Spirit be more luminous? If the gift of rules which condemn a person was deemed marvelous, isn't the gift of a right relationship a greater marvel? As marvelous as receiving the rules has been, this gift is fading away because it is superseded by the reception of the Spirit. If what is abolished is marvelous, how much more marvelous is that which remains. {2 Cor 3:7-11 One of the Newer Translations}

That is what Paul has been talking about. Because he has found this new basis for living, which is far more exciting and more attractive than trying your best to keep the Law, that leads him to say in Verse 12, "Since we

have such a hope, we are very bold."

That is the mark of somebody who has really trusted the new covenant. He becomes bold; he becomes confident. That is the idea. The root meaning behind this word is openness. He becomes right out front, out in the open, with nothing to hide, transparent. The reason is because he is not counting on himself; he is counting on God, and therefore, he becomes confident and out front.

Paul contrasts this immediately with Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendor. You can read that story back in the 34th chapter of Exodus, where we are told that when Moses brought the Ten Commandments down from the mountain his face was shining like the sun and the people actually fled from him. Moses called them back, and when he had finished giving them the words of God, it says he put a veil over his face.

Paul tells us he did it so that they would not see the end of the fading glory. When Moses went back into the tent of meeting and met with God again, he took the veil off, and his face began to shine again. When he would come out he would put the veil back on. He did not want them to see the final condition that trying to obey God with all your might will bring you to.

What is that condition? Well, Paul has already described it for us in Chapter 3. He calls it the "dispensation of death" (Verse 7), "the dispensation of condemnation" (Verse 9), and then in Verse 11, "that which fades away." This describes for us what the end of trying your best to live up to what God wants you to be will bring you to.

It will be first, a sense of death. You never measure up. Nobody ever does. You never get the feeling, "Aha! at last I have done what God wants," because something inside of you says, "Well, you may think so, but maybe God doesn't." So you feel guilty, you feel a sense of failure and lack. Furthermore, Paul says it will be made up of a sense of condemnation, that is, a fading away of all the excitement, the glamour, and the glory. What you are left with is boredom and emptiness and a sense of futility.

I think this explains why many Christians testify, when they are honest, saying, "You know, my Christian life is not very exciting. I find it rather boring, kind of empty." They confess, in their most honest moments, to having a feeling of waste and futility about their life. Well, that is confirmation of what Paul is saying here, that it is our very attempt to think we can live up to what God demands of us that is producing the sense of death and guilt and emptiness within us.

So, this veil over Moses' face becomes a symbol of whatever interferes with and delays the work of the Law. Paul has been telling us the Law has come to kill us, to show to us how completely useless it is for us to try hard to obey God. The Law has come to make that real, to show us how absolutely futile it is to try. But a veil delays that. It makes us think we really are pleasing God, we are fulfilling his demands. The veil, therefore, puts off the death that we need to come to in order to receive the life that God is willing to give.

Moses, perhaps, did not understand all this when he put the veil over his face. It is somewhat difficult for us to guess what his motive may have been.

Some commentators suggest that he felt that if the people saw that the glory was fading away, they would not pay any attention to the Law, they would disregard it and go on living as they wanted.

Others have suggested that, perhaps, he was trying to preserve his own status symbol as a special mediator with God.

That is the position I have taken in my book, *Authentic Christianity*, which deals with this passage. I think that Moses, like many of us, was trying to preserve the reputation he had with the people and he did not want them to see that when he came out from God's presence the glory began to fade -- as many of us do not like people to see what is really going on inside of us. We want to preserve an image of being spiritual giants when actually we are not at all. Our family knows it, but we do not want our friends or anyone else to know. That may be what Moses' motive was.

One thing is clear, however: It was not a bold or confident act on Moses' part. Paul contrasts his own boldness with Moses. What Moses did was born out of fear, out of compromise, out of an attempt to hide something that should have been seen.

That is confirmed by the fact that Paul goes on to link this with the action of Israel, of the Jews of his own time, and their unbelief for he says:

But their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed. {2 Cor 3:14-16 RSV}

Notice what that is saying. The apostle is very clear that the nature of the darkness, the blindness that lay over the minds of the Jews of his day, which he calls a "veil," is the same veil that Moses put over his face. Now, obviously, the veil on Moses' face was a material veil; it was made of cloth. Paul is not suggesting that the Jews walk around with cloth veils on their faces. What he is saying is the same thing that veil stood for in Moses is the same thing that was happening in the Israelites of his own day. What the veil did on Moses' face was to hide the end of the fading glory, hide the terrible end of self-effort, the death that would result. That is what it is doing on the face of the Jews who read the old covenant, the Old Testament, even today. They do not see that the end of all their efforts to try to live a righteous life by their own human resources is going to end in death and condemnation and emptiness and a total sense of futility and waste. But yet, that is what happens.

Paul also calls it a "hardening," by which he means it becomes a continual condition. It is a state of mind that they enter into. Now, the amazing thing is that, in our day, 2000 years after Paul, this is still true. You can see it in the Jews today. In Orthodox Judaism, and much of Reformed Judaism, and certainly in Liberal Judaism, they are still trying to make it before God on the basis of how they behave.

To illustrate that to you I would like to share a quotation from a letter that a young man in this congregation received from a Jewish rabbi. This boy was of Jewish background, but he had become a Christian, and he was in correspondence with the rabbi who was trying to defend Judaism. This is what he wrote:

"We Jews have rejected the Gentile Christian view. Judaism, as shaped by our rabbis in Palestine, conceived of the body (that is, our physical bodies) as a gift of God and to this day we regard the body as holy and wholesome, not as a prison from which to escape. Any inclination by man to commit a wrongdoing, we hold, resides not in his body but in his heart or mind and this inclination can be overcome by a change of heart or mind. Thus man, by himself, does possess, indeed, the power to atone for his own misdeeds, and we Jews have in our Torah [the Old Testament] the guidance directing our hearts and minds to righteous living."

And that, of course, is the old covenant. The veil still lies over their minds so that they cannot see the end of that fading glory.

Now this message is not an attack on Judaism, for Paul is not attacking Judaism. What he is simply doing is using Moses and Israel as an illustration of something that is true of Christians. (The ones Paul is concerned about are the believers to whom he is writing here in Corinth, and, through them, to us as well). These people had become Christians, and by faith the Spirit of God had entered their human spirit and had established them into a relationship with Christ which could not be broken. In the spirit, at the deep level of human unconsciousness, they were linked to God already in an open, clear relationship.

But the trouble was (and this is our trouble as well), in their soul, in their conscious experience of life (the part we are aware of), this veil over their minds was often there. They still believed that, if they tried hard enough, they could keep themselves from evil and so live a life pleasing to God. That is the error that pervades churches all through this country and around the world today. It locks us into weakness and futility and condemnation and guilt and all the other phenomena we are familiar with in mediocre church life today.

What happens is this: Once we become a Christian we receive the gift of salvation by faith. We thank God we have that, and then immediately we begin to set up rules of conduct. (We usually submit to somebody else's for awhile, and then we begin to set up our own). We determine what is wrong and what is right.

Everybody has on his list certain things that are obviously wrong -- murder and adultery and drunkenness, etc. These are almost always on everybody's list because they are so clear in Scripture. Then we begin to add others. Drinking, that is out; smoking, that is wrong; dancing, that is wrong; going to the movies, theater, whatever, are wrong. There is no limit to where you can go in that direction.

You can do like the Amish people and include wearing buttons, that is wrong; or using zippers, absolutely wrong; or playing instruments in a congregation, that is absolutely of the devil.

There are groups which believe that once you have made your list, whatever it is, once you have got your No-No's clear, then all you have to do to be approved of God is to keep the list. Since they are external things, that, by effort of will or mind, you can keep from doing, you do have a possibility of pleasing God, it looks, so you try to do it.

Now you can either fail, because your demands are too unrealistic; you give up entirely and throw the whole thing out, or, what is probably worse, you succeed, and you do not do any of those things. You then begin to feel good about yourself because you have lived up to what God expects of you.

But what you do not realize, because the veil is hiding the end of the fading glory, is that when you keep your list you begin to feel very proud of yourself because you have achieved this. You do not openly admit that; you do not begin to brag about how spiritual you are (you know that will get you into trouble), but inside there is a very strong pride that begins to develop which will reveal itself outwardly.

And the way it usually comes out is in some form of snobbery. You will look down on people. Most Christians suffer from this. (I look down on people who look down on people.) It shows up as prejudice. Certain types of people are acceptable and others you cannot stand. You cannot understand how anybody can stand them -- hippies, or blacks, or poor people, whatever.

You begin to develop a critical spirit -- others do not measure up. Where you feel you are strong, you begin to put down those who cannot make it in that area. There is nothing worse than a reformed drunkard, for instance. He makes everybody uncomfortable. Or you become absolutely intolerant of others, impatient of lack of progress on their part. It comes out in the form of sarcasm, the way you talk about people, the names you give them. Archie Bunker is a clear manifestation of the bigotry that begins to emerge.

The great problem is we are blind to these as sins. If we saw ourselves, we would see that we are wretchedly self-righteous. But we really think God approves of us. (We are just like the Pharisees whom Jesus would scorch with his words because they were so wretched in their self-righteousness.) And since we do not see these as sins, we never turn to the Lord about them. We think of them as minor peccadilloes that might be a little troublesome, but they are not really sins. God is not very concerned about them because of the great self-righteous record we have in his eyes. So we never confess them; we never acknowledge them as wrong to ourselves or anybody; we never turn to the Lord.

Therefore, the blindness is never removed, because it says here, "when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed." You cannot take it off any other way; there is no way you can show yourself how self-righteous you are. You have to turn to the Lord. That is the only way it is possible. But because we do not do this, we go on year after year hurting ourselves, hurting others, enjoying the momentary pleasure and sense of excitement we get from indulging these attitudes. We are unaware that gradually there is coming into our life the end of the fading glory, the death, the darkness, the emptiness, the sense of futility, the boredom, the dullness, the "blahness" of that kind of Christianity. That is where it is coming from. Paul is telling us to look right at it, and see it for what it is.

But there is one great area of hope; and you get this in the next two verses:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. {2 Cor 3:17-18 RSV}

The apostle reminds the Corinthians immediately that, though the veil is over their minds, the Lord is in their hearts, in their human spirits. Their hope of freedom comes from that great fact, for the one who is within them is God himself. Paul identifies him: "the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

He is not confusing, of course, the personages of the Trinity. He does not mean that the Holy Spirit and Jesus the Lord are one and the same. He means that they are so identified in purpose and function that they seem to be the same; you can exchange one for the other. That is why "to walk in fellowship with Christ," and "to walk in the fullness of the Spirit" is to talk about the same thing. It is not two different experiences, it is the same. The Holy Spirit has come to reveal the Lord Jesus, therefore, all that he does will not involve talking about himself but talking about the Lord. The Spirit-led life is one in which Jesus Christ is very visible and clear and plain to our eyes. Therefore, the one who is doing this is the Lord himself, "and where the Spirit of Christ is (the Spirit of the Lord is), there is freedom."

Freedom is being out in the open, it is having boldness, nothing to hide. That is what Paul is talking about. The man who is free is one who does not have any reputation to defend, no image to hide behind, nothing to preserve about himself. He can be himself. That is what freedom is.

Everywhere, today, we hear this held up as what people are longing for. People want to "be themselves." "I've got to be me," we hear, and there is nothing wrong with that. God wants you to be you too. The only thing wrong is the way we do it. We are being taught in the world that the way to be "me" is to think about "my" advantage, "my" efforts, and defend and demand them.

The Word of God teaches us it is quite another process. The way to be yourself, to have freedom, is not to be afraid to look at all the evil that is possible in your heart and in your life, because you have another basis on which you can receive the acceptance and approval of God. It is a gift to you. It is faith continually accepting anew the gift of righteousness, of already being pleasing to God, and, on that basis, serving him out of a heart of gratitude for what you already have.

Do you see the difference? You know you do not deserve it, but, nevertheless, you have it. God's basis of deliverance is to give you the gift of full acceptance, of righteousness. You do not have to earn it at all, and your performance is not going to affect it. You already have it.

When you start looking at the One who is doing this in your life, the Lord Jesus, and beholding him with all your veils taken away so you are not afraid to look at your own evil capacity, then a wonderful thing happens. Paul says,

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another. {2 Cor 3:18 RSV}

Without even knowing that you are doing it, just by rejoicing in what you have, and serving the Lord who gave it to you, you suddenly discover -- and other people will discover -- that you are becoming a loving person. And love is the fulfilling of the Law; the very demand that God made in the Law, which you tried so hard to fulfill by your self-effort, will be fulfilled without you even realizing it when you begin to love out of the grace and the forgiveness of God.

A loving person is already fulfilling the Law. He is compassionate, understanding, forgiving. He is firm when it comes to right and wrong; he knows how to speak the truth, but he does it in love. He is not constantly criticizing and judging others because he understands the weakness with which we come at these standards. Yet he is helpful; he tries to encourage people to rest upon the grace and forgiveness of God. Without realizing it, we suddenly discover to our own amazement that we are becoming more like Jesus.

It is a process of growth. It does not happen in one great transformation when you are suddenly sanctified, or filled with the Spirit, or baptized. It happens as you keep your eyes on the glory of the Lord and not on the face of Moses; not on self-effort, but on what he is already giving you. When you do, you suddenly discover the Spirit of God has been at work making gradual changes. You are becoming a loving person, easier to live with, more attractive, more compelling, your life is deepening, it is losing its shallowness; you are more understanding of things. That is the work of the Spirit. Notice what he says, "for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." It is not you who does it, it is he. He has the responsibility.

This accounts for what many of us have difficulty understanding. It is the work of the Spirit to remove the veil, which is what is keeping us from seeing ourselves, and how futile it is for us to try hard to please God. There is another way of pleasing him -- accepting what he gives you. As long as you are trying hard, you never can lay hold of what he is ready to give. Therefore, the work of the Spirit is to help you to see how futile your efforts at trying have become.

These are what we call "moments of truth."

Did you ever have one?

They are rather shocking. You think you have been going along, eating your Wheaties and doing OK, and suddenly you discover that you have been a very self-centered person, that what you thought was a perfectly acceptable life is filled with lovelessness, viciousness, and selfishness.

I have often told of the two young men who were students down at Duke University in North Carolina who were invited to a masquerade party. They decided to go dressed in the costumes of the mascots of Duke University, the "Blue Devils," so they rented blue devil costumes. Dressed in these, they started out for the party, and, without realizing it, they got mixed up and went by mistake into a church congregation at Prayer Meeting. When these people looked up from their prayers to see two blue devils walking down the aisle there was a great exodus, out the doors and out the windows, all except for one rather stout lady who got wedged in the front pew when she tried to turn around. She began to scream in terror, and these two young men, forgetting they were causing this problem, rushed forward to try to help her. When she saw them advancing on her she raised her hand, she rolled her eyes, and said, "Stop! Don't you come any further! I want you to know that I've been a member of this church for 25 years, but I've been on your side all the time!"

That is what the Spirit of God does with us. He suddenly makes us see whose side we have been on, and it is very upsetting. I have felt it many times. You suddenly see how futile it is to try to be good, but how wonderful it is to realize that, by the gift of God, you already are good in his sight. When you believe that, and, out of sheer gratitude for that, you begin to live and to do the things that fulfill the love that you feel in your heart, you suddenly discover that your behavior has changed as well, and that without being conscious of it you are becoming a loving person. That is what the new covenant is all about. That is the greater glory.

I hope many of you will read through again the very excellent sermon that Jack Crabtree preached this summer called, *The Purpose of the Law*, because he brings out very well how the Law is intended to kill us, to make us give up trying to be good. That is its purpose, because it makes us understand that we cannot achieve God's standard of righteousness that way, ever, but we can have it as a gift, fresh, as many times a day as we need it. That is what will result at last in love, which fulfills the Law.

And we all, with unveiled face, [having come to the end, having accepted the fact that we cannot make it before God or man by pretense, by image, by trying to look good. When we come to that place we are] beholding the glory of the Lord, [and we] are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. {2 Cor 3:18 RSV}

OUTLINE OF 2 CORINTHIANS 3:12-18

1. Opposition from within, 3:12-18
 - A. The veil on Moses' face, 12-13
 1. His motive-lack of boldness.
 2. His purpose-hide the end.
 - B. The veil on Israel's face, 14-16
 1. The effect of the veil-hardening.
 2. The nature of the veil-same as on Moses' face.
 3. The reason it remains-only Christ can remove.
 - C. The glory of the unveiled face, 17-18
 1. The freedom of the Spirit, 17
 - a. The Spirit's identity.
 - b. The mark of His presence.
 2. The increasing glory, 18
 - a. The object of our faith, 18a
 - (1) The beauty of Christ
 - (2) Seen without a veil
 - b. The effect on us, 18b
 - (1) Changed into His likeness
 - (2) The process of growth
 - c. The One responsible, 18c

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