

GREAT AND LASTING GLORY

By Steve Zeisler

Tomorrow, Palo Alto will be visited by Mikhail Gorbachev, a man universally recognized as one of the key political figures of the 20th century. President Gorbachev has just participated in the Washington Summit with President Bush. They discussed German reunification, cutting back on nuclear and conventional weapons, world economics, etc. For many who think biblically, the hopes for the future which these discussions raise bring to mind the question David asked in Psalm 8. As David considered the heavens and the glory of creation, with all of its possibilities, he asked God, "What is man that you take notice of him?" Those who would shape human history-who, like David, are leaders of nations-must also ask the questions of human destiny and purpose.

Bound for glory.

"What is man?" David's answer to that question, inspired by the Spirit of God, follows in Psalm 8:5: "You have made him only a little lower than God, and have crowned him with glory and honor." This will be the subject of our study in the apostle Paul's 2 Corinthian letter this morning. What does it mean for ordinary human beings to become participants in glory? According to the word of God, the purpose of humanity is to become partakers of glory; to be crowned with glory and honor.

But what does this mean? The communist world of Mikhail Gorbachev is collapsing under the weight of its own ideology. Human beings cannot successfully base their lives on the promised accomplishments of the collectivist state. But if we are honest, we must admit that the capitalist West is headed for collapse also. If it is not enough to live for the greatness of the collectivist state, neither is it enough to build a life upon the glamor of self-made wealth. Neither system adequately answers David's question, "What is man?"

God's answer is that we were made to contain him, to be vessels filled with a great treasure, and crowned with glory and honor. No other answer will suffice, not the atheism of the communist world, not the secular humanism of the Western world.

Our confidence to minister flows from the initiative of God

But what is glory? If we were made for glory, made to contain God, how do we define that word? "Glory" is an important word in the Bible, Old and New Testament alike. The root idea is to have weight or depth. It is the exact opposite of fluffiness, of something insubstantial or shallow. What is glorious is that which is intrinsically valuable, worthy, weighty and beautiful. Glory comes only from God himself. It is the beauty and worthiness God expressed in his creation, and expressed finally in humanity. It is what he is like-glorious by nature.

Glory is also explosive. It radiates out from the center, spreading itself abroad from its core like a volcano or an atomic explosion; extraordinary force, beauty and magnificence streaming out from a central point, from the heart of God itself. That which is glorious overwhelms everything in its path.

How humanity can come by its glorious inheritance is the subject of our study this morning. Second Corinthians 3:4:

Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant-not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved on letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Confidence in ministry

I want to begin by hearkening back to what we said last week. Verse 4 opens with a ringing note of confidence, the same confidence that Paul described in chapter 2 as he urged his readers to remember that Christians are always led in triumph in Christ. Here, in verse 4, he says, "Such confidence as this is ours through Christ...not from ourselves but from God." We are competent, sufficient, capable of carrying out this important ministry that God has given us. We are to be representatives of the Sovereign of the universe. He has appointed us as his ambassadors, ministers of a new covenant, as our passage states, and we are capable of doing what we have been assigned to do.

Some will say that the concept of everything coming from God and nothing coming from us leads to a life of quiescence and tentativeness, but there is nothing of that in this passage. We are confident in Christ, and competent to minister. We are the light of the world, and we are to get on with what God has called us to do.

There is tremendous buoyancy in what Paul is saying here, and yet, as we have seen in chapters 1 and 2, not very long before he wrote this he despaired of life itself. Despite this, however, he pressed on, disregarding his feelings. Christians have been called into an extraordinary ministry. In a world of collapsing communism, and its major alternative, spiritually empty capitalism, a world that cannot save itself, we are to represent the Lord-and we have everything we need to do so.

The covenants of God

Our confidence in ministry flows from the initiative of God. God's outreach to us always begins with the making of a covenant. He approaches us and speaks of himself, giving us a basis for understanding him, and a means by which we can approach him. There are, in the final analysis, two covenants that make their appeal to every generation-the old covenant (3:14), and the new (sometimes called the eternal) covenant, 3:6.

Both of these covenants operate all the time, not just during the Old Testament era. They are always the basis on which men and women approach God. We meet the old covenant first, so that it should eventually do its work and lead us to the new. The old covenant produces death. God intends that we despair of our sins and appeal to him for a Savior; then he meets us with everlasting life by offering us the new covenant. Both covenants are glorious---and they both come from God

The difficulty that has descended upon believers in every age is that we don't move from the old to the new covenant. We prefer the law to grace. We are more comfortable responding to the living God in an external, rather than an internal way. We like the challenge of doing our best, and we cover up and lie about the times we fail.

Differentiating between the old and new

The distinction between these covenants is very important to Paul, and it should be important to us, too. He lists a number of ways we can make comparison between them. First, in verse 5, he says,

"Not that we are competent to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God."

Paul is implying here that the old covenant is that which is based on our accomplishments, that which comes

from ourselves. The new covenant, on the other hand, is that which comes from God: it is his life mediated through us. It is not us doing our best for him; it is him acting within us.

A second distinction is that one is an external standard, the other internal. One is by the letter-the finger of God having written it on stone tablets on Mt. Sinai. It stands before us, speaking to us from outside of ourselves, compelling us to act and judging us when we don't. The other is by the Spirit-and verse 3 has already told us that the Spirit writes on the tablets of human hearts. The Spirit takes us residence inside of us and ministers to our hearts and our thinking-not outside but inside us.

A third distinction that is made between these covenants is that one brings death and the other life. Another comparison indicates that one brings condemnation, the other brings righteousness. This is not a reference to self-righteousness. Some Christians regard righteousness as an essentially unattractive thing. They think that it sounds like prudishness. But Paul is indicating here that righteousness is the very opposite of condemnation, the very thing that the old covenant produces. Nothing is more desirable than to be free of condemnation.

Another distinction Paul draws between these covenants is to note that one fades away and the other is indelible. He makes the point in verse 10 that the old covenant was glorious at the beginning, but the new covenant is so much more glorious (an oft-repeated phrase in this context) that the first covenant ceases to have any glory at all. A flashlight contributes nothing once the sun comes up. In the same way, once the greater glory becomes manifest, the old covenant fades away.

The attractiveness of the old covenant

But let us not be under any illusions: the old covenant is attractive. Paul is not saying that God's first approach to mankind was evil, ugly, or deceptive. The law is a good thing, as the book of Romans says, in and of itself. Did it not come with glory? How is it possible that something that results in death can yet be glorious, attractive and beautiful?

Remember that what preceded knowledge of the old covenant---for Israel as a nation and each of us individually---was slavery, the lies of the evil one, and silence from heaven. The first time we became aware that a righteous God had spoken and that he cared, we encountered glorious news indeed.

And secondly, his voice called for heroic response on our part. It made us want to do our best. When we heard his voice, our response was to say, "I can do that. Others may fail the test, but not me." For the first time we became aware that God was interested in us, and we were given a goal to strive for. But God's intention all along was that we should do our best and fall flat on our face; that we should try our hardest and discover we were suffering from a disease that prevented us from ever doing enough; and that ultimately, having discovered that, we should say, "Lord, I'm going to die in my sins unless there is a Savior who will save me."

The old covenant was designed to bring death, to bring about hard and aggressive but futile effort that would ultimately fail. But what all too often happens is that we respond with energy and competitiveness, hoping to outstrip those around us. And we do get better; there is some improvement. However, when we come to realize that our best is not good enough, instead of asking God to help us we pull a veil over the whole thing. We begin to lie, to say we've done better than we have.

Statistics and competition

I have spent some time this spring watching boys play baseball. My fourteen-year-old son plays in a league made up of thirteen- through fifteen-year-olds. I was struck while watching these games that there is an analogy between the old covenant and baseball. These boys practice hard and set goals for themselves. They want to be able to do what they could not do last year: make the throw from third to first base, hit a curve ball, etc. Maximum effort is required, and improvement in skills is apparent. When the players do well, and the team wins, there is a rush of enthusiasm which is delightful to experience. Competition is glorious. Making demands of yourself and seeing improvement is wonderful. But even the best players get hits only one-third of the times they come to bat. No team wins all of its games. There is always somebody better. There are momentary mountaintop experiences of exhilaration, but all too often there are strikeouts, errors, and team losses. Even age eventually takes its toll. Fifteen years is the age limit in this league. Other, younger boys are

waiting to take over.

Baseball is exciting, but it is not a basis on which to live life. The desire to compete and succeed is not enough. Furthermore, the game is replete with statistics and, like the law written on stone, statistics testify to performance. There is always someone who hits for a higher average, someone who has won more games as a pitcher. Statistics are stark testimony of how you are doing-and the kids keep track of every number. A boy on my son's team hit a home run the other day and it was interesting to hear how the measured length of the homer grew with time. When he first hit it, people in the stands said it must have gone 300 feet. A couple of nights later others reported that it went 350 feet. By the end of the season it will have become a 500-foot monster. Performance is always measured against perfection. There is a willingness to lie, to cover up, to make greater than which was not deemed great enough. All of this is glorious, but it's inadequate; it's not enough to build a life on.

The old covenant calls forth great effort, but it stands ready to judge the smallest failure

The alternative, it seems to me, is something like being in love, real love, agape love, in which the measurements are not outside yourself anymore. Instead, a lover has taken ownership of your heart. Someone whom you care for very much has taken up residence inside. You begin to want different things than you ever desired before, and you have the power of self-sacrifice that you never had before; you want to give up your rights if only your beloved can be benefited somehow. You are not competing anymore, you are not keeping track. Love does not keep batting averages. Someone has wrapped himself or herself around your heart, and the way you think and feel has been changed. This is what the new covenant is like. It is the Spirit of God, writing on tablets of human hearts, living inside, making us different people from inside out, offering us power to do what we could not do before, changing us so that we don't even want to do what we did before. God loves us and approves of us and he will never disapprove of us no matter what we do, and that love transforms us so that we become ministers of a new covenant.

The moon and sun

There will be a full moon next Friday. That night, you will be able to walk in its beautiful light. But that light is merely the reflected light of the sun. The moon never generates any light of its own. In fact, if you get close to it, the moon is not very attractive at all. It's grey, pock-marked, lifeless, and cold. But, seen from earth, it looks quite beautiful. Two weeks from Friday it will have waned from full to new. Its light will fade. Here, Paul says that Moses' face had a shining quality about it because Moses had stood in the presence of God, and the power and presence of God made his face shine, just as the sun makes the face of the moon to shine. The people were amazed at the glory of Moses' face, but it was a fading glory.

Further on in the book of 2 Corinthians (4:6) we read, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." There is a second face in this passage- the face of Jesus Christ-which is intrinsically glorious; it does not reflect anyone else's glory. And in the new covenant, light is implanted within our hearts so that we become like the sun: much more remarkable than the moon, inwardly generated, radiating out from our core---life itself---not responding to God from a distance, but responding to him because he has taken up residence inside us.

We have a choice to make. The law of God written on stone is unchangeable. We can turn to the old covenant and read the inflexible, immutable, external-to-us appeal any time we want. It calls forth great effort, but stands ready to judge even the smallest failure. God can be known on this basis. We can do our best and fool the people around us concerning our failures-that is an option that always remains available to us-or we can have the old covenant do its work of condemning us, making us cry, "Lord, I'm an utter failure." Then, having been condemned, we can appeal to the Savior who in a love relationship takes up residence inside us.

In Colossians 1, Paul says, "The mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this ministry, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." I urge upon all of you a decision. To the degree that God has made

clear to you that you have lived your life with everything coming from you, keeping him at a distance---choose the new covenant. Choose the life in which the Lord God resides within, in which everything begins with a love relationship, where failures are no longer measured, where God gets the honor. Then the watching world has a reason to hope for glory.

Catalog No. 4219
2 Corinthians 3:4-11
Fifth Message
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June 3, 1990

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