

BOLDNESS AND LIBERTY

By Steve Zeisler

A letter from a Canadian missionary, quoted in an article by Mary Lou Stam, had a powerful effect on me when I read it recently. She had spent many years on the mission field, and wrote the following upon her return:

When I returned from Zaire, I felt I had lost my reason for living...my friends, my home, my companions, my job and my belongings were gone. I was too exhausted to think of a job and too insecure to consider entering a new situation. I was going to drop out...I hated using the telephone, and felt totally inadequate before a simple electronic calculator. Although I resented watching the things that I saw here, I found myself longing for them. I enjoyed the carefully and tastefully decorated homes. Then would come the memory of a fragile mother, crumpled at my feet, begging for a bar of soap for a baby of two hours old, clutched under a dirty cloth. How could I ever find meaning again in a culture that had everything; that threw away more food and clothing than my country had ever seen? God has shown me slowly and painfully that I need to change; I need to grow; need to know that He is not so interested in our service as He is in ourselves.

As I read this, I was burdened by the reminder that missionaries are often treated badly when they return home. Further, this woman raises the issue of the maldistribution of the world's resources; why some nations have so little and some have an abundance. But what struck me most profoundly about this letter was the writer's struggle for self-knowledge. She had been comfortable serving God in one setting, but once she was removed from familiar surroundings she did not know how to trust God. She had built a life based on service in Africa, and had discovered self-worth in that, but when she found herself in a setting where accomplishments proved difficult, she lost her sense of who she was and where God could be found.

For many of us as well, familiar patterns have dulled our perception of who we are as children of God. I pray that the passage we will be studying this morning will have the effect of making us bold and hopeful as we take a fresh look at ourselves. Second Corinthians 3:12:

Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. But their minds were made dull...

This word "dull" is interesting. It was used to describe callouses which developed on the hands through hard labor. The hands become dull, so that even a pin-prick cannot be felt because the nerves are buried under the calloused surface. This is the term Paul uses to describe the minds of the Israelites when they heard the old covenant read.

...for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, for only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Here once again Paul returns to the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. When Moses came down from the mountain, having spent time with God, his countenance was so bright people could not look at him, so he veiled his face when he spoke to the people. Although it is not mentioned in the Old Testament story, it is clear

that the glory which Moses' face reflected faded with time, and he was reluctant to remove the veil. From this incident, Paul deduces an important spiritual principle. "We are not like Moses," says the apostle. We are tempted to act the way Moses acted, but Paul exhorts that we not do this, that we not become deliberately deceptive. The Christian's veil is taken away in Christ. We are now at the point of seeing ourselves made like Christ and learning here how that process takes place.

A veil as a mask

Let us look at what Paul unearths in this Old Testament incident of Moses veiling his face, of his covering his shortcomings, if you will. Here we see that there are three ways in which a Christian is tempted to veil things: a veil lies over the face, over the heart, and over the mind. The veil that covers the face is a mask which we put on in order to fool others about who we really are. It is an attempt to deceive. We may even do this subconsciously, and be unaware that we are trying to deceive people. Hundreds of thousands of Americans undergo cosmetic surgery each year, strictly for the change of appearance and the hoped-for confidence that will result. The use of cosmetics of any kind is some entering into this desire to make ourselves look different. This is not so bad in a physical sense, but when we wear spiritual masks in an effort to fool people about who we really are, grave consequences follow.

Self-righteousness is the term that comes to mind as most encompassing of the kind of masks that Christians wear. We proclaim our high standing and look down upon the sins of others, and are always calling attention to our successes in the Christian life. This characteristic never encourages any observer toward righteousness, but rather drives unbelievers away.

It has been my experience at times that anger uncovers self-righteousness. When I become upset with people too quickly, this is generally a clue to me that I am angry about something inside me. When we are hurt too deeply, too easily, too quickly, when our feelings are assailed and we pout and feel sorry for ourselves beyond what is reasonable, this is a sign that what is behind the mask is calling attention to itself.

Lack of compassion, the inability to hurt with people who are hurting, is another sign of a mask of self-righteousness. One of the great responsibilities of Christians is to hate sin and to love sinners. A Christian must denounce sin by both word and action, and repudiate everything that God hates-and then embrace and love with the love of Christ the one who is caught in sin. When we find ourselves hard-heartedly rejecting people because of their sin, the chances are good that there is similar sin in us that we have hidden from ourselves and others. That very lack of compassion ought to suggest something to us.

I remember talking once with an elderly man who could not abide divorced people. There was no note of compassion in his voice, or no option of embracing people who had failed and then genuinely repented of the sin of divorce. As we talked, however, I realized that this man had many years earlier divorced his wife in his heart and he resented having to live with her. Deep down he wished he could have been divorced. A marriage in which he had been miserable for years, which God had never been permitted to heal, had hardened him toward people who had taken the unrighteous step of separating from their spouses.

Jesus said that hating someone is like murdering them. If you have lusted after someone and played out that lust in your mind, you are an adulterer. Many Christians have thought lives which they hide behind masks and then angrily denounce those who have lived out what they have thought but never admitted to themselves.

The first way the veil operates then is that it covers our countenance. The public us, the way we want people to perceive us, is masked so that others will not be aware of the different reality behind the mask. The face of Moses used to be glorious, so he covered it up, hoping that people would assume his face was as brilliant as ever.

The veil as a blindfold

Secondly, says Paul, masks cover the mind as well. The Jews continued to hear Moses read throughout the centuries so that the Old Testament had become rigid formula for them and no new truth entered their thinking. To them, God was not saying anything new, and as a result, when Christ came, they missed him. They could

not hear any new song, any new reality, any touch from God, anything that had not already happened. Their minds had frozen into rigid grooves in which every thought proceeded down the same channel, and only on cue. In this sense, the veil operated as a blindfold, not a mask, keeping the light from ever penetrating their thinking.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "You have heard what the ancients have said, but I say to you..." The Jews had taken the Old Testament laws and reduced them to intricate formulas that answered every conceivable human question. Thus when Moses was read, they were unable to see the glory of the Lord. When we sang "Joy to the World" this morning, I was reminded that the angels sang at Jesus' birth. The shepherds heard them sing, but the leaders in Jerusalem heard nothing. The wise men came from a great distance, drawn by the star, but no light penetrated the hearts of the leaders of Israel.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come.
Let earth receive her King.
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing.

If we think God will only do what he has always done, that all the answers have already been given, if our thinking is so seized and frozen in place, then we are in danger of having the veil remain forever. There will be no glory and no life.

Is there any adventure in Christ for you on the horizon? Do you spend your time thinking the same thoughts you have always thought? Do your friends have the same testimony as you? Does the Bible ever come alive for you? When you hear Moses or John or Paul or Peter or Isaiah read, does anything new ever happen? Is there a veil covering your mind?

The veil for mourning

Thirdly, says Paul, a veil covered the hearts of the Israelites. Here, the veil is referring to a mourner's covering. Your heart is the seat of your feelings. Your face is that part of you which engages the world around you, what you produce in public. Your mind is that which gives you understanding of life and reality. But your heart is you living with yourself. Paul says there is a veil, a mourner's veil of sorrow, which covers the heart. What is tragic about people who wear this veil is that they are always looking back to the past; what used to be is always better than what is true now. They long for what has been lost. They remember the day when they came to the Lord, and when their face shone for the first time, when everything was new and exciting. But all that was long ago. And, just like the widow dressed in black who remembers only the old days, the old covenant veils our hearts.

I am amazed at the growing nostalgia industry and the influence it is having on our lives. A growing number of radio stations play only music of the past. Reunions seem more important than living in the present. Ray Stedman wrote of the old covenant, "Gradually, there is a 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 blah-ness of that kind of Christianity." This is a description of a mourner, of someone who once knew life but has forgotten how to live. A veil has covered the heart.

Turn to the Lord

What is the alternative to living with these veils, a mask for our public face, a blindfold for our thinking, and a mourner's veil for our hearts? "Turn to the Lord," is Paul's answer. Twice the apostle says it is only in the Lord that the veil is removed. We are to deliberately turn toward and seek the Lord for help in this process of becoming real people who live vital lives. Self-reformation is not an option here. Running away to seek a more tranquil lifestyle, our efforts to forsake the hypocrisy of the modern world, won't cut it.

It is in the Lord that the masks are removed. We must turn to him. Someone who loves us deeply already knows what is inside of us. There is no fooling him. We can tell him the truth and see what we have not

wanted to see. We must deliberately turn to God for life, not just old answers, rules and memories of long-lost vitality.

A clear emphasis which Paul makes twice here is that the Lord is the Spirit, and the furthest thing from this Spirit who cannot be contained is living life under a set of human rules. The Spirit, like the wind, blows where it will, shaking and changing things. How are you going to put a mask on the Spirit? How can you cover up the wind? The Lord who is the Spirit is the one who helps us see Christ as he really is. John says that this is the ministry of the Spirit-making Jesus real to us. It is he who removes the masks we have put up. "And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." Adventure becomes possible once more. The here and now, not only the past, is filled with the presence of God. There are new things to be seen in the Bible, new songs to be sung, new testimonies shared, new brothers and sisters, new ideas to change the world. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

Make no mistake, though, what is going to take place is change from one degree of glory to the next. When we turn to the Lord and the veils are removed, things will not remain the same. If we fear change, it is precisely that fear which will keep us from turning to the Lord. The believer's life is an unpredictable adventure. We will be made like Christ. We ought to recognize that there is no other way worth living. But it is not safe. Turning to the Lord will not produce a life of predictability, but it will mean a life of joy and freedom.

New covenant ministry

In 3:4, Paul talks of our confidence toward God; in 3:12, he talks of boldness, knowing who we are as we engage life in the world; and in 4:1, he refers to our refusal to lose heart, our perseverance in ministry to others. So whether we are facing God or living with ourselves or ministering to people, we have a sense of life that cannot be contained. We persevere, we are bold, we are confident, unafraid, free people. Listen to what he says about ministry:

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 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.

We reject what is shameful. Many Christians in ministry use what is shameful to attract others. They have secret, inner rings in which love of sexual pleasure, riches, racism, giving vent to angry, bitter things, etc., are allowed. We reject all that, says Paul. We will not minister by pandering to people's flesh. Nor do we have a ministry that distorts the truth. We have renounced everything that cannot be said in the open, appealing to the conscience of men. Instead, we preach "Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants."

There are two choices to make. The first concerns what must be renounced in ministry. You must reject everything that cannot be said plainly, everything that cannot be said under the light of the sun. Do not have anything to do with things that must be said in the dark. And secondly, we choose to preach Jesus as Lord, appealing to the conscience, although a lot of people will not listen. One reason we are tempted to distort the gospel is that we want people to respond positively to it. Paul recognizes that many who have been "blinded by the god of this age" will reject what we have to say, but that should not change our message. We need to appeal to an individual's conscience, to offer to him or her at some point at least the possibility of freedom from blindness by the god of this age.

"Ourselves as servants and Christ as Lord." This is a great summary of ministry. I like how Ron Ritchie puts it, "I don't mind being a servant. I just don't like to be treated like one." I feel like that a lot. I think most of us do. But there is nothing more important than giving our lives over to the service of others for Christ's sake. This is what we preach. We renounce what is shameful; we preach what is true.

Two faces, two mountains

Moses went up Mt. Sinai to receive the law from God and returned with face so bright and shiny that he had to cover it. Initially, his reason for veiling his face was good; later, it was to deceive. Jesus also went up on a mountaintop, and there his person was transfigured before three of his disciples. Matthew 17:2 says of him, "There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun and his clothes were as white as the light." "God has made the light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ," says Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:6. On different mountains, on different occasions, the glory of God was present. Once it was outside, and Moses' face shone for a time. The other time it was inside, in Jesus, and for a moment the glory burst forth. In his incarnation, Jesus laid aside the right to display his glory-but it never faded or lost potency. Recall Revelation 1:16, "In his right hand he held seven stars. Out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword, and his face was shining like the sun in all its brilliance." That is the way his face will always be. The glory of God reflected made Moses' face to shine for a while, but the Son of God radiates his own immeasurable worthiness forever.

A number of the English translations of 2 Corinthians 3:18 are misleading. They suggest that we act as a mirror for others, reflecting the glory of the Lord. But I don't think that is the point that Paul is making. The term he employs (to use a mirror) is only used this one place in the New Testament. It is a participle used in the middle voice, indicating use of a mirror for yourself, not becoming a mirror for others. In fact, the NAS translates this verse that way: "We all with unveiled faces beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed." We are beholding ourselves in the mirror, and we see the glory of the Lord. This is the extraordinary good news, not that we reflect God to others, but for the first time we can start looking at ourselves honestly (warts and all), becoming more and more like Jesus. Honest examination of ourselves discovers the glory of the Lord in us.

So there really are three faces in this passage: the face of Moses, the face of Christ, and our own face. We don't have to hide from ourselves, or hide from other people anymore. By the grace of God we can be the kind of people who see ourselves honestly in the mirror, more accurately alert to who we are, and more grateful to Christ for what he doing among us. The mask that is removed in Christ leads not to terrible, hidden realities that we wished were not true of us, but it reveals our transformation to the likeness of Christ.

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