

THE NEW COVENANT OPPOSED FROM WITHIN

SERIES: THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE

by Doug Goins

Over the years I have seen the value of having baby dedications in our worship services. Our dedication this morning showed me again that little children are usually very comfortable in front of us. A two-year-old standing on the platform with her parents was very excited to be part of her baby sister's dedication. She was not self-conscious in front of the large audience and displayed an innocence, openness, and fearlessness. I am sure the parents were concerned about things going just right this morning, just as I was. We don't want the children to embarrass us, we want them to perform well. One pastor even admitted to developing a clinically defined fear as he led baby dedications in his church called "wetta diapaphobia."

For those of us who have raised children through adolescence, there was a sadness as they gradually lost a comfortable, innocent, honest approach to life. Even if you do not have children a degree of self-awareness will allow you to recall your own gradual movement from living out of child-like transparency to living out a carefully crafted persona. The reality is that now in adulthood, apart from the transforming work of Christ in our lives, we all wear masks of one kind or another in our daily relationships.

Many years ago I found a poem by Claudia Seiler entitled *Please Hear What I am Not Saying*. Although it was written for adolescents, it addresses us all. An excerpt reads:

*Don't be fooled by me;
 Don't be fooled by the face I wear,
 For I wear a mask, I wear a thousand masks,
 masks that I'm afraid to take off
 and none of them are me.
 Pretending is an art that's second nature with me,
 But don't be fooled, for God's sake don't be fooled.
 I give you the impression that I'm secure,
 that all is sunny and unruffled with me,
 within as well as without,
 that confidence is my name and coolness my game,
 that the water is calm and I'm in command,
 and that I need no one.
 But don't believe me.
 Please!
 My surface may seem smooth, but my surface
 is my mask;
 my ever-varying and ever-concealing mask.
 Beneath lies no smugness, no complacency.
 Beneath dwells the real me in confusion, in fear,
 in aloneness.
 But I hide this,
 I don't want anybody to know it.
 I panic at the thought of my weakness and fear being exposed.
 That's why I frantically create a mask to hide behind,
 A nonchalant, sophisticated facade, to help me pretend,
 To shield me from the glance that knows. (1)*

Second Corinthians 3:12-18 is about "the glance that knows," the loving look that can penetrate our facades of self-protection and defensiveness. It is a promise held out by the apostle Paul from his own personal experience. He assures us that the Spirit of God can remove the veils we hide behind. They are veils covering our minds and hearts, and blocking out God's transforming love. The good news in this passage is that the innocence we have lost can be restored. We can live before God with confident boldness, in open honesty, and with hopeful optimism. Paul says:

Having therefore such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, and are not as Moses, who used to put a veil over his face that the sons of Israel might 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 man 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 liberty. 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.

We all wear masks

This paragraph divides into two contrasting halves. The first four verses focus on the universal problem that we all wear masks of one kind or another. What is at work in us is human pride. The last three verses offer the good news of the gospel: God will work by his Spirit to unmask us so that we are not people of facades or veils before him or each other.

Reviewing the New Covenant

Verse 12 begins with the word "therefore," pointing us back to the Christian lifestyle that Paul calls the new covenant. His discussion of it began in 2:14: "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ." In 3:6, we are described as "servants of a new covenant." Throughout our examination of this section of scripture (see [Discovery Papers #4633-4635](#)) Paul compares and contrasts the new covenant lifestyle with what he identifies in 3:14 as the old covenant. He says that the new covenant is freely given, it is God's grace to us. The new covenant provides us with continuing resources to live effectively and adequately. We can expect God to work through us even in the most ordinary circumstances. The promise is that he will empower us to obey him, and will not ask us to do anything without providing the resources to serve him. When there is sinful failure or weakness on our part, we can lay claim to his forgiveness. In contrast, Paul says the old covenant is "a dispensation of death," "a dispensation of condemnation" that fades away. The temptation to rely on self-effort to carry out the law and its demands always will bring emptiness and futility.

Hopeful optimism and confident boldness

Paul learned to live out of the new covenant after many years of trying to be a Christian under the old covenant. He found it more fulfilling than trying to keep the law in his own strength, and he describes the results in verse 12: "Having therefore such hope, we use great boldness in our speech,..." Hopeful optimism and confident boldness are two consistent characteristics of the person who lives a new covenant lifestyle. The root of the word "bold" is openness, transparency. Because there is nothing to hide, we can be optimistic about life and relationships. We have seen in previous passages that new covenant success in life and ministry does not depend on our dedication, our religious zeal, our background, training, spiritual sensitivity, or wisdom. Paul says in 3:5, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God,..." We can paraphrase that as "everything coming from God, and nothing coming from us." The result is freedom from the fear of failure and freedom to live without masks or veils. It is an attractive way to live, and it is God's desire for each one of us.

But why is it so elusive? Why do we continue to hide from God and from one another behind facades? Why are our hearts and minds veiled, spiritually dulled and complacent? The sad reality is that even as Christians we can oppose the liberating new covenant lifestyle. Like Pogo said, "We have found the enemy and he is us." In chapter 4 we will consider the things external to us that oppose this life, such as our satanic enemy and the pressures of the world. But this passage has in view the internal opposition we experience.

To illustrate our internal dynamics that resist the freedom God offers us in the new covenant, Paul first uses an example from the life of Moses, and then he considers Israel's entire history. In this passage, Paul refers to Exodus 34, the second time that God gave the law to Moses at Mount Sinai: "But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how shall the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?" The Exodus account is mentioned again in 3:13 in terms of the veil on Moses' face: "...and [we] are not as Moses, who used to put a veil over his face that the sons of Israel might not look intently at the end of what was fading away."

The veil on Moses' face

Exodus 34 does not tell us why Moses kept the veil on even after the glory of God's presence faded from his face. But the Apostle Paul, writing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and with apostolic authority, tells us that Moses kept the veil on longer than he needed because of a lack of boldness. His purpose was to hide the final end of the glory. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai after communing with God his face was dazzling bright, a reflection of the glory of God. When he spoke to the people they were blinded by the brightness and were not able to look at him. Initially, Moses covered his face with a veil out of concern for the people to protect their eyes. He realized, however, that the longer he was away from the presence of God the more the glow faded. So he began to wear a veil, not to benefit the people but to prevent them from seeing the glory that was disappearing.

Moses was motivated by fear. After all, who wants to follow a leader whose glory is fading? Like Paul with the Corinthian church, Moses was leading a difficult group of people. The Israelites constantly challenged Moses' leadership, and complained and plotted against him throughout the 40 years in the wilderness. But when Moses came away from the presence of God with the visible shining splendor on his

face, the people must have been stunned into temporary silence. How great it must have been to have a glow with a group of complainers wandering around! But then a process of deterioration set in, and Moses could not bear to have anybody know it. So he wore the veil to preserve his spiritual reputation, to hide the reality that he was losing a mark of status and privilege with God. What was once a veil of legitimate protection became a facade for Moses to hide behind so the people would not see what was happening.

Are you personally familiar with this old covenant mask of hypocrisy that Moses' veil symbolizes? Are you able to differentiate between your public Christian persona that you want everyone to know and love, from your private unguarded part that you hope will not be discovered?

I am all too aware of many of my sanctimonious, Mosaic tendencies. I care deeply about being a godly pastor and elder, and I believe it is motivated by the Spirit of God. But I find myself, at times, being careful not to reveal my sharp tongue or my perfectionism or my impatience. Why do I hide my sinful, fleshly tendencies? Because I want people to be convinced that I am spiritually competent and consistent as an elder and pastor. What is really at work is religious pride, and under the veil there is some pretty ugly stuff. I realize, however, that the people closest to me see behind my veils of deception because we can't fool those we live with.

As I finished this sermon, our younger son Micah, who came home from college this week, told his mother and me that we bicker too much. I honestly tried to laugh it off and joke about it, but he said, "No, you guys pick at each other." Now let me ask you, do you believe that? Have you ever seen Candy and I bicker at church? No, we do not want you to see that kind of fading glory behavior, so we are careful not to let you see it. It is the same issue that was at work in Moses' life.

After using Moses' personal experience, Paul continues by using the history of the Jewish people to illustrate the same dynamic. He links Moses' veiling with the attitudes of the nation Israel, even up to the Jews of his own time. He says that "to this very day" (3:14) the attitude continues. Paul moves from the veil on Moses' face to the veil on Israel's face. In writing about the sons of Israel, Paul says, "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..."

The veil on Israel's face

There are three important points that we can draw from the two verses. First, the nature of the veil is the same as the one Moses wore. Spiritual pride was at work in the people of Israel throughout their history. In Exodus 24, when Moses offers the law to the people for the first time, they immediately respond, "All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" (24:7). They boast that they will never fail God even though a few chapters later they degrade themselves by idolatrous worship of the golden calf. Their history is a consistent refusal to admit failure, preferring rather to cover up sin with religious ritual and surface piety. They are examples that the old covenant always focuses on external behavior rather than internal spiritual reality and transformation.

Secondly, the effect of living a veiled life results in what Paul calls a process of hardening or dulling to spiritual reality. The veil over the mind and heart has a two-way effect. It blocks out life-changing truth, and in effect blinds people to what God wants them to see and hear and understand. It keeps them from being known by others, so they end up exuding an air of religious invincibility. The internal result is a religious life that is dull, boring and empty because religious effort expended under the old covenant always results in death, condemnation, and futility. The strange thing is that the veiling counters with powerful self-righteousness. A belief in their spiritual superiority suppresses the frustration of living under the law.

The third point is the reason that Paul says the veil still remains. It is because only Christ can remove it. Unfortunately, whenever the Jews read their scriptures they don't see the truth about their own Messiah because they are blinded by their religion. Before the apostle Paul became a Christian he was a man who loved the scriptures, worshiped God wholeheartedly, defended orthodoxy, and lived a good life according to his religion. But Paul missed God's meaning for life and as a result he orchestrated the imprisonment and death of Christians. His heart had been so veiled by legalism that he could not understand life by the Spirit of God. This was true in first century Judaism, and it is still true today.

The spiritual dynamic Paul describes can be as real for Christians as it is of Israel. We cannot remove our own veils. Only the Lord Jesus can open closed minds or soften our hearts if they have become hard and callused. Too often we are unwilling to allow Jesus to deal with our self-sufficient, self-protective attitudes so that we become just as self-righteous in our law keeping and our surface piety as the Jews. There has always been a fascination with superficial religious legalism that causes people to miss the heart of God's desires.

In writing about self-righteous Christianity, Ray Stedman says:

...self righteousness is a particularly noxious form of Christian pride. It seizes upon some biblical standard of conduct and takes pride in its own ability to outwardly measure up while conveniently overlooking any failure of the inner life or thought life to conform. The end result is a smug, patronizing, and even nasty attitude toward anyone who does not meet the standard. This is the sin that Jesus struck at most forcibly. He exposed it in the Pharisees and said that even the adulterers and the extortioners would enter the kingdom of heaven before them. It is the sin of the crusader who habitually mounts a white horse

and rides out to combat any form of evil which he considers reprehensible. Self-righteousness is also the sin of the woman (or man) who nags another, for the nagger is focusing upon a single point of conduct and ignores the areas in her (or his) own life where a similar failure is occurring. Instinctively we retreat behind this veil whenever failure or weakness is exposed in us. ("I may be weak there, but at least I don't do such-and-such.") We keep self-righteous veils always close at hand so they can be put on quickly to keep others from seeing the end of the fading glory. (2)

The bad news is that we all wear masks, and they are kept in place by pride, competitiveness, and self-righteousness. But the last three verses of 2 Corinthians 3 tell us that we do not have to live that way.

A wonderful ministry of unmasking

These verses introduce a wonderful ministry of unmasking by the Spirit of God at work in us. The first step in moving into the freedom of the new covenant is to turn to the Lord in repentance to admit our failure, our pride, and our self-righteousness. Verse 16:

...but whenever a man [person] turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

In Exodus 34:34 we are told, "...whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak to him, he would take off the veil until he came out;..." Since he did not need a veil in God's presence, whenever he turned to go into the presence of God the veil was removed. Paul's allusion to this verse is a reminder that he no longer needed the veil either. In verse 14, we were told that it is only "in Christ" that the veil is taken away. So the good news for everyone is that all we have to do is turn to the Lord Jesus Christ and we will find him. He is the fulfillment of the law.

Romans 10:4 promises us, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." The Lord Jesus will completely remove the veils of legalistic religious self-effort over our hearts and minds, but we must be willing to repent. We must be convinced of our sin and confess it, and come into God's presence with brokenness, contrition, and honesty. Repentance means we are willing for Jesus to change us, to turn us around in every area of sinful failure and inconsistency he chooses to reveal. Additionally, we must repent in the areas of pride and dishonesty that we hide behind. We must acknowledge that we cannot change ourselves, that we are unable to remove the veils on our own. It is not religious reform, but nothing less than transformation by the Spirit of God. The long-term results are spectacular.

The glory of living with an unveiled face

In verses 17 and 18, we are promised the glory of living with an unveiled face:

Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. 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.

Here is the fearful hope of the "glance that knows"-that was expressed in Claudia Seilers' poem. Our fear is that if we allow the Lord to remove our masks, we will be stripped naked, exposed in weakness and vulnerability. We are afraid that other people will reject us as being phony. But seeing clearly and being known completely is our only hope of experiencing the joy of new covenant living. The poem continues:

*I panic at the thought of my weakness and
fear being exposed.
That's why I frantically create a mask to hide behind.
A nonchalant, sophisticated facade to help me pretend.
to shield me from the glance that knows.
But such a glance is precisely my salvation, my only salvation.
And I know it.
That is if it's followed by acceptance, if it's followed by love.
It's the only thing that can liberate me, from myself,
from my own self-built prison walls,
from the barriers that I so painstakingly erect.
It's the only thing that will assure me of what I can't
assure myself
that I'm really worth something. (3)*

The one who knows us, and the one who sees us completely is our wonderful God. His look is the look of love. He loves us deeply and he loves everything inside of us-the good, the bad and the ugly.

The freedom of the Spirit

The result of the "glance that knows" is the freedom of the Spirit. It is God's sovereignty in our lives as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit working together towards the same purpose of giving us an unveiled life of freedom from old covenant bondage. Living in hopeful optimism and confident boldness does not happen all at once. Verse 18 speaks of an ever-increasing glory, a vision of faith we can have. The object is Jesus himself. When the veils are stripped away, we see Jesus in his attractiveness, his beauty, and his truth-speaking. Because we are not looking at him through veils of self-defense, self-justification or rationalization we see and hear him clearly, and the effect on us is dramatic. We are changed into his likeness. His character, and his image are reflected in who we are. We become more like Jesus as God removes one veil at a time through a gradual, sensitive process.

These last three verses are a powerful summary of what Paul has personally modeled for the people of Corinth and for us. In fact, throughout the first three chapters of the 2 Corinthian letter Paul says, "I open myself to you. I reveal myself so that you might see Jesus in me." Jesus is not revealed in some supposed human perfection, but rather in our progressive transformation. It is not "See how good I am." The witness to the new covenant reality is rather, "See what God is doing in such a sinner."

Paul reveals his weakness to the Corinthians, and in doing so, he also reveals the power and the reality of Jesus Christ. Paul is weak, but the Spirit of God constantly empowers him, transforming him and overcoming his weakness. By taking off the veils that hid the real Paul from the Corinthian believers, he knew that his critics would not only discover a weak, needy apostle, but they would also see Jesus. That is the goal of living in the new covenant.

In this explanation of Paul's transparency and vulnerability we see reflections of an important core truth. First of all, we are sinners who are warped and twisted out of shape. We are far from being the people we want to be, or the people that God intends for us to be eventually. But when Jesus enters our lives at conversion, we are born again. First Peter 1:23 tell us we receive Jesus' own indestructible heritage: "for you have been born again, not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God." Heritage speaks of roots and family relationship. In Romans 8:14-15, Paul uses language similar to the language in 2 Corinthians 3:18 as he addresses our spiritual family relationship. He writes, "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" New covenant living understands that our *Abba*--our daddy, our loving father--is committed to the process of transforming us. From 2 Corinthians 3:18 we read, "[we] are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory..." (NIV).

There are important implications for us as believers. We are called to encourage one another and be spiritual examples to one another. In the words of Hebrews 10:24, "...let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds...." We will need to ask God to remove the veils from our lives, from our personalities, so that people can see us for who we really are. And yes, when the veils start to fall, people will discover our weaknesses. But the reality is that people already know a lot more about our weaknesses than we think they do. The reason they see weakness is because the transformation is incomplete, we are in the process of being changed. The good news is that since Jesus is in our lives, our brothers and sisters will see the glory of God at work to change us. And as they see Jesus at work in us, they will find the confidence to hope for their own spiritual transformation.

There is a cost in living out the new covenant lifestyle. Some people will misunderstand, others will use our weakness against us, and some people will judge us. But once again, this passage opens for us God's way of thinking which is in marked contrast to old covenant condemnation. We are called not to pride and self-protection but to humility and self-revelation. Jesus said the characteristic of kingdom life is child-likeness. The good news is that God can restore the innocence, the openness, the fearlessness, and the transparency. We can become like little children, open and unafraid. Remember the promise: The old covenant veil is removed in Christ and whenever a man turns to the Lord the veil is taken away.

NOTES:

1. Claudia Seiler, "Please Hear What I am Not Saying." *Focus on Youth*, No. 14. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Press, 1973, pp. 8-9.
2. Ray C. Stedman, *Authentic Christianity*. © 1996. Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI., pp. 83-84.
3. Seiler. *Ibid*.

Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE ("NASB"). © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. Where indicated, Scripture quotations were also taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION ("NIV"). © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers

Catalog No. 4636
 2 Corinthians 3:12-18
 7th Message
 Doug Goins
 May 7, 2000

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 2000 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.