

2 Corinthians 3:18

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[0 : 0 0] Turn with me to the passage that we read in 2 Corinthians and chapter 3, and we're going to be thinking this morning very especially about the final verse in that chapter, verse 18 of 2 Corinthians chapter 3. As you locate that verse in your Bible, can I just mention one thing that I omitted to mention earlier on as I intended to do, and that is just to say that next Sunday morning we will be celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Ordinarily we do that on the second Sunday of March, but I'm going to be away that Sunday and so we brought it forward to next Sunday morning. So next Sunday morning we'll be participating in that sacrament. 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and verse 18.

I was asked a helpful and probing question following the evening service last Sunday. Now those of you who were able to be here will remember that in the sermon we were considering the call directed to us as Christians to be imitators of God, among other things that we found in our text. And I suggested three reasons why we are to imitate God. And the focus in that part of the sermon was on the why. Why would we do so? Why might that be expected of us? And I suggested that we do so because of who we are. We are dearly loved children, and as children of God it's right and fitting that we should imitate our Father. We are to do so also because of what we want.

It is our desire as children to be like our Father. And then thirdly I suggested that we are to do so because of what we expect, our hope, the Christian hope that we will ultimately be like God. And in that connection I made reference to the verse that we are going to be considering this morning. But what was the question? What was the question that I was posed? Well the question was a very good one, and a very practical one, and it was, okay, that's fine, but how are we to imitate God? You've told us why, but how, how are we to do so? Or to perhaps put it in other language, what can or must we do in order to imitate God, in order to become like God? And that is a very good question, and it's a question that I want to try and answer in some measure this morning with the help of our text, 2 Corinthians 3, and verse 18. Our text, the verse, recognizes that in order to become like God, to be a successful imitator of God, if you wish, we need to be transformed. This is the language that Paul uses, is the language of transformation. A transformation is required. Our starting point is that we are not like God, and our goal is that we should be like God. And the bridge that spans across from where we are to where we need to be is or involves a process of transformation. And Paul identifies a number of key components in this transformation, among them providing an answer to the question, what can or what must we do in this matter? Now, before we knuckle down and consider our text, we need to get a grip on the background to the language and imagery being employed by Paul in this chapter, and very particularly in verse 18, that is our concern this morning. An appreciation of the context of a text, a verse, is always helpful, but on some occasions it is indispensable, and this is one such occasion. Paul is concerned in this chapter with extolling the wonder and glory of the new covenant inaugurated by the person and work of [4 : 3 8] Christ, and he does so by contrasting the new covenant with the old. Characteristics of the new compared to characteristics of the old. Now, it's not our concern this morning to consider all of these contrasts that are identified by Paul, but we do need to be aware of one particular passage that Paul explicitly refers to in verse 13 of chapter 3. 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. In that verse, Paul very clearly makes reference to the passage that we read, the two passages that we read there in Exodus, very particularly perhaps the one that speaks of Moses on Mount Sinai, and as he came down from Mount

Sinai with the glory of God irradiating from his face. Now, as I say, we've read that passage, and what we need to have a handle on in order to properly understand verse 18 in 2 Corinthians is how Moses on Mount Sinai, and subsequently in the tent of meeting, would see or behold the glory of

God, and how that glory was then visibly reflected from Moses' face. It was a physical reality. You could see it with your eyes, the radiance of God's glory reflected on Moses' face. And that was so to the extent that Moses would place a veil over his face to hide the glory from the people who, we're told, were afraid to come near him. It was a frightening spectacle for them to see Moses as he would come down the mountain or come out of the tent of meeting. But, and this is important, it's important for our purposes this morning, to notice that on every occasion that Moses would return to the Lord, and again, to use the language we find in Exodus, and indeed in 2 Corinthians, as he would turn to the Lord, he would remove the veil. Moses himself would remove the veil as he would turn to the Lord to have an encounter with him and to speak with him. In God's presence, the veil was neither necessary nor appropriate. And we need to bear this in mind as we now proceed. Our verse, 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and verse 18, encapsulates much of the great theme or reality of transformation, that process that takes us from where we are, not like God, to where God would have us be, like Him. And there are five aspects of transformation that our verse touches on, and that we want to notice and consider this morning. So, I'll mention what these five aspects are, and then we'll consider each of them in turn. First of all, our verse identifies the objects of transformation.

It speaks of the goal of transformation. It identifies the author of transformation. It touches on the nature of transformation. And then finally, and importantly, it identifies the means of transformation. So, these are the three aspects we want to consider. The objects, the goal, the author, the nature, and the means of transformation. First of all, then, the objects of transformation, or to put it more simply, the answer to the question, who are transformed? Who are transformed?

Well, Paul begins our verse with the words, and we. There, verse 18 of 2 Corinthians chapter 3, and we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed.

We are those who are being transformed. But who are the we that Paul is referring to in this verse? Well, the we refers to all those who are described as having unveiled faces. And we who with unveiled faces reflect the Lord's glory are being transformed. Which leads on to another question, and who are they?

[9 : 37] Who are those who can be described as having unveiled faces? And the answer to that question, and the answer to the question, who are being transformed, is found in verse 16. Just two verses before we read, but whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. And such can be described as having unveiled faces.

They were veiled, but the veil has been taken away. And who are they? They are those who turn to the Lord. Those who turn to the Lord. And here we see an important and deliberate contrast being drawn by Paul with the Old Testament and the experience of Moses. In the passage read, it was Moses who could see or behold the Lord with an unveiled face. Moses alone could enter the tent of meeting and speak with God. And to use the language of the passage that we've read, very beautiful language, as a man speaks with his friend. Only Moses could speak with God in this manner.

But not so in the new covenant. All are invited to turn to the Lord. And as they do, the veil is removed, and they can behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And as they behold, so in turn, they are transformed. So, in answer to the question, who are transformed? Who are the objects of this transformation? The answer is before us, all who turn to the Lord. And before we move any further, before we consider any more this matter of transformation, the question that we all need to grapple with and confront is this, have you turned to the Lord? Are you of those who have turned to the Lord? This is the language of personal encounter? This is something that you must do. No one can do this for you. You must turn to the Lord. Will you turn to Him? Will you turn from yourself, from your sin, from your lostness, from your darkness and doubt, and will you turn to the Lord? Will you turn to Him in repentance and faith? I would urge you this morning, turn to the Lord. The means have been provided, the way has been provided in the person of God's Son, Jesus, that is a Savior, the Savior to whom you can turn. He is the one to whom you must turn. It is only those who turn to the Lord who are the objects of God's transforming work. We can say that then of the objects of transformation, but secondly, we want to consider or notice in our verse the matter of the goal of transformation. And Paul is very clear in this matter. We read there that we are being transformed into His likeness. We are being transformed into His likeness. Now, you may think that it's self-evident, but we do need to explicitly identify whose likeness Paul is referring to. The His of His likeness. Who is He? Well, the His of His likeness in the verse clearly refers to the

Lord. And we who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory are being transformed into His likeness. It is clearly noting back to the Lord who has just been mentioned. But I have another question which may seem a strange question to ask, but the question that I have that I want to pose at this point is, who does Paul mean by the Lord? And there you might think, well, this is just so blindingly obvious. Why would you even pose that question? Well, the Lord, it's got to be Jesus. And of course, it's true that Paul ordinarily, when he speaks of the Lord, is indeed speaking of Jesus. It's also certainly true that the Father's intention for us is that we might become like His Son, Jesus. But I suggest that on this occasion, the Lord, as the name is used by Paul in this passage, is referring to God as the triune God rather than to any one of the persons of the Trinity. In this case, who we might have imagined that it was referring to, the Son. And we'll come back to this in a moment to explain why I'm suggesting that this is the case, as we consider the matter of the author of transformation. But for the moment, you can maybe just park that in the back of your mind, and we'll come back to it. The point is that the goal of transformation, and this brings me back to part of last week's text that we are called to be imitators of God.

The goal of transformation is that we will indeed arrive at the point where our imitation of God is of a character that we become like God, that we can be so described as being like God. This is the goal. [15:22] And it's important to stress that this is not, in the first instance, my goal as a believer. It's not your goal as a believer in the first instance. It is God's goal. When we speak of the goal of transformation, we're speaking of God's purpose, of God's goal. Now, we can buy into that. We can identify with that.

We can embrace that and make it our own, certainly. But in the first instance, it is God's goal that His people, those who have turned to the Lord, would become like Him. And that's important to stress, because when we recognize that it's God's goal, we can be sure that it will happen. Indeed, it is happening. You see, if it was only my goal, if I said, well, I'm a Christian now, and I want to be like God, I want to be like Jesus, and that's my goal, how easily we could fail. How easily we could say, well, yes, that's my goal, but will I ever achieve it? It's so unlikely. It's just not going to happen. But when we realize that this is, in the first instance, God's goal, then we can be confident and secure that it will happen, and indeed, it is happening. So that, with regard to the goal of transformation, but the third aspect of transformation that we find in this verse, and that I want to briefly reflect on, is the matter of the author of transformation. And this really flows naturally from what we've just said concerning the goal as being God's goal. The question, I suppose, is this, who transforms? Who does the transforming? Paul speaks of how He, together with God's people, are being transformed. But the question is, who? Who does it? Who is doing the transforming? And Paul, immediately in the verse, proceeds to tell us. We read that we are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory. And then we read, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. Which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. The which, you know, which comes from the Lord, might appear to refer to the glory, the ever-increasing glory that has just been mentioned. And while that is true, I would suggest that it refers principally to the process of transformation. Paul is speaking of how we are being transformed. And then he says, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. Who transforms? Who is the author of transformation? To use the language that I'm using, it is God. God is the one who transformed. The Lord is the one who transforms us. The transformation of believers is God's work. He is the author of transformation. Now, the language that Paul uses here in the second half of the verse, you've maybe already noted it and are maybe even now thinking in your own mind, well, what does this mean?

[18:27] How are we to understand this language which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit? It is somewhat unusual in terms of the manner in which Paul expresses himself. And we're left pondering somewhat, well, what does that really mean? I'm calling the expression that Paul uses intriguing, which is really just a nice word for difficult in terms of understanding what it means. And of course, because it is intriguing or difficult, it is variously understood or explained. The Lord, who is the Spirit. Or literally, as we have it, the Lord, the Spirit. Now, Paul has already used very similar language in this chapter in verse 17. Now, the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is a freedom. How are we to understand this? Is Paul identifying the Lord, a name Paul normally assigns to Jesus, with the Spirit? And if so, would this challenge our understanding of the persons of the Trinity, or certainly the Son and the Spirit, as distinct persons? It seems to me this difficulty, if indeed difficulty it is, is best resolved by recognizing that Paul, in this passage, uses the divine name, the Lord, the Greek equivalent of Yahweh, the name of God, the name of God that

God revealed as His own name, He is using that name to speak of

God in His triune character, not any one of the persons of the Godhead. We need to be clear that the divine name, Yahweh, or its Greek equivalent, the Lord, is not applied exclusively to any one person of the Trinity. It is the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It can and is applied to the Father and to the Son, and indeed Paul ordinarily applies it to the Son. But infrequently and significantly on this occasion, the name, the divine name, is applied to the Holy Spirit. Hence, we can understand the language of Paul. Now, the Lord is the Spirit, or our transformation comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit, comes from God, who is the Spirit. Of course, as we understand it in this way, it proves a very important text to undergird, as many others do, the divinity of the Holy Spirit. And so, in answer to our question, which really is our primary concern, is who is the author of transformation?

The author is the Lord, the author is God, and very particularly, that responsibility resides with the Holy Spirit. The third person of the Trinity. He is the one who is responsible for this aspect of our salvation, of our redemption, of being transformed. The Son secures our transformation at Calvary, but it is the Holy Spirit who performs that work of transformation in our lives. The work of transformation in your life is the work of the Holy Spirit. He indwells you that He might transform you from the inside. And so, the author of transformation is God, the Lord, and very particularly, the responsibility residing with the Holy Spirit. But moving on to the penultimate aspect that we want to look at, and that is the nature of transformation. And I want to highlight two aspects that we might call the nature of our transformation, or that refer to the nature of our transformation, that are explicitly or implicitly referred to in our text. The first thing I want to suggest about the nature of our transformation is that it's unseen but visible. That sounds like a bit of a conundrum, but I'll explain in a moment. Unseen but visible, but also that it is present and continuing.

First of all, it is unseen but visible. What do I mean by that? By calling the Spirit's work of transformation unseen, I'm simply noting that it is a work in the heart of man, and in that sense, unseen for who can see a man's heart. To put it in another way that's maybe a little bit more easy to remember. God is a heart surgeon, not a plastic surgeon. The work that He does is on the inside. It is in the heart of man that the Spirit works to transform us. Now, this is a point that Paul has made explicitly just a moment before in this very chapter. Notice in verse 3, he's contrasting the old covenant with the new, and we read in that verse, you show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

Indeed, this aspect of the new covenant, that it is a work in the heart of man, is one of the principal characteristics of the new covenant as prophesied by Jeremiah.

[24 : 02] We read in chapter 31 of Jeremiah in verse 33, This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord.

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. The unseen nature of the work of transformation is confirmed by the very verb that Paul employs here in this verse, a verb from which we derive our English word metamorphosis, the word there transformed in verse 18. It's only ever used on one other occasion by Paul in a passage that's familiar to us in Romans chapter 12 and in verse 2. We'll read from verse 1 to get the context.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, and then notice what Paul says, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

This is the same verb that Paul employs here in 2 Corinthians. Transformed by the renewing of your mind. Something that is internal, something that is unseen to the naked eye.

So, we can see in the manner in which Paul speaks here in our text, and very particularly as we compare that to the way he uses that same verb in Romans, that the nature of this transformation is, in that sense, unseen. It's in our mind. It's in our heart. It's unseen, but it is, or it ought to be, and it will be visible. Now, how does that work? Well, the idea or the reality is simple enough. The work of the Spirit in our interior is made visible by our exterior conduct. In fact, in the absence of visible external evidence, we have to conclude that there is no internal transformation taking place.

And what is the evidence? Likeness to God sounds very grand, but concretely, what does that look like? Jesus Himself, in the Sermon on the Mount, challenges us, or makes the point very eloquently by their fruit.

[26 : 38] You will recognize them. And the clue to what fruit is to be found is, or the clue as to what fruit is to be found in remembering who is the author of our transformation, the Holy Spirit. It is His fruit, the fruit of the Spirit, that is the external or visible evidence of His internal work in our hearts.

We remember the words that we read in Paul's letter to the Galatians in chapter 5, but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And this is the external visible evidence of the internal work of God by His Spirit in our lives. So that's the first aspect of the nature of transformation that we can draw from the text. It's unseen but visible, but also that it is present and continuing. The language Paul employs, we are being transformed. We are being transformed. This is a work that has begun and a work that is continuing. It's interesting to note how this work of the Spirit is ordinarily designated in theological categories or terminology. The usual word that we would use to speak of what we're looking at this morning is sanctification. That's the present and continuing work of the Spirit in the life of the believer. But we could also, on the basis of the vocabulary employed by Paul in this verse, legitimately speak of this work of God in our lives as glorification. That's a term ordinarily, employed only to speak of our future experience as Christians. And yet the language of this verse is of glorification. We are being transformed currently now into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, from glory to glory. We could say that in this transformation fashioned by the Holy Spirit of God, sanctification and glorification. It's a wonderful and awe-inspiring thought, but an even more wonderful reality. But one thing we do need to be clear as we consider this aspect of the nature of transformation, and it is this, that we are a work in progress. And it's always important to remember this so as to avoid two related dangers, be that discouragement with ourselves or impatience with others.

You see, if we don't realize that this is a work in progress, then we will become discouraged. When we say, well, I'm so far from being what I ought to be. And what this reminds us of is, yes, of course that's true, but you're a work in progress. Or we become impatient with others, other Christians, and we say, well, they're so immature, and they're not growing, and they're not serving as they ought. And yet we need to be reminded that they too are a work in progress. The Church of Scotland minister in St. George's Tron a few years ago, Eric Alexander, in connection with this theme, tells the story of how he was attending a conference. I don't know where it was, but he was in a hotel, and the hotel was being renovated at the time. And so there were signs all over the hotel indicating that this was happening in order to really excuse the limitations of the accommodation as a result. And the sign read as follows, please be patient with us, we are being renovated. And that really is a sign we could lift up as Christians and hold out to others. Please be patient with us, we are being renovated. Yes, we are being transformed. The work has begun. It is continuing. But it has yet to be concluded. But then the final thing that I want you to notice here in this regard is, or as an aspect of transformation, it is the means of transformation. And this finally brings us at least to partially answer the question posed to me last week. How do we imitate God? What can or must we do? It is God in the person of the Holy Spirit who is the author of our transformation. We are being transformed by another. We don't transform ourselves. But we are not passive in the process. God has instituted means whereby we can and must cooperate with Him in this glorious work. What does Paul say?

[31 : 30] Well, in the verse we read, and we who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory are being transformed. We all reflect the Lord's glory. And the key matter here is to understand the verb that Paul employs. Translated reflect in our text, but with a footnote providing contemplate as an alternative translation. Now, this verb in ordinary usage meant to look at oneself or something in a mirror, or to reflect in a mirror. And the two options available for translation into English are to see or behold or contemplate, as is placed there in the footnote, or to reflect, which is the word actually used in our version. Now, I suspect that Paul has deliberately employed a verb that is ambiguous in a manner that allows us to see both meanings as intended, to see or behold and to reflect.

And in this matter, it's helpful to remind ourselves of Moses on the mountaintop or in the tent of meeting. What did Moses do? Well, he first saw or beheld the glory of God, and then he reflected that same glory to others.

Both words apply, but it begins necessarily with seeing or beholding. In the absence of seeing or beholding, there can be no reflecting. The reflection is a consequence of the beholding. And notice very intriguingly that Moses didn't even notice that he was reflecting God's glory. We've read that in the passage. We don't have time to return to it. But that in itself, I think, is interesting for us to

notice, that he did reflect God's glory, but he himself didn't even realize that that was so. He was obviously then told, and so he then knew, but in the first instance, he didn't realize that is what was happening. So too with us. We cannot reflect in the absence of seeing or beholding, but we need to get practical. How do we see or behold the Lord's glory in order that we might reflect and be transformed?

And there are three very practical and foundational Christian disciplines that involve beholding or seeing the Lord's glory, or if you wish, three places where we can see the Lord's glory. First of all, we see the Lord's glory in the gospel. If we read on, we've read on into chapter 4, but let's just remind ourselves of what Paul says there. In verse 4, 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.

Paul very clearly says that where do we see the glory of God? Where do we as New Testament believers, where do we see the glory of God? We don't go on to Mount Sinai. Where do we see that? We see it in the gospel, and the gospel as it is revealed to us and recorded for us in the Bible. As we turn to God's Word and as we contemplate the gospel of Jesus Christ, there we see, we witness, we behold the glory of God.

[34 : 57] And so, here we have no shortcuts, no mystical answers to the question, how do we behold God's glory? It involves the study and meditation and reading of God's Word as we are presented in God's Word with the gospel of Jesus Christ. There we behold the Lord's glory in the gospel. But also in prayer, when we think of the context of what Moses is saying and of how Moses would go to the mountaintop and have an encounter with God. And of course, in the Old Testament, only Moses climbed to the mountaintop.

Only Moses would go into the tent of meeting, but not so today. We are all invited to go, but we need to go. It's not enough that the access is there. We need to make use of that access. It's not enough that we're invited to go. We need to go. And there as we meet with God, so we behold and see His glory.

But I think there's a third place where we see the glory of God that might not immediately be obvious. And I think it's in each other. Just think about that for a moment. According to what Paul says, we are all being transformed into the likeness of God. That is happening to all of us as Christians. And so we should and we can see something of God's likeness in each other, in other believers. Like Moses of old, other believers may have little or no awareness that they are reflecting the glory of God. They might be embarrassed if we were to say that, I see Jesus in you. I see something of God in you, in me. Just as Moses would have been surprised, what is it? Why are you so afraid? What is it that would have you hold back? We see the glory of God in each other. The measure in which we do so will, of course, be the measure in which we are being transformed. The more we are along the road of that process of transformation, the more we will reflect the glory of God to others. But we are to see the glory of God in the gospel, in the Word of God, as we meet with God in prayer, but also and importantly in each other. There are no mystical shortcuts. This is a lifelong process. But we can become like God. We can be imitators of God. It is God's work, but we must be involved. We can and must see or behold the glory of God in the places that God has ordained and graciously provided for us, in our encounter with Him in His Word, in our encounter with Him in prayer and in fellowship and service with each other, where we also encounter Him.

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. Let us pray.

[38 : 16] Amen.