

2 Corinthians 3

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[0 : 00] Amen. I want to, this evening, turn you to that passage that we read just a few minutes ago from 2 Corinthians chapter 3. And I want to suggest to you that this is one of the most important passages in the Bible for the days in which we live. Because there is a kind of feeling amongst, within the Christian church, that the gospel, the message of Jesus, the gospel that we proclaim is really not all that different to other religions.

And particularly with regard to the Jewish people. Why should we take the gospel to the Jewish people? Why should we bother to tell them about Jesus? Many Jewish people are religious. They go to synagogue. They have a rich heritage. They have great traditions. They have a very colorful religion.

Why should we take the gospel to them? Why should we take the gospel to Muslims? Why even should we tell atheists about Jesus? If we're happy to believe in Him, why can't we just let other people have their own beliefs? Live and let live. In other words, the question really that I'm asking tonight is, what's so great about the gospel? What is so great about the gospel that should make you and me want to tell other people about Jesus? What is so great about the message of Jesus that you and I should believe it and believe it firmly and believe it not just because it appeals to us, but because it's true?

What's so great about the gospel? Well, Paul answers that question in this particular passage of Scripture. And what he does in this third chapter of 2 Corinthians is to contrast the gospel, the good news of Jesus, with the law of God. And he shows us that there were certain things that the law of God that was given at Mount Sinai could do, but it had certain limitations. And there are certain things that the gospel can do that religion can never do. And if the gospel is more glorious, as Paul puts it in this chapter, than the very law of God that came on Mount Sinai, then if the gospel is greater than that revelation of God, then it's greater than any other man-made religion. Because the fact is, there are so many religions in the world, thousands of them. Some are major religions that have millions of adherents. Some maybe have just a few thousand or a few hundred adherents. And the question is this, how can we know the truth? How can we know, if we can put it like this, what is the true religion?

Because the fact is, either all religions are wrong, or one of them is right and the rest are wrong. They can't all be right. They could all be wrong, but they can't all be right. And so the question is, how can we know? And that's a question Paul addresses here. And you notice how he draws this contrast.

[3 : 37] He talks about the law of God, what he calls the old covenant that was made at Mount Sinai back in the book of Exodus. And he talks about the new covenants. Now, if you've come to the table of the Lord, if you've come to Holy Communion any time, you will be aware that some point in the service, that the minister takes a cup with wine in it. And he pronounces that this cup is the new covenant in the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Not that the cup is the blood of Jesus, but that it represents the blood that Jesus shed to establish a new covenant. That's the thing that people are really keen on today, isn't it? Something that's new, because the new is always better. Well, actually, it's not always better. But in this particular case, because it is something new that has been introduced by God, then it is better. And none of the disciples say to him,

Lord, what is this new covenant that you're talking about? Because as Jews who knew their Bible, they should have been aware that in the 31st chapter of the book of Jeremiah, written some 600 years before Jesus was born, that God had said, behold, the days are coming that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their fathers when I brought them out of Egypt, which covenant they broke, although I was a husband to them. See, that covenant at Mount Sinai, God had entered into a marriage

covenant with Israel.

And Israel had said to God, I do. They said, all that the Lord has said, we will do. Moses then goes up into Mount Sinai, and he comes back with two tables of the law. Both tables were identical. Both tables had the Ten Commandments on them. That was what the Jewish people called the ketuva, the marriage contracts. And one of these stones went in the Ark of the Covenant in the tabernacle. That was God's copy of the marriage contracts. And Israel had the other stone, and that was their copy of the marriage contract. And we know what happened when Moses went up the mountain to bring down the ketuva, the writing of his marriage to Israel, everything that they'd said amen to, that he found them worshipping a golden calf. On the very eve of their wedding, they were committing adultery with a golden calf.

And so God says, I will make a new covenant that will not be like that covenant, which was a covenant that could have been broken. But this is the covenant that I will make in those days. I will put my Torah, my law in their minds. I'll write it in their hearts. They will no longer say every man to his neighbor, know the Lord, because they will all know me. Everyone in that covenant will know me from the least to the greatest because their sins and their iniquities I will remember no more. So that was the old covenant where they had said, we will obey God's laws, and they didn't. And there's a new covenant that has come through the blood of Jesus in which everybody under that covenant has all their sins, all their iniquities, all their shortcomings, all their failures, all their rebellion, all forgiven.

Not swept under the carpet, but completely removed as far as the east is from the west. So from that point of view alone, the covenant that Jesus made is better than that covenant that was made at Sinai. And if it's better than the law of God, if it's better than that covenant, it's better than any man-made religion. Second thing is, Paul talks about how that law at Mount Sinai was written on stones, and Moses broke those stones when he came down from the mountain because the people had broken the law that was written on them. But this law, this gospel, this good news, this new covenant is written on people's hearts. And he says, look at the old covenant. It came, when it came, it came with glory. But he says, the new covenant is even more glorious than that.

[8 : 23] And how he proves that is he draws our attention and the attention of these Corinthian Christians back to an incident that happened in the 34th chapter of the book of Exodus. And when Moses went up to the, up the Mount Sinai to bring the, the law of God back down, he was, he was six weeks, 40 days and 40 nights up in the mountain where he met God and he saw God. And his fellowship with God was so intimate and so close that the glory of God actually reflected from the face of Moses. So that when he came down Mount Sinai, his face was literally glowing, wasn't that he had a big smile on his face, but his face was literally glowing. Now you can imagine what would happen if somebody came in that door tonight and their face was glowing. You'd think they'd come from Dunray or someplace like that. You know, we'd all run for the door. You know, he's, you know, he's a radioactive man. And the Israelites were terrified when Moses comes down from the mountain with the skin of his face glowing. And so what they did, they made Moses cover his face with a veil whenever he spoke to them. And whenever he went to speak to God, he took the veil off his face and the Bible says he spoke to God face to face as a man speaks to his friend.

But, says Paul, that glory disappeared because there came a point in the life of Moses when the glory just disappeared. It may have been that he woke up one morning, his face was no longer glowing, and the people said to him, you don't need to put a veil on this morning, Moses, we can see your face, it's not glowing any longer. Or it may have just been that it gradually faded away little by little until it was no longer there. But the important thing Paul is telling us here is in the end, it had faded away. But he says this glory of the good news of Jesus, this glory of the new covenants, this glory of the covenant that is written on the heart of men and not on tablets of stone, is something that not only remains, but it increases in glory. It is even more glorious than the law that came with Moses. That law that was so glorious that even the face of Moses was beaming and shining.

And Paul draws four lessons that I want to share with you tonight. These are the four most important lessons you and I will ever learn in our whole lives. They are literally matters of life and death, principles of life and death. Because Paul is going to tell us what the gospel can do that the law can never do. And even if the law of God, if the law of God could not do the things that the gospel does, then Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Taoism, none of those religions can hit the spot either. Only the gospel can do it. And that's why we need to recover this confidence in the gospel, this confidence that the gospel is able to transform not only the minds of people, but also

the hearts and the souls of the souls of the world. It's the only hope for the world. It's the only hope for the

Jewish people. And what I'm going to share with you tonight is the reason why I get up in the morning. The thing that gets me up in the morning is what we read here. It's this great news that we have to share with the Jewish people and with others as well. The gospel is great. The gospel is the greatest news that the world has ever heard and the greatest news that the world ever will hear. So, what makes the gospel so great? Well, the first contrast Paul draws is this, that the good news of Jesus, this new covenant, this covenant of the spirits, this covenant that is written on human hearts that was brought in by the death of Jesus, gives life. The law could never do that.

All the law can tell us is that we are under condemnation. It can never save us. It can never really bring us into a right relationship with God. All it can do is tell us that we're in trouble.

[13:10] So, you know what it's like when somebody tells you not to do anything, particularly, you know, you younger people. I can remember some years ago when I used to walk to work, and I'm a pretty law-abiding person these days, or it wasn't always, but I'm a pretty law-abiding person these days, and I was walking to work one summer morning, and I used to walk by this little stream. And this morning, this particular morning, there was a notice, and it said, please do not throw rubbish in the stream. It can cause flooding. Now, I had never thrown anything in that stream. I'd never even thought of throwing anything in that stream. But that morning, I wanted to go through my pockets. I wanted to find something in my pockets that I could throw into the stream, because somebody is telling me, don't do it. And when somebody tells me, don't do something, there is like a little bell that rings in my head that says, go ahead and do it. I can remember when I was a kid going to play cricket with my friends, and I'm running through the park. I've got my cricket back with me. I can see my friends, and

I'm running along the path, and suddenly I see a little sign that says, keep off the grass. Now, I had no intention of going on the grass, but as soon as I saw that, there was something in me that said, they can't tell you what to do. Go on the grass. That's what law does. It never really says to us, oh yeah, that's a good idea. Yeah, I must do that. We have a struggle. I've got to tell you, when every time I see a speed limit in front of me, I want to exceed it. I've never seen a speed limit sign yet that I didn't want to exceed, and sometimes I've paid the penalty for that, I can tell you. But that's the way we are. That's the way that we're, in a sense, we're built ever since man's first sin and disobedience. The law is not a message of life. It's a message of warning. It's a message that tells us we're in trouble. Some of you will remember John Graham, who was our field director in Australia.

And he came across a group of religious Jews, and they began to meet every Saturday afternoon to study the Bible. And the leader of this group of Jews said to John on one occasion, he said, I would like to study your New Testament. I'd like to study the Gospel of John. So, they studied the Gospel of John. And then he said, I'd like to study the letter to the Romans. So, they studied the letter to the Romans. And they came to chapter 7, where Paul says that there came a point in his life where he discovered that the law which was intended to give life actually brought death.

Because when we read that law and when we understand it, it says to us, you've broken the law. You're under condemnation. You're a dead man. And this man looked at John. He said, John, I had always thought of the law of God as being like the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. The commandments are the fruit on the tree, and you take that fruit and you eat and you live forever. He said, I can see that what Paul is saying is that no matter how much we try to keep that law, it is always condemning us. It is always telling us that we're wrong. And when we really understand the Ten Commandments, when we really understand God's law, it doesn't make us feel, well, you know, eight out of ten is not bad.

Eighty percent, yeah, that'd get me through a school exam. Yeah, that'd get me through my GCSEs. No, it's never intended to be like that. What it says to us is you've failed, because God demands nothing less than absolute obedience. And that is intended to make us say, who can help me? Who can get me out of this mess? And Jesus comes along and says, I can.

[17:30] And when you read the Gospel of John, the word life comes up time and time and time and time again. Jesus says, I am come that you might have life and have it more abundantly. He who has the Son of God has life, but he who has not the Son of God does not have life, but the wrath of God abides on him.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father but by me. I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. And the Gospel ends by saying, these things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and by believing you might have life in his name. The law of God never, ever says that. The law of God never says, if you obey me, I will give you life, because it can't do it.

It needed something more glorious, and that's what makes the Gospel so glorious. That's what makes the message of Jesus so glorious, because it's not a way of life. It's the way to life. It's the only thing that can give us life. So it puts us in this situation. Each one of us tonight find ourselves in a situation where we're either spiritually dead or we're spiritually alive.

Jewish people, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, agnostic, outside of Jesus, there's no glory. Outside of Jesus, there's no life. That's why the Gospel must go to the Jewish people and to the whole world and to us as well. The Gospel gives life. The Gospel gives light. Paul says that there is a veil over the hearts and over the minds and over the eyes of the Jewish people. Paul is saying something quite outrageous here. He is telling us that Jewish people don't understand their own Bible.

[19 : 54] And he says, to this day when Moses is read, there is a veil over their hearts. They can't see. They can't understand. Two thousand years later, that is still true. About three years ago, three, four years ago, I began going to Aberyst within the summer for two weeks, where thousands of these ultra-Orthodox Jews go, you know, the guys with the black hats, the long black beards, the side curls, long black coats. And every day, these men will rise at dawn on their holiday. They will go down to the sea, and whether it's raining or whether it's shining, whether the sea is calm as a sheet of glass, or whether there are ten-foot-high waves, these men will go into the sea to ritually cleanse themselves, and then they will go and pray for an hour or two. And that's on holiday.

Now, you have to admire that, don't you? You have to admire people who will do that. And we tend to think, surely God must respect people who do that kind of thing, because we do it.

And yet I found that as I talked to these men about their own Bible, that they knew nothing about their Bible. If I was to say to you tonight, which is the greatest of God's commandments? I hope you would say, as Jesus said, hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The Jewish people have a saying, and it goes something like this, where you get two Jews, you'll get at least three opinions. And boy, was that true. I was saying to some of these men, even rabbis among them, which is the greatest commandment? Which is the greatest of God's commandments? And one man said to me, well, there is no greatest commandment. They're all equal. Another one said to me, well, the greatest commandment is to believe in God. Another one says, the greatest commandment, although you won't find this commandment in the Bible, is to free someone from prison. So many different answers. And I said to these men, what about that great commandment?

Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And they would say, well, that's a good commandment, but the greatest commandment is this, or there is no greatest commandment. And I said, but suppose you kept all of the 613 commandments, because that's how many commandments the rabbis have counted in the pages of the Old Testament. Suppose you kept them all perfectly, and you did it because your rabbi told you had to do it, you did it because, you did kept those commandments because the commandments are there in the Bible, but you did not do it out of genuine love for God. How would you benefit from that?

And these men said, never thought of that. That's a good point. And that's the problem, isn't it? Living a good life and yet not loving God. What makes you any different to an atheist if you live a different, if you live a decent moral life, but it's not done out of love for God? And when they read the Scriptures, they can't see Jesus in those Scriptures, they can't understand the Scriptures because Jesus is the key to the Scriptures. He said the Scriptures speak about Him. They speak of Him.

[23 : 45] And when we become believers in Jesus, we see Him there in the Scriptures. You know, you may say tonight, well, I tried to read the Bible and I just can't understand it. You know, I've been to university, but I really can't understand the Bible. I can't make head and tail of it. The problem is not here.

The problem is here. There's a veil. It's not just the Jewish people who have a veil covering their hearts. When you put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, in Jesus the Messiah, what happens is that God literally raises you from a condition of spiritual death. And when you are made alive, then you also have light, and you can actually then begin to understand the Bible because you're reading it not just with these eyes, but with your inner eyes. You see, you're reading the Bible with a veil that's been taken off, and at last it begins to make sense. The third thing is this.

The gospel is greater than the law of God because the gospel, the message of Jesus, not only gives life, it not only gives light, but it also gives liberty. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

liberty. Now, I was saying to you a few moments ago about how, you know, when commandments come, when laws come, we tend to rebel against them. There is something about us that does that. We need to be liberated from that. I, before I was a Christian, every year I used to, when it came to the new year, I'd make up, you know, resolutions. I'm not going to be nasty to people anymore. I'm not going to use bad language anymore. I'm not going to steal anymore. I'm not going to do this anymore. I'm not going to do this anymore. By the end of January the 1st, I'd broken at least one of those resolutions that I'd made.

Because of our human condition, we are naturally slaves. We have been born into a condition in which we really cannot help myself. People will say, I couldn't help myself. And there's truth in that. [26 : 18] Because we are slaves to our worst instincts. We're slaves to our worst desires. And try as we might, we cannot break out of it. I remember some years ago, I challenged a group of guys who were saying, well, you know, we could be Christians if we want to, but we don't want to be.

So I said, why don't you want to be? And they said, well, we just don't. I said, you don't want to be because you can't. They said, yes, we could. So I said, here's a challenge. I want you to live this next week, seven days, as a Christian. Try it. Live as a Christian for seven days. And these guys said, whoa, it's only seven days, guys. Come on, you know, you can do it. And they said, whoa, I don't know about that.

Well, there's the challenge. You said you could live as a Christian. Do it for seven days. Just take the seven-day challenge. Well, I said, okay, let's bring it up one day. Live the whole of tomorrow from the moment that you get up to the moment you go to bed as a Christian.

Ah, well. Now, you don't want to do it because you know you can't do it. It's too hard. We need to be liberated. We need to be set free from our fallen nature.

We need to be given new life, a life set free. And only Jesus can do that for us. So, the gospel is greater than the law of God because it gives life, it gives light, it gives liberty, and last of all, it brings lightness. But we all, with open face, beholding us in a mirror, the glory of the Lord are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to another. You know, what starts happening when God gives you life in Jesus, when God gives you light in Jesus, when God gives you liberty in Jesus, he also begins a process of transforming your life to make you like Jesus. C.S. Lewis once said that God intends to fill heaven with little Christs. His purpose is that he might once again restore his creation to its original perfect condition. Now, it will not be completed in this world, but God begins a process.

[29 : 07] John Newton, who had been a slave trader, said later on in his life after he'd become a Christian, I'm not the man that I ought to be, but I thank God I'm not the man I once was.

A process has begun, a transformation, and God will not stop until he has made you like Christ, like Jesus. And I have to say that for over 40 years, I've been haunted by something that I read.

About a year or two after I became a Christian, I read a book called Tortured for Christ. Some of you may have read it as well. Tortured for Christ by Richard Wernbrandt. Now, he was a man, he was a Jewish believer in Jesus. He was a pastor in Romania, and the communists arrested him. When Romania was a communist country, and he put him in prison, and they tortured him. And when I say tortured, I'm talking about torture. I'm talking electric drills. I am talking about pliers and fingernails and things like that. They tortured him mercilessly to get him to deny Jesus, and he refused to do it. And he was sharing a cell with another man who was not a Christian, and they brought Richard Wernbrandt back to his prison cell one day, and they threw him in, totally exhausted because of the pain and the agony that they'd put him through.

And one day, this man that he was sharing the prison cell said to him, Mr. Wernbrandt, if Jesus Christ is like you, I would very much like to know him. And that has haunted me for so many years, because there are people who know that I'm a Christian.

[31 : 11] They know that I preach. They know that I work with a missionary society. They know, as they would put it, that I'm a good person. That's the way they see me. But I have never, ever had somebody say to me, Mike, if Jesus Christ is like you, I would really like to know him. And that's something that I pray.

I'm not a man who is given to tears, but I think in my Christian life, I probably shed more tears over the fact that I am so unlike Jesus. But I do know this, in over the last 40 years, there has been, there's been a transformation. I'm not what I ought to be, nowhere near what I ought to be, in terms of being like Jesus. But I know that I'm not what I once was.

And ladies and gentlemen, what will happen when you put your trust in Jesus, or if you have put your trust in Jesus, a transformation process begins. And it will not end until you are reflecting the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in your life. As King David put it, I shall, I shall be satisfied when I awake in his likeness. And it will happen. Now, what religion, what man-made religion can possibly offer those things? Life instead of death, light instead of darkness, liberty instead of bondage, likeness to God instead of likeness to Satan?

They just can't do it. Religion cannot hack it. And God doesn't call us to be religious. He calls us to put our faith, our simple faith in Jesus. And that's what we are calling the Jewish people to do. And that's what I'm calling any of you tonight who have settled for religion, any of you tonight who have settled for Sunday at Bon Accord, those of you that have settled for, you're saying your prayers at night and maybe reading a portion of Scripture. And that's all your life consists of. You can't really put your hand on your heart and say, I know Jesus Christ. He's given me life. He's given me light.

[33 : 41] He's given me liberty. He's set me free. It can begin tonight. A brand new, brand new life. A new life for and old. And that's why we are taking the gospel to you. Those of you that are Christians, pray for us.

As we proclaim this message of life, light, liberty, and likeness, pray that God's Spirit will be with us and help us. And if any of you tonight, you think, you know, he's right. I've never done that. I've never had an encounter with Jesus Christ whereby I know my sins are forgiven and that I've been brought from death to life. I've been brought from darkness to light, been brought from bondage to liberty. And that work of transformation has begun in me.

Tonight is a night for it to happen, for you to call out and say, Lord Jesus, I'm in a state of death. I need life. Lord Jesus, I'm in darkness. I need your light. Lord Jesus, I am in absolute bondage. Nobody else knows it, but I know it. I'm in bondage. I need you to liberate me. Lord Jesus, I'm so unlike you. Totally unlike you. Please begin that process in my heart. And Jesus says, whoever comes to him, he won't turn away. He won't turn away. You'll be received. You'll be welcomed. Knock and the door will be opened. Let's sing together Psalm, three verses from Psalm 72. It's a hymn of praise here in the heart of the Old Testament. It's right in the heart of the Psalms. Praise to the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's Psalm 72, verses 17 to 19. It's on page 314 to the tune Effingham. Yet his name, the name of Jesus, forever shall endure, last like the sun it shall. Men shall be blessed in him, and blessed all nations shall him call. Now blessed be the Lord our God, the God of Israel, for he alone doth run doth works in glory that excel. And blessed be his glorious name to all eternity. The whole earth. Let his glory fill. Amen. So let it be. Page 314, Psalm 72, verses 17 to 19 to the tune Effingham.

[36 : 21] Psalm 73, verses 17 to 19. This name forever shall endure, last like the sun it shall, this name forever shall endure, last like the sun it shall.

Let's sing.

Let's sing.

Let's sing. Let's sing. Amen.

May the name of the Lord Jesus be exalted, we pray. We ask you as we conclude this service, O Lord, may your word remain with us.

[38 : 26] May we contemplate it. May we think on it. May we pray, Lord, for your people. Bless them and keep them and make your face shine upon them and be gracious to them.

Lift up the light of your countenance on them and give them peace. Grant that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, will be with us all now and forevermore.

Amen. Amen.