

**‘LIFE & GLORY’
2 CORINTHIANS 2:12-3:18**

[St Mark’s Online Services- Sunday, May 17, 2020- 9:30am & 5:00pm]

1. The Quest for Life & Glory.

The passage we’re looking at today/tonight is brimming with interesting and important ideas. But at the heart of it, I think, are two key concepts. I want to suggest to you this morning/evening that these verses are, above all, about life, and glory.

But as we begin I want you to remember that life and glory aren’t just important ideas in the Bible. They’re also important ideas in the world. I think we could make the case, in fact, that millions of people in our world today are on a quest for life and glory. They seek both to prolong their lives and to fill their lives. The quest for life is a search for fullness- to be full of health and longevity, full of satisfying relationships, full of sought-after experiences, full of happiness, and comfort, and meaning. People these days, especially in a country like ours, seek life.

But people also seek glory. The quest for glory is the desire to leave a mark on the world, to leave a legacy. People don’t want to be ordinary. They want to be memorable. They may not all want to be a celebrity on the front cover of Who Magazine. But so many do want to be known for something, to have a great reputation within their chosen field or endeavour, or even just within their circle of family and friends. People long for this kind of glory.

The people amongst whom we live and move care about these things. They’re not just important to Christians, although Christians will have a very different concept of what these things mean. But nevertheless, the world in which we live is full of people on a quest for life, and glory. And I want us bear that in mind as we think today about what the Apostle Paul has to say. I want us to listen as he tells us about what true life really is, and where we can find the only glory that truly lasts.

Let’s take another look at our passage- under two headings. ‘Life and Death’- 2:12-3:6. Then ‘Glory and More Glory’- 3:7-18.

2. Life & Death (2:12-3:6).

- the open door

And our passage opens with Paul telling the Corinthians about his visit to Troas. He went there to share the gospel, but also to find Titus. And the reason he tells the Corinthians about this is because Titus was his source of information about them. Paul was keen to

see Titus because of all the recent angst in his relationship with the Corinthian church, and he wanted to hear news from Titus about how things were¹.

But because Paul didn't find Titus in Troas, he decided to leave, despite the fact that there was amazing opportunity for the gospel there. Paul describes it as an 'open door'. And the fact that Paul can see the opportunity there and yet still leave is a good reminder to us that the ministry of the gospel is God's work and it doesn't ultimately depend on us. Because of his confidence in God's sovereign purpose, Paul felt a great deal of freedom in the choices he made about his ministry². He wasn't working on the assumption that every "open door" represented clear guidance from God that this is where he should be. And that's why he could walk away from opportunities at times- like he did from Troas³.

- the procession and the aroma

But part of that freedom Paul felt in his choices was also because he knew that there would be opportunities for the gospel everywhere. Verse 14 is linked to the paragraph before because Paul is telling us why he felt he could leave Troas.

[Read 2:14- emphasise 'everywhere']

In the context, that last word of the verse is the crucial one. He can leave Troas, despite the open door, because wherever he goes the gospel of Jesus goes with him. The aroma of Christ is on Paul not just in Troas, but everywhere!

But these are fascinating images Paul uses here aren't they? To us they're quite strange. First he pictures himself as a captive being led by God in a triumphal procession in Christ⁴. The picture likens God to an all-conquering military leader parading his captives through the streets at his home-coming. And by it he reminds us that Christians⁵ are now God's subjects because of the victory of Christ⁶. And, as such, we point people wherever we go to the one we now serve. We spread the aroma of the knowledge of Christ wherever we go. And the "aroma" part of the imagery may be related to the burning of incense in ancient processions. Or it may be that Paul shifts metaphors and draws on the imagery of incense being burnt in the temple⁷? But either way you get the point. We live now in the

¹ Cf. 7:5-7

² Some commentators struggle to see here how Paul's decision to leave Troas could possibly be justified. They speak of this as providing an example of God working through our 'muddled and fallible decision making'. Of course, God does do that. But I think that we need to see Paul's decision-making here as not so much 'fallible' as 'free'.

³ Acts 20:6 tells us about a time when Paul later went to Troas again and stayed seven days. Perhaps the Lord in his mercy kept the door open there for him?

⁴ The NIV translation is presumptuous here when it opts for 'Christ's triumphal procession'. It more literally reads: 'But thanks be to God- the one always leading us in triumph in Christ . . .'

⁵ Some may think that Paul is speaking here only of himself and the other apostles (and 1 Corinthians 4:9 may be seen to offer some support that view), but I think the nature of the metaphor suggests his thinking here applies to all Christians since all believers are subjects of God through the victory of Christ (even if the apostles are the humblest of servants in that company- as per 1 Corinthians 4:9).

⁶ The commentators argue about whether Paul is picturing himself and others as a fellow-victor with Christ, or as a defeated enemy in this metaphor. The latter seems more likely to me based on the more explicit use of this image we find in 1 Corinthians 4:9. See also 1 Corinthians 15:57.

⁷ Marcus Loane sees this as a 'temple' image ('By Faith We Stand'- p.12), and Paul Barnett says it's connected to Old Testament sacrifices ('The Message of 2 Corinthians' BST Commentary- p.54).

train of God's Lordship and in the wake of Jesus' victory. We live in the train of God's Lordship and in the wake of Jesus' victory. He leads us wherever we go. And so wherever we go we carry with us his smell. The aroma of Christ is attached to us.

{Because Tamara isn't a huge fan of eating fish, I often cook myself a piece of salmon for dinner on the nights she's out at work. And very often the next morning she complains that the whole house smells of fish. She's right of course. Some aromas are hard to disperse. And the aroma of Christ is like that, except exponentially so. The smell of Christ never leaves his people. And God uses it to spread around⁸ the knowledge of Jesus.}

This aroma of Christ sticking to us is a pleasing aroma as far as God is concerned⁹- verse 15. And to some it is the source of their salvation. In the case of those ready to hear and receive the gospel the aroma of Christ brings life. But to those who have no ear for the message of Christ's victory, God's people are an aroma that leads to death¹⁰. [Pause] What an awesome responsibility! It's through us that some will be led to heaven and others condemned to hell. So it's no surprise that Paul wonders out loud who on earth is equal to such a task¹¹? Who is sufficient? Who's up to it? And that question which rings out at the end of verse 16 is so important that it will definitely require an answer.

But we ought to pause here and take in the significance of what Paul is saying- not just about himself, but about all who are subjects of God through the victory of Christ- even Christians today. We reek of Jesus¹². In fact, we're meant to. And, as a result, some people are never going to like us because they don't like the message. We ought to expect hard-heartedness and rejection in the world. But, at the same time, some are going to welcome us and welcome the message. So we also ought to expect that some will respond with faith and joy. I worry these days that we expect the rejection but are surprised when people accept the gospel. It ought not be like that. The pleasing aroma of Christ will lead some to life. That's God's wonderful intention as he uses us to spread the knowledge of Jesus around. And that's why Paul sees all this as a cause for thanksgiving. Verse 14: 'thanks be to God'¹³.

- two different kinds of ministry

But that hanging question at the end of verse 16 then leads Paul to consider two different kinds of ministry- the ministry he exercises, and a very different ministry exercised by others that the Corinthians may have come across. As verse 17 says, his is a ministry marked by the sincerity of people who've really been sent by God. But there are others who peddle the word of God for profit. Paul's ministry is that of someone in a triumphal

⁸ The word in the Greek is literally 'make manifest'- also in 3:3.

⁹ Note in verse 15 that Paul's ministry is 'to God' as much as it is 'among people'. The god-wardness of Paul's ministry is, in fact, an important feature of how he sees himself as he serves the Corinthians. See also 4:2, 5:11, 12:29

¹⁰ In the Greek the phrases here are literally: 'death into death' and 'life into life'. Perhaps he means that in rejecting Christ's death they are brought to their own spiritual death; and others, in accepting the life of Christ, come into life eternal for themselves. (See Barnett, 'The Second Epistle to the Corinthians' NICNT Commentary- p.154).

¹¹ Barnett says that the question of the end of verse 16 is provoked by the 'onerous notion' that people will go to their life or their death because of our representation of Christ (BST Commentary- p.55).

¹² This is Roy Clement's phrase. See 'The Strength Of Weakness'- p.61.

¹³ In this he echoes a refrain we've heard previously. See 'praise' in 1:3, and 'glory' in 1:20.

procession which God leads. It's for God. But the peddlers are those whose ministry seeks their own gain, their own glory.

And then at the start of chapter 3 Paul also compares his ministry with the ministry of those who need letters of commendation to introduce themselves¹⁴. But Paul he claims he has no need of such letters when it came to the Corinthians. He didn't need to commend himself to them¹⁵. They knew him well. And his ministry amongst them was its own testimony. 3:2.

[Read 3:2-3]

The question Paul's looking to answer here is about how we know a person's ministry is really authentic. Is it the pile of references and commendations they turn up with? Or can true authenticity be seen in the heart? Paul says it's the latter. His authenticity is seen in his own heart through the sincere love and affection he has for the Corinthians. But it's also seen in their hearts through the changes that Christ has made in them by the power of his Spirit¹⁶. Paul says his love and their transformation make his authenticity obvious. People can see it¹⁷ and know it¹⁸.

And Paul's point here has an obvious parallel with our church today. You can tell authentic ministry has taken place amongst us because people's hearts and lives are changing by the power of Christ's Spirit. And you can tell authentic ministry is taking place here because of the sincere love and affection that's in the hearts of the leaders. I wish you could sit in staff meetings and Overseers meetings and youth and Kids Church leaders meetings and Home Group leaders meetings like I do. I wish you could see the palpable love all these pastors have for you, the love that we have for you. We don't need someone to commend you to us. Our love for you is real. And the transformation in your hearts is real. God is at work amongst us.

- competence in the Spirit

And so, Paul says, because this was true for him with the Corinthians, he ministered with confidence. Verse 4- it's the confidence that he can only have before God¹⁹ through Christ. He is only competent as a servant of Christ because of God. Verse 5 answers the question that has been hanging in the air since 2:16. Who is equal to the task of representing Christ to the world? Who is competent to do that? Verse 5²⁰.

¹⁴ Of course, this sort of practice was commonplace and necessary in Paul's day and he had a hand in such letters at various points himself. See Acts 18:27, Romans 16:1-2, 1 Corinthians 16:10-11, 2 Corinthians 8:22-24, Philemon etc. We often do the same or similar today- write references (of which there are many on my computer), offer political endorsements, commend a friend or potential future partner.

¹⁵ I have to confess I'm not sure what Paul could be referring to when he uses the word 'again' in 3:1.

¹⁶ Cf. 1 Corinthians 9:2.

¹⁷ Paul again uses to vary to 'make manifest' here (cf.2:14).

¹⁸ 3:2.

¹⁹ See also 2:15 and 2:17.

²⁰ It's important to note that in the Greek the word for competence in 3:5 is exactly the same word Paul used in 2:16 to ask the question about who is 'equal' to this task? It's very unfortunate that the NIV has obscured the close and important relationship between these two verses.

[Read 3:5]

Paul says that he can be confident as he serves, he can be competent to represent Christ, but only through God. He is competent because he does not minister on his own. He serves with the Holy Spirit- the Spirit who changes hearts- verse 3, the Spirit who gives life- verse 6. Do you see why I say this section is all about life? Paul said back in 2:16 that through the spreading aroma of Christ some people are brought to life- eternal life. But he quickly followed up with a question. How is that possible? Who can possibly do that? And the start of chapter 3 has the answer. The only person who can do that is the one God helps, the one through whom the Spirit works²¹. It's the Spirit that gives life! So it's from the Spirit that Paul's competence comes. As one writer says, Paul's 'sufficiency is located abidingly outside himself'²². God makes him equal to the task- the task of bringing people to life.

3. Glory & More Glory (3:7-18).

Well, you will have noticed in verse 6 that Paul described his ministry as a new covenant ministry. He and the other apostles were servants of Christ- the one who ushered in a whole new way of God relating to his people- a new testament, or covenant. And Paul reminded the Corinthians in verse 6 that the old covenant- the covenant of the letter- ultimately killed people. The Old Testament law was very good at exposing sin, but it wasn't equipped to cleanse people from sin. Whereas the new covenant, the covenant of the Spirit, gives life to people.

- different covenants

And in the verses that follow Paul expands upon the differences between these two covenants. And he teaches that the old covenant was engraved in letters on stone tablets, it ultimately brought condemnation, and it carried only a transitory glory. By contrast, the new covenant is mediated by the Spirit, it brings righteousness, and is glorious forever. {And this was always the plan. God never intended the old covenant to be permanent. Within the Old Testament itself, God predicted the coming of a new covenant when sins would be washed away²³, and when the Spirit would come and write on human hearts²⁴. And we know what happens to all of God's ancient promises don't we? God says "yes" to them in Christ²⁵!}

- difference in glory

But of all the differences between the two covenants that Paul mentions here, it's the difference in glory that he's most interested in. It's the difference between the real but

²¹ See also 1:21-22 on the work of the Holy Spirit.

²² Susanna Baldwin in St Mark's Home Group Leaders Notes on 2 Corinthians 2:12-3:18.

²³ Including the sins of the old covenant believers.

²⁴ See Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ezekiel 36:24-27

²⁵ 2 Corinthians 1:20

transitory glory of the old covenant, and the glory of the new covenant which is greater, and which remains²⁶.

And Paul explains that in the Old Testament we read about the glory of God which lit up Moses' face on Mount Sinai. Exodus 33:11 tells us that at that time the LORD would speak with Moses face to face 'as one speaks to a friend'. What a remarkable thing²⁷. And when he came down the mountain his face was radiant and people were afraid to come near him. So he wore a veil over his face to protect the people- even though the reflected glory of God on Moses' face was fading²⁸. And Paul says here in verse 14 that, as a result, their minds became dull. They couldn't understand a glory they couldn't see. And Paul says that many of his fellow Jews still lived in his day with dull minds, because the veil remained, as it were. I guess that's true to this day. Many Jewish people even now read the Old Testament but don't see the true glory of God. Because it's only in Christ that it can be seen²⁹! But when Jewish people turn to Christ it's like the lights suddenly come on and the whole old covenant begins to make a new kind of sense. That was Paul's experience was it not? He very literally saw the light! And what was true for him literally, was also true for every other Jew who turned to Jesus, at least metaphorically³⁰. They went from knowing God partially, to seeing God in his fullness³¹. And Paul's point is that all new covenant believers have this privilege. They see more of God's glory. In Jesus they see what Paul calls the 'surpassing glory'- verse 10.

{It could be tempting for us, I think, to see our experience of God's glory now as somehow lesser than that transcendent experience Moses had on Mount Sinai. But Paul says our experience of God's glory is greater. Moses' face was radiant because he spoke to God like a man speaks with his friend. But in Jesus we find ourselves having an actual friendship with God. This is not a simile for us like it was for Moses. This is our reality. We are friends with God in Christ. We see the fullness of God's glory in Jesus. And that's an experience Moses could only dream about.

- boldness in the Spirit

And it's that experience of surpassing glory in Christ that makes Paul bold. Verse 12.

[Read 3:12]

Christ gives him confidence like he said in verse 4. In verse 17 he uses the word freedom. And that freedom, that boldness in ministry comes to Paul in the Spirit of Jesus. And it's

²⁶ The Greek in verse 11 uses the verb 'to remain'.

²⁷ And yet not even Moses could be given a full view of God's glory and live. So God would cover him with his hand to protect him (Exodus 33:21-23).

²⁸ See Exodus 34:29-35.

²⁹ When Paul speaks here of the veil being 'removed' in Christ (NIV), in the original it is actually the word 'abolished'. It even seems possible to me that he's not so much talking about the veil being 'abolished' as the old covenant being 'abolished' in Christ? However, I can't find any commentators who adopt this view. I also recognise the tension that would exist on this interpretation with Jesus teaching in Matthew 5:17 (although a different Greek word is used there).

³⁰ Barnett in his BST commentary- p.74.

³¹ Cf. Colossians 1:19-20

that same Spirit which is at work through Paul to transform the people he serves. This is what verse 18 is all about. The faces of Christians in the new covenant are unveiled. We have a clear vision of God's glory in the face of Christ³². And we are being transformed by Jesus into his image with ever-increasing glory through the Spirit. And that word transformed there is actually the same word the gospel writers used to describe Jesus' glorious transfiguration on the mountain when he was seen with Moses and Elijah³³. Just as Jesus was transfigured so that he appeared more glorious, so are we³⁴. We are being made more and more like him³⁵, and, as we are, people around us see more and more of the glory of God³⁶.

{This is the real deal, as Paul was saying in the first few verses of chapter 3. The evidence of authentic ministry, ministry that really does come from God, is a transformed heart. This is the work God is doing in every believer from the inside out. The Spirit who gives life, is also the Spirit who transforms. And the Spirit who transforms us, is the Spirit who shows people the glory of God³⁷.}

4. The Gift of Life & Glory.

So how should we conclude? How do we draw the threads of this rich passage together? Well, I can tell you what I'm not going to do. I'm not going to finish this sermon with some strong exhortations for evangelism and sanctification. Some preachers may be tempted by that sort of conclusion here. After all, 2:14-16 is an incredible passage about evangelism. And 3:18 is one of the most famous verses about sanctification in the whole Bible- and by sanctification I mean the process God uses to make us more holy, more like Jesus. And it can be tempting for preachers to see these themes here, these big ticket items of the Christian life, and to launch into some application about how we engage in evangelism and how we work at our sanctification. But in my judgement that'd be a huge mistake with this passage. Because it would turn the spread of the gospel and the transformation of people into a Christian version of the world's quest for life and glory. But this isn't about a quest. There are no imperatives here. Did you notice that? There's not a single command for Christians in this whole passage. I don't think there's even a gentle invitation. So you're not going to hear me conclude the sermon today/tonight with an invitation to get more involved in evangelism or to take your sanctification more seriously. I don't want to exhort you to join a quest here. Rather I want to encourage you to see the work of God and to rest in it. I want to encourage you not to quest for life and glory. Instead, I want to invite you to rest in the life and the glory that God gives to us. This is a passage about God. It's a passage about his gift of life and about the gift of his glory.

³² The NIV says we 'contemplate' the Lord's glory but it's also possible to translate this as 'reflect'.

³³ See Matthew 17:2 and Mark 9:2.

³⁴ See also 1 John 3:2. Loane says that 'the effect of continuous beholding is continuous transformation' (p.18).

³⁵ Clements has a lovely turn of phrase to describe this. He says this is the 'very image of God embossed into human character' (p.67).

³⁶ See also the use of this verb in Romans 12:2- the only other place the verb is used in the New Testament.

³⁷ 'It is the triumph of the grace and power of God reproducing through the Spirit the beauty of Christ in lives which are outwardly decaying and disintegrating through their connection with the world that is passing away. Only the grace of God is kind enough and the power of God strong enough to achieve this transformation in our broken and darkened lives' (Barnett BST Commentary- p.76).

Because he's a God who spreads and a God who transforms. So let me finish by reminding you of that.

- the God who spreads

God is a God who spreads the aroma of the knowledge of Christ everywhere. That's what 2:14 told us. It's not a verse that gives us a mission. It's a verse that tells us about the mission of God which, by his remarkable grace, we're a part of. When we're living in the train of God's Lordship and in the wake of Christ's victory, the smell of Christ follows us wherever we go.

Let me tell you how this truth is working itself out in the life of our mission partner James Lane and his family. As you know James serves as a Scripture teacher in Fairfield in Sydney's South West. For many years now he and his family have been living in Fairfield too, trying to find opportunities to share their lives and the gospel with their neighbours. But they recently made the decision for a variety of reasons to move away from Fairfield to be closer to family etc. So they've moved to Illawong. Here's a photo of their recent move from James' latest prayer letter. [Show photo]. And by the way it's great that people from our church were able to help them with their move. {I'd recognise those cute little Scottish legs anywhere!} But what is God doing in the midst of this change? Should we feel disappointed that James' ministry to his neighbours is now an open door he's walked away from? Well no. Because now the aroma of Christ has moved with the Lanes to Illawong- into their new house, into their new street. It will accompany them as they go to the shops, and as they meet the parents of other kids at the school gate, and as they and their children make new friends. What's God doing? He's spreading. He's spreading the aroma of the knowledge of Christ.

I think what Paul's saying here is that if you're a Christian, spreading the gospel of Jesus is not something you can opt into or out of. It's something you're a part of, kind of whether you like it or not. The gospel goes where you go. You reek of Christ. And people will smell it. Some people won't like you because they don't want to hear God's word about Jesus. But others do. So don't be surprised if God uses you to bring some people to life. Eternal life.

This is God's mission, as I was saying earlier in the service today/tonight. By his incredible mercy, we're a part of it. But we're not trying to win some kind of war on his behalf. We're proclaiming the victory Christ has already won- the victory over sin and death. And we're not alone. God leads us at the head of the procession. And we're with a long line of other people who are his subjects as well- all smelling the same. And as we go about our daily affairs, as we shop, as we chat at the school gate, as we work, as we hang out at school, as we make friends and have conversations, and as we love and serve others, people will see and hear about Christ. That's just the way it is. And as they do, the Spirit of God will give life. Like the sprouts of green that burst through the ground after the rains that broke the drought, little shoots of life will be popping up all around us. Life. Because we smell of Christ. Life. Because the Spirit of God is at work. Life. Because God is a God who spreads.

- the God who transforms

But by that same Spirit, he is also a God who transforms. And as he transforms people we see more and more of his glory. That's what 3:18 tells us. Where do we find the glory of God in the world today? Paul says, you find it in the transfigured lives of God's people.

When a Dad starts finding ways to better control his temper so that instead of yelling at his kids he disciplines them more gently- you see it. The glory of God. When someone who's been in the habit of having too many wines on a Friday night after work leaves after just two drinks and heads home- you see it. The glory of God. When a teenager realises that they've started using the same bad language as all their friends at school so they start to choose their words more carefully- you see it. The glory of God. When someone who's used to spending most of their money on themselves makes a conscious decision to start giving a larger percentage away- you see it. The glory of God. When it begins to dawn on a child that they always want the biggest piece of cake and when they start to think about giving the biggest piece to someone else- you see it. The glory of God. When someone takes stock and starts to admit to themselves that that thing they desire has become bigger than it should and they start praying that God would increase their desire for him instead- you see it. The glory of God.

I could go on and on of course. These things aren't just little steps of personal growth. These are not just a part of the ordinary course of life. These things are the radiant faces of God's new covenant people. This is the Spirit of the living God writing on the tablets of human hearts. This is Jesus making his much loved people more and more like him. This is the holiness of God being embossed on the characters of his people. This is glory. Spectacular, transcendent, brilliant glory. Every single seemingly tiny step of gritty growing godliness- it's us contemplating the glory of God in the face of Christ and becoming more glorious ourselves! It's astonishing. Really, it is! I see it all around me. In the people in our church family. In the lives of my Christian friends in other places. Incredibly, I even see it in me. God. The living God. Transforming us. Transforming me. Making me like his son- his perfect, precious son. Showing me his glory and growing that glory in me. And in you. This is what God is doing.

Sisters and brothers, there's no exhortation here today/tonight. There's just a description. A description of the astounding things God is doing in the world and in us. Spreading the aroma of Christ through us, and giving people life. Transforming us by his Spirit, and showing his glory.

The people of the world quest for such things. But not us. Why quest when you can rest? We rest in the gracious gifts of God. We marvel at them. We thank him for them. We rejoice. And we continue to watch on as the God who spreads and the God who transforms does what he does.

[Read 2:14 and 3:18]