

The Christian Life: Glory

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

2 Cor 5:1-10 is considered one of the ten most difficult texts in the New Testament. What is it about?

Two preliminary comments: All the divisions in our Bibles into verses and chapters were added much later. Some of the divisions seem arbitrary. It's useful to remember that these New Testament letters and writings were not divided in the way we have them today.

The second preliminary comment is that Paul is dealing with "opponents," and we can't exactly say who they are. We do know that in 2 Corinthians he is fighting for his apostolic life. What is important for us is that he is really asking the question: What does the Christian life look like?

We have the idea among us that there is something specific in the Christian life that shows or should show in the Christian life. Show it to me. Prove it to me. What are you doing that shows you are a Christian?

We also have the idea among us of heroes and heroines. In the Nineteenth Century Thomas Carlyle wrote a book, *Heroes and Hero Worship*. We like to have heroes in the worldly sense. In the last century there was a movement debunking heroes, showing they all had clay feet. If you go into the lives of people who live under the discipline of monastery or nunnery life, you find out that in spite of their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, their lives are often a mess. We have personal records from the lives of some of the great saints showing that it's not that they had grown in great holiness, but they had grown in their sense of sin.

And then there are modern figures like Mother Thereza who are put up on a pedestal, but when you came down to it, she was impossible. She was a very difficult and mixed-up woman. Nevertheless, she was beatified and then made a saint.

Paul is being asked by his opponents: What does being a Christian look like? Show us! Show us in your life by what you are doing. Prove it to us. The theme throughout this letter, especially in chapters 3, 4, and 5, is the theme of glory. What is glory like?

Often in pictures of saints there is a halo around their heads, a nimbus which shines. Someone has said that glory could be spelled glow-ry. It's the splendor. What's it like? Where is it?

Paul takes this on. It's a fascinating defense. It's not abstract. He's fighting for his apostolic life. And he's also asking: What does it really look like? Where is the glory?

The first of three important points is already stated by him in Romans 8:30: "We have been glorified." There is a tense in Greek that we don't have in English which means "It's complete." "Already done." We are already totally glorified.

Paul makes the same point in Phil 3:12: "Christ Jesus has made me his own." And Gal 2:20: "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." And it's found also in Colossians 3:3: "For you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God."

It's already done. At the same time he goes on in this section to talk about how it's hidden. It looks like defeat. He writes in 2 Cor 4:7: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show the glory belongs to God and not to us." The problem with the phrase "earthen vessels" is that it doesn't speak to us very well today. Some have said it's "clay pots." But really today it's "paper plates."

In our lives we don't have this glory. You know what happens to paper plates. We throw them away.

Paul goes on in 2 Corinthians 4:7-11 to say we are "afflicted in every way," we are "perplexed," we are "persecuted," we are "struck down." Instead of saying – "Look at the glory in my life! Look at how well I am doing!" – he makes an ironic statement. He mocks his opponents saying: "Maybe you have glory that can be seen, but we do not. There is nothing glorious to show" (paraphrase of 4:12).

But then he goes on in 2 Cor 4:14 to say: "That is hidden but he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus." There is this other dimension of being with him in the resurrection.

The same thing is true here in the general flow of the discussion about how the Gospel is that which is proclaimed, the message which is spoken. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ" (Rom 10:17, RSV).

What Paul writes is this: "The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God" (4:4). The gospel is the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God.

He writes basically the same thing again two verses later: “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (4:6).

In 1 Cor 1:17 the Gospel is the cross. In 1 Cor 2:2 Paul writes: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” The same is found in the Gospel of John: The glory is the cross. Something hidden. It’s not evident except to those who are in Christ Jesus. The Gospel is hidden, veiled to those who don’t believe (2 Cor 4:3).

That’s point number one. We are already totally glorified. Then in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “We are being transformed from one degree of glory to another.” We are being transformed. It’s being done to us. In Romans 12:2 Paul writes: “Be transformed.” Here he points out we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another. How is that possible?

In this difficult passage (2 Cor 5:1-10) he then writes in verse 5: “The Holy Spirit is given to us as a guarantee.” It’s a problem what translation to use there. Sometimes it’s translated “down payment,” or “pawn ticket.” That is to say, there is something we have now already, like a pawn ticket. 2 Cor 1:22 states: “We have been sealed,” which refers to Baptism. Or in Romans 8:23: “We have the first fruits.” That makes it sound as if there’s a little bit of glory now.

It's helpful to note that in 2 Cor 5:4-5 he brings up words we know from elsewhere. He says there’s a groaning and a sighing. That recalls Roman 8:22 where he writes that there is this glorious freedom. Nevertheless, he writes: “Nature is groaning.” Glory is not evident now. And in Romans 8:27 is the astonishing statement about prayer: “The Holy Spirit is the one who prays for us with signs too deep for words.” That’s the same as in 2 Cor 5:4-5: It’s not self-evident; it is hidden. There is nothing more that we have which is more than Christ and more than the Gospel.

In the third place, there is the fascinating verse in 2 Cor 4:17: “This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” What is that? An eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison!

What is meant by a “weight of glory beyond all comparison”? We could also say “beyond comprehension.”

The last test is 2 Corinthians 5:10 “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done

in the body.” That makes it sound as if we haven’t been glorified, that the Lord isn’t doing this, and there still is the last judgment for Christians.

We remember the baseline found in Romans 8:1: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” There is no condemnation. No last judgment. When you are in Christ Jesus, the Last Judgment has taken place already on the cross. That is the confidence and certainty that he has given us who have been baptized in him.

What then is 2 Cor 5:10 about? It is talking about the problem he has with his opponents, but it is also about the Christian life. That is to say, this is a serious business. But this is not another judgment of the final sort.

Here we go back to 2 Corinthians 4:17: “An eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” When we talk about life forever with him, we tend to use old images of various rewards and punishments, such as in heaven some will have more stars in their crowns, or that everyone will have a full glass, but some glasses will be bigger than others. This verse puts a stop to all that. “An eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” puts away all that speculation and calculation. Heaven is beyond all comparison, beyond all comprehension.

This is the same message that you find in 1 Cor 2:9: “No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has entered into the heart of anyone, what God has prepared for those who love him.”

And Luke 6:38: “good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into our lap.”

And Ephesians 3:20: “exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think” (KJV).

It is beyond us. We can rejoice in the eternal weight of glory. Amen