

## Life in Spirit 6 – The glorious Spirit (2 Cor 3:7-18, John 4:19-24)

Glory. It's a common word and whenever you read the news you'll probably find it. In the news this week, we learned of the death of Gordon Banks, one of our sporting greats and no doubt you'll have heard the phrase 'world cup glory'. Last weekend we also had the BAFTAs, and The Favourite and other films received the glory of their awards. Perhaps you've been looking forward this weekend to the FA Cup 5<sup>th</sup> round and been dreaming of 'FA Cup glory'.

Glory, it seems, is all around us. But what is it? Well, it's a lot older than the FA Cup and the BAFTAs. The word glory is a very ancient one and you'll find it way back in the early parts of the Old Testament. The Hebrew word is 'Kabod' – literally means heaviness or weight. And in time it came to be used for the manifest presence of God. That is the root of glory – the manifest presence of God among us.

So 'kabod' / glory / God's presence was what accompanied Israel as they travelled through the desert (physical description was pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night). It was what appeared when the Israelites first performed their tabernacle worship in Leviticus 9. Glory is what happens when God shows up.

On into the NT – Greek word for glory is 'doxa' – same idea. God's presence and his reputation. So when Jesus turns water into wine, 'he thus revealed his glory'. The book of Hebrews describes Jesus as the 'radiance of God's glory'. But Jesus also describes his journey to the cross by saying 'now the Son of Man is glorified'. God's presence, His glory, is shown in all these things.

Our theme this week is the glorious Spirit. And actually, once we get back to basics, to what glory is, then in many ways our theme is a tautology. Of course the Spirit is glorious! He's God, he's the 3<sup>rd</sup> person of the Trinity – and more than that his job description is to make God real in the world. So if glory is what happens when God shows up, then wherever the Spirit is, of course there is glory, because that's where God shows up. Tell us something we don't know, Matt!

OK, fair enough – guilty as charged. But I wanted to give a week to this because it's not always how we think of Him – for many of us the Holy Spirit is a kind of workhorse, that gentle presence in our lives, very much behind the scenes: the 'encourager'. But in 2 Cor 3 Paul sees it differently: v8 – in fact he emphasises it again and again – READ v10-11.

Friends, we all need a bit of glory in our lives. Not gongs and awards and all that, but the presence of God. So what does that look like? What is this 'glorious ministry of the Spirit'? Let's unpack the ministry of the Spirit today and get a fresh vision of how glorious it is. I'll focus on the last 2 verses which draw all the threads together, but doing that will shed light on the rest of the text too.

The first thing we learn in v17 is that **the Spirit brings freedom** – READ v17. This takes us back to the heart of the gospel, the good news of our faith. When Jesus describes the cross in John 12 as his glory, he means that this is the place where God meets us most powerfully of all. When Jesus dies he triumphs over all our greatest enemies: sin, death and the devil. Through the cross God pronounces our forgiveness. Through Jesus, by His grace, He declares us his righteous children.

Therefore all who believe this can now live with the assurance of his love and forgiveness. That, my friends is a message of *freedom*. As the book of Romans says, ‘it is God who justifies, who is he that condemns?’ *Sin* can no longer condemn us because the punishment has been paid once for all time at the cross. *The devil* can no longer accuse us, because his lies were defeated once for all through the life and death of Jesus. *Death itself* can no longer defeat us, because those who die in Christ will rise forever to be with him. When we truly internalise these deep truths, there is no longer anything to fear but fear itself. Perfect love drives out fear.

Now for most of us, we’re a long way from that place, and I suspect many of us long to really grasp these things, because we know that if we did, then that place would be *true freedom*. The truly free person is not the one who feels no fear but who has totally overcome his or her fears. Deep down we know that is freedom. It’s what Jesus was getting at when he told the woman at the well that His followers will worship God in Spirit and in truth. Four chapters later he told his disciples that it is the truth that sets us free, free to worship in spirit – in other words with the presence of the living God with us in a very real way. No wonder Paul says that where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

But just as Paul contrasts the ministry of law as the imperfect forerunner to the glorious ministry of the Spirit, the ministry grace and freedom, we too face the same dilemma. We can choose to live by law, always trying to earn God’s love. Deep down we might see God as a capricious tyrant, or at the very least as someone who would never be interested in the likes of us, so we approach him with veiled faces, hoping we’ve been good enough to earn His affection. We don’t like the idea of receiving it as a gift, we want to *prove* ourselves. Now there is a place for proving ourselves in the Christian life – we do sometimes face tests and have to prove worthy of our calling. But coming into the presence of God is not one of them. We can only receive it as a gift. A gift which God wants to give, but we have to choose to receive. Friends, don’t leave a veil over your heart! God is always near to us, always desiring to give us freedom. The Lord is the Spirit, and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

But how do we grow in that freedom? Well Paul gives us a good answer in **v18 – ‘with unveiled faces, we contemplate the Lord’s glory’**. What does that mean? It’s a difficult sentence, but let’s look at each phrase in turn:

With unveiled faces – this goes back to what we were just saying – to have an unveiled face is simply to receive this basic truth – that God is *for* us and not against us. We can look at the face of God and live because we can look directly at the cross of Christ, we can gaze at the empty tomb. In Christ we see God made real – a God of infinite power, but also a God of love and grace. We look directly at Jesus, but more than that...

We contemplate – we looked at this word last year. It means we give our full attention to. The word comes from temple worship – but it’s not restricted to religious buildings. We can contemplate Jesus anytime & anywhere. We give him our full attention. But where do we focus:

The Lord’s glory – what is Jesus’ glory? It’s everything that makes God real in Jesus – above all his death for us, but also his resurrection, his miracles, his teaching, his love – it’s all Jesus’ glory!

**So how do we grow in freedom?** – we start by *believing* that God’s desire for us is freedom because that is what His Spirit came to bring, and then we give *our full attention* to Jesus, the radiance of God’s glory, and all those things that make him beautiful and captivate our attention. And *we keep doing that*, and keep doing it, and keep doing it.

Have you noticed that Paul doesn’t give us any tips on what that actually looks like? I think that’s deliberate. It’s not a technique. Yes, there are all kinds of useful things – we need silence and solitude and community and music and heartfelt prayers and lots of time in God’s word, and walks in God’s creation and the advice and encouragement of friends, and occasionally a telling off, and fruitful reflection on our successes and failures and all the experiences of life – and for each of us it will be a unique mixture of all of those. But however we do it, there is no shortcut, my friends, to growing in faith – whatever we do, ultimately we have to give our full attention to Jesus.

And how do we know if it’s working? Well that’s the last part of the passage – READ v18b. In other words, **little by little we become more and more like Jesus.** Transformed into his image – what a great phrase that is. But we can’t rush it. Jesus himself invested intensively for 3 years into just 12 people and on the night before he dies his disciples are still saying and doing daft things: Thomas ‘we don’t know where you’re going’; Peter getting his sword for some tasty action and then running away. *If even Jesus could only get so far in 3 years, how quick are we going to go?* That’s not to get downhearted, quite the opposite: don’t judge yourself harshly. You’re doing better than you think you are. You’re further than you think. Other people will see changes in you that you can’t see yourself.

One final reflection. For some time now I’ve had a piece of wisdom buzzing through my mind. The first was a talk I went to a couple of years ago by Bishop Graham Tomlin. He said lots of amazing things but one has stuck with me and keeps coming back – his one piece of advice for us as churches was this: ‘Get the worship right and the rest will follow.’ This glorious passage takes me back to this truth. What is the purpose of our worship? Ultimately it is to unveil our faces that we might give our full attention to the Lord’s glory – all those things that reveal the love and grace of Jesus to us, that make him beautiful and compelling. If our corporate gatherings are doing that, then we’ll see the freedom and transformation that this passage speaks of and that we long for.

To come back to where we started. There was one other piece of news this week, unreported except in Christian circles. After a long and fruitful life, Michael Green died this week, aged 89. He was one of the great Christian leaders of the last 60 years, author of over 50 books and a huge force bringing the gospel alive to millions of people. In his obituary this week, they quoted one of his famous sermons: ‘I only have one life and I want to live it all for God.’ And that desire to give Jesus everything never left him. One of the last books he wrote in 2014, aged 84, began with a chapter titled ‘thirst for God.’ MG walked the talk: someone who gave Jesus his full attention....

The Spirit of the Lord is glorious: it brings freedom, allows us to look directly at Jesus, to give him our full attention, and be transformed little by little to be more like him. We *need* this Spirit, we *welcome* him every day, every hour, we seek his presence. And as Paul says, we can be bold about it. Perhaps I need to be a bit bolder – perhaps many of us do.

And may God grant us grace to experience the joy of that transformation, the joy of that freedom as we give our full attention to Jesus. Amen.