

# I Turn to Christ

Exodus 34:29-35 | Psalm 99 | 1 Corinthians 12.31b – 13:13 | Luke 9:28-36

## 2 CORINTHIANS 3:12 – 4:2

<sup>12</sup> Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, <sup>13</sup> not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. <sup>14</sup> But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. <sup>15</sup> Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; <sup>16</sup> but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. <sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup> And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. <sup>1</sup> Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup> We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practise cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

## INTRODUCTION

What's the most shameful thing you've ever done? Reflecting on this question the last few days, I have probably three or four top candidates in my own life. Shame is a powerful feeling. An article from a few years ago about the scientific underpinnings of shame starts this way:

We feel shame when we violate the social norms we believe in. At such moments we feel humiliated, exposed and small and are unable to look another person straight in the eye. ... Shame makes us direct our focus inward and view our entire self in a negative light. Feelings of guilt, in contrast, result from a concrete action for which we accept responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

The article goes on to draw out distinctions between shame and guilt, primarily that shame is tied to the person: 'I am a worthless human being who does this kind of evil thing,' versus guilt, which focuses on the act: 'this evil thing is bad for me and for other people.' The two, of course, are related. But shame has this capacity to imprison us, to turn us inward, with dark emotions collapsing around us and shame scenes playing in our heads, imprisoning us, enslaving us. It's called a shame spiral and it very quickly renders void any sense of hope.<sup>2</sup>

If we asked God's people in the Old Testament what was the most shameful thing they had ever done, they might point to a story from Exodus 32-34—a story referenced in our reading from 2 Corinthians. And we'll get into that in a moment. But the thing we will learn today, as we look more closely at this reading from 2 Corinthians, is that from turning to Jesus Christ, comes hope. From turning to Christ comes hope, hope that we might find freedom and transformation in the face of our guilt and shame. From turning to Christ comes hope. Let's take a look.

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<sup>1</sup> Annette Kämmerer, "The Scientific Underpinnings and Impacts of Shame," *Scientific American*, August 9, 2019. See [scientificamerican.com/article/the-scientific-underpinnings-and-impacts-of-shame/](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-scientific-underpinnings-and-impacts-of-shame/).

<sup>2</sup> See Gershen Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-Based Syndromes* (New York: Springer Publishing, 1989), 90.

## 1. VEILED IN SHAME

In the first verse of our reading, Paul declares his thesis. We have hope. And this hope means we can act boldly. But, interestingly, he does not define it right away. Instead, he begins with an illustration, a reference to the story of Moses and the people of God at Sinai 1,500 years earlier, found in Exodus 32-34.<sup>3</sup> In a famous scene, Moses goes up the mountain to speak with God, receiving the law, the Ten Commandments, inscribed by God himself on stone tablets. Meanwhile, the people of Israel act, in the words of the author, “perversely.”<sup>4</sup> They have too quickly forgotten that God saved them from slavery in Egypt, in the Exodus, and instead constructed an idol, a golden calf, and worshipped it as the god who saved them from Egypt. God’s anger is kindled against them, telling Moses what has happened. Moses implores him: ‘Don’t wipe your people from the face of the earth now, not after you just saved them.’ Moses then goes down the mountain, sees the dancing and idol-worship himself, and he also becomes angry, smashing the stone tablets on the ground. Moses then intercedes for the people, returning, as God commanded, up the mountain to receive new tablets with the covenant law to replace the broken ones. Each time Moses went back and forth, returning from speaking with God, his face would shine with the glory of God.<sup>5</sup>

This shining glory of God, reflected in Moses’s face, was significant because it made the people afraid. It reminded them of their shameful deeds, their idolatry, and it reminded them of the judgment and wrath of God that they deserved. It became a symbol of their shame. And so, Moses would go up the mountain and speak with God uncovered, but then he would put on a veil to hide this glory of God when he returned, for it was too much for the people to bear.

Paul, back in 2 Corinthians, unpacks this story in a very particular way. He notes that people still have this barrier, this veil, shielding them from the glory of God. Even in hearing the law, they are still enslaved to their guilt and shame, enslaved by the law. And it is so easy to be. Isn’t it? You sin, you do something wrong or sinful, and in the best case, you feel uneasy about it. You say something hurtful to someone, you take advantage of them in some way, someone catches you doing something wrong. You feel guilty. Then you can’t face the person at all. You continue to feel anxious, and it eats at you. Or worse, you lie about it. Try to hide it. Deflect it. Justify it in your own mind. Deny it. You build this house of cards around your sin in order to hide your shame. It very quickly becomes a prison, a veil through which you see everything, a weight you bear in everything, a burden. And the thing is, all people do it. It is a human condition, this sin thing is.

And let me be very clear: Shame is not, itself, a bad thing. The law is not a bad thing. Together, they are very useful. The law—God’s standard of righteousness—reveals everyone’s guilt. It drives us into a shame spiral of despair and hopelessness, pushing us to cry out in anguish, to grasp for help and hope from anywhere we might find it, to have this veil removed.

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, Paul has been referring back to this section of Exodus, chapters 32-34, throughout this section of the letter (see 2 Cor 3:7-11).

<sup>4</sup> Exod 32:7.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome, in the fourth century, translated the Hebrew word for *shining with glory* in Exodus 34 as *horned*. It’s a difficult Hebrew word that can mean *has horns*, like a goat, though not here. Context matters. But Jerome’s Latin translation became the dominant translation well into the Renaissance, which means that artists were reading that Moses came down the mountain and his face was *horned* after speaking with God. So, if you ever wonder my renaissance art—including Michelangelo’s famous Moses at San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome—depicts Moses with horns, that’s why.

## 2. UNVEILED IN GLORY

For the Christian, the one who has—as the text puts it—turned to the Lord, the veil is lifted. Beyond the shame spiral and hopelessness is hope, the glory of God seen with an unveiled face. And this hope, brothers and sisters, is everything. Because Christ Jesus died for our sins, because he rose again from the dead, defeating sin and death once for all, because in so doing he reconciled us to God, we have hope. We have an unimaginable hope of seeing the glory of God face-to-face. And that is what Paul then unpacks here, along two lines.

First, there in verse 17, there is freedom. Those who see God unburdened by shame, without that veil, find freedom from slavery to sin. Now, to be clear, that doesn't mean they find sinlessness. And this difference is important. It is the difference between shame and guilt. The law continues to serve a function. It continues to reveal guilt. Paul writes extensively about this in his Epistle to the Romans, probably written here in Corinth.<sup>6</sup> That is, even after baptism, even after maturing in the faith, we still continue to sin. But, knowing Christ has dealt with our guilt in the gospel, in the cross, we need not devolve into shame. We take responsibility, but we need not despair. We are freed. We have hope.

Secondly, there in verse 18, we are also transformed. Having hope, seeing the glory of God unveiled through Christ, we are transformed into the image of Christ. Having come to faith, having turned to Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, our lives begin to look more and more like Jesus Christ. This is what the rest of the passage shows. We can act boldly, renouncing shameful things, making choices to live as Christ would have us live, joyfully living according to his Word, rather than being imprisoned by it in shame. What a glorious picture it is! And what an important picture it is for those who have been baptized or Confirmed, who have made that vow: "I turn to Christ."<sup>7</sup>

My question is this: Do you? Depending on his righteousness, hoping in his gospel, living without the shame of sin, in the power of the Holy Spirit, do you strive to turn to him, to live a life conforming to his image? "*We do not lose heart,*"<sup>8</sup> Paul says. "*We commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.*" According to what standard? "*By the open statement of the truth*"<sup>9</sup> of his Word. That is what it means to be transformed. That is what it means to act boldly.

## CONCLUSION

As I begin to conclude, let me put the question to you this way. Forget the most shameful thing you have ever done, for a moment. Do you want to live your life under the veil? It is a choice you make. Because, from the gospel of Jesus Christ comes hope, hope that we might find freedom and transformation in the face of our guilt and shame. From the gospel of Jesus Christ comes hope. And so, will you turn to Christ?

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<sup>6</sup> See Romans 7-8.

<sup>7</sup> The Archbishop's Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 353.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Cor 4:1.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Cor 4:2.

Just before his own conversion, Saint Augustine considered a famous rhetorician, Victorinus, who had decided to become a Christian and was baptised. Augustine wrote:

I felt that he was not so much courageous as fortunate to find occasion for dedicating all his time to you [God]. I sighed after such freedom, but was bound not by an iron imposed by anyone else but by the iron of my own choice. The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me a prisoner. The consequence of a distorted will is passion. By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity.<sup>10</sup>

He goes on to write: “The burden of the world weighed me down with a sweet drowsiness such as commonly occurs during sleep.”<sup>11</sup> But eventually, having been beckoned to turn to Christ himself, Augustine picked up a Bible, and read “*put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh.*”<sup>12</sup> He writes: “At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.”<sup>13</sup> In that moment, Augustine was freed and transformed, the veil was taken away. May it be so for us.

Let me pray. *Heavenly Father, show us your glory, in your Son, that we may see and be freed, that we may be transformed, that we may not lose hope, but live boldly for you. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions* (trans. Henry Chadwick: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 140).

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 141.

<sup>12</sup> Rom 13:14.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 153.