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## LESSON NOTES

PAUL'S 3<sup>RD</sup> LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT CORINTH  
(2 Corinthians: Chapters 2-3)

## OVERVIEW

“Seeing Through the Veil: Shall We Stink or Share a Pleasant Fragrance?”

Life stinks. Death stinks. Yet, glory be to the Lord God that both stink. If life did not stink, we would know not the pleasure and hope of life beyond death. If death did not stink, we would know not the pleasure and value of life. For it is in life that we rehearse for death, and it is in death that we find value in life: a life lived well—not long, not painless, not sumptuous—but well. For the believer, it is in (εἰς) Christ that life is lived well. It is in Christ that our inheritance is secure (Galatians 3:29; 2 Corinthians 2:21-22). It is in Christ that life matters; it is in Christ that death does not. Death has lost its sting.

**A QUESTION TO GET YOU THINKING:**  
WHY IS THE VERY SAME MESSAGE  
COMMUNICATED ABOUT CHRIST  
CONSIDERED PUTRID POISON BY SOME  
PEOPLE, AND LIFE PRESERVING BY  
OTHERS?

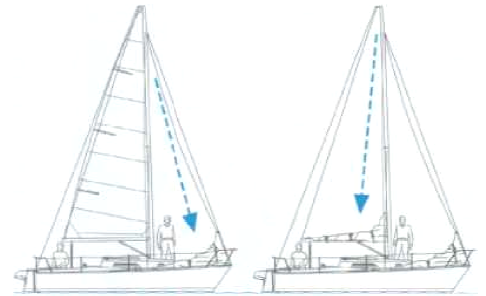
**BUT** We live in Corinth. Our leaders are enthralled with the ambiance of anything goes, anything is excusable, and nothing really matters. Our citizens overlook the murder of thousands yearly, tolerate narcissistic<sup>i</sup> misogyny<sup>ii</sup> as if it were merely bad taste, and are irritated with the homeless as if they were bad design elements in our well-designed cities. We live in Corinth.

**AND** We love Corinth. We enjoy the heirarchy of morality—there’s always someone about whom we can say we are better. We may do A, but at least we don’t do Z. Paul had to deal with Corinth as well. Steeped in post-modern values before there were post-modern values, he actually had to tell believers that morality matters. Sleeping with your step-mother? Bragging about your gift from Holy Spirit? Telling evil things about your brothers and sisters in Christ? Is this God’s family? No. Not then, not now.

When the Romans conquered a city, great processions would commemorate Rome’s glory. The bodies of the city’s leaders—the enemies of Rome—would be dragged through the streets. If you saw Rome as your liberator, your source of life and riches, then the sight was neither gory nor repulsive. On the other hand, if the city was your home, the bodies simply stank, and reminded you that you are no longer home. Paul is teaches us in 2 Corinthians 2-3 to come home. Rome is not your home. Neither is Corinth.

## CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT: CONTEXTUAL ISSUES—2 CORINTHIANS 2:1-13

So, Paul has a tough row to hoe. After wrestling with the nonsense in the church at Corinth, he recognizes he must continue to be firm, but loving. So after reassuring believers that in Christ there is no “Yes or No,” but only “Yes,” and that Holy Spirit is within us as a seal, a protective seal which guarantees “what is to come,” he nonetheless must lower the boom. Time to slow down and look out.



2 Corinthians 2:1-13. *Previously.* Paul is sure he's got another painful visit to Corinth—kind of like going to Las Vegas again—but without air conditioning. He apologizes for the tough love he must exact (e.g., “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God?”).<sup>1</sup> The punishment you exacted on my orders is sufficient; now let it go! Reaffirm your love for the knucklehead. Let's not let Satan win this battle—we're not stupid. We know his schemes.

So? Even though the Lord opened up doors in Troas, Titus my brother wasn't there. I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia.

- Q Why was this visit also painful?
- Q Why do you suppose we need Scripture to remind us to forgive our erring brothers and sisters in Christ?
- Q Why does failing to forgive benefit Satan?



<sup>1</sup>1 Corinthians 6:9a).

## 2 CORINTHIANS 2:1-13

So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. <sup>2</sup>For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? <sup>3</sup>I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. <sup>4</sup>For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

<sup>5</sup>If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. <sup>6</sup>The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. <sup>7</sup>Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup>I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. <sup>9</sup>The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. <sup>10</sup>If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, <sup>11</sup>in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

<sup>12</sup>Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, <sup>13</sup>I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-by to them and went on to Macedonia.

## TEXTUAL ISSUES—2 CORINTHIANS 2:14-3:18

2 Corinthians 2:14-3:3. *Shall we stink or smell good?* Thanks be to Father God who always leads the triumphant procession as we in Christ spread everywhere the breathtakingly magnificent fragrance of knowledge about Him.

To some we have the smell of death, and to others—the fragrance of life.<sup>2</sup>



And are we equal to this fragrance sharing task? There are those, of course, who peddle the gospel, the logos of God for money. We do not. When in Christ, we speak before God sincerely, just like what we are—people sent from God. So, do you think we're braggin' again? Do we need, like some folk, recommendation letters to support our credibility, our reliability, our competence? No. You are our letters—your lives show everybody. You are a letter from Christ—the result of our ministry. Letters written by ink fade, but letters written by Holy Spirit live! Letters written on stone tablets crack, but letters written on the tablets of hearts by Holy Spirit live!

- Q What is so “fragrant” about the knowledge of Christ?
- Q What is the “aroma of Christ?”
- Q Why are some put off, and others attracted to this aroma?
- Q What makes us able to share this rather expensive aroma? What does it take to be truly sincere?
- Q What makes today's peddlers of the gospel successful? [Hint: warning—pointing one finger...]
- Q Why are “letters of recommendations” about others from people you trust (to be honest and competent) so critical to communication?
- Q What makes our letter stand out? Stay permanent, indestructible?

## 2 CORINTHIANS 2:14-3:3

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.<sup>15</sup> For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.<sup>16</sup> To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?<sup>17</sup> Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup> Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?<sup>2</sup> You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody.<sup>3</sup> You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

<sup>2</sup>*My Burberry Black Parfum* (900ml) will cost you \$2,800 (USD). 1.6 ounces is \$95 on Amazon; but it was out of stock as of this writing. You also must complete a social register application to purchase it. :-)

## TEXTUAL ISSUES—2 CORINTHIANS 3:4-3:18

2 Corinthians 3:4-3:18. *The glory kills, the glory transforms.* We have the ultimate confidence for it resides in the assurance of knowing Christ. Thus, our confidence comes not from us, but He within us. The Lord God has made us competent envoys for a covenant based not on the letter of the Law, but on the Spirit which gives life.

Make no mistake about it, the Law came not only as letters engraved on tablets, it came with glory, so much glory that we could not even look at Moses' face. It was shining from him seeing Yahweh on the mountain. Yet, that reflected glory faded. Think about it—if envoy work with the gospel is glorious, and it is, how much more is that work that brings righteousness!?

Can you then imagine how glorious the envoy of Holy Spirit, the Lord God Yahweh Himself, will be?!! That initial glory faded; just how much greater is the glory that lasts!

Ergo—we've got it all! Hope makes us bold. Moses put a veil over his face to keep us from looking at him—he didn't want us to see the glory fading. Nonetheless, our minds were dulled—even today the veil remains when the old covenant is read. Our hearts are veiled from the glory without the Christ.

So? Whenever anyone turns to the Christ, the veil disappears—the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit resides, freedom reigns. With unveiled faces we all reflect Yahweh's glory as we are being transformed into His likeness, with everlasting glory no less.

Q What is about the "letter" that kills, in contrast to the "Spirit who gives life?"

Q Why is the latter glory superior to the glory Moses brought down from Sinai? [Hint: see 2 Corinthians 1:22]

## 2 CORINTHIANS 3:4-3:18

Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. <sup>5</sup>Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. <sup>6</sup>He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

<sup>7</sup>Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, <sup>8</sup>will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? <sup>9</sup>If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! <sup>10</sup>For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. <sup>11</sup>And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. <sup>13</sup>We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. <sup>14</sup>But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. <sup>15</sup>Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. <sup>16</sup>But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. <sup>17</sup>Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup>And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect [or *contemplate*] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

- Q Why is today's glory superior to that of the glory before the Christ? [Hint: see Exodus 33:20]
- Q Why is hope the foundation of boldness? [Hint: Examine more than "spiritual" hope and you'll see the power of Paul's equation of hope = boldness.]
- Q Why did Moses use a veil over his face?
- Q Why is the veil still there when Hebrew Scriptures are read? [Hint: Pretend you don't know how to use Matthew-Revelation to interpret Genesis-Malachi and vice versa.]
- Q Why do we, believers or not, insist on "veils?" Why are they useful? What is the most popular veil among modern believers? [Hint: Is agnosticism, perhaps, an example?]
- Q What is the point of all this unveiled glory? So what? Just what is "transformation?"



### ADVANCED BIBLE COMMENTARY FOR 2 CORINTHIANS 2-3<sup>3</sup>

**2:1** *another painful visit.* Paul had already made one painful visit to Corinth, and he wanted to avoid another such visit, though he was ready to exert his authority should it prove necessary (cf. 13:2). The occasion of this former painful visit is not known to us. It could not have been his original visit to Corinth at the time when the church there was founded in response to the preaching of the gospel. Therefore he must have paid a second visit, which is confirmed by 12:14; 13:1, where he states that the visit he is now about to make will be his third. The second visit probably took place between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians, though some hold that it occurred before 1 Corinthians was written.

**2:3-4** *I wrote as I did . . . out of great distress and anguish.* This passage refers to a previous letter that had been sent to the Corinthians. The consensus of the church from the earliest times has been that this previous letter is 1 Corinthians. In more recent times, however, the hypothesis that the reference is to an intermediate letter, written after 1 Corinthians and before 2 Corinthians, has been widely accepted. Some advocates of this theory hold that the letter in question is now lost; others have identified it, in whole or in part, with the last four chapters of 2 Corinthians, contending that these chapters are out of harmony with the earlier ones and that they fit the description of a letter written "out of great distress and anguish." No historical evidence is extant, however, that the unity of 2 Corinthians was questioned or that its integrity was doubted prior to modern times.

**2:5-11** Speaks of a particular person who has been the cause of serious offense in Corinth and upon whom church discipline has been imposed. Paul admonishes the Corinthians that because the offender has shown genuine sorrow and repentance for his sin the punishment should be discontinued and he should be lovingly restored to their fellowship. Church discipline, important as it is, should not be allowed to develop into a form

<sup>3</sup>Adapted, corrected, and revised by D. Thomas Porter from Compton's Interactive NIV © 1996.

of graceless rigor in which there is no room for pardon and restoration. The offense in question probably took place during Paul's intermediate visit to Corinth (see notes above on verse 1) and was the occasion for his writing the severe letter demanding the punishment of the offender (see notes above on verses 3-4). Another view is that the reference is to the incident recorded in 1Co 5.

**2:12** *when I went to Troas.* Paul had traveled up from Ephesus to Troas, a city on the Aegean coast opposite the island of Tenedos, hoping to find Titus there and to receive news from him about the Corinthian church. But Titus, who, presumably, Paul knew would be following the same route in reverse, did not arrive in Troas; so Paul, anxious for news from Corinth, "went on to Macedonia" (v. 13), perhaps to the city of Philippi.

**2:13** *my brother.* Cf. 8:23. Paul held Titus in high esteem; he entrusted Titus with the organization of the collection of funds in Corinth for the relief of the poverty-stricken Christians of Jerusalem (8:6), and he chose him to bear this letter to the Corinthian Christians (8:16-17).

**2:14** At this point Paul breaks off the narrative of his itinerary and in a characteristic manner allows his spontaneous spirit to carry him into a lengthy digression (the narrative is not resumed until 7:5). The digression, however, is quite relevant to the main tenor of this letter, for it is an immensely rich outpouring of triumphant faith in praise of the unfailing adequacy of the grace of God for every conceivable situation, no matter how threatening and destructive it may seem to be.

**2:16** *the smell of death . . . the fragrance of life.* As the gospel aroma is released in the world through Christian testimony, it is always sweet-smelling, even though it may be differently received. The two ultimate categories of mankind are "those who are being saved and those who are perishing" (v. 15). To the latter, testifying Christians are the smell of death, not because the gospel message has become evil-smelling or death-dealing, but because in rejecting the life-giving grace of God unbelievers choose death for themselves. To those who welcome the gospel of God's grace, Christians with their testimony are the fragrance of life.

**2:17** *we do not peddle the word of God for profit.* Paul is referring to false teachers who had infiltrated the Corinthian church. Such persons—themselves insincere, self-sufficient and boastful—artfully presented themselves in a persuasive manner, and their chief interest was to take money from gullible church members. Paul, by contrast, had preached the gospel sincerely and free of charge, taking care not to be a financial burden to the Corinthian believers (see 11:7-12; 1Co 9:7-15).

**3:1** *Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?* Paul is sensitive to the fact that virtually everything he wrote or said was liable to be twisted and used in a hostile manner by false teachers in Corinth.

**3:3** *letter from Christ.* Paul is no more than the instrument in the hands of the Master.

- *with the Spirit of the living God.* Holy Spirit is the ultimate substitute for ink. Ink fades and may easily be deleted or blocked out since it is no more than an inanimate fluid. But He is Himself life and therefore life-giving (v. 6), and the life Holy Spirit gives is eternal and without defect.
- *not on tablets of stone.* As at Sinai (see note above on v. 6).
- *on tablets of human hearts.* See Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26. Paul explains the significance of this contrast between the old and the new covenants in verses 7-18.

**3:5** *our competence comes from God.* Answers the question in 2:16: "And who is equal to such a task?"

**3:6** *ministers of.* Those who serve the cause of (see Ro 15:16; Col 1:7; 4:7; 1Ti 4:6). Paul will return to the theme of "this ministry" in 4:1.

- *new covenant.* Here Paul takes up the theme suggested by the mention of "tablets of human hearts" (v. 3). See Hebrews 8-10 and especially Hebrews 7:22. Paul's reference to ministers of a new covenant in contrast to the "ministry that brought death" (v. 7) may have been occasioned by his opponents in

Corinth who were Judaizers, perhaps those who claimed to be associated with Peter (1Co 1:12) and who are referred to as Hebrews in 11:22.

- *the letter*. The "tablets of stone" on which the letter of the law was originally written (see Ex 24:12; 31:18; 32:15-16).
- *the Spirit*. The writing of the law "with the Spirit of the living God . . . on tablets of human hearts," which was the promise of the new covenant as foretold by the prophets (see Jeremiah 31:31-34; 32:39-40; Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26).
- *the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*. "The letter" is synonymous with the Law as an external standard before which all people, because we are lawbreakers, stand guilty and condemned to death. Therefore it is described as the "ministry that brought death" and the "ministry that condemns" (vv. 7-8). On the other hand, the Spirit who gives life is the "Spirit of the living God" who, in fulfillment of the promise of the new covenant, writes that same Law inwardly "on tablets of human hearts" (v. 3). Holy Spirit thus provides the believer with love for God's law, which previously he had hated, and with power to keep it, which previously he had not possessed.

**3:7-18** Paul is defending his "ministry" of the new covenant in Christ (cf. v. 6; 4:1) and here compares the experiences of Moses, who mediated the old covenant of Sinai, and his own as a minister of the new covenant. But he now applies the word "ministry" to the law that was "engraved in letters on stone" and to the Spirit, who writes "on tablets of human hearts" (v. 3). The point of comparison is the fading glory that shone on Moses' face and the "ever-increasing glory" reflected in the faces of those who minister the new covenant. This contrast in regard to glory serves to highlight the temporary and inadequate character of the old covenant and the permanent and effective character of the new covenant.

**3:7** *came with glory*. The law of the old covenant given at Sinai was in no way bad or evil; on the contrary, Paul describes it elsewhere as holy, righteous, good and spiritual (Ro 7:12,14). The evil is in the hearts and deeds of people who, as lawbreakers, bring upon themselves the condemnation of the law and the penalty of death--and the law engraved on stone could not purge away that evil.

*its glory*. The glory of God surrounded the giving of the law and was reflected on the face of Moses when he descended from the mountain (see Ex 34:29-30).

**3:8-9** *ministry of the Spirit . . . brings righteousness*. Giving life instead of death. "Righteousness" is here both objective (justification) and personal (sanctification).

**3:11** *what was fading away*. Paul here applies the fading to the old covenant of Sinai, which was not to endure forever. In due course it was superseded by the unfading and much more glorious radiance belonging to the new covenant.

**3:17** *the Lord is the Spirit*. This statement should be linked with what was said at the end of v. 6: "the Spirit gives life." It is only by turning to the Lord (v. 16) that the condemnation and the sentence of death pronounced by the law on the lawbreaker are annulled and replaced by the free life-giving grace of the new covenant. There is a close relationship between the Spirit of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Both are said to dwell in the believer (Romans 8:9; Galatians 2:20). In Romans 8:9-10 the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, and Christ all seem to be used interchangeably. In Acts 16:6-7 the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus appear to be one and the same. Since Holy Spirit is of the same substance as the Father and the Son, all three work together to glorify Themselves.

**3:18** *being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory*. Christ himself is the glory of God in the fullness of its radiance (Heb 1:3); His is the eternal and unfading glory, which He had with the Father before the world began (John 17:5). Believers are made partakers of this glory by being transformed into the likeness of Christ. Many call this transformation into His likeness sanctification; i.e., a "metamorphosis," including Paul in Romans 8:1.

<sup>i</sup>“Narcissistic personality disorder is a mental disorder in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for admiration and a lack of empathy for others. But behind this mask of ultraconfidence lies a fragile self-esteem that's vulnerable to the slightest criticism.” See <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/narcissistic-personality-disorder/basics/definition/con-20025568>

<sup>ii</sup>“He [a misogynist] is extremely competitive, especially with women. If a woman does better than him socially or professionally, he feels terrible. If a man does better, he may have mixed feelings about it but he is able to look at the situation objectively.” See Berit Brogaard, *12 Ways to Spot a Misogynist*, February, 2015, *Psychology Today*. See <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-mysteries-love/201502/12-ways-spot-misogynist>

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Her work has been featured in various public media, including Nightline, ABC News, the Huffington Post, Fox News, MSNBC, Daily Mail, Modesto Bee, and Mumbai Mirror. She is also an editor of the international peer-reviewed philosophy journal *Erkenntnis*, is the 100th President of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology and was the first female President of the Central States Philosophical Association.