

Homiletics Analysis: 2 Corinthians 3

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Second Corinthians 3 is Paul's sustained argument for the superior glory of the new covenant ministry over the old. The chapter opens mid-defense: Paul has been accused of self-commendation, and he turns the charge back by pointing to the Corinthians themselves as his letter of recommendation — written not in ink but by the Spirit of the living God on tablets of human hearts. From this opening move, Paul launches into a formal comparison of the two covenants and their respective ministers. The old covenant, embodied in Moses and inscribed on stone tablets, was glorious — but its glory was fading and was accompanied by condemnation and death. The new covenant ministry, by contrast, is characterized by the Spirit who gives life, by righteousness, and by a glory that does not fade but surpasses and remains. Paul's argument reaches its climax in the veil passage (vv. 12–18): Moses veiled his face so that Israel could not see the glory fading; but the same veil remains over Israel's heart even now when Moses is read, and it is only removed in Christ. The chapter closes with an extraordinary promise — that all believers, with unveiled faces, are beholding the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into His image from glory to glory by the Spirit.

This Text — Intent

God is using this passage to accomplish two interrelated effects in readers. First, He is assuring Paul's embattled ministry — and by extension, every minister of the new covenant — that their sufficiency is not self-generated but comes from God, and that the ministry they carry is categorically greater than anything the old covenant produced, precisely because it is the Spirit's own ministry through them. Second, and more broadly, God is calling every believer to live in the open confidence and freedom that the new covenant makes possible: no veil, no condemnation, no fading glory — instead, direct access to God's glory in Christ and continuous Spirit-wrought transformation. The passage is simultaneously a defense of authentic ministry and an invitation to the full inheritance of new covenant life.

Subject Sentence: The new covenant's surpassing glory transforms believers into Christ's image by the Spirit.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people out from under every veil — every fear, every performance, every remnant of old-covenant living — into the unveiled, transforming

freedom of new covenant life in the Spirit, where His glory is not fading but increasing in them from the inside out.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Sufficiency Question (vv. 4–6)

Paul’s declaration that his sufficiency is “from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant” is sometimes read through a generic pastoral-encouragement lens — God will enable whatever ministry He calls you to. This reading, while not false, misses the polemical precision of Paul’s claim. His sufficiency is being contrasted with those who commend themselves (2 Cor. 10:12; 3:1) and who apparently claim a Moses-like authority grounded in credentials. Paul’s point is not merely that God enables but that the entire basis of ministry competence has shifted covenantally: the new covenant minister’s authority derives from the Spirit, not from Torah-keeping, letter-carrying, or self-generated qualification. Reformed interpretation rightly reads this as a theologically loaded claim about the nature of gospel ministry — its power is pneumatological, not institutional or credential-based.

Letter and Spirit (v. 6)

“The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” is among the most frequently misread verses in Paul’s corpus. Two major misreadings must be addressed:

First, the allegorical/spiritualizing reading, favored in patristic exegesis and continuing in some pietist traditions, takes “letter” to mean the literal or surface meaning of Scripture, and “Spirit” to mean the deeper, spiritual, or allegorical meaning. This reading makes the verse about hermeneutics — how to read Scripture. This is exegetically untenable. Paul is not contrasting literal versus spiritual reading; he is contrasting two covenants and two ministries. “Letter” (*gramma*) refers to the written Mosaic code; “Spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit. The contrast is covenantal, not hermeneutical.

Second, the Dispensational reading, while correctly identifying the covenantal contrast, sometimes overdraws the discontinuity between Old and New Testaments in a way that makes the Mosaic covenant appear to have been a failed experiment or a purely condemnatory system. The Reformed reading qualifies this: the Mosaic covenant was genuinely glorious (Paul says so repeatedly — “for there was glory”); it was not wrong or evil but was serving its appointed purpose as a temporary, typological, and preparatory administration. Its inadequacy lay not in God’s design being defective but in its design being deliberately provisional. The new covenant does not contradict the old — it fulfills, surpasses, and consummates it (Matt. 5:17; Heb. 8:6–13).

The Veil Passage (vv. 12–18)

The interpretation of Paul's use of the Exodus 34 veil narrative is genuinely contested. Paul appears to modify the Old Testament account — in Exodus 34, Moses veiled his face after speaking with Israel so that the fading radiance would not disturb them; Paul reads this as Moses veiling the *end* of the glory, the *telos* of the old covenant, which Israel could not perceive. Several issues require evaluation:

First, what is the “end” (*telos*) of v. 13? Some take it as the termination (the fading of the glory); others take it as the goal or fulfillment (Christ, as in Rom. 10:4). The Reformed reading is that both senses are in play — Paul is doing a typological reading in which the fading glory points to the old covenant's designed obsolescence, and Christ is the *telos* toward which it always pointed. The veil prevents Israel from seeing either the fading or the fulfillment.

Second, Paul extends the veil metaphor into the present (vv. 14–15): the veil remains over the hearts of Israel when Moses is read. This is not an anti-Semitic polemic but a pastoral diagnosis of spiritual hardness — the same veil that prevented Israel from seeing the old covenant's end prevents them from seeing its fulfillment in Christ. Only in Christ is the veil removed (v. 14).

Third, the Roman Catholic tradition has sometimes read v. 18 (“beholding the glory of the Lord”) as referring to the beatific vision mediated through the church's sacramental life. While the ultimate eschatological vision is a real category (1 John 3:2; Rev. 22:4), Paul's context is present-tense transformation — ongoing, progressive, by the Spirit, through gospel proclamation. The Reformed reading is that v. 18 describes the normal condition of every believer under the new covenant: continuous, unveiled, Spirit-wrought beholding that produces ongoing Christlikeness.

The “Reflecting” vs. “Beholding” Question (v. 18)

The Greek verb *katoptrizomenoi* in v. 18 can be translated either “beholding as in a mirror” (ESV, NASB) or “reflecting as a mirror” (some older translations, NEB). The difference matters: are believers beholding Christ's glory, or reflecting it to others? The majority of contemporary scholarship and virtually all major translations favor “beholding” — and the context supports this, as the preceding verses contrast veiled and unveiled perception. However, the Reformed tradition rightly notes that these two senses are not entirely separable: the one who truly beholds is genuinely transformed, and transformation into Christ's image will naturally mean reflecting His glory. Both dimensions are real; beholding is primary, reflecting is the consequence.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 34:29–35** — The original veil account: Moses' face shone after speaking with God; he veiled himself before Israel. Paul reads this typologically as pointing to both the glory and the designed obsolescence of the Mosaic administration.

- **Jeremiah 31:31–34** — The new covenant promise: God will write His law on hearts, not stone; He will be their God; sins will be forgiven and forgotten. This is the Old Testament ground for everything Paul argues in 2 Corinthians 3 — Paul is announcing that Jeremiah’s promise is now being fulfilled.
- **Ezekiel 36:26–27** — God promises a new heart and His own Spirit placed within His people, causing them to walk in His statutes. Corroborates Paul’s Spirit/letter contrast and the transformative power of the new covenant.
- **Romans 10:4** — “Christ is the end (*telos*) of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” Directly supports Paul’s reading of Moses’ veil as concealing the law’s own *telos* — its fulfillment in Christ.
- **2 Corinthians 4:6** — Paul immediately continues the argument: God who said “Let light shine out of darkness” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. This is the unveiled glory of 3:18 in its most explicit form — the new creation act of gospel illumination.

Aim: To demonstrate from 2 Corinthians 3 that the new covenant life to which every believer has been called is characterized by unveiled access to God’s glory, freedom from condemnation, and Spirit-wrought transformation — and to call readers to inhabit that inheritance rather than retreating to veiled, performance-based living.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Paul answers the charge of self-commendation; asks whether he needs letters of recommendation	Polemical context: opponents carried letters; Paul refuses the equivalence
2–3	The Corinthians are his letter — written not in ink but by the Spirit of the living God on tablets of human hearts	Echoes Jer. 31:33 and Ezek. 36:26; the community itself is the credential
4–5	Paul’s confidence is through Christ toward God; his sufficiency is not from himself but from God	Key theological pivot: sufficiency is covenantal and pneumatological, not self-generated
6	God made them sufficient as ministers of a new covenant — not of the letter	Central thesis of the chapter; most misread verse; covenantal contrast,

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	but of the Spirit; the letter kills, the Spirit gives life	not hermeneutical
7–8	The old covenant (ministry of death, carved in stone) came with glory; how much more does the ministry of the Spirit come with glory	Argument from lesser to greater (<i>qal wahomer</i>); old covenant genuinely glorious
9	If the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds it in glory	Introduces the righteousness/condemnation contrast
10–11	What had glory has come to have no glory, because of the surpassing glory; the permanent surpasses the fading	Qualifies the comparison: not that the old had no glory, but that it is eclipsed
12	Because Paul has this hope, he speaks with great boldness	Application of the argument to ministerial confidence
13	Unlike Moses, who veiled his face so Israel could not see the end of the fading glory	Paul's typological reading of Exod. 34; the veil conceals the telos
14–15	Israel's minds were hardened; the veil remains when the old covenant is read; it is only removed in Christ	Present application: the veil is now a spiritual condition of the unregenerate heart
16	When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed	Echoes Exod. 34:34; conversion as the removal of the veil
17	The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom	Theologically dense; Spirit brings the freedom the old covenant could not produce
18	All believers, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, by the Spirit	Climax of the chapter; the new covenant condition for every believer

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The New Covenant Minister’s Credential and Sufficiency
2	7–11	The New Covenant’s Surpassing Glory — Argument from Contrast
3	12–15	The Veil: Bold Ministry and Hardened Hearts
4	16–18	The Veil Removed: Freedom, the Spirit, and Transforming Glory

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The new covenant’s surpassing glory transforms believers into Christ’s image by the Spirit.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people out from under every veil — every fear, every performance, every remnant of old-covenant living — into the unveiled, transforming freedom of new covenant life in the Spirit, where His glory is not fading but increasing in them from the inside out.

Applications (Five)

1. Stop living as though your sufficiency must be self-generated. [Mind/belief] Paul’s declaration that his sufficiency comes from God (v. 5) is not a motivational footnote — it is a covenantal statement about who new covenant ministers and believers are. If you are constantly calculating whether you have enough competence, credibility, or spiritual depth to serve, speak, or lead, you are operating from an old-covenant logic that grounds sufficiency in the self. The new covenant relocates the source entirely: God has made you sufficient. The question is not whether you measure up; the question is whether you will act from what God has already declared.

2. Grieve the specific ways you have retreated into veiled, performance-based living. [Affections/worship] The veil in Paul’s argument is not merely a theological abstraction — it is a spiritual condition characterized by fear of exposure, inability to see what God is doing, and hardness toward the gospel’s freedom. Many believers live in a functional veil: they approach God through a layer of performance, shame management, or spiritual credential-building, never quite trusting that direct access has actually been granted. Let

Paul's image produce genuine grief over the ways you have lived as though the veil were still in place — as though Christ's removal of it did not apply to you personally.

3. Expect to be transformed, not merely informed. [Mind/belief] The promise of v. 18 is that beholding the Lord's glory produces transformation — not occasionally, not eventually, but continuously and progressively. This reframes the entire purpose of Christian formation: the goal is not to accumulate correct theology but to encounter the living God through His word and Spirit in ways that change you at the level of image. If your engagement with Scripture and worship has become primarily informational — collecting truths without expecting encounter — you have stopped short of what the new covenant promises and the Spirit intends.

4. Come to Scripture with the expectation of an unveiled beholder, not a veiled observer. [Affections/worship] Paul's contrast between veiled Israel reading Moses and unveiled believers beholding the Lord's glory is a contrast in the mode of encounter, not just in the content encountered. The old covenant reading left the heart untouched because the veil prevented genuine perception. The new covenant believer reads the same Scriptures — including Moses — but with the veil removed, which means the text is no longer a closed system of law but an open window onto Christ. Come to the Word expecting to see Him there, expecting the Spirit to make what is written luminous and transforming, not merely informative.

5. Let the ministry of righteousness produce boldness in your speech and witness. [Will/behavior] Paul explicitly grounds his ministerial boldness in the surpassing glory of the new covenant (v. 12): "Since we have such a hope, we are very bold." The same logic applies to every believer's speech and witness. If you carry a ministry of righteousness — a message that does not condemn but justifies, that does not fade but remains — then timidity and apologetic hesitation are inconsistent with the inheritance you carry. Identify one specific context — a relationship, a workplace, a family conversation — where you have been veiled in your witness, and speak with the boldness the new covenant affords.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Second Corinthians 3 is one of the most theologically concentrated passages in the Pauline corpus on the relationship between the covenants, the nature of the Spirit's ministry, and the mechanism of Christian transformation. Paul teaches here that the new covenant is not a renovation of the old but its surpassing fulfillment — the old was genuinely glorious but designed to be provisional, while the new is marked by permanence, life, and righteousness. The passage reveals the Spirit as the agent who both constitutes new covenant ministry (v. 6), seals new covenant hearts (v. 3), produces new covenant freedom (v. 17), and accomplishes new covenant transformation (v. 18). Crucially, this transformation is not self-improvement or moral effort but the Spirit's work in those who, with unveiled faces, behold the glory of God — a work that is continuous, progressive, and certain.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This passage is foundational to the Reformed understanding of covenant theology, the relationship between law and gospel, and the Spirit's role in the application of redemption. The contrast between letter and Spirit (v. 6) is not a rejection of Scripture or law as such but a declaration that the Mosaic administration, as a covenant of works extended to the nation Israel, has been fulfilled and surpassed in Christ — precisely the distinction the Reformed tradition draws between the law as a covenant of life and the law as a rule of life within the new covenant. The veil passage grounds the Reformed doctrine of spiritual illumination: the unregenerate cannot perceive the gospel's glory not because of intellectual deficiency but because of covenantal blindness, removed only in Christ by the Spirit. The climax of v. 18 grounds the Reformed *ordo salutis* — specifically sanctification — in the Spirit's transforming work through the means of grace, not in human cooperation or sacramental mediation. The glory being beheld is the glory of God in the face of Christ (4:6), which is to say: the gospel itself is the transforming agent, and the Spirit uses it to conform believers to the image of the Son.

Main Takeaway

The veil is gone. In Christ, you stand before God's glory with nothing between you and Him — no condemnation, no fading credential, no performance requirement holding you at arm's length. And where you stand is not static: the Spirit is actively, continuously, certainly transforming you into the image of the One whose glory you behold. Stop managing the distance. Stop living under a veil Christ already removed. Behold Him — and become.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Misreading “the letter kills” as a hermeneutical principle.** This is the most common and most damaging misuse of v. 6. Preachers frequently invoke it to argue for “Spirit-led” reading against “merely literal” reading — as though Paul were authorizing a more intuitive, less grammatical approach to Scripture. He is doing nothing of the kind. “Letter” is the Mosaic written code; “Spirit” is the Holy Spirit. The contrast is covenantal, not hermeneutical. Importing the hermeneutical reading not only misreads Paul but actively undermines the authority of Scripture — precisely the opposite of Paul's intent.
- **Treating the old covenant as simply bad or failed.** Paul says repeatedly and emphatically that the old covenant was glorious (vv. 7, 9, 10, 11). Preaching that implies the Mosaic covenant was a mistake, a second-rate system, or evidence of

early Israel's failure will produce a theologically distorted view of the Old Testament and God's ways. The old covenant was glorious, purposeful, and designed — it was also provisional and preparatory. Both must be held.

- **Reducing the veil passage to a polemic against contemporary Judaism.** Paul's extension of the veil into the present (vv. 14–15) is sometimes preached in a way that positions Israel as uniquely or permanently blind. This misses the pastoral force of Paul's argument: the veil is a condition of the unregenerate heart in any person when confronted with God's word apart from the Spirit. It is a diagnosis applicable to all unregenerate readers of Scripture, not an ethnic or national verdict on Israel.
- **Preaching v. 18 as the promise of eventual full sanctification without engaging its present-tense force.** "Are being transformed" is present passive — ongoing, now. The temptation is to defer the promise to glory ("one day we will fully reflect His image"). While eschatological completion is real, Paul's point is the present, progressive, continuous nature of Spirit-wrought transformation for every believer under the new covenant. The sermon should press the present-tense claim, not defer it.
- **Reducing the application to ministerial encouragement only.** Because 2 Corinthians is a letter in defense of Paul's ministry, preachers sometimes focus the application entirely on pastors, church leaders, or vocational ministers: "God has made you sufficient for the work He's called you to." While true and important, it misses the climax of the chapter — v. 18 applies to *all* believers ("we all, with unveiled faces"). The inheritance of unveiled beholding and Spirit-wrought transformation belongs to every believer, not only to ministers.
- **Losing the polemical energy in the interest of "balance."** Paul is arguing here — against real opponents, with real stakes, in a real crisis. The passage has a rhetorical energy and boldness that reflects its covenantal claim. Flattening it into a balanced doctrinal survey of covenants will evacuate the very confidence and freedom the passage is designed to produce. Preach it with the directness Paul writes it — the glory of the new covenant is not a matter for hedged academic qualification but for bold proclamation.