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Seeing the Lord Unveiled

HAROLD SHANK

Editor's note: The text of this article is from an address delivered at the 2002 Pepperdine University Bible Lectures.

When I was a junior in college, a spiritual revival swept through the campus. Students were interested in spiritual things. Large crowds attended devotionals. Bible classes were popular. Some students changed their majors to ministry. As couples announced their engagement they revealed their plans to do foreign mission work.

Characteristic of the revival that swept through the student body that fall was a campus-wide retreat called Inreach. We rented the largest camp in Oklahoma, borrowed 21 church buses, and opened registration. One hundred fifty students signed up, so many that it was over-capacity for the camp and the registration had to be closed.

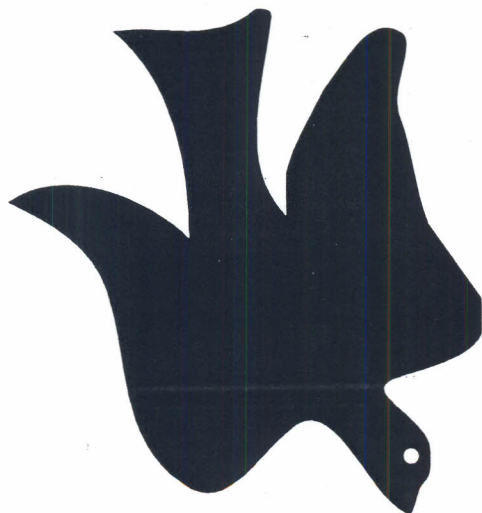
Stanley Shipp of St. Louis spoke at that retreat. I will never forget the gathering in the camp dining hall. It was wall-to-wall students. Some climbed up in the rafters to listen to Stanley. Stanley stood, opened his Bible and went verse by verse through Colossians.

What Stanley was doing, as I think back now, was telling us how to experience God. He told about having lived almost his whole life with only a nominal practice of prayer and only recently had discovered the power and majesty of prayer. He was getting up at 5:00 A.M., driving to a parking lot and praying for a couple of hours. He told us stories of how he would pray in the morning and how God had answered the prayers by that very evening. Stanley thrilled us with tales about the Bible study he and Marie had in their St. Louis

home. They would invite a person to the Bible study and, somehow, by the time that one invitation was spread around, ten people would arrive. They moved the couch and television out of the living room in order to accommodate all the people.

I remember it as a time of great spiritual awakening for me. I wanted to be able to pray like Stanley Shipp. I wanted to be part of a Bible study like they had in St. Louis. I wanted to make Colossians live like Stanley did at the retreat. I wanted to experience God.

God only made one Stanley Shipp. Spiritual revivals come and go. I may never be part of a



retreat like Inreach again. But God wants us all to encounter him. How do we experience God? How do we know him?

About the time of that retreat I was introduced to 2 Corinthians 3:15b-18:

... to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 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.

This is a dense text. It's not one of those passages we read, reread, check a commentary on it and say, "I've got that passage down. Next please." Students of 2 Corinthians point out that the most difficult chapter in the book is chapter three, and the most difficult verses in chapter three are these. That may all be true, but I don't think it's as difficult as it is deep. Maybe right now, for just a few moments, we can go deeper in these verses than any of us has ever gone before. As we go deeper, let me mention three thoughts that we need to have in our minds in order to understand this complex text.

First, it is part of the Corinthian correspondence. The central theme of this correspondence is the cross of Christ. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." In 2 Corinthians, as he considers the issues he faces in life, he shows how these life issues intersect with the cross of Christ. Our passage is in that broader context.

Second, in 1 Corinthians, chapters two through seven, Paul spells out his theology of ministry. He is under attack and being criticized. By way of rejoinder he says, in effect "My ministry is from God and

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empowered by God. It is not my own." The passage under consideration reveals the roots of Paul's experience with God, which in turn forms the foundation of his ministry.

Third, here in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul comments on Exodus 34. To understand those Old Testament events we must begin earlier in Exodus. Moses went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments (Ex 20), came back down to witness their idolatry (Ex 32), and, in anger at the people, broke the tablets. Moses returned to the mountain to receive the second set of commandments (Ex 34), and he came down again. When he came down this time, his face was shining so brightly that Moses put on a veil to cover it. Paul uses the veil of Moses and extends it to a covering we all wear. The roots of the veil image go back to Exodus.

Here is my plan for understanding these verses: I begin with the end in mind. I look at the end of this chapter, these last few verses, and assume that this is the conclusion, the crescendo, the climax of what Paul wanted to say about experiencing God. That is our focus. Then, I work back through the chapter to see how it all fits together.

Rather than making this passage more difficult for us, my purpose is to make it clearer, so that we can understand how to experience God. Notice the two significant movements in this passage which are set in italic text in the citation below:

... but when one *turns to the Lord*, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled face, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are *transformed into his likeness* from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor 3:16-18).

Note that the individual under the veil "turns to the Lord" and then is "transformed into his likeness." I want to focus on these two movements.

Beginning in verse 16, Paul says, when we turn to the Lord, God lifts the veil. That is the first part of experiencing God: we turn to the Lord. The second part comes in verse 18, when once we have turned to the Lord, God begins to change us or turn us into his likeness. Experiencing God is about two turnings. First, we *turn to the Lord* and the veil is lifted. Second, *God turns us into his likeness*. Let's think about those two turnings.

The turning to God comes in verse 16. This is a move that we make. It is not a work, but a release. It is not an accomplishment, but a giving up. It is not a grabbing, but a letting go.

We tend to live our lives focused on ourselves.

We think life depends on us. We think everything is about "me" and "I must live my life my own way." That idea is illustrated here with the concept of the veil. Moses covered his face with a veil and it kept the Israelites from seeing his face. For Paul, the veil became a symbol of the legalistic system adopted by many people. Paul uses the veil to refer to whatever it is that keeps us from seeing God.

Ultimately, the veil is self-delusion. The veil is pride. We have this veil over us in life and, because we have this veil over us, we can't see beyond the veil. We find ourselves in our own little world, dominated by us.

It's as if I have a blanket over my head, and inside this blanket is the kingdom of Shank. King Harold is on the throne. In the kingdom of Shank, Harold wears the crown. Harold is in charge. Harold issues the proclamations. There is no opponent—no outside force—because I am in charge under the veil in my little kingdom of Shank.

The problem is that I am cut off from God. God can't work on me because I think it all depends on me. God can't work in me because, under this veil, life is all about me. God can't work on me because I think I must have my own way.

But when, under that veil, I turn to God, I immediately begin to experience God because he lifts off the veil. I begin to see the glory of God that I didn't see before because I'm now in the kingdom of God and not in the kingdom of Shank. It's similar to when you're driving along and condensation forms on the windshield. You pull out a tissue and wipe it off the glass, but what happens? The condensation comes back just as quickly as you wipe it off. What you have to do is turn on the defroster and let it clear away the fog. Turning to the Lord is like turning on the defroster.

When we turn to the Lord, God lifts off the veil, just as the defroster clears the fog. Once we turn to the Lord and the veil is lifted, God begins turning us into his likeness. This is a move that God makes. He doesn't become like us; we become like him. It happens slowly, one degree of glory at a time. Being changed into his likeness means that I'm no longer the way I was. I'm not in the powerless world of "it all depends upon me." I'm in the powerful world of God. I'm not in the temporary world of "life is all about me." I'm in the eternal world of God, and life is about him. I'm not in the ritual world of "I must have my own way," but I'm in the free world of God.

I experience what might be called a paradigm switch. I'm no longer in the kingdom of Shank, where I am on the throne. I'm now in the kingdom of God where Jesus is on the throne. No longer do the sun, moon, and stars revolve around me, but I revolve around God. So there's a turning to the Lord, a lifting of the veil, and that is when God begins turning me into his likeness.

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In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul gives us three examples of how this process works. The first example is in verses 1-3. He writes on our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Paul writes,

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of commendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Paul is talking about conversion. He raised the issue earlier in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 of their coming to know God. When he was in Corinth, he remembered seeing the Holy Spirit work with power. He saw people outside of Christ moved inside of Christ. He saw people living in sin give up that sin. Every conversion is evidence of the change God brings about.

Last summer, one of our urban ministers in Memphis, Anthony Wood, and I, went to see a woman named Tiny. Tiny is 6 feet 6 inches tall. As we were sitting in her living room, I said, "Tiny, what did you do before you became a Christian?" She said, "I was a shake dancer." She meant she worked at an exotic dance club. Tiny was also promiscuous that through her sexual activities she contracted AIDS. When she found out that she had AIDS, she was angry. Driven by her madness, she sought to infect every person she could with AIDS. And she did.

During the seven years Anthony had known Tiny, he regularly dropped by her house to ask her, "Tiny, can I pray with you on the porch here?" For seven years, Tiny said, "No." Anthony constantly stopped to suggest, "Tiny, could we have a Bible study so you can learn about God?" For seven years, Tiny said, "No." Anthony doggedly pressed, "Tiny, would you come to church?" For seven years, Tiny said, "No."

Then in July 2000, Tiny, in her little kingdom of Tiny, turned to the Lord. She was baptized into Christ. As she turned to the Lord, God took off that veil. Then God began turning Tiny into his likeness, a degree of glory at a time. Last summer, when I was at her house, Tiny was praising the Lord. Tiny, an exotic dancer, had given up dancing. Tiny, a woman with AIDS, was praising God. In fact, Tiny went to every single person she had infected with AIDS to ask for their forgiveness.

What is happening here? What is happening in this life? Tiny turned to the Lord. God lifted the veil and now he is changing Tiny from one degree of glory to another, into his image. The process of experiencing God in 2 Corinthians 3:16-18 is seen in conversion.

Or consider Bill. Bill was into child pornography; not looking at it, making it. One afternoon he was taking exotic pictures of a 14-year-old in his living room and got caught. He had been living in the little kingdom of Bill, but when he got caught, he suddenly turned to the Lord. And the Lord lifted that veil and started changing Bill into his likeness. Bill gave up child pornography. Bill went to that young girl and her mother and made things right. Bill went to his wife and rebuilt his marriage. He went to his daughter and his son and patched things up. Bill became a Christian. He became a church member, a leader, and my prayer partner. That was 25 years ago. What's going on? Bill was living under the veil and when he turned to the Lord, God began remaking Bill into his own image.

Look around. People who were prostitutes, men who had affairs, teens who were alcoholics, women who were drug users, and folks who were rebellious, turned to the Lord. The veil came off, and God started turning them into his likeness. We experience God in conversion.

A second way we experience God is outlined in verses 4-6.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Our confidence is changed by God's life-giving spirit. Paul talks about his own ministry in verses 4-6. He says, in effect, "I'm not competent to do this. I'm not competent to start churches. I'm not competent to write the New Testament. I'm not competent to lead people to God." But then he says, "God is working through me to change me from one degree of glory to another." He makes me competent.

Recently I was at the Tulsa Soul-Winning Workshop. My friend, Randy Becton, and I decided that we would go to the Tulsa Mall for supper. We were excited because of the workshop. As we entered the restaurant, the hostess, Kelly, showed us to a booth. As she was seating us, Randy said, "Kelly, tell me the best thing that has happened to you this month." Kelly looked at Randy as if he had crawled out of some hole. (Randy didn't see me reach into my pocket to get out my veil.) Kelly, caught completely off guard, just replied, "I don't know, but your waitress is coming."

A few minutes later, Mary came and said she was our waitress. She looked about 15, but was actually 21. Randy asked her, "Mary, how's your life going?" She answered, "It's not going very well."

"What do you mean it's not going very well?" Her reply was, "I just had a baby, and the father deserted me." Randy said, "Well, don't you have a church family or someone that could help you?" "The church people I know aren't very helpful." Randy reached into his wallet and pulled out his business card and gave it to her, "If you ever want to talk, day or night, you call me."

By now, I was fully in the kingdom of Shank. I was hiding under my veil thinking, "Randy, we're leaving Tulsa in two hours. Don't start down an evangelistic road that we can't finish. We can't do this. We've got to arrange this thing. What if the water in the mall fountain isn't deep enough to baptize her? What are we going to do?" Randy asked, "What did you name your child?" Mary said, "I named him Elijah." Randy said, "Well, Harold here teaches Hebrew. Harold, write Elijah's name in Hebrew." I stuck my arm out from underneath my veil and wrote the name on a napkin. Mary happily picked up the napkin and left.

In my kingdom of Shank I groaned about what Randy had done. Restaurant evangelism doesn't work, I thought. What are we getting ourselves into? Then Cybil came to take our drink order. Randy asked her, "Cybil, how's your life going?" I needed another veil on top of the first one. She said, "Oh, my life is going great." "Cybil, what do you plan to do with your life?" Cybil said, "I plan to teach people Hebrew." I peeked out from under my veil and said, "You mean the language God speaks at home?" Randy asked, "Cybil, where do you go to church?" She said, "I go to Garnet Road Church of Christ. It's a great church.

I love it." Then Randy asked, "Cybil, do you know about Mary?" Cybil knowingly nodded her head "yes."

Suddenly, then and there, I saw the glory of the Lord! I saw that God had a plan, that Randy Becton and Harold Shank were just links in the chain, but that he had a follow-up program already in the works. I don't know how it will turn out. But I do know this, if Mary turns to the Lord, her veil will be taken away, and God will change Mary into his likeness from one degree of glory to another. That will happen. God's transforming us makes us competent to do ministry. We can't do it by ourselves nor can we do it under our veil.

A few years ago, I was in San Francisco to hear Dev Ogle speak. He talked about a co-ed who came up to him one day and said, "Mr. Ogle, you may wonder why I spent so much of my high school years over at your house." Dev said, "I always thought you were there because you were best friends with my daughter." She said, "That was part of it, Mr. Ogle, but that's not the whole story. The real story is that when I came

When he was in Corinth, he remembered seeing the Holy Spirit work with power . . . He saw people living in sin give up that sin. Every conversion is evidence of the change God brings about.

We are made competent by God. Things that seem insignificant to us become life-changing events in his hands.

to your house, you and Mrs. Ogle were always there at the door, and when I came in, you'd hug me. Then later, when I got ready to go home, you and Mrs. Ogle would be at the door again, and you would give me a hug. Mr. Ogle, that was the only time I was ever hugged."

After I told that story at the Tulsa workshop, an older couple, I'll call them Bill and Betty, came up to me. Betty said, "Could I tell you a story?" I said, "Sure." Betty began: "About 35 or 40 years ago, I met a teenage boy called Ben (not his real name). He had an attitude, and a chip on his shoulder. He had been shifted from one foster home to another and didn't have any living parents. As a result, he didn't want to be trifled with. I felt this urging from God to hug that boy. So I reached out and hugged him and wouldn't let go."

[I]f you turn to the Lord, God will lift that veil and you will see that you live in the garden of God's glory, and then he will begin to turn you into his likeness, one step at a time.

Then in the midst of that crowd, with all those people milling around, Betty started to cry. She said, "I adopted that boy and raised him in Christ and he became a Christian. He's now 51 years old and an elder in the church." "He told me the thing that made the difference in his life was that hug."

Standing in the middle of the pavilion at Tulsa, I saw the glory of the Lord. I saw how God had worked through a hug, how a boy had turned to God, how God had lifted the veil and changed him into his likeness.

We are made competent by God. Things that seem insignificant to us become life-changing events in his hands. God is so great he can change a whole life with a hug. God changed Tiny. God changed Bill. God changed Betty. God changed Ben. God changed me—not all at once—but one degree of glory at a time.

Finally, number three, we experience God through his grace. This point is made in verses 7-11.

Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses' face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory. Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory; for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory.

Our righteousness, Paul says, is changed by the work of the Spirit. This text compares the new law with the old law, contrasts the law of grace with the law of works. It boils down to this distinction: it's not how good we are, it's how good God is. We are changed from people who try to do good into people who are made good by the blood of Jesus.

We live in a world where we rejoice when we move something one inch. The church makes the budget; we shout for joy! We moved an inch. We have a special contribution; we congratulate ourselves for reaching the goal. We moved an inch. We paint 32 houses, or send off a missionary, or have 800 people in a worship service, or baptize 54 in a year, and we rejoice over the inches we've moved. But these are nothing compared to what God can and will do.

When we turn to God, the veil of self-dependence is removed. The veil of "it all depends on me" is taken away. The veil of "life is all about me" is cast aside. The veil of "I must have my own way" is ripped away; the utilitarianism that grips our churches is gone—the guilt that we feel because we're not good enough disappears, and the veil of our self-centeredness is lifted.

Suddenly, the glory of God hits our face with blinding force, and we realize that God is saying, "It's not you; it's me. It's not your inch; it's my mile. It's not your flashlight; it's my sun. It's not your words; it's my voice. It's not your competence; it's my omnipotence. It's not your goodness; it's my goodness. It's not your guts; it's my glory."

Turn to the Lord! Let him take off the veil. Let him throw it on the ground. Let him stomp it into the dirt, and let the glory of God fill your life. Look into the face of God. Stand by and see his glory. Witness the brightness of his face. Look into the holiness of his person. See the magnificence of his presence. It doesn't matter who you are or where you've been; it doesn't matter what you have or haven't done; it doesn't matter about your failures or your successes. The glory of God reaches you wherever you are.

In 1989, The World Congress of Evangelism was held in Manila, Philippines. About 4,000 people from all denominations gathered to discuss world evangelism. One of the speakers was M. Y. Chang from mainland China. His speech turned into a testimony. Before the masses in Manila, he told of being in a Communist prison for 17 years, with four or five of those years in solitary. He said "Let me tell you about my favorite time. It was when I was doing my job shoveling human waste. The human cesspool was 6 feet deep in the middle, shallower toward the edge. I would get into the cesspool and shovel it. It was my favorite time because the stench was so bad that the guards would leave. I found myself alone. I would recite the Psalms out loud, to hear the word of God. But my favorite thing was to sing. And my favorite song was this one, "I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses; and the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses."

You may live in a human cesspool, but if you turn to the Lord, God will lift that veil and you will see that you live in the garden of God's glory, and then he will begin to turn you into his likeness, one step at a time. And that is how we experience God.

HAROLD SHANK

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