

With Greater Splendor!

Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:7-18

October 11, 1998

“If the dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such splendor that the Israelites could not look at Moses’ face because of its brightness, fading as this was, will not the dispensation of the Spirit be attended with greater splendor? For if there was splendor in the dispensation of condemnation, the dispensation of righteousness must far exceed it in splendor.” That is to say, Jesus Christ was greater than anything that had gone before him. Jesus Christ was greater than anything else that was his contemporary. And Jesus Christ continues to be greater than anything else the world has had to offer since, or ever will have to offer in the ages to come.

Paul’s immediate concern, historically, was that the glory, the wonder, the joy, and the splendor of Jesus Christ far exceeded even what God had granted to his own people, the people of Israel, under the old covenant. This was important for him to acknowledge, in regard to his own transition from Judaism to Christianity. This was important for him to emphasize in terms of defining the Christian faith for the Corinthians. And this continues to be important for us, not only in its historical particularity, since not many of us here today or listening on the radio have come to Christianity out of Judaism, but also in its application by extension to many other situations and faiths.

In comparison with the other options available, the faith of the old covenant shone forth with great glory. The people of Egypt worshiped, among others, the sun god. The people of Israel worshiped the God who made the sun. The people of Greece and Rome worshiped a multitude of gods, understood to lust after and mate with humans, often driven by petty jealousies. The people of Israel worshiped the one God above all gods, the God of truth, justice, holiness, and beauty. Other religions practiced human sacrifice. Israel’s God forbade it. The list could go on. The faith of the old testament was clearly superior.

And yet, in the course of time, a problem emerged. The splendor of the old covenant was surpassed by the splendor of the Christ of the new covenant. When we see the stars in the sky shining at night, we are struck by their genuine splendor. But in the day, even though we are told that they continue to shine, we cannot see the stars or their splendor at all, because of the far greater splendor of the sun. So it is with Jesus Christ. What had appeared wonderful in comparison to everything else now is shown to be darkness and night.

How can this be? The old covenant, summarized in the Ten Commandments carved in stone, can and does tell us what is right and what is wrong, but it does not and cannot give us the desire, the motivation, the push, the encouragement, or the healing that we need actually to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong. That is to say, the laws are great, but they have no power. More precisely, they have no power for life. They have power only to condemn. That is why Paul calls them the dispensation of death. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, came to forgive our sin, to win our hearts, to capture our souls, to turn our lives around, to point us in a new direction, to fill us with new life, and to make us new and whole. He alone gives us the grace and the power not only to believe but also to obey, and so to hope. Therein lies his greater splendor.

What does this have to do with us? Very few if any of us have stood under the requirements of the old covenant. And yet, have we not stood under task masters just as harsh? Have we not suffered under dispensations of death which can only condemn us, not give us life? To put it in the language of our day, from what have we sought to derive meaning, security, and purpose in life? What are the ways offered to us by the world to establish meaning, security, and purpose in life? Maybe people are living so long today that they do not worry about mortality anymore, or maybe we are just not as honest about our fear of death as earlier generations have been. Maybe people are so well behaved today that there is no overwhelming sense of guilt before the holiness of God, or maybe we just do not know any better. Maybe people are not lost today and are not seeking salvation, but I do not believe it. What I do think has happened is that the vocabulary has changed. What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of life? How can I secure my life and that of those I love? How does the world tell us to answer these questions? What different answers does Jesus supply?

One cluster of answers in the world centers around our own, human accomplishments. These would suggest that we are what we do, that life means what we say it means, that my purpose is to accomplish all that I can, and that by the strength of my own achievements I can secure myself and my own. There is enough truth in this to make it plausible. And surely we want people to work hard and to accomplish much, both for themselves and for the common good. But finally, these answers about accomplishment betray us. No matter how much we do, it is never enough. We can always imagine that we could have done more, and we could have. And then the day comes when we can do no more. Yes, there is a nobility about striving to accomplish much. And yet, there is always a sadness attached to it, for finally it fails. And then meaning is no more.

Another cluster of answers centers around our possessions. Perhaps life means, if not what we do, then what we own. According to this, the purpose of life

is to amass wealth and belongings. But again, while in general we might think it better that people have things than that they not have things, it is always possible to imagine that we have more things than we do. The desire for possessions can never be satisfied, and therefore can never be satisfying. Finally, this urge cannot give meaning, purpose, or security to our lives.

There are many other candidates available, with similar problems. We might think that we can secure ourselves by military strength. It makes sense, on the face of it, that peoples and nations be militarily strong to prevent invasions by other countries. And yet, the strength of one often threatens another, leading, ironically, not to increased security but to an escalation of insecurity. Surely, it cannot possibly be the case that people are more secure today than they were before the invention of nuclear weapons. The legitimate fear of terrorist attacks confirms these suspicions. However, once this journey is embarked upon, it seems not to be an easy one from which to extricate ourselves. So we and our enemies all spend billions on nuclear weapons and others, hoping against hope never to use them, proving each day that worship at the altar of military strength does not win security for us.

How does Jesus Christ compare with these alternatives? How does Jesus Christ offer us meaning, purpose, and security? How does Jesus Christ shine more brightly than any other light in the universe? How does he compare with all the faiths, schemes, and gimmicks which place their confidence in human goodness, will, power, accomplishments, possessions, and strength?

First of all, the meaning of life is not to be found in what we do or what we fail to do, in what we possess or what we fail to possess, or in any strength we may or may not have in ourselves. As good and as useful as those may be in their own limited arenas, none of them makes sense out of the whole of life. In fact, the effort to force them to give meaning to life only heightens and adds to the meaninglessness of life. We are more than what we do, more than what we own, and more than what strength we may have. More than all of this put together, the meaning flows from the reality that God made us, God made us for God's own self, and therefore we belong to God. The meaning of life, then, is that God loves us. This, more than anything else, tells us who we are and what we are about. This, more than anything else, makes sense out of the rest of life. It is still hard to make sense out of some of it, but this makes more sense than anything else. And how do we know about this love of God? We see it in Jesus Christ more clearly than anywhere else. And so it is that the splendor of Christ far exceeds that of any other person, plan, scheme, proposition, or faith.

If the meaning of life is that God loves us, what is the purpose of life? The purpose of life is for us to love God and to love each other. What did Jesus say?

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.

And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). This is who we are and what we are about. This is why we are here and why we are alive. This is the purpose of life. We may use our lives to do a million other things, but those are not the things for which life was intended. Finally, none of them will satisfy us, and some of them will twist and ruin us beyond recognition. The very purpose of life, as we learn it from the lips and from the life of Jesus Christ, is to love God and love each other. This shall not disappoint us. Once again, Christ shines more brightly than any other light in the world, not only the false lights but even the lights that are good in and of themselves.

Now, if the meaning of life is that God loves us, and if the purpose of life is that we are to love God and each other, what is the security of life? How are we to secure ourselves and our loved ones against evil, loss, decay, and decline? We have seen the problem of inextricable military escalation. Similar problems lurk in all efforts for security: financial, medical, social, and so forth. Finally, we have to admit that life is not secure and that life cannot be made secure by our efforts. That is to say that, finally, our security rests only in God and in God’s good will toward us. For our enemies are not only the worldly enemies, such as age, disease, and each other. Instead, our enemies are sin, death, and evil. Our enemies are stronger than we are. But they are not stronger than God. Our only security is that we belong to God, and from God no one can snatch us away.

Of course, things may not turn out as we want in this life and in this world. Life can be hard, unfair, brutish, and short. And yet, our security is not in this life. Our security is in God. And God has already conquered sin, death, and evil. Here we find the splendor of Christ shining brightly, not in the way or worldly glory, but just the opposite. For here we see Jesus beaten, bloody, and dying. Here we see Christ, the innocent Christ, taking on the sin of the world, and yet he sins not. Here we see Christ suffer ridicule, mockery, and hatred, and yet he hates not. Here we see Christ suffer betrayal, false trial, and wrongful execution, and yet he protests not. Evil tries its best but cannot break him, for he never returns evil for evil. He chooses to suffer and absorb evil instead, taking it all upon himself, without deflection, without return, and so is evil forever undone. Death attacks him and seems to win the day, but only because Christ does not fear it and does not resist it. So also is the power of death undone from the other side. In all the horror of the cross, the blood from the thorns, the pounding of the nails, and the darkness of the noon day, in all of this, strangely enough, we see shining forth the glory and the greater splendor of Jesus Christ. Here is where he wins us over, heart, soul, mind,

and strength. Here is where he takes away our sin. Here is where he moves, inspires, and empowers us to faith and obedience.

If his cross were the end, it would be a heroic but a tragic story. But the cross is not the end. The God who made us, the God to whom we belong, the God who loves us and whom we are to love, approved the selflessness of Christ's self-sacrifice, vindicated his trust in, and obedience to, God even and especially when all appearances were to the contrary, and raised him from death to a new and different life, the same person but forever beyond the power of death. This is our hope. This is our security. This is the one thing to which we can cling in life and in death. Nothing else compares to it or is even worth comparing to it.

What is this greater splendor of Jesus Christ? For Paul, for the Corinthians, and still for us today, Jesus Christ was greater than anything that had gone before him. Jesus Christ was greater than anything else that was his contemporary. And Jesus Christ continues to be greater than anything else the world has had to offer since, of ever will have to offer in the ages to come. Anything else is second- or third-rate at best. "What once had splendor has come to have no splendor at all, because of the splendor that surpasses it. For if what faded away came with splendor, what is permanent must have much more splendor.... And we all... are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory into another; for this comes from the Lord."

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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