

Jesus, Divine Light

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

by Michael G. Lilienthal

Enlightened souls,

Have you ever wondered, “Why the Gospel?” Why do we preach it? Why use God’s Word? Paul says, before our text today, “We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s Word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). But why? There are certainly easier ways to convince people to join our church. Sometimes the Bible is just complicated. And then, there are times, too, when the Gospel just doesn’t seem to cut it. There are problems in the world! They’re not being fixed by the church! Can’t we leave the Gospel behind for a moment, and go give motivational speeches to convince people in the world just to *love* one another? If we focused our efforts, couldn’t we accomplish a change? Why don’t we give the Gospel a break – because we all know that we’re saved already – and actually *do* something?

Today is the feast of the Transfiguration. As our Gospel records for us, Jesus stood on a mountaintop with three of his disciples, and there “the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white” (Luke 9:29). This light shining from him came with purpose, for God there announced what he intended to do with Jesus, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; *listen to him!*” (9:35). Learn today, I urge you, about **Jesus, the divine light of knowledge and life**, who is given **into the hands of men**.

I. Of Knowledge and Life

There are two great goods to be had from Jesus: knowledge, leading to life. For we know God's will, that he "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). For this purpose, to fulfill this desire, God is revealing Jesus. But he does not work unopposed. The Devil, whom Paul here calls "the god of this world," works to blind "the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ."

On the cross, Jesus said, "It is finished" (John 19:30), and after his burial he descended bodily into hell "and proclaimed to the spirits in prison" that he had won this victory (1 Pet. 3:19). We hear of this great victory in St. John's heavenly vision in the book of Revelation:

And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, 'Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them!' (Rev. 12:9-12a)

But it doesn't end there. This passage concludes: "But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (12:12b). This is Paul's woe, knowing that, in the case of those who are perishing, "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers." And

because the devil will not stop trying to deceive, St. Peter also cautions: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). He has many tricks up his sleeve, leading him to be nicknamed “the master of a thousand arts.” He spares no effort to turn eyes away from the brilliant divine light of the Gospel. He will distract you with the things of this world – your job, your family, your pleasures; he will convince you in your sinful flesh to close your eyes to the Gospel willingly – something that you are all-too-happy to do, because we find it easier to adopt a religion that tells us things that make sense, or else he will emphasize what your itching ears want to hear, focusing on a watered-down, feel-good religion, one without any hatred, any judgment, any exclusion; if he can’t pull you so directly away from this religion, he will instead force you to focus on your sin, to turn your eyes into the black pit of your own soul and prove to you that you will never be forgiven, that the Gospel is not for you, so that you are left to despair!

God has a power of light that is unstoppable, for he is the “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness.’” At the creation of the world, God caused light to come out of *nothing*. Now in Jesus we see a greater light: divine light, for he is “the image of God,” that is, the only way we can *see* God’s glory and the Gospel. For Jesus said, “And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (John 12:45-46). And again, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). From eternity Jesus is “the form of God,” the μορφή of God, the shape of him who is spirit (Phil. 2:6). “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3). And from

Jesus' own declaration, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (John 14:6-7). Therefore "we proclaim...Jesus Christ as Lord." All Christians should proclaim with St. Paul, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing," "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ," "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:2; 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Cor. 1:18). This knowledge of faith from the Gospel is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, "because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit in belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 2:13-14), life.

II. In the Hands of Men

We proclaim it. The power is ours. That Word of God which caused light to shine out of darkness is in the hands of each and every Christian, for that word "shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake," because "it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

This immortal light of God, unstoppable, it should therefore enlighten all hearts, shouldn't it? There should be no resisting. So why does St. Paul admit the possibility, "if our gospel is veiled"? The Devil should have no power to blind any eyes to such

divine light, especially not if it's true that God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). But hear how the Holy Spirit caused this to be recorded: "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing."

St. Stephen, just before being stoned to death, declaimed, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you" (Acts 7:51). As Isaiah delivered the words of God: "I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices" (Is. 65:2). Jesus himself cried in despair, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matt. 23:37).

Holy Scripture in fact speaks very clearly about this light of the gospel, proving that it very well may be resisted, and it constantly is resisted by sinners like us. This gospel light is indeed different from God's creative light; but nevertheless God is a God of light. On Mt. Sinai "Moses said, 'Please show me your glory,'" but at that time God told him plainly, "'[Y]ou cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live'" (Ex. 33:18, 20). The divine light of God cannot be witnessed by sinful man. We would be devoured in his glory. But in his mercy, God has provided a way for his light to come to us and not destroy us. This was done through Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the visible God, with his glory hidden (and sometimes revealed as in the occasion of his Transfiguration on the mountain). But because Jesus is God's agent of

mercy and grace, bringing us salvation, that glorious light works for that purpose. The glorious God became a man in the muck so that his divine light could shine in our hearts and not destroy us. And yet “those who are perishing,” “the unbelievers,” blind themselves to this divine light, harden their hearts against it, and condemn themselves. But in their case only the “gospel is veiled.” To us who are being saved it is clear.

Let speculation end here.

We should concern ourselves with this revealed will of God, follow it, and be diligent about it because the Holy Spirit gives grace, power, and ability through the Word by which he has called us. We should not explore the abyss of the hidden foreknowledge of God, even as Christ answered the question, ‘Lord, will those who are saved be few?’ by saying, ‘Strive to enter by the narrow door’ (Luke 13:23, 24).¹

For this reason Paul confidently declares, “For what we proclaim is not ourselves,” not our own speculations, not our own ideas, not our own imaginings, not our own gospels, “but Jesus Christ as Lord.” “Our election to eternal life does not rest on our piety or virtue but solely on the merit of Christ and the gracious will of the Father.”² In another place Paul boldly stated, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,” “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.... Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God” (Rom. 1:16; 5:6, 9). Where else would you look for certainty that your salvation is secure? The unbelieving world proclaims *itself*—do works! pray harder! *feel* saved!—because it is blinded to the

¹ *Book of Concord*, Tappert, FC SD XI:33.

² *Ibid.*, FC SD XI:75.

Gospel. But “Jesus is the stone that was rejected...which has become the cornerstone. And there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11-12).

And now, just as Jesus is the visible God, with glory hidden (and sometimes revealed), we have visible grace, with glory hidden beneath. Think of baptism. There is nothing significant about splashing water over a person’s head: the cultural dictates of personal hygiene decree that it should occur daily. But through that visible, tangible act you can look back and know that grace has come to you. And hidden in that water, with the Word of God spoken alongside it, is divine light and glory: “Baptism effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, just as the words and promises of God declare.”³ And think of the Lord’s Supper. There is nothing remarkable about eating: it is again a daily occurrence, for survival. But through that visible, tangible act you can repeatedly taste God’s grace coming to you. “The Sacrament of the Altar is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine,” “The benefit which we receive from such eating and drinking is shown us by these words: ‘Given and shed for you for the remission of sins;’ namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given us through these words.”⁴

You notice the common theme in both of those, right? What causes glory to be hidden under the water, or under the bread and wine, is the *Word*. The divine Word of

³ *Luther’s Small Catechism*, “The Blessings of Baptism.”

⁴ *Ibid.*, “The Nature of the Sacrament of the Altar,” “The Benefit of the Sacrament of the Altar.”

God, the Scriptures “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). This Word also is given into our hands, this Word which is nothing but the testimony of Jesus Christ as Lord, pointing again back to that Word made flesh, that divine light that entered into the darkness of men to bring us salvation. It is for this reason, therefore, that a true Christian church will preach to you “not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” We pastors are the servants of the congregations we serve, for Jesus’ sake. You have been given the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and through your call have ordained me to administer to you the visible grace of God, in Word and Sacrament, so that Jesus’ own salvation can be yours. Therefore receive this divine light from me once again, and always, so that you can be certain in the comfort: On the basis of Christ’s sacrificial death and glorious resurrection from the dead, your sins are forgiven!

Amen.