

The Sabbath in 2 Corinthians 3:7-16

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^{NIV} **2 Corinthians 3:7** ¶ 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, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? ⁹ If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! ¹⁰ For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. ¹¹ And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts! ¹² ¶ Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. ¹⁶ But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

Introduction

When Paul refers in 2 Cor 3 to Moses' face being glorious, or radiant, he is referring to Exod 34:33-35. In Exod 34 there is nothing about the radiance on Moses' face being the reason for his use of a veil, or for the fact that the radiance eventually faded away. For these things we turn to the New Testament. Here's the passage from Exodus.

^{NIV} **Exodus 34:33** When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. ³⁴ But whenever he entered the LORD's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.

The Greek Word *katargeō*

Turning now to 2 Cor 3:7-16, a key word in the passage is "fading," as NIV translates the passage. Notice that I include more than just vss. 7-11. It is important to include vs. 13 along with vss. 7 and 11. The reason why vs. 13 is important is that it helps us to understand what Paul says in vs. 11. Verse 14 also contains a form of this same word.

Table 1
Forms of *katargeō* in 2 Cor 3:7-16

Reference	Greek	Parsing
Vs. 7	tēn katargoumenēn	present passive accusative feminine singular
Vs. 11	to katargoumenon	present passive nominative neuter singular
Vs. 13	tou katargoumenou	present passive genitive neuter singular
Vs. 14	tou katargeitai	indicative present passive 3rd person singular

The first three terms are participles that have much in common grammatically and form a unified group. The fourth example may be interpreted on the basis of what Paul says in vs. 14, where the implied subject of his second sentence is the veil that Moses wore temporarily after spending time with God and then coming down off the mountain. Here we focus on vss. 7, 11, and 13, where I submit that in all three cases the implied subject is the glory on Moses' face.

Overview of possible meanings

Lexicons gloss the basic word *katargeō* in various ways, but lexicons can only derive the meanings they propose from the way words are used in text. So here are all of them. In table 2 I list all 27 examples of the word *katargeō* in the New Testament, as translated by NIV and NRSV.¹

¹ BibleWorks 7 uses the abbreviation NRS.

Table 2
New Testament Examples of *katargeō*
Sorted by Reference

Reference	NIV	NRSV
1 Cor 01:28	nullify	reduce to nothing
1 Cor 02:06	coming to nothing	doomed to perish
1 Cor 06:13	destroy	destroy
1 Cor 13:08 (a)	cease	come to an end
1 Cor 13:08 (b)	pass away	come to an end
1 Cor 13:10	disappears	come to an end
1 Cor 13:11	put . . . behind	put an end to
1 Cor 15:24	destroyed	destroyed
1 Cor 15:26	destroyed	destroyed
2 Cor 03:07	fading	set aside
2 Cor 03:11	fading	set aside
2 Cor 03:13	fading	set aside
2 Cor 03:14	taken away	set aside
2 Thess 02:08	destroy	destroy
2 Tim 01:10	destroyed	abolished
Eph 02:15	abolishing	abolished
Gal 03:17	do away with	nullify
Gal 05:04	alienated	fallen away from
Gal 05:11	abolished	removed
Heb 02:14	destroy	destroy
Luke 13:07	use up	wasting
Rom 03:03	nullify	nullify
Rom 03:31	nullify	overthrow
Rom 04:14	is worthless	void
Rom 06:06	done away with	destroyed
Rom 07:02	released	discharged
Rom 07:06	released	discharged

Table 3
New Testament Examples of *katargeō*
Sorted by Meaning (NIV)

Concept	NIV Gloss	Reference
abolish	abolished	Gal 05:11
	abolishing	Eph 02:15
alienate	alienated	Gal 05:04
cease	cease	1 Cor 13:8 (a)
pass away	pass away	1 Cor 13:8 (b)
come to nothing	coming to nothing	1 Cor 02:06
destroy	destroy	1 Cor 06:13
	destroy	2 Thess 02:08
	destroy	Heb 02:14
	destroyed	1 Cor 15:24
	destroyed	1 Cor 15:26
	destroyed	2 Tim 01:10
disappear	disappears	1 Cor 13:10
do away with	do away with	Gal 03:17
	done away with	Rom 06:06
fade	fading	2 Cor 03:07
	fading	2 Cor 03:11
	fading	2 Cor 03:13
be worthless	is worthless	Rom 04:14
nullify	nullify	1 Cor 01:28
	nullify	Rom 03:03
	nullify	Rom 03:31
put behind	put . . . behind	1 Cor 13:11
release (from)	released	Rom 07:02
	released	Rom 07:06
take away	taken away	2 Cor 03:14
use up	use up	Luke 13:07

In general *katargeō* refers to the end of a process or state of affairs. When this word is used, something stops. The question in 2 Cor 3 is, What stops? Failing to get the answer to this question precisely right will mean getting the answer precisely wrong.

Verses 7 and 13

Let me make clear at the outset that everything Paul says in 2 Cor 3:7-16 is absolutely true. More than this, it is important. Seventh-day Adventists should not seek to minimize any part of this passage, although we do need to understand what claims are and are not being made. If we feel that we must protect ourselves from Paul's words, we do not understand either them or the message we are trying to defend.

One thing to notice when evaluating translations of 2 Cor 3:7, 11, and 13 is whether the same term is used in all three verses. In the Greek the thought is the same

each time. So when an appropriate gloss has been selected for the word *katargeō* in this passage, it would be appropriate to use it consistently. NIV translates "fading" all three times (vss. 7, 11, 13). Similarly, NRSV has "set aside" all three times. Either of these is acceptable, although in context NIV makes a bit more sense. NLT, on the other hand, has "fading," "replaced," and "fading."

Once we say that one meaning is required, which meaning should that be? Which one best fits the context of what Paul is saying? To answer this question we must know what the context is. In vss. 7 and 13 Paul uses the word "face" in connection with Moses' "glory," so the context there has to do with Moses' appearance when he came down from mount Sinai after being with God. His appearance was glorious, or radiant. The glory persisted for a certain length of time and then gradually dissipated.

If this is the context, then which gloss is the best one to use in vss. 7 and 13? NRSV suggests "set aside", and uses this term consistently not only in vss. 7 and 13, but in vss. 11 and 14 as well. This is certainly an accurate rendering of Greek *katargeō* as a lexical entity. In context, though, can we say that God "set aside" the glory on Moses' face? Did He take active steps to remove it? If this is the case, how did the glory come to him being initially? In the course of Moses' visit with God did God decide at a moment of time that Moses should have glory on his face and arbitrarily put it there? This would be consistent with NRSV's handling of the passage, but there is a question whether this gives the best idea of what happened.

I submit that Moses' face started reflecting God's glory because of the time he spent in God's presence on the mountain. The result followed naturally from the cause. And his face gradually stopped reflecting God's glory as the same process worked in reverse because, when he came back down the mountain, he was separated from God's immediate presence. When Moses became separated from what had made his face glow, it stopped glowing. From the fact that his face was still glowing when the people saw him on his return it is clear that a gradual process was taking place. The glory lasted for a time after Moses got down off the mountain. How much longer did it last? We don't know, but it didn't disappear immediately.

With these facts in mind let us consider some glosses that have been used as an English translation of the Greek word *katargeō*. Was the glory on Moses' face "abolished"? This or any other expression that implies God was shaping events arbitrarily are probably not appropriate here ("destroy," "do away with," "nullify," "put behind," "take away"). Moses was certainly not "released from" the glory on his face. It was not "used up." Adequate glosses would include "cease," "pass away," and "disappear." Any of these would work equally well. But in my view NIV captures the idea best. His glory "faded."

Verse 11

^{NIV} **2 Corinthians 3:11** And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

In vss. 7 and 13 it is clear that Paul is talking about Moses' appearance, because he explicitly uses the word "face" both times. In vs. 11 he does not use the word "face." There it would be possible – it would be inaccurate, but possible – to think that what

fades or otherwise goes away is the law itself. But this cannot be. The word is equivalent all three times (*katargoumenē*, *katargoumenon*, *katargoumenou*) and, given the same context in all three verses, it must be understood similarly each time it is used.

If we were to separate vs. 11 from 7 and 13 and interpret that one verse independently of the others, what fades in vs. 11? There are only so many objects to choose among. See table 4.

Table 4
What Was Glorious?

Object	Before	After
God's face	Glorious	Glorious
Moses' face	Glorious	No glory
Stone tablets	No glory	No glory

If we don't come to Moses' glory on the basis of vss. 7 and 13, we must come to Moses' glory from the facts we find in vs. 11. The glory of the stone tablets, or of the law written on them, could not fade because they never had any glory to begin with. Neither Exod 34 nor 2 Cor 3 makes any reference to glory in connection with the stone the law was written on. When Moses says, "Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire" (Exod 19:18), that is a reference to God Himself, not the law He pronounced while on the mountain. In regard to the tables of stone that Moses carried down to the people, there was never any glory. So that cannot be what Paul is talking about.

The thing about stone is not that it shines, but that it's hard. It is permanent, immovable, durable. This is why there is so much rock symbolism in the Bible. Consider passages such as Deut 32:4, 15, 18, 30, 31, 37, and there are many other passages.

He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he. (vs. 4)

Here also is the context for Matt 16:18 ("you are Peter, and on this rock . . ."), interpreted for us in 2 Pet 2:4-8 by one who was there and heard what Jesus said. (Moreover Jesus was speaking to Peter when He said what He did on this occasion.) And then we have parables like Matt 7:24-27 ("Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." [vs. 24]). There are many examples of rock symbolism throughout the Bible. So that's what stone is like.

When God says, "It pleased the LORD for the sake of his righteousness to make his law great and glorious" (Isa 42:21), there is a reason why He would say so. In and of itself the law was not glorious. Only in Christ can it possibly become glorious. When we see the character of Christ shining through in His law, that glory does not pertain to the law but to the Lord. This is in every way parallel to what we read about the glory on Moses' face. Moses had no glory in himself. He gradually gained, and gradually lost, the glory that he reflected for a time in the presence of God. Any glory associated with

Moses would have to come from elsewhere. And for our part, when we lose sight of Christ in the law, we lose sight of anything that could make the law great or glorious.

What is Paul saying?

Having said all of this, what is it that fades in vs. 11? We have talked about Moses' face, but of course much more is involved than just this. Paul does refer to Moses, but that is not his topic. Instead he is talking about a contrast between two spiritual states, two types of relationship toward God.

Table 5
Contrasts in the Passage

Reference	What Was	What Is
Vss. 7, 8	Ministry that brought death	Ministry of the Spirit
Vs. 9	Ministry that condemns men	Ministry that brings righteousness
Vs. 10	What was glorious	The surpassing glory
Vs. 11	What was fading away	That which lasts
Vs. 14	The veil remains	Only in Christ is it taken away
Vss. 15, 16	A veil covers their hearts	The veil is taken away

An example of Paul dealing with people who have a veil over their hearts is found in Acts 28.

²⁴ Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. ²⁵ They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: ²⁶ "Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." ²⁷ For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them. ²⁸ "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" (Acts 28:24-28)

And again in 2 Cor 3 Paul says,

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. (2 Cor 3:14-15)

So what does it mean to remove the veil in the context of what we have read in Acts 28? It means to see Christ's role in the Old Testament Scriptures which tell about Him. It means coming to Christ on a spiritual level, but not just in some abstract way. The context is more specific than that. Paul says, "when the old covenant is read." Thus the "old covenant" is something written. He also says, "when Moses is read." Again "Moses" is something written.

If the problem is that, when the "old covenant" is read (vs. 14) or when "Moses" is read (vs. 15), the Jews Paul was talking to were unable to discern the beauty of Christ, the solution is to see what they missed. Jesus addressed this same issue in Luke 24.

25 He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

The veil Paul has in mind prevents people from seeing and understanding what "Moses and all the Prophets" (Luke 24:27) say about Christ. Would it be possible that Christians could miss some of what is being said in both 2 Cor 3 and Luke 24, not to mention Moses and all the prophets, by insisting that the discussion be confined exclusively to what is said about Jesus in the New Testament?

Moses had a relationship with God that was so close he could speak to God face to face (Exod 33:11; Num 12:8). And yet he was here, God was there, and as soon as Moses left God's immediate presence the glory started fading. But when Christ comes into a person's life by His Holy Spirit that person has God's presence within. This glory can shine from human faces in acts of kindness, in conversation with others, or in other ways. We are talking here about spiritual realities which any born again Christian should be able to understand. By coming to our dark planet as He did, Christ invites us to enter a relationship with Him that is closer than if we had never fallen.

The corollary to this is that God, by His Spirit, writes His law on the fleshy tables of our hearts (see Heb 8:8-12; 10:16-17). In doing this He is not changing the text of what the law says. It is not an altered version of the law, with one commandment conveniently removed. It is God's law, still saying now what it always did before. The difference is that now we see Christ in it whereas we didn't before. We didn't want to do what it says before, but now we have the desire to obey. No one can do this in an unconverted state, unaided by the Holy Spirit, but I am not writing to unconverted people. I am writing to mature Christians who have studied enough for questions such as the ones we are dealing with to be issues. In Heb 8 (and in Jer 31, which Heb 8 quotes), the law that has always been the standard of right and wrong for God's people is merely written in a different place – no longer on stone, but on flesh.

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. (Heb 8:10)

Writing the law on our hearts does not call into existence something new, just as writing it on stone centuries earlier did not call into existence something new. What is new is our relationship with the law. Now the veil is removed and we see the deep

spiritual significance in what the law says. Jesus gives us an example of how this could be in Matt 5:17-48, commenting on commandments 5, 6, 7, 9, 8, and 10 in turn. When God writes His law on our hearts through the ministry of His Holy Spirit – "the ministry that brings righteousness" (2 Cor 3:9) – we come to love what God loves and to hate what He hates. We come to reflect His image and His likeness, as summarized for us in the law. But for us as Christians the glory need not fade, because there is no separation from its Source. The Spirit remains, welling up in our own hearts (see John 4:14) and spilling over to others. The woman at the well illustrates this point by running back to her village, leaving her water jar (see vs. 28-29). She had lost sight of everything but Jesus and hurried to share Him with others.

Here is the meaning of Paul's words quoted earlier, "And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!" (2 Cor 3:11). The glory is that of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. It is the glory of God seen now in a new way which impels us to share what we have learned with others. This interpretation is faithful to the words of 2 Cor 3, to the context in which they are used, and to the writer's intent both here and in other passages.

Discussion

I have argued that 2 Cor 3:7, 11, and 13 all refer in one way or another to the glory on Moses' face. In vs. 11 Paul starts at this point, but goes beyond it to establish a relationship between what once was in literal Israel, and what now is in Christ. The Jewish nation had a proud heritage.

^{NIV} **Romans 9:4** Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.

And yet, however proud their heritage, the glory associated with the giving of the law was the glory of God. The law had no glory of its own, nor did Moses. Moses reflected God's glory for a time, but the tables of stone never did. The glory God gives the law in Isa 42 has to do with showing us His own attributes in the law, i.e., it has to do with revealing Himself. He does this through what would otherwise have been cold and lifeless laws – words and syllables, letters that kill. There is a parallel between this and breathing life into inert soil to produce Adam and Eve. There was no life in the dirt we came from. Our life is a gift from God. When we see Christ in the law, we see glory (John 1:14), but it is not any glory that the words have in themselves. The glory does not pertain to the law, but to Christ as we see His image reflect there.

The law cannot lose what it never had. In and of itself the law is simply a death sentence on any who transgress it. This is the only function it has now or has ever had in the past. Its only function is to define what sin is and make us aware of our condition as law breakers. There is no salvation in law or in law keeping. There never was. Obeying God has always involved something more, i.e., it has involved loving God, having a relationship with Him. "[B]ut showing love to a thousand *generations* [supplied word, literally 'thousands'] of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exod 20:6). God is more than a law Giver, He is a life Giver. A love relationship with God unites the twin concepts of obedience and life (see Lev 18:5; Ezek 20:11, 13, 21).

Paul twice quotes Lev 18:5 negatively (see Rom 10:5; Gal 3:12), and it is true that some have always taken outward actions as a substitute for heart obedience. We look back on such people and marvel at how slow they were, all the while assuming that a warm inner attitude toward God is a substitute for obeying Him. So which is worse? There are two things here and we must not neglect either one of them. If we have truth without spirit, or spirit without truth, does it matter which one we leave aside?

^{NIV} **John 4:23** Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.

Jesus criticizes the Pharisees, not for tithing their garden herbs. In fact He commends them for doing so. What He criticizes is the fact that they neglect "the more important matters of the law-- justice, mercy and faithfulness." He concludes by saying, "You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Matt 23:23).

Christ does not redeem us from the law, but from the curse that follows from breaking the law. He redeems us from sin. As the angel said, "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21) – not from the law, not in their sins, but from their sins. Let us take the passage just as it reads.

Law has a legitimate role to play, even for Christians, but we need to understand what that role is. Paul points out in Gal 3 that the law is a schoolmaster (*paidagōgos*) which leads us to Christ. Sometimes it drives us to Christ with a heavy cudgel, and for good reason. There has never been life in the law. Life comes only from the life Giver. Law drives us to the law Giver for forgiveness so that we might receive His free gift of life. Confessing once is not enough. Paul says, "I die every day" (1 Cor 15:31). Every day he had to resist the inclinations of his human nature and submit himself to God.

The question whether there is law after the cross can be answered by asking another question. Is there sin after the cross? If there is sin, there is law, because only law can define what sin is.

^{NIV} **Romans 4:15** . . . law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

The force of the *kai* that begins the second clause has been missed here. The idea is one of contrast. Law brings wrath, but (not "and") where there is no law there is no wrath – because there is no transgression that would bring wrath. Is there wrath after the cross? Any reader of Rev 15-20 would have to say that there is. And so there is law.

Only those who see that they are under God's just condemnation have any reason to turn to Christ for healing. So is it really the case that now, after the cross, people have no need of such knowledge? Now that Christ has come, no one needs to be aware that they must turn to Him for repentance and forgiveness? No, now is just when we need this awareness more than ever. We need an accurate knowledge of the problem, because now the solution is freely available. Now is not the time to ignore it.

Following this same train of thought, in Acts 5:1-10 why did Ananias and Sapphira have to die? Carrying out a death sentence sounds like wrath to me. Did God have a reason for doing what He did, or did He bring His wrath on them without cause?

How fair would that be? And yet He did punish them without cause if they committed no sin. Punishing people for sins they didn't commit hardly sounds fair. Did Ananias and Sapphira sin, or were they innocent? They were innocent if there is no law. So is there sin after the cross? Peter says so in Acts 5:4 and 9. That is one example.

We have talked about undeserved punishment. Let us talk about undeserved favor. This has always been the free gift of God. Those who keep God's commandments have never been able to pardon themselves. It is God who shows mercy, and the reason why what He shows is mercy and not something else is that those who receive the gift do not deserve it. Another word for unmerited favor is "grace." I submit that the concept of grace is built into the Hebrew text of the law, in the clause where God tells us that loving Him and obeying Him go hand in hand ("but showing love [or 'mercy,' *hēsed*] to thousands who love me and keep my commandments," Exod 20:6; NIV 1978). We cannot obey God without loving Him, and we cannot love God without obeying Him. The two concepts become one in the preceding verse. As Jesus says, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15).

Paul says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). What do we fall short of again? Paul says it is the glory of God. I have argued at length that the law in and of itself has no glory, and Paul does not contradict this. When we fall short of what the law requires, we do not fall short of the law's glory, but the glory of God. Similarly, it is His glory that shines out to others when we keep the law, i.e., when His word and His will are implemented in this otherwise rebellious world.

Conclusion

For 2000 years people have been living after the cross, and for 2000 years they have been sinning. The only way we could possibly know we have sinned, and for that matter the only reason why it makes sense to say there is such a thing as sin, is that God's law is still in full force and effect. Because it is still here with us, it still makes sense to say that sin is sinful, that we need a Savior, that we must turn wholeheartedly to Christ for repentance, forgiveness, and salvation. If there is no law to transgress, no sin can result from transgressing it (Rom 4:15). So what is the gospel?

If God's law really has been "set aside" – an interpretation some would like to draw from 2 Cor 3:11 – then the present generation has no guilt. It is without sin. Not because everyone living now has confessed to God, but because, living after the cross as we do, we have nothing to confess. I am not arguing this is the case, but rather that the erroneous conclusion that we have nothing to confess follows as a natural consequence of saying that God's law has been done away.

If I could point out one more thing, it is really disingenuous to say that the law was done away but that the principles behind nine of the commandments are still binding because they are restated elsewhere. This cannot be. If the law ends, what it says ends. Suggesting that the law ends but the substance of what it says does not end is double talk. If the substance of its instruction lives on, the law lives on – doing the only thing it was ever capable of doing, i.e., condemning sin. Saying that the law was partly reinstated is another way of saying that it was never wholly done away. The law was done away or it was not. We can't have it both ways (see Jas 2:10-11).