

SESSION 22: THE AUDACITY OF HOPE

2 Corinthians 3:12-13

September 14, 2025

PREFACE

The moment the title for this session came to me, I realized there was something familiar about it. If you perform an internet search for “The Audacity of Hope,” you get nothing less than a flood of adoring, worshipful links about Barack Obama—and not a word about 2 Corinthians 3:12. Forgive me, but I need to do something I rarely, *rarely* do: quote from *Wikipedia*.

The title of *The Audacity of Hope* was derived from a sermon delivered by Barack Obama’s former pastor, Jeremiah Wright. Wright had attended a lecture by Frederick G. Sampson in Richmond, Virginia, in the late 1980s, on the G. F. Watts painting *Hope*, which inspired him to give a sermon in 1990 based on the subject of the painting: “with her clothes in rags, her body scarred and bruised and bleeding, her harp all but destroyed and with only one string left, she had the audacity to make music and praise God ... To take the one string you have left and to have the audacity to hope ... that’s the real word God will have us hear from this passage and from Watt’s painting.” 📖 Having attended Wright’s sermon, Obama later adapted Wright’s phrase “audacity to hope” to “audacity of hope” which became the title for his 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote address, and the title of his second book.

Which, by the way, is an inaccurate description of the painting. In reality Watts’ painting includes no “clothes in rags,” nor shows “her body scarred and bruised and bleeding.” Apparently, as was his way in most things, Wright was inflaming the simple truth (i.e., lying through his teeth).

Unlike Barack Hussein Obama, who borrowed the title of his speech and book from his racist, hate-filled pastor, I glean mine from the verse before us in God’s word. The two very different sources mean that my use of the phrase means something profoundly different.

It is a natural inclination of human beings to compare themselves to others. We do it all the time, often without even thinking about it.

Yeah, I’m short—but that guy’s even shorter.

I wish I had her hair.

If I were as smart as my neighbor I’d have a better job.

If I were as rich as my boss I could afford a better car.

We all do it, some times unconsciously, every day of our lives. We can’t help it; it’s built into us from birth.

Because Paul's emphasis is less about the actual two covenants than it is about the *ministry of* those two covenants, he now, in the passage before us, burrows right down to his bottom line. And it begins by the apostle comparing himself, as minister of a new covenant, to Moses, the minister of the Mosaic Covenant.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:12-13.

vv12-13

We've discussed before that God, in His unfailing wisdom, has from the beginning chosen to work through human agency. Painfully cognizant of the failings of the flesh, from our point of view we wonder if that is really the best option. But if we accept and bow to His sovereignty and his superior, flawless wisdom, we must accept that it is correct, as espoused and explained by Paul to the Romans.

Read Romans 10:13-15.

Moses was sent by God to "minister" (preach, teach) the covenant handed down to him by God Himself. Without Moses accepting that call to be sent as not just a preacher and leader, but, in his case, as both priest and prophet between the people of Israel and Yahweh, they would not have heard the words. They would not have been repeatedly protected from Yahweh's wrath by Moses as he stood in the gap. They would not have received His blessings both on the road for forty years and once they had crossed the Jordan.

Likewise, how would the Corinthians have heard the gospel were it not for the minister sent by Christ—in this instance, Saul of Tarsus (3:3, 6-9)? They would have been lost in their sins, as well as anyone who heard the gospel from any of them. So even though the apostle Paul does not hold *exclusive* rights to the ministry of the gospel (as Moses did as minister of his covenant), in this context he can rightly draw the comparison he does in vv12-13 between himself and Moses.

Therefore having such a hope...

Paul's "hope" (*elpida*) is diametrically different from the hope espoused by the painter G. F. Watts, preacher Jeremiah Wright, and president Barack Obama. Their brand of hope is from the soil of a fallen world, a wistful longing that something might possibly go their way: *Pleeeeeeasse let this happen!* In the immediate context the basis for Paul's hope is expressed in vv1-4.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-4.

Paul's confidence and hope are based in two things—both grounded in the Spirit:

First, the tangible evidence for what the "Spirit of the living God" has performed in the Corinth church; as Mark Seifrid writes, "His confidence is the utter confidence that the Corinthians are 'a letter of Christ,' in whom Christ Himself is present, despite all outward appearance." The behavior of certain members of that congregation may disappoint, but the church as a whole is a witness for what the Spirit has and will accomplish on earth.

Second, the Spirit Himself, especially in eschatological terms. Look at 5:4-5.

For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.

Paul and all Christians can have a "hope" that is "a supreme confidence grounded in divine realities. The hope is so sure that it transforms how one understands and reacts to everything in the present" (Garland). That is, those in Christ live every day with the assurance of how this whole thing ends; it is referred to as "hope" simply because that end cannot yet be seen or experienced. But it is as real as if it had already occurred.

...we use great boldness,

Because of this hope, Paul "uses" or "acts with" (*chrometha*) great boldness (*parresia*). All our common versions translate this as "bold" or "boldness," which is not incorrect, but doesn't really drill down to the specifics.

As used here, *parresia* refers to speech that is outspoken, frank, plain; the right to speak freely, openly, and, here, to give frank criticism to encourage moral improvement, personal candor, speaking directly and bluntly. And here we see Paul pinpointing one of the criticisms of him coming from the church. Many in the church resent his admonishments of them—especially in his letters to them. Here he draws a comparison between himself and Moses to validate his right to speak so to them.

So if we might dare to put words in the collective mouth of the church, they have been saying, *Who gives you the right to speak so audaciously to us in your letters?* To which Paul replies, as he does in v17, *“The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”* My unveiled “audacity” comes from the Spirit of the Lord.

...and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the consequence of what was being brought to an end.

Here we have, once more, a verse much debated and argued among biblical scholars—especially the second part of v13: “so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the consequence of what was being brought to an end.” Just what does Paul mean by that? Before we resolve this we need to get the context from the passage in Exodus 34 on which the apostle is basing his defense.

Read Exodus 34:29-35.

Note:

- Initially the shining face of Moses made the Israelites afraid to be near him. (The radiance in his face was the temporary reflection of Yahweh’s radiance—His *shekinah* glory—the visual manifestation of His glory and power.)
- But when he called them back, they returned to hear what Yahweh had commanded.
- *After* Moses spoke, he placed a veil over his face. (We are not told here in the Exodus passage *why*, specifically, Moses employed the veil.
- Whenever Moses communed with Yahweh, he would remove the veil.

- Coming out, Moses would again speak the words of Yahweh to the sons of Israel *without* the veil.
- After speaking to the Israelites, he would place the veil over his face until he entered the presence of Yahweh again.
- So from this passage we see that the veil was only in place on Moses' face whenever he was *not* ministering, either before the Lord or before the sons of Israel.

...and are not like Moses,

Let's first examine closely the separate pieces that comprise v13, then we will put them together to understand the whole. First Paul establishes the comparison: "[I (and my ministry) are] not like Moses," and then he proceeds to explain why.

(The following is heavily influenced by the analysis of v13 and its resulting interpretation by George H. Guthrie.)

who used to put a veil over his face

From the OT passage we can see that Moses repeatedly put on and removed the "veil over his face," so a good representation of the Greek would be to read *etitheí* (eh-TEETH-ay) as "kept putting a veil over his face."

so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at...

Because of their initial fear at the sight, many of us have assumed that the purpose of the veil was to save the sons of Israel from the unnatural glow of Moses' face. But we have seen in the OT text that when Moses formally delivered Yahweh's message to the people, the veil was not covering his face. Only *after* the message was completed did he put the veil back on.

Some of our versions attempt to include the nature of the Greek verb *atenisai* (ah-teh-NEEZ-eye); the LSB does a pretty good job with "look intently." Paul used the word in the same way in v7:

But if the ministry of death, in letters having been engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, which was being brought to an end, (emphasis added)

The verb does not mean to just "see" or "look at" something, but expresses a curiosity, and refers to "attentive and prolonged visual observation of an object," or "an insistent fixing of the attention" (Spicq).

...the consequence of what was being brought to an end.

One's interpretation of v13—and especially the problematical phrase “the consequence of what was being brought to an end”—is going to be influenced by one's interpretation of the end of v7: “which was being brought to an end,” because obviously *Paul* means much the same thing in both.

George Guthrie translates vv12-13,

Therefore, since we have this kind of hope, we conduct our ministry with a great deal of openness, in contradistinction to Moses. He kept putting a veil over his face with the result that the children of Israel did not look with sustained attention unto the completion of what was being made inoperative.

Let me suggest a modern illustration that might help us understand what Paul is saying here. Think of any popular, dynamic speaker. He (or she) repeatedly stands on a stage before thousands of people. In the vernacular of the stage, he is “on,” he is in performance mode, and is thoroughly impressive. But anyone viewing him in that setting knows little to nothing of the *real* person behind the facade. One would have to be with the person day in and day out, when he is *not* “on,” to come to know the real person. But the vast majority of the the public know only the public persona of the celebrity—only the performance facade of the man wearing a mask.

We might liken the situation described in v13 to the tabernacle/temple experience itself: Only the high priest—and only once per year—could enter the most holy place to be in the presence of God, to be in the presence of His *shekinah* glory. The people of Israel never got to see or experience that for themselves.

Moses placing the veil over his face was similar to that. When he was “on,” formally ministering Yahweh's message to the people of Israel, he was properly *unveiled*, allowing Yahweh's reflected *shekinah* glory to accompany the words of His message. But then he would hide his glowing face behind a veil, so that during other times, just being a man in the community, that glory was never shared with the common people. They only got to witness it at the formal performance.

We do not read in the Exodus passage that Yahweh *instructed* Moses to do this, so apparently it was his idea—with, according to Paul, a deleterious result regarding the glory of God. ➡

Or, as some commentators conclude, an instructive result, *demonstrating* that the consequences of the Law would eventually come to an end.

This is a tough passage, and the interpretations of the last part of v13 are all over the board. Some of the interpretations, in my opinion, try too hard; this interpretation by George Guthrie seems sensible and logical to me. Let's close with his summary remarks.

Guthrie: The veil then becomes symbolic of a dull heart that does not grasp God's purposes nor enjoy the outcome of being a people who know God's presence. In short, the people fail to embrace the fullness of the glorious relationship that God desires with them; this, for Paul, is analogous to those up to this day who fail to grasp the gospel because the veil still stands between them and the manifestation of God's glory in the gospel of Christ (3:14)... [The] key here is to understand the veil as a barrier standing between the people and the manifestation of God's presence... [Paul] simply means that the veil cut off their experience of God's manifest presence on Moses' glorious face. They were cut out, closed off, refused access. This then stands in bold contrast to the new covenant, where the veil has been taken away by Christ and there is free and open access to the presence of God by the indwelling Spirit.