***“From One Degree of Glory to Another”*** by Stephen Finlan at The First Church, 3-3-19

**Exodus 34:29–35**

29 Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. 30When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. . . . 32He gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him. 33When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; 34but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out . . . 35the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again.

**2 Corinthians 3:12–18**

 12 Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, 13not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. 14But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. . . . 16But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.17Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18And 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.

Today’s texts ask us to look at revelation, spiritual shining, and transformation. Nothing very challenging, right?

We read that Moses, when he comes down from the mountain, has the Lord’s glow on him. He’s *shining*, and people are afraid to come near him. That’s why he had to wear a veil over his face after every encounter with God: so he would not terrify people. This shining would fade over time. The mechanics are not explained, but we can guess that God’s glory is rubbing off on him. Is this a physical thing, or a spiritual thing that has some echo on the physical level? We would just be speculating. I am more interested in the story itself, and how the Apostle Paul uses it, since Paul seems to have real knowledge of the spiritual level.

With the image of glory, what Paul emphasizes is that the glory of Moses is fading, whereas the glory that comes from the Messiah will only grow stronger, “from one degree of glory to another.” He is not putting down Moses, but stressing the great difference between the two glories, which also means a great difference between the two revelations. Christ’s revelation is greater than Moses’. Christ imparts a glory that will never fade.

Next, Paul builds on the veil image, but switches its *meaning*. Instead of building on how a veil can shield against brightness, he builds on how a veil can block one’s vision. He says the unbelieving Jews read Scripture with a veil that blocks their understanding. The veil is only removed “when one turns to the Lord,” that is, recognizes the Messiah (3:16). Recognition of the Messiah is essential for correctly reading the Old Testament.

What else happens when one removes the veil, that is, recognizes who the Messiah is? One receives the Spirit, “and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (3:17). This implies that the law of Moses has a certain *lack* of freedom. He spells this out in Galatians, chapter 3: “before faith came, we were *imprisoned* and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed” (3:23). When *faith* came, Paul teaches, it was not only life-changing for one person at a time; it was *world*-changing. Faith brings a new age, and it comes with spiritual freedom. Because faith is the new way to be saved, and freedom is the byproduct of faith, the mere mention of faith and freedom suggests the new age. The mention of *Spirit* also suggests the new age. Messiah-recognition and Spirit enable one to read the Old Testament without one’s understanding being veiled.

Now comes verse 18, one of Paul’s long and intellectually *loaded* sentences. The first thing to remember is that, when Paul says “Lord,” he is talking about Christ. This sentence reads “We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18 ESV, English Standard Version). The “same image” refers to Christ’s image, so we are being transformed into Christ’s image.

This is stunning! We are being transformed, step by step, into resembling Jesus. That’s more than we know what to do with! It seems like a gift too great, or a calling too high, or a goal that’s unobtainable. And it would be, if we were expected to do it by ourselves. But there is a conspiracy of divine spiritual forces helping us, though never without our willing cooperation. The Spirit transforms us, God guides us, and Jesus prepares a place for us.

We can relax and contemplate this astounding promise that we will become Christlike. It happens in stages or by degrees, from one *degree* of glory into another. Perhaps it’s comparable to passing through stages in our earth lives, from infancy to childhood to teenage-hood to adulthood, to old age. Except our spiritual bodies will not get weaker with advancing age, and we will not die. In the afterlife, and over untold ages, we will progress into these degrees of glory, which must also involve degrees of spiritual unification, wisdom, and learning. We will be of service to all our fellows: to other former mortals like ourselves, and to angels and “ministering spirits” (Heb 1:14 ESV, RSV).

In what great and unimaginable projects will we be involved? I don’t know, but we will need to have spiritual, intellectual, and social skills adequate to the task. We don’t need to know the details now, but we *do* need to know the principle, the *idea* of spiritual transformation.

This concept of spiritual transformation toward the image of Christ or toward the character of God has a name in Christian theology. It is called *theōsis. Theōsis* is Godward growth. It speaks of the big scheme of everlasting growth. *Theōsis* is to some degree a neglected theme in Western Christianity, but it is being rediscovered by many.

I find it very comforting to know that there are stages of growth that lie ahead for me. The mention of *degrees* of glory tells me there are stages of spiritual growth, and each stage is important, just as each stage of our growth in the earth life is important. I will grow into God’s family, guided by the Spirit, aided by many spiritual friends, and so will you.

This insight, this faith, is what gave early Christians the courage and the good cheer to handle whatever came their way. They had certainty about eternal life. They had nothing to fear any more. They carried a little bit of glory around with them, and they didn’t have to veil it. “Be of good cheer,” Jesus said (Matt 9:2; 14:27 King James Version). *Theōsis* is built into the plan.