

# Transformation from Glory to Glory

By Elliott Johnson

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## FIRST ENCOUNTERS

Zane Hodges left an imprint on me as a student, and later on as a colleague, in a continuing discussion about interpretations of Biblical texts.

It is with seriousness that I address the subject of *sanctification*. More often than we want to admit, some who cherish a gospel of grace have taken advantage of grace to their own peril in personal sin.

That was not true of Zane Hodges. Yet it is more common than we want to acknowledge.

My first encounter with Zane came in 1960. It was my first year and I had enrolled in baby Greek. I went on to major in Greek Literature and New Testament Exegesis. I went to seminary to study the Bible. And almost immediately, I was drawn to Zane. In my study of the Greek language, it was his simple and heartfelt exegesis of texts in the Gospel of John that first impressed me.

Was he perfect? No, and he gave no impression of that. Did we always agree? No, but I always came away from our discussions with the impression that he appreciated my efforts, even as I respected and appreciated his mentoring of me. He would listen to me, ask probing questions, and frequently pose thoughtful alternative ways to consider the issue.

In one such discussion about the new covenant, the subject of *sanctification* came up. We both appreciated Lewis Sperry Chafer's *He That Is Spiritual* which focused its conclusions on Eph 5:18. In addition, he offered 2 Cor 3:18 as a related focus in the consideration of the doctrine. So in 2004, when *Six Secrets of the Christian Life* was offered for sale, I was pleased to find it included a popular exposition of 2 Cor 3:18 in the context of Paul's discussion of a New Covenant ministry.

In the *first* secret of the *Six Secrets of the Christian Life*, Zane answered the question: How does a Christian live the Christian life? The answer is in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not in our efforts. That's the point of Eph 5:18.

Then the *second* secret is found in 2 Cor 3:18. It answers the question: How does the Holy Spirit bring power to bear upon the Christian life? Second Corinthians 3:18 reveals that process of spiritual transformation. I'd like to highlight three aspects of that process.

## AS IN A MIRROR

*First, look into the mirror* (God's Word). What the Christian looks at is *the glory of the Lord* and one does so *as in a mirror*. To illustrate, he used the fable of the wicked witch and Snow White. The witch had always asked her magic mirror, "who is most fair?" The mirror responded, "you are." Then one day, it answered that Snow White was the fairest of them all.

In a similar fashion, Paul posits that the mirror is the Scriptures. When the Scripture is asked, who is most glorious?, it answers that it is Jesus Christ. On earth, he revealed Himself to be none other than the very glory of God. Yet in Jesus' generation, the Jews failed to see his glory as they read the Scripture. Jesus explained that they searched the Scriptures looking for themselves, thinking that it revealed how they could gain eternal life, following what it said about what must be done. "You pour over the Scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them, yet they testify about Me" (John 5:39).

So if they read the story of Jacob in the Torah, they saw his story as their story. He was their ancestor. They were his heirs. Yet, what Jacob had failed to gain because of his duplicity and deceit, they would gain from inheritance. They would keep the law. In their own effort, they would gain the blessing promised to Abraham.

## BELIEVE

*Second, look with a believing heart.* Paul then explained what Jesus had described among the Jewish readers of Scripture. It went back to Moses who talked to God face to face. When Moses returned to the people of Israel, his face shone with God's glory. The people were afraid. So Moses veiled his face so they would not see God's glory. Then Paul transitioned to his own day and posited that the Jews still had a veil over their eyes when they read the Scriptures.

As a result, when they read the story of Jacob, the Jews failed to see what Jacob came to see. In the story, they saw themselves but without the deceitful and deceptive heart. So they failed to discover what Jacob discovered when he wrestled with the Lord all night: Blessing can't be wrestled from God in one's own power. Jacob, in exhaustion, finally realized that blessings came from *believing* the LORD's word of promise. A veil lay over the Jews' heart as it had over Jacob's heart as Paul said (2 Cor 3:15). As Jacob's heart turned to the LORD in pleading for a blessing, the veil was taken away (2 Cor 3:16). And what he received was a new name – no longer would he be *Jacob* (usurper), but in God's promise he would be *Israel* (he wrestled with man and with God and would overcome). By *faith* Jacob would ultimately overcome in the promised Seed – Jesus Christ. Glory appeared in the hope of overcoming through the Seed. It is that Glory which the mirror reveals when read in faith.

*Faith* is the precondition for *beholding...the glory of the Lord*. Zane summarized the point of *sanctification*: “It takes only a moment of faith to believe in Christ and be eternally saved. But we need to *continue to believe* in Him to experience the process of change and growth.” So the Holy Spirit's power comes to bear upon the believer as they read and meditate, by faith, upon Scripture. And in the Scripture they see Christ's Glory.

## FROM GLORY TO GLORY

*Third, realize that the process of transformation is from glory to glory.* What was taking place in my life was God's work of *sanctification*. Second Corinthians 3:18 explained that process in more detail in terms of three transformation principles.

The first principle is that Christian transformation doesn't take place all at once. As I came to spend more time in the Scriptures, I also came to recognize Scripture's role more clearly. It wasn't so much my agenda of change, but as I read Scripture, a sense of conviction would come over me concerning different issues. Rather than focusing on what I could do, I focused on the Spirit, as I turned in prayer to Christ about the issue. I believed that He could change me, even though there were struggles with selfishness or subtle pride. And, in time, I realized changes were taking place.

The second and related transformation principle is that Christian involvement with the mirror of God's Word is life-long.

Yes, I miss Zane and our conversations about the interpretation of the meaning of different texts, but the essential ingredients remain—the Spirit and the Scripture.

## FULL OF GRACE & TRUTH

The third transformation principle is that the goal of the process is an increasing conformity to the likeness of Jesus Christ and to His glory. And at that moment, I remembered that first class in baby Greek. Not only did we study the declensions of nouns and the parsing of verbs, but I remember those early expositions. In particular I remembered John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we *beheld His glory, the glory* as of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (italics added).” In other words, *to be like Christ is to be full of grace and truth*.

To be gracious, in our politically correct world, there is no truth. Tolerance and truth are often seen as mutually exclusive. So when my wife asks me—do you like my dress?—how should I answer? I can lose if I say no. I can also lose if I say yes and her friends don't agree. The white lie becomes the servant of compassion and unity.

But, in the world of Scripture, without *truth*, a believer would see no need for *grace*. And without *grace*, I would never be able to accept the *truth* of who I am.

Zane proposed that these twin, balancing virtues appear and reappear in John's account of Jesus' ministry. The most striking was in his exposition of John 7:59–8:11. It was also unexpected because most of our translations doubt the authenticity of this textual tradition. The claim was that this text was not in the original text located at this place.

However, when Zane introduced the textual evidence, it appeared to be plausible to include it here. Then when he showed how the pericope fit in the argument of John 7 and 8, I was persuaded. And the message of the passage showed the glory of Jesus, full of grace and truth before the sinners of His day.

The religious leaders in Jerusalem posed a dilemma for Jesus that was intended to discredit him before the crowds gathered for the Feast of Tabernacles. The strategy followed those in the crowd who entertained the conclusion that Jesus was indeed the Messiah (John 7:40-52). A woman, caught in the very act of adultery, was thrust in the midst of the people before Jesus. The dilemma concerned the verdict Jesus would issue concerning her guilt or innocence. If Jesus would condemn her, as her behavior warranted, the people would ask why the man was not included. Justice demanded that both be condemned. But the religious leaders were using the woman to serve their agenda. That also was sin. However, if Jesus were to disregard her sin and overlook her guilt, Jesus would put himself in conflict with Moses. That was the dilemma.

But Jesus turned their testing into a trap exposing their evil. In *truth*, He challenged the leaders according to the law to cast the first stone. Their agenda in using the woman for their own purposes was sin and discredited their witness. So He challenged that the one without sin should throw the first stone. Yet in *grace*, Jesus allowed the guilty Jewish leaders to leave without facing judgment before the crowd.

In a similar fashion, He acted in *grace* toward the woman. She deserved to be condemned for her sin, but He chose not to exercise judgment at that time. In *truth*, however, He firmly challenged her to sin no more. And in the challenge, Jesus was available in *grace* to help her deal with her sin. As far as the text is concerned, we don't know whether the woman took advantage of Jesus' grace.

I conclude that *sanctification* is the work of God in which we are daily *confronted* with the mirror of *truth*, and *find grace* as we approach our Lord's throne in a believing and repentant spirit.

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