

The Power of the Gospel

17

Conformed to His Image

Read Galatians 4:19

The whole Christian life is moving toward one special goal: the likeness of Christ himself. This is the “living hope” that Peter talks about in **1 Peter 1:3**, a goal that is clearly elucidated by Paul in **Colossians 1:28-29** (as rendered by the NIV):

“We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”

Everything the Holy Spirit does in your life is working toward that one goal. This is why Paul was able to say in **Romans 8:28** (NIV):

“And we know that *in all things* God works *for the good* of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

The meaning of the Greek verb translated “to work together” literally means “to cooperate, to work together, to work with one another.”¹ The sense of this verse is that everything that you face as a Christian is reshaped by God along the pattern of his purpose for your life. There is a “pulling together” of situations and events, a convergence of circumstances all redirected by the power of God’s Spirit toward one great goal. Everything you face in life now, whether good or bad, is ultimately used by God to further that goal for you. Instead of destroying you, even the worst of situations can be molded by God so that the ultimate outcome is as God intended. As J. B. Phillips translates this verse, “everything that happens fits into a pattern for good.”

But what exactly is this “good” toward which all things are working? What is the “purpose” to which we have been called? What is the goal toward which all circumstances in your life are converging? Let’s take a look at **Romans 8:28** in its context.

Read Romans 8:29-30

The good toward which all things are now working in your life is nothing less than the goal of you being conformed to the likeness of Christ himself.

Created In the Image of God

Read Genesis 1:26-27

From the beginning, God's intention was to have a race of people in his own image.* Most Christians already know this, but how many have asked the question: *Why* would God want to do something like that? *Why* did God decide to create us in his image? In the next chapter of Genesis, God gives Adam an object lesson in why he had created man in his likeness.

Read Genesis 2:18-24

This is the story of how Adam named all the animals. But in this story we catch an insight into God's purpose in creating man. For in the progression of events from the naming of the animals to the creation of Eve, we see a parallel between man's situation and God's situation.

Have you ever wondered why God went about the creation of Eve in this way? Why didn't he just create Adam and Eve together. We know that this wasn't a slip-up on God's part, that he had absent-mindedly forgotten one important element of his grand design. No, from the beginning God had intended that there be male and female (read again [Genesis 1:27](#)).

Let's take a look at the progress of events in [Genesis 2:18-24](#), in order to determine what God was in fact teaching Adam through these events.

- **Verse 18:** God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper *suitable for him*." This statement sets the pace for all that is to follow. For in this statement we see what God is intending Adam to learn.
- **Verses 19-20:** God brings all the animals to Adam and Adam names them.
- **Verse 20:** But out of this exercise, a clear issue arises. There is no "suitable helper" found among all of God's creation.
- **Verse 21-22:** It is at this point that God creates the woman. But rather than creating her independent of the man, he takes her out of the man.
- **Verse 23:** Adam immediately recognizes the significance of this. The woman is "bone of my bones" and "flesh of my flesh." The fact that the woman was "taken out of the man" strikes home with great clarity to Adam.
- **Verse 24:** The writer then goes on to draw a parallel between this creation event, with the woman being "taken out of the man," to the rejoining of a man and woman in marriage. The result of this union is that they are "united" and "become one flesh."

Now, let's ask ourselves two questions:

* It is interesting to note that God created you as a three-in-one being just like himself. Although this is not the sole meaning of being created in God's image, it shows a fascinating parallel. God is three-in-one – Father, Son and Holy Spirit ([Matthew 28:19](#)). And you are also three-in-one – spirit, soul and body ([1 Thessalonians 5:23](#)).

- **Why was no suitable helper found among the animals?** The answer is: Because none were *compatible* with Adam. In every aspect of his being – spirit, soul and body – there were unlike him. They were not in his image.
- **Why did God take the woman out of the man?** The answer is: Because she would be in his likeness. She was “bone of his bone” and “flesh of his flesh.” They were compatible in spirit, soul and body. They had a common image.

When God created man in his image, what he was after was a *compatibility* between man and himself. This compatibility was designed to be expressed in fellowship and communication. But being made in the image of God was just the starting point. The goal of this likeness was to be united in relationship and purpose. It was designed to be a “bone of my bones” and “flesh of my flesh” quality of relationship. For just as Eve was created by God to be a “suitable helper” to Adam, so we were created by God to be a “suitable helper” to him.

Read Ephesians 5:25-32

In this passage, Paul is instructing husbands on how to love their wives. But the parallel he draws is that of Christ’s love for his church. In fact, at the end of this passage, Paul states: “This is a profound mystery – *but I am talking about Christ and the church.*” In other words, human marriage is a picture of a heavenly reality, not the other way around.

In **verse 31**, Paul actually quotes from **Genesis 2:24**. And it is after this verse, that Paul makes his statement, “I am talking about Christ and the church.” God’s intention all along was for us to be united with himself in the same depth and quality of union as was being pictured in the uniting of Adam and Eve as “one flesh.”* Yes, you are created in the image of God. But this is for a reason. You are in his likeness so that you can be joined with him in relationship and purpose.

The Marred Image

Read Romans 3:10-18

When Adam turned from God, sin entered into human experience (**Romans 5:12**) and all mankind fell short of God’s glory (**Romans 3:23**). Suddenly there was a fly in the ointment. The image of God had become marred by sin. Yes, there were still traces of a compatibility between God and man, but sin destroyed all possibility of union in relationship or purpose. So what was God going to do?

Read Jeremiah 18:1-6

We see in this parable a pre-picture of what God intended to do with your life. Your life had become marred while being shaped in the potter’s hand. And so

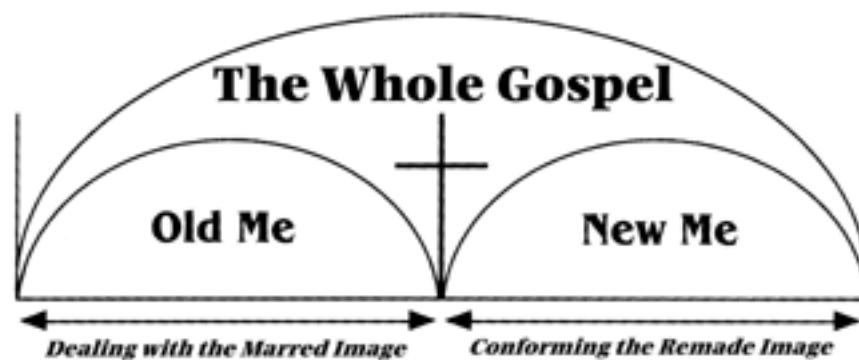
* Note that even though Adam and Eve became “one flesh,” there was no loss of identity or individuality. Being conformed into the likeness of God is not being “absorbed” into God. It is the union of compatibility in relationship and purpose.

God, as the master potter, decided not to try to fix up the marred pot. Instead, he went back to step one and reshaped the clay into a brand-new pot.

Through the work of the Cross, you have now been brought back on track. You are again in the center of God's purpose. Once again, the image of God has been stamped upon you through the Holy Spirit who has come into your life. Because you are "in Christ," your life is now compatible with God's life.

When seen in this light, we can understand why God has made the Cross a clear dividing line between the Old Self and the New Self.

- The Old Self – the marred image
- The New Self – the recreated image



The Recreated Image

Read Matthew 5:48

What an incredible statement! Do you realize that the words of Jesus quoted in the verse above represent God's expectation for your life? Impossible, you might say, and rightly so, for who could ever live up to such a standard? Who could ever be perfect as God is perfect?

The incredible thing about the Gospel is that this is exactly what God has in mind! And the starting point for this high standard of godliness is the new self. This is what Peter refers to when he says in **2 Peter 1:3** (NIV):

“His divine power has given us everything we need *for life and godliness* through our knowledge of him who called us *by his own glory and goodness.*”

Everything you need for life and godliness is found in the new self which God himself has created for you. But that is not the end of the story. The re-created new self just puts you back to the original plan God had for Adam. Adam was created in the image of God, but he still had choices ahead of him to make – choices that would either enhance or hinder God's purpose for his life.

The whole Gospel is geared toward propelling you toward the goal of full maturity

in Christ. Your new self is “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness,” but now you must put on the new self and walk in the Spirit (**Ephesians 4:24**). It is the new self that is being conformed to the full likeness of Christ, moving from the *potential* of a Christ-like life to the full *outworking* of a Christ-like life.

The Message phrases **Romans 8:29** in a vivid way:

“God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him.”

In **Ephesians 4:24** and **Colossians 3:10**, we see two aspects of this new image that has been stamped upon your life:

- **Ephesians 4:24**: This verse tells us that the new self has been “*created to be like* God in true righteousness and holiness.” This describes the *starting point* – the remade image, which has the potential of being conformed to the likeness of Christ.
- **Colossians 3:10**: This verse tells us that the new self is “*being renewed* in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” This describes the *process* of God’s work in conforming the recreated image into the full likeness of Christ.

To be conformed literally means to become “as having the same form.”² A craftsman will sometimes use an “original” or “master,” which then becomes a reference to make multiple copies of his work. Christ is the original prototype, the master template against which our lives are crafted. He is in the image of God (see **Colossians 1:15**; **2 Corinthians 4:4**; **Hebrews 1:3**). In being conformed to the likeness of Christ, we are also being conformed to the likeness of the Father.

Read Hebrews 10:14

This extraordinary statement shows the nature of the conforming work of the Holy Spirit.

- You have been “*made* perfect forever.” You have already received the righteousness of Christ himself and stand without guilt or shame before the throne of God (**2 Corinthians 5:21**). You are perfect *only* because of your identification with Christ.* It is not your perfection; it is Christ’s perfection. This is the *once for all* aspect of the image of God.
- You are “*being* made holy.” You need to *grow* in the image of God. A baby may be perfect – it is a complete and whole human being – but it still has to grow in that perfection. This is the *daily* aspect of the image of God outworked in your life.

Read Philippians 3:12-14

* Christ identified totally with you, so that you could identify totally with him. God sent his Son “in the *likeness* of sinful man” (**Romans 8:3-4**; **Philippians 2:7**) so that you could be “conformed to the *likeness* of his Son” (**Romans 8:29**).

The prize toward which Paul was pressing on was the fullness of everything God had planned for him in Christ. Note how **2 Peter 1:3** tells us that you have received “everything [you] need for life and godliness through [your] knowledge of him...” Paul’s statement of his goal to “know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (**Philippians 3:10**) is the *means* by which “the prize” – the totality of God’s goal for his life – is attained.

Two Aspects of the Image

The image of God has been designed to be outworked in your life on two levels:

An individual image

As an individual believer in the Lord, you have been created in the image of God. The nature of this image can be understood in your relationship with God as his child.

Read John 1:12-13

Read Romans 8:15-17

Read Galatians 4:4-7

When you look at a baby, you often see in it the likeness of its parents (note **Genesis 5:3**). The baby is a unique individual, but it bears the family resemblance. In the same way, when you were born into God’s family by the Holy Spirit, you were stamped with the family likeness. But like a baby, this is an immature likeness. You have yet to grow up into the full potential of the likeness of Christ.

Read Titus 3:4-7

The *New International Version* translates **verse 5** in this way:

“...He saved us through the washing of *rebirth* and *renewal* by the Holy Spirit.”

Note how Paul emphasizes two aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit:

- **Rebirth** – this is the *starting point* of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. You are born into God’s family as a child and heir of God. This is where the image of God is stamped upon your life.
- **Renewal** – this is the *process* of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. You now begin to grow into a mature son* of God. This is where you are conformed into the full likeness of Christ.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:18

When most Christians think of the image of God, they think of the individual aspect of this image. But this is not the only expression of the image of God.

* There are some titles in the Bible which are not gender-specific (note **Galatians 3:28**). You are a “son of God,” regardless of whether you are male or female, for under Old Testament culture, the son had special privileges which foreshadow your relationship with God today as his son. In the same way, you are part of the Bride of Christ (**Ephesians 5:25; Revelation 19:7-8**), regardless of whether you are male or female, for this picture of a bride prepared for her husband reflects both the intimacy of your relationship with God and the transforming work he is doing in your life in preparation for the outworking of his eternal purpose for you (**Ephesians 1:4**).

A corporate image

It is not just as individuals that we are being conformed to the likeness of Christ. We are also being conformed as a corporate* Body.

Read Ephesians 4:13

The Christian life was never designed by God to be solely an individual experience. It is also meant to be a corporate experience.

This corporate image of God is foreshadowed in the creation of man as male and female (note **Genesis 5:1-2**). Individually, they were created in the image of God. But that image also had a corporate expression in their union. It was *together* that God intended for Adam and Eve to display the likeness of their Creator.

In the same way, it is *together* as the Body of Christ, that God intends for us to attain to “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” And not only does this apply to the Church as it exists in any one generation; it also applies to the entire company of the redeemed, both in Old and New Testament times, down through the corridors of history.

Read Hebrews 11:40

It is only “together with us” that the heroes of faith in the Old Testament enter into the fullness of God’s eternal purpose for them. Only *together* are we all made perfect!

The individual and corporate expressions of God’s plan for his Church can be seen throughout the Bible and it is important to recognize when God is speaking to you individually and when he is including you in a corporate expression of his plan.

Let’s take a couple of examples:

- **1 Corinthians 6:19:** Here Paul declares that “your body (individually) is a temple of the Holy Spirit” and links this declaration with a warning against sexual immorality. This scripture establishes the fact that you as an individual are a temple of the Holy Spirit.
- **1 Corinthians 3:16:** Here Paul declares that “you yourselves (corporately) are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you (plural),” and then links this declaration with a warning against destroying God’s temple. Note that in **verse 17**, Paul is not warning against those who would defile their own bodies with immorality, but against those who would defile the entire corporate temple of the Holy Spirit (see also **2 Corinthians 6:16**).

* The word “corporate” is used throughout the Biblical Studies Course to refer to that which is plural or multi-person (i.e. not individual). Thus the Body of Christ is a “corporate” (rather than an “individual”) Body. Corporate praise is the praise of a congregation. And the corporate image of God is that likeness of Christ which is expressed in the company of the redeemed.

The Process of Transformation

Let's now take a closer look at the individual expression of God's image in your life and, in particular, the mechanism by which God conforms you to the likeness of Christ.

Read again 2 Corinthians 3:18

Different translations of this verse bring out different aspects of its meaning. Note these versions:

New International Version: "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

New King James Version: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord."

God's Word: "As all of us reflect the Lord's glory with faces that are not covered with veils, we are being changed into his image with ever-increasing glory. This comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

New Century Version: "Our faces, then, are not covered. We all show the Lord's glory, and we are being changed to be like him. This change in us brings ever greater glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

New Living Translation: "And all of us have had that veil removed so that we can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more."

The Living Bible: "But we Christians have no veil over our faces; we can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him."

The New Testament in Modern English: "But all of us who are Christians have no veils on our faces, but reflect like mirrors the glory of the Lord. We are transfigured in ever-increasing splendor into his own image, and the transformation comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

Let's dissect **2 Corinthians 3:18** for a moment to see what it is telling us about the transformation process. There are five points that are made clearly by Paul in this verse:

- We have unveiled faces.
- We all reflect the Lord's glory "as in a mirror" (KJV).
- This reflection process results in us being transformed into Christ's likeness.

- This transformation is progressive – “from glory to glory,” or “with ever-increasing glory.”
- This transformation is from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Paul begins **2 Corinthians 3:18** with the statement that we have “unveiled faces.” This follows on from what he has just written in the verses prior.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:13-16

Paul is using the example of Moses, who had to put a veil over his face to protect the people from the radiance that was shining from his face after his close encounter with God’s glory (**Exodus 34:29-35**). Note that everytime Moses went into the presence of God, however, he took the veil off.

In the same way, says Paul, we now enter the presence of God without any veil covering our face. Prior to coming to know Christ, we did have such a veil, metaphorically speaking. It clouded our minds so that we could not see the truth of the Gospel (note again **2 Corinthians 4:4**). But now, in Christ, that veil has been removed, allowing us to grasp the scope of the *whole* Gospel of the glory of Christ.

But then Paul goes on in **2 Corinthians 3:18** (NLT) to say that “all of us have had that veil removed so that we can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord.”

The Mirror Effect

A mirror is made to reflect someone’s image. Go find a mirror (either one mounted on the wall or a portable one) and note how it works. The operation of a mirror is extremely simple. There is no need for an instruction manual, because we all know how it works. For a mirror to reflect your image, there is only *one thing* you need to do: *Get close to it!*

This is also how God has designed the transformation process to work. It is by *coming close to him* that we are transformed into his likeness.

Sociologists use a term called “the mirror self” to describe how a person forms a self-image. In its essence, the mirror self works like this: we reflect the values, expectations and perceptions of those who are closest to us.

We see this in operation every day. If a group of people spend enough time together, they will begin to “reflect” one another in mannerisms, speech, attitudes and philosophy. This is why Paul says: “Bad company corrupts good character” (**1 Corinthians 15:33**).

Sometimes we even joke about a couple who have been married for some years that “they look alike.” But God has created this “mirror effect” in our lives because he has purposed for us to come close to him and thus reflect his nature.

The whole purpose of the Gospel is to remove every barrier between you and God *so that you can come close!* It is in *closeness to God* that you are trans-

formed into his likeness!

You see, everything depends on where your face is turned. If your face is turned toward the world, what do you think you will reflect? If your face is turned toward your old self, trying to fix it up yourself, what do you think you will reflect? But if your face is turned toward the Lord, daily drawing upon his grace, guess what it is you will reflect!

Paul closes off **2 Corinthians 3:18** with the declaration that this process of transformation “comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

Read 2 Corinthians 3:17

Before actually describing the transformation process, Paul here underlines the source of that transformation process: the Holy Spirit.

The *New International Version* translates **verse 17** in this way:

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

Do you want to have freedom? Then go to where the freedom is. Where is the freedom? “...where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

This is the declaration of the Gospel. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, *there* is freedom. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, *there* is transformation. The Gospel opens the door for you to walk hand in hand with the Spirit of God, experiencing both his freedom and his work of transformation.

Can anything be simpler than that? But that’s exactly what the Gospel is: simple. God has totally dealt with your old self in order to create a new self. Your one responsibility is to put off the old self and put on the new self, actively cooperating with the Holy Spirit in his work to conform you to the likeness of Christ.

¹ E. H. Gifford, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, as quoted by Fritz Rienecker & Clean Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), p.367.

² Fritz Rienecker & Clean Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), p.367.