

In pursuit of glory

Exodus 33:18-23, 1 Corinthians 2:6-10

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Introduction: How do *you* define “glory”? Is it about honor or beauty or great achievement? What comes to mind when you think of *glory*? Is it a beautiful sunset or landscape, or an award or distinction someone receives? Or is it a rhapsodic piano concerto, or a thrilling football match between your favorite team and their archrival, or perhaps a fantastic spread of dishes for Thanksgiving dinner? I’m remembering this weekend a year ago when we were celebrating our youngest son’s wedding – and what a glorious moment it was, the culmination of such a long wait! And the bride and groom were so lovely, their parents so elegant, and to have all six of our grandchildren together for that delightful event was such an emotional high! So as I’ve anticipated the anniversary of that glorious event, my mind has been whirring with a book project, which I thought I would entitle “In Pursuit of Glory!” (until I discovered that this title has already been used for several books and a board game – about sports and war!). So maybe they already stole my title, but not my idea! It’s about three of my grandchildren as they get enmeshed in a search for “glory” (no doubt I’ll have to do a sequel about the other three!). This is the younger set of grandkids who now live in Texas: the oldest is a bookworm, the middle child is a natural scientist, and the youngest is a philologist (they are type-cast in the book according to their true-life personalities!). Each one thought he or she would be the first to discover the greatest glory on earth, but as they work through their research, they find they need each other’s insights to unlock the overall mystery.

So today’s message is really the “backstory” behind their explorations and research, the Scriptural context for it all – and this part is no fantasy, but pure revelation, starting with early Old Testament conceptions of glory. For example, Gen. 13:2 says that Abraham was “glorious” in livestock, silver, and gold. The Hebrew word *kabod* designated a real value according to a specific weight; so the foundation of *human* glory was related to riches, though it also had implications for one’s social position and power, as when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers and told them to go back to his father and tell him about all the “glory” Joseph had in Egypt (Gen. 45:13). But glory could also designate the splendor of beauty, as in Aaron’s priestly robe (Ex. 28:2,40), the glory of the temple or of Jerusalem, the “*glory of Lebanon*” (Is. 35:1), etc. But poor old Job, after he was ruined and humiliated, exclaimed: “*He has stripped me of my glory!*” (Job 19:9). So this is all about an earthly standard of glory, isn’t it?

The Israelites compared the glory of Saul and David in terms of their conquests and battles: “*Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.*” Is this any different from today’s idea of glory? Think of how many computer games glorify war: *Counter Strike 2*, *Fortnite*, *Valorant*, *Escape from Tarkov*, *Call of Duty*. But this kind of glory is what the Bible refers to as the glory of the flesh – it’s like the grass (here today, gone tomorrow), or like the glory of the dust (no permanence, no substance)! But **God’s glory** is such a different story! The mystery is **how that glory is revealed**

and experienced in this world and in human life (seen by some, ignored by others). The nighttime sky was one of my first object lessons in God's greatness! What a thrill it was for me, on a summer night with my brother, to gaze up at that huge expanse dotted with distant points of light and an occasional "shooting star," and to realize this was all God's handiwork. So in nature's beauty, order, and grandeur God's glory first impacts our minds. But a second way is through the glory of God's image in humanity (Gen. 1:26-27) – John calls it **"the light that illumines every human being"** (Jn. 1:9). And a third channel of His glory's revelation is His presence with His people, especially revealed to the Israelites as **YAHWEH** showed His power to deliver them from the oppression of Egypt, from the dangers of the desert, and from other predatory nations. Then when they came to Mt. Sinai, God gave them a special visual display of His glory: **"Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel"** (Ex. 24:17): this was strong motivation for worship and learning the fear of the Lord!

As Moses grew in confidence in his relationship with this powerful and glorious God of his fathers, he dared to make a strange petition: sensing God's friendship, he became bold enough to ask to see God's glory (Ex. 33:18). God's response was, **"You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."** Then the Lord said, **"Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my GLORY passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen"** (vv. 19-23). Then in Ex. 34:6, as God declares His name, He links His glory tightly to five adjectives that are basic to His character: **"YAHWEH passed before him and proclaimed, "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, great in lovingkindness and truth!"** [Hebrew *rachum, hannun, erek apphim, rab hesed ve-emeth.*] Nothing in the whole universe can compare with God's glory revealed in His name and His character! The multiple repetitions of these terms throughout the Old Testament is proof of their radical relevance (Num. 14:18; Ps. 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Joel 2:13, Jon. 4:2, Neh. 9:17).

Because Moses was so close to that glory (pillar of fire) for a long period of time, he ended up with a radiating face, so **"as he came down from the mountain, he didn't know that the skin of his face shone because he'd been talking with God."** Aaron and all the people of Israel saw it, and they were afraid to come near him. So later he wore a veil until it had faded. Then at the dedication of the tent of meeting, God's glory invaded the tabernacle, consecrating it (Ex. 29:43), and Israel would be in service to that glory all through their wandering (Lev. 9:6, 23), living out their whole pilgrimage under its influence and guidance (Num. 16:1-17:15, 20:1-13, 40:36ss). Israel was developing its theology of glory as they came to understand generation after generation just how powerful and glorious their God was. Later David would write (in Ps. 19) that the heavens themselves declare the glory of God. In 1 Kings 8, **Solomon** saw the glory of God fill the temple, so the priests could not remain to minister. **Isaiah** would also see the glory of the Lord in the temple, with a holiness that exposed the impurity of the creature, its nothingness, its fragility, and he would hear the seraphim declaring that all the earth is full of the Lord's glory. But a little over a century later when Israel filled the cup of its rebellion to overflowing, and still they didn't return to the Lord, Ezekiel (chp. 10-11) presents his vision of the glory of the Lord **abandoning** the temple because of the people's sin, so it would be only a question of time before the temple itself would be demolished. Yet Isaiah (chp. 40-55) had written at length about the day when Israel would return from exile, and the glory of God would accompany them (Is. 52, 60), and Ezekiel would also share this vision regarding the return of the glory to the temple. So throughout the history of the second temple (rebuilt at the end of their exile), there is a deep **yearning for the Lord's glory to return**, but it doesn't happen. The flames of hope were also fanned by the prophet Haggai (2:7): **"I will make all nations tremble, and the Desired of all nations will come; and He will fill this house with glory, says Yahweh of hosts."**

So now we fast-forward six centuries, when the glory of God's presence among His people would be manifested personally in the glory of the Logos – the Word made flesh in Mary's Son (Lk. 2:9-14). In Jesus' day, they were still longing for the glory of Israel to come back to the temple. And in His

ministry Jesus filled Israel with the glory of the knowledge of His Father, faithfully representing His character in every sphere of life, so that John would bear this witness regarding the Word made flesh: ***“we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”*** On Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem, you may remember how He stops at the Mt. of Olives, with the temple in view, and He breaks into tears on behalf of the city ... because they couldn’t recognize the day of their visitation (the glory of the Lord had returned, but He wasn’t received). Later, Jesus would enter that temple to cleanse it one last time, throwing out the money changers and vendors (Mk. 11/Is. 56:7), who in their pursuit of earthly glory couldn’t see the heavenly glory in their midst!

Jesus had warned the Jews that it’s mutually exclusive to seek glory from others and from God Himself: ***“I do not accept glory from human beings, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?”*** (Jn. 5:39-44). The Pharisees didn’t know anything but “horizontal glory” (among themselves); so they didn’t seek the glory that comes only from God. Our most intimate desire is to be loved and to love, to enjoy communion and friendship; that desire for relationship stems from God’s image in us, but under the influence of sin, it degenerates into a **desire to be admired**, honored (even worshiped), a longing after “greater personal value” (glory, Is. 40:6). Your personal value (human dignity) comes with the *imago Dei*, but thanks to sin, it has become distorted and deficient from a very early age. Our tendency to try to satisfy that deficit in our own way is really strong, instead of turning to Christ, the only one who can restore us, because He lived for the glory of His Father, and not for His own glory. Jesus even said He had given this glory to His followers (Jn. 17:22).

The revelation of His glory that the disciples saw all through Jesus’ ministry would ultimately explode into a veritable “meteor shower” when the Gospels speak of the crucifixion of ***“the Lord of glory”***; it was the greatest tragedy of all human history, yet at the same time, the most glorious moment of the whole cosmos. In Jn. 12:22ss, some Greeks came wanting to see Jesus, and for Him it was the definitive sign that His time had come – the “moment of true glory,” like that of a seed that has to fall to the ground and die in order to bear fruit. In Jn. 17, Jesus prayed that the Father would glorify Him with the glory He had with His Father before the foundation of the world. The cross would be the occasion for that glory to be manifested to humanity. The Kingdom of God, under its greatest attack from the enemy, would rise to its culminating point on earth, resisting the most ferocious attacks from humans and the hosts of Satan, but it remained unmovable: a fortress of grace and forgiveness! This is the point in the story I’m writing for my grandchildren where I imagine them coming onto the scene of the crucifixion (in their Bibles), and they begin to hear that voice of God declaring His name and those key terms that clarify His character: compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and truth. Now they see what those words mean in flesh and blood, and they fall to their knees in awe! This was the answer to their search for glory – the highest glory in the universe: God’s self-sacrifice on our behalf, incarnating His mercies and love! And thanks to the resurrection, it’s the same glory that God wants to share with all humanity – His own kingdom coming on earth as His Spirit rules our hearts and His glory comes to dwell in its earthly temples (Col. 1:27, 2 Cor. 3:18)!

So what is the glory that you’re pursuing in your own life? Will you come and investigate the glory of this King? You will find that no one else’s glory can even begin to compare!