

“God’s Glory” | Ephesians 1:3-14
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(Discussion questions on page 7)

One way of understanding Ephesians 1:3-14 is to imagine we are making our way up a spiraling staircase inside a tall stone tower of a castle. As we spiral upward, one wall has windows in it overlooking the castle courtyard. We look out at a busy scene. People working and trading and talking. This represents God’s sovereign plan, which is being worked out through the events and plans of humankind—things are happening “according to God’s purpose, according to his plan” Paul says again and again the passage (1:5, 8, 11).

As we spiral upward, we also come to a wall in the staircase with shelves, and on these shelves, we see one blessing after another: the blessing of election, redemption, and assurance. There are our “spiritual blessings” in Christ (1:4).

But there is another wall we pass as we go up, and this has windows that face the sea. As we climb higher, we look out at a blazing orange sunrise over a vast ocean that glistens as glass. The light of the sun increasingly illumining the castle courtyard, our shelves of blessings, everything. This last vista represents the glory of God, the third theme that reverberates in this passage, with Paul sounding the phrase, “to the praise of the glory of God” no less than three times (1:6, 12, 14).

In the past two weeks, as we’ve lived in this tower, we’ve considered God’s Plan and then God’s Blessings. Today we must look out at the rising sun, and glistening sea, and consider God’s glory.

The theme of God’s glory runs through the Bible, and through time. Before the foundations of the world, Jesus tells us of a glory he had with the father (John 17:4-5). As time moves into eternity, we see saints in heaven singing, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory” (Rev 4:11). Scripture adds that God created his people “for his glory” (Isa 43:7), and we are to do “everything unto the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).

For God to make his glory the ultimate purpose of things is not egomania (which would be the case if any of us did this!). It is simply the result of God being the most valuable, beautiful, worthy being that exists. For God to set up anything over himself to glorify, would be for God to commit idolatry.

But what, exactly, is glory? And what does it mean to glorify God?

Glory implies both weightiness and brightness. To glorify God is to experience His heaviness in your life—his weight rebalancing the scales of value you have. To glorify God is see, with the eyes of your heart, His beauty and splendor. God’s glory is his greatness and honor.

To glorify God is to have an awareness of God's greatness in your heart, and a desire to honor God's name with your life. To glorify God is to *delight in the heart, and honor with the life*, God's Godness.¹ This is what it means "to praise God's glory." It is the opposite of indifference and disrespect toward God.

But we face the deepest of dilemmas when we come to this theme. And not because we don't like glory. We are glory creatures—constantly noticing, with our hearts and minds, the things around us that are weighty, important, beautiful, praiseworthy. It just that we notice everything *but* God. Our sinful nature, as Paul will explain in Romans, is to "exchange the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (Rom 1:23). With our hearts we praise the glory of false gods, and neglect the honor due the True God.

This is due pride, on the one hand, but also blindness. We simply cannot clearly see God's greatness in our fallen world. Now we see, as Paul says, "through a glass darkly" (1 Cor 13:12). We need the eyes of our hearts to be opened to see the greatness and goodness and splendor of God.

And this is our prayerful aim as we move up this spiraling staircase of Eph 1:3-14 a final time: that the Spirit of God would enable our dim-eyed hearts to see the grandeur of God. Looking out these windows to the sunlight sea, we will take in three vistas of God's glory: **(1) God's Glory in Redemption; (2) God's Glory in Grace; (3) God's Glory in Sustaining.**

I. God's Glory in Redemption

The first thing to notice in our passage is that Paul is not speaking about God's glory in His works of creation—though His work of creation teems with glory:

The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps 19:1).² God's "invisible attributes ... his eternal power and divine nature, are clearly perceived ... in the things that have been made," adds Romans 1:20.

In a sunset, mountain-scape, the brilliance of the human body, the miracle of human birth, the creativity of a composer—in all these things, we see the glory of the Creator.

But it is not the theater of creation Paul draws attention to here, but the drama of salvation—God's work in redemption. Our passage is a verbal narration of God's electing (1:4), adopting (1:5), redeeming (1:7), and sanctifying and sustaining of His people (1:4, 11-14). It is this work that is "to the praise of God's glory," and it centers upon Christ, who we are told elsewhere is the most intensified display of God's glory:

¹ "Godness" is a noun that means the quality of being God, or the divine nature of God as it is expressed in a human being. The word "godness" is derived from the word "god" and the suffix "-ness". The earliest known use of the word "godness" was before 1225 in Ælfric's Homily *In Die Sancto Pentecosten*.

² The saints in heaven sing, "**Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory ... for you created all things**" (Rev 4:11).

He [=Christ] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb 1:3).

Nowhere are we told that a mountain, or stream, or solar system—thought bursting with glory—are the “exact imprint of God’s nature” or the “radiance of the glory of God.” Christ is.

The point here is twofold: first, while it is natural to notice the glory in created things, it will be harder to peer into the glory in God’s work of salvation. We need spiritual eyes for the latter. But secondly—and most significantly—it is this work of redemption that offers the greater, and more intensified display of that glory.

It is as though God’s glory in creation is like the beams of the Sun—displayed everywhere. But God’s glory in redemption is those rays refracted through the most intricate and beautiful diamond. That diamond is the work of redemption, and through it the glory takes on new colors, hues, brilliance.

Another way to think of this would be the relationship between a city’s beautifully built sport’s stadium—glorious in its own right—and the actual drama and their team playing and winning in it. Five or so years ago Los Angeles saw the completion of the famed SoFi stadium, the LA Rams new home, which cost 5 billion, seats 70K, and is covered by a giant class canopy. It is a spectacular, glorious creation. But it took on a new glory when in 2021 the Rams team, newly assemble with a new coach and new quarterback, lived through the drama of a season that culminated in playing in the Super Bowl hosted in their own stadium and winning it. The glory of creation (the stadium) was crowned by the greater glory of salvation (the winning team).

God’s creation is the stadium, the theater, where the drama of creating human beings with freedom, watching them plunge into bondage to sin, then rescuing them from judgement in Christ, is played out. The plan for this drama, after all, came first, “before the foundations of the earth” (Eph 1:4).

The design of the universe, the laws of nature, the intricacies of human DNA, the workings of the human body—while amazing—are not as amazing as the workings of divine providence to make sinners into saints.

A point of application here: allow the beauty of creation to draw your mind toward the stunning work of redemption. How might you do this? Follow the example of Jesus, and see in God’s work in creation all type of analogies for God’s work of salvation—God’s work in the spiritual realm. That a seed can sink into soil, and become, then a tree, is less amazing than God’s work, sinking into your heart and turning you into a different person. The sunrise tells sailors the weather (Matt 16:2-3). Perhaps the blazing sunrise pales in comparison to the awakening of faith in your life? Our inability to control the wind points to the freedom of the Holy Spirit. Let the wonder of creation draw your mind into the wonder of salvation.

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God” wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins. How much more so the drama salvation.

That is the glory of redemption. Next, we turn to a theme at the heart of that redemption, the glory of *grace*.

II. God’s Glory in Grace

Text: Paul writes in verse 6 that our adoption as God’s children is “to the praise of God’s glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved (1:6)

Some translations read, “to the praise of the glory of his grace” (KJV, ASV) others, “to the praise of his glorious grace.” Either way, the point is the same: the glory is emanating from this particular attribute of God: *grace*.

Why does Paul focus on the glory of grace? He could have written, To the glory of God’s holiness, or of the glory of God’s Justice or Power. Why grace?

I think this is because grace is the feature of God’s heart that most acutely shines forth in redemption. The glory of God’s holiness shines in His giving of the law (Exod 20); the glory of God’s power shines when he creates the world by merely speech (Gen 1); the glory of God’s justice will shine at on Day of Judgement (Matthew 12:36; 1 Cor 4:5).³

But here, in choosing us before we do anything, in sending His Son to die in our place, God reveals more than holiness, power and justice. He reveals *grace*—undeserved, unearned love, applied to us do to no effort or merit of our own.

A Peculiar Glory

And grace shines with an unexpected, unusual, even *peculiar* glory—like a Red Moon, or the Cherry Blossoms in May, it is glorious because it is so *unique*.

Grace does not follow the patters we follow. It loves to be patient, while we hurry; it loves to pardon, while we love to condemn.

And most peculiar of all, in God’s grace, God manifest His majesty in meekness, his might in gentleness, his power in tenderness. Grace is the *Lion of Judah* arriving as the *Lamb to be slain*.

Make no mistake, God is not meek and tender because he lacks majesty and strength: in the Bible God’s glory is compared to thunder (Ps 29:3), fire (Exod 24.17; 2 Chr 7.3), and brilliant radiance (Ezek. 1.28).⁴

³ “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak” (Matthew 12:36).

⁴ Revelation tells us that in the newly created world, there will be no need for the sun and moon, because “the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (Rev 21.23; Isa 60.19).

It is precisely *because* God is too holy for sinful eyes to look upon, that he “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6:16), that His presence at the wedding at Cana, his gentle hand upon the leper, his dining with sinners, his patience with Peter, his submission before Pilot, His gentle kindness toward you, are glorious!

When Caesar Augustus’ (Rome’s greatest emperor) empire and glory were everywhere expanding, when Herod the Great ordered the slaughter of all the Hebrew baby boys, God decided to confront the darkness not with an angels riding on chariots of fire. Instead, it was the sound of a single cry, rising from an infant son in the arms of Mary, that made pathetic Caesar’s empire and Herod’s sword.

Grace is God’s way of holding up justice and dealing with evil, while also making a way to offer life to a Caesar, to a Herod, to a lowly and shame-filled sinner like you or me.

Experience Grace as Personal Encounter with God

To “praise God’s *glorious grace*,” therefore, means that we must do more than observe it. Grace becomes glorious, when we experience it. In grace, the God of creation becomes *personal* to us—we see what His heart is like when it meets our heart.

Grace heals our wounds. It is experienced precisely in the places in our life where we would—by nature—most resist the glory of God. When we have sinned, again, and therefore turn away from His holiness, *grace* finds God still applying forgiveness. When we have strayed for so long we turn away from God’s judgment, *grace* finds God like the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son, running towards us.

Grace wins our hearts. And have you not felt the *weight of the glory* of grace, and how it can win a heart? Have you ever experienced a person showing you grace, and seen how it impacts your heart toward them? The glory of God’s grace is that God wins our hearts—not by coercion or threat—but by what the old timers called *irresistible grace*: how could we not give ourselves to a God who loves like this?

Finally, our passage draws our attention to the comforting glory of the Sustainer.

III. The Glory of Sustainment

Verses 1:11-14 have an eye to our future inheritance, and speak to the presence of the Holy Spirit as “a guarantee of that inheritance.” This, too, is to the praise of God’s glory, a phrase that appears twice:

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed

with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Eph 1:11-14).

Here, God's glory is tied to his power to sustain his people until they fully enter His kingdom. God's glory is tied to his promise keeping.

His Glory and His Promise-Keeping

It is human nature to break promises. Governments, advertisers, employers, employees, preachers, church members, husbands, wives, children—we all make promises to each other which often are broken. Many of these promises are made with the best of intentions. But life happens. And promises are broken.

God's promises are not like ours. If he has said that we are his sons and daughters in Christ, and that we have an inheritance of eternal life and peace and joy, that is a Word God will keep.

To say that his keeping of this word is to the praise of his glory, is to recognize that God has attached his reputation to our future wellbeing. Often in the Bible, we read that God acts to save Israel "for the sake of His name." This is because God attached his glory to the promises he made to Abraham, and now, to His Church.

His Glory in Our Depending on Him

It is also the case that in our journey through this life, God has so ordered things that our weaknesses, in many respects, remain even after we are walking with Christ. Sometimes they intensify (see 2 Cor 12). There is a design in this. God wants his creatures to depend on Him, so they are living by faith in His strength, His power, not their own. Do you see how this glorifies God as He sustains us?

It is easy to neglect those things which we don't perceive our dependence upon. We don't walk around praising gravity for keeping us well-situated upon the earth—but we depend on it every moment. We depend on oxygen moment by moment, but forget our need for it so take it for granted. But put us in a room with bad air, or under water, and we suddenly feel acutely our dependence on oxygen.

In this life, when we are confused, afraid, or suffering, and because of this situation we cry out to God to uphold us and help us—and God then does—God is glorified in His sustaining of us.

Therefore, see in the areas of challenge in your life—battles with fear, or sin, or weakness—an opportunity to cry out to God for help, and then praise him as he delivers and sustains you.

And see in all the blessings of this life, an opportunity for gratitude—gratitude is one of the main ways we praise the glory of God, thanking him that all we have comes from Him.

To praise God's glory, then, look not only to his work in creation, but his work in redemption. Look deeply into His grace toward you. And depend upon God to sustain you, and praise Him as He does so, day by day.

As he moved into middle age, Saint Augustine realized that the growth of a person required not only purification, but "widening." Man needed a wider capacity to see and savor God.⁵ Fifteen hundred years after Augustine, Søren Kierkegaard notes that a person becomes great in proportion to the greatness of that which he values.⁶ Both thinkers make the same point: *what appears to our hearts as glorious, and what where thereby come to value as praise as glorious*, says something about the quality and size of our own being.

The saints in heaven behold the Lord in all his glory, and therefore find it impossible not to erupt in praise. Those of us who dwell in this present world, seeing through a glass darkly, but work harder to see that glory. So let us close with Paul's prayer which comes later in the letter, where God is called "the father of Glory":

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him,¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe (Eph 1:17-19).

Amen.

Small Group Questions

1. Three times in Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul writes, "to the praise of His glory" (1:6, 12, 14). How would you define glory? How would you define God's glory?
2. Does God's passion for His own glory make him an egomaniac? Why or why not?
3. "The heavens declare the glory of God," (19:1). What are some visions of God's glory that you experience in God's created world? How might these point you toward God's stunning work in salvation?
4. How does God's glory show in a unique way in His works of redemption/salvation that we cannot see it through his work of creation?
5. What are two ways you can praise God's glory this week?

⁵ See Peter Brown, *Augustine*, 276

⁶ See Adam Kirsch, "Søren Kierkegaard's Struggle with Himself," *The New Yorker*, May 11, 2020 Issue.