

THE GLORY OF GOD IN SALVATION

Ephesians 2:7

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, August 10, 2008

So that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:7).

One of the most challenging features of modern life is the sense of insignificance so many people feel. What does it matter, they think, at least in the grand scheme of things, how they live or what they contribute in life?

In part, this is fueled by our society's cult of celebrity. We think fame is what determines how significant a person is. Pop-artist Andy Warhol predicted that in the future "everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes." But most of us will never be famous for even five minutes, so we don't feel very important.

This is all magnified by today's secular ideology, and especially by the theory of evolution, the whole point of which is that there is no God who either created or governs this world. As a result, there is no meaning to life. Harvard Professor Stephen Jay Gould sums up the implication of evolutionary atheism, writing, "We are here by accident... we have no intrinsic meaning."¹ If that is true, then my job is just to make it through life, to have as many good times and as few bad times as possible, and to succeed in my selfish ambitions.

How does Christianity differ from this? Christianity says that there is a God and it is unto him that we live. Man, like all creation, was

¹ Stephen Jay Gould, cited from Ravi Zacharius, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 56.

made by God and for God. As the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism so famously tells us, we do have a purpose. It says, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

This is bad news to unbelievers, because despite their unbelief, the God who really is there is going to hold them to account. But this is wonderful good news to God’s people, because it means that even though we are ignored or despised by the world, our intense longing for purpose and meaning, a longing that burns deep within our hearts, is fulfilled in the eternal glory of God. Sinclair B. Ferguson says,

The average man... has accepted the idea that life is without final purpose, and so he naturally devotes himself to whatever interests him at the moment. By contrast the Christian... walks on the path which God has laid; he enjoys the purpose for his life which God has ordained; he looks forward to the destiny which God has planned.²

GOD’S GLORY THE REASON FOR SALVATION

In Ephesians 2:7, Paul deals with this matter of meaning and purpose. He has been teaching about the glorious blessings that come to those who belong to Jesus Christ. He said that having been spiritually dead we have been made alive. Having been slaves to sin we have been raised up into the liberty of a heavenly citizenship. Having been condemned in our guilt, we are seated with God in loving fellowship. For many of us, this all seems too much to believe. Therefore, Paul tells us the reason for such an abundance of blessing for those who were God’s enemies before he saved them. God did this, he says, “so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

This tells us that *the reason for our salvation is the glory of God*. People hear the gospel and find it hard to believe that God would pardon and renew sinners by the sacrificial death of his Son. Why would God be willing to do this, they ask? The ultimate answer is that our salvation will serve to glorify God forever. Here is a great ground of assurance and hope to Christians who believe God’s Word but feel so unworthy of salvation: it is precisely by saving people like

² Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Discovering God’s Will* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth,), 16.

us that God glorifies himself; it is precisely by loving his enemies and transforming us into loving children by his grace that God is glorified in our salvation.

In this sense, it is the greatest sinners who provide God the greatest glory in salvation, so that Paul could boast, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20). That is not an incentive for us to sin, because salvation delivers us from sin. Instead, it is a demonstration of the power of God’s grace. In the early days of Christianity, there was no greater enemy to the church than the man who later wrote this letter: Saul of Tarsus, later the apostle Paul. Paul never tired of pointing out how much it glorified God to save a horrible man like him, making him a trophy of grace before all the world (see 1 Tim. 1:15-16). It will be the same with you in your great sin, which is conquered by a greater grace.

We need to realize that just as the chief end of man is to glorify God, so also the chief end of God is to glorify God. This is what God wants, for his glory to be displayed. When we talk about the glory of God, what we mean is the revealing of his perfections, the display of his glorious attributes. When we say that God desires his own glory, what we mean is that he wants to reveal who he is, what he is like. It is a sin for us to seek self-glory; indeed, self-glory is the fountain of so many of our sins. But God is the One being worthy above all to be glorified. For God to desire his own glory is not only good, it is the highest possible good; for him to be known is for glory to shine. As Paul wrote in Romans 11:36, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.”

This tells us the purpose of creation: God created the universe to display his glory. Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” Old Testament scholar E.J. Young writes, “The entirety of creation... speaks with voices clear and positive of the glory of the Holy God. Wherever we turn our eyes, we see the marks of His majesty, and should lift our hearts in praise to Him who is holy. This is His world, the wide

theater in which His perfect glory is displayed.”³ The chief end of creation is to glorify God.

The same is true of redemption; in redemption, God achieves all his aims in creation. It was for the sake of God’s glory that Jesus was born, lived, died and rose from the grave. On the night of Jesus’ birth, the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest” (Lk. 2:14). On the night of his arrest, Jesus began praying in the Garden of Gethsemane in the same fashion: “Father... glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you” (Jn. 17:1).

The same is also true when it comes to the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives. Why are we born again? Why are we raised and seated together with Christ? So that God’s glory may be seen forever through his grace in our lives.

IN THE COMING AGES

In great art galleries, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, you will find collections of famous portraits. The men and women depicted on canvas lived long ago, when they were no doubt very important or at least beloved. But today, when crowds pass by admiring their portraits, it is not the men and women depicted who garner the praise, but the artist who painted them. That is what we admire – the skill, genius and passion of the painter, which endures long after the subjects are no longer remembered.

That is similar to the situation of God’s work in our salvation. God saved us and is doing his powerful work of transformation in our lives, so that in eternity to come his handiwork might be displayed in glory.

This is true in the present. People see the change that has come over us through our faith in Christ, and by our good works God is praised. But it is especially in the ages to come that God will be glorified through our salvation. Imagine the conversation of angels, millions of years from now, at the sight of a redeemed sinner resplendent in heavenly glory. “Is that not one of those rebels,” the angel will marvel, “a son of Adam, corrupted by sin, guilty of the gravest

³ E.J. Young, *Isaiah*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,), I:245-246.

offenses to God's honor and rule? But look at him, now that God has finished his salvation? He is radiant in the righteous robes of Christ, beautiful in the holiness that has been perfected by God's Spirit, beloved of God the Father and one closest to his heart, his own child and heir of glory!"

It is especially in the future ages that we will praise God for the blessings now only begun but that then will be in full bloom. Yet even with the burdens of this present sinful world, with the pains and degradation of a mortal body, with the torments and struggles of contending with sin, we still have ample reason to praise and thank God. And in the age to come, with glorified bodies, with a nature that is cleansed from every residue of evil, with a routine joy that far exceeds the best we ever attain in this present life, think of the intensity and fervor with which our voices will give praise to God in heaven. We will be like Moses, who on the one side of the Red Sea, with Pharaoh's army bearing down, trembled and feared even though he trusted God, but who, once he had passed through the parted waters, had seen the destruction of Pharaoh's host, and was safe and secure on the other side, sang with unrestrained joy of the glory of Almighty God. In heaven, we will sing Moses' hymn: "The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him" (Ex. 15:2).

In our present lives we are often afflicted, we stumble in sin, and the best of us are not very impressive when it comes to holiness and faith. It may be hard to believe, but everyone who is now joined to Christ in faith will one day be perfect in holiness and resplendent in the reflected glory of God. What an encouragement it is now to know what we will be then. Hugh Martin asks:

Does not this constrain my wonder, joy, surprise, and praise... that I should be called not only to receive freely an infinite, sovereign, undeserved love, but that my reception of it should be the means of throwing light, to the angelic beings, during the eternal ages, on the glorious character and perfections of God?⁺

This is the very thing that God has promised in his Word. Daniel 12:3 says, "Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky

⁺ Hugh Martin, *Christ for Us* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 213.

above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” Paul writes in Romans 8:18, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Therefore, however much we struggle in this pilgrim journey to heaven, those who walk with God are destined to display his glory forever, to the eternal praise of his name.

THE IMMEASURABLE RICHES OF CHRIST

I have defined God’s glory as the revealing of the perfections of his attributes. But Paul has something specific about God in mind when it comes to our salvation, namely, that it glorifies “the immeasurable riches of his grace.” In creation, God displayed the glory of his power, wisdom, and beauty. But if his grace is to be displayed in glory, then God needed to exercise grace towards us. God glorifies his attributes by exercising them. He glorifies his sovereignty by reigning; he glorifies his justice by judging, and he glorifies his grace by saving undeserving sinners like us.

This helps us to at least go partway in answering the question of why God allowed sin to happen in the first place. God is not the author of sin (see 1 Jn. 1:5), but since God is omnipotent and sovereign over all things (Rom. 11:36), the entry of sin was necessarily in accordance with his eternal decree. The question is Why? Paul gives one answer in Romans 11:32, “For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.” Our verse gives us another clue, that God ordained our salvation from sin to display the “immeasurable riches of his grace.”

Donald Grey Barnhouse gets at this by telling of a store window he once saw in Paris. The shop was world-famous for making the finest, most delicate, most intricate white lace in all the world. Some of the best specimens were on display in the store window, laid out on a background of the blackest velvet. Looking at the display, Barnhouse thought of how God uses the dark background of sin to display the marvels and intricacies and riches of his grace, about which we otherwise would never have any idea. John Owen concurs in this, explaining that our redemption from sin simultaneously increases the

blessing to God's elect while magnifying his glory to a greater extent than did even the creation of the world:

God's purpose was to raise sinners to an inconceivably better condition than they were in before sin entered the world. God now appears more glorious than ever he did before. Now he is seen to be a God who pardons iniquity and sin and who is infinitely rich in grace... To save sinners through believing will be seen to be a far more wonderful work than to create the world out of nothing.⁵

Paul writes that God glorifies “the immeasurable riches of his grace” through our salvation. What are these riches? To remind ourselves we need only walk back through this letter to the Ephesians. In chapter 1, verse 3, Paul says that God “blessed us with every spiritual blessing,” and then he went on to tell us what they are. Verse 4 says we were chosen by God before the foundation of the world to be holy in his sight. What is the value of that? What is it worth to be elected by God to receive the holiness without which you cannot get to heaven? Verse 5 says God predestined us to be adopted as his own sons in Christ. Verse 7 speaks of Christ's blood, shed for our forgiveness. Verse 9 speaks of the knowledge of the mystery of God's will, granted us through his Word. What do you possess that you would not give for these things?

When a jeweler wants to appraise a stone, he puts a special lens before his eye. Likewise, the riches of God's grace are seen only through the lens of faith. It is God's Word that reveals them to us, and faith in God's Word that makes these riches real to our lives.

If we have this faith and thereby see these riches, how can we be discontented in this present life? You say, “But I am poor in this world.” But this life is short and you will soon have eternal riches beyond counting! “But I am afflicted with temptations.” Yes, but those temptations will have less effect on you as you grow in grace, and in eternity you will be spotless and pure, untouched by any sin. “But I am lonely.” Yes, but you can have fellowship now with the God of the universe, whose fatherly love is set upon you forever. “I am sick.” Yes, and hard though that is, what is mortal will soon be clothed in immortality, and what is corruptible with the incorruptible.

⁵ John Owen, *Communion with God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth,), 86.

So even through tears – and all of us will shed them – Christians can have joy because of the immeasurable riches of God's grace.

One of my favorite Bible stories that gets at this comes from the life of the prophet Jeremiah. The city of Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonian army, and all the surrounding area had been trampled by enemy boots. God came to Jeremiah and told him to take his money and buy a plot of land in his hometown of Anathoth, which at that moment was occupied by the Babylonians. Jeremiah obeyed, buying land that no one else wanted, because to the eyes of sight it had no worth at all. By faith, Jeremiah saw the future promised by God. He knew that the town would be rebuilt and would prosper in the hand of the Lord. He was buying low, and later he would sell high when God's promises were fulfilled (see Jeremiah 32).

The same is true for us today. When it comes to eternity, Christians are the ultimate inside traders. We know exactly where to put our money and which investments are certain to take off in the light of glory! Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a treasure a man found hidden in a field. The man who found it “in his joy went and sold all that he had and bought that field” (Mt. 13:44). It is faith that enables us to see “the immeasurable riches of God's grace.” If you are wise, then, instead of investing in this present, evil, passing world, you will invest your hopes, your time, your money, your sweat and tears and prayers in the kingdom of God, where, like Jeremiah's field, the riches of God's grace will yield dividends for an eternity in glory.

The riches of God's grace are revealed in his “kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” What is the value to God of the grace by which we are saved, but the price of his own beloved Son? What was the cost of this grace to Jesus Christ? Though he was the eternal, divine, and glorious Son of God, he set aside his glory to be born in poverty and undertake all the troubles of life in this world. He suffered the scorn and abuse of men and endured the terror of God's holy wrath on the cross, all to deliver into our hands this grace of God that truly is immeasurable in worth. This is the grace given to us to be shown in eternity, and only eternity will be big enough for the full display of the infinite riches of God's grace for us in Christ.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY

I began by saying that people today lack a sense of purpose or meaning. But Christians have been saved to a great purpose, for which we now live. The purpose of our salvation is not to take all our troubles away, but to give us the opportunity, in the midst of so many and great trials, to glorify God in this world. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:16). Just as our eyes cannot bare to stare into the sun, but only can stand to see its glorious rays reflected onto the nearby clouds, likewise unbelievers whose sinful natures recoil from contemplating God may look at the reality of his grace in our lives and discover God’s glory for themselves.

So how do we glorify God? We glorify God, as Jesus said, by doing good works in his name. We glorify God by telling others about his love and the free salvation that comes through faith in Christ. But most of all we glorify God through the holiness he desires in us, by cultivating the fruit of his Spirit in our hearts, by being no longer conformed to the world but transformed by the renewing of our minds through his Word. God made us to bear his own image, and it is by the holiness that conforms to the character of Christ that we most glorify him in this world. Whatever else is different about individual Christians – and we are all very different in many ways – we are unified in this great purpose: to live for the glory of God in the beauty of holiness.

But I want to go beyond that and say that glorifying God is not only our purpose, but it is the great privilege of our lives. If you have ever met veterans of World War II, a war in which the issues of good and evil were clear and our soldiers knew themselves to be part of a noble crusade, you will find that they considered it the great privilege of their lives. Despite all the hardships they endured, some of them wounded and even bearing lifelong disabilities, they still will say, “I am so honored to have been a part of it. And it was such a glory to be among such a great group of guys, a band of brothers and heroes!” That is how we should feel about our calling in Christ to bring glory to God. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

The privilege of being used of God in this way to vindicate His own eternal, glorious character! Why am I in this? Why did He ever look upon me?... Do we not all feel like saying that? Who am I, and what am I, that God should ever have looked upon me and chosen me to be part of His plan and His purpose... Christian people, think of yourselves like that, and go on to glory.⁶

Everyone, not just Christians, but everyone, will ultimately glorify God. Whether you are a believer or not, you will glorify God at the end of this age and forever after that. God's chief end is to glorify God, and being all-powerful, God will certainly achieve that in each of our lives. But there are other things about him to glorify than his grace. God is just and holy, and these he will glorify in the eternal condemnation of sinners who reject the offer of his gospel. James M. Boice writes:

Every person who has ever lived or will ever live must glorify God, either actively or passively, either willingly or unwillingly, either in heaven or in hell. You will glorify God. Either you will glorify him as the object of his mercy and glory, which will be seen in you. Or you will glorify him in your rebellion and unbelief by being made the object of his wrath and power at the final judgment.⁷

How much better for you to glorify God for his grace, exercised in his kindness to you in Jesus Christ, if you will turn from your sins, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and offer your life for the praise of the glory of the grace of our loving God.

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God's Way of Reconciliation: An Exposition of Ephesians 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 116.

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 3:1108-1109.