

The Power of Glory

1 Corinthians 15

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Introduction

Glory--the display of God's character and plan, the wonder of His wisdom and the awe created by understanding His abilities. Glory—the goal and purpose of God particularly as seen in the culmination of His work at the end of this age. This is the focus we wish to make from the texts presented over the ensuing weeks.

I personally remember things better when I see them than by merely hearing them. I like to see images, graphs, and tables and to actually read the words. This often translates into speaking with motions, gestures and action. Now, not everyone appreciates these actions. In fact, formal instruction in public speaking teaches that too many gestures are distracting and should be avoided. With this backdrop, I often speak about or allude to the concept of “eschatology” with a particular posture and gesture. Eschatology is one of those big theological words that have found their way into common evangelical Christian vocabulary. For many it's meaning involves merely what the Bible has to say about the particulars of the end of the age. It involves identifying timelines, characters and details of prophecies and their fulfillment strategies. When I use the term (and for this matter Pastor Russ as well), I am thinking more along the lines of “looking ahead to the future.” The concept involves thinking more of purpose and direction rather than “detail”. God has always had an intention and plan for the creation and is working toward that end, that purpose, as the drama of reality continues to unfold. This directional focus that is looking to God's ultimate purpose and plan involves thinking and living “eschatologically”. In other teaching settings, I have acted this out by having a distant, slightly upward gaze.

This is reminiscent of a premise in my driver's education training many years ago, that of “Aim High In Steering.” I recall a video (or maybe even a film strip) that I now know is called the Smith System for driving safety. The idea to “aim high” was to counter a popular approach to setting a sight on the hood with the line on the road and keep them tracking together. “Aiming high” kept your awareness of what was happening ahead and allowed you to react sooner to problems. Thinking eschatologically will accomplish much the same in our Bible reading and its application for living. An “upward gaze”, an awareness of God's big picture and plan will prepare us and protect us from faithless thinking and actions. We want to think of “glory” in this way throughout the series.

This morning we want to provide a more eschatological awareness of a familiar text and concept. I doing so we will see the power of glory and should have a renewed sense of awe in God's ability and plans. We will do so by looking at God's message to us from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in chapter 15.

The Core of the Gospel (vs 1-11)

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul is engaging serious problems in the thinking of this group of new believers in the city of Corinth. Paul himself had spent a considerable amount of time in personal instruction with them. But the city of Corinth's strategic position as a port and commercial center in the heart of the Roman Empire has brought many ideas and teachings creating conflict in the outworking of the Gospel among them. This text in chapter 15, engages one of these, that of the focus on the Gospel as the anchor for living and thinking. This has arisen from some who have actually taught that the future involves something radically different than what they are experiencing. This world is thought to be innately flawed and "sinful" and God's purpose is to show this difference by removing the world. Paul counters this by asserting that God is displaying His glory in the redemption of this world, not the avoidance of it. He then asserts the principle of the Gospel and the importance of resurrection as its proof. There are several things we should see in this extended passage that helps to orient our directional thinking, our thinking eschatologically, "upward gaze" of awareness of God's big picture and plan.

Vs 1,2

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain.

In the advancing of his argument, Paul comes to a point where the essential character of the gospel is involved. Paul identifies the core of the gospel. He reminds them of the message he preached to them. It is important to notice his use of three tenses of "gospel" encounter. Paul speaks of the past when he says, "which you received." He references the present by stating, "in which you stand." And he orients them toward the future when he says: "by which you are being saved." That should cause us to notice the gospel's directional character. It is not merely recuperative. The gospel is not just fixing a problem, but includes orienting to a direction or goal.

Vs 3-11

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Paul elaborates on the nature, the content of this gospel-good news message. The content of the gospel is describes as of "first importance." Demonstrating the centrality of the gospel in his thinking, Paul indicates this is central to God's

purposes in creating and sustaining the world. By using the terms “delivered” and “received” we see this central concept involves a message, content laden communication. Understand the fact and implications of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. But this information is not all that Paul communicates. He does not stop with the mere elaboration of fact. He connects this with the continued storyline of his readers. The impact of the gospel, its understanding and belief, is only felt because of God’s initiative, His grace. Grace changed Paul’s orientation and then empowered his gospel proclamation. Grace gave him a perspective to see the significance of resurrection and appearance, a perspective we will see unfold as we proceed.

The Capability of the Gospel (vs 12-34)

But the gospel was not only an occurrence in the distant past, it carries a current effect. Paul connects the work of Christ, particularly His resurrection, with real capability. Some in the Corinthian environs, whether as teachers within the congregation or as itinerate preachers, were teaching a very Greek concept that involved a denial of bodily resurrection. To them it is somehow “better” to be a pure spirit and this body (not just this sinful existence) is a shackle that requires shedding to free the human to its full potential. So Paul goes on to say this:

Vs 12-19

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Paul asserts that the concept of bodily resurrection is central to God’s plan and eternal purpose. The goal of the cosmos is intimately connected to our bodily existence. Therefore we read in verse 17 that if Christ is not raised there is no hope, our faith in the removal of the sin barrier to relationship with God is a vapor and without substance. In verse 19 he also asserts something significant for our understanding of the Christian faith. If the future is uncertain, a mere Christian ethic, a way of life that is good now, is a pitiable existence. We must order our thinking beyond the here and now. For Paul life involves a sense of “aiming high in steering.” The reality of life as Christian is also directional in its implications.

Vs 20-34

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is

death. ²⁷ For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him.

²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? ³⁰ Why are we in danger every hour? ³¹ I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! ³² What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” ³³ Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.” ³⁴ Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

As the argument continues, notice the intentionality, the direction of the impact. Christ’s resurrection is a “first-fruits”. Jesus work represents not only the historical accomplishment that defeated sin with its guilt and judgment, but orients us to see its final and decisive fulfillment yet to come. This is the intention, the storyline, of the entire Bible. We see this in Paul’s passing allusion to Adam. It is not just our individual sin and weakness that Christ defeats, it is the entire human enterprise that he reclaims. He will destroy every rule, authority and power that would dare to compete with His Father’s kingdom. The goal to which all of this is directed is that God may be all in all. And don’t miss Paul’s use of many “glory” words in this paragraph. Words like “end”, “kingdom”, “rule”, “authority”, “reign”, “all in all” are integral to the flow of discussion.

The Consequence of the Gospel (vs 35-58)

Remember, we are not giving a full discussion of the implications of this passage, rather pointing out a thread that will give a connection of this passage to many others. As this passage unfolds the idea of the importance of the gospel and in particular the crucial nature of resurrection to the whole of the gospel work, Paul continues to direct us in an eschatological framework.

Vs 35-49

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” ³⁶ You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷ And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. ³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. ³⁹ For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. ⁴⁰ There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. ⁴¹ There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵ Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶ But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. ⁴⁷ The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸ As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

It is not that the gospel lacks immediate change but this is but the tip of the iceberg. There are far-reaching, eternal consequences to the work of the gospel and Paul connects this to Christ's resurrection. This paragraph answers a hypothetical argument (or perhaps a real argument relayed to Paul). It can be reconstructed along these lines, "Once you are dead, your body rots and decays. How can this just come back to life?" (This argument even made sense to them and they didn't live in the era of 'zombie-drama'!) Paul discounts that argument by logically demonstrating the new, glorious nature of resurrection existence. Don't just hear "glorified body", but an entire "glorified existence" that is yet to be because of the gospel.

Vs 50-58

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

"Death is swallowed up in victory."

⁵⁵ *"O death, where is your victory?"*

O death, where is your sting?"

⁵⁶ *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

⁵⁸ *Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*

In fact as we proceed, Paul implies that without the resurrection and its implications, we are left without hope because it is this forward thinking, this upward aim, this eschatological implication where the true power of the resurrection rests. Inheritance, kingdom, last days and victory are all accomplished because of the gospel and demonstrated because of the fact of resurrection life. Death, sin and bondage are removed and will be ultimately destroyed. But notice our emphasis that begins in verse 58. This forward gaze, this eschatological orientation is the impetus for our current life and labor. We are called to be steadfast, immovable. We are to be confident and steady, laboring in God's field. We are to walk in life's personal difficulties, live with one another, encourage and admonish one another in the life of the church in the power of the gospel. This is life-giving power that defeats sin and death and overcomes the grave as evidenced in the glorious resurrection of Christ and gives us new life now and will give us a new glorious existence when the kingdom comes in its fullness. *"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain!"*

Reflect (Summary)

This passage provides just one anchor in our thinking of heaven and glory. Let's recap what we understand from this passage. We see that the gospel is central in the plans and purposes of God and central in our understanding of God's work and our role in God's designs. This gospel engages both the world and each of us individually in the past, present and future, bringing change, empowerment and hope. It sets our orientation and frames our approach to living. The gospel not only provides the remedy for our sin and rebellion but in view of Christ's resurrection and "new life" we also are guaranteed resurrection as already and in its fullness though not yet. This orientation, which is essential to all of the tenses of salvation, is the lens for our living and hope. Our focus is not directly to be upon the benefits of glory but upon the person of glory. This is empowered by the same Spirit that enabled and gifted the man Jesus on earth as he laid aside His prerogatives of deity and then raised him to new life. His victory becomes our victory.

Respond (Application)

1. Think deeply about God's glory and its power. For those of you engaged in the current "through the Bible reading," note those passages and stories that confront us with God's presence both directly and indirectly. We must regularly expose our hearts and minds to the wonder of God's work in the reading and hearing of His Word. Make it habit, practice and pattern to put this into your living.
2. Trust God himself for this transformational power. We often work as though we are somehow "able." Even when transformed to evangelical language, it often becomes self-work. We need to live in gospel-oriented fashion. This recognizes our sin/failure/weakness/inability in all aspects of life and trusts in God's ever-present and all-powerful provision to accomplish His purposes in each moment of this existence.
3. Live in the midst of life's messes, sometimes catastrophes, with a determined, intentional eschatological orientation. Focus on the "what will be", aiming high as we steer through the obstacles of this road of living. "Walk" may be the Biblical metaphor for living but we traded it this morning for "drive". Drive this live with intention and a forward gaze. This will keep us on the road, avoid collisions with competing worldviews and ideologies, and let us know we are not "there yet" but that we are getting close and its "worth the drive."