

Experiencing God's Glory

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[0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. Did the last spoken words in that video come as a surprise to you? I must admit they did to me when I first heard them.

They said, listen, and you'll hear glory. Is glory something we think we hear? Probably not. But when you think about it, we can experience God's glory with all our senses, and certainly we can with our ears, with our hearing.

Maybe at Christmas we're more aware of that than any other time of year. So many of the Christmas carols we sing talk about glory. Just a few examples. Glory stream from heaven afar. His power and glory evermore proclaim. The glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love. Glory to the newborn king. Angels from the realms of glory.

Glory to God. Glory in the highest. I could go on. There are lots and lots of Christmas carols as we hear them sang, or perhaps as we sing them as well. We hear of God's glory.

[1 : 09] And of course, the very first Christmas carol, the carol that the angels sang to the shepherds, its focus was the glory of God. Glory to God in the highest.

And what an experience of God's glory these shepherds saw and heard as they were out on the hills in Bethlehem. But then we maybe need to ask the question, what is glory?

What does the Bible mean when it talks about God's glory? You may feel you have a good idea of that. You may not. But I think we all find it quite difficult to express exactly what it means.

If you look at Bible word books and commentaries, they all have a slightly different view of exactly what God's glory is. Because in the Bible, in the scriptures, it can appear to have lots of different meanings.

Let me give you my suggestion of what God's glory is. If you want to discuss it later, that's fine. So I think God's glory can be defined as the totality of all the features of God that makes him so, so much greater than we are.

[2 : 19] So there's the fact that God has always existed and always will exist. There's the power that brought the universe into being and sustains it. There's the infinite wisdom and knowledge of God.

The fact that he's everywhere. His holiness. His love. All of these things which are so much greater than anything that any of us have or experience in our daily lives.

That is what God's glory is. It is the totality of everything that is God-like, that is divine in his nature. The word that's used in the Old Testament for God's glory, the root meaning is something that's weighty or that has real stature.

It is a reminder of how much greater God is than we are. And again, at Christmas, maybe we should particularly be awed by that, by the greatness of our God and the greatness of what he did that first Christmas.

In the reading that we have from Luke's Gospel, the word glory is mentioned twice. It was more than twice in Psalm 96. We'll come back to that.

[3 : 29] But twice in Luke's Gospel, the glory of God is mentioned. The first, that the glory of the Lord shone round about the shepherds. And the second, that they said glory to God in the highest.

And I think that brings before us the two principal things that the Bible refers to generally when it talks about the glory of God. It is that the glory of God is something that can be seen and was seen at various times in history.

And it's also something that we give to God. We see God's glory and we give glory to God. Let me just briefly talk about these two and we'll relate them to the Christmas story as well.

The psalmist says, The heavens declare the glory of God. In other words, any day we want to, if we look round about us, particularly if we look upwards into the heavens, into the night sky perhaps, we

can see the wonder of God's creation.

This universe that is so vast for all intents and purposes for us is infinite, it is not, but it is so vast. And God made that. And it is majestic.

[4 : 45] It is wonderful. And just seeing God's creation should make us bow in awe and worship him and recognize just how much greater he is than us.

But as I said, at various times in history, God has appeared in a special way and people have seen his glory. So when the Israelites were traveling through the desert under Moses, and Moses went up to receive the commandments from the Lord, and he came down and the Lord came among his people.

It says the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle, the tent of meeting that he had set up for. And the glory of the Lord filled it.

And Moses' face, having been in the presence of God, it shone so much that Aaron and the other Israelites needed him to put a veil on it before they could even approach him.

And then we have in this passage in Luke that we read the appearance to the shepherds. And the glory of God shines round about them.

[5 : 54] And they are astonished, they are amazed, and they are terrified by it. It wasn't just a big light in the sky that the night turned to day. It says all around them they saw the splendor, the glory of God.

I don't know if it's picked up in Psalm 96, as Ruth was reading, it says, splendor and majesty are before him. Strength and glory are in his sanctuary.

While no one can see God, while we can't in that sense see his attributes, yet we can see his glory in creation. At times he has revealed that glory in a special way to people.

And what is the response to it? The response of people is to be overwhelmed by God's glory. Be overwhelmed by the sense that someone is there who is so much greater than, so much wonderful than any of us.

When Isaiah saw God's glory in the temple, his response was, woe is me. I'm not worthy to be here. And as I said, the shepherds were terrified when they saw God's glory, although really encouraged later on, as they saw the glory in the angels singing and in being able to see the baby Jesus.

[7 : 16] God's glory is something that should awe us and in a good sense perhaps should terrify us. We should have a real fear of God in our hearts.

And yet, in the Bible, the most clear appearance of God's glory is not in the appearance to the shepherd, it's not in the tabernacle in the Old Testament, it's in that baby that was born in Bethlehem.

Paul says, the God who said, let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And these shepherds who came to witness soon after the birth of the Lord Jesus found him lying in a manger. They saw there the glory of God revealed.

As the wise men came later and as they brought their gifts and as they saw the Son of God lying there, they worshipped him. John says, we have seen his glory as the glory of Jesus, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

[8 : 35] And if we really want to see God's glory, if we really want to see what God is like, then we have to look at that baby who was born in Bethlehem as he grew up to be a man, as he lived a perfect life, as he showed God to us, and then as he died on the cross at Calvary.

And the glory of God is seen at its fullest in that most unexpected of places. As Jesus is crucified, as his appearance is so marred, yet we see the glory of God there because the essence of God is shown at Calvary in the death of the Lord Jesus, probably more than anywhere else in the Bible. God's justice, his mercy, his love, his victory over the forces of evil. All of these are seen as Jesus dies for our sins and then rises again.

And that journey to the cross begins in Bethlehem's manger. And the baby born there, apparently so helpless, yet he would grow up and would be the saviour of the world.

Yes, the shepherds saw the glory of God in the fields in an amazing, wonderful way that terrified them. But they also saw the glory of God in the baby in the manger.

[10 : 02] God incarnate, come into our world, living our life here, ultimately dying our death for us. We see glory and we see it especially in Jesus.

But we also give God glory. And that is the second meaning of the hundreds of references to glory in scripture. That is the second key thing that comes out.

The angels sing glory to God in the highest. In other words, give glory to God. And when we give glory to God, that is when we recognise who he is and we worship him for it.

Going back to Psalm 96, it's Ruth read. It said, declare his glory among the nations. Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name. And we give glory to God as we recognise that he is so supreme above us.

[11:10] That we cannot fully understand him, but what we do understand is so amazing and so wonderful. And the fact that he sent his son into the world to live a life of poverty among us, to die in the most excruciating way, but more than that, to take our sins on himself.

That is when we see the glory of God. And that's when we worship him. There's maybe no time more than Christmas that we should recognise God's glory as God steps into human history, as his son becomes a baby and lives among us.

And we give glory to God when we recognise our inadequacy before him, recognise our sinfulness, our failure, what a contrast that is to him.

And then we see his glory in Jesus and trust in his death on the cross for our forgiveness. Let me finish with words from Martin Luther King, probably the best known words that Martin Luther King ever uttered.

He said, I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be engulfed, every hill shall be exalted and every mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plains and the crooked places will be made straight.

[12:37] And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. And all flesh shall see it together. Well, that day hasn't come yet.

It will come. By this Christmas, let it come in our hearts. Let the glory of God, the glory of the Lord Jesus, fill our hearts and our thoughts.

Let's see the glory of the Son of God born in Bethlehem and give glory to God as we trust and worship him. Let me pray and then we'll sing our final carol.

Our Father, we thank you for your Son, the Lord Jesus. We thank you that in him we see the glory of the invisible God. Though we cannot see God, though we have not physically seen the Lord Jesus, yet as we look on him, as we recall his birth, his life, his death, and his resurrection, we see in him the glory of God revealed.

Help us today, this Christmas, as we remember the birth of Jesus to be filled with awe and wonder at what you have done, at the glory that is yours and that is his.

[13:56] And that we too may give you, may give the Lord Jesus the glory that you deserve. We give you our thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.