

The Death of Christ and the Glory of God

By Pastor Andy Aikens

*Redemption, salvation, and restoration are not God's ultimate goal.
These he performs for the sake of something greater:
namely, the enjoyment he has in glorifying himself.*

- John Piper

Does the death of Christ reveal man's worth to God, or does it reveal God's great worth to man? How you answer that question reveals what you really think about the relationship between God and man. I think it is pretty clear that God does value humanity. He created us in his image, and he has chosen to keep us around in spite of our rebellion. However, many people live by the false premise that God needs man. In fact, many people believe this to be the very reason that God created us. I was taught as a child by one of my Sunday School teachers that God was lonely and in need of fellowship. For many people, this principle has become the basis for an elevated view of man. Without comprehending the peril of such conclusions, my childhood teachers laid the groundwork for a fundamental misunderstanding of how God relates to man. I don't think that anyone in their right mind would say that God cannot live without man, but I see people practically living as though this were true.

One way that people do this is by blaming God for their trials. Faced with life altering pain, many people cry out to God, "How could you let this happen?" This very unhealthy response is rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of how God relates to man. Christians and non-Christians alike are convinced that man is the center of the universe. Therefore, people blame God in their trials

because the trials themselves and the lack of deliverance from them are inconsistent with the belief that man is supremely valuable to God.

Another way that people practically demonstrate an elevated view of man is by taking credit for their own success. To many, the triumphs of life are proof of man's real value. When people experience success, they secretly and sometimes not so secretly, entertain the lie that they deserve it. All of us are prone to this danger because we have been duped into believing that success is the result of our expertise rather than God's goodness and grace.

Human beings are needy. The God of the Bible is not needy. He is self-sufficient. Acts 17:24-25 teaches us that, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." This passage clearly expresses man's dependency on God and God's dependency on nothing. Therefore, instead of acting as though God cannot live without man, we should be casting ourselves upon God because it is man that cannot live without God.

Man's dependency on God is seen most clearly in our redemption at the cross. The cross does not teach us about man's value to God, even though many people believe that it does. Many people believe that the cross demonstrates just how important people are to God. They think, "Surely Christ would not have suffered so much if we were not worth it." Instead, the cross teaches us that God is the one supremely valuable being in the universe. We

have no hope or comfort in this life, or the one to come, apart from God. In order for humanity to experience wholeness and happiness, God must go to great lengths. He demonstrates how far we have fallen, and how needy we are, by showing how far he must go to rescue us. The cross does not happen because human beings are so wonderful. The cross of Christ is an expression of the greatness of God and his grace. The cross testifies to human weakness, depravity and failure while simultaneously testifying to the holiness, love, mercy, justice, goodness, and power of God.

Hebrews 1:3 says, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." Jesus' whole life is designed to manifest the truth about God. He reveals God to humanity like nothing or no one. This is especially true when it comes to his death. The death of Christ marvelously displays the glory of God. How can this be? The cross is such a grotesque moment in the life of our Savior. How can so much suffering be connected with anything as wonderful as God's glory? To find the answer to that question we must do at least two things. We must first survey the passages from the Bible that teach us that there is such a connection. Then, we must define God's glory so we can understand what that connection means. By the time this chapter is finished, I hope you will be convinced that God shines forth his glory in the cross to show the whole universe that man cannot live without God. Only then will we run to God in our trials and glorify God in our successes.

The Glory and the Cross

Notice how Fanny Crosby links the glory of God to the death of Christ in this hymn that is a favorite of many:

To God be the glory, great things he hath done!
So loved he the world that he gave us his Son,
Who yielded his life an atonement for sin,
And opened the life gate that all may go in.

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood!
To every believer the promise of God;
The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Great things he hath taught us, great things he hath done,
And great our rejoicing thru Jesus the son;
But purer and higher and greater will be
Our wonder, our transport, when Jesus we see.

These words joyfully express appropriate awe and wonder for our glorious God. If we understand the atoning work of God's Son, then this response must accompany our view of Christ's death on the cross. However, the glory that is due to God because of the cross is more than just a response to the cross.

Rather, that glory is integral to the cross because the cross itself is an awesome unveiling of the glory of God to the whole world. This event, which appears extremely horrific, is in reality a most glorious communication of the full character of God. The cross beautifully manifests the glory of God in a multifaceted display of his wisdom, power, goodness, love, justice, mercy, wrath and righteousness. The glory of the cross must never be diminished into an occasion to exalt man. The Cross of Christ must forever stand as the great exaltation of an awesome God.

Even though the connection of Christ's death and God's glory is not a common thought, it is not a unique thought. John Calvin said, "by [Christ's own death] he glorifies God the Father; for in the cross of Christ, as in a magnificent theatre, the inestimable goodness of God is displayed before the whole world. In all creatures, indeed, both high and low, the glory of God shines, but nowhere has it shone more brightly than in the cross."¹ And, Steven Lawson has echoed that thought when he wrote, "Calvary was the moment when God's glory shone brightest through his one and only Son."² In addition to this, one of my own seminary teachers, Roger Nicole, has said, "The Son of God sought his Father's glory as he obeyed his Father's commands for his life on earth. As he approached Calvary, his supreme desire was to glorify his Father, and he was assured that this would be the case."³

Where did these men and women learn this truth that has informed their teaching and their music? They learned it from Scripture. Scripture teaches us

¹ Calvin, John, Calvin's Commentaries Volume XVIII. P. 164.

² Lawson, Steven, Made in Our Image. P. 167.

that there is a connection between the glory of God and the death of Christ. In the gospel of John 12:27-28 Christ's death and God's glory are connected when Jesus prays, "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!" Jesus indicates that the primary purpose of the cross is to glorify the Father. He says, "It was for this very reason." Jesus could have indicated any number of reasons why he came because there are many. But at this moment of anguish it is the purpose of God's glory that he identifies as the primary reason for his going to the cross. Then, in John 13:31-32 we read these words, "When therefore he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him; if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and will glorify him immediately.'" In addition to these statements John 17:1-4 also records another of Jesus' prayers,

"Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. ² For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. ³ Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. ⁴ I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

³ Roger Nicole. Our Sovereign Savior. P. 21.

Jesus' own understanding of the cross is centrally connected to the manifestation of God's glory. And, this understanding is primary. Many Christians have a tendency to make the cross primarily about saving sinners and thereby reach the false conclusion that the cross is a statement about the value of man. It is clear from John 17:2 that Christ's work is about redeeming sinners. However, these texts also indicate that the cross is about so much more. Understanding how the emphases of saving sinners and glorifying God work together comes from the priority we put on them. The cross *is* about redeeming sinners, but the act of redeeming sinners is not ultimate. The death of Christ is ultimately about glorifying the Father and the Son. In fact, redeeming sinners is a means of glorifying the Father and the Son.

Another text that connects the death of Christ to the glory of God is the request of James and John in Mark 10:35-40. In this request the two men make an appeal to sit on Jesus' right and his left when he comes *in his glory*. In Jewish thinking this was a request to have the seats of honor. But, when Jesus answers this request he asks his own question, " Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" What is this cup, and what is this baptism? The cup and the baptism obviously refer to crucifixion. In verse 45 of the same chapter Jesus says, " the Son of Man (came)...to give his life as a ransom for many." It is an astonishing thing to realize that when the disciples ask about Christ's glory, he begins to speak of the cross.

What does this connection mean? It means that the death of Jesus is about more than the value of man. The cross is about the glory of God. And, God's glory is so important to himself that he says in Isaiah 48:9-10,

"For the sake of my name I delay my wrath, and *for my* praise I restrain *it* for you, in order not to cut you off. ¹⁰ "Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. ¹¹ "For my own sake, for my own sake, I will act; for how can my *name* be profaned? And my glory I will not give to another."

So, What is the glory of God?

The glory of God is the radiance of God's excellence in all that he is and all that he does.⁴ And, it is that radiance reflected back to him in the praises of his people.⁵ The glory of God has meaning at a minimum of four levels, his appearance, his character, his actions and the praises of his people in response to the first three.

At the first level is God's appearance. Scripture tells us that God is light (1 John 1:5) and that God wraps himself with light as with a garment (Psalm 104:2). Revelation 21:23 describes heaven as a city that, "does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp." Building on these Scriptural truths, that great hymn of the church, Immortal,

⁴ Edwards, Jonathan, The End for Which God Created the World. Ed. John Piper, p. 247

⁵ Watson, Thomas, A Body of Divinity, p. 5

Invisible, tells us that God exists “in light, inaccessible, hidden from our eyes.”

God’s glory is a true shining of light.

At the second level, the glory of God has to do with the attributes of God. His attributes are his character and nature. God is love, holiness, power, righteousness, justice, and mercy. God knows all things; he is all-wise, and he is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. When the Bible speaks of the glory of God it has reference to these attributes being put on display. In his essence God shines like brilliant light, but that brilliance is the manifestation of God’s perfect character. In Isaiah 6:3 the cherubim cry out, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory." This text links the holiness of God to the glory of God. Also, in John 1:14 we read, "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." Clearly the Bible links the glory of God to the character of God. The beholding of Christ's glory is possible because he is full of grace and truth. Through the sinless life that Christ led, the Apostles caught a glimpse of God's glory.

Not only is this brilliance realized in God’s character, but at the third level the glory of God is also manifested in his actions. Isaiah 43:6-7 says, “I will say to the north, ‘Give *them* up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not hold *them* back.’ Bring my sons from afar, and my daughters from the ends of the earth,⁷ everyone who is called by my name, and whom I have created for my glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made.” And, Revelation 4:11 says, " Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all

things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created.” God’s works of creation, providence and redemption display his glory because these works show forth those perfect attributes that constitute God’s character. When we see God bringing all things into existence at creation we see his power, wisdom, holiness, mercy and goodness on display.⁶ When we see God governing and sustaining that creation, which is providence, we again see his power, wisdom, holiness, mercy and goodness on display. And, when we see the Son of God dying on the cross, performing the work of redemption, we see the ultimate display of those same attributes.

Finally, at the fourth level God’s glory means the praises of his people. 1 Chronicles 16:29 says, “ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name.” And, 1 Corinthians 10:31 exhorts us, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” In worship we reflect back to God something of his very own glory. We are like the moon, which receives and gives off its light by reflecting the light of the sun. When we see his magnificence on display we desire to reflect that back to him in words and acts of adoration, and this also is the glory of God.⁷

Many puritans have used the illustration of sunlight to demonstrate how this works. One of those Puritans, Thomas Watson, put it this way, “glory is essential to the Godhead, as light is to the sun. Glory is the sparkling of the deity; it is so natural to the Godhead, that God cannot be God without it.”⁸

⁶ This list of God’s attributes is not meant to be exhaustive. For a fuller treatment of God’s attributes see Wayne Grudem’s Systematic Theology. P. 156-225

⁷ Watson, Thomas. A Body of Divinity. P. 5.

⁸ Ibid.

A recent experience helped me to understand what Watson meant. Have you ever had the experience of sitting by a window where the sun was shining through? I have. The beams strike your face with a heat that is in contrast with the coolness of other parts of the building. When this happens it is as though the sun itself has kissed your cheek. The sunbeam, a translucent ray of light coming from a large ball of fire in the center of the solar system, is the natural emanation of the sun itself. It shines forth carrying with it something of the natural composition of the sun. The sunbeam is so identified with the sun itself that we usually make no distinction in our speech. Like the sun, which sends forth itself in the sunbeam, God shines forth himself in the emanation of his glory.

Every act of God is an emanation of his glory. But, I wonder if each beam is equally radiant. It seems that the beam of redemption shines more brightly than any other work of God. To feel the weight of such a thought, consider for a moment how the world was created. God spoke all things into existence by the power of his word (Genesis 1:3; John 1:1-3). Consider for a moment how God has sustained his creation from the beginning of time. All things are held together by the power of his word (Hebrews 1:3). These are amazing displays of his wisdom, power, mercy, holiness and goodness. But, as amazing as these activities of God are Scripture, in Job 26:14, declares that God's works of creation and providence are but the outer fringe of his works.⁹ And, in that same text, Job exclaims, "how faint the whisper we hear of him." If the works of creation and providence are a faint whisper, then the work of redemption is a shout. If creation and providence are the outer fringe, then the cross is the inner

core. Therefore, in keeping with our illustration of sunlight, creation and providence are only sparks of his glory, while the cross is the brightest beam of that glory. There is no better place in all of history to witness the display of God's excellence in all that he is and all that he does than the cross of Calvary.

Facing A Legitimate Objection

Before we move on to our applications of this great truth, I want to address a question that hangs over my interpretation. One good reason why this connection between the death of Christ and the glory of God is not common is because most Christians associate the event of Christ's coming in his glory with his second coming at the end of this age. I do not desire to disconnect this association. When Scripture speaks of the Son of Man coming in his glory in Matthew 25:31-33 it is certainly referring to the second coming. However, I would add that Mark 10:35-40 forces us to expand our view of what is meant by "in his glory."

Christ's coming in his glory is a two-fold event. It begins at the cross and is completed at the second coming. These two events sit like bookends to the great event of redemption. There is no contradiction in these two texts and there is no reason to play around with Jesus' words in either text to make them refer to the same historical moment.

The tension that is held together in Mark 10 and Matthew 25 is best expressed by the phrase "already and not yet." This phrase means that Christ's

⁹ See Job 26:14 and Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology. P. 150

work on the cross accomplished many things. This would be the "already." But, everything that was accomplished has not been applied. This would be the "not yet." Everything that Christ began at Calvary will be consummated at the end of the age. This is why we can have confidence regarding the life to come. If there were still some chance that Jesus would not finish what he started at the cross, then there would be no assurance that heaven was a reality. But, the Apostle Paul teaches us that we have great cause for confidence. In Philippians 1:6 he says, "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Paul can say this because he understands the "already-not yet" tension of the gospel.

Many gospel truths are held together by the already-not yet tension. An example would be the Christian's relationship to sin. Are we free from sin, or do we still sin? The answer to both questions is yes. The reason is "already and not yet." In Christ we have a positional holiness that can never be taken away. As a result of this God views us as being absolutely holy even though, in our fleshly existence, we are not yet completely holy. We will be made completely holy at Christ's second coming.

It is therefore easy to see that Christ's coming in his glory can be understood as descriptive of his crucifixion/resurrection as well as his return. The cross is his glory because it fully displays the perfection of God. In the cross we see the wisdom*, holiness, power, mercy, justice and righteousness of God.

Conclusion

God shines forth his glory in the cross to show the whole universe that man cannot live without God. Therefore, let us run to him in our trials and glorify him in our successes. By acknowledging our own unworthiness of God's sacrifice in the cross, we free ourselves to trust God and to honor God. Instead of blaming him for our pain, we will run to him as its only cure and our only comfort. Instead of taking credit for success, we will thank God for all the blessings he has bestowed.

So, does the death of Christ reveal man's worth to God, or does it reveal God's great worth to man? Clearly, this great display of God's glory is supremely about the great value of God. Redemption, salvation, and restoration are not God's ultimate goal. These he performs for the sake of something greater: namely, the enjoyment he has in glorifying himself.¹⁰

We do not like to consider just how small we are, but it is helpful. God created us from dust, and the Word of God says that to dust we will return. The Psalmist asks, "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" The answer is "nothing." The point of Psalm 8 is that God has done an amazing thing in elevating man. According to the psalm, God is worthy of praise because of the great grace he has poured out on undeserving humans. While Psalm 8 does inform us of the dignity God has bestowed on humans, it simultaneously reminds us that this dignity is the result of God's goodness, not man's worth.

¹⁰ John Piper, Desiring God. p. 33

Only a little later in Psalm 22 the same writer will say, "I am a worm and not a man." I am so thankful that God has not left us in this condition. Through the work of the cross God has lifted man higher than we could ever have desired. Yet, the gospel always reminds us that this grace is not the result of our inherent worth. For any of us to be healthy and happy we must constantly remember where we have come from and who it is that rescued us. Only then will we have an appropriate humility that leads to an exaltation of God in our lives. He is the supreme fountain of all our joy and confidence and comfort. Therefore, may we find in the cross the radiance of God's glory, which is the true measure of our God and the true measure of humanity.