

A Sermon
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Glory Comes Down at Christmas

Isaiah 40:1-11

"And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (v. 5). These are familiar words to some of us, which I suppose is both good news and bad news. Good news because our faith needs to hear words that we've heard before. These well-worn words can encourage us, strengthen us, and renew our confidence in God. Bad news because we can grow complacent and take a lot of our religious terminology for granted.

Take the word *glory* as an example. "And the *glory* of the Lord will be revealed." A lot of our speech and conversation in the life of the church is glory talk. "Give God the glory." "I'm bound for glory." "Glory be to God." "I'm living for his glory." These are just a few examples of our glory language. But do we have a good handle on what *glory* is actually all about? Often we toss the terminology around, both inside and outside the congregation, without thinking carefully about what it means.

One pastor tells about preaching a sermon from 1 Peter 4:10-11, which ends with the declaration of praise, "To him be the *glory* and the power for ever and ever. Amen." Near the end of the sermon, the pastor spent a little bit of time unpacking the meaning of the word *glory*. Right after the service, a woman named Norma hustled to the front of the worship room and spoke about how surprised and grateful she was for the definition, saying that although she had heard the word *glory* repeatedly and used the word countless times, she never had really understood the term. The pastor says:

I was shocked. After all, this was no novice in the faith telling me this. Norma had been involved in the local church for 50 years! For 50 years, she had sung "To God be the glory, great things He hath done." For 50 Christmases, she had heard the angelic words of Luke 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!" Still, she never really understood the word. It was just Christian chatter to her, one of the many words believers mindlessly murmur.¹

Glory certainly isn't a word being mindlessly murmured in today's Scripture passage. "And the *glory* of the Lord will be revealed." Here in Isaiah, God is sending word to his people Israel that their time of exile will come to an end. They need to know that their experience of God's wrath is just part of a larger story that ends in deliverance. God will come to them with redemption and restoration, and his people will return home. They'll make an Exodus journey back to the holy city of Jerusalem, which they viewed as the geographic center of God's presence.

Now this doesn't mean that God wasn't present in other ways, in other places. But it does mean that Jerusalem, and its Temple, were viewed as God's dwelling place. And that's what God's glory was all about. It was about God's presence. The phrase "the glory of the Lord" occurs often in the Old Testament as a technical term for the visible and active presence of God. And though God's presence fills the entire creation, his glory, his presence, is primarily in the midst of his covenant people Israel. So to hear the announcement "the

glory of the Lord will be revealed" essentially meant that God has not rejected and abandoned his people. Indeed, God is coming to rescue his people and to rule over them in righteousness and peace.

In the Scriptures, "glory" has to do with God's power and magnificence, his awesomeness. "Awesome" is another word that get tossed around a lot, and increasingly overused. A few years ago, one blogger lamented how "awesome" has become such a worn out, empty term. He said:

Unless you're a pedant for language, you're probably not too concerned about the way that overuse has stripped the "awe" from "awesome," reducing a word that was once reserved for encounters with unthinkably powerful heavenly creatures to what you say when you get a discount on toothpaste, but you don't need a linguistics degree to see that the word's been overused to the point of losing all meaning.²

I once crossed paths with someone wearing a T-shirt that read: "You're Not That Bad . . . I'm Just That Awesome." In that case, the word was used in a humorous way to give us some perspective on one another. But in the deepest sense, "awesome" is a word that should give us some perspective on ourselves in view of God's magnificence. In one respect, glory, in the sense of awesomeness, is something that belongs only to God. It's similar to what one mom wrote about hearing her 5-year old child telling a neighbor, "I don't say *awesome* about toys. I'm saving some good words for God."

"Glory" has its roots in a group of words that mean "weight" or "heaviness." So glory is what gives someone or something importance and impressiveness, inspiring awe and respect and fame. In contemporary culture, glory in this sense regularly gets attached to celebrities, who are often viewed as the epitome of fame and glory. The singer Madonna once said, "I won't be happy until I am as famous as God." Her words capture the desire to have god-like characteristics, to have fame, to have glory. And yet, we are called to acknowledge and worship the glory of God, not the glory that usually comes with being high profile, prominent, and influential. For us, God's renown is supposed to be the most heavy, most impressive, most important thing in our lives.

"And the glory of the Lord will be revealed." God's saving presence was manifested to his people Israel, and they were brought home from exile. And from Israel came a Savior, sent to bring the world out of its captivity. Through Jesus Christ, the glory of God has descended, taking up habitation in this world and in our lives. Glory comes down at Christmas.

Part of what this means is that the church, the community of God's people, joined by faith to Christ, is the dwelling place for God's glory, and the primary way that God works in this world. In other words, the awesomeness and magnificence of God take up residence in local congregations, so that in our life together as Grace Baptist Church, the fame and splendor of God are put on display to the world, that others may come and believe and worship, until that day when finally and fully, "the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

¹ Dillon T. Thornton, "To Him Belongs Glory: A Plea for Pastors to Unpack the Jargon." Preaching Magazine website. Accessed December 4, 2014 <<http://www.preaching.com/resources/articles/11668319/>>.

² Miles Raymer, "Let's Make 2014 Less 'Awesome.'" Esquire Magazine website. January 3, 2014. Accessed December 4, 2014 <<http://www.esquire.com/blogs/culture/less-awesome>>.