

Introducing the Story of God's Indescribable Glory

"Behold, heaven & the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built." – King Solomon in 2 Chronicles 6:18

Intro: Landscape Photography & God's Glory

When it comes to the glory of God all I can really do in preaching is show you the equivalent of a landscape photo. With most landscape photos there was always more outside the photo than what was captured inside it, but that does not mean it's not worth taking photos. For what a photographer captures in a photo is still real, beautiful & often stunning. It can be so stunning that people will pay significant money for a quality print & it can be so stunning it encourages people to personally go out & explore the area photographed. In introducing this new sermon series I want to underline there is always more outside the sermons than inside them. More that has not been said than has been said. That is the reality of preaching on the indescribable glory of God. Yet this does not mean it is not worth doing. For just as we can be stunned by a photo capturing something of a greater 'glory' I believe sermons, because of the Spirit's work in hearts, can have a similar effect. As well as this we live in a world distracted by many trivial things while there is a glorious God waiting to be known, encountered & enjoyed! And just as a photo can draw people's attention to a 'glory' they have never seen preaching of God's Word can do the same.

Colin Hansen writes; *"We live in a transcendence-starved culture & a transcendence starved evangelicalism... We've so dumbed down the gospel & dumbed down worship in a good effort to reach as many people as we can that there's almost a backlash. It comes from this great hunger for a genuinely God-centred, transcendence focused understanding of who God is & what God wants us to do & what God has given us in Jesus Christ."* Even as Christians we can be found settling for theological finger food when we are created to feast on glory. There is an indescribable, uncontainable, incomparable God to be known, celebrated, enjoyed & feasted upon!

Psalm 19:1 tells us; **"The heavens declare the glory of God, & the sky above proclaims his handiwork."** All around us every day creation is proclaiming the story of God's indescribable glory. Note that creation is not declaring its own glory but the glory of God; it serves as a signpost to, a reflection of, an appetizer to the greater glory of God. We were made to taste a greater glory & for this reason Scripture is also a story of God's indescribable glory. Down through the centuries many have believed that the glory of God is the main theme of the Bible. So why am I calling this series *Indescribable Glory*? Let's break it down:

1. Indescribable

Solomon declares in his prayer of dedication for the temple in 2 Chronicles 6:18; **"But will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold, heaven & the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less**

this house that I have built.” We have learned that the heavens can declare God’s glory then but here we learn they cannot contain it. This is even truer of anything we can build. There is nothing we can build that can contain the glory of who God is. Solomon recognises this reality in the middle of his prayer of dedication! No temple, no cathedral, no ministry philosophy, no system of theology, no vision for church, no sermon series can contain the glory of God. Think about it, if what God has created himself is not big enough to contain his glory, then how much less anything we can build. That is essentially what Solomon acknowledging. This is our starting point when it comes to the glory of God – he is indescribable, uncontainable, and incomparable & therefore it is words like Solomon’s that help introduce us to this inexhaustible subject best. Solomon built a temple that could not contain him; I am preaching sermons that cannot fully describe his indescribable glory.

This has also been a repeated acknowledgement in everything I have read about the glory of God over the last month or so. Listen to these tweet sized quotes from a selection of people who have written about the glory of God:

“He is everywhere—His circumference nowhere. How the immensity of God baffles human imagination & explanation.” – Herbert Lockyer

“Our understanding of God is riddled with things we cannot explain properly, & this makes him more glorious, not less.” – Andrew Wilson

“Any intelligent attempt to talk about God—talk that is critically aware of its conditions & limitations—must begin & end with confession of the inconceivable majesty of God which transcends all our concepts.” – Wolfhart Pannenberg

“God alone knows what exactly constitutes his internal glory; our finite minds cannot penetrate it. But we know as God manifests his glory in the world, we see a reflection of that internal glory...” – David VanDrunen

“God is so much bigger than our speaking or thinking of him. God is, in other words, so much bigger than our theology. He is before it, around it, at the end of it & over it.” – Stephen Nichols

“With all that has been said about it, the glory of God is transcendent—completely beyond conclusive description.” - Jack Hayford

Yet with that acknowledged one last quote by Don Carson’s tells us why we should still attempt to know & join creation in declaring God’s glory. Carson writes; *“You can know some things truly, without knowing anything exhaustively.”* And we can know the ‘some things truly’ because God’s has revealed his glory in creation, in Scripture & most fully in Jesus Christ his Son!

In the last couple of weeks twitter increased its amount of characters per tweet from 140 to 280. So it's now more like tweet, tweet. All those quotes above are less than 140 characters & they all say something significant & true. We can say very significant & important things in a sentence or two. Yet at the same time even if Twitter gave us 280 trillion characters we'd still only be prefacing the subject & beauty of God's glory. That is the glorious tension we live in when discussing the glory of God: We can truly know him but there is always more to know & discover about him than we already know. He transcends what we can fathom. Therefore all I can really do as a preacher is offer a very inadequate preface to the glory of God. I can certainly state things that are true regarding God's glory, yet human words always fall short in fully describing him & I think that is a good thing! For this is why he is God & this is why we worship is the most appropriate response to his glory. True worship does not bypass the mind but it surpasses the mind simply because God is indescribable.

When Solomon finished his prayer, at the beginning of 2 Chronicles chapter 7, the glory of the Lord filled the temple. God's house was so full of glory there was no room for anything else. So while the temple Solomon built could not contain the glory of God it could be filled with the glory of God. This ignited a response of worship & thanks in the people of God because it indicated in the most glorious way that Yahweh's splendour & love was still with his people just like it had been with them in the time of the tabernacle in the wilderness. Likewise, while our minds, hearts & lives cannot contain God's glory they can be filled with it to the point there is no room for anything else... This is why meditating on God's indescribable glory is worth it!

2. Glory

So we have thought about the appropriateness of the word indescribable but what about the actual word glory?

James Hamilton writes that; *"God's glory... is like a many-faceted gem, which reflects & refracts light in ever-new, ever unexpected ways as it is admired."* He also suggests that; *"the glory of God is the weight of the majestic goodness of who God is, & the resulting name, or reputation, that he gains from his revelation of himself as Creator, Sustainer, Judge, & Redeemer, perfect in justice, mercy, loving-kindness & truth."*

The most used word for "glory" in the OT is the word "kabod" & this important word also informs our understanding of the NT word "doxa". There are other words used, but these are the main ones. I'll say more about the word "kabod" especially as we move through the story of God's glory in Scripture but I just want to give a quick overview now & focus on one or two things that will help introduce the series.

Glory (Kabod) includes the idea of giving respect & reverence but it is also associated with the object of respect. In only a few cases the object involves humanity, as when God's people exchange their glory for

false gods (Jer. 2:11). More commonly it is used of God, particularly for the Lord's manifest presence. So if you search the word glory in Bible Gateway you will see it is often found with the phrase **"the glory of the Lord."** The term first appear in Exodus & is a very prominent theme as the glory of God accompanies Israel in the wilderness period & is strongly associated with a cloud by day & pillar of fire by night. God glory then was in a sense both manifested & veiled. We will think about all this again. The other important thing to understand is that God's glory is who God is & therefore is interconnected with his Name. Perhaps more than any other word it catches the essence of who God is. So when the Bible talks about the glory of the Lord it is talking about all he is, & while it is an attribute of God it is the attribute that covers all the others because everything about him is glorious!

This word kabod occurs in some form over 375 times in the OT, & most of the time directly relates to God. It is a weighty word in more ways than one, since the root idea relates literally to weightiness. When we hear this word we should be thinking about the weight of his substance, worth & majesty & everything else that makes him God! He is of inestimable worth & there is nothing trivial or transient about him! And as one person puts it; *"God needs no one & nothing to make him glorious. He himself is the origin & author of his glory."* We could say then that glory is the opposite of trivial & transient; there is nothing light-hearted or fleeting about the glory of God.

In life there is certainly a time & place for trivial light-hearted things. I believe even these can be gifts from God. However the point is we must not let the trivial & transient distract us from knowing & enjoying the weighty & eternal glory of God! I think that is the danger in our world today, that we miss the glory of God! The God who is transcendent! The God who is eternal – who is not only endless but without beginning! The God who is unchanging – who has not changed & will never change & for that reason he is always constant, absolutely reliable & totally complete in his being! The God who is self-sufficient – who needs nothing & has the resource to eternally satisfy the desires of every living thing! The God who is all powerful, all-knowing & always-everywhere-present! There is nothing trivial or transient about him.

Conclusion: How God's Glory Help Us in Everyday Life

How can sermons on God's glory help me in everyday life? For when we talk about such things it can seem way up there, detached from everyday life & meaning... Yet the reality is a true understanding of God's glory brings weight & power to our everyday life & to everything we do! Let me give you just two examples & how it does so:

Firstly Paul tells us very plainly in 2 Cor. 3:18 that as we behold the glory of the Lord we get transformed from one degree of glory to another. In other words our transformation & ultimately our glorification is wrapped up in beholding-contemplating-reflecting the glory of the Lord! So meditating upon the glory of God is more practical & transformational to our everyday lives than it first appears. Habits & thought

patterns can be broken as we behold the glory of the Lord. Our lives can become re-orientated & rightly ordered as we contemplate the glory of the Lord, as they become centred on him rather than self or something else. We were not created to be centred on anything else, so when we are not God-centred we are off centre. For this very reason being captivated by his glory has the power to deliver people from suicidal thoughts, low self-worth, lack of purpose, self-centredness & a thousand other things that result from a life off-centre. And this happens when our attention is taken off ourselves & centred on the glory of the Lord. We live in a generation starved of transcendence & we are all the more trivial & miserable because of it. Psalm 16:11 says; **“You make known the path of life; in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore.”**

Secondly, think about this. You are overwhelmed with life or something else & you come into church & the worship team start to sing the song; *“God I look to you, I won’t be overwhelmed...”* What comes into your mind when you hear the word God? Is it just a nice little song or is it a song about a glorious God who transcends yet is also always present in all you are going through. That is where the importance of this subject connects with everyday life! Do you have an accurate & glorious vision of the indescribable God, one that fills you with faith every time you hear his Name, one with the power to lift you above your present circumstances & empower you in your present trial? Because the God who uncontainable is also the God whose glory fills the *temple* - Paul’s says that as Christians we are temples of the Holy Spirit!

We were made to behold the transcendence of God while at the same time knowing the immanence of God filling us. Stephen Nichols writes; *“God’s transcendence refers to how God stands above & beyond his creation & created beings. God’s immanence refers to God’s intimate involvement with his creation & created beings.”* God transcends but he also longs to fill his people with his intimate presence. For this very reason it’s when I have been most aware of his transcendence that I have also been most aware of his immanence! We cannot fully describe his glory & that is good, but we can be fully filled with his glory & that is glorious!

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