

The Glory of God

Acts 19:21–41

February 17, 2002

“What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Thus read the first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The language may be archaic, but the meaning should be clear. “What is the ultimate purpose of human life? The ultimate purpose of human life is to glorify God, and to be centered upon him forever.” The purpose of human life is to glorify God. The reason we exist is to glorify God. We have mouths in order to sing God’s praises, we have hearts in order to love God, we have minds in order to acknowledge God, we have souls with which to honor God, we have wills in order to obey God, and we have strength with which to serve God. This is what human life is all about. We exist to glorify God. What great joy this is! What a privilege!

“What is the ultimate purpose of human life? The ultimate purpose of human life is to glorify God, and to be centered upon him forever.” Note also what is not being said. That is, we do not exist for ourselves. We do not exist for our own sakes. We do not even exist for each other, ultimately. We exist for the glory of God. Here is a treasure beyond measure. It is our good to know this truth. Have you ever wanted to be a part of something larger than yourself? Here it is. It is good to be part of a team. It is rewarding to be a member of the choir. It is right to be a patriotic citizen of a nation. It is exciting to be part of a great movement of history. It is important to be part of the church of Jesus Christ. And most of all, it is who we are and what we are about for our lives to be focused and centered upon God, to be absorbed into the praise and honor of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God for calling and naming us his very own, for thus so we are!

Sometimes the glory of God is made more obvious by contrasting it with the false glory of would-be gods. In the deliciously sarcastic observations of Isaiah, the great high gods of Babylon, Bel and Nebo, exist as heavy, handmade, golden idols, inanimate, unmoving, nonspeaking, uncaring, incapable of helping or saving, carried by poor beasts of burden. But the LORD, the God of Israel, is the one who made the people of Israel, the one who carries them from birth to death, the one who carried them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, the one who foretells the future from of old, the one whose word does not return to him empty accomplishes his purpose, the one who shall deliver them from Babylon, the one whose salvation will not tarry, the one who shall save his people for his own glory. There is no contest! Unbelievers are urged to take note.

The Apostle Paul knew the prophecy of Isaiah. Paul knew the difference between the idols and the living God. Most of all, Paul knew the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. No wonder he was accused of saying that gods made with hands are not gods. At one level, that would seem obvious even to us. Gods made with hands are not gods.

Those who lavish gold from the purse,
and weigh out silver in the scales,
hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god;
then they fall down and worship!
They lift it upon their shoulders, they carry it,

they set it in its place, and it stands there;
it cannot move from its place.
If one cries to it, it does not answer
or save him from his trouble” (Isaiah 46:6–7).

Gods made with hands are not gods! But woe unto him who tells that to the hands that make gods. And that is where Paul crossed the line. That is where he got into trouble. It was one thing that he preached Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected. It was quite another when he told the hands that made gods that gods made with hands are not gods! Demetrius was a silversmith in Ephesus. He made a good living making gods with his hands. Whether or not he believed in those gods is not clear. But he did believe in the wealth those gods brought him. He may or may not have worshiped idols. But he definitely worshiped silver and gold. And therein lies the problem.

Silver and gold are creatures of this world, just as you and I are. God made them, just as he made us. Silver and gold, then, are meant to be used. But they are not meant to be worshiped. They are not meant to be glorified. They are not meant to be revered. They are not to be the center and the focus of our lives. In the technical language of the Shorter Catechism, reaching back at least to Augustine, silver and gold are not meant to be enjoyed. This is different from the way we normally use that word. In this technical sense, all the creatures of this world are signs, and they are all meant to be used to point our way toward God, their Creator and our Creator. By way of contrast with all these created signs, God is the one uncreated thing which alone we are meant to enjoy, which alone we are meant to love without reservation, on which alone our lives are to be centered and focused.

In this understanding of human life, we get into trouble when we confuse any of the many signs with the one thing. We get into trouble when we fail to use a fellow creature as a sign pointing us to God and instead lavish upon it all the love, attention, duty, and honor—that is, all our enjoyment—which God alone deserves. If and when we stop along the way to worship and enjoy a sign, we never make it to God. The sign may be good and even wonderful in and of itself, but when we allow it to become an enemy of the best, when we allow it to divert our attention away from God, when we allow it to absorb our energy and affection, when we glorify it, whatever it may be, instead of glorifying God, when we enjoy it, whatever it may be, instead of enjoying God, then we have lost our way, we have forfeited the great love of our life, and we have failed to fulfill our ultimate purpose. This is a tragedy beyond speaking. And it happens every day. God help us.

Demetrius may or may not have worshiped Artemis of the Ephesians. He may or may not have believed in the idols he made. But that does not matter, for he fell prey to an idolatry even more pernicious: he worshiped silver and gold themselves. He glorified money. He enjoyed wealth. And he lost his soul. No wonder he took offense at Paul’s teaching that gods made with hands are not gods. What Paul said challenged his religion. What Paul taught threatened his livelihood. What Paul promoted disrupted the whole life of the city. What Paul preached undercut the entire mind-set of the ancient world. And it does a pretty good job on today’s world. We are not likely to be tempted to worship something so crude as an idol or a statue. We are not that primitive or unsophisticated. And yet, in a time of great wealth, great power, great technology, great communications, are we not tempted mightily to worship silver and gold? Are we not tempted to glorify the beauty and power of wealth? Are we not tempted to focus our lives,

energies, and efforts upon the pursuit of wealth, ease, comfort, and security? And, to the extent that we fall to these temptations, do we not fall into the same predicament as Demetrius?

Gods made with hands are not gods. Instead, the one who made the hands, the one who made the world, the one who placed us in it, he it is who is God. The one who made the hands, the one who made the world, the God and Father of Jesus Christ, the one who raised him from the dead, he it is, and he alone, who is God. Him alone are we to worship. Him alone are we to glorify. Him alone are we to praise. Him alone are we to serve. Him alone are we to enjoy. To God be the glory! This is who we are and what we are about. This is good news. Thanks be to God!

Did you think the gospel was about salvation? Only secondarily. The gospel is about the glory of God, manifested in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our salvation is almost a by-product of that. It is an important by-product. It is of great interest to us. But it is not of ultimate interest. It cannot be. For if it were of ultimate interest, then we would have loved the gift more than the giver, we would have enjoyed the sign instead of using it, and we would have failed to glorify and enjoy God alone. If salvation were of ultimate interest to us, then we would not be saved. God saves us to show that his glory is greater than the power of sin. But the point of that is his glory, not our salvation. Now, we do not despise the gift. We do not belittle it. We do not neglect it. We do not fail to appreciate it. To do any of this would be to fall into the terrible sin of ingratitude. Nevertheless, we best honor the gift by giving higher honor to the giver of all good gifts. Him alone are we to glorify and enjoy.

Did you think the gospel was about eternal life? Only secondarily. The gospel is about the glory of God, manifested in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our eternal life is an outgrowth of that. It is an important outgrowth. It is of great interest to us. But it is not of ultimate interest to us. It cannot be. For if it were of ultimate interest, then we would have loved the gift more than the giver, we would have enjoyed the sign instead of using it, and we would have failed to glorify and enjoy God alone. If eternal life were of ultimate interest to us, we would not live eternally. God gives us eternal life to show that his glory is greater than the power of death. And the point of that is his glory, not our eternal life. Now, we do not despise the gift. We are profoundly grateful for it. Nevertheless, we best express our gratitude by worshiping God, not by worshiping God's gift. God alone are we to glorify and enjoy.

Did you, perhaps, think the gospel itself was about us? Did you think the church was about us? Did you think the world was about us? Only secondarily. The gospel, along with the church which it engenders and calls into existence, as well as the world arena within which this occurs, are all about the glory of God, manifested in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are a part of that. We are an interesting part of that. But we are not of ultimate interest, even to ourselves. For if we were of ultimate interest, then we would have loved the creature more than the Creator, we would have enjoyed the sign instead of using it, we would have loved salvation more than the Savior, we would have loved life more than the giver of life, and we would have failed to glorify and enjoy God alone. If we were of ultimate interest, even to ourselves, we would have missed our true ultimate interest, the incomparable glory of God. God calls us into existence to share with us the high privilege of beholding his glory, which alone is good reason to live. God calls us into existence that we may spend our lives not chasing after false gods made with hands, or even silver and gold, but glorifying God alone. God calls us into existence so that we may enjoy him forever. And that is our salvation. That is our eternal life. That, finally, is about us, for that is the ultimate purpose of our lives.

Paul said that gods made with hands are not gods. He said this because he knew the prophecy of Isaiah. He knew the difference between the idols and the living God. Most of all, he knew the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. And this is the one he would still have us know today. Have you met Jesus the Christ? Do you know the Son of God? Through him, do you know the God and Father of Jesus Christ? This is what life is all about. Do not miss this opportunity.

We gather here every Sunday morning, and thousands more join us by way of radio, to glorify God. We do this not only by singing praises to God, affirming our faith in God, making our prayers to God, and offering our gifts to God, but also, and especially, by reading and hearing the word of God. So, even worship is not primarily about what we do, but about what God does, speaking his word to us, showering his glory upon us, drawing us to himself, recentering and refocusing us upon him alone. And when we go forth from here, into the city and the counties, into our homes and neighborhoods, into our schools and places of work, we continue to glorify God in our lives, in our service, in our relationships with others, in acts of charity, in deeds of love, in efforts for justice, and in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. For the glorification of God not only occurs in worship, though it begins here, but it also continues in vocation, our work beyond here. The same holds true for the enjoyment of God. Our being centered and focused upon him not only occurs in worship, though it begins here, but it continues in vocation, our work beyond here.

“What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” That is to say, the chief end of man is not to promote man, not to glorify man, not to save man, and not to achieve eternal life. The chief end of man is not even about man. It is about God. “What is the ultimate purpose of human life? The ultimate purpose of human life is to glorify God, and to be centered upon him forever.” What great joy this is!

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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