

Glorifying God: Putting First Things First

By David de Bruyn

The four and twenty elders fall down before Him that sat on the throne, and worship Him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created."

Revelation 4:10-11

Those who have died know what life is about. Here in Revelation, we find the 24 elders – who I believe represents believers who have died and are now in Heaven – crying out in worship. They a remarkable statement that seems to sum up the whole Bible: 'God, You deserve all the glory, because You created everything, including us, and the reason You created us was for Your pleasure.' In a few words, the 24 elders explain the reason for human existence.

When you heard those words – you are worthy to receive glory, because you created us for your pleasure – do the words resonate with you? Do your ears prick up, do you find your heart saying, "Yes, that's it, that's what life is about!" I believe the reason Christianity is in such a state, is that we have not stopped to really think – what is it all about? What is the main idea in the Christian life?

Instead, we just throw ourselves headlong into a throng of Christian things – Bible study, prayer, missions, church, evangelism, obedience. All of these are good and vital, but we fail to connect these things. We can't relate the parts to the whole. We cannot in one sentence explain what the real purpose of the Christian life is, and then explain why we are doing these various things.

I am fairly certain that if you asked a hundred Christians, "What's the point of the Christian life?" you would get close to a hundred different answers. Listen to Christian speakers and you'll hear things like, 'The main reason we are left on this Earth is to evangelise.' The next one will say, 'The point of the Christian life is to praise God.' And the next might say, "The Christian life is really about love.' And the next, "You can sum up the Christian life as a life of faith.' No wonder our heads are spinning!

So what is the point of the Christian life? In fact, what is the point of our existence, of the very universe? The verse we have read says it for us: The point of the universe is to glorify God. *"The heavens declare the glory of the Lord"* (**Psalms 19:1**). Man was created to glorify God. In a simple sentence, your purpose for existing is to glorify God.

The universe is God-centred

The point of life is God's glory. In case you don't believe me, let's look at a few texts. God speaks clearly about what motivates Him in **Isaiah 48:9-11**: *"For My name's sake will I defer Mine*

anger, and for My praise will I refrain for thee, that I cut thee not off. For Mine own sake, even for Mine own sake, will I do it: for how should My name be polluted? and I will not give My glory unto another."

He again says why He spared Israel in the wilderness in **Ezekiel 20:14**: *"But I [acted] for My name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen, in whose sight I brought them out."* Listen to God's explanation of why He restored Israel from exile and see if it is man-centred approach, or a God-centred approach:

Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord GOD; "I do not this for Your sakes, O house of Israel, but for Mine holy name's sake, which ye have profaned among the heathen, whither ye went. And I will sanctify My great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the heathen shall know that I am the LORD," saith the Lord GOD, "when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes."

Ezekiel 36:22-23

God tells us why He forgives our sins and saves us in **Isaiah 43:25**: *"I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for Mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins."*

Jesus' ultimate aim is that God's children might see and enjoy His glory: *"Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am; that they may behold My glory, which Thou hast given Me: for Thou lovedst Me before the foundation of the world"* (**John 17:24**). See, God loving us is not, as John Piper often puts it, God making much of us. It is God wanting us to have the joy of making much of Him.

Paul tells us in **1 Corinthians 10:31**: *"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."* And the whole earth will proclaim it one day: *"For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea"* (**Habukkuk 2:14**).

What is God's glory? If we understand this – we will understand what it means to glorify Him. I am going to borrow a term from Jim Berg. God's glory is His firstness. It means He is first, best, greatest in all things. He is absolutely supreme. God's glory is His supremacy – His firstness.

Let's illustrate it like this. The highest mountain known to man is on the planet Mars. It is Olympus Mons and it rises to 24 kilometres high. It is three times the height of Mount Everest. The glory of Olympus Mons is its height. It is first among mountains. No mountain is taller. No mountain can compare with it. It is higher than all, supreme. It is first among mountains.

God's glory is His firstness in all things. There is nothing that God created that is better than He is. He is always the greatest, the best, the highest, the first. If you were to hold a competition in any area – God would always win. Whether it be knowledge, or wisdom, or strength, or speed, or power, or beauty, or purity, or age, or size, or faithfulness, or love, or mercy – God is always first.

God is always the greatest, the supreme. He is unique. He alone is Creator. He alone is Self-Sustaining – the Great I AM. He alone is infinite and perfect. This absolute uniqueness makes Him first. God's glory is His supremacy.

To glorify God is to acknowledge, rejoice in and then display this firstness. Glorifying God is when we realize He is the centre of all things – He is the end to which all things must go. He is the author and finisher – the point of existence – and for His pleasure we are created. He does not exist for us – we exist for Him.

This is why God asks in **Isaiah 40:25**: *"To whom then will ye liken Me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One."* God cannot rightly be compared to His creation, because He towers above it. He is way beyond it. He excels it. He is glorious, He is first!

And this God-centredness is what all created beings should confess. The beings in heaven certainly do, as we read in Revelation. They break out in delight, acknowledging, 'God, you are first. You deserve all the honour and praise, and dominion and power, for You are first. You are worthy of all of the praise, because You are first.'

God's holiness refers to this. While holiness does speak of His moral purity, the Hebrew word for holy is literally 'other'. To be other is to be separate, different. God is distinct from His creation – He is supreme and first above it – this is His glory. When Isaiah saw the seraphim crying out *"Holy, holy, holy,"* what they were saying is 'Unique, unique, unique is the Lord God.'

Any movement away from God-centredness is sin

To the degree that we move away from this central thought of glorifying God – of displaying Him as first – is the degree to which our lives are out of order. Unless we put first things first, all else will come apart. We will be disobeying our own design instructions. We will be running in opposition to the momentum of the very universe.

Romans 11:36 says, *"For from Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen."* We were created by Him and for Him. It is only sensible that if all things are moving toward a final display of God's absolute firstness in Christ, then we need to be busy with this. **Isaiah 43** puts it as plainly as can be: *"Even every one that is called by My name: for I have created him for My glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him."*

So, we have been created to glorify God. But now, in our hearts, we begin to feel uneasy. God wanting the glory sounds a bit vain, doesn't it? It sounds like He craves attention, or is selfish. But the answer is to see that God, being truthful, loves most what is most valuable: Himself. If He loved something of lesser value than Himself, He would be untruthful, And He'd be unjust, because He'd be making a wrong judgement by favouring what is not to be favoured.

The reason God seeks His own glory is because nothing can ever be more valuable or greater than Him. He is first. If God loved something more than Himself, He would in effect, be putting lesser things first. But God is righteous because He always puts first things first. Therefore,

when He seeks His own glory, when He commands His creatures to glorify Him – He is in fact seeking their own good. He is commanding them to seek after that which will bring them the greatest satisfaction, since they were created to glorify Him.

So how do we glorify Him?

Now a human does not glorify God by making Him first. You cannot make God first, just as you cannot *make* Mount Olympus first among mountains. It *is* first. I glorify Mount Olympus by admitting it is first, by treating it as first. In the same way, I glorify God not by making Him first, but by responding to Him in a way that expresses it is so.

This is really what humility is: acknowledging the firstness of God. What grows out of humility is faith – which is treating God as if He is first. And it must begin with salvation. Salvation is where a human says, ‘God, you *are* God. You are first. I have been disobeying that fact. I now seek to be reconciled to You by Your Son Jesus Christ, so that I can begin glorifying You as Your child.’

Once we are saved, we can now glorify God. To glorify God, we must seek to display Him as first in three ways: in our delights, in our dependence and in our decisions.

1. First in our delights

When I say the word pleasure, what is the first thing that comes into your mind? It’s likely the first thing you look to for delight. When your heart desires joy, happiness, satisfaction – where is the first place it turns? The thing you seek above all things as your joy, your delight, your pleasure – that thing you glorify. You say – this thing or this person is the greatest source of joy and pleasure to me. When I want fulfilment, this is the first place I turn.

So what is it for you? A husband, a wife, a child? A friend? Food? Sex? Romance? Music? Success? Fame? Money? Power? Intelligence? Good looks? Popularity? A hobby? Your work? Sports? What thing or person is above all others as the source of your joy and pleasure? If we are to glorify God, He is to be first in our delight.

Someone says, “Well, it doesn’t matter how I feel, I don’t have to delight in God – I’ll just serve Him.” Really? What Bible are you reading? The Psalms in mine say, *“Delight thyself in the Lord,”* *“Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice!”* and *“Serve the LORD with gladness: come before His presence with singing.”*

In fact, listen to what God said to Israel, and consider if God regards delight as an optional extra: *“Because thou servedst not the LORD thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things; therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies which the LORD shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things: and He shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until He have destroyed thee”* (**Deuteronomy 28:47-48**).

God would punish Israel for not delighting in Him. Is this because God is vain? No, it is because He is most enjoyable, He is the source of greatest delight – and when we seek it in other places above Him, we rob Him of glory.

“Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate,” saith the LORD. “For My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

Jeremiah 2:12-13

Israel's travesty in Jeremiah was twofold – they forsook the highest satisfaction in the universe, and turned to things that cannot satisfy. Plus, the entire book of Ecclesiastes could be called 'The search for satisfaction.' Solomon tries money, pleasure, power, beauty, possessions, and wisdom – and none of it works. His conclusion? *“Rejoice in God! Fear God and keep His commandments”* (**Ecclesiastes 12:13**).

You might be asking – how can I be delighted in God? Well, if you don't yet know, then the Bible commands you in **Psalms 34:8**: *“Taste and see that the Lord is good.”* Every need, craving, insecurity, and desire you have finds its complete and fullest satisfaction in God – in who He is, His ways, His purposes, His promises to you as a believer. Everything you are, the very shape of your heart, so to speak, was designed to find its fullest joy in God.

To turn anywhere else before Him for joy is idolatry, sin, because it robs Him of glory. Does that mean we can never look to anything else for joy? What it means is that everything in life – all of His gifts – are to cause us to look up. **James 1:17** tells us, *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above.”* We can use God's gifts with thankfulness, and cause them to take joy in God.

Augustine put it this way: “He loves Thee too little, who loves anything together with Thee, which he loves not for Thy sake.” God made us to find our deepest joy in Him. Jesus said, *“These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full”* (**John 15:11**). And to quote Augustine again: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in You.”

2. First in our dependence

Not only will our delight prove that God is first, but we will glorify God by showing Him to be first in dependence.

As a creature, you are always at some point lacking and needing. You need food, shelter. You need direction and guidance. You need protection. You need wisdom. You need many things every day to keep going. When you have a need, who or what is the first thing you turn to? What is the first thing you depend on? Your bank balance? Your husband or wife? Your parents or friends? Your security systems? Your insurance policy? Your own intelligence?

Where do you first turn or who do you depend on, to make it through life? A leader or influencer? A Christian teacher? What is your first turn when you are in trouble, distress, calamity, or emergency? When you face more than you can handle, do you first turn to

sedatives, tranquilisers, painkillers? Maybe your dependence is social media, games, golf, or some kind of leisure activity – to just distract you. When these things or these people are your first turn in trouble, you glorify them. You make them great, and you rob God of glory.

One of the greatest provocations that Israel did to God was that they relied on Egypt when faced with other enemies. Here is the singular nation of God – faced with threats – and their first turn is not God, it is another mere country. Who is your first dependence for all of life? **Acts 17:28** says: *“For in Him we live, and move, and have our being.”*

Whether or not we realise it, God is first when it comes to our dependence. If a five-year-old comes to Mom and Dad and says, “I don’t need you! I’m leaving home!” the parents smile to themselves, knowing that in about 30 minutes, Junior will be hungry, and his first turn will be back to them. That the child doesn’t realise in the moment they are dependent doesn’t change the fact that they are. And we are dependent on God.

All things made need maintenance. Whether they be cars, computers or a growing cauliflower. Things that are made need to be watered, repaired, fixed, supplied with energy. You and I are created – we need God. There is only One in the Universe who can say “I AM” and that’s God. Only God does not need. He does not in any way depend. We do. And when we say – “God, help! God, please! God, I need You” – this does not annoy God. It does not irritate God. This glorifies Him.

Such a plea shows Him to be the Strong One – the Rock, our Refuge. He gets glory as our Provider, and we get the help. **Psalms 50:15** says, *“And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.”* When you need help, call on God. We get the help, and He gets the glory. God is shown to be first in dependence. He is not only desirable – able to bring delight; He is reliable – to bring help in time of need. And as humans, we are always in a time of need!

That’s why Peter commanded the following in **1 Peter 4:11**: *“If any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”* When we serve, let us serve in full dependence, so that God may get all the glory.

Sadly, however, too many times in our lives. God is not first in dependence. He is all too often the last resort. We turn to our own ingenuity, our own plans, our own ideas, our own resources. And what that says is, ‘God, You are not first among things to be relied upon. There are things better than You to turn to – that’s why I turn to them first.’

3. First in our decisions

This is the third area we can glorify God in. The prophet Isaiah probably gave the simplest definition of sin when he wrote in **Isaiah 53:6**: *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way.”* Do you realise that the heart of sin is to not demonstrate God’s firstness in our decisions? The very first sin was where Lucifer no longer said, ‘God is first! God’s will is first!’ He instead said, ‘I will’ five times.

Adam and Eve copied this when they chose to go their own way instead of God's way. See, if they had reflected His firstness, they would have said, 'I hear what the serpent is saying, but God is best is wisdom. He is best in goodness. He is best in truth. He cannot be lying! He cannot be misleading us. He cannot be withholding good things from us. It must be the serpent who is lying, who is misleading us. The serpent cannot be greater in wisdom or goodness than God!'

Instead, Adam and Eve chose to believe Satan; they chose to exalt the serpent's advice over God's commands, and chose to exalt their own selves over God. That is sin. Sin is when you decide in your own favour over God. Sin is when you have a choice – please God or please self. Now when you choose to please God, it will please self as well. But when the choice is please self in a way that displeases God, and you choose self – you make self first.

Then, you rob God of glory. You say, 'He is not Lord. He does not have the right to tell me what to do. He is not first in authority. My first authority is myself. I listen to me first.' Paul described sin in **Romans 3:23**: *"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."* When we choose to go our own way, we rob God of glory and say, 'His ways are not best. His commands are not best. His will for my life is not best. His purposes are not best. His authority is not greatest.'

That is sin. That is why God will punish sin in hell eternally, because if He is infinite, if He is infinitely supreme – then to choose your way over His is an infinite offense. First in your decisions means that every act of your will is guided firstly by a desire to please Him.

God the Son lived this out when He said in **John 8:29**: *"And He that sent Me is with Me: the Father hath not left Me alone; for I do always those things that please Him."* What governed Christ's decisions was, 'Will this please God? Does it reflect God's supremacy by obeying His laws, following His ways, imitating His character? Does it say, being like God is the best way to live, because God is best?' That's demonstrating His firstness in our decisions.

When a human shows God is first in their delight, first in dependence and first in decisions, they glorify Him. With this understanding, we can see why the first of the ten commandments is "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." In other words, thou shalt have none other before me in dependence, in delight, in decisions. The one that comes first in your decisions and delight and dependence is your god.

Those who have died seem to know best about what life is about. We were created to bring God pleasure. If you seek to acknowledge Him as First, by the power of the Spirit – you will experience the highest possible meaning of your existence, your life will have fullness of joy, and your Christian life will have all the meaning and depth it was supposed to have.