

The Fullness of Glory

John 1:14–18; Exodus 33–34

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Introduction

There is a story I carry with me from a fishing boat — one of those moments where someone in authority tells you exactly what needs to be done, but leaves out the most important part: how to do it. I was told to close the freezer. Just close the freezer. What I wasn't told was the particular method that made it possible. The instruction was clear enough. The knowledge required to carry it out was not.

I think this happens constantly in the life of faith. Scripture tells us to give God the glory. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:31:

| “*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*”

What is our primary purpose as human beings, if not to glorify God and to enjoy him forever? We are told — in everything we do — to give glory to God. And yet it seems to me that most people envision giving glory to God as more or less the same thing as giving him thanks or praise. A touchdown is scored, a hand points to the sky — and yes, giving glory to God does include thanks and praise. But that thanks and praise is like closing the freezer. There is something deeper that needs to happen first.

To understand what that something is — to understand what it actually means to give glory to God — we must first understand what the glory of God actually is.

That question shapes the movement of this morning's message. We begin with a definition: what is the glory of God? We then turn to the great example of Exodus 33 and 34, where Moses encounters that glory face to face. From there we come to our text in John 1:14–18, where John tells us something even more staggering. And we close with the application: what does it mean, in light of all of this, to give glory to God?

What Is the Glory of God?

Not long ago, Jacob and I traveled to Anacortes, Washington, to visit my parents. If you asked me to describe Anacortes, I could tell you about the climate, the temperature, the nearness to the water, the kinds of trees, the size of the town. I can give you all kinds of facts. But where my description falls apart is the moment I actually try to convey the beauty. I can tell you that it is beautiful. But to describe it — that is another thing entirely.

This is how it is with the glory of God. I can tell you that God is glorious. Describing his glory is something else.

Glory, in many ways, is like beauty — it is the manifestation of certain realities, certain traits. The glory of God is the manifestation of God's presence, God's holiness, God's truth, and God's will. And when we encounter these things — even in the smallest quantities — we experience them as something overwhelming. People fall on their faces. The glory is so awesome that people cover their eyes. He is so real that it feels like being undone. The power is simply unstoppable.

Those words — weight, beauty, substance, and power — are, in fact, the different meanings carried by the Hebrew word for glory, *kābôd*. Weight. Beauty, or splendor. Substance. Power. Each of these captures something of what it means to be in the presence of God's glory.

Think of it this way.

God's glory is the weight of his presence. Imagine a classroom with no teacher. The students are in chaos. But the moment the teacher walks in, the dynamics of that room shift entirely — chairs are taken, chatter stops, attention is redirected. The teacher's very presence has weight. That is just our small, human experience of this phenomenon. When God's presence is felt, the weight of it is manifested as something almost physical. This is why, every time someone encounters God in Scripture, they fall flat on their faces.

God's glory is the beauty of his holiness. God is holy — which means he is utterly unique, utterly perfect, utterly pure. And when that holiness is manifested, it appears as an awesome splendor, as light, as infinite beauty.

God's glory is the substance of his truth. There are times I have picked up a book by C.S. Lewis, or Dallas Willard, or Spurgeon, or Augustine, and found myself overwhelmed by the truth on the page — edified, convicted, sometimes undone. These are writers of real substance. Yet they pale before the substance of God himself. Encountering God's glory in his truth is like having a brilliant light shone into every shadow.

God's glory is the power of his will. God is at work. He is doing something. And what he does is glorious — and it carries a power I have no means to divert or adjust. His will is moving toward his purposes.

The glory of God, then, is the manifestation of his presence, his holiness, his truth, and his will — experienced by us as weight, beauty, substance, and power. And we see this in all of its fullness in the story of the Exodus.

The Example: Exodus 33–34

In the first eighteen chapters of Exodus, we get hints of God’s glory. The burning bush. The powerful signs in Egypt. The pillar of fire leading Israel through the wilderness, separating the sea, opening the way out of bondage. Manna from heaven. Water from the rock. Then in chapter 19, the God who had delivered this people from slavery sets up a meeting at Mount Sinai — and his glory is revealed: weighty, powerful, beautiful, and substantial. The law is given. Something enormous is happening.

But I want to go back to a conversation that takes place after the golden calf, in chapter 33. It is a remarkable exchange.

God speaks to Moses:

“Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey.” (Exodus 33:1–3, NIV)

This is an extraordinary offer. Military victories through an angelic vanguard. Land rich and flowing with milk and honey. Every promise fulfilled. Take it all, God says. Just go.

And notice — this is exactly what most people want from God. Bless me. Give me what I want. Remove every threat. Enrich me. God’s offer to Moses and Israel is precisely what people spend their lives asking for.

But then comes the line that changes everything. God continues: *“But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.”*

Here it is. Take the land. Take the blessings. Take the promises. But you will not have my presence.

And now Moses responds in a way that marks him as one of the greats:

“If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” (Exodus 33:15–16, NIV)

Think about what Moses is actually saying. Without God’s presence, they are in the desert — and they will die there. Moses is staking everything on this. *If you do not go with us, life is not worth living.* What distinguishes us from every other people on earth? Not the land. Not the prosperity. Not the angel. It is you. Your presence. Your holiness. Your truth. Your purposes.

God’s response in verse 17 is remarkable in its simplicity: *“I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”*

And then Moses, having won this, goes one step further. Verse 18: *“Now show me your glory.”*

Somewhere along the road — between the burning bush and the burning mountain — Moses has caught something. He has come to understand that the very purpose for which God has created us is to know him, to enjoy his presence, to glory in his glory. *Show me your glory, God. I want to know your purpose, your truth, your holiness, your presence.*

And God says yes — with a caveat. Exodus 33:19–20:

“I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”

Moses, I will show you as much of my glory as you can handle. But the fullness of it — the full weight of it will crush you, the full splendor of it will blind you, the full substance of it will undo you, the full power of it will destroy you.

So in Exodus 34, God hides Moses in the cleft of a rock — protecting him from his own glory — and passes before him. Here is what Moses hears:

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (Exodus 34:6–7 ESV)

And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. (Exodus 34:8 ESV)

The glory that was revealed to Moses can be summed up in two words.

Grace: the Lord is merciful, compassionate, abounding in steadfast love, forgiving. God is perfectly loving.

Truth: he will by no means clear the guilty. God is perfectly just.

Moses heard God's glory as the Lord passed over him.

But now there has come a time when the glory of God — in its fullness — has dwelt among us.

The Lesson: John 1:14–18

This is what John is telling us. Turn to the text:

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, “He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.”’) For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” (John 1:14–18 ESV)

The only person who had ever come close to the full presence of God was Moses. But Moses was only told about God's glory. He was placed in the rock, God passed over him, and declared his character — grace and truth. Moses never actually saw it. He never saw the full manifestation of God's mercy, love, compassion, and justice. He was told about it. And he passed it on to us through the law.

But in this one named Jesus — who dwelt among us — John is saying: *we have seen his glory*. The glory of the only begotten one. Full of grace and truth.

There is a word John uses twice in this passage that is absolutely critical: the word translated “only Son,” or in older translations, “only begotten” — *monogenēs*. It appears in verse 14 and again in verse 18, and John himself is clear about what it does not mean. It does not mean a created being, something brought into existence at a point in time. John has already told us: *in the beginning was the Word*. He has always been. The Word is not created. He is himself God. The word *monogenēs* here carries the sense of essence, substance, and nature — very God of very God.

And so John says: *from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace*. The law was given through Moses — grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God — but the only begotten God, who is at the Father's side, *he has made him known*.

The God that Moses only heard, we have seen. Jesus is of the same essence, the same substance as the Father. He is himself the full revelation of God's glory — of his grace and of his truth.

The Application: What Does It Mean to Give God the Glory?

The glory of God — his perfect and total goodness — is seen most fully in the cross. This is the place of total and perfect love and justice. The place where grace and truth meet. Where God's perfect love and perfect justice intersect. The glory of God, manifested.

And so to give God the glory — it is not simply pointing to the sky after a victory. It is entering this story. It means enjoying his presence through worship, praise, and thanksgiving. It means standing in awe of his holiness — imitating him, seeking him, longing for him, and being made holy ourselves. It means receiving his truth through confession and repentance, and resting in his grace. It means doing his will — bearing fruit, surrendering your life, walking in obedience.

Closing the freezer is simple enough, once you understand what the freezer actually is.