

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“In Christ: For the Praise of His Glory”
Ephesians 1:11-14

We're in the middle of a series going through the first three chapters of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and we're calling this series "In Christ," because Paul uses that phrase so much, but also because it has so much to do with who we are, what our identity is. It is, in fact, the most common phrase Paul uses to describe someone or something that pertains to the Christian faith. Not "Christian," not "disciple," not "believer," but rather "in Christ." Two weeks ago we skipped ahead to the end of chapter three, and last week we started back at the beginning of the letter, and we'll be moving our way forward through the letter as Paul addresses some of the foundations of the faith, and what it all means when it comes to our identity as the church, as those who are, as Paul puts it over and over, "in Christ."

Last week, we looked at how Paul starts this letter with the eternal choice of God, God's choosing of a people as v. 4 put it "before the foundation of the world." It was pretty heady, but the main thing to remember is that the choice of God was raising up a people to himself for a greater purpose, a people to whom he would reveal in Christ a mystery, a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him. And we left off by asking, when it comes to God's great glorious plan, just what might be our part to play? As it turns out, Paul's going to tell us more about that. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

You ever hear a word so many times that it starts to sound funny to you? So much that you almost lose what the word even means? "Glory" is one of those words for me. It just sounds funny.

In v. 11, Paul says this: "In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will." In the immortal words of Ronald Reagan, "There you go again." Here's Paul bringing up that predestination stuff again: "having been destined according to his purpose." I thought we were over and done with that last week.

But it's at this point, that Paul builds on it and tells us just what role we have to play. Tells us directly: as v. 12 continues, "so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory." That's the reason, Paul says, that God has chosen a people to be in his Son, the reason that God has adopted a people as his children: that we "might live for the praise of his glory."

Paul uses this phrase again just two verses later in v. 14. He talks about how we, having heard the word of truth, believing the gospel, are marked and sealed by the Holy Spirit, and that this Spirit of God is a pledge or an advance of that inheritance, and again with it all being "to the praise of his glory." It's powerful stuff. God is making a promise to his people, a promise to save, a promise to redeem, and gives his Spirit as an assurance of that promise.

But Paul's doubling down on something here. When he's talking about just what our role is, he keeps coming back to this phrase, "for the praise of his glory." That's our purpose, "to live for the praise of his glory."

Gotta be honest, that's one of those phrases that sounds really nice, but I'm not really sure what it means.

There's this comedy sketch I saw a while back that came to mind when this phrase "for the praise of his glory" kept popping up. It's a bit irreverent, but I think it's funny. It's set at a religious boys' school, and they're having a daily chapel service. A priest stands up and calls all the students to pray with him and to repeat after him. And this is what he says, with all the students repeating each phrase. "Let us praise God. Oh Lord. Oooo you are so big. So absolutely huge. Gosh, we're all really impressed down here, I can tell you. Forgive us, O Lord, for our barefaced flattery. But you are so strong and, well, just so super. Fantastic. Amen."

Now, I think that's funny, but clearly, it's poking a hard jab at this whole notion of praising God, reducing the words of the psalms and church hymns to mere flattery. And really, if you take a cynical view of this whole "for the praise of his glory" that Paul says, the whole reason why we're here, you might be thinking, "God sounds kind of vain." Think about it. If the reason God made and chose any of us is just to praise him and adore him, how is God not the vainest being ever? Creates a people just so he can have a group of adoring fans. I didn't think God was supposed to be that insecure.

Some of you literary-minded folks might recall the Greek epics by Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, stories of these ancient Greek heroes during and after the Trojan War. But if you've ever read much of either one of these stories, something you'll come across is these heroes' pursuit of glory. It's like an obsession, really. It's like everything they do, every attack, every strategy, every victory, all of it is for the sake of their own glory, and by "glory" they mean their renown, their fame, the way the world will speak of them long after their dead. That's how "glory" worked in that ancient world for those Greek heroes.

Is that how it works for God, just out to get some glory? Just on a cosmic quest to get some likes? And if that's the case, does that mean we're just puppets to flatter this narcissistic God? If so, doesn't sound like good news to me. Doesn't sound like the "gospel of salvation."

"Glory" is just a loaded word. A lot of baggage goes into that word. A lot of different meanings.

But here's one to try on, especially when we're talking about God, especially when we're talking about Jesus.

The most common way that the word "glory" is used in Scripture isn't quite the same thing as those Greek heroes, meaning trying to gain renown. The most common meaning for "glory" is instead closer to "the amazing, terrifying presence of God," like in the Christmas story in Luke 2: the "glory of the Lord" shone around the shepherds in the fields, and they were terrified.

The point is, "praising the glory of God" is not about what people think about him. That might've been what the Greeks were obsessed about, but that's not what God's worried about. God's glory doesn't depend upon public opinion or the praise of the people. It is self-evident.

And when you praise something, you're actually making two statements. First is the obvious one: it's the word of admiration directly to the one your praising. So if you're praising a child for doing the right thing, there's what you're saying to the child, a word of affirmation. But that's not the only thing you're saying. When you praise someone or something, you're also making a statement, even if just an indirect one, to everyone else who might be listening or

watching. You're saying, "This is what you value. This is what's important. This is what's worth our attention."

So when we praise the Lord, we're saying two things. First, we're saying to God Almighty, "It is to you and you alone that we lift our hands," and it is right and good that we do so. But we're saying something else too. We're saying something to anyone else who might be listening or watching. It's a testimony, saying, "This is what we value. This is what's important. This is what's worth our attention."

Now at this point, I'm guessing that some of you are thinking, "Jay, we're getting kind of lost in the weeds here. All this talk about what 'glory' actually means or what 'praise' actually means—it's not really landing." Here's why it's important. What Paul is saying here in Ephesians is that the meaning of life, the very purpose of our being here, the very reason God has chosen and set apart and raised up a people for himself in his Son, in Christ, the very reason God has redeemed and forgiven and empowered this people, is so that they might "live for the praise of his glory." But if living for the praise of his glory is nothing more than feeding the vanity of some cosmic narcissist, then I'd rather not waste my time, and you shouldn't either. We should all close up shop here. There are better ways to spend a Sunday morning.

But what if it means something else?

What if praising the glory of God is about more than singing songs in church, more than heavenly flattery? If the glory of God is the amazing presence of God, and if praise is a testimony, then praising the glory of God is much more than opening a hymnbook. It is a charge, to testify to the good news that God is here and that in Christ, through his blood, through the cross, he wants to be with you. Put another way, our charge is this: make known the amazing presence of God. That's what praising his glory means, this is what God has redeemed us for: to make known the amazing presence of God. So how do we do that?

Well, all the folks sitting behind me have their finger on one way to do it. When our choir leads us in worship—and I'll confess because our choir is so gifted that it's tough for me to remember this—but it is not for our entertainment; it is not for personal performance; it is a glorious declaration that we seek to worship and serve the Lord with joy and excellence every week, and that builds up this house of faith; it makes known the amazing presence of God.

But some of you may not feel like you belong in a choir. (I'd quickly add that professional vocal talents are not a requirement to be in the choir, so don't let that stop you.) But I get that it may not be what everyone feels led to do.

No doubt many of you have noticed how this sanctuary is beautifully adorned each week with flowers. Spoiler alert: doesn't just magically happen. There's a whole crew of people who help put these together each week, and I learned just last week from Adrienne McPeake and Kathryn Callaway, two of the folks who help make this happen, that the motto for this effort has been for some time, "All for the Glory of God." That's how you might praise the glory of God.

But some of you may not feel like you're supposed to arrange flowers. So here's another way to think about it: our charge to make known the presence of God would be pretty limited, our God would be pretty limited, if it just applied to a few hours on Sunday mornings. It's everywhere. It's all the time.

Last week our Director of Children's Ministries Mary Emily Morris offered a few words from a book by a 17th century French monk who was known as Brother Lawrence. The book's called, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, but it's a Christian classic now. And it's all about how this monk sought to recognize the presence of God with him and around him in all that he did. The catch is, what this monk was doing wasn't all that remarkable: not sitting on top of a

mountain or walking some lengthy pilgrimage. He was a cook. He was a cook in the monastery, and he fixed sandals. But he saw every meal he prepared, every shoe he re-soled as a chance to know and to make known the presence of God.

Also this past week, I learned from one among you—he didn't want me to share his name—that he has been serving in ministry at the Blount County Jail. And every year, he compiles all the sermons together from our church, puts them in a booklet, and distributes them to the different cell blocks. For fifteen years he has done this, and every so often hears from one of the inmates or even one of the prison staff how their lives were touched by the words they read. That is making known the presence of God.

Finally, I learned of a young man who years ago served at a Young Life Camp in North Carolina one summer. He was just working in the kitchen and wasn't loving life, because every day was just a long series of dishes he had to clean, so he was thinking about dropping it. But others encouraged him to see his work there in the kitchen as his ministry, and what he started to do was really powerful for me to hear. From that point forward, with every dish that came through, he offered a prayer for the person that had just used it. Wouldn't even see their faces, just the plates, but would pray for each and every one of them. That young man was Mark Lampley. And that is making known the presence of God.

Friends, we have been given an amazing gift: the chance to be a part of what God is doing in the world. And our purpose, our charge is, as Paul puts it, to live for the praise of his glory, to make known his presence in the world. I'll confess compared to the awesome glory of God, what we have to offer probably seems pretty insignificant. But I think God is less interested in what grand abilities we have and more interested in whether we would let every waking breath, every step, every action, every thought, every word be in some small way a testimony that the Lord is at work, that God is here.

It means that in everything you do, you're declaring that there is a different power at work. And just as God has made a pledge to you in the Holy Spirit, a pledge to redeem you, a pledge to deliver you, you are making a pledge to the world that the brokenness that we can all see is not how things will always be. And the reason they will know that is because through you, they will see the glory of God. They will see that God is here, and God is at work.

So I ask you, friends, this morning, to look upon everything you do, every interaction, every decision, and ask, "Does this tell of the glory of God? Does this make his presence known? Does this testify that there is a different power at work in the world?" And if it doesn't, could it?

In the name of Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**