

Glory to God alone

When preparing for today, the topic seemed overwhelming. I asked myself various questions as a starting point, firstly:

What is glory?

The dictionary describes it as renown, recognition; exalted or triumphant honour; splendour, beauty; resplendent brightness.

What we'll be looking at today is different from the Glory of God, which emanates from Him. It is the experienced presence of God, which has been described by those who've experienced it as like weight, heaviness, intense light, power (the earthquake and fire experienced by Elijah). The Glory of God, signifying the presence of God, was witnessed leaving the temple by Ezekiel in a vision.

What does giving glory to something or someone entail?

It is giving them recognition/credit, honouring, praising or exalting them.

Keren Hannah Pryor in "A Taste of Torah" suggests that giving glory to God involves "obedient service and whole-hearted worship".

It's not wrong to give people credit or respect for who they are or what they do, but it can get out of proportion. When we give them glory or we take glory for things that are only due to God, we are wrong.

What or who do we give glory to?

There are many things that people give glory (recognition, credit) to that are not God, for example 'Mother Nature', chance/luck, wealth, a particular country or people group, science, superstition/the stars, other people (leaders, celebrities...) or even ourselves.

If we give God our attention, make Him the focus of our thoughts, recognise His work in our lives and work to please Him, then we will be in our right place and God will be at the centre of our being. If we are giving that attention and recognition to someone or something else, then that person or thing takes God's place in our lives.

Giving glory to God alone

In our passage today, we've heard the incident of Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

I find Old Testament history confusing, particularly after the kingdom was divided, so let's put this in context. After a brief revival in the reign of King Josiah, the nation of Judah has fallen again into idolatry. Josiah's successor, Jehoahaz, did evil in the sight of the LORD and ended his days in captivity in Egypt. He was replaced by Josiah's grandson, Jehoiakim, who did evil in the sight of the LORD. He ended up paying tribute to Egypt, serving Babylon and fighting the Chaldeans, the Moabites and the Ammonites, who were sent by God because Jehoiakim had rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, reigned for a grand total of three months but still managed to do evil in the sight of the LORD.

Judgement came again as Nebuchadnezzar's army besieged Jerusalem and the royal family, and thousands of people were carried off to exile in Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar placed Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, on the throne. Despite everything that had gone before...he did evil in the sight of the LORD.

Chronicles records that God brought judgement on Judah specifically for the sin of King Manasseh. Manasseh had built altars to the stars and an Asherah pole in the temple of the LORD, he had also

consulted fortune-tellers and used witchcraft, and he had practiced child sacrifice. He led the nation in his sin.

This is all recorded in 2 Kings 23-24.

At this point, God instructed his prophet Jeremiah to tell Judah and the surrounding nations that He had placed Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hands and that all nations will serve Babylon until the time for Babylon's judgement has arrived. In Jeremiah 27 v 5-7, God says:

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"It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. ⁶ Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. ⁷ All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes. Then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave."

God makes it clear that Babylon's current position is dependent on God. God has raised up Nebuchadnezzar and will raise up his son and grandson, but he will also judge them and bring down that great empire in His time.

At the time of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Judah has been in exile for many years and the king has witnessed the miracle of the fiery furnace. He knows something of Judah's God but is still glorifying other gods too.

His dream is a warning that he will be cut down and humbled until he acknowledges that God alone is the true God.

Despite the encouragement the King gave him, Daniel could still have lost his life for giving this interpretation. He also goes a step further and boldly advises the King. "Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity."

God has given the warning but allows a chance for Nebuchadnezzar to change. Have we seen similar warnings in our country?

It seems like Nebuchadnezzar didn't take the warning seriously. There's no immediate change of heart or a gradual change of behaviour. There's now a break in the narrative and the writer picks up the story a year after the dream. Someone has asked the King a question, and the King answers "'Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?'"

He has taken the glory for himself and not given it to God. Even before he has finished speaking, a voice from heaven is heard declaring that the dream is about to come true.

He claimed glory that was not rightfully his, so all the glory God had given him will be removed. Not just his glory and power as a king, but his glory and honour as a man. The most exalted man in the empire is driven out from the safety and companionship of the city to the isolation and danger of the countryside. He eats grass like cattle instead of the choicest food, and his curled hair and well-kept appearance become straggly and unkempt.

The judgement is for a set time-span "seven periods of time shall pass over you". When those periods of time are complete, Nebuchadnezzar raises his eyes to heaven. In his disordered state, he is looking up to God when he used to look down on everything from his exalted state.

God restores his reason and Nebuchadnezzar gives glory to God.

“At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honoured him who lives forever...”

God’s mercy and grace do not simply cause Nebuchadnezzar to be restored in his reason and humanity, although that is a huge thing. God does not bear a grudge against Nebuchadnezzar, He doesn’t say ‘well, you can eat normal food again and live in the city, get your hair done, but you’ll be washing dishes for the rest of your life.’ God not only restores him to his kingdom but adds even more to the king’s glory.

“At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendour returned to me. My counsellors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. ³⁷ Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.”

Although the ultimate fate of Babylon was not changed, for a time Babylon was ruled by a man who acknowledged Almighty God and was not afraid to share the word of his testimony across the empire. This whole chapter is a record of a letter Nebuchadnezzar sent to every part of his empire. The beginning of chapter 4 shows the greeting:

“King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! ² It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me.

³ How great are his signs,
how mighty his wonders!
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and his dominion endures from generation to generation.

I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. ⁵ I saw a dream that made me afraid....”

Let’s compare this with a couple of other incidents, this time in the New Testament.

In Acts 12 v 21-23, Herod Agrippa is angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon and they ask for peace because they’re dependent on Judea for food. Based on other historical sources, it is likely that this incident happened at the amphitheatre in Caesarea Maritima on the coast. Herod arranges to address the crowd in his robes but makes a terrible error: when the crowd flatters him by likening him to a god, he does not stop them. He does not give glory to God. Immediately, he is struck down and subsequently dies.

Why should Herod Agrippa be struck down immediately, when a pagan emperor had a chance to repent and be restored? I think the key difference is that, although Herod had spent a large part of his life in Rome, he had still had the chance to hear the Word of God, he had also heard the good news of Jesus the Messiah, but he had rejected Him. He had authority over Israel, but idols reigned in his own life. He was Israel on the outside but Rome on the inside.

In contrast, in Acts 14 v 11-15, when God healed a man in Lystra and the people hailed Paul and Barnabas as gods, the apostles were so desperate to reject this that they tore their clothes in grief and cried out. They knew the terrible results of taking glory for themselves or giving glory to someone, when that glory is rightfully for God alone.

So why should we give glory to God alone?

- He creates and sustains the universe and everything in it.

- He provides all that we need.
- Authority, position and wealth – even life itself - are his gift.
- He saves – He even saves a pagan emperor.
- He is the King of Kings
- He alone is worthy
- He is a jealous God, Isaiah 42 v 8 “I am the Lord, that is My name; And My glory I will not give to another...”
- Giving glory to God keeps us in our proper place and protects us from pride – and destruction.

It seems easy to give glory to God when life is going well but comfort and security can equally lead us to complacency and pride. God warned the Israelites about this when they were still in the desert. We have proved this in our own country: as living standards have improved for most people, the nation has gradually turned away from God. What matters in life is what I want and the pursuit of my happiness, as long as I'm not hurting anyone else I can do what I like. We pursue our own agenda of tolerating anything and everything except the Word of God.

Nebuchadnezzar learnt to recognise God's authority while he was still living like an animal. He gave glory to God before his restoration occurred, without knowing if any restoration would occur. Unlike Herod, he had changed completely on the inside.

Like Judah, our nation has pursued idols of one sort or another, we have taken glory for ourselves or given it to people or things instead of to God. Our nation has been shaken and will continue to be shaken for some time.

Will we examine ourselves to make sure we are giving glory only to God.

Will we have the courage to warn people when the Holy Spirit prompts us? Daniel faced a man who could have had him killed. We face people who might laugh at us or reject us or report us for hate crime. In my mind, I'd have the courage, but in reality...?

Let's take the warnings seriously and encourage each other with prayer. That our lives shall be ones of “obedient service and whole-hearted worship” and that our nation will repent and give glory to God.

As Nebuchadnezzar said “How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders!
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation.”