

CHAPTER 1

GOD'S GLORY: THE *TELOS* OF HISTORY

*I am a slave of Christ in a remote country because
of the unspeakable glory of eternal life which is in
Christ Jesus our Lord.*

~Patrick of Ireland~

During my second semester in college, a dormmate and I were heading out for a greasy hamburger. We hadn't had much chance to connect during that first year, but we were taking the time to ask the proverbial get-to-know-you questions about one another. He was a much better question-asker than me, and he asked some soul-penetrating questions. Toward the end of dinner, I remember one of his questions quite well, of which he even reminds me to this day. He asked, "What are you passionate about?" And my answer was blunt and not premeditated. I said, "The glory of God." As soon as I said it, his face seemed baffled. He later said he had been expecting me to list off some hobby or sport. But his facial expression also reflected what I was thinking. I was surprised that I didn't say something "normal" like "baseball, travel, fishing, or music." And more curiously, I didn't say something ministry-focused,

like “evangelism, preaching, or missions.” After all, we were both formally training for missions. The words that rolled out of my mouth revealed a foundation deep in my soul that God had been stealthily establishing. Through His truths, God was crafting an immovable God-centered anchor in my heart and mind that would never let me go. God had been teaching me to love Him with my mind, heart, and will, more than the lost, more than the church, and more than myself. The honor of God’s name had become the burning furnace of all my missionary ambition. I still had much growth ahead of me, and still do, but God was at work.

That above conversation happened around the same season when God flattened me. I was working in Oregon for the US government in forestry, and in the evenings I would walk along the beach and pray as the sun set. One evening, while praying about my missionary calling, this passage from Acts 17:25 (NASB1995) slammed into my mind: “Nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things.” God. Is. Not. Served. As if He needs us. And He certainly didn’t need me.

I went from walking briskly to lying face down in awful wonder. The burden I felt for doing something great for God disappeared. I was free to obey the King of the Great Commission because all sovereignty is His alone. He is sufficient. He would supply all my needs to take His gospel to the unreached. For His glory alone was I now motivated. And this joyfully fearful sense of Christ’s sovereignty has strengthened and sustained me through the highs and lows of the privilege of missions. To be sure, this spectacular vision of God’s sovereignty is the testimony of thousands upon thousands of nameless Great Commission servants who have quietly plodded on for one thing: the glory of God in Christ.

Hidden Costs and Subtle Motivations

Enigmatic languages. Hostile resistance. Totalitarian government surveillance. Lifelong sickness. Virus-ruined bodies. Chronic fatigue. Merciless depression. “Begging” for financial

support. Skeptical supporters. Distance from friends. Scorn from family. Slander from neighbors. Imprisonment and martyrdom. Sleepless nights. Unending stress. Wayward children. False brethren. Unpredictable change. Constant transition.

Reading this cacophony of challenges might leave you breathless, maybe even in suspense. How are these all related? These are all potential (and even common) experiences that await would-be Great Commission servants unaware. Much more important than the questions of “what,” “where,” and “how” in Great Commission service is the question of “why.” Answering that makes all the difference. It affects everything.

That which motivates us to Great Commission service will be the primary reason why we stay or retreat. In contemporary Great Commission service in particular, often motivating claims for passion include adventure, dreams, prophetic words, cultural affinity, wanderlust, noble causes, injustice, philanthropic compassion, eternal rewards, and rousing clarion calls to reckless abandon. Though these well-intended motivations might be honorable and altruistic, they can lack rootedness and transcendence. They can be consequently devoid of staying power.

Bleeding Hearts or Burning Hearts?

Two kinds of gospel servants exist, both with similarly big-sized visions. Most gospel servants, and Christians in general, are somewhere on the spectrum between these two. If we're honest, none of us have it all figured out. We all walk with a limp, leaning all our weight on the crutches of God's grace. These two categories, at the risk of over generalization, are “the bleeding hearts” and “the burning hearts.”

The first, “the bleeding hearts,” find motivation from virtuous causes, motivational conference speakers, dire needs of perishing people, injustices perpetrated upon the helpless, and so many other truly humane reasons. They exude a self-giving vision. They are kind. They are sacrificial. These bleeding hearts endeavor to serve out of love for others, though they

might use creative labels such as holistic ministry, relief work, leadership development, business as mission, social justice, creation care, reconciliation, wealth creation, culture creation, empowerment, kingdom expansion, advocacy, peace making, and so many other big hearted slogans. They truly do good to others and exemplify the kingdom's preserving salt throughout the workplace, media, education, and politics. They claim God-sized visions for meeting the critical needs of humanity. They dream of a better life for people to have hope and know they are loved. I praise God for the good that they do for so many hurting people and for how they have inspired me to remember the forgotten of society. I even find some of their initiatives, like business as mission and mercy ministry, to be quite compelling and strategic for getting access to unreached language groups.

The second, "the burning hearts," might also feel stirred up by similar causes, events, and needs, but their controlling vision is uniquely truth-driven, not cause-driven. These burning hearts certainly value compassion ministry and creative platforms, but their vision is grander than any mere human face. A vision for the glory of God in the face of Christ captivates their wills. They solemnly surrender to knowing Him and taking His gospel to the most resistant places. In fact, stories of martyrdom and hard-hearted hostility only provoke their intrigue. God has no church among some hostile language groups, but Christ died for people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Therefore, someone must go and proclaim the gospel of Christ. And the mission cannot fail, even if martyrdom or a lifetime of hard-hearted rejection await. This can only be so because God has promised an eschatological harvest from all the peoples. The doxological need rouses them (for God to be worshiped among all the peoples), and the eschatological truth sustains them (that God promises to call out worshipers from all the peoples to reign with Christ forever).

These burning hearts admittedly go with imperfect theology (which we all have to some degree, don't we?), but their theology is God-centered enough that from start to finish, their earliest motivations, sustaining encouragements, and future aspirations all revolve around spreading the fame, renown, and glory of

God among all the peoples. In other words, the glory of God in Christ revealed from the Word buttresses their vision. They view all of life—the struggles and the successes—through the lens of this consuming reality. And such a vision is unassailable. The God of the Bible is worthy, and they want to be on the front line of spreading that vision. There is no better life than one “wasted” in the inglorious obscurity of Great Commission service.

But how do these “burning hearts” get there? What stabilizes them in their lackluster assignment after the first five to fifteen years of apparent fruitlessness? What empowers them to race across the finish line with their veins still bulging? Not a novel theology. Not an ecstatic experience. Just an ancient, tried-and-true sage-like vision that has secured countless servants throughout history: fearing God and seeking His glory.

Unless a biblical vision and a holy affection for the glory of God’s grace in Christ dominate the Great Commission servant’s soul, he will most likely languish in the lean years and easily change course in the face of more promising opportunities. The history of the advance of the church records lives of faceless men and women who have struggled to persevere in anonymity, toiling in barren fields, because God’s glory so arrested their souls that they could imagine doing nothing else. Simply put, He is worthy.

The first American missionary to Burma, Adoniram Judson (1788–1850), summed up the God-entranced passion of historic Great Commission spirituality:

Courage, lone laborer! . . . Courage! Every ray shed from thy gospel lamp speeds away as the mountain rill to the ocean, swelling the flood of radiance which is ere long to sweep over the entire earth. Then, at the rising of the Sun of Righteousness, shall the nations clap their hands in gladness, and the redeemed and renovated race of man burst forth in one universal shout: “*Hallelujah! Hallelujah! The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!*”¹

1 Francis Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of the Rev. Adoniram Judson, D.D.*, vol. 2 (Boston: Phillips, Samson, 1853), 410; emphasis in

So many like-minded unsung servants have labored faithfully, hoping in the promises of God to redeem people from the four corners of the earth to the praise of His glory. The Holy Spirit, through the prophet Isaiah, indicated such fulfillment:

They lift up their voices, they sing for joy; over the majesty of the LORD they shout from the west. Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD; in the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One. (Isaiah 24:14-16)

The gospel servant who burns with the holy fire of God-centered worship will keep the Word, endure to the end, and bear fruit in eternity. Such a burning heart longs for the finale of the *telos* of history—the ransomed church, elect from all the *ethne*, with one thunderous voice, praising the glory of the sovereign grace of God to save:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” (Revelation 7:9–12)

The Telos of Human History

As mentioned above, the *telos* of human history should control the Great Commission servant’s motivation. Before we can drill down and define his individual role and mandate, briefly surveying the big picture helps put the indecipherable pieces together.

original. Quoted also in E.D. Burns, *A Supreme Desire to Please Him: The Spirituality of Adoniram Judson* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 169.

Just as someone who starts putting puzzle pieces together after first examining the box cover's whole picture, so stepping back and studying God's panoramic historical and theological glory helps us know how we fit within God's sovereign plan for His glory.

So, how do you scrutinize the inscrutable? What's the roadmap for mankind's mysterious destiny? Here is my approximate (*not* exhaustive) description that I use with my students, albeit not without its limitations and omissions. I portion it into salient phrases:

The *telos* of human history is the glory of the sovereign grace of God, in the forgiveness and justification of sinners, through the execution of the perfectly obedient Son of God, on their behalf, made certain through the Son's resurrection, in order that the Son would reign as benevolent King over His redeemed people, by transforming them into His likeness, through the Spirit of God, with the Word of God.

Here's a simple diagram:

The glory of the sovereign grace of God,
in the forgiveness and justification
of sinners,
through the execution of the perfectly
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Defining the Indefinable?

Since the glory of God is the gospel servant's motivating aim and chief end, and since it is the grand summary of human history, it deserves clarification and explanation. If it is only some ethereal impression or some slogan of Christianese, when