

The Glory of God in Missions

Psalm 96

Introduction

Which of you are immersed in March Madness this year? Is Lehigh playing in the NCAA basketball tournament this year? Do you have a favorite team? March Madness elicits more emotion than even the war against the Islamic State, it seems. Just today Kevin Twit, RUF minister at Belmont, was bemoaning his pitiful standing in the RUF ministers tournament bracket, and Matt Terrell at Samford was boasting about his surprisingly good position. Derek Bates wrote on Facebook, “Parents, fill out a bracket with your kids. It's a great way to teach them, as you cross off Iowa St and Baylor through 3 rounds, that decisions have consequences.” Poor Derek.

Why are those crazy basketball fans going on and on about their teams? What causes RUF ministers, grown men, ministers of the gospel, to get caught up in March Madness? What causes such an outpouring of unrestrained enthusiasm? Isn't it admiration and loyalty? We admire the star qualities of our favorite players. We see them sink a basket from 30 feet. Most of us know we could hardly hit the rim from that distance. They run up and down the court at tremendous speeds and jump like kangaroos. It's amazing enough if you have never played the game, and it's even more amazing for those who have. College basketball players have trained hard for years, and they are the best. So we rightly admire their ability. Loyalty is the other ingredient in team excitement. Maybe you grew up in Philadelphia, or maybe your uncle loved Villanova. So you feel an attachment to them. When they win, you win; when they lose, you feel their loss. So you take their performance personally. Remember when Lehigh beat Duke in the 2012 tournament? The campus erupted in joy because we all felt like winners.

Made for Glory

Man was made for glory. We were made glorious, we admire glory, and we aspire to glory. We are captivated by NCAA basketball and the Olympics, and the Lehigh orchestra and football team because we see glory there. We see strength and beauty and skill and character – and together these add up to that amorphous quality we call glory. Glory is evident in the creation. The snow is glorious at this time of year, and the mountains are glorious any time of the year. When you see a rainbow, you admire it for its glory. There is glory in powerful waterfalls and delicate butterflies. Glory is even more evident in man. These basketball players exhibit beauty and strength and skill, and also character. They exercise great discipline to win games. We are irresistibly attracted to the glory of men and women when they excel. There is glory in political office, when one wins an election and wields the power of the state. We admire the such men as Benjamin Netanyahu and Vladimir Putin even if we do not approve of their policies, because they possess supreme skill and power. Glory is irresistible because it represents a quality that is core to our nature.

The pinnacle of glory is the One who is the source of all glory – God. God exceeds all else in glory. In fact, the reason anything else has glory is because God invested it with excellent qualities.

The Glory of God

Psalm 96 begins with a call to sing to the Lord. This is such an important occasion, we are called to sing a *new* song to God – as new music is commissioned for a special event. Furthermore, all the earth is called to sing to God. That includes all people everywhere, as well as the beasts and forests and waters and rocks. The whole creation must rise up in song to God. What shall we sing? The gospel! Our song is the good news of His salvation. Our song is God's glory. This song we must sing in every nation over all the earth. All peoples must hear the wonderful stories of God.

Why? Why are we called to sing praise to God? Verses four to six explain why. God is great. He is greater than anything in the earth. Even the other gods whom people worship are nothing compared to Him. Everything has a beginning. Everything is made by someone else. But God made the heavens and the earth.

Do you worship an idol? God is greater than the idol because He made the wood or the gold the idol is made from. Do you worship a person? God is greater because He made that person. Do you worship wealth? God is greater than wealth because He owns everything. But God is not merely a powerful force. He is majestic and beautiful as well. By any measure God is greater than anything in the universe. That is why we should sing praise to God.

Verses seven to nine focus the call to sing to God. We should sing to the Lord in His house. We should worship Him with offerings. And not only us, but all the earth should worship the Lord. The end of verse nine sets us up for the rest of this psalm. It tells us the whole earth must tremble before God.

The last four verses tell us why the whole earth must tremble before God. The Lord reigns over the earth, and He is coming to judge all peoples. On earth we sometimes have trouble receiving justice, but God is always just. He knows all things, so slippery lawyers cannot pull the wool over his eyes. God is holy, so He cannot be bribed to favor one people over another. God is truth, so He will not miss any of the facts of the case. He is righteous, so He knows what is right. God is perfect, so His justice will be perfect as well. His justice will not be tainted in any way. This is not good news to everyone. This is disturbing to those who serve other gods. If God reigns over all, other gods are usurpers, and their followers are traitors. If judgment is righteous, they will be condemned. This is alarming! They *ought* to tremble at this news. By contrast the rest of the creation rejoices at the news of God's judgment. The heavens and the earth, the seas and fields and trees have been oppressed by the evil of mankind. They are delighted that God will bring justice to the earth. Then they will be freed from the tyranny of man. But man will cower at God's coming.

What is the overall tone of this psalm? Is it joyful? bleak? hopeful? fearful? In spite of the shadow cast by the mention of God's coming in judgment, the overall tone of this psalm is bright. It is about singing and rejoicing – and those are not dismal themes. Is this appropriate? Why should this psalm have a happy spirit when the prospect of God's judgment is so frightening? The answer is back in verse two.

The Glory of Salvation

All the earth may welcome the judgment of God because salvation is available for sinners. On our own we all face the anger of God for our sins. But the good news is that we may be saved from God's anger. Salvation is available to all the earth. Everyone who calls upon the Lord will be saved. Those who continue to worship idols will perish in the judgment, but this need not happen to anyone. Everyone may repent of his sin and worship the true God. And as this poem shows, *this* is the glory of God. Hebrew poetry was written in parallel lines. The second line complements the first in some way, either by expressing the same thought in negative terms, or by intensifying the original thought. Here verses two and three operate as a pair, with the four lines working together. "Tell of His salvation from day to day" and "Declare His glory among the nations" are sandwiched in the middle and express the same idea. God is glorified in many ways, as we saw in verses four to six. But salvation is the pinnacle of His glory.

The psalmist did not have the ability to see as well as we how God's salvation is the pinnacle of His glory. Just before Jesus went to the cross He asked God to glorify Him, and the death of Christ is the most vivid, compelling display of God's glory. There we see in living color the love of Jesus for us. Jesus suffered unimaginable torment because He loved us. At the cross we also see the undeniable justice of God. God would not compromise His holy character. Sin demanded death, and God slew the one guilty of sin. At the cross we see the unfathomable wisdom of God, who accomplished justice and showed mercy without damaging either. The cross reveals the power of God. When He crushed His Son, He also crushed sin and destroyed forever its power over man. We who were condemned sinners were set free from sin's guilt and power, and now live in the joy and freedom of Christ. Satan and all his demons have been declawed by Jesus' death, so we no longer fear them. The salvation of God which He accomplished on the cross is the

most glorious event in the universe. Nothing displays God's glory so brilliantly as His death for sinners so that the wicked may be forgiven and made holy.

If this is true, we will be shouting this message everywhere! This is a billion times more exciting than the basketball tournament— and infinitely more important. It is not a chore to recount the glory of the time Lehigh beat Duke, and neither is it a chore to recite the glory of God when He set out to save the earth. It's true there may be some sourpusses who don't like basketball, but their ignorance cannot dampen the excitement of the fans. Likewise there may be some sourpusses who do not want to hear about God's wonders, but that cannot dampen the enthusiasm of us who worship Him. God is glorious beyond words! Anyone who knows anything about God will be bursting with joy at the opportunity to talk about His wonderful deeds.

Declaring God's Glory

If this is true, we will want everyone in the world to hear about it. This news is so terrific we *will* find a way to get the word out. Look, here we are spending billions of dollars and risking thousands of lives to bring democracy to Iraq and Afghanistan. Most of us agree this is a noble cause, even if we disagree about how to accomplish it. But while democracy is good, eternal salvation is a million times better! Salvation is worth billions of dollars and thousands of lives to carry the gospel to all the peoples of the world. Isn't it? Or is it?

There are millions of people in America who need salvation. There are thousands here at Lehigh University. This is a need that calls for serious effort. This is why we need pastors and evangelists to preach the gospel and call people to repentance. This is why Scott Mitchell has been sent to Lehigh, and this is a calling you can answer as well. You can have a huge impact on those around you by simply talking about the great things God has done in your life and in history. It's not any harder than talking about the greatness of Lehigh when we beat Duke. But there are other countries in much greater need than ours. This does not mean that you, personally, should drop what you are doing and become a missionary. It *does* mean that the church must call and send people to declare the glory of God's salvation to nations where the gospel is seldom heard.

I spent a summer in Morocco. Morocco is a beautiful land with wonderful people, but it is also a dark land and full of evil. Her people are enslaved by an evil religion and live in misery as a result. I knew this before I went there, but seeing it first-hand made a life-long impression on me. There is little joy of the Lord in Morocco. There are no songs to God, except in a few secret house churches. God's glory is hardly seen, and the gospel of salvation is unknown. Morocco is a land of natural wealth and beauty, but is locked in slavery to false gods.

When I was the RUF minister at Lehigh, 12 of us went to Mexico to minister to orphans. These children have no families, or their families are too poor to feed and clothe them. They are living in an orphanage where they are cared for and where they hear the gospel of salvation in Jesus. We helped minister to these children by playing with them and teaching the Bible to them. Even more troubling than the children in the orphanage are the children without an orphanage. There are millions of children around the world living on the streets who beg or steal for food. We spent one day in Mexico at a new mission to the street children of Acapulco. We sang with them, played soccer with them, and had lunch with them. Lunch was tamales, which are a greasy affair. When I asked for a napkin, the missionary said they do not provide napkins because of the drugs. The children soak the napkins in paint thinner and sniff them. I asked how many children use drugs, and was told that in a crowd of 30, only two do *not* use drugs. I hope it is obvious that there is a desperate need for people to devote their lives to saving the lost and abandoned children of this world.

In Africa the church is growing by leaps and bounds. Every year in sub-Saharan Africa church growth is in the double digits. Hundreds of thousands of people are becoming Christians every year. But growth is so rapid, there is little depth in the church. This exposes the church to serious error or even heresy. There is a desperate need for people to go to Africa to help teach new believers in the faith.

With all the focus on the military and political operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, what about the gospel? Let me tell you about three people currently working in the Middle East, declaring the glory of God's salvation. The names have been changed to protect them in countries where Christianity is either persecuted or illegal. "Sam" is working somewhere in the Gulf of Arabia. I knew him as a student. Sam was a great witness and a good leader among Christians at the school where I was a campus minister in Philadelphia. He grew up in Morocco until the government expelled his family and they moved to Spain. He is fluent in Spanish and Arabic, and fair in French. He got his Bachelor's degree and then his Master's. Now he is married and seeking to declare the glory of God's salvation to people in a Muslim land. He cannot speak out publicly, so he makes friends and speaks to people he meets in cafes and shops and in his neighborhood.

"Bill" was working in Pakistan with a team of people, telling people about Jesus and training leaders. A few years ago I got a letter from him. He had not written for a while because he was hoping to send good news. Instead his news was that he had been given 24 hours to leave the country. He managed to persuade the chief of police to extend that to a week, but his ministry in Pakistan was over. Now he is beginning again in a different Muslim country. "X" works in a country that is very hostile to the Christian faith. People are imprisoned or executed there for openly worshiping Christ. X quietly tells friends and acquaintances about the salvation God gives through Jesus.

Sam, Bill, and X are declaring God's glory in the Middle East. So now who will go to Iraq and Afghanistan to do likewise? I do not say this to make you feel guilty. This is not a call to guilt, but a call to excitement. This is an opportunity to tell millions of people who have never heard about Jesus that His death saves us from sin. Not everyone should go. But some should. How about you? Does this opportunity excite you?

Application

I would like to list five ways we can apply this message to ourselves tonight. First, have you been saved from your sin? Do you believe in Jesus, trust Him to save you from God's anger? If not, this is God calling you to turn to Him. This is the time to stop serving other gods, and begin serving the true God. Salvation is available to all who ask, but judgment is the fate of any who refuse to believe in Jesus. Do not delay! Our God is a great God, and His compassion is boundless. Believe in Jesus and share in God's glory.

Second, if you do believe in Jesus, are you excited about Him? More than the NCAA basketball tournament? If not, why not? This is not a question to make you feel guilty. Maybe you are engaged in some sin that you need to repent of. Or maybe you need something else. Scott stayed home today because he has been very sick. Scott doesn't feel guilty about it. He doesn't stay locked in his room because he is afraid the doctor will accuse him. No, he goes to the doctor to get help. We saw tonight that God is so wonderful, normal people are excited about Him. Even the trees have enough sense to rejoice in the Lord. If you aren't excited about God, get some help. See me or Scott or someone else to find out what you can do to restore the joy of salvation.

Third, does your excitement about God overflow throughout the day? I don't mean are you all bouncy and bubbly. Some aren't like that. Some of us are quieter. But in your own way, does your excitement about God's salvation spill over into the things you do? When your team wins, you naturally talk about it with the people you see. Similarly, do you naturally tell people how much you appreciate what God does

for you each day? Is the glory of God part of your conversation?

The fourth application is to consider going on a mission trip. RUF periodically goes to some place where there is a great need for the gospel. A mission trip is an opportunity for you to make a small contribution to missions, and it will also open your eyes to the needs and opportunities elsewhere in the world.

Fifth, pray. Pray for God's glory to be declared all over the world. This can be a lifetime ministry for you. Prayer is the foundation of any other activity, and anyone can do it. Learn about specific missionaries and pray for them. They cannot do much without a solid basis of prayer support. Let's also pray for missions in RUF. We can do this in a lot of our existing activities. Let's make a habit of praying for world missions every day at Noon Prayer. We can pray for missions here in our Large Group meeting and in our Bible studies. Right now God has placed us here at Lehigh, but we can play a significant role in declaring God's glory all over the world through our prayers. In particular I urge you to remember your brothers and sisters who are dying for their Lord, especially in Nigerian and Iraq. Our prayers can make a huge difference in the fate of these fellow Christians.

Conclusion

God is wonderful and glorious. There is nothing like Him! His trees and rivers and people are astonishing, but He is beyond description. Above all let's pray for God to so grip our hearts with a true appreciation of His glory, that we cannot keep quiet about Him. May God so thrill us with His glory that we become determined that everyone on earth shall worship Him. Amen.

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March 19, 2015

Psalm 96

- 1 Oh sing to the LORD a new song; *
sing to the LORD, all the earth!
- 2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name; *
tell of his salvation from day to day.
- 3 Declare his glory among the nations, *
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
- 4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; *
he is to be feared above all gods.
- 5 For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, *
but the LORD made the heavens.
- 6 Splendor and majesty are before him; *
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
- 7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, *
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!
- 8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; *
bring an offering, and come into his courts!
- 9 Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; *
tremble before him, all the earth!
- 10 Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns! *
Yes, the world is established;
*it shall never be moved; **

- he will judge the peoples with equity.”*
- 11 Let the heavens be glad, *
and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it; *
- 12 *let the field exult, and everything in it!*
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy ¹³ before the LORD, *
for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness, *
and the peoples in his faithfulness.