

Gloria Dei

8 Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.

10 Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11 "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

12 "And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

14 "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

15 So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.

17 Now when they had seen *Him*, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. 18 And all those who heard *it* marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. (Lk. 2:8-18)

Roeh had been a shepherd as long as he could remember. He'd begun helping his father while still a small boy, and had replaced his father when he could no longer work. Shepherding was hard on the body. Miles of walking every day, mostly standing, in the merciless sun during the day, and in the frost and snows at night. Sleeping was usually done in shifts at night, so that at least one pair of eyes was watching for thieves or predators. He'd lost a few that way, when sleep got the better of him. But now his body had hardened, and he was used to this life.

They made their living from pilgrims needing to buy animals for Temple sacrifices, and from a few Levites who were regular customers. Keeping their flocks just about an hour south of Jerusalem meant enough space for the animals to graze, but close enough to the city to get a few coins to scrape by a living.

Roeh didn't much enjoy leaving Bethlehem to go to Jerusalem. He didn't fit in with all the elites and priests in their perfect robes and jewellery and oil and fragrances. He lived with animals most of the time, so he looked and smelt like it. People didn't even try very hard to hide their disgust when he came in, sneering at him, some even covering their noses with their robes.

He was used to it. He wasn't noble or wealthy, or even learned. He learnt a few letters when in the synagogue school, but his life was about sheep and goats. He actually enjoyed his animals more than some people. Animals were simpler, and to him, they were innocent.

That night, the cold was enough to cause the sheep to huddle, which made it easier than on the warmer nights when the sheep went a-wondering. The other shepherds were around a fire, their usual coarse talk and laughter, the only real sound.

But then they noticed light on the ground, like a lightning flash. But there were no storm clouds, no thunder, and the light was not a flash, but a continual glow. When they looked up to see the source, they saw squinting in the light, a being standing in front of them.

They were terrified. They couldn't run, there was no point looking for a place to hide, all they could do was wait to see what he would do to them.

Amazingly, he spoke, and spoke in their language. Words of comfort: Don't be afraid. I come with good news. Good news which means great happiness and joy for all people. Today, in David's city, Bethlehem, a Saviour has been born: the Messiah, the Lord. When you look for Him, this is how

you will know it is Him: he will be lying in a feeding trough, wrapped in cloths.

And now, the one angel was joined by many, many others. They then praised God with this simple song, the third song in Luke: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Lk. 2:14)

In this beautiful song, we find the great secret of existence, and the great secret of the Gospel: God's glory, man's good. Glory to God, goodwill and peace to man.

I. God's Incarnate Son Brings Greatest Glory to God

"Glory to God in the highest,

The first thing the angels say is that this event brings glory to God who dwells in the highest. Glory to God. Glorify God. These are terms you have often heard and sung and recited. But what does it mean to speak of the glory of God, of glorifying God? Why would the angels say that the coming to earth of the Son is glory to God?

The meaning of the word *glory* is closest to the idea of beauty. It means weighty or heavy. And the idea is heavy with value. Dense with majesty. Large and imposing in excellence.

God's glory is all that God is, shining out and revealed to be loved and admired. God's glory is all God's attributes: His omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, eternity, self-existence, sovereignty, purity, grace, mercy, longsuffering, justice, kindness, all those colours in the spectrum in one white light that is His holiness: His revealed beauty.

Now the Bible reveals one of the most important secrets of the universe. God seeks His own glory more than anything else. God's love of His glory is His chief and ultimate love. His own glorification is uppermost in His affections. God is utterly God-centred. God's first love is Himself.

How can we say that?

The Bible repeats that God acts for His own glory, God works for His own glory, God is motivated by His own glory. Let me give you a biblical sample of something that is everywhere.

God created us for his glory (Isaiah 43:6-7) God called Israel for his glory: (Isaiah 49:3). God rescued Israel from Egypt for his glory:(Psalm 106:7-8). God raised Pharaoh up to show his power God defeated Pharaoh at the Red Sea to show his glory: (Exodus 14:4, 18; cf. v. 17)

God spared Israel in the wilderness for the glory of his name:I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out. (Ezekiel 20:14)

God gave Israel victory in Canaan for the glory of his name: (2 Samuel 7:23) God saved Jerusalem from attack for the glory of his name: For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David. (2 Kings 19:34; cf. 20:6). God restored Israel from exile for the glory of his name: (Ezekiel 36:22-23; cf. v. 32). God forgives our sins for his own sake: (Isaiah 43:25) (Psalm 25:11)

God instructs us to do everything for his glory: (1 Corinthians 10:31; cf. 6:20). All are under judgment for dishonoring God's glory: (Romans 1:22, 23) (Romans 3:23). Jesus' ultimate aim for us is that we see and enjoy His glory: (John 17:24). God's plan is to fill the earth with the knowledge of His glory: (Habakkuk 2:14). Everything that happens will redound to God's glory: (Romans 11:36). In the New Jerusalem the glory of God replaces the sun: (Revelation 21:23).

And it's not just the words *glory*, but the idea.

In fact, you can take the first three requests of the Lord's prayer, and therein find much of the idea

of the glory of God: “Hallowed by Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done”. God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will or desires make up so much of the revealed glory of God. Do a search through Scripture looking for God's commitment to His name, God's commitment to his kingdom, and God's desires or pleasures or will, and you will find that God is committed above all to His glory.

If you could drill down to the tiniest particle, or if you could take a snapshot of the entire universe, if you could gather up the souls of every human and angel, you would find out that it all exists for the glory of God.

Objection: Doesn't this make God a selfish, vain god? How can God say *It is not good to eat much honey; So to seek one's own glory is not glory.* (Prov. 25:27) and yet seek His own glory? How can God say in 1 Corinthians 13: 5 that love does not seek its own, while God seems to be seeking His own?

First, it would be selfish if God were one Person. But Scripture reveals that God is more than one person. So when God delights in His own being, it is not selfish vanity, it is love. It is Father enjoying the Son, and the Son enjoying the Father, and their enjoyment being the Holy Spirit of communion between them. G.K Chesterton once noted that the cruelty found in some religion was partly due to its idea of absolute unitary monotheism. He wrote, “ the god who is a mere awful unity is not only a king but an Eastern king... out of the desert, from the dry places and, the dreadful suns, come the cruel children of the lonely God; the real Unitarians who with scimitar in hand have laid waste the world. For it is not well for God to be alone.” In other words, if God is not a Trinity, then He is not love. If He is not love He is pure will and pure power, and such a god produces a religion of submission and discipline, but not of love. If God were alone and sought His own glory, we might suspect something is wrong. But God's glory takes place within the happy society of the Trinity.

Second, God loving His own glory most would be selfish if God were not the most beautiful. God is most beautiful and most glorious, so it is only just and truthful for God to love Himself most. If God valued something or someone else more than Himself, while knowing that that thing or person was less beautiful than Himself, it would not make Him humble. It would make Him unjust, unrighteous, untruthful. God esteems Himself highest because He knows He is infinitely beautiful. God is perfectly righteous in His judgements, so He perfectly judges His own value and worth to be highest and ultimate. If a creature loves his own glory or beauty more than anything else, it is selfish and egotistical, because no creature is perfect in value or beauty. It would be sinful pride. But for God, it is truth.

Third, God loving His own glory would be selfish if it came at the expense and pain of His creation. But God's glory is the health and shalom of the universe. Like rain or snow on the mountains waters all the rivers, trees and animals in the valleys below, so when God is glorified, it blesses and nourishes the works of His hands. Creation exists as the overflow of God's generous glory. Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created. (Rev. 4:11)

God is the most God-centred being in the universe. God is the most ardent worshipper of God. God loves God with all His heart, soul and might. God is supremely jealous for His name. This is because He is Triune, and because He is just and truthful, and because He is generous.

Now all of this brings us back to the angels' song. “Glory to God in the Highest.” This has always been the theme of history, so why now, with the birth of the Son, does this glory reach a new high? How does the coming of the Son bring maximum glory to God?

20 Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin. 21 But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, 26 to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:20-26)

We can imagine a few scenarios of history, and the glory that goes with them.

We could imagine if God had not created at all. He still would have been perfect and received glory in His Triune person. But God had desired to give Himself to Himself, and creation seems to have allowed the gift of the cosmos within the Trinity. So God created.

We could imagine God would have received glory if we had not sinned, but that was not in His plan. His plan was to include angels and then men who would sin.

Once we had sinned, there appeared to be the dilemma of less glory for God no matter what. If God simply condemned the whole human race to Hell, God would get glory as a Judge, but it would seem like less glory because the creation was now marred, and His people were now separated from Him.

But if God decided to pardon all mankind, it would break His own law. There would be glory for being merciful, but then less glory for not being just.

Perhaps this was even Satan's gamble in tempting Adam: God would get either less glory through a fallen world where all are judged, or less glory through an unjust universe where all are pardoned.

Romans 3 shows what God did. 24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, 26 to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Verse 25 tells us what God did. God the Son took on the justice on Himself, paying the penalty, becoming propitiation for sins. In so doing, God could remain just while also mercifully justifying. He could get glory as a judge on sin, and get glory as forgiver of sins. He could punish rebels, and pardon the repentant. God the Father gave the creation to His Son as an inheritance. Once marred by sin and evil, God the Son became a man, paid the price of sin, rose from the dead, and so redeems His people, and redeems the world from the curse, and according to 1 Corinthians 15, He will then give the restored, renewed, improved second creation back to God the Father as a gift.

More glory, greater glory through the Son.

II. God's Incarnate Son Brings Greatest Good to Man

And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!

The first part has to do with God in the highest. This second part has to do with men on earth. God the Son's death brings not only glory to God, but something to man.

Man gets peace. This is the Greek version of Hebrew *shalom*. It is not simply the idea of calm or the absence of conflict. Shalom is the idea of flourishing, of happiness, fullness, joy, satisfaction. It is what man is seeking: fulfillment, contentment, wholeness.

Man gets goodwill. Man is the recipient of God's desire to bless, to bring pleasure, to bring happiness.

There is a slight variation here in translations. The presence of one letter in the Greek changes the meaning from “peace and goodwill to men” to “peace to men of goodwill”, or “peace to men to whom good is willed”. It's not a major difference, because in the end, if God means to bring you peace, then He means goodwill towards you.

Here's the main thing. God getting glory does not come at the expense and pain of mankind, unless man rebels. God's glory and man's good are not competitors, not if we understand them rightly. God made the world to glorify Himself and bless His image-bearers. So long as man remained a reflector of God's glory, he would enjoy that glory.

In Jesus' High Priestly prayer, we see that God's glory, and man's benefit are complementary, not contradictory.

4 "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.

5 "And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. (Jn. 17:4-5)

13 "But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. (Jn. 17:13)

22 "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: 23 "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. 24 "Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. 25 "O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. 26 "And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare *it*, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." (Jn. 17:25-26) (Jn. 17:22-24)

This is why the old Westminster confession unites the two: What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. To glorify God and to enjoy Him, and find fullness of joy is not a contradiction.

Happy *are* the people whose God *is* the LORD! (Ps. 144:15)

11 You will show me the path of life; In Your presence *is* fullness of joy; At Your right hand *are* pleasures forevermore. (Ps. 16:11)

25 Whom have I in heaven *but You*? And *there is* none upon earth *that* I desire besides You. (Ps. 73:25)

But once again, it is the coming of Jesus and the Gospel that unites these two. Man in his natural state does not love the glory of God. According to Paul, men are lovers of themselves, lovers of money, ...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, (2 Tim. 3:2-4). Man does this not out of ignorance, but out of chosen rebellion.

21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Rom. 1:21)

But now with the coming of the Son, God intervenes. God demonstrates not only a commitment to His glory, but of love for His creatures. God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son. God demonstrates His love in that while we yet sinners, Christ died for us.

4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,

5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), (Eph. 2:4-5)

God is good. God is kind. God is tender. God feels compassion, even on those who have rejected

His glory. God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. God announces amnesty and not just amnesty, but reward and inheritance and sonship to those who will repent of self-worship, and come and bow the knee before God in His Son.

You can spend your life fighting for your own glory, trying to get pleasure and love and benefit independently of God. But it is worse than futile. It is insane to battle the Creator. It is even more insane when He offers you more joy than you could get on your own. He offers you more happiness than your attempts to hoard it for yourself will ever achieve. He offers you union with Himself, the source of perfect joy and beauty.

To turn from this is to go from a fountain to licking the gutter, from a feast to eating out of a rubbish bin, from health and life to sickness and death.

The song of the angels are these two inseparable: glory to God and peace to men. But if you wage war against His glory, you will find neither peace, nor goodwill.

In fact, Roeh was not the name of the shepherd. Roeh is just the Hebrew word for shepherd. The shepherds were not even named. Why would God give this hymn which is the very meaning of life to some anonymous shepherds? Because firstly it shows it is for all men. It's a general announcement made to nameless men so that anyone will know it is for him or her.

Second, because to receive this message, you really have to leave your own name, and your own identity, and your own reputation behind. You come, and receive the Son, and say glory to God, and trust in His goodwill to you. And then you let Him name you. You let Him give you your identity in His Son. You say, from now on, I am crucified with Christ: 20 "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

If you are a glory-thief, and seek what belongs to God, you will never get the peace and goodwill. But make God's glory your highest aim, and you will receive more peace, and more goodwill than you know what to do with.

The shepherds went to Bethlehem, found a baby in a manger as they had been told, and knew that this was now happening. So they told everyone they could. That's what you do when you receive the message. You tell everyone that the meaning of life is "Glory to God in the highest, and to men on earth: peace and goodwill, in Jesus Christ."