

“To God Alone Be the Glory”

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Imagine this: You run into someone you haven't seen in several years. It's a younger man, perhaps a distant cousin, or someone you went to school with, or the kid who grew up down the street. At any rate, you haven't seen him in years, and now you find out he's been home for Thanksgiving and you catch up a bit. You ask him what he's doing these days. He says that he's become an actor. He now lives in Los Angeles. And he's starring in a new movie that's coming out in December. You might have heard of it. It's called *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. He says he'll be home again for Christmas and, if you see the movie, he'd love to hear what you think of it.

So, you go see the movie when it comes out. It's a Star Wars movie, which means you wanted to see it anyway, but now you're really interested in seeing it because the kid you knew from back in the day is starring in it. You watch the opening scenes and don't see him yet, but you figure that perhaps he plays a character who enters the story a bit later. Halfway through the movie, you haven't spotted his face yet, but perhaps he makes a dramatic appearance in the last act of the movie. But he doesn't. And as the closing credits play, you begin to think that you made a mistake about which movie he was starring in, or perhaps he just lied to you.

About a month later, around Christmas, you see him again. He asks you, “What did you think about the movie? How was I?” And you say, “You were in *Star Wars*, right?” He says, “Of course.” And then, after an awkward pause, you say, “I saw the movie, but I didn't see you in it.” And he says, “Of course you saw me. I was one of the stormtroopers.” In case you don't know, stormtroopers are the soldiers who work for the bad guys. They wear helmets, so you can't see their faces. You say, “Well, which stormtrooper were you?” And he says, “I was the one in the back row of that scene.” You say, “Oh. Yeah, that was great.”

You're trying to be polite, so you tell him you enjoyed the movie, but you're puzzled. Why did he say he starred in the movie? This question starts bugging you, so you ask him. He says, “Well, honestly, I thought the movie was going to be more about me. When I told you I starred in it, I hadn't seen the movie yet. But I was on set for a few days, and there were cameras all around, and I figured the movie was really about me.” Again, you're trying to be polite, so you just say, “Well, perhaps next time it will be.”

But you're still puzzled. Why would anyone in their right mind think that just because he played one of many stormtroopers in a cast of hundreds of people, that he was playing the starring role? How could anyone be so misguided, so conceited, so foolish?

But that's how we are. In this great big story we call life, our time on screen is relatively short. Each of us has a significant role to play, but we're just one of many people who grace the screen. Most of us will never play anything like a starring role. We're more like the extra who appears briefly in the background. Yet too often we think that we play the starring role, that life is really about us. We act like everyone else is an actor in a movie about us. Yet, truly, the story of life is primarily about God. He plays the starring role. We play important roles that he has written for us, but he remains the star of the show.

The last of the five principles that came out of the Protestant Reformation, the one that binds them all together, is *Soli Deo Gloria*, or, "To God Alone Be the Glory." When we talk about glorying God, we mean that we recognize that he is the star of the show. God is the only one worthy of worship. Ultimately, everything exists and is done for the glory of God.

Before I continue, I want to define "glory," because it's a term that we don't hear a lot outside of religion. We do hear about it sometimes, like when people talk about an athlete or a team achieving Super Bowl glory. That generally means that by winning a Super Bowl, they have made a name for themselves, or they have reserved for themselves a place in the Hall of Fame. That's not far from the biblical definition of "glory." In the Bible, the word "glory" appears frequently in both Testaments. In the Old Testament, that word translates a Hebrew word that can mean "abundance, honor, glory," or "riches/wealth," or "splendor."¹ That word is related to another word that means "heaviness" or "weight."² So, the idea is that God is the richest, the most splendid, the weightiest being that exists. And as we come to recognize his greatness, God takes on more worth and weight in our lives.

In the New Testament, the Greek word that is translated as "glory" means "brightness, shining, splendor," or "greatness," or "fame, renown."³ The Greek verb that's translated as "to

¹ "כְּבוֹד," Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 458.

² "כִּבְדָּת," See *ibid.*, 459.

³ "δόξα, ης, ἡ," William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 256–257.

glorify” means “to praise” or “to cause to have splendid greatness.”⁴ So, when we talk about God’s glory, we’re talking about how great he is, how famous he is, how brilliant and splendid he is. And when we glorify God in our lives, we’re praising him, recognizing his greatness. And when God glorifies us, he causes us to be great. But we can only be glorified if God is first glorified in our lives.

The subject of God’s glory is a large one that’s hard to summarize in one sermon. But in order to get to the heart of what it means for God to be glorified, I want to turn to one passage in John’s Gospel. In chapter 17, shortly before Jesus is arrested and crucified, he prays to God the Father. This is commonly known as Jesus’ “high priestly prayer,” because he acts as a priest, praying for his disciples.

Let’s begin by reading the first five verses:

¹ When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.⁵

I want to begin with that last verse first. Jesus has always existed as the Son of God. As God, he is eternal. He has no beginning. Before the universe was created, he had always enjoyed unbroken fellowship with the other two Persons of the Trinity: God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Now, at this point in time, he asks for the Father to glorify him “with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”

I point this out because we need to understand that God is glorious by himself. He doesn’t need us to glorify him, but he chose to create us for that purpose (cf. Acts 17:24–25). God is intrinsically glorious and glorified. He is splendid and great, and the three Persons of the Trinity magnify or reflect or acknowledge the greatness of the other Persons. The Father proclaims how his Son pleases him, and his Son loves and obeys the Father.

⁴ “Δοξάζω” in *ibid.*, 258.

⁵ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

And during his time on earth, when Jesus became the God-man, he glorified the Father on earth by obeying him, by doing all that the Father planned for him to do. In that way Jesus is the perfect human being. As a man, Jesus fulfills God's designs for creation.

The big story of the Bible can be summarized in four words: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Each part of this story glorifies God.

First, creation exists for God's glory. God created the universe for his glory. Psalm 19:1 famously says, "The heavens declare the glory of God." The seraphim, the fantastic creatures that accompany the Lord in heaven, say in Isaiah 6:3, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." God's plan has always been for the earth to "be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14).

The opening chapters of Genesis show that God made the universe and specifically the Garden of Eden to be his temple, where he is glorified.⁶ And God made people in his image, to reflect his greatness and glory.⁷ God wants us to glorify him alone. He alone is worthy of our worship. He says, "My glory I will not give to another" (Isa. 48:11).

God sent his Son into the world because of the second part of the story, the fall, when human beings rebelled against God and fell into sin. It is mysterious why a good, all-knowing, all-powerful God would create human beings who would sin, but even sin glorifies God. We get hints of this in different parts of the biblical story. For example, one of the most important stories of the Bible is the exodus, when God rescued the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. It seems that God orchestrated the whole story—from Israel going into Egypt, to their being enslaved, to his dramatic redemption of the Israelites—in order to display his glory among the nations. Egypt was the most important nation in the world at that time, and there was no better place for God to show that he is the true God, as opposed to all the false gods the Egyptians worshiped. God showed that he, not Pharaoh, is the true King.

God did that first by hardening Pharaoh's heart so that he would not let the Israelites go (Exod. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). In one passage, God tells Moses,

² You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. ³ But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, ⁴ Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my

⁶ See the sermon, "A Theater for His Glory," preached on September 27, 2015, at <https://wbcommunity.org/story-of-the-bible>.

⁷ See the sermon, "Image Bearers," preached on October 4, 2015, at <https://wbcommunity.org/story-of-the-bible>.

people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment.
⁵The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand
against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them” (Exod. 7:2–5).

The Egyptians would know that God is indeed the one true God because of what he would do. God told Pharaoh, “for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth” (Exod. 9:16; Rom. 9:17). Pharaoh was responsible for his sin, yet God raised him for the purpose of displaying his power and glory. That gives us a hint of why there is sin in the world. The same is true when Jesus brings his friend Lazarus back to life. Lazarus was allowed to die so that God could display his power over death and therefore be glorified (John 11:4, 40).⁸

So, God is glorified in creation and God is glorified by the fall because he is more powerful than evil. He judges evil people and miraculously triumphs over evil. God is therefore glorified in judgment.

And God is glorified in salvation. That is why Jesus came. He most perfectly displays God’s glory. At the beginning of John’s Gospel, we’re told, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). And when he died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin, he was glorified. That’s why Jesus says, at the beginning of his prayer in John 17, “glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.” Earlier in the Gospel of John, his death is referred to as his hour of glorification (John 12:16, 23, 28; 13:31–32). It’s quite ironic that Jesus is most glorified, and he most glorifies the Father, by dying in a humiliating way. Crucifixion was reserved for the worst of criminals. It was a way of torturing and shaming enemies of the state. Jesus was not a criminal, he never sinned, but he was treated like a criminal so that all who trust in him can go free.

Jesus is most glorified in his death because he demonstrates his obedience to the Father and his love for his people. Who else would obey God unto death in that way? Who else would die for sinful people? God the Father is glorified in Jesus’ death because he sent his Son to be the one who absorbs his righteous, just wrath against sin. And the Father is worth obeying, even unto death. Father, Son, and Spirit are glorified in Jesus’ resurrection, because all take part in bringing

⁸ See the sermon, “Why Do Bad Things Happen?” It was preached on October 8, 2017 and is available at <https://wbcommunity.org/why-do-bad-things-happen>.

Jesus back to life, showing God's power of sin and death. In short, God is glorified in Jesus' death and resurrection because only that saves sinful people. We are told time and again that the reason God saves us is for his glory.⁹

So, God is glorified in redemption. And he is glorified in those he has redeemed. Let's see this by continuing with Jesus' prayer in John 17. Let's read verses 6–19:

⁶“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. ⁸For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. ¹⁴I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Jesus taught the disciples who God is. He manifested the name of God to his disciples, which means he made clear God's identity and character. God the Father gave certain people to Jesus, and Jesus taught them his word. Jesus prays for his people, not for the whole world, but for the ones the Father gave Jesus. And Jesus says that he is glorified in his disciples. Jesus keeps his disciples in the Father's name, which means he keeps them in a right relationship with God. He guarded them. The only exception was Judas, who betrayed Jesus. And even Judas' betrayal was a fulfillment of God's plans.

Jesus asks the Father to sanctify his disciples. “Sanctify” means to make holy and pure. He asks the Father to “sanctify them in the truth.” And what is the truth? God's word is truth.

⁹ See Ezekiel 36:22–32; Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14; Philippians 2:5–11.

Jesus knows that they have been sent out into the world, just as he was sent into the world, to do the Father's will. So, he asks the Father to protect them, to guard them, and to purify them.

Now, lest we think that Jesus was only praying for the apostles, he makes it clear that he prays for all his people. We see that in the last paragraph of his prayer. Let's read verses 20–26:

²⁰“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Jesus prays “also for those will believe in” him through the apostles' word. He prays that his people will be one, as he and the Father are one. This unity among believers will be a sign to the world that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and God's anointed one, the Christ. And, quite stunningly, Jesus says that the glory that the Father gave to him he gives to his people. We are glorified by being united to Jesus.

Jesus' words show that God is glorified when people come to faith in Jesus and join God's family. At the beginning of the prayer, Jesus said that the Father gave him authority to grant eternal life to the ones the Father gives to Jesus to save. Jesus says, “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Knowing who God is and trusting in him glorifies God. Growing in our knowledge of God and growing in our obedience to God by being sanctified by his word glorifies him. Loving one another and being united in our faith glorifies God.

Faith, knowledge of God, obedience to God, and love for one another glorify God. Our praise and evangelism does, too. First Peter 2:9 says, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” When we proclaim God's excellencies, we are glorifying him. When we tell others about the One who brought us out of darkness and into light, they may also become part of God's family. The apostle Paul said

that “as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God” (2 Cor. 4:15). When people are thankful that God saved them, they glorify God. When we see that God saved us not because of anything we’ve done, we should be thankful. We should praise God all the more.

I think that’s why this concept of *Soli Deo Gloria*, or “To God Alone Be the Glory,” ties together all the Reformation Principles. The first one we looked at was “Scripture Alone,” which says that only God’s written word, the Bible, is inerrant and infallible. It alone gives us knowledge of God that is true and doesn’t fail. Think of how this gives God glory. If we could figure out on our own what God is like and what he expects of us, we would be glorified for our cleverness. But God makes the wise of this world foolish by humbling them. God must reveal himself in order to be known truly and fully. The fact that he alone gives us this revelation brings glory to him, not us.

The second principle we looked at is “Grace Alone.” Salvation is a gift. It is not something we have earned. Even the act of faith is a gift (Eph. 2:8–9; Phil. 1:29). The fact that “salvation belongs to the LORD” (Jon. 2:9) and not ourselves shatters our pride. But it brings glory to God, because God is merciful towards sinners and he graciously gives us salvation, which is something that we could never attain ourselves.

The principle we looked at is “Faith Alone.” We can only receive the gift of salvation. We cannot earn it. No amount of good works puts us in the right with God. Again, this humbles us. It shows that our sin is so pervasive that even our good works are tainted by selfish motives. But it glorifies God because it shows that he provided a way for us to be made right with him. He does the work for us.

And God did that work through the world’s only Savior, Jesus. “Christ Alone” is the fourth principle we have looked at. The fact that only a divine man can save sinful human beings humbles us. It shows us that no intellectual, no politician, no warrior, no scientist can save us. Only the perfect man, the God-man, can save us. Only he can give us God’s blessings. And this glorifies Jesus.

So, what the Protestant Reformation did was lower our view of ourselves and raise our view of God. Only God can reveal himself to us. Only God can save. Only God can do the work to save us, and he did that in the only Savior, Jesus.

Of course, we are not yet at the end of the story of the Bible. We live in a fallen world that doesn't always seem so glorious. And many people today refuse to glorify God. They act as if they, or some other person, is the star of the show. But the last act of this great drama we're in is called restoration, or consummation. That is when Jesus returns, when all the dead are raised back to life, when Jesus judges everyone who has ever lived, and the world is turned into a paradise. When Jesus returns, everyone will know that Jesus is Lord, the true King. Some will bow their knees in worship. Others will bow in terror. But "every knee [will] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10–11).

When Jesus returns, according to the apostle Paul, he will pay "vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Thess. 1:8). Paul continues by saying that those who are judged will suffer "away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thess. 1:9). Those who reject God will not see his glory and they will not be glorified. But Paul also says that Jesus comes "to be glorified in his saints" (v. 10) and that he prays for Christians to live lives worthy of their calling, "so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 12). Jesus will be glorified in his people, and they will be glorified in him. The only way to have true glory is not by winning a Super Bowl or an Academy Award or a Nobel Prize or an election. The only path to true glory is Jesus.

And when Jesus returns, we will be resurrected. We will have glorified bodies, bodies that can never die again. And the earth will be filled with the glory of God. The new creation is described as the New Jerusalem, a beautiful city that has "the glory of God" because it shines like a jewel (Rev. 21:11). And in that beautiful city, we're told there will be no sun and moon, "for the glory of God gives it light" (Rev. 21:23).

So, we are part of the great story of God's glory, but the story never will be primarily about us. To think so is to imagine that the sun revolves around you, instead of realizing that we actually revolve around the sun. The proper way to be part of this story is to trust Jesus, to realize that he is the King, and we are not, that God is God and we're not, and to seek forgiveness for our sins through Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross. God is glorified when his grace is received and when people are transformed into his thankful worshipers.

If you're here today and you aren't trusting Jesus, following him and glorifying him, I would urge you to start now. Acknowledge that he is Lord and you're not. Confess your sins, that you haven't lived to glorify God. Ask for his forgiveness. Tell him you want to follow him and that you need his help. I would love to tell you more about what it means to be a Christian

Christians, Jesus is glorified in our evangelism. When we tell others about Jesus, regardless of how they respond, he is glorified. When we testify that Jesus is the Son of God who came to earth in the humble form of a man, lived the perfect life, died in place of sinners, and rose from the grave, his greatness is put on display.

God is also glorified by our growing in knowledge and love and obedience. When the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Philippi, he said this:

⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

We should grow in our love for God and for one another. We should grow in our knowledge of God and our ability to discern what lines up with God's design and what doesn't. We should grow in our purity and holiness, becoming more and more like Jesus. We should produce good fruit, because all of this is "to the glory and praise of God."

Jesus told his disciples that God is glorified by our obedience. He said, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:8). God is glorified when we put Jesus' words into practice, bearing good fruit in our lives.

Jesus is glorified in worship. But he is most glorified when our focus is on him, not on our traditions or personal preferences. Worship is about acknowledging God's worth, his greatness. It exists primarily for God, not for us. Yes, when we worship God, we benefit. But worship is not entertainment or something that exists to make us feel comfortable.

Often, when we talk about our experiences in worship, people start to talk about what they like. "I like that hymn." "I like that song." "I like the way he preaches." Or, "I didn't like that music." "I didn't like that sermon." And so on. When we get hung up on our likes, we're glorifying ourselves, not God.

This matters for our church because we need to reach out to younger generations. We want younger people to join us in worship. That means that older, more mature Christians are going to have to let go of their personal preferences in order to make younger generations feel

more welcome here. That means we'll sing songs that perhaps are not our favorites. That means changing how we worship. It never means changing what we believe or whom we worship. It never means changing God's word. But we will continue to change the style of worship. I ask you this: what would glorify God more, having us hang on to our little traditions and our preferred worship style, or making a new generation of disciples? The church does not exist for our comfort. It is not a museum or some nostalgic show that reminds us of the "good ol' days." It exists for God's glory.

We were made to glorify someone or something. And we will do that. We will glorify ourselves, or someone in our lives, or our favorite sports team, or someone or something else. Or we will glorify God. But here's the thing: We will only be glorified when we glorify God. Someone who writes and stars in a one-person play that no one sees won't get glorified. But if we gladly play our small role in God's big story, we get to take part in the biggest, most glorious story of all time. And the glory of God will shine on us, so that we also will be glorious.