

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”

(Luke 2:8–11)

Introduction

“Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God!” These lyrics are lifted from a wonderful hymn by John Newton. Sadly, even though it is often sung in churches, most who sing it are unaware what it means.

It was written to magnify the grace of God for dwelling, not only among, but rather in, his people. His people are those who belong to “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16), those who belong to “the Jerusalem above” (Galatians 3:26). That is, it is a song, not about geo-political Israel, but rather about the glory of the New Jerusalem that has come down from heaven (Revelation 21:10-11). It is a song of great hope concerning the glory of God’s people, the new covenant church. God’s church is glorious and will be glorious because she is indwelt by one who is glorious. As Paul put it: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). “And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself even as he is pure” (1 John 3:3).

God dwelling with his people is a major theme that runs right through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. When God dwells with his people, it is glorious, because he is glorious. But when God does not dwell with a people, then his glory is not present, and those people will live ungloriously. And, I must add, they live hopelessly as well – like so many in our day, like so many who were living when Jesus Christ was born.

While the shepherds watched their flocks by night so long ago, something that had long been prophesied occurred: God’s glory returned to Israel, because God was returning to Israel. He was returning as a baby, yet every bit God! For the first time in over four hundred years, the glory of God shone in the land of Israel – just as God said it would (Ezekiel 43:1-5; cf. 44:1-4ff).

This glory that the shepherds saw was the Shekinah, a Rabbinic term, which is the Hebrew for “dwelling” or “settling” and denotes the dwelling or settling of the presence of God. Though it had been long absent from Israel, God’s Shekinah, his presence has now

returned with God's full and final revelation in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of his people (Hebrews 1:1–2). And with the return of his presence came hope. The presence of God in Christ was, and remains, the hope of glory. This is a glorious hope. It was, and remains, a weighty experience.

The Hebrew word for "glory," as found in the Old Testament, means "heavy." It denotes that which carries weight, that which is sobering and important, that which is preeminent. When we consider the glory of God, we are considering the weightiness of God. That is why the presence of God is such a profoundly humbling and life-transforming experience. To be in the presence of God is to be in the presence of greatness. God's glorious presence experienced and appreciated will carry weight in our lives. This will affect our worship, our walk, and our works.

Sadly, as David Wells has well articulated in his five-volume study, *God is*, for the most part, treated as weightless in many churches of our day. As he points out, we need to recapture this glory. We need to hope for such a recapture. And we need to work for it.

As God becomes heavier or weightier to us, the more of a force for biblical good we will be in this world; the more the world around us will feel the weight of his glory. This is my burden in this study. May God the Holy Spirit open our hearts as he opens the word for us to see the glory of God in Christ and to then steward this glory for God's glory. In other words, may we, as the shepherds left their fields, come away with a hope of glory; with the hope that arises from the glorious presence of God. This is a commendable pursuit for 2019.

The Revelation of Glory

With the revelation of God's glory, we see the fulfilment of a promise: "And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them" (vv. 8–9).

We see here the progression of biblical theology. We are seeing another major part of the big stoats of the Bible: God's commitment to dwell with man. But, first things first.

The shepherds were in the field doing what shepherds were paid to do: watching over their flocks, and it was nighttime. But it was also night in a spiritual sense.

You will remember that Israel was chosen to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation that would be God's treasured possession among all peoples (Exodus 19:5–6). But when the angel of the Lord appeared to these shepherds, the nation of Israel was a long way

from what she was chosen and called to be. Rather than being God's glory on earth (Isaiah 46:13), to declare his praise (Isaiah 43:21), to show God's marvellous grace, Israel was a disgrace. The glory had long departed. In fact, the glory of God had departed some four hundred years earlier. This was the first revelation of God's glorious presence in Israel in over four centuries. This is significant. But to appreciate its significance, we need a biblical history lesson. So, let's go back to the beginning.

When God created the world, he was creating a dwelling place in which to display his glory (Psalm 19:1). When God created the heavens and the earth, it was gloriously good. God's weighty word produced a universe that could withstand the weight of his glory. Indeed, it was good. The earth, and particularly the Garden of Eden, became a dwelling place for the Shekinah—the weighty because glorious presence of the triune God

God created the temple of Eden as a place where God would dwell with his people. This garden would serve as their home, and as their temple. There they would experience the glorious and hence weighty presence of God.

From there, God's glory was to be exported by the offspring of Adam and Eve with the goal of eventually filling the entire globe with the weighty, glorious presence of God (Genesis 1:26–28). Adam and Eve were given this privileged hope of glory. But, as they say, we know the rest of the story.

Sadly, Adam and Eve treated God's word as weightless and therefore they sinned. They disregarded the glory of God and were separated from the glory of God (Genesis 3:1–7, 22–24). They were sent east of Eden. They were now forced to look back if they would see the glory of God. Was there any hope for the future? Yes, because God is gracious, and God is sovereign. God would fulfil his purpose.

With the birth of sons and daughters, two lines of humanity would come forth (Genesis 5). One of those lines would carry with it the hope of glory as it's people experienced God's saving grace. Yet, there would come a deep spiritual decline, so much so that God would destroy all people except one family (Genesis 6–9).

This family built a boat on which they would transport, as it were, the glory of God into a new world, into a new creation on the other side of the flood. The hope of glory remained afloat.

Again, decline occurred and, rather than the earth being filled with the praise of the glory of God, it was filled with rebellious people. Therefore, God scattered them and, from one people, made many peoples (Genesis 10–11). Yet his hope of glory was neither diminished nor derailed.

We see this in Genesis 12 where God chose one man from whom he would form a nation. From this man—Abraham (and his wife Sarah)—would come the nation of Israel. They would become the new stewards of God’s glory—those with whom God would dwell. Israel would be privileged with the glorious presence of God.

In Exodus 16, and then in Exodus 20, God’s glory appeared to Israel as he cared for them and as constituted them as a people—his people. To solidify this, God gave to Moses heavenly plans for the people to construct God’s dwelling place, the tabernacle (a tent of meeting).

They paid attention to God’s weighty instructions, constructing in accordance with his specific plan, and the tabernacle was completed. God then moved in (Exodus 40:34). God’s presence was amidst Israel. What a glorious privilege and what a glorious hope. But again, we know the rest of the story.

Like Adam and Eve, Israel did not take God’s word seriously. It held no weight for them. God was present, but weightless. In fact, at the very time that God was giving Moses the building plans for the place where he promised to dwell with Israel, they were busy apostatising (Exodus 32)! God threatened to destroy them and to make another nation with whom he would dwell. Moses interceded and God graciously relented. The hope of glory continued.

Over the centuries, God was gracious and longsuffering towards Israel. He chastened Israel time and again. Just read the book of Judges. God dwelt with them and the hope of glory continued.

Under Solomon, Israel seemed to be more glorious and experienced much blessing by God’s presence. Solomon built a permanent dwelling place for God in Jerusalem. And God was pleased to dwell there (1 Kings 8:10–21). All seemed good; more so, all seemed glorious. The nations surrounding Israel, and even those afar off, felt the weight of glory in her and they were impressed (see 1 Kings 10). The temple was designed with the hope of glory for all the nations (1 Kings 8:41–43; cf. Mark 11:17). But again, sadly, we know the rest of the story.

Like all those before them, Israel turned away from the Lord God. God became weightless to them. They took his personal presence for granted. They were not impressed. They rebelled. And so God banished his people further east, away from his glorious presence in the temple (to Assyria and Babylon).

The most dramatic demonstration of the glory of God departing was when God left the temple in Jerusalem. This is recorded in Ezekiel 9–11 (see 11:22ff).

If the vision of the wheels in Ezekiel confuses you, these chapters make clear that the wheels speak of transport. God was packing up and would remove himself from the nation. The weird creatures were God's removalists. God was saying, "I'm out of here." And yet, the hope of glory continued.

God spoke through prophets, such as Jeremiah and others, promising that a remnant would return to Jerusalem and that God's dwelling place would be rebuilt. The presence of his glory would be restored, to a degree. Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai particularly record this coming to pass. And yet the glory of this house was nothing like the former dwelling place of God (Haggai 1; Ezra 3).

In a very real sense, the glory of God had still not returned to Israel and the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, indicates this. Hence, the commencement of four hundred years of silence; four hundred years of spiritual bleakness; four hundred years without God's glorious presence. The best was yet to come. These shepherds would be the first to get a glimpse of it.

In the meanwhile, the times of the Gentiles dominated world history. As did their paganism. Was there any hope of glory? Absolutely – at least for those who felt the weight of God's Word. There was hope of glory for those who took God seriously.

Through prophets such as Ezekiel, God promised that the glory of the Lord would one day return to Israel. One day God's glorious presence would return to Jerusalem. One day, from the east, God would appear at the gate of the temple. God's glorious presence would dwell with his people again. This is the burden of Ezekiel 40–48. Listen to these prophetic words, in Ezekiel 43, "Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east and ... the vision I saw was just like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy this city" (vv. 1–3). Note that the Lord would return to restore!

As you read the rest of Ezekiel, it becomes clear that this promised restoration was not what took place after the Babylonian exile. Rather a more glorious restoration was envisioned. It was restoration on a much larger scale – worldwide! This was the vision of the Lord returning to a whole different kind of temple. One that would be multi-ethnic in its makeup and scope. More on that later, but for now, we need to see that Ezekiel's prophesy was coming to pass in Luke 2.

One more important prophetic observation: Jeremiah also spoke about the coming of Messiah in the context of shepherds. Jeremiah records,

For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the LORD.

Thus says the LORD of hosts: In this place that is waste, without man or beast, and in all of its cities, there shall again be habitations of shepherds resting their flocks. In the cities of the hill country, in ... the places about Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the LORD.

(Jeremiah 33:11b–13)

The prophecy was fulfilled as these shepherds, in the field in the hill country of Judah, experienced the arrival of divine glory. They experienced the Shekinah, the presence of God; because God was present, a little distance away, in the tabernacle of a manger in Bethlehem. God had returned!

When considering the incarnation and the nativity, remember that there were other visitors who adored the baby in the manger. Wise men from the east followed his “star” when it arose. They followed this “star” to come to worship him (Matthew 2:1–12). Consider two things.

First, this “star” was obviously unique, and it was “his.” That is, this light belonged to Jesus. Along with a host of commentators, I conclude that this was the manifested glory of God.

Second, this glorious star came from the east. From what direction did Ezekiel prophesy that the Lord and his glory would come? The east (43:2). It is as though these wise men were simply following the glory of the Lord as he returned to the people that he had left so long ago.

We have spent considerable, but necessary, time examining the context. I trust it has helped us to see that the glory of the Lord revealed to these shepherds was fulfilment of God’s promise to return to Israel. God always keeps his promises.

The incarnation was about God’s glory returning to Israel. But it was more than that. It was the beginning of God’s glory returning to the globe.

Israel would once again fail in her stewardship of the glory of God – to the extent of killing the glorious one. Rather than beholding his glory, they shut out his glory. The eclipse of the sun, at three o’clock in the afternoon on Passover Friday, further symbolised this.

But this was all a part of God’s plan. Israel’s rejection of God’s glory meant the Gentiles’ reception of God’s glory. Israel’s rejection of God’s gospel meant the Gentiles’ reception of God’s gospel. This is why Christmas is good news, not only for Israel, but for the entire world. It is important that we understand this biblical theology. If we don’t, we will miss

the point of the incarnation. We will miss the point of history. We will miss the point of living.

The Church, God's Temple

Some seventy years after the return of the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ, Jerusalem's magnificent temple was destroyed. But God did not depart. No, his glorious presence remains in Israel, and increasingly throughout the world by the temple that we call the church (Ephesians 2:19–22; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 1 Peter 2:4; compare with Ezekiel 40–48!).

The revelation of the glory of God—the weight of his glory—is made known by his church. And this is all according to his eternal plan (Ephesians 3:11). We will look at the implications of this later.

Before moving on, we need to reflect on the truth that the revelation of the glorious presence of the Lord is what we all need. We need to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (see 2 Corinthians 4:1–6). This is the point of history. This has been the trajectory of history since day one of creation. If you do not line up your life with this trajectory, then you are lost and will remain so until you do. Worship is God's appointed revelation to you for this. For worship is designed to point all of us to God's glory as revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ. After all, as John wrote, "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).

Do you see it? Do you sense it? What will you do in response to it?

The Response to Glory

With the revelation of the glory of God, we see a reasonable response to it, fear. "They were filled with great fear" (v. 9). This is to be expected.

The presence of God is frightening. After all, he is holy and we are sinful. (We push the boundaries; we refuse to listen; we lean on our own understanding.) God is just and we are unjust. He is Creator and we are creatures. He is self-sufficient and we dependant. He is light, and we are darkness. He is glorious and we are fallen. He is God and we are not.

The shepherds felt the weight of glory and that made them fearful. This is necessary. We need to feel the weight of glory. We need to be confronted with the holiness of God. We need to see God as he is, not as we want him to be, so that we can truly see ourselves as we are. It is dangerous to get close, but necessary.

If you do not fear God, you will never benefit from the glory of God. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and of wisdom. May God help you to feel the weight of his glory that you will be moved to plead for his grace.

Having seen that this revelation of glory has everything to do with God's new covenant dwelling with his people, we should connect some practical dots with this second point: namely, the church's proper response to the weight of glory.

In a nutshell, the church, driven by the hope of glory, will be weighty. She will be weighty in her worship, in her walk, and in her works. We can put it this way: The church's gatherings should be, must be, weighty. That is, when the church gathers for worship, God must be the focus and therefore reverence will be our demeanour.

The church must be weighty in what she says together: praying, preaching, singing.

Exposition rather than entertainment must be our direction: treating God's word with the weighty respect it deserves. We cannot play fast and loose with it. We must carefully study and teach and apply it.

Biblically-informed praying is required: praying God's words back to him.

Biblically-faithful singing is necessary. Truth is more important than tune.

The church must be weighty in how we serve together. I am speaking here of how we serve one another; how Christians relate to one another. After all, if we are corporately the dwelling place of God, if we are the temple of God, it stands to reason that, as priests in this temple (1 Peter 2:4–5; Ezekiel 44:15ff), we will be concerned and committed to worshipful service together (Romans 12:1–2).

This matter of serving together, in a weighty, glorious way, has many applications.

Church Membership

Church membership should be treated as the glorious privilege that it is. Church membership must be given its due weight in our lives. This will mean, for some, that they make the move to become a formal member of a local church. This is a non-negotiable. To refuse to be a committed, covenantal church member is to treat God's dwelling place lightly. We are not talking about a building, but of a body (1 Corinthians 3:16; etc.). God dwells individually in believers (1 Corinthians 6:19–20) but his body corporate dwelling is the main point of the Bible – both in the Old and the New Testament.

In addition, we need to give due weight to the responsibilities of church membership. We covenant together to gather together, to worship together, to learn together, to pray together, to love together, to serve together, to give together, to sacrifice together, to raise a godly seed together, to evangelise together, to disciple together, and to spread the fame of God's name together. Let me ask you, how are you doing? Let this year be a time of the church carrying more weight in our lives.

Related to the above, if we pursue and properly steward the weight of God's glory when we gather, we will live more glorious lives and our hope of even more glory will be bolstered. So, prioritise the Lord's day. Prioritise corporate gatherings. And let us work on making our gatherings more God-centred, more glorious.

Gather expectantly – as Simeon gathered expectantly at the temple week after week as he looked for the promised Messiah (vv. 22ff). Come enthusiastically – in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). Come engagingly – committed to connect and commune. The church must be weighty in how we see together. That is, the Word of God must not only be appropriately spoken and sung; it is to be obeyed in the public, observable ordinances.

Baptism

Baptism is the entry point into the local assembly of God's people. Upon a credible profession of faith, one is baptised and becomes a covenanted, responsible and accountable member of the local church. This commanded ordinance (Matthew 18:18–20; Acts 2:38) is to be taken seriously. It is to be given its due weight. And, by the way, any other form of baptism (i.e. infant baptism) is biblically weightless and can be dangerous.

Baptism, and the covenant commitment it displays, must be taken seriously. We should long for more baptisms – including, in proper time, the baptism of our children.

The Lord's Supper

When the church is motivated by the hope of glory, when the church is committed to responding appropriately to the weight of glory, it will affect how we sup together.

If we take God seriously, including taking God's gospel seriously, we will take the Lord's Supper seriously. Those who do not give the table weight on earth will probably not be seated at the table of the marriage supper of the Lamb.

The table is about the body of Christ. If you treat the body of Christ dismissively on earth, then you perhaps will not be seated with the body of Christ in heaven. That is, how you treat the Lord's Supper reveals something of how you have responded to the Lord's salvation.

Normal Means with Abnormal Results

Like the shepherds, who were simply going about their normal routine, we too can experience the glorious presence of God as do God's prescribed normal means of grace.

Having noted the weighty, reverent response to the revelation of God's glory, we must pause to emphasise that, like these shepherds, when we are close to the presence of God, the feeling of discomfort will arise. This, as noted, is to be expected. Getting close to the light can be disturbing. But, as we will see, the revelation of God's glory, though it can initially seem like bad news, ultimately leads to good news.

The Remarkable Reassurance of Glory

With the revelation of glory, we are introduced to the wonderful reality of freedom from the problem of God—the weighty problem of “how can I be right with God?” There is a gloriously weighty answer. Listen to this messenger of the Lord: “And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord’” (Luke 2:10–11).

The angel of the Lord reassured the shepherds that they need not be afraid, for the remarkable news is that the presence of God's glory brings “good news of great joy to all the people.” And what was that good news? “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”

When God makes his glorious presence known then, like these shepherds, we are both surprised and scared. Perhaps like Isaiah, we will even be terrified (Isaiah 6:1–6). After all, God has the power to destroy body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28). But the message that the angel of the Lord (the first evangelist!) announced was the gloriously good news that we can survive this weight of glory. We can survive because of the glorious gospel of God in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, this is precisely why this revelation took place. God has returned to save a people unto himself, to form them into a new temple, as we have seen. How remarkable this is. How reassuring this is!

Christian, as we put ourselves in a position to experience this weight of glory (by gathering with God's people around his word, by reading God's word, by seriously and reflectively praying, by honest self-examination, by submitting to discipleship), or when God sovereignly brings his glorious weight to bear on us (heartaches, illness, conviction of sin, etc.) then, though we might initially be unsettled and even frightened, the gospel is there to reassure us. In other words, when the glorious presence of God reveals our

sinfulness, the gloriously powerful gospel of God (1 Timothy 1:11) reassures us that there is no condemnation.

The church should be a gathering of those willing to be exposed by the weight of God's glory. But we do so comforted by the equal weight of the gospel. That is why we can sing, though saddened by sin, "Amazing grace! how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." When the weight of the gospel counteracts the weight of our guilt, then we sing with joy, "It is well with my soul!" When fear weighs upon us because of our sin, the weight of the gospel shouts freedom from that fear as we rest in the promise that, though we are sinners, yet we have a Saviour!

Conclusion

As we close, aim this year to increasingly feel the weight of glory. Aim to experience more of the glorious presence of God. Aim to rest more and more in the promised forgiveness and freedom of the gospel of God. But lest we become self-absorbed in this pursuit, remember that this realised hope of glory in the life of the shepherds was for far more than merely them. It was for "all the people." Christian, we have the hope of glory individually that we will be like Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:27). But we must never lose sight that this hope of glory is global as well. For, by the spread of the gospel, the knowledge of the glory of the Lord will one day cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

That is precisely where history is headed (Revelation 21:10–11, 23). That is a glorious hope, indeed.

AMEN