

The Glory of the Lord

by T. Austin-Sparks

God's end is always glory, and the glory of God is the governing principle of God's movements.

Scripture: 1 Kings 8:11, Ezekiel 1:26, Matthew 27:45-46, Luke 2:14, John 7:39, Acts 7:2, Ephesians 1:19-22, 2 Timothy 4:18, Hebrews 2:9, 2 Peter 1:16-18

Topics: "God's Glory", "Hope in Difficult Times"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the centrality of God's glory in His divine purpose, illustrating how every significant movement of God throughout history, from Abraham to Ezekiel, is prefaced by a revelation of His glory. He highlights that even in seemingly hopeless situations, like Ezekiel's captivity, the glory of the Lord can break through, offering hope and direction. Sparks asserts that God's ultimate aim is glory, and that understanding this can transform our perspective on life's challenges. He encourages believers to recognize the open heavens and the supremacy of Christ on the throne as sources of strength and hope in difficult times. The sermon calls for a renewed apprehension of God's glory to inspire faith and perseverance.

Transcript

Reading: Ezekiel 1

"Above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone; and upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness as the appearance of a man upon it above" (Ezekiel 1:26).

"That working of the strength of His might which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and made Him to sit at His right hand in the heavenlies, far above all rule, and authority, and power, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in that which is to come: and He put all things in subjection under His feet" (Ephesians 1:19-22).

"We behold Him Who hath been made a little lower than the angels, even Jesus... crowned with glory and honour" (Hebrews 2:9).

Let us focus, for the moment, upon the twenty-eighth verse of Ezekiel 1:

"As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness roundabout. This was THE APPEARANCE OF THE LIKENESS OF THE GLORY OF THE

LORD."

That fragment seems to me to sum up all these prophecies. Not only does it apply to the first chapter in particular, but it can be taken all the way through; for everything in these prophecies is being governed by THE GLORY OF THE LORD.

There is a very practical and immediate relationship between this word and ourselves. I am quite sure that most of us have a deep and strong sense of the need for the Lord to do a new thing. I believe that is felt very widely. What that new thing is may be given different interpretations. In the evangelical world there is much prayer and talk about 'revival'; that is perhaps only another way of expressing this sense of a need for the Lord to move in, in a new way, and do a new thing. Others would put it in other ways. But it is there amongst Christians everywhere: the Lord must do a new thing; the Lord must take a fresh step.

God's End Is Glory

We need to be very intelligent and understanding about this matter. The Lord has His ways and His means, and we need to know something about them if we are going to be in line with the Lord in any movement that He purposes to take. This word is therefore very appropriate to the situation. For whenever God has moved in a new and further step in His Divine purpose, He has prefaced that movement by bringing, first, an instrument, and then, through such an instrument, His people, to a fresh apprehension of His glory.

That is a statement which will bear investigation and confirmation. GOD'S ONE END IN ALL THINGS IS GLORY. Make no mistake about that. If you want to know what God is after, what He is moving toward, in all things - and that compasses countless details in every realm; in personal life and corporate life; in the nations - the answer is that God's end is GLORY. That being so, it is to be noted that He always establishes that principle at the outset of every movement. He sets it there as the thing which is going to govern the step, or movement, or whatever it is, that He is about to undertake: it is going to be governed by the end which He has in view, in this as in every new beginning. That may sound a little difficult for the moment. But let us take some instances.

Some Examples From The Old Testament

(a) Abraham

We would all agree that, when God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees, and separated him to Himself, that was a new movement of God. There is no doubt about that. It was a clear-cut and defined breaking-in to human history on the part of God, with a further stage in the Divine programme in view. Now Stephen tells us that "THE GOD OF GLORY appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia" (Acts 7:2). Why the God of GLORY? The end toward which God was moving was GLORY - His own glory in a people, to be manifested among the nations. And so, as the God of glory He appeared to Abraham. He put the glory there as the principle, the law, the basis upon which He was taking that step, and upon which He was going to follow it through.

(b) Moses

Some centuries later (revealed to Abraham even to the very period: see Genesis 15:13,16; Acts 7:6), the Lord had that people out of Egypt. He brought them to Sinai; and there He changed them from a rabble crowd, an unconstituted and unorganized multitude, into a corporate nation. That was the new move at

Sinai. By the law and the testimony and the revelation given in the mount, the people were constituted a nation. And it was done in GLORY. Moses went into the mount, and saw the God of Glory, and came down with that glory on his face. Again God had put the principle at the beginning of His new move: He was moving on the pathway of glory.

(c) David And Solomon

A further step in the Divine plan was reached in the days of David and Solomon. The temple was indeed a development of the Divine thought in representation; and it is all in GLORY. The issue there is GLORY: "the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord" (I Kings 8:11, etc.). It was a glorious time; it was a glorious place. It was all just enunciating and preserving this principle: God is moving all the time with this thought governing - GLORY!

(d) Ezekiel

But we are told that the day came when the glory departed from Jerusalem. We know why. And that brings us to the prophets of recovery, and to this prophet Ezekiel in particular. Here, at the opening of these prophecies, in the day when the glory is eclipsed amongst the Lord's people, as lifted up and departed from Jerusalem (9:3,11:23), the Lord of Glory appeared to Ezekiel: 'This was the appearance of the likeness of the GLORY of the Lord.' It is impressive that that comes right at the beginning of the prophecies, is it not? Now everything that follows is going to be but the outworking of that law of glory. God is more concerned, and in these various ways He is showing His concern, for the end of GLORY to be reached.

Some Examples From The New Testament

(a) The Incarnation

So much for the Old Testament. When we come to the New, we shall all agree that the Incarnation - the birth of the Lord Jesus into this world - is a new movement of God. That is indeed a great step forward in the Divine programme. And therefore it is accompanied with glory - heavenly glory: 'Glory to God in High Heaven!' (Luke 2:14). We sing it in our Christmas hymn. There is glory again at the inception of this new, mighty movement of God, because the end of that thing is indeed going to be glory: He has come for the recovery of the glory of God in this earth. That is Heaven's psalm.

(b) Pentecost

We move on still, and again we will all agree that the Day of Pentecost is another great step forward in the plan of God. God is moving on, and this is a clear mark of that progress of God through the ages. The Day of Pentecost was a step of God from Heaven. And what glory! John tells us quite clearly that the coming of the Holy Spirit was upon the basis of Jesus being glorified. He said: 'The Spirit was not given; because Jesus was not yet glorified' (John 7:39) - implying that when the Spirit was given Jesus was glorified. It was on that ground. God is moving on this basis all the way along.

(c) Peter

And so we could go on. We think of the individual instruments of God's new movement. We will agree that a new movement was in hand through Peter. There is no doubt about it. It is a real new movement. Though Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, we must remember that Peter opened the door for the new

dispensation both to Jew and to Gentile, in Jerusalem, and in Caesarea. It is a mighty new movement. But Peter had his ministry set in this glory. He tells us that he was with Jesus in the Holy Mount, and beheld His glory (II Peter 1:16-18). That had undoubtedly been a tremendously dynamic thing in Peter's life. The Holy Spirit interpreted everything to him on the Day of Pentecost. He got a new Bible, because he had got a new Lord, and an opened Heaven! It was this great principle of glory which accounted for Peter's ministry, and Peter's work, and Peter's endurance to the end.

(d) John

That is clear, too, in the case of John, who was with him for so long as his co-worker and fellow-apostle, in Jerusalem at least. When we come to the beginning of the Book of Revelation, we once again recognize that we are in the presence of a new movement - a new movement for the recovery of the GLORY, which has become so limited and obscured in the churches. The Lord comes to John in vision in Patmos; but it is such a glorious thing, and the visions are so glorious, that more than once John is down in utter prostration before the Lord, and has to be lifted up, helped to rise, because of the overwhelming impact of the vision of the glory (1:17; 19:10; 22:8).

(c) Paul

And what shall we say of Paul? That wonderful ministry, so full, so rich, so glorious, was all born in the day when he saw the GLORY on the Damascus road.

The point is this. The Lord displayed the glory upon every occasion when He was going to move again with some new step in His purpose. All these things that I have mentioned were steps onward of God in His age-long purpose, and every one of them was based upon a new apprehension of the glory of the Lord by those who were concerned. So that, in the case of the prophets and apostles, their ministry was a ministry of the greatness and the glory of the Lord; and as those to whom they ministered saw that, they became a people with a very great significance in this world. It was this apprehension of the glory of Christ that gave character and meaning and power and value to their being here in this world. All this, then, has but one meaning: God's end and God's object is GLORY, and everything that He does is governed by that.

This is something that must really take hold of us, and of which we must take hold: that God intends that all things - ALL things, to the minutest detail of our life, should work out, under His hand, for glory; that God, in everything, is working with glory in view. Do you believe that? No doubt you believe it as a statement and a truth; perhaps you believe it in your heart; but it is not always easy to believe that, because we just do not see how it can be. Indeed, what we do see convinces us that anything but glory will come out of this! Oh that the Lord would just grip us with this - grip me, grip you - individually, and as companies of His people where we are: that what He is doing, what He is allowing, is under the control of this one law and principle - He intends it to be for His glory. That is what He has in mind, and what He will do, for He will not be finally thwarted in His purpose.

Ezekiel And The Glory

True, everything may seem to contradict this. We come to the prophecies of Ezekiel, and there is plenty that seems to contradict this glory. But you cannot get away from the fact that the glory is disclosed in the very first chapter. It is not reserved to the end, so that you have to wade through all the wearisome tale of judgments and woe, and then at last find that God comes out with things in His own hands - so to speak

just manages to survive. You are told right at the very beginning that everything is governed by GLORY. In everything that is going to happen, everything that is going to be said, right on to the end, the governing thing is THE GLORY OF GOD; it is there as the very foundation of everything. We must take note of that. What is God's end? Paul has seen it, and has given it to us in a matchless fragment: "Unto Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all the generations of the age of the ages" (Eph. 3:21). You cannot get beyond that! That is finality; that is the end - 'unto the age of the ages, GLORY in the Church and in Christ Jesus'.

We come then to Ezekiel. There is much here to help us as to God's own concern for His glory. WE may have a concern for the Lord's glory, the Lord has a far greater concern for His glory than we have. This book is a book just full of God's own concern for His own glory. Notice how precise Ezekiel is, even to the year, and the month, and the day of the month. "The word of the Lord came expressly unto Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi..." (1:3) - where he was, when he was, how he was. It is like the Lord, moving so exactly, so meticulously, in this matter, and laying hold of this man. Remember, it had to be a laying hold of him, because it resulted in a complete change in his whole vocation. Ezekiel was a trained priest; he belonged to the priesthood; he was a young man, who was expecting that through his life he would fulfil the ministry of a priest. This broke in and upset his whole career and his whole vocation: he had to change his whole manner and method of life, from priesthood to prophet. It was something very strong in this man's case. It is interesting to notice that his name, Ezekei-el, means 'God will strengthen'. For the glory of God that is very necessary, especially in conditions such as those in which Ezekiel lived.

Ezekiel, thus, as a young man, was carried away with the captives to Babylon, and was 'among the captives by the river Chebar', he tells us (1:1,3); and, from what we know, and what we read, it was a pretty hopeless situation. We know something of the conditions in Jerusalem from the prophecies and ministry of Jeremiah: it was pretty bad there; poor Jeremiah had his heart broken, as he had ministered in Jerusalem. But there are reasons for saying that, whatever it was like in Jerusalem, it was even more difficult in Babylon - that is, so far as the people were concerned to whom Ezekiel ministered. They were a difficult, recalcitrant people. Read these early chapters; see Ezekiel's encounter with them, and the measures to which he had to resort.

An Unpopular Man

I do not want to stay with too much detail, but it is very necessary, for our encouragement, that we should get the setting of the glory of the Lord. Here he is with these captives. Now, a man who has to bring home to a people the reasons for their condition and for the judgments of God; to speak faithfully in the name of the Lord, without compromising on any principle; who will put his own very life and future in the balances of his ministry and be thoroughly faithful. He will not condone any wrong. He will not compromise on any principle in order to preserve their favour and his own position. The man who really has the glory of God at heart at any cost is a very unpopular man.

And Ezekiel was an unpopular man among the exiles - so unpopular that he had to resort to all sorts of seeming tricks in order to gain their attention, to get a hearing. Look at the things to which he resorted, and had to do - spectacular things; unusual things; unnatural things. Sometimes he seemed to act the fool to draw attention, so that people should look in his direction. It was a hard time to get a hearing, to have any attention at all; he was the most unpopular man, perhaps, in the country. It was a desperately difficult situation that he was in amongst his own people there.

The Heavens Opened In Difficult Situations

In the midst of such a situation - which I do not think I exaggerate; indeed, I could add much more to it from these very chapters - in the midst of such a difficult and, for the time being, seemingly hopeless situation, he tells us that the heavens were opened, and he saw visions of God! There is no situation so hopeless as to make it impossible for the glory of God to break in; no situation that can shut God out and be too impossible for a fresh manifestation of His glory. Do you not take heart from that, if it is true? Well, here it is! It is an amazing thing when you take the whole setting, and the whole circumstances, and the whole provision. You could say, Well, that is altogether beyond any hope; that has broken Jeremiah's heart; that has brought the wrath of God - destroyed Jerusalem and sent the people far away: what can you hope for in such a situation? And, right in the midst of that, Ezekiel says: 'I saw the heavens open, and visions of God.' And he sums it all up: "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord."

Now, difficult as it is for us to take hold of that, really to believe it, this may be a message to us. Perhaps we are sometimes very near to despair over the whole situation. Let it come to us as a message from the Lord. In our own lives, or in the place where we are, perhaps as a company of the Lord's people, things create such difficulty that sometimes we get near to giving it all up. Ezekiel might well have done that, for he had far more occasion for doing it than you or I have; but right in there - THERE - "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord". "The heavens were opened!"

We have thought and said much about an 'open Heaven'. All we will say about that, for the present, is that, if there is any indication at all that the Heavens are open, that is always the most hopeful thing in any situation. You may be having some difficult times in your company of the Lord's people; perhaps you have some difficult people - well, Ezekiel had some difficult people; you may be having much discouragement; there may be things which you feel to be very wrong, and so on. And yet, when you come together and give yourselves to the worship of the Lord, there is a wonderful sense of unction. You just become occupied with the Lord! For the time being, at any rate, you let the other go, and the Lord becomes your Centre - the Heavens are opened! While that lasts, there is every hope for your assembly; there is every hope for the future. There is nothing more hopeless than a closed Heaven.

Look at Calvary: 'There was darkness over the whole earth... and Jesus cried with a loud voice, My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken Me?' (Matt. 27:45-46). Heaven was closed, because of what He was doing there - taking the sin of the whole world. Heaven was closed down, was shut; there was no way through. That is the most hopeless situation that could ever possibly be. The hopelessness of that situation killed Him. That was the final stroke to bring about His death. It was not the nails; it was not the thorns; it was not the action of men: it was the broken heart, because He had lived all His earthly life with a clear way through to the Father - with an open Heaven. All His days He had been in communication with Heaven, with the Father; He had never known until then one moment when He could not instantly get through. Here that all ended: there was no way through; no response; no answering voice: a closed Heaven. That is hope-less.

If you and I have any answer to prayer, any little indication or token that the Lord has not forsaken, given up, shut down on us; if we have anything like that, then Heaven is still open, and that is very hopeful for the future. Let us cherish the open Heaven in our times of worship. Many dark things may be about; many difficult things; situations, like Ezekiel's, may be full of evil, or perplexities, or problems, or difficulties, or sufferings. Yet when we come together, and focus upon the Lord, we sense His presence: that is our open Heaven; and an open Heaven is always a sign that there is hope yet; there is still a future for glory!

The Lord forbid that we should ever come to the time when we are closed down by Heaven, and cannot get through. 'I saw the heavens opened...', and that meant God had not finished with things yet; God had not closed down yet. There may be judgments; as the following chapters show. There may have to be judgments; there may have to be discipline; there may have to be chastening; there may be much yet to be done. But whatever it is that has to be cleared up - perhaps by the jealous wrath of God for His glory; whatever hard things, sufferings, afflictions, have to be gone through, because of the wrong; nevertheless, it is all governed by this: A HOPE OF GLORY - a hope of GLORY - if the Heavens still remain open.

The Supremacy Of The Lord On The Throne

"I saw visions of God" - that is, visions given by God. What did Ezekiel see? What was it that comprised those visions of God? Well, as we have seen in chapter 1, he saw a throne; and then he saw "a likeness as the appearance of a MAN" upon the throne above (1:26). And then he saw a two-fold symbolic medium of the administration of that throne - the cherubim and the wheels. (We shall hope to return to these things later). Then, as we know, he saw a 'house' - THE House - which he was commanded to show to the people of Israel (43:10). He saw the House in later glory. He saw the river coming from under the threshold, circling the altar, passing through the court, and away down, broadening and deepening, and making everything live whithersoever it came (47:1-9). Then he saw the land and the inheritance possessed (47:13-48:29). And finally he saw the City, and the name of the City: "The Lord is there" (48:30-35). That is the end of it all - the Lord is there!

What I want to emphasize and stress particularly is that all that we see in this book is the result and the expression of that throne, and of the 'Man upon it above'. Of course that is very simple to understand: everything emanates and results from the great, inclusive fact that there is One in the place of supreme government and authority. And for us, and for them, and for all time, by the eternal appointment of God, that One is the Lord Jesus, the Son of God. He has been exalted to the 'right hand of the Majesty in the heavens' (Heb. 1:3; 8:1). 'We see Jesus crowned with glory and honour' (Heb. 2:9). 'God raised Him and set Him at His own right hand, far above all rule and authority, dominion and power, and every name that is named' (Eph. 1:20-21). Everything comes out of that. If that is true, then everything is all right; it will be all right in the end.

Now, this is very up-to-date, is it not? We have spoken of the conditions in which Ezekiel spent his life and fulfilled his ministry - the time and place and the state of things. Yes, he had a very difficult situation. But the Church has got a pretty difficult situation now; things are far from easy today. There is now, as then, very much that is wrong, and much that is evil. Who will say today that the GLORY of God pervades His people? Ezekiel's was a difficult time; but it was at that time, and in those circumstances, that this instrument, under the government of the throne, was brought in for a new movement of God. Or we might say, that this apprehension, on the part of an instrument, of the supremacy of the Throne and of the Man upon it led to the wonderful result that, in time, the whole situation was changed, and God had something for His glory.

The Vision Of The Glory Saves From Despair

That vision - the opened Heaven; the throne, and the Man upon it above - had a tremendous effect upon Ezekiel. It saved him, in his day, from despair; it saved his ministry; it saved his testimony; it saved his life. And it is only that that will save us; only that CAN save us. Perhaps that sounds a little pessimistic. I do not want to be a pessimist; but you cannot be acquainted with the state of things on this earth today, even

amongst what is called Christian, or Christianity, without sometimes feeling fairly hopeless about it. Is it possible that the great revelation given to us of the Church, as we have it in the New Testament, can in any way be realized in our time? Look at the divisions; look at the quarrels; feel this awful atmosphere that has grown up and spread. In the United States, for instance, some 35 years ago, there seemed to be such an open, clear way for something new of the Lord: the atmosphere seemed so clear, and hearts seemed so open. But in that land today, everybody is suspecting everybody else; the spirit of criticism has got into the most devoted Christians, both about other Christians and about Christian things. You cannot have half-an-hour's conversation even with those who are most devoted to the Lord, without somebody being lashed, somebody being mentioned for warning, as suspect. It is like an awful miasma, or fog, that has crept in amongst Christians over the whole world. You cannot go into your religious bookshops without seeing line upon line of pamphlets and books that are occupied with denouncing something. Men are giving their whole lives to this horrible work of trying to expose what they think to be error.

That is strong language, but it is not too strong. It is the state of things, and you might despair of the realization of that which you have seen to be God's purpose. And yet you cannot; the Lord will not let you. If you really have seen the Lord, you just cannot give it up. You may say, like Jeremiah, that you will not speak in this way any more. He resolved that he would never speak again of the Lord. But then - "If I say, I will not... speak any more in His name, then there is... a burning fire shut up in my bones... and I cannot contain" (Jer. 20:9).

You and I may have often decided that we should just have to stop talking about it, and give it up, because it does not seem to work; things seem to go from bad to worse, and worse to awful! And yet we are still here. We cannot help ourselves; we are back again in full view of God's declared purpose. The Spirit will not give it up, and will not let us give it up, however bad the situation is. The Heaven is not closed yet; the Man on the throne has not evacuated the throne yet; there is still hope. We have got to have the mastery of that great reality that He is still there, where God put Him. And if this is true, difficult as it sometimes is to believe it, or at any rate to see it, - then He IS 'far above all rule and authority, and dominion, and power, and every name' - world dictators or anybody else - 'that is named, in this age or in the ages to come.' Only as that gets hold of us, and we take hold of it in turn, will there be any prospect at all; but that is the prospect.

Strategic Revelations Of The Glory

To reveal the glory is always a strategic movement of God in a difficult and unpromising day and situation. I think that was the meaning of the Transfiguration. It was a difficult day; things were closing in on the Lord and His little band of men; the atmosphere was impregnated with hatred; and the Cross was there immediately before. How will they meet it? How will they survive it? The strategy was the Transfiguration - they 'saw His glory'. And although for a time afterward it seemed to be eclipsed, nevertheless, when He was risen from the dead, they understood all things. In the light of the resurrection the Transfiguration took on its full meaning.

Things were going very hardly for the church in Jerusalem on the day that that wonderful young man, Stephen, was dragged outside and stoned to death, with that so vicious hatred of the Lord Jesus. But Stephen saw the Heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56). It saved the situation for him, and I think it had a much farther reach than just himself; I think it handed on something. At any rate, one man there became a very potent factor in the Church for all time. He was tremendously affected by what he saw in the face of Stephen, and heard through the lips of Stephen; he

never got over it. And he never forgave himself. He confessed afterwards: 'And I, I was standing by and giving my vote, my consent!' (Acts 22:20). The seeing of the glory was a saving thing in a dark and difficult day.

Paul is in prison; he is nearing the end of his long, full life and ministry. He thinks of all those many churches - far more than we have tabulated by letters addressed to them - which he had been used to bring into being; of all his many converts, and of the many who owed everything spiritually to him and his ministry. Now he is in prison, shut up, and he cannot go to them; the churches are in a state of decline; many are turning against him and away from him as he is there. He is a lonely man - 'only Luke is with me'; a man in difficulty, if ever a man was, speaking naturally. What a situation, what an end, for a man like that! What saves him?

It is astoundingly impressive, that, in the midst of all that, knowing it all - knowing his own position, knowing his own prospects, which were pretty poor for this life; knowing the state of things far away in the churches; getting news of these secessions; faced with the seeming breakdown of his work; disappointed with believers and with churches - I say that it is an amazing thing that with all that, out of that, in the midst of that, enough to crush a man in despair, he has an open Heaven, and says: 'To Him be the glory unto the ages of the ages!' (II Tim. 4:18). He is saved by the glory; he is delivered by the glory. What a different end it might have been but for this apprehension of the glory!

Here he writes then, that this One, this Man, is in the glory on the Throne above, far above all rule and authority. Caesar may be there next door, governing the whole world, bringing it under his mighty and evil heel, and seeming to be able to carry out all his fell designs against the Church of Jesus Christ. Paul, right along side of Caesar and Caesar's city and stronghold, says: 'He hath set HIM far above all rule and authority, and every name - Caesar or any other - in this age, or in any other age... hath put all things in subjection under His feet...' That is a saving vision of the glory.

It was that that saved John in his difficult and desperate situation in Patmos, for it was indeed something to break a man's heart and send him deep down in dark despair. John was the one lonely survivor of the whole apostolic band. They have all gone, he is cut off from his beloved church; alone; isolated; exiled; with all the conditions which must have accompanied that exile. That is enough to make a man despair, to feel that he has lived his life in vain, and that there really is no hope at all. But he had an opened Heaven, and saw a vision - and what visions he saw! It was the opened Heaven that saved him. The Lord give us that, and a new apprehension of the Throne and of the Man upon it.

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