

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Glorification

“For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.” —Romans 8:29-30

Introduction

God’s plan of redemption has never been a “Plan B”—an emergency response to a tragic and unexpected fall of humanity into sin. To the contrary, God’s plan of redemption has always been “Plan A”—the best conceivable plan that would maximally display His power, wisdom, and love. This plan was *arranged* by God the Father in eternity past. Its basis was *achieved* through the life, death, and resurrection of God the Son at a distinct point in human history. And now God the Spirit *applies* its benefits to those who are redemption’s underserving recipients.

The Holy Spirit’s application of redemption takes place in various stages. At the moment of conversion, when the sinner experiences the graces of *regeneration*, *justification*, *adoption*, and *sealing*, the Spirit gives to the believer the full benefits of Christ’s atonement in a legal sense. As a justified, adopted child of God, the riches of salvation now belong to him. He holds the title deed. They are now his—forever. But the believer in this life still only experiences these blessings as a foretaste of the glory to come—as a down payment of a forthcoming inheritance. For him, the greatest and most glorious experience of redemption still lies in the future. The term which describes the moment when these riches will be finally and fully experienced is the term *glorification*.

Glorification is the ultimate destiny of the redeemed. From the very beginning, God’s redemptive plan has been pushing toward this end. So certain is Paul that glorification will take place for every believer that he describes it as already accomplished, though its experience is still future:

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. (Rom 8:29-30)

Yet despite its glorious nature, the doctrine of glorification does not always receive the attention it deserves. As Millard Erickson writes, “This topic receives little treatment in standard theology textbooks, and even less attention in sermons, yet it is rich in practical significance, for it gives believers encouragement and strengthens their hope” (Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 924). Why this neglect? Perhaps it is due to a fear of that which stands between the believer and his glorification—*death*. Perhaps it is due to a *preoccupation with this present world* and a love of things like careers, sports, hobbies, vacations, and bucket lists. Perhaps this neglect is due to *ignorance*. Many believers assume that life after death will be boring—a step down from the adventures and possibilities of this life.

The biblical teaching on the doctrine of glorification leaves no room for apathy or neglect. Although its experience will be in the future, it provides needed encouragement for believers today. It reinforces hope; it motivates holiness; and it enriches worship. As such, it is important that we spend the final two sessions of our series on this doctrine.

A. Key Terms and Definitions

In our first look at the doctrine of glorification, the following three concepts are important to identify and define:

1. **“Glorification.”** MacArthur and Mayhue define *glorification* as **“the radical transformation of both the body and the soul of believers, perfecting them in holiness, and thereby fitting them for eternal life on the new earth in perfect communion with the triune God”** (*Biblical Doctrine*, 924). Thus, glorification is not a gradual process like progressive sanctification. Neither is it something in which the believer himself participates. It is an instantaneous act accomplished unilaterally by God Himself. It is God’s crowning achievement whereby He transforms believers into the glorious likeness of Jesus Christ in both spirit and body (Rom 8:29). John Murray’s definition is helpful as well:

Key idea:
The decisive moment when God finally and fully transforms the believer into the likeness of Jesus, in both body and soul.

It is the complete and final redemption of the whole person when in the integrity of body and spirit, the people of God will be conformed to the image of the risen, exalted, and glorified Redeemer, when the very body of their humiliation will be conformed to the body of Christ's glory. (*Redemption Accomplished & Applied*, 186)

See **Rom 5:1-2; 8:23, 29-30; Phil 3:20-21; Col 1:21-22; 3:1-4; 1 Thess 5:23; 1 John 3:2; Jude 24-25.**

“This [glorification] is the highest end conceivable for created beings, the highest and conceivable not only by men but also by God himself. God himself could not contemplate or determine a higher destiny for his creatures.”

—John Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2.316

2. **“Intermediate State.”** The definitions provided above emphasize that glorification involves not only the soul but the body as well. Believers often neglect this truth when they think that they will reach their final destiny when, at the moment of death, their souls are ushered into the very presence of God in heaven. However, according to Scripture, the final step in the application of the benefits of redemption comes when believers receive their glorified bodies. The human soul was never intended to exist eternally without a body. Without its glorified body, the soul remains incomplete.

Key idea:
The time between a believer's death and his bodily resurrection, when his soul dwells with the Lord in heaven.

Nonetheless, there is a unique stage that does occur for believers who die prior to their reception of a glorified body when the Lord comes to gather His church. This stage is called the *intermediate state*. This state is **the duration of time between the believer's death**—when his body goes to the grave and his soul goes to be with Christ—**and the believer's resurrection**—when Christ gives to the believer his glorified body. As Matthew Barrett states, “When we breathe our last, it is not the case that we cease to exist or our soul goes to sleep until the time of our bodily resurrection. Rather, our soul goes to be with the Lord in heaven” (*Forty Questions about Salvation*, 342).

See **Luke 23:42-43; 2 Cor 5:6-8; Phil 1:23-24; 1 Thess 4:14; Heb 12:22-24; Rev 6:9-11.**

It is important to note that even though the believer will be without a body in this intermediate state, and thus be incomplete in his composition (a “disembodied” soul), he will nevertheless possess full consciousness in Christ's presence, and be fully sanctified in his soul. The striving against temptation and sin will be finished, and perfect holiness—albeit only in the soul at this point—will be enjoyed.

Question: What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?

Answer: The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory: and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

—Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 37

3. **“Beatific Vision.”** The word *beatific* comes from the same word as *beatitude* (see Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5:3-12). A *beatitude* describes a state of supreme blessedness. Thus, a *beatific vision* describes a *vision of supreme blessedness*. Ultimately, it describes **the sight of Jesus Christ in His glory—a view that brings ultimate happiness and perfection**. When it occurs, this sight will not be through a medium or channel, as it is for the believer now as he sees the glory of Christ through the words of Scripture. It is not the vision of Christ by faith (1 Pet 1:8; Heb 11:1). Instead, it will be that glorious moment when the believer enters the presence of Jesus Christ and beholds him **face-to-face**. At that moment, faith will become sight!

This face-to-face sight is the ultimate desire of all believers. It was the longing of Moses (Exod 33:18). It was the hope of David: “As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake” (Ps 17:15). Jesus desired this for all His followers: “Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). The Apostle John wrote about it with great anticipation: “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has

Key idea:
The glorious moment when the believer sees Jesus Christ in His majesty, face-to-face.

not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2).

Because of what Christ accomplished through the atonement, believers can rest in the promise that they will one day see Jesus Christ in all His glory, face-to-face, without any barrier. For those who die before the coming of the Lord, this view will be their first experience when they step from this life into “paradise” (Luke 23:43), when they go to be “home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8). For those who are alive at the coming of the Lord, this view will begin the moment they are fully glorified—soul and body—as they are caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess 4:16-17).

“In the immediate beholding of the person of Christ, we shall see a glory in it a thousand times above what here we can conceive. The excellencies of infinite wisdom, love, and power therein, will be continually before us. And all the glories of the person of Christ which we have before weakly and faintly inquired into, will be in our sight for evermore. . . . This immediate sight of Christ is that which all the saints of God in this life do breathe and pant after.” —John Owen, *Works*, 1.379

B. Essential Characteristics

1. **Death has been transformed from curse to victory.** Certainly, death is ugly—a vivid reminder of the curse (Gen 3:19). It is the consequence for all of Adam’s descendants, marked by original sin (Rom 5:12). It is judgment—the wages of sin (Rom 6:23; Heb 9:27). But God intervened and sent His Son to conquer death. As Paul states, Christ Jesus “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim 2:9-10; see also Heb 2:14). Thus, death no longer means to the Christian what it once meant. Its purpose has been radically transformed. Now, death marks the end of struggle and the entrance into victory.

“Death is only a grim porter to let us into a stately palace.” —Richard Sibbes

“Faith gives a title to heaven; death gives the possession.” —Thomas Watson

2. **Death is no longer to be feared.** The Apostle Paul emphasized this point to believers often. To the Corinthians he stated that “we are of good courage . . . and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8). To the Philippians he acknowledged that when considering the choice between living and dying, his preference was “to depart and be with Christ,” though he was by no means trying to speed death’s arrival (Phil 1:23-24). For Paul, “death was gain” (Phil 1:21).

This is one of the great proclamations of the gospel. In it Christ proclaims to those who fear death and judgment, **“Fear not!”** Those who embrace the gospel’s promises can then think about death, talk about death, plan for death, and even die *very differently* than those who reject those promises and have no hope.

“Let your hope of heaven master your fear of death. Why should you be afraid to die, who hope to live by dying!” —William Gurnall

“The hopes I have of an eternal life, swallow up the fears of a temporal death.” —Christopher Love

“It is a grand thing to see a man dying full of life.” —Charles Spurgeon

3. **Death ends the struggle with sin.** Death completes the process of sanctification which began at regeneration. *Definitive* sanctification = the act of terminating the power of sin (1 Cor 6:9-11). *Progressive* sanctification = the process of removing the pollution of sin (Rom 8:12-13). *Perfective* sanctification = the act of ending the very presence of sin (1 Thess 5:23). With death comes the end to all striving against sin and temptation, and the beginning of an eternity of perfect holiness. The sins that plagued the believer throughout his earthly life, and the tears and discipline that they produced, are finally over—forever.

4. Death ushers the soul immediately into the presence of the Lord. God's Word is clear that when the believer in Jesus Christ dies, his soul goes immediately to be *with* the Lord. See Luke 23:42-43; Acts 7:59-60; 2 Cor 5:6-8; Phil 1:23-24; 1 Thess 4:14; Rev 6:9-11. Yet there are two serious errors which ignore this clear teaching:

- a. **The Roman Catholic teaching of *purgatory*** (Lat. *purgare*, "to make clean") insists that Christians—if they die without having made penance for *venial* (minor) sins, must go to pay the penalty for those sins in a place that is neither hell (for the damned), nor heaven (for saints). The duration of the soul's painful existence in fiery purgatory is as long as God deems necessary, but can be shorted by those who are still on earth through their intercessory prayers to Mary and the saints, and, of course, monetary contributions to the local diocese! Such a teaching arises not from Scripture, but ultimately from the Catholic Church's unbiblical view of justification. (See the session on "Justification," 1/22/2020.)
- b. **The Seventh-Day Adventist teaching of *soul sleep*** argues that the soul cannot exist apart from the body, and so at death it goes into a period of hibernation—an unconsciousness that continues until the body is resurrected and rejoined with the soul. Indeed, the Bible does use the term "sleep" often with respect to physical death (e.g., Dan 12:2; Matt 9:24; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thess 5:10; 2 Pet 3:4). But this way of describing death refers to the *body*, not to the soul. It is a *euphemism*—a figure of speech which describes something in a more positive way than its stark reality (similar to our English euphemism for death: "passing away"). This figurative language in no way contradicts nor negates the clear language of Scripture, that to "depart" from the body is to be "at home with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:8).

5. The first sight after death will be glorious! John states this clearly: "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2). Death marks the transition to living *by sight*, and that sight will be "a thousand times above what here we can receive" (Owen). Our soul's longing will be finally met.

6. The intermediate state is not the final state. As glorious as this intermediate state will be for those who die before the coming of the Lord, it will not be the final state of their existence. The soul was not created to exist apart from the body. Thus, as Paul states, we wait "eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body" (Rom 8:23; see also Col 3:1-4). This resurrection will be the focus of our next study (5/20/2020).

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: 2 Corinthians 5:6-8

Recommended Reading:

- MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 653-659.
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chapter 41, "Death and the Intermediate State," pages 810-827.

Homework:

- How often do you think about death and the glory that is to follow? Why is it that you prefer *not* to think about it?
- When can thinking about death become unhealthy for the Christian life, and even dangerous? How are we to avoid this?
- Why is the desire to go to be "with the Lord" so important for living the Christian life today? How does this desire help us live better lives? Show your answers from biblical texts.
- Read Philippians 1:18-26 very carefully several times this week. Record your observations on Paul's attitude toward the present life and the life to come.
- If it was the Lord's design for you to die a slow and painful death, how can you prepare now so that you would die in way full of hope and joy—in a way that would powerfully testify to the power of the gospel?
- Search for R. C. Sproul's hymn, "Highland Hymn," and reflect upon its beautiful articulation of the *beatific vision*. Ask yourself the question, Is it my ultimate desire to see Jesus Christ face-to-face?

Hymns: "My Jesus I Love Thee" (*Hymns of Grace* #380); "The Sands of Time Are Sinking" (#427)

This Week's Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: May 20 – "Resurrection"