

Chapter Two

Tell me the old, old story

I'm indebted to the Gideons. They'd invited me to speak at their national gathering in Birmingham and had gently suggested I might like to consider speaking on their 'theme' verse from 1 Chronicles 16:24: 'Declare his glory among the nations'. Now to my shame I have to confess that I'd never really engaged with that verse before, but the speaking opportunity forced me to drill down into this unexpected diamond-mine. And what I discovered was that 'evangelism' had always been part of God's plan for his people, even during the formation and shaping of the nation of Israel.

This particular verse from Chronicles was a direct quote from words already used in the nation's hymn-book (Ps. 96:3). It tells us something of what we should be declaring, how we should declare it, and where that is to be made known.

So – what was it that God's people were to declare?

The answer is – 'his glory'. But this is where our problem lies. What on earth does that mean? It seems to be one of those Bible expressions that we grow up with but can rarely define. It feels like something big and shiny, but as soon as we try to put it into words it begins to feel like nailing jelly to a wall.

For some of us, glory is what we associate with events in the past: when things went well, when there were particular times of triumph and achievement. We called them the glory days;

days of lost innocence, days of inexhaustible energy, days of long, hot, uncomplicated summers. And no doubt your mind travels back to such times.

My own experience of glory was being brought up in north-east London and being taken to see the double-winning Spurs side in 1961 as a five-year-old. That was glory. And when you went to White Hart Lane, ringing the hoardings was Spur's motto – 'The game is about glory'.

But is this what the Bible writers mean? And when we look more closely, we discover that they use that word 'glory' in one of two ways.

Firstly, it's used in the sense of describing what God is like – what theologians call the attributes of God – his beauty and splendour, his holiness and power, his supremacy and rule, his majesty and compassion.

The following verses give some idea of how 'glory' is used in this way:

Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the *glory* and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all (1 Chron. 29:11).

LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your *glory* in the heavens (Ps. 8:1).

The heavens declare the *glory* of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands (Ps. 19:1).

for all have sinned and fall short of the *glory* of God (Rom. 3:23).

And in the Old Testament this Hebrew word for glory – *kavode* – occurs 144 times, whilst the equivalent Greek word – *doxa* – appears 115 times in the NT.

But this word for glory is predominantly used in another way. Not to describe God's awesome character in general, but

specifically to refer to his character being revealed physically to sinful people. And so, when you get references to light and fire and cloud, it is often summarised by the word 'glory'.

Let me give you some illustrations of what I mean.

While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the *glory* of the LORD appearing in the cloud (Exod. 16:10).

and the *glory* of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud (Exod. 24:16).

To the Israelites the *glory* of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain (Exod. 24:17).

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the *glory* of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the *glory* of the LORD filled the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-35).

Then the LORD will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the *glory* will be a canopy (Isa. 4:5).

You've maybe heard this referred to as the Shekinah glory, a phrase used later by the rabbis to describe the presence of God in the pillar of cloud and fire. You'll maybe remember how the glory of God appeared to lead the people across the sea and through the wilderness and how, at Sinai, with Israel encamped around the mountain, the glory of God comes in the cloud and fire to speak with Moses in the sight of the people.

This picture of Israel encamped around the glory of God on Sinai portrays God dwelling in the midst of his people. Later,

the same glory filled the new temple that Solomon builds. God was in their midst.

So, do you get it? The glory of God is often a reference to the amazing miracle that the infinitely glorious and holy and powerful God comes to dwell with his people in all their sin and failure. Now this really is glorious. This is astounding. And this is the way the word 'glory' is used in Psalm 96.

It's in this sense rather than the more general definition of glory, that we're to understand what it is that the Israelites were to declare. And we know that because of the lines that surround the words 'declare his glory' in Psalm 96 verse 3.

Have another look at them:

Sing to the LORD, praise his name;
 proclaim his salvation day after day.
 Declare his glory among the nations,
 his marvellous deeds among all peoples.

This is Hebrew poetry. And Hebrew poetry operates according to 'parallelism' in which surrounding lines repeat, develop or explain what the poet wants to say.

And what do the surrounding lines to 'Declare his glory' say? What's another way of understanding this phrase better? 'proclaim his salvation', 'declare ... his marvellous deeds'.

So the glory to be declared isn't something vague and general. We've got to go beyond big clichés, however wonderful they may be, to declare that our God, in all his infinite glory and wonder and splendour, is best seen and known through the fact that he pleases to make himself known to, and dwell with, sinful people. That's 'glory'.

And this is where it gets even more exciting. That word for salvation ('proclaim his salvation') gives us a clue as to where God's saving glory is most clearly seen, where it finds its perfect embodiment. In Hebrew that word for salvation is 'Yeshua'. Now does that ring any bells? Of course it does. This is where the name 'Jesus' comes from.

‘An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins”’ (Matt. 1:20-21).

Jesus – Joshua – ‘the Lord saves’. And in John’s summary verse of the birth of Jesus he says this:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

And when John says that Jesus ‘made his dwelling among us’ it could more literally be translated as Jesus ‘tabernacled’ among us and ‘we have seen his glory’.

John deliberately likens the coming of Jesus to the Shekinah glory. Just as the glory of God was evident when the tabernacle was erected in the centre of the Israelite camp, so Jesus is the perfect representation of God among sinful people. It is in Jesus that we see the glory of God.

And Luke gets in on this as well. He wants us to see the connection. Listen to the words of Simeon when he holds baby Jesus in the temple:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel (Luke 2:29-32).

Jesus – the light of God’s glory, the perfect embodiment of God’s glorious character, the complete sum of all God’s majestic attributes, the Saviour of sinners.

We see this pictured again when Jesus was transfigured before three of his disciples. Listen to Matthew's account and get a glimpse of what he's describing:

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus (Matt. 17:1-3).

Do you notice Matthew doesn't name the mountain they went up? It was probably Tabor or Hermon, but that's not his point. He's drawing another parallel. He wants this 'high mountain' to resonate with his Jewish readers so they think of Sinai, of fire, of Moses, of glory. For Jesus is the Shekinah glory. He is God's salvation.

And when God's people, by his wonderful saving grace, end up in heaven, we'll live in the light of his glory. God will dwell among his people. We'll see Jesus. We'll serve in the light of his Shekinah glory.

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever (Rev. 22:3-5).

So, you see what it was that God's people were expected to declare – 'his glory', who we can now name as Jesus. He's the one we're to declare, he's the one we're to point to, he's the one who must be the centre of all our energies, he's the one who must fuel our passion.

But how were God's people to declare this glorious Jesus?

The Hebrew word used here for ‘Declare’ is *‘caphar’*. It’s used 109 times in the OT, and on 33 occasions it has the sense of numbering or counting. For example:

He [the Lord] took him [Abram] outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them”. Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be” (Gen. 15:5).

Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers, consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation (Ps. 48:12-13).

And the sense here is that the psalmist was encouraging the worshippers to be strengthened by a knowledge of what God had done for Jerusalem.

This numbering or counting or reckoning is all to do with a sense of amazement at what God had done. And before God’s people could ever ‘declare his glory among the nations’ they needed to have seen and experienced the wonder of his salvation. There needed to be the ‘wow’ factor.

This is exactly what Isaac Watts was getting at.

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,