

The God Who Sets His Glory Among The Nations

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Well, if you would take out your Bibles and open to Ezekiel 39 on page 727, that would be great. I want to preach this morning on the face of God, which is the foundation in this passage.

Three times the face of God is mentioned. And this is, well, it's basically what we're trying to do with everything we're doing as Christians and in the church here.

So Tuesday night we gathered to pray together for a new church home, a great night of weakness and dependence on God. What are we doing? We're seeking the face of God. Yesterday women gathered for a quiet day. I've heard reports about it. What were they doing?

They were seeking the face of God. And somehow the title of this sermon on the bulletin got called The God Who Sets His Glory Among the Nations. And that was Dan's fault. Actually, it wasn't. It was in a hasty moment I did that.

It ought to be called something like How to See the Face of God or Our Highest Good or something like that. Because to see the face of God is what makes the gospel good news.

[1 : 15] Not just that Jesus died for our sins so we have a clean conscience and have forgiveness. Not just that he rose from the dead and we have the hope of eternal life.

But here it is. It's seeing God's face. It's what we were made for. It's what we long for. It's the highest good we can possibly imagine. There's a writer by the name of Roger Scruton who's an eccentric from England, a composer and a professor and a novelist.

He published the Gifford Lectures in 2012 where he laments the loss of the sense of divine in Western culture. And he's not just looking at the familiar things of consumerism and individualism. He says we've lost any sense of sacrifice in our culture and we live now in a disenchanted world.

And he wonders whether some of the jauntiness of the new atheists like Richard Dawkins has more to do with the inbuilt propensity we have to hide from the face of God.

And he says what we are doing is we are defacing the world. We deface one another in relationships because we deface God.

[2 : 28] We unface God. I think it's a very interesting idea. And he begins his starting point is the human face. Very interesting when you think about your face. I mean there's something very intimate and personal and relational.

It has to do with our identity and meaning and relationships. And it is the pattern of restoration has to come from face to face, not virtual, but face to face reality.

And when you look at someone's, when you really look at someone's face, you can no longer treat that person as an object. They become a person, a subject. And I think the whole idea of God's face is a remarkable idea.

The idea in the Bible here, because the Bible speaks absolutely unashamedly about the fact that though God is spirit, our ultimate hope is to see him face to face.

And since along the way God is revealing his face to us, it opens the door for intimacy and for him to be known. Throughout the Bible, the face of God, when the face of God is turned toward us, it means his favor and his blessing, his approval toward us.

[3 : 41] Which is why God said to Aaron in the Old Testament, here's how you should bless the people. You should say, the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

The Lord lift up the light of his face, same word, upon you and give you peace. We keep putting things in the way. We keep pushing the face of God away.

We look at other things and we pretend they give us the pleasure of God's face until in the end we come blind to his glory. And the life of the believer is a daily joy and a daily duty to seek God's face.

That's what we do. The psalmist says, Lord, you've said to me, seek your face. Your face do I seek. Do not turn your face away from me. And there's a very different passage from last week's passage.

Have we not found this through the book of Ezekiel? Some passages are right on the ground. Some passages are stratospheric. And we've had just about everything in between. Last week was on the ground as we talked about money.

[4 : 50] You remember? And how we get a God complex. And when wealth meets the human heart, it creates pride, inevitably. And we saw that God's...

The great interest of God is not so much how much you have and how much you spend, but it's got much more to do with the effect of wealth on our hearts. That was kind of on the ground.

That was a runway sermon. But this sermon goes right up into the air. And from chapter 38 to the end of Ezekiel, we are above history in a way.

And we get God's perspective. And we move in great big sweeps. I'm waving my arms around. So that we go outside. We have to go outside the context of this passage to really understand it.

And I'm going to try and do that at the end of the sermon. Build a couple of bridges for us. Which means that the sermon is a little bit al dente. It means you're going to have to take it and think it through.

[5 : 48] If that's okay. Some sermons are al dente. Some sermons are overcooked. Throw them against the congregation and see which sticks. So chapter 38 and 39 describes God's final destruction of evil at the last day.

We discover that Gog and Magog are not villages near Montreal. They are symbolic powers of evil. And they come up again in the book of Revelation when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead.

It's 30,000 foot stuff. But as soon as we come to our passage today that Nathan read, verses 21 to 29, we are immediately alerted to the fact again that this has much more, much higher application, wider, broader application than just this nation Israel which is in Babylon going back to Israel.

Because the first phrase God says, I will set my glory among the nations. And then in the last verse God says he's going to pour out his Holy Spirit. And these two, you know, the beginning and the end of the passage are like the two sides of the catapult that push the whole meaning of the passage up very high and spread it very wide.

And the two paragraphs are little, they mirror each other. It begins with God's action and promise so that we'll know he's the Lord. And then it comes to his face. His face. Three times his face.

[7 : 13] So behind everything God is doing is he is revealing his face. And I'm going to just, let's look at these two paragraphs, two headings.

The first one is the loss of face and the second is restoring face. So the first paragraph, loss of face, I don't mean our loss of face. I mean that Israel and we are in danger of losing sight of God's face. And God says that is why you are in exile in the first place. So verse 21, I will set my glory among the nations. They shall see my, that word is not judgment, it's justice.

They'll see my justice that I've executed and my hand that I've laid on them. And they'll know that I am the Lord their God from that day onward. Now, if you've been in a Bible study and studying Ezekiel, you know this phrase, they'll know that I'm the Lord, they'll know that I'm the Lord, they'll know that I'm the Lord.

It comes 54 times, the commentaries tell me. Why does God keep saying this? He's saying this because what he's doing and he's saying is not a performance.

[8 : 20] You can't hear these words as a spectator. This is revelation and the intention of it is that we would personally engage it.

When God says they'll know that I'm the Lord, he's not like a defeated boxer who wants to make a comeback, you know, then they'll know his boss. The word know is the Old Testament word of intimacy.

Adam knew his wife and they had a child. You see, to know God is not to know about him, but is to truly know him, to see him and to experience his glory, to see his face.

And that's where it opened up. Remember chapter one, there was this magnificent explosion, the vision of the likeness of the glory of God, the combination of all God's goodness and all his holiness in this magnificent, terrifying shining of splendor.

And remember, it's like the center of gravity at the beginning of the book because it's the center of gravity of our universe. Because there is no glory like God's. There's no God like God. And what could be better for us than seeing his face and savoring his face of knowing him?

[9 : 32] I mean, this is at the root and it's the reason for all our desires. The face of God and seeing the face of God because of his glory is the insatiable satisfaction we're created for.

And do you remember where it was that God made his glory manifest? It was over there in Babylon by the river Kiba. It wasn't tied to a building or to a city.

It was unfettered. It was free. And then in chapters 8 to 11, we saw the glory of God tragically driven out of the temple and driven out of Jerusalem, leaving with the people and going into exile with the people as he punished them.

So you see, we ask the question, why does Israel, why does Israel go into exile? Why does God's glory leave the temple? Ultimately, the answer is, I hid my face from them.

That's the bottom answer. Verse 23 and 24. Why does he hide his face? Well, there are four little terms in here. Let me read it and just emphasize.

[10 : 35] A second sentence in verse 23. The house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity. One. Because they dealt so treacherously, two, with me that I hid my face from them.

Verse 24. I dealt with them according to their uncleanness, three, and their transgressions. And I hid my face from them. Each one of those four terms describes the impact of our sin on God.

And they're described in deeply personal terms. Each time we turn from God, it is like an act of treachery. That word treachery is a marriage word.

It's deliberate disloyalty. It's a slap in the face of God. The book of Isaiah says, Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God.

Your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. This is from God's side. And God's response to constant defiance and betrayal is to turn his face away, to hide his face, to remove the smile of blessing and favor.

[11 : 44] That is what the exile is about at root. That is what judgment is at root. Judgment is God turning his face away. Now, I need to just pause and say there are times in the Christian life when it feels as though God has turned his face away from us, doesn't it?

There are desert times when we experience something of the hiddenness and silence of God. I know some of you may be experiencing this now. Some of you are.

It may be a period of discipline where you seek the face of God and you feel alone. You don't seem to experience the intimacy of God's presence. This is the experience of every true believer.

And there are many examples of this, not only in history, but in scripture. I mean, you take the apostle Paul, who everyone thinks is as hard as nails. Listen to what he says to the Corinthians.

He says, we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength. We despaired of life itself. You say that sort of thing to a doctor? Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.

[12 : 54] But that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. Same for Job. The hardest thing for Job was not losing his wealth or the physical pain or even the death of his children, but was the thought that God might have turned his face away from him.

That is not what God is saying. That is not what this chapter is about. Because there's a great deal of difference between the temporary discipline of the loving heavenly father and the decision, the just decision of God to turn his face away permanently.

One is short term and it's aimed at making us more fruitful and more faithful. And the other is the eternal sentence of death. So if you are someone who is struggling and feel like God is hidden from you at present and for a season you've prayed and you've prayed, but you are distressed with God's seeming silence, it is your distress itself that is proof that the Holy Spirit is at work in you.

God is preparing you for something and preparing something for you. God is preparing you for something and praying for you. The people Ezekiel is addressing had no interest in seeking God. Their hearts were hard and cold.

They turned away from the word of God. And it's the way, it's the terrible, terrible truth of verse 24 comes through. See verse 24? I dealt with them according to their uncleanness and transgression and hid my face from them.

[14 : 20] You should pray that God would never do that, that he would never treat us according to our sins, that he would never treat us as we deserve to be treated. Because if God treats us according to our sins, the end of that is this chilling phrase, I hide my face from them.

And they're so chilling because they come from the God who takes no joy and no delight in judgment, but rather we turn from our wickedness and live. And you may be thinking, yeah, but how does this square with the fact that God started this passage by saying I'm going to set my glory among the nations?

How does this square with the fact that God promises three times in the Old Testament that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of my glory as the waters cover the sea? And we need to move to the second paragraph to move away from the loss of face, loss of God's face to the restoration of his face.

Verses 25 to 29. I was going to make some rude comments about facelifts and those sorts of things, but you'll forgive me, I won't. If it's truly God who turns his face away, it's only God who can turn his face back to us, right?

And so you see through these verses, God personally undertakes to actively do it. It's very intense action by God. Just look down, I will, I will, I will, I will.

[15:45] You see, what is this turning his face back to us? It is a reversal of judgment. Verse 25, I will restore your fortunes. Verse 25, I will have mercy on you.

Verse 26, you will forget your shame and treachery. Verse 27, I will gather you back. I will assemble you. 28, I will not leave one single person behind.

So somehow God's grace breaks through and he overcomes the treachery, our treachery, or the treachery of his people, and creates a new reality, a new thing where our shame and our treachery are done away with.

And the promise here is that he will not hide his face from us anymore, which is eternal and total. That's what, that's what's underneath this blessing. Here verse 29, I will not hide my face anymore from them when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel, declares the Lord God.

See, if judgment is God turning his face away, salvation is turning his face toward us. And here is the promise that through his spirit, he'll never again hide his face from us. That by his spirit, he's going to make his face, his smile, his approval permanently accessible to us.

[17:06] We will be able to experience his glory somehow inwardly. And that will lead to a transformation, a new people. That's the point of the Ezekiel thing. Not people who, you know, go from being naughty to being nice, but people who have been fundamentally treacherous and blind to people whose lives are now seeking and saving the face of God.

But it still doesn't explain how God is going to do it, does it? And we now have to build some bridges. We have to see that there are other parts of scripture that come in here.

And as Christians, we read the Old Testament back through the coming of the Holy Spirit and the death of Jesus Christ. And I want to trace an outline of how God restores his face to us.

But before I do that, I just want to give a justification for this. I didn't do this at the nine o'clock, so this is worth extra coming to the 11.

You don't have to listen to this. But the thing about the Bible, the thing about God's word, is that it has surplus meaning.

[18:20] That the meaning is not exhausted when we come to one level of understanding about it. And the original hearers in Ezekiel's day would have thought and heard this in terms of their entry into the land and the physical Jerusalem to try and get back to things they were.

But the New Testament tells us that the Old Testament prophets were working for us. So just turn right in your Bible to 1 Peter. We're going to go to two places.

Let's go to 1 Peter chapter 1. If you would like to. If you wouldn't like to, then go to 2 Corinthians chapter 4. And everyone will meet up in 2 Corinthians 4.

Here is the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 1, speaking about the Old Testament scriptures. In verse 10 he says, In other words, they knew somehow that what they were prophesying would not be fulfilled completely in the terms of their own day.

Verse 12, It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves, but you, speaking to New Testament Christians, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preach the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

[20:02] So somehow the Holy Spirit enabled Ezekiel to see that he was serving a future generation. Okay, let's go to 2 Corinthians chapter 4. The question is, how is God going to restore his glory?

And the New Testament tells us there are three steps. And the first has to do with the coming of Jesus to reveal the face of God. In 2 Corinthians 4 verse 6, and this is the verse I kind of will dwell on now.

God who said, let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Okay, so when we come to the beginning of the gospel, John says, no one has ever seen, no one has ever seen God, but the only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. And then we find Jesus speaking to his disciples, and he says, if you have seen me, you've seen the Father. So that the entire face and pleasure of God, we now see in the face of Jesus Christ. If you want to see what the face of God looks like, we look at Jesus Christ. He was the image of the invisible God. [21 : 19] All the fullness of God dwelt in him bodily. That's what Paul means here when he says, that the light of the glory of God is in the face of Jesus Christ.

But it's in his death where he takes our treachery and our shame, and God puts our treachery and our sin in such a place where he can turn his face away from them.

This is just remarkable. On the cross, Jesus takes our sin and our shame and our treachery and our trickery and our deceiving and disloyalty, and as he dies, God the Father turns his face away from his son for the first time.

That's why there was darkness that swallowed the land. Do you remember? That was a sign of God turning his face away from his son. But you see, what that means is that the ancient prayer that King David prayed, God, hide your face from my sin, it can finally come true because God can turn his face now away from our sin and turn his face toward us.

In other words, in the death of Jesus, God has made a way so that he does not have to treat us according to our sins or as we deserve, but to treat us as Christ deserves.

[22 : 39] And that is how Jesus restores the face of God to us. That's the first step. The second, obviously, is the sending of the Holy Spirit. It came up in our passage.

Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit of truth, whose main job is to shine the light, shine the focus on Jesus Christ, to open our eyes so that we will see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself says this, when he comes, whom I send from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. It's God alone who can open our eyes and he does this by pouring out his Holy Spirit into our hearts.

And the Holy Spirit gives us the desire to see and to treasure the face of God, to recognize the face of God and to love the face of God in Jesus Christ.

That's what happens, that's what's happening when we gather together in church. church, if we weren't looking for and seeking the face of God, church would be terribly boring. I mean, wouldn't, don't you think?

[23 : 52] You're allowed to agree with me on that. I mean, just, that last hymn that we sang, angels, help us, adore him, behold him, you will behold him face to face, praise him, praise him, hallelujah, praise with us the God of God.

Where does the desire to sing that come from? It comes from the Holy Spirit working in our hearts to seek the face of God, to seek it together. That's what happens when we pray, that's what happens and that's how we grow as Christians.

And I said the sermon's al dente, but this, this has massive implications and I can't work them out now. I mean, if we're seeking the face of God, it changes the Christian life from a life of obedience to a life of pleasing the person of God.

Changes how we look at what we do with our finances or with our kids. It changes, you know, whether we should build a church home or not, whether others can see the face of God. So, if the first step is Jesus and the second is the Spirit, the third step in the chain, and I finish with this, is the future promise that we have of seeing God face to face in the new creation.

God, the Holy Spirit, ties our hearts to the future and so when we come to the last chapter in the Bible, the pinnacle of the new heavens and the new earth is that we will see his face.

[25 : 14] We will see him face to face. We will be in his presence and we will, where faith will be turned into sight and we will know him as we are known and we have uninterrupted and eternal communion with God and with one another.

And if you ask me, how can we possibly see his face? I don't know. I don't know. The great Christian writer Augustine suggests that we might be able to see spiritual things as we do now with

our heart or that somehow our resurrection eyes might have new capabilities.

It's got a long chapter on this. Doesn't really matter, does it? But Augustine says this about seeing the face of God. because it is so lovely my brothers and sisters, so beautiful, once you've seen it nothing else will give you pleasure.

It will give insatiable satisfaction of which we will never tire. We'll always be hungry and we'll always have our fill. So beloved, we are God's children now and it doesn't yet appear what we will be.

But we know that when he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is and everyone who hopes this way in him purifies themselves as he is pure.

[26 : 38] Now before we turn to pray, let's just have a moment of quiet meditation. Thank you.