

The God Who Sets His Glory Among The Nations

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[0 : 0 0] look at the scripture that we've just read. We're on page 727 of our pew bibles there, and you'll see the first word is and, and that's, you know, that probably says that what's before it is important. So let's have a look at what's before it.

The paragraph immediately before it, let me read that out to you because that's wild. So from verse 17, as for you, son of man, thus says the Lord God, speak to the birds of every sort and to all beasts of the field, assemble and come together from all around to the sacrificial feast that I'm preparing for you, a great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat flesh and drink blood. You shall eat the flesh of the mighty and drink the blood of the princes of the earth, rams, lambs, he goats, bulls, all of the fat beasts of Bashan, and you shall eat fat till you are filled and drink blood till you are drunk at the sacrificial feast that I'm preparing for you. And you shall be filled at my table with horses and charioteers with mighty men and all kinds of warriors, declares the Lord. What is going on here?

Okay. So the first bit of chapter 39, because we're just in the last little chunk of 39. So the first part of 39 is apocalyptic. So here, just in this kind of a bit immediately before what I'm preaching on, you've got God calling birds and animals to eat what turns out to be the bodies of the fallen enemy soldiers. But this actually never happened, okay, and I'll get to that.

So this is an apocalyptic oracle. It's pointing to a ridiculously sort of catastrophic defeat of some enemy. And in verse 1 of chapter 39, it talks about prophesying against a gentleman called Gog from a place called Magog, which are fabulously evil names, I think. And so these folks, they, no one knows who they were. There's no historical kind of like, you know, well, this was this place or whatever. In the 80s, they thought Magog was Russia. Some Christians thought Magog was Russia because, probably because they wanted to sell books, I think. And their evidence was that at the end of 38, which also talks about this, in the Hebrew, it talks about the prince of Rosh, R-O-S-H, which people go, oh, Rosh, Russia. Totally the Soviet Union. Anyway, it's all falling into place, of course. So you've got this apocalyptic vision of this war going on, this war, okay, with their main players, people who didn't exist. So it's pointing to something in the future.

And the war is, you've got this powerful priest, Gog, okay, who gathered together this enormous army from lots of different countries, and he marched on Israel. Remember, this didn't happen, okay.

[3 : 1 7] He marched on Israel, and he got seven nations from the ends of the earth. If you look at the names of them, they kind of represent the ends of the earth here. They march on Israel. As it turns out, doesn't win, God defends his people, and it's, let me read a couple of verses to you.

With pestilence and bloodshed, I will enter into judgment with him, and I'll rain upon him and his hordes, and the many peoples who are with him, torrential rains and hailstones, and fire, and sulfur, and I'll show my greatness and my holiness, and make myself known in the eyes of many nations.

They will know that I am the Lord. So Gog terribly misreads the situation, gathers a huge army, which is completely destroyed. Israel didn't have to lift a finger. It's all God.

It says that with the clubs and chariots and bows and arrows that were left behind, Israel had firewood for seven years, it says in chapter 39. And then we get to the bit that's immediately before our passage, to the birds and stuff. You know, God sends these vultures and scavengers in to eat the bodies of the unburied dead there. It's this grotesque sort of feast. It's the opposite of how a sacrificial feast should work. Instead of people eating animals, it's unclean animals eating people.

And it says to the enemy, you guys really, really lost here. This was a big win for me. This was really bad for you. Scavengers finished off the job. It's saying God is immeasurably more powerful than you are. He has plans. Nothing can disrupt those plans.

[5 : 03] That's all leading up to what we're preaching on this evening. And what's it all about? Again, I'll just reiterate this. As I've said, it's a symbolic day. It's painting this picture of this battle, which points to a future when God will finally and completely destroy all evil.

But it's more than just the destruction of evil. If you look in verse 12 and 16, it's really important that the land isn't defiled by dead bodies. And so it talks about burying them properly. It takes seven months. Israelites, it takes the Israelites seven months to actually bury all these bodies.

And it talks about, it says they wanted to cleanse the land. And so in this day, God will destroy evil. And it's saying he's going to heal the world as well. He's going to heal God's world. He's going to heal our world. He's going to heal us from healing, abuse, heartache, sorrow, sadness. There's going to be great healing. So what a wonderful and terrifying day that will be. And that day is painted here in very vivid colors, in the colors of an ancient battle. And now we get to our text.

But before then, just a small excuse. Tolkien wrote, I may have read this to you before. Tolkien wrote this essay called On Fairy Tales, where he defends the genre, because it's not regarded as a super high class kind of genre, fairy tales. And back in the days when he was writing, people were quite critical of the genre that he wrote in. And so he says, it's always going to be popular though. And I'm paraphrasing a bit of this essay here. And here's what he says. He says why it's going to be so popular.

Fairy tales move us in a way that realistic fiction does not and cannot. Because fairy tales speak to us of several deep human longings that we are almost afraid to admit and that we can never discard.

[7 : 03] We long to get outside of time altogether and escape death. We long to hold communion with other living things like angels. We long to find a love which perfectly heals and from which we can never depart. We long to triumph over evil finally and totally. When you're in the middle of a great fairy tale, the fairy tale lets you live even briefly with the dream that love without parting, escape from death, triumph over evil, are real and realizable. And that's why stories, these stories stir us so deeply and why we'll go on reading and writing them no matter what the critics may say. And he's right. I think this is what I'd say, how this relates to what I've been talking about here.

This sort of apocalyptic stuff, you know, the violence and the catastrophic nature of it is, it bumps up against some of our modern sensitivities. Feels uncouth or, I don't know how to say this, but I would say this, when you come across this stuff in the Bible, don't push it away.

Try and work out what it's saying to your heart. I would say actually keep it very close to your heart because it's a promise that God will protect us, will protect his people, and it's a promise that he will heal our world and he will heal your heart and he will make evil disappear forever. It's a wonderful promise. Moving on, that's the end of the excuses. Let's get back on track. All right, so we've talked about context. That's the context. As I said, I'm going to speak on the knowledge of God, the glory of God, the face of God. So first, the knowledge of God, and here we dig in the text. So the passages that we've read out loud in the service follows on from this apocalyptic vision and explains and answers the question, why? Why? Why does God want to do all this stuff? Why does God want to make evil disappear? Why is he saving people? Why is he picking these? What's his deal? Like, why judge the nations? Why free? He's God, and surely he can do other stuff. Like, why does he choose to do this?

That's what makes this passage so important and why it's maybe it's the key to all of Ezekiel here. So the passage is in two sections, verses 21 to 24, coming after the Gog stuff, and in it God talks about the nations and judging Israel. And the purpose of that judgment, so the purpose of why he is doing this, verse 22, so they will know that I am the Lord their God. Did you get that? It's very important.

The purpose, so that they will know I'm the Lord their God, verse 22. Now look at the second section, 25 to 29. The passage is mostly about God restoring Israel. It says, I will restore the fortunes of Israel.

[9 : 59] I'll have mercy on Israel. I'll bring them back into the land. There is restoration on a grand scale, restoration. And the purpose of that restoration? Verse 28, so they will know that I am the Lord their God. So God judges, so they will know that I'm the Lord their God. He redeems, so they will know that I'm the Lord their God. Hold that thought. Hold that thought. Let's talk about the glory of God now.

In the Old Testament, the word glory mentioned in 21, the very first verse. In Hebrew, which is the language that this is originally written in, it literally means weight, W-E-I-G-H-T, which is very helpful for understanding what it's talking about. Because it conveys the idea of the weightiness of God, the massiveness of God, the fact that he is so much greater than us.

You could describe it in this way. You could say it's the beauty and wonder and holiness of God on display. In verse 21, it says, I will set my glory among the nations. To set, like he wants to establish it. So God wants them, the nations, to get it. He wants them to understand who he really is. Now, obviously, that is very connected to the knowing God. So when the passage says, they will know I am God, it's saying they'll know his glory.

Folks, this stuff that I'm talking about now, the idea of God's glory, the idea of God being known, this is not a minor issue in the Bible. This is not an interesting aspect of who God is. This is not a fun biblical factoid that it's kind of interesting to know, right? This is the issue. This is the issue of the Bible. This is God's overriding goal. His overriding goal is to be known. His overriding goal is to glorify himself. To answer the question, why does God, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, why does God, the answer is always so that he will be glorified. We'll come back to that idea.

This idea of God's big goal to glorify himself, I wonder if that sounds a little bit funky to some of our hearts. Does it? A little bit? Maybe a little bit? God wants to be known. God wants to be glorified. You might think, isn't that self-centered? Isn't that beneath? Isn't that kind of beneath God? I mean, doesn't that, I mean, if there was a, if you were to describe a narcissist, wouldn't you say, oh yeah, they just want to be glorified. That's all they want. I mean, how can that be God's desire? To be just known by everybody, to be glorified. How can, how can that be God's like main thing? Let me say three things about that first.

[13 : 10] One of the reasons we may have a problem with this idea is that we know firsthand what selfishness looks like and how destructive it is in the human heart. And I think in thinking this through, I wonder if we fall into the trap of projecting that onto God. But God is not a man or a woman.

We can't just transpose our experience of self-centeredness onto God. That's the first thing I'll say about that. The second thing, I will simply quote J.I. Packer, short paragraph. If it is right for man, and this is, I'm sorry about the exclusive language here, inclusive, exclusive, exclusive language here. If it is right for man to have the glory of God as his goal, can it be wrong for God to aim at that same goal? If man can have no higher end and motive than God's glory, how can God? If it is wrong for man to seek a lesser end than this, then it would be wrong for God too. The reason why it cannot be right for man to live for himself as if he were God is simply the fact that he is not God. The reason why it cannot be wrong for God to seek his own glory is simply the fact that he is God. Third thing I'll say about why it might feel a bit funky to think about God being completely self-promoting. It's a funny way of saying it, but you know what I mean. Third thing I'll say is the Hebrew word to know in terms of they will know I am God is the word yada. Now you know you've heard this word before. Adam knew Eve. It's the same word. Adam had sex with his wife, Eve. That's the yada word. Sex. That's the most intimate way we can know someone. So when the passage says, in the passage says, they will know that I am God, it's less about like God wants to be famous, and it's more about being in a relationship with God, an intimate relationship with God. So it's not so much God wants to be known. No, it's not so much God wants to be well known. It's he wants people to know him. He wants to be in a relationship with people.

Now let me summarize where we've been before moving on. God's chief goal is to be glorified.

In that passage, this happens through the judgment of the nations. It happens through the redemption of his people. And we could dwell on that a little bit, because that's fantastic stuff, actually. And so let me, give me one minute on that. It's wonderful to think that one of the ways we glorify God is, maybe it's the chief way, is through being a forgiven and transformed people.

When that's happening in your life, you're actually putting God on display. You're glorifying God by being a transformed people. Have a look at verse 27. When I've brought them back from the peoples and gathered them from their enemy's lands, talking about Israel, and through them have vindicated my holiness in the sight of many nations. So they gathered the back part. That's like a physical picture of God sort of restoring hearts. But do you see what it did? It vindicated God's holiness.

[16 : 25] So God's reputation was damaged by his people. They claimed to be his people, but just did whatever. But God's holiness, his glory, his massiveness was on display in forgiving them and seeing them restored.

And it was all done in that last part, we see, in the sight of many nations, so that they will know God as well. And that's, it's very missional, this passage, but we don't have time to talk about it.

So we'll move on. Okay. So we've talked about the knowledge of God, the glory of God. Now, lastly, the face of God. You see there in verse 24, So judgment looks like a number of things, but earlier it looked like a sort of a military defeat, but here it's painted in very personal terms. What does judgment look like in the passage?

God hides his face from you. It can be devastating to our hearts when our earthly father is distant, can't it? Let me read a short excerpt from a real letter written to a counselor that I saw in a book a number of years ago.

I'm a disappointment to my father. He wanted a son. He never hugged me, praised me, or told me he loved me. I realize he was a product of his generation and I've forgiven him, but my self-esteem is very low.

[17 : 50] I'm depressed and I'm riddled with guilt. I'm 85 years old. It is really hard when you don't have a good relationship with your earthly father, or when they're just not even on the map, really.

And how much more when we have no relationship with God, when God hides his face from us? Of course the effects are going to be catastrophic in your life.

But it doesn't have to be like that. So remember what we've just said here, is judgment here meant God hid his face from his people. Now 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.

So what's the most significant thing to come out of God's restoration of his people? He didn't hide his face from them. So judgment, hid face. Restoration, I didn't hide my face.

But why use this face word though? You're thinking, God doesn't have a physical face, so what is this face business conveying here? All right.

[18 : 54] Let me say it like this. God is present everywhere. That's true. The face of God though, when it talks about that, that's God's relational presence in your life.

For example, this is a very sort of twee sort of example here, okay, it's not a great one, but you're at a dinner party with 10 people. You are present to all of those people.

You're at a dinner party for single people. Let me qualify by that. It's a, it's a, what do you call it? In New Zealand, we call it a cold start party. A whole lot of single people are invited to have a dinner party, right?

Cold start. So, cold start dinner party. You are present, stop thinking about that, you are present to everyone at that party.

But the guy and girl you're trying to chat up, that's like immediately opposite you, your face is turned to that person. So, tell me about yourself.

[19 : 57] That is so interesting. You, you love Condoleezza Rice too? She is such an inspiration, isn't she?

Oh, we should hang out, it'd be great. Right, so you're present to everyone, but you are intimately present with this particular person, your face is turned to that person.

That's a woefully inadequate example, but you get the idea, okay? God is everywhere. Everybody is in God's presence. But not everyone is in relational intimacy with God.

That's what seeing God's face means. It means being in an intimate relationship with God. You know, we have this wonderful blessing that we use a lot from number six. You know this one, right? The Lord bless you, the Lord keep you, the Lord make His face to shine upon you.

It's beautiful. I love it. So, just forgive one more excuses here. It's, the blessing talks about the face of God and it describes it as shining, a shining face of God.

[21 : 04] I think that's so lovely. What does the shining face of God mean? I think this, because I think this relates to what we're talking about here. Okay, my daughter B, if I smile at her, if I grab a hold of her, look at her, and I smile at her, in a few seconds, she will smile back at me.

Now, she's not mimicking me because she can't see her own face. She just perceives that I'm happy with her. She perceives that I'm really enjoying being with her and it makes her heart glad.

It fills her heart. So, she starts smiling. See, that's what this blessing is conveying. It's conveying this idea that God will enjoy His relationship with you.

You would have this intimate, the intimate presence of God, the smiling face of God would be upon you. I think it's a wild thought, but it's a true thought. It's a biblical thought.

So, the blessing just mentioned here in number six and the passage we're talking about, these are not the only times the face of God are mentioned in the Bible. It's a really important concept in the Bible, this.

[22 : 14] In the new creation, Revelation 22, let me read a short snippet from that and listen to what the pinnacle of the experience of being in that new creation is and then I'll wrap up. So, this is Revelation 22 from chapter, sorry, verse 22.

The angel showed me the river of the water of life bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God and the lamb through the middle of the street of the city.

Also, on either side of the river the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer would there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the lamb will be in it and his servants will worship him.

They will see his face and night will be no more. Isn't that wonderful? So, I've talked about knowing God, the glory of God, the face of God.

There is a wonderful scripture that draws all these threads together in the New Testament and how we experience that now. It's from the 2 Corinthians 4. For God who said, let light shine out of darkness has shone on our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

[23 : 39] So, how do we see God's face now? How do we experience him now? How do we experience the joy of God? How do we enjoy that relationship? How do we know that God is enjoying that relationship and wanting to be intimate, in an intimate relationship with us?

That all happens through Jesus. We're going to talk more about that in the following weeks. So, let me wrap it up here. Folks, the glory of God, the knowledge of God, the face of God, obviously, completely all mashed up together ideas, aren't they?

All completely interrelated. And they all say the same thing. God wants to know you. Whatever you think Christianity is about, whatever you think it's about, okay, the guts, God wants to be known so he can know you, so he can have a relationship with you.

You were created for that relationship. God enjoys that relationship and it is the best thing you can do with your life. Amen. Thank you.