

THE GOAL OF GOD IN REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

In chapter 1, I said that God’s ultimate goal in all He does it to preserve and display His glory. I inferred from this that He is uppermost in His own affections. He prizes and delights in His own glory above all things. This appendix presents the biblical evidence for this statement. First, a comment about terminology.

The term *glory of God* in the Bible generally refers to the visible splendor or moral beauty of God’s manifold perfections. It is an attempt to put into words what cannot be contained in words—what God is like in His unveiled magnificence and excellence.

Another term that can signify much the same thing is *the name of God*. When Scripture speaks of doing something “for God’s name’s sake,” it means virtually the same as doing it “for His glory.” The “name” of God is not merely His label, but a reference to His character. The term *glory* simply makes more explicit that the character of God is indeed magnificent and excellent. This is implicit in the term *name* when it refers to God.

What follows is an overview of some of the high points of redemptive history where Scripture makes clear the purpose of God. The aim is to discover the unifying goal of God in all that He does.

OLD TESTAMENT

Creation

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26–27)

The biblical story of creation reaches its climax with the creation of man (male and female) in God’s image. Four things should be noted about this climactic act: (1) Man is created as the last of all God’s works and thus is the highest creature. (2) Only man is said to be in the image of God. (3) Only now that man is on the scene in the image of God does the writer describe the work of creation as being *very good* (1:31). (4) Man is given dominion and commanded to subdue and fill the earth (1:28).

What is man’s purpose here? According to the text, creation exists for man. But since God made man like Himself, man’s dominion over the world and his filling the world is a display—an imaging forth—of God. God’s aim, therefore, was that man would so act that he would mirror forth God, who has ultimate dominion. Man is given the exalted status of image-bearer not so he would become arrogant and autonomous (as he tried to do in the Fall), but so he would reflect the glory of his Maker, whose image he bears. God’s purpose in creation, therefore, was to fill the earth with His own glory. This is made clear, for example, in Numbers 14:21, where the Lord says, “All the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD,” and in Isaiah 43:7, where the Lord refers to His people as those “whom I created *for my glory*.”

The Tower of Babel

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar

and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” (Genesis 11:1–4)

The point of this story is to show how fallen man thought, and how he still thinks. By contrast, it also shows God’s purpose for man. The key phrase is “Let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed.” (v. 4). The instinct of self-preservation in fallen man seeks fulfillment not by trusting God, and thereby exalting *His* name, but by employing his own human genius, thereby making a name *for himself*.

This was contrary to God’s purpose for man, and so God frustrated the effort—and He has been frustrating it more or less ever since. God’s purpose was that He be given credit for man’s greatness and that man depend on *Him*. This will be even more evident when we look at what God did next in redemptive history.

The Call of Abram

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” (Genesis 12:1–2)

At this major turning point in God’s dealings with mankind, He calls Abram and begins His dealings with the people of Israel. There is a clear contrast between what God says here and what happened at the Tower of Babel. God says that *He* will make Abram’s name great, in explicit contrast to Genesis 11:4, where man wanted to make his own name great.

The key difference is this: When man undertakes to make his own name great, he takes credit for his own accomplishments and does not give glory to

God. But when God undertakes to make a person great, the only proper response is trust and gratitude on the part of man, which gives all glory back to God, where it belongs. Abram proved himself to be very different from the builders of the Tower of Babel because (as we see in Genesis 15:6) Abram trusted God.

In Romans 4:20–21, the apostle Paul shows us the link between Abram’s faith and God’s glory: “No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, *but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God*, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” So, in contrast to the builders of the Tower of Babel, the children of Abram were chosen by God to be a people who trust Him and thus give Him glory. This is what God says in Isaiah 49:3: “You are my servant, Israel, *in whom I will be glorified.*”

The Exodus

After the period of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), which is recorded in the rest of the book of Genesis, the people of Israel spent several hundred years expanding in the land of Egypt, and then became slaves there. They cried to God for mercy. In response, God undertook to deliver them through the hand of Moses and then to bring them through the wilderness to the promised land of Canaan. God’s purpose in this deliverance from Egypt is recorded several places besides in Exodus—for example, in Ezekiel and the Psalms:

Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day when I chose Israel, I swore to the offspring of the house of Jacob, making myself known to them in the land of Egypt; I swore to them, saying, I am the LORD your God. On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands. And I said to them, Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on, every one of you, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the LORD your God. But they rebelled against me and were not willing to listen to me. None of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt.

Then I said I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. But *I acted for the sake of my name*, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt.” (Ezekiel 20:5–9)

Both we and our fathers have sinned; we have committed iniquity; we have done wickedness. Our fathers, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wondrous works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled by the Sea, at the Red Sea. Yet he saved them *for his name’s sake, that he might make known his mighty power*. (Psalm 106:6–8)

It is clear that the deliverance from Egypt is not due to the worth of the Israelites, but to the worth of God’s name. He acted “for the sake of his name.” This is also made clear in the story of the Exodus itself in Exodus 14.

“And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and *I will get glory over Pharaoh* and all his host, and the Egyptians *shall know that I am the LORD...* And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, *when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh*, his chariots, and his horsemen.” (vv. 4, 18)

God’s purpose is to act in a way that causes people to own up to His glory and confess that He is the only Lord of the universe. Therefore, the great event of the Exodus, which was a paradigm for all God’s saving acts, should have made clear to all generations that God’s purpose with Israel was to glorify Himself and create a people who trust Him and delight in His glory.

The Giving of the Law

When Israel reached Mount Sinai, God called Moses onto the mountain and gave him the Ten Commandments and other regulations for the new social community. At the head of this law is Exodus 20:3–5.

“You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water beneath the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.”

When God says we are to have no other gods before Him and that He is a jealous God, He means that His first aim in giving the law is for us to accord Him the honor He alone is due. He has just shown Himself gloriously gracious and powerful in the Exodus; now He simply demands in the law an appropriate response from His people—that we should love Him and keep His commandments.

To love God does not mean to meet His needs, but rather to delight in Him and to be captivated by His glorious power and grace and to value Him above all other things on earth. All the rest of the commandments are the kinds of things that we will do from our hearts if our hearts are truly delighted with and resting in the glory of God’s grace.

The Wilderness Wandering

God had good reason to destroy His people in the wilderness because of their repeated grumbling and unbelief and idolatry. But again the Lord stays His hand and treats them graciously for His own name’s sake:

“But the children rebelled against me. They did not walk in my statutes and were not careful to obey my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live; they profaned my Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the wilderness. But I withheld my hand and *acted for the sake of my name*, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out.” (Ezekiel 20:21–22; cf. vv. 13–14)

This motive of God in preserving His people in the wilderness is the same one that emerges in Moses' prayer for the people when God was about to destroy them:

“Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not regard the stubbornness of this people, or their wickedness or their sin, lest the land from which you brought us say, ‘Because the LORD was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them, and because he hated them, he has brought them out to put them to death in the wilderness.’ For they are your people and your heritage, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm.” (Deuteronomy 9:27–29; see also Numbers 14:13–16; Exodus 32:11–14.)

Moses appeals to God's promise to the patriarchs and argues with God that *surely He does not want scorn to come upon His name*, which would certainly happen if Israel perished in the wilderness. The Egyptians would say God was not able to bring them to Canaan! In allowing Moses to pray in this way, God makes plain that His decision to relent from His wrath against Israel is for *His own name's sake*.

The Conquest of Canaan

The book of Joshua records how God gave the people of Israel victory over the nations in the land of Canaan. At the end of the book we find a clue to why God did this for His people:

“And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you, the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant.

“Now *therefore* fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.” (24:12–14)

The words “Now *therefore* fear the LORD” are an inference from God’s grace in giving Israel the land. The logic shows that God’s purpose in giving them the land of Canaan was that they would fear and honor Him alone. In other words, in giving Israel the land of Canaan, God aimed to create a people who would recognize His glory and delight in it above all things. This purpose is confirmed in David’s prayer recorded in 2 Samuel 7:23:

“Who is like your people Israel, the one nation on earth whom God went to redeem to be his people, *making himself a name* and doing for them great and awesome things by driving out before your people, whom you redeemed for yourself from Egypt, a nation and its gods?”

The Beginnings of Monarchy

After a period of judges (recorded in the book by that name), Israel asked for a king. Even though the motive for asking for a king was evil (Israel wanted to be like other nations), nevertheless God did not destroy His people. His motive in this gracious act of mercy is given in 1 Samuel 12:19–23.

And all the people said to Samuel, “Pray for your servants to the LORD your God, that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king.” And Samuel said to the people, “Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil. Yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. And do not turn aside after empty things that cannot profit or deliver, for they are empty. For the LORD will not forsake his people, *for his great name’s sake*, because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself. Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you, and I will instruct you in the good and the right way.”

Here the preservation of the people, despite their sin at the beginning of the monarchy, is due to God’s purpose to preserve and display the honor of His name. This goal is supreme.

Another way God showed mercy during the monarchy was to bring to the kingship a man after His own heart, a king whose goal was the same as God's. We can see this in how David prayed: "*For your name's sake*, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great" (Psalm 25:11). And in the most famous psalm of all, David says God's motive in leading His people is the glory of His name: "He leads me in paths of righteousness *for his name's sake*" (Psalm 23:3).

The Temple of God

The books of 1 and 2 Kings tell the story of Israel's history from David's son Solomon, who built God's temple, down to the Babylonian captivity. This was a period of about four hundred years ending in 587 B.C. In 1 Kings 8 we read Solomon's dedicatory prayer after the building of the temple, including these words:

"Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country *for your name's sake* (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you; in order *that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you*, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is *called by your name*.

"If your people go out to battle against their enemy, by whatever way you shall send them, and they pray to the LORD toward the city that you have chosen and the house that *I have built for your name*, then hear in heaven their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause." (vv. 41–45)

This prayer shows that Solomon's purpose for building the temple—in accord with God's own purpose: "My name shall be there" (v. 29)—was that God's name should be exalted and all the nations should know and fear God.

Deliverance in the Time of the Kings

After the death of Solomon, the kingdom of Israel was divided into the northern and the southern kingdoms. One example of God's continued grace during this time, and of His continued purpose to be glorified and maintain the honor of His name, is evident in the way He intervened when Hezekiah was king of Judah in the late 700s B.C.

The Assyrians, led by Sennacherib, were coming against the people of Judah. So Hezekiah prayed to the Lord for deliverance. Isaiah the prophet brought God's answer, stated in 2 Kings 19:34: "For I will defend this city to save it, *for my own sake* and for the sake of my servant David." He says the same thing again in 2 Kings 20:6, "I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city *for my own sake* and for my servant David's sake."

Exile and Promised Restoration

Finally, in about 587 B.C., Jerusalem falls to the invading Babylonians (the northern kingdom had gone into exile with the Assyrians in 722 B.C.). The people of Judah are deported to Babylon. It looks like God may be through with His people Israel. But if so, what about His holy name, for which He had been so jealous over the centuries? We soon discover that God is not finished with His people, but will again be merciful. And again, as Isaiah makes clear, God's purposes are the same as always:

"For my name's sake I defer my anger, *for the sake of my praise* I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. *For my own sake, for my own sake,* I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another." (Isaiah 48:9–11)

Similarly, Ezekiel, who prophesied during the Babylonian exile, tells of God's merciful restoration and why He will perform it:

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is *not for your sake, O house of Israel*, that I am about to act, but *for the sake of my holy name*, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And *I will vindicate the holiness of my great name*, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And *the nations will know that I am the LORD*, declares the Lord GOD, when through you *I vindicate my holiness* before their eyes.... It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.” (36:22–23, 32)

Salvation is not a ground for boasting of our worth to God. It is an occasion for self-abasement and joy in the glorious grace of God on our behalf—a grace that never depends on our distinctives, but flows from God’s overwhelming concern to magnify His own glory on behalf of His people.

Post-Exilic Prophets

Zechariah, Haggai, and Malachi, who prophesied after Israel’s return from exile, represent the last writings in the Old Testament period. Each reflects a conviction that God’s goal after the exile is still His own glory.

Zechariah prophesied concerning the rebuilding of Jerusalem: “I will be the glory in her midst” (2:5).

Haggai made the same point: “Build the house...that I may be glorified” (1:8).

Malachi criticized the wicked priests in the new temple: They “will not take it to heart to give honor to my name” (2:2).

NEW TESTAMENT

Moving from the Old Testament to the New Testament, we shift from an age of promise to an age of fulfillment. The hoped-for Messiah, Jesus Christ, has come. But God’s supreme goal does not change, only some of the circumstances

in how He is achieving it, along with the revelation that now the goal is “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).¹

Jesus’ Life and Ministry

Two texts from the Gospel of John show that Jesus’ life and ministry were devoted to glorifying His Father in heaven. In John 17:4, Jesus prayed at the end of His life, “I *glorified you* on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.” And in John 7:18, referring to His own ministry, Jesus said, “The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory, but the one who *seeks the glory of him who sent him* is true, and in him there is no falsehood.” Therefore, we can say with certainty that Jesus’ all-consuming desire and deepest purpose on earth was to glorify His Father in heaven by doing His Father’s will (John 4:34).

Jesus’ Death

In John 12:27–28, Jesus weighed whether to escape the hour of His death, but He rejected that alternative, knowing that precisely through dying He would finish His mission of glorifying the Father.

“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. *Father, glorify your name.*” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and *I will glorify it again.*”

The purpose of Jesus’ death was to glorify the Father. To be willing as the Son of God to suffer the loss of so much glory Himself in order to repair the injury done to God’s glory by our sin showed how infinitely valuable the glory of God is. To be sure, the death of Christ also showed God’s love for us. But we are not at the center.

1. Tom Schreiner rightly presses into the ultimate goal of all NT “emphases” and “focuses” and themes by demonstrating that the glory of God in Christ is the center of Pauline theology. See his *Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001).

God put forward His Son on the cross “to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (Romans 3:25). In other words, by forgiving sin in the Old Testament and by tolerating many sinners, God had given the impression that His honor and glory were not of infinite worth. Now to vindicate the honor of His name and the worth of His glory and to satisfy the just demands of the law, He required the death of His own Son. Thus, Christ suffered and died for the glory of His Father. This demonstrates the righteousness of God because God’s righteousness is His unswerving allegiance to uphold the value of His glory.²

The Christian Life

The work of Christ for the glory of God leads inevitably to the conclusion that God’s purpose for His new redeemed people, the church, is that our life goal should be to glorify God in Christ. Paul makes this explicit in 1 Corinthians 10:31, where he says, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, *do all to the glory of God.*” And where is God’s glory now most clearly seen? Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:6: “For 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.*”

Peter shows that the goal of all our service as Christians is that God would be glorified as the One who enables all good things: “Whoever serves [let him do it] as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:11).

And when Jesus was instructing His own disciples what their goal should be in their daily living, He said in Matthew 5:16, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and *give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*”

2. For a further development of this understanding of God’s righteousness, see John Piper, *The Justification of God*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1993).

The Second Coming and Consummation

In 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10 the second coming of Christ is described as hope and terror. Paul says of those who do not believe the gospel:

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day *to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed*, because our testimony to you was believed.

Jesus Christ is coming back not only to effect the final salvation of His people, but through His salvation “to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed.”

A final comment concerns history’s climax in the book of Revelation: John pictures the new Jerusalem, the glorified church, in 21:23: “The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.” God the Father and God the Son are the light in which Christians will live their eternity. This is the consummation of God’s goal in all of history—to display His glory for all to see and praise. The prayer of the Son confirms the final purpose of the Father: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, *to see my glory* that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).

CONCLUSION

What may we conclude from this survey of redemptive history? We may conclude that the chief end of *God* is to glorify God and enjoy Himself forever. He stands supreme at the center of His own affections. For that very reason, He is a self-sufficient and inexhaustible fountain of grace.