

## Why Expository Preaching Is Particularly Glorifying to God

By John Piper

There are four parts to this message. First, I will reflect on the kind of preaching that I long to see God raise up in our day—the kind that is shaped by the weight of the glory of God. Second, I will try to portray the glory of God which affects preaching this way. Third, I will offer my biblical understanding of how people waken to this glory and are changed by it. Finally, I will explain how all of this calls for a kind of preaching that I call *expository exultation*.

### Reflections on the Kind of Preaching Produced by the Weight of God's Glory

George Whitefield believed in preaching and gave his life to it. By this preaching God did a mighty work of salvation on both sides of the Atlantic. His biographer, Arnold Dallimore, chronicled the astonishing effect that Whitefield's preaching had in Britain and America in the eighteenth century. It came like rain on the parched land and made the desert spring forth with the flowers of righteousness. Dallimore lifted his eyes from the transformed wasteland of Whitefield's time and expressed his longing that God would do this again. He cries out for a new generation of preachers like Whitefield. His words help me express what I long for in the coming generations of preachers in America and around the world. He said,

Yea...that we shall see the great Head of the Church once more . . . raise up unto Himself certain young men whom He may use in this glorious employ. And what manner of men will they be? Men mighty in the Scriptures, their lives dominated by a sense of the greatness, the majesty and holiness of God, and their minds and hearts aglow with the great truths of the doctrines of grace. They will be men who have learned what it is to die to self, to human aims and personal ambitions; men who are willing to be 'fools for Christ's sake', who will bear reproach and falsehood, who will labor and suffer, and whose supreme desire will be, not to gain earth's accolades, but to win the Master's approbation when they appear before His awesome judgment seat. They will be men who will preach with broken hearts and tear-filled eyes, and upon whose ministries God will grant an extraordinary effusion of the Holy Spirit, and who will witness 'signs and wonders following' in the transformation of multitudes of human lives.<sup>1</sup>

Mighty in the Scriptures, aglow with the great truths of the doctrines of grace, dead to self, willing to labor and suffer, indifferent to the accolades of man, broken for sin, and *dominated by a sense of the greatness, the majesty, and holiness of God*. Dallimore, like Whitefield, believed that preaching is the heralding of God's word from that kind of heart. Preaching is not conversation. Preaching is not discussion. Preaching is not casual talk about religious things. Preaching is not simply teaching. Preaching is the heralding of a message permeated by the sense of God's greatness and majesty and holiness. The topic may be anything under the sun, but it is always brought into the blazing light of God's greatness and majesty in his word. That was the way Whitefield preached.

In the last century no one embodied that view better than Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who served the Westminster Chapel in London for 30 years. When J. I. Packer was a twenty-two-year-old student, he heard Lloyd-Jones preach every Sunday evening in London during the school year of 1948-1949. He said that he had "never heard such

preaching.” (That’s why so many people say so many minimizing and foolish things about preaching—they have never heard true preaching. They have no basis for judgment about the usefulness of true preaching.) Packer said it came to him “with the force of electric shock, bringing . . . more of a sense of God than any other man” he had known.<sup>2</sup> That’s what Whitefield meant. Oh, that God would raise up young preachers who leave their hearers with a spiritual sense of shock at the sense of God—some sense of the infinite weight of the reality of God.

That is my longing for our day—and for you. That God would raise up thousands of broken-hearted, Bible-saturated preachers who are dominated by a sense of the greatness and the majesty and the holiness of God, revealed in the gospel of Christ crucified and risen and reigning with absolute authority over every nation and every army and every false religion and every terrorist and every tsunami and every cancer cell, and every galaxy in the universe.

God did not ordain the cross of Christ or create the lake of fire<sup>3</sup> in order to communicate the insignificance of belittling his glory. The death of the Son of God and the damnation of unrepentant human beings are the loudest shouts under heaven that God is infinitely holy, and sin is infinitely offensive, and wrath is infinitely just, and grace is infinitely precious, and our brief life—and the life of every person in your church and in your community—leads to everlasting joy or everlasting suffering. If our preaching does not carry the weight of these things to our people, what will? Veggie Tales? Radio? Television? Discussion groups? Emergent conversations?

God planned for his Son to be crucified ([Revelation 13:8](#); [2 Timothy 1:9](#)) and for hell to be terrible ([Matthew 25:41](#)) so that we would have the clearest witnesses possible to what is at stake when we preach. What gives preaching its seriousness is that the mantle of the preacher is soaked with the blood of Jesus and singed with fire of hell. That’s the mantle that turns mere talkers into preachers. Yet tragically some of the most prominent evangelical voices today diminish the horror of the cross and the horror of hell—the one stripped of its power to bear our punishment, and the other demythologized into self-dehumanization and the social miseries of this world.<sup>4</sup>

Oh that the rising generations would see that the world is not overrun with a sense of seriousness about God. There is no surplus in the church of a sense of God’s glory. There is no excess of earnestness in the church about heaven and hell and sin and salvation. And therefore the joy of many Christians is paper thin. By the millions people are amusing themselves to death with DVDs, and 107-inch TV screens, and games on their cell phones, and slapstick worship, while the spokesmen of a massive world religion write letters to the West in major publications saying, “The first thing we are calling you to is Islam . . . It is the religion of enjoining the good and forbidding the evil with the hand, tongue and heart. It is the religion of jihad in the way of Allah so that Allah’s Word and religion reign Supreme.”<sup>5</sup> And then these spokesmen publicly bless suicide bombers who blow up children in front of Falafel shops and call it the way to paradise. This is the world in which we preach.

And yet incomprehensibly, in this Christ-diminishing, soul-destroying age, books and seminars and divinity schools and church growth specialists are bent on saying to young pastors, “Lighten up.” “Get funny.” “Do something amusing.” To this I ask, Where is the spirit of Jesus? “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever

loses his life for my sake will find it” ([Matthew 16:24-25](#)). “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell” ([Matthew 5:29](#)). “Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” ([Luke 14:33](#)). “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” ([Luke 14:26](#)). “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead” ([Matthew 8:22](#)). “Whoever would be first among you must be slave of all” ([Mark 10:44](#)). “Fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” ([Matthew 10:28](#)). “Some of you they will put to death . . . But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives” ([Luke 21:16-19](#)).

Would the church growth counsel to Jesus be, “Lighten up, Jesus. Do something amusing.” And to the young pastor: “Whatever you do, young pastor, don’t be like the Jesus of the Gospels. Lighten up.” From my perspective, which feels very close to eternity these days, that message to pastors sounds increasingly insane.

### **A Portrayal of the Glory of God**

What you believe about the necessity of preaching and the nature of preaching is governed by your sense of the greatness and the glory of God and how you believe people awaken to that glory and live for that glory. So this next section presents a portrayal of the glory of God, and the third will deal with how people awaken to that glory and are changed by it.

From beginning to end nothing in the Bible is more ultimate in the mind and heart of God than the glory of God—the beauty of God, the radiance of his manifold perfections. At every point in God’s revealed action, wherever he makes plain the ultimate goal of that action, the goal is always the same: to uphold and display his glory.

- He predestined us for his glory ([Ephesians 1:6](#)).
- He created us for his glory ([Isaiah 43:7](#)).
- He elected Israel for his glory ([Jeremiah 13:11](#)).
- He saved his people from Egypt for his glory ([Psalm 106:8](#)).
- He rescued them from exile for his glory ([Isaiah 48:9-11](#)).
- He sent Christ into the world so that Gentiles would praise God for his glory ([Romans 15:9](#)).
- He commands his people, whether they eat or drink, to do all things for his glory ([1 Corinthians 10:31](#)).
- He will send Jesus a second time so that all the redeemed will marvel at his glory ([2 Thessalonians 1:9-10](#)).

Therefore the mission of the church is: “Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all peoples” ([Psalm 96:3](#)).

These and a hundred more places drive us back up into the ultimate allegiance of God. Nothing affects preaching more deeply than to be struck almost speechless—almost—by the passion of God for the glory of God. What is clear from the whole range of biblical revelation is that God’s ultimate allegiance is to know himself perfectly, and to love himself infinitely, and to share this experience, as much as it can be, with his people. Over every act of God flies the banner: “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 48:11](#); cf. [42:8](#)).

From all eternity the ever-existing, never-becoming, always-perfect God has known himself and loved what he knows. He has eternally seen his beauty and savored what he sees. His understanding of his own reality is flawless and his exuberance in enjoying it is infinite. He has no needs, for he has no imperfections. He has no inclinations to evil because he has no deficiencies that could tempt him to do wrong. He is therefore the holiest and happiest being that is or that can be conceived. We cannot conceive of a happiness greater than the happiness of infinite power delighting infinitely in infinite beauty in the personal fellowship of the Trinity.

To share this experience—the experience of knowing and enjoying his glory—is the reason God created the world. He would bring us to know him and to enjoy him the way he knows himself and the way he enjoys himself. Indeed his purpose is that the very knowledge that he has of himself and the very joy that he has in himself will be our knowledge and our enjoyment, so that we know him with his own knowledge and we enjoy him with his own joy. This is the ultimate meaning of Jesus’ prayer in [John 17:26](#) where he asks his Father “that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” The Father’s knowledge of and joy in “the radiance of his glory”—whose name of Jesus Christ ([Hebrews 1:3](#))—will be in us because Jesus is in us.

And if you ask, How does God’s aim to share this experience (of knowing himself and enjoying himself) relate to the *love* of God, the answer is: His aim to share that experience *is* the love of God. God’s love is his commitment to share the knowledge and enjoyment of his glory with us. When John says that God is love ([1 John 4:8, 16](#)), he means that it is God’s nature to share the enjoyment of his glory, even if it costs him the life of his Son.

This means that God’s aim to display his glory and our delight in that glory are in perfect harmony. You do not honor fully what you don’t enjoy. God is not glorified fully in merely being known; he is glorified by being known and enjoyed so deeply that our lives become a display of his worth.

Jesus said two things to emphasize his role in giving us the knowledge and the joy of God. He said, “No one *knows* the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” ([Matthew 11:27](#)). And he said, “These things I have spoken to you, that *my joy* may be in you, and that your joy may be full” ([John 15:11](#)). In other words, we know the Father *with the knowledge of the Son*, and we enjoy the Father *with the joy of the Son*. Jesus has made us partakers of his own knowledge of God and his own enjoyment of God.

The way this becomes visible in the world is not mainly by passionate acts of corporate worship on Sunday morning—as precious as those moments are—but by the changes that it produces in our lives. Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” ([Matthew 5:16](#)). The light that shines through our deeds and causes people to see God, not us, is the all-satisfying worth of his glory.

It works something like this: When the glory of God is the treasure of our lives, we will not lay up treasures on earth, but spend them for the spread of his glory. We will not covet, but overflow with liberality. We will not crave the praise of men, but forget ourselves in praising God. We will not be mastered by sinful, sensual pleasures, but sever their root by the power of a superior promise. We will not nurse a wounded ego or cherish a grudge or nurture a vengeful spirit, but will hand over our cause to God and

bless those who hate us. *Every sin flows from the failure to treasure the glory of God above all things.* Therefore one crucial, visible way to display the truth and value of the glory of God is by humble, sacrificial lives of service that flow only from the fountain of God's all satisfying glory.

### **How People Waken to This Glory And Are Changed by It**

We turn now to the question of how people are wakened to the glory of God and are changed by it. One essential part of the answer is given by the apostle Paul in [2 Corinthians 3:18-4:6](#). He says, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." Beholding the glory of the Lord, we are transformed from one degree of glory to another. This is God's way of changing people into the image of his Son so that they reflect the glory of the Lord. To be changed in the way that glorifies God, we fix our gaze on the glory of the Lord.<sup>6</sup>

How does this happen? (And here we are moving very close to the implications for preaching.) Paul explains in [2 Corinthians 4:3-4](#) how we behold the glory of the Lord.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing [here is the fulfillment of [2 Corinthians 3:18](#)] the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

We behold the glory of the Lord most clearly and most crucially in the gospel. So much so that Paul calls it "the gospel of the glory of Christ." Which means—and this has enormous implications for preaching—that in this dispensation, when we cannot see the glory of the Lord directly as we will when he returns in the clouds, we see it most clearly by means of *his word*. The gospel is a *message* in words. Paradoxically, words are *heard* and glory is *seen*. Therefore, Paul is saying that we see the glory of Christ not mainly with our eyes but through our *ears*. "Faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ" ([Romans 10:17](#)), because seeing the glory of Christ comes through hearing and hearing through the gospel of Christ.

Consider how this was expressed in the life of the prophet Samuel. In the days of Samuel there was no frequent vision of the Lord ([1 Samuel 3:1](#))—just like today where there is a famine of seeing and savoring the glory of God. But then God raised up a new prophet. And how did God appear to him? The same way he will appear to you and your people. [First Samuel 3:21](#), "And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed *himself* to Samuel at Shiloh *by the word of the Lord*." He revealed *himself* by the *word*. This is how our people will behold the glory of the Lord, and be changed into the kind of people who make his glory known. And Paul tells us now that the word that reveals the glory of God most clearly and centrally is the gospel ([2 Corinthians 4:4](#)).

### **The Implicit Call for Expository Exultation**

This brings me finally to a concluding point on preaching as *expository exultation*. If it is the purpose of God that we display his glory in the world, and if we display it because we have been changed by knowing and enjoying it, and if we know and enjoy it by beholding the glory of the Lord, and if we behold that glory most clearly and centrally in the gospel of the glory of Christ, and if the gospel is a message delivered

in words to the world, then what follows is that God intends for preachers to unfold these words and exult over them—which is what I call *expository exultation*.

Each word matters. It is *expository* because there is so much about the gospel that cries out to be explicated (opened, unfolded, elucidated, clarified, explained, displayed). We see this when we focus on five essential dimensions of the gospel message.

- The gospel is a message about *historical events*: the life and death and resurrection of Christ—summoning us to open them with thorough expositions of texts.
- The gospel is a message about what those events *achieved* before we experienced anything or even existed: the completion of perfect obedience, the payment for our sins, the removal of the wrath of God, the installation of Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah and king of the universe, the disarming of the rulers and authorities, the destruction of death—all of these summoning us to open them with thorough expositions of texts.
- The gospel is a message about the *transfer* of these achievements from Christ to particular persons through our union with Christ by faith alone apart from works—which summons us to open for our people the nature and dynamics of faith by the exposition of dozens of texts.
- The gospel is a message about the *good things that are now true about us* as the achievement of the cross is applied to us in Christ: that God is only merciful to us now instead of wrathful (propitiation), that we are counted righteous in Christ now (justification), that we are freed now from the guilt and power of sin (redemption), that we are positionally and progressively made holy (sanctification)—all of which summons us to open these glorious realities for our people week after week with thorough expositions of texts.
- And finally the gospel is a message about the glorious *God himself* as our final, eternal, all-satisfying Treasure. “We . . . rejoice *in God* through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” ([Romans 5:11](#)). The gospel we preach is “the gospel *of the glory of Christ who is the image of God*.” If our gospel stops short of this goal—enjoying God himself, not just his gifts of forgiveness and rescue from hell and eternal life—then we are not preaching “the gospel of the glory of God in the face of Christ” ([2 Corinthians 4:6](#)). Our ultimate goal is knowing and enjoying God. As we saw in the beginning of this chapter, that is why we were created—that God might share with us the knowledge and enjoyment of himself. This is what it means for him to love us. This is what the cross ultimately obtained for us. And this too, by every text of Scripture—all of it inspired by God to awaken hope in his glory<sup>2</sup>—calls for the richest exposition that our people may be fed the best and highest food of heaven.

Exposition of texts is essential because the gospel is a message that comes to us in words and God has ordained that people see the glory of Christ—the “unsearchable riches of Christ ([Ephesians 3:8](#))—in those gospel words. That is our calling: to open the words and sentences and paragraphs of Scripture and display “the glory of Christ who is the image of God.”

Which leads us finally to the second word in the phrase *expository exultation*. Woe to us if we do our exposition of such a gospel without *exultation*—that is, without exulting over the truth we unfold. When Paul says in [2 Corinthians 4:5](#), “For what we

*proclaim* is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord,” the word he uses for “proclaim” is *kerussomen*—we *herald* Christ as Lord, we *announce* Christ as Lord. The *kerux*—the proclaimer, the “preacher” ([1 Timothy 2:7](#); [2 Timothy 1:11](#))—may have to explain what he is saying if people don’t understand (so teaching may be involved). But what sets the herald apart from the philosopher and scribe and teacher is that he is the herald of news—and in our case, infinitely good news. Infinitely valuable news. The greatest news in all the world.

The creator of the universe, who is more glorious and more to be desired than any treasure on earth, has revealed himself in Jesus Christ to be known and enjoyed forever by anyone in the world who will lay down the arms of rebellion, receive his blood-bought amnesty, and embrace his Son as Savior, Lord, and Treasure of their lives.

O brothers, do not lie about the value of the gospel by the dullness of your demeanor. Exposition of the most glorious reality is a glorious reality. If it is not expository *exultation*—authentic from the heart—something false is being said about the value of the gospel. Don’t say by your face or by your voice or by your life that the gospel is not the gospel of the all-satisfying glory of Christ. It is. And may God raise up from among you a generation of preachers whose exposition is worthy of the truth of God and whose exultation is worthy of the glory of God.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1 (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Catherwood, *Five Evangelical Leaders* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1985), p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> Jesus said in [Luke 22:22](#) that the cross was “determined [*horismenon*] by God,” and in [Matthew 25:41](#) that the fires of hell were prepared by God. “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”

<sup>4</sup> From the American scene consider this breathtaking comment by Joel Green that flies in the face of what the church has believed is central to the gospel and what is grounded in clear scriptures ([Isaiah 53:4-6, 8-10](#); [Galatians 3:13](#); [Romans 8:3](#)) : “Whatever meaning the atonement had, it would be a grave error to imagine that it focused on assuaging God’s anger or winning God’s merciful attention . . . [T]he Scriptures as a whole provide no ground for a portrait of an angry God needing to be appeased in atoning sacrifice. . . . Whatever else can be said of Paul’s understanding of the death of Jesus, his theology of the cross lacks any developed sense of divine retribution.” Joel Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 51, 56. From the British scene Steve Chalke calls the teaching that Christ bore the wrath of God in our place “cosmic child abuse”: “The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offense he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that,

however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement ‘God is love’. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.” *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 182-183. N. T. Wright argues that “most” (does he mean “all”?) of the references to hell in the New Testament are not talking about a place of eternal conscious suffering, but that we need a “reconstruction” or “restatement” of the doctrine of hell “in the present day” 1) in terms of humans using their “gift of freedom” to “dehumanize themselves completely,” and 2) in terms of social injustice and misery: “There is an equally proper and yet more necessary biblical doctrine of hell in terms of human social and corporate life on this earth.” *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 95-96.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from *The Islam/West Debate: Documents from a Global Debate on Terrorism, U. S. Policy and the Middle East*, edited by David Blankenhorn in *First Things*, March 2006, #161, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Beware of saying: “It doesn’t work” and then turning to other techniques and leaving God’s way of changing people behind. You may be able to change people with ways and means different from this process of seeing the glory of the Lord in the word of God, but will it be a change that magnifies the glory of Christ? Not all change honors Christ. Paul sounds this warning with the words at the beginning of [2 Corinthians 4:3](#), “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing.” In other words he admits that his gospel does not change everyone. The “perishing” do not see the glory of God in the gospel. Paul does not change his strategy because of this. Neither should we.

<sup>7</sup> [2 Timothy 3:16-17](#); [Romans 15:4](#).

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