



Nancy Thomas

I'm writing these devotionals from my room in tropical San José, Costa Rica, where the glory of God is reflected in the bird-of-paradise plant just outside my door and in the splendid orange and purples sunsets that make me think the Spirit is playing in the sky. His glory is also reflected in the people gathered here, men and women from all over Latin America, come to study as part of the Latin American Doctoral Program in Theology (PRODOLA). As part of the last day of my class on "Culture, Spirituality and Mission," we considered the biblical theme of glory, a topic so big and so, well—glorious—that it's impossible to grasp with the mind alone. We need God to "open the eyes of our heart" (Ephesians 1:18). The devotional lessons for this week are taken from this study, and represent only a small part of the biblical theme of glory.

BIBLE READING: Psalm 96:1-9

The biblical concept of glory defies description. Mostly used in reference to God, scholar Colin Brown calls it “the luminous manifestation of [God’s] person,” something overwhelmingly bright and beautiful that radiates out from God and leaves a profound impression on the beholders.

The words that cluster around “glory” push us toward understanding. They include words like splendor, magnificence, majesty, grandeur, beauty, marvelous deeds, mighty acts, riches, power, and strength. Metaphors of light abound. Another circle of meanings has to do with the effect all this splendor has on those who perceive it: reputation, esteem, praise, fame, honor, prestige. The main Hebrew word for glory, *kabod*, has the root sense of heaviness, thus influence, power, and reputation. (Could we also call a “weighty Friend,” a “glorious Friend”?) So glory in the many biblical passages refers both to the shining forth of God’s being and to our recognition and proclamation of the bright splendor.

Images often speak more clearly than words. We read that the heavens declare the glory of God, that earth is full of his glory. Pictures swim up from memory: a cold starry night on the Bolivian altiplano; a crimson sunset on the beach; thunder, lightning, and the accompanying terror; Oregon in the autumn, what poet Arthur Roberts calls a “Whole Earth Vine Maple Flaming Silence Concert.” Certain sights and sounds, certain experiences move us with their beauty and cause us to respond in astounded silence. Or with a single word: “Glory!”

SONG: Angels We Have Heard on High

*PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Open the eyes of our heart,
Lord. Help us to see your glory and worship.*

—Nancy Thomas

BIBLE READING: Psalm 24

I was walking the beach on the Oregon coast one clear, cold afternoon in January, walking and sensing the companionship of Jesus. The sunset crept up on me without my awareness, when I saw that the sky had turned orange. The sun skipped off the Twin Rocks and sank quickly into the sea, while the colors overhead intensified. Gulls circled and the surf strummed its endless music. I felt the splendor and was instantly filled with wonder that this friend I had been walking with and enjoying was the Maker and King of all this glory.

“Who is this King of glory?” David asks in the psalm. “Who may approach him? Who may stand in his holy place?” The wonder is that any of us may approach him, that the place of his glory may be anywhere. “Clean hands and a pure heart,” David responds to his own question. Confession, forgiveness, and grace allow us access. This is basic discipleship, Christianity 101, something we learn to do daily. This is how we say to the door of our heart, “Open up! The King is knocking” (Revelation 3:20). I wonder sometimes how there could be room inside so small a space for the King of glory. Most of the time I don’t even think about it. I just sense the gentle presence of a friend.

The morning prayer in the Celtic Daily Prayer Book contains the phrase, “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ, King of endless glory.” Hold that phrase in your heart today. Ask God to help you sense the truth of his glorious presence. He is our friend. He is also the King of glory.

SONG: I Walk with the King

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ, King of endless glory.

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BIBLE READING: 1 Peter 1:24

The word *glory* is also used in the Bible to refer to people. It is a negative reflection on human pride. The glory of nations points to wealth, honor, military might, fame, and even natural resources. Lebanon's glory was in her trees. Babylon gloried in her capital city with its shining palaces and hanging gardens. God's Word pronounces judgment on the pride and pomp of nations that refuse to acknowledge him. Speaking of the future destruction of the city of Tyre, Isaiah says, "The Lord Almighty planned it, to bring low the pride of all glory, and to humble all who are renowned on the earth" (23:9).

This extends to human beings who find their glory in all kinds of things, apart from God. United States middle class culture pushes us to value youth, physical beauty, education, skill in sports, success in our profession, a lovely home in the right neighborhood, and brilliant children. But none of this, say the Scriptures, will last. Like an orchid or a rose bush, the season passes and the glory fades. I used to take great pride in my hands—clear smooth skin, perfectly groomed nails, nicely shaped. People complimented me on my hands. Now that I'm in my sixties, no one comments on my hands any more.

In the words of the old hymn (and the apostle Paul in Philippians 2), when we compare our past achievements and glories, the beauty of our youth to the cross of Jesus, we join in the song, "My greatest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride." There is no lasting beauty, no glory apart from God.

SONG: When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Help us, Lord, to let go of false glories and hold fast to your word, your cross.

—Nancy Thomas

BIBLE READING: John 1:14; 2 Corinthians 4:6

Just before he received the Ten Commandments the second time, Moses, “the friend of God,” made the audacious request, “Show me your glory” (Exodus 33:18). The Lord replied, “If you look directly on my glory, it will kill you.” So God prepared a safe place among the mountain cliffs, and as he passed in front of Moses he covered the prophet’s face with his hand, letting Moses only see his back. What a mysterious passage. And to continue the story, when Moses came down from the mountain, he was so full of the glory of God that the people could not stand to look at him and covered his face with a veil.

The situation changes in the New Testament when Jesus, the image of the invisible God in whom all the divine fullness dwelt (Colossians 1), came to earth and lived among human beings. John, one of the disciples of Jesus, writes, “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The disciples and hundreds of other people gazed face to face at the glory of God—walked with it, talked with it, lived in its presence in the midst of the ordinariness of life—and were not destroyed.

And it gets better. Paul writes to the new believers at Corinth (and to us) that “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). In the face of Jesus Christ, God’s glory comes down to us.

SONG: Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus

*PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, let me see your glory.
Open the eyes of my heart.*

—Nancy Thomas

BIBLE READING: Psalm 8:3-5; Revelation 21:22-27

A few days ago we read about God's judgment falling on the pride and false glories of cultures and people. But there is another side to this picture. In Psalm 8, a song full of the majesty and splendor of creation, we read that God created people—male and female—and crowned them with glory and honor. This is part of the mystery of our being created in the very image of God. Of course that image—that glory and honor—became tarnished when people chose to follow their own ways rather than God's. The rest of the great biblical narrative tells the story of God's provision of a way back to the glory granted us at creation.

The writer of Hebrews picks up the theme again, referring to Psalm 8, and noting that Jesus is now the one crowned with glory and honor, and that through his death and resurrection, Jesus is bringing many sons and daughters to glory. Through Jesus, the glorious image of God in us is being restored (Hebrews 2).

The story extends to the cultures and nations of the world, subject to judgment for pride and false glory. But again, there is another side to the picture. In Revelation 21, we see the nations that acknowledge God bringing to the holy city all their splendor, glory, and honor. What might this consist of? I think of the Aymara people and their intricate weavings, their haunting music, their reverence for the land. The best and the most beautiful of all the different cultures of the world. Talk about diversity! And all of it glorious, all of it at the feet of Jesus.

SONG: Crown Him with Many Crowns

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Help me, Lord, live today
in light of the glory that will one day be restored to us.*

—Nancy Thomas

BIBLE READING: 2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 1:27

Christian discipleship is the process of growing back into the image of God. Paul's second letter to the Corinthian believers shows how this happens. The third chapter speaks of the need for Moses' veil to protect the Israelites from the glory in his face. Then Paul writes, "But when anyone turns to Christ, the veil is taken away" (2 Corinthians 3:16). We have the incredible privilege of gazing at Jesus face to face. While the disciples saw Jesus physically, we see through the illumination of the Spirit, and we too can say that he lives with us and we behold his glory.

"Behold" refers to a special kind of seeing. This is no casual glance or ritual look that is part of some devotional regimen. To behold the Lord and gaze upon his glory refers to a life that cultivates the sense of his presence. It happens in the practice of contemplative prayer when we simply sit in silence with Jesus. It also happens throughout the day as we are at our jobs, in our homes, at school, talking with people, buying and selling, coming and going, but conscious of Jesus with us. I love to start my day with the prayer of St. Patrick, part of which reads, "Christ as a light, illumine and guide me; Christ as a shield, overshadow me; Christ under me, Christ over me, Christ beside me, on my left and on my right; this day be within and without me."

And as we behold his glory in the ordinariness of our lives, the Spirit of Christ changes us into the very image of the One we love. From glory to glory.

SONG: Little by Little, He's Changing Me

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Teach me, Lord, how to behold you. Show me how to cultivate the practice of your presence.

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BIBLE READING: Psalm 96:3; Habakkuk 2:14

There is a strong relation in the Bible between glory and mission. A vision of God's glory motivates us to cooperate with God in mission. Isaiah's glorious vision in the temple included the seraphs singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." This experience ended with his declaration, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6). This strong sense of God's glory sustained the prophet throughout the hardships of his life in mission.

Glory is certainly related to the task of mission, whether that mission take place across the sea or across the street. "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples," sings the psalmist (Psalm 96:3).

The glory of God resting on his people is part of the spirituality of those sent out in mission. It forms part of their protection and part of their resources for the task. In the context of reaching out to the hungry, oppressed, and poor—in our own neighborhoods or in another country—Isaiah says that as we follow God, he provides us with light, healing, righteousness, and glory (Isaiah 58:8). God's glory accompanies us in mission.

And finally, glory is part of the culmination of the mission of God and God's people. The prophet Habakkuk describes the end of mission as a day when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." The Scriptures abound with descriptions of the glory of God in the new heavens and the new earth. We will be part of that shining glory. Forever.

SONG: Shine, Jesus, Shine

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Let the vision of our glorious forever future be a source of hope and courage in carrying out God's purposes in the world today.

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