

Emptied for abounding love

We saw God as a high and mighty being,
and wanted His glory for ourselves.
Yet He revealed Himself as humble,
willing to lay aside His eternal glory,
so that all might be drawn to Him.

Scripture gives us many pictures of God. Each picture of God helps explain something about Him. Here are some pictures of God. As I'm describing them, please think about which picture of God is most true.

- Is it the God who breaks the earth's mantle, so that the waters of the deep would flood the world (Genesis 6, 7)?
- Is it the God who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with fire for the evil they had done (Genesis 19:23–29)?
- Is it the God who sent plagues against Egypt in order to punish Egypt's gods (Exodus 7–12, esp. Exodus 12:12)?
- Is it the God who appeared before Israel as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21)?
- Is it the God who appeared in dark cloud, rumblings, thunder, lightning and a loud trumpet blast on top of Sinai (Exodus 19, 20)?
- Is it the God who crushed Jericho's walls (Joshua 6)?
- Is it the mighty warrior God who rides on angels, thunders in the heavens, sending out arrows and lightnings and shaking the earth to its core (Psalm 18)?
- Is it the God whose train of His robe fills the temple, attended by seraphim who confess, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isaiah 6:1–3).
- Is it Ezekiel's vision of God encased in fire, sitting enthroned above a mighty river of fire (Ezekiel 1:4, 13, 26–27)?

Which image of glory best describes God Almighty? Which image best fits the God who created the world? Which image best fits the omnipotent God (Revelation 19:6, KJV)? Which image best fits the ever present God (Psalm 139:7–10)? Which image best fits the all knowing God (Psalm 139:12; Psalm 44:21; Jeremiah 17:9-10; Hebrews 4:12, 13)? Which image best fits the eternal God (Deuteronomy 33:27; Psalm 102:27; Isaiah 57:15)? Which image best fits the God to Whom all knees in heaven, on earth and under the earth will bow and give praise (Philippians 2:10, 11, NASB).

Wanting to be as God

In the garden of Eden, Man was clearly able to see the glory of God. And despite the fact that God had already shared His sovereignty with Man (Genesis 1:26–28), Man desired a glory independent of Him (Genesis 3:6).

When Eve saw the tree of knowledge of good and evil, she saw a tree whose beauty was greater than all the other trees in the garden, and wanted that beauty and that glory for herself. For this poem describes what she saw.

“Whom are you like in your greatness?
Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon,
with beautiful branches and forest shade,
and of towering height,
its top among the clouds.
The waters nourished it;
the deep made it grow tall,
making its rivers flow
around the place of its planting,
sending forth its streams
to all the trees of the field.
So it towered high
above all the trees of the field;
its boughs grew large
and its branches long
from abundant water in its shoots.
All the birds of the heavens
made their nests in its boughs;
under its branches all the beasts of the field
gave birth to their young,
and under its shadow
lived all great nations.
It was beautiful in its greatness,
in the length of its branches;
for its roots went down
to abundant waters.
The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it,
nor the fir trees equal its boughs;
neither were the plane trees
like its branches;
no tree in the garden of God
was its equal in beauty.
I made it beautiful
in the mass of its branches,
and all the trees of Eden envied it,
that were in the garden of God” (Ezekiel 31:2b–9).

As she saw that magnificent beauty, perhaps she had a vision of her glory exceeding that of God Himself. Perhaps the Tempter shared His own vision of glory with Eve, which sounded like this.

“You said in your heart,
‘I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
 I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
 in the far reaches of the north;
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
 I will make myself like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:13, 14).

Matching or exceeding the wisdom and knowledge and glory of God has been Man’s burning obsession ever since the fall. We humans have wanted to be as god. And we’ve wanted to be strong, to be powerful, to be wealthy, to dominate and control others, to use force and power to build our might and glory.

Man cooperated at Babel to try to exceed God’s glory. Solomon built palaces for Himself far grander than the palace He built for His God. Nebuchadnezzar considered his power and majesty to be independent of god Himself. The Caesars declared themselves to be gods, and sons of gods. Augustus Caesar even declared that he was god manifest, saviour of the world, bringing peace and fulfilling all human hopes, and whose gospel was for the entire world.

Our God emptied Himself

In contrast to Man’s self-glorying, our God revealed His true character when He stepped off His throne, laid aside the glory of the Father, and was born as Man (Philippians 2:6, 7).

He who had been subject to eternal worship, was born as a baby. Now He became an obedient son. He entered into a life of servant-hood. He entered a life of pain.

He came close to us, that we may understand the character of God. And the fundamental truth about God is that—unlike Satan, unlike us—He doesn’t grasp for glory or power. He holds it lightly, and is willing to give it up. For He is humble.

Our God, the Almighty, revealed Himself as a humble god.

He revealed Himself a Man who was willing to receive little children. He revealed Himself as a Man willing to help widows in their distress. He revealed Himself as a Man willing to suffer scorn to bring the gospel to social outcasts. He revealed a humble, merciful, forgiving God, who is calling, inviting, transforming, tabernacling, empowering His people.

And then, in the gospel of John, we begin to sense the best picture of God is yet to be revealed. For Jesus said,

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (John 3:14).

The idea of “lifting up” the Son of Man carries the overtones of exaltation. Being “lifted up” is to “exalt” and “glorify” the Son of Man.

“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me” (John 8:28).

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (John 12:23).

“This hour’ ... is the purpose for which I have come. Father, glorify your Name (John 12:27, 28).

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).

“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given Him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” (John 17:1–5).

Christians have often supposed that the glory Christ was referring to occurred at the resurrection. But actually, the hour of Christ’s glorification occurred when He was exalted onto that cross. The gospel of John shows us that Christ was enthroned on that cross. For it was on that cross that the true character of God was revealed.

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6).

“His mercy endures forever” (Psalm 136:1b, KJV).

“I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20d).

“I will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).

Christ Jesus emptied Himself, and became a servant even unto death. He showed us the true character of God. For God does not grasp at glory, but is willing to give it up, in order to reach out and heal His sin-sick children.

Christ Jesus,

“who though he existed in the form of God
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself
by taking on the form of a slave,
by looking like other men,
and by sharing in human nature.
He humbled himself,
by becoming obedient to the point of death
—even death on a cross!
As a result God highly exalted him
and gave him the name

that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee will bow
—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord
to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:6–11, NET).

This is how we are to live

As Jesus is, so are we to be (1 John 3:2).

The true glory of God His willingness to empty Himself of glory. To step down off the throne in heaven. To shrug off the royal robes that filled the temple, and be dressed in swaddling clothes. To willingly give up praise, power and control. To kneel down and wash a man’s dirty feet. To stoop to the ground and mix mud to solve a man’s blindness. To comfort a woman entrapped in adultery. To eat with an enemy of the state. To comfort widows in their distress. To suffer to the point of death, that we might live.

If we call ourselves Christian, that is who we are to be. We are to have the character of God. We are not to grasp for greatness or glory, but to humble ourselves, emptying ourselves, laying aside our fancy robes, and becoming a servant of others. We are called to enter into Christ’s suffering (Romans 8:17), for when we suffer for the sake of Christ, then the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us (1 Peter 4:14).

References:

This message based on John 12, 14, 17, Philippians 2:6–11.