

12-21-25 Before Bethlehem: The Return of God's Glory

Week 4

Text: John 1:14

Big Idea: The story of Christmas is the story of God's glory returning—not to a place, but to a Person, and now through His people.

Introduction – “The Weight of Glory”

Let me ask you a question right out of the gate:

What's the heaviest thing in your life right now?

- For some of you, it's your schedule.
- For others, it's your stress level.
- For a few of you, it's your Amazon cart - and you're still pretending it's “just browsing.”

Some of us carry things so heavy we wake up tired, go to bed anxious, and wonder why joy feels like it has a weight limit.

And here's the irony:

We live in a culture obsessed with light things - light diets, light commitments, light conversations, light entertainment - but we are weighed down on the inside.

Now here's where Scripture flips the script.

The Bible says the heaviest thing in the universe isn't your bills, your past, your regrets, or your calendar.

The heaviest thing in existence is the glory of God.

That's what the word glory means - weighty, substantial, overwhelming, impossible to ignore.

And here's the Christmas shocker:

God didn't just display His glory in clouds, fire, or temples... He wrapped it in flesh and moved into the neighborhood.

Christmas isn't about God making life lighter.

It's about God bringing His weight - His presence, His holiness, His grace - into our world.

Today, we're going to walk the story of glory:

When it showed up. When it was ignored. When it departed. When it returned. And where it lives now

Because the story of Christmas is not the story of decorations and sentiment. It's the story of God's glory returning, not to a place, but to a Person.

So, before we rush past the manger, let's slow down and ask the real question:

What's carrying the most weight in your life - and does God's glory actually outweigh it?

Let's walk through the story of glory.

I. Glory Defined (Exodus 13:21; Psalm 19:1)

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night. Ex. 13:21

**The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. PS. 19:1
ESV**

- The word **“glory”** literally means, “Heavy in weight, important, significant, having a great reputation and splendor, brightness and beauty, worthiness and honor.
- God's glory is the sum total of the weightiness of all His attributes. It has to do with the fame of His name and represents His presence and power.
- God's Shekinah glory is the transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning, “the one who dwells.”
- A.W. Tozer: “The glory of God is the holiness of God put on display.”

Application:

What is heavy in your life? Is it bills, stress, politics? The weightiest thing in the universe is God's glory, yet how lightly we often treat Him.

II. Glory Displayed (Exodus 25:8; 40:34-36; 1 Kings 8:10-11)

And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. EX. 25:8

- This portable sanctuary was a tent where God's Shekinah glory shone over the mercy seat between the two golden cherubim. Cherubim are winged angelic beings who protect and magnify the glory of God.
- Outside, above the holy place, was the manifested glory of the pillar of cloud by day, and of fire by night, visible reminders that God was always present with His people while they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.

- 440 years later, after Solomon finished constructing the temple, God reiterated His promise in **1 Kings 6:13: “And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel.”**

1 Kings 8:10-11 adds: “And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.” This glory cloud had filled the tabernacle and now it filled the temple.

- God guided Israel by glory. His presence was their protection.
- But the people took glory for granted.

Application:

Do you treat worship and God’s presence as optional? Or as oxygen?

III. Glory Departed (1 Samuel 4:21–22; Ezekiel 10–11)

- When the people became spiritually sloppy, they started sinning in big ways. Once, when they were losing a battle to the Philistines, they brought the Ark of the Covenant with them.
- According to **Numbers 4:15**, only the high priest could touch the Ark. Since God won’t be treated like a good luck charm, He allowed the Ark to be captured by their enemies, and 30,000 soldiers were slaughtered.
- When Eli the priest was told his sons died in the battle and the Ark was in the hands of their enemies, he fell backwards, broke his neck, and died.
- When his daughter-in-law heard that her husband was dead and the Ark had been captured, she immediately went into labor and gave birth to a son, naming him Ichabod, and then she died.
- **Read 1 Samuel 4:19-22.**
- Sin led to Ichabod: **“The glory has departed.”**
- Ark captured. Temple abandoned. Ezekiel saw glory leave in stages... slow, reluctant grace.
- **Ezekiel 8:4, “And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I saw in the plain.”** describes God’s glory enthroned over the ark in the temple, in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 9:3, “Then the glory of the God of Israel rose up from between the cherubim, where it had rested, and moved to the entrance of the Temple. And the Lord called to the man dressed in linen who was carrying the writer’s case.” NLT

- Ezekiel 10:4, “Then the glory of the Lord rose up from above the cherubim and went over to the entrance of the Temple. The Temple was filled with this cloud of glory, and the courtyard glowed brightly with the glory of the Lord.” describes how the glory of the God filled the temple.
- But as Israel continued to sin and distance themselves from God, He began to remove His glory from the temple.

Ezekiel 10:18-19, says “Then the glory of the Lord moved out from the entrance of the Temple and hovered above the cherubim. 19 And as I watched, the cherubim flew with their wheels to the east gate of the Lord’s Temple. And the glory of the God of Israel hovered above them.”

Ezekiel 11:23, “And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.” After leaving the temple, leaving Jerusalem and God’s glory was seen on the Mount of Olives.

- As a result, God was no longer dwelling with His people and the display of His glory on earth became a distant memory.
- After God’s glory departed from the temple, there is no record of God’s Shekinah glory returning when the next temple was built after the exile.

Matthew Henry: “The glory of God leaves the church when the church leaves the God of glory.”

Application:

Is God’s glory welcome in your home, your church, your life—or have we become Ichabod?

IV. Glory Descended (Luke 2:9–14; John 1:14)

- Read Luke 2:9-14.
- Then, a whole arsenal of adoring angels broke through the heavens and proclaimed that God’s glory had returned in the birth of a baby!
- Listen for the word “glory” in verse 14: “GLORY TO GOD in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.”
- These angels celebrated the return of God’s glory to earth. God’s glory had returned to dwell with people again!
- We’ve moved from the bad news of Ichabod’s lost glory to the good news of great glory brought by Immanuel. (God with us)
- The story of Christmas is all about the return of God’s glory!
- “Glory to God in the highest,” which means the “loftiest and most elevated.” God is at the highest level, the peak, the summit. He is the most beautiful, the brightest,

and most brilliant. There is no one higher and nothing greater. Among the Jews, the “highest” is Elyon, the main name for God.

John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory...”

- **“Word became flesh...”** This is the single, most unique quality of Christianity that makes it different from any other religion: God became flesh. The miracle of Christmas is the infinite becoming an infant.
- The whole superstructure of Christianity rests on this truth. Jesus is fully God and fully man.
- The next phrase, **“...and dwelt among us...”** refers “to pitching one’s tent.” More specifically it means, “to settle, to stay, to inhabit.”
- In the Old Testament, it denotes the idea of “residence.” One paraphrase puts it like this: “Jesus came and moved into our neighborhood.”
- This word **“dwelt”** is the same word used for “tabernacle.” The body of Jesus is the new tabernacle and the new temple!
- Let me say it as clearly as I know how: In a similar way that God dwelt with His people in the tabernacle and in the temple, He now dwells with people through His only Son Jesus Christ!
- In Him, Jesus, the glory of God has descended, and He has pitched His tent to dwell among us and with us. God’s good news comes into our bad news. Centuries of waiting are now over. God’s heart for mankind has been revealed through Jesus.
- The tabernacle and temple pointed to Christ. Now glory is no longer tied to a place but a PERSON, the Messiah (promised one) Jesus the Christ.
- The story of Christmas is all about the return of God’s glory!
- Are you ready for some more spiritual goosebumps?
- On Palm Sunday, do you know where Jesus was before riding into Jerusalem?
- He departed from the Mount of Olives, reversing the order of the departure of God’s glory in Ezekiel!
- And as He rode the donkey, which fulfilled another prophecy found in **Zechariah 9:9**, the crowd broke out into song of praise according to **Luke 19:38**: **“Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and GLORY IN THE HIGHEST!”**
- Do you know where Jesus went after arriving in Jerusalem? The King of Glory went into the temple! Do you know what He did when He got there? **Verses 45-46** tells us Immanuel cleansed the temple because it had become Ihabod.
- As we look into the future, **Ezekiel 43:1-5** describes what Jesus will do at His second coming when He enters the future temple:

“Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory... and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple.”

V. Glory Delivered (Future) (Matt. 24:30; Rev. 21:3, 22–23)

“Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and GREAT GLORY.” Matt. 24:30

- First coming: Glory in a manger.
- Second coming: Glory in the clouds.
- New Jerusalem: No need for sun, **“the Lamb is its lamp.” (Rev. 21:22-23)**

Jonathan Edwards: “The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied.”

VI. Glory Discovered (Now) (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19–20)

- God’s glory was previously tied to a place but now it’s wrapped up in a person named Jesus. And, when we put our faith in Him, His glory comes and resides within us.

“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” 1 Cor. 3:16

“Don’t you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, 20 for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.” 1 Cor. 6:19-20

- NT shocker: God’s glory now dwells in His people.
- Pentecost: tongues of fire = Shekinah glory resting on every believer.
- You, believers, followers of Jesus the Christ are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Application:

We must stop treating our bodies like it belongs to us... it’s the dwelling place of God’s glory.

The glory that filled the temple is meant to shine through you.

Closing Challenge – “Grace and Truth” (John 1:14b)

Jesus is “full of grace and truth.”

Grace and truth are two concepts that don't often appear together. As humans we tend to err on one side or the other. If we stress grace, we can be too quick to let something slide. If we pull the truth trigger too quickly, we can wipe someone out. Grace without truth can lead to sloppy sentimentality and truth without grace can lead to religious rigidity.

With, Jesus you can always count on both truth and grace. He tells the truth about your situation and your sins, and then His grace causes Him to stick with you all the way.

At Christmas we're reminded that the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. The manger is filled with the awesomeness of God's glory and grace, but we're also faced with truth: because of our sin, Jesus Christ came as our sin substitute.

Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Because He is full of grace, you can come to Him just as you are, without having to clean up your act first. You don't need to do penance or focus on performing for Him. Because He is full of truth, you can come in complete confidence that He will keep His promise to forgive you and grant you eternal life.

Jesus became one of us in order to get a message to us that He is the King of Glory who has come to dwell among us so we can dwell with Him forever.

Charles Spurgeon: "If you meet with a system of divinity which magnifies man, flee from it, for it is not the gospel. The gospel is that which exalts God."

Invitation

Hold up a wrapped gift: Two responses, receive it or reject it.

"Ichabod or Immanuel? Departed glory or dwelling glory? Which story will be yours?"

Pray the salvation prayer.

Isaiah 60:1 – "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you."