

Let the Nations Be Glad

by John Piper

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the Church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't.

Worship is ultimate, no missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.

Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions. It's the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory. The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God. "The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!" (Ps 97:1). "Let the peoples praise thee, O God; let all the peoples praise thee! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy!" (Ps 67:3-4).

But worship is also the fuel of missions. Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You can't commend what you don't cherish. Missionaries will never call out, "Let the nations be glad!" who cannot say from the heart, "I rejoice in the Lord...I will be glad and exult in thee, I will sing praise to thy name, O Most High" (Ps 104:34; 9:2). Missions begins and ends in worship.

If the pursuit of God's glory is not ordered above the pursuit of man's good in the affections of the heart and the priorities of the church, man will not be well served and God will not be duly honored. I am not pleading for a diminishing of missions but for a magnifying of God. When the flame of worship burns with the heat of God's true worth, the light of missions will shine to the darkest peoples on earth. And I long for that day to come!

Where passion for God is weak, zeal for missions will be weak. Churches that are not centered on the exaltation of the majesty and beauty of God will scarcely kindle a fervent desire to "declare his glory among the nations" (Ps 96:3).

SECOND GREATEST ACTIVITY IN THE WORLD

The most crucial issue in missions is the centrality of God in the life of the Church. Where people are not stunned by the greatness of God, how can they be sent with the ringing message, "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods! (Ps 96:4). Missions is not first and ultimate: God is. And these are not just words. This truth is in the life blood of missionary inspiration and endurance. William Carey, the father of modern missions, who set sail for India from England in 1793, expressed the connection:

"When I left England, my hope of India's conversion was very strong; but amongst so many obstacles, it would die, unless upheld by God. Well, I have God, and His Word is true. Though the superstitions of the heathen were a thousand times stronger than they are, and the example of the Europeans a thousand times worse; though I were deserted by all and persecuted by all, yet my faith, fixed on the sure Word, would rise above all obstructions and overcome every trial. God's cause will triumph." 1

Carey and thousands like him have been moved and carried by the vision of a great and

triumphant God. That vision must come first. Savoring it in worship precedes spreading it in missions. All of history is moving toward one great goal, the white hot worship of God and his Son among all the peoples of the earth. Missions is not that goal. It is the means. And for that reason it is the second greatest human activity in the world.

GOD'S PASSION FOR GOD

One of the things God uses to make this truth take hold of a person and a church is the stunning realization that it is also true for God himself. Missions is not God's ultimate goal, worship is. And when this sinks into a person's heart, everything changes. The world is often turned on it's head. And everything looks different-including the missionary enterprise.

The ultimate foundation for our passion to see God glorified is his own passion to be glorified. God is central and supreme in his own affections. There are no rivals for the supremacy of God's own glory in his own heart. God is not an idolater. He does not disobey the first and greatest commandment. With all his heart and soul and strength and mind He delights in the glory of his manifold perfections.² The post passionate heart for God in all the universe is God's heart.

This truth, more than any other I know, seals the conviction that worship is the fuel and goal of missions. The deepest reason why our passion for God should fuel missions is that God's passion for God fuels missions. Missions is the overflow of our delight in God because missions is the overflow of God's delight in being God.

And the deepest reason why worship is the goal in missions is that worship is God's goal. We are confirmed in this goal by the biblical record³ of God's relentless pursuit of praise among the nations. "Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him all peoples!" (Ps 117:1). If it is God's goal it must be our goal.

THE POWER OF MISSIONS IS WORSHIP

God's supremacy in his own heart is not unloving. It is in fact the fountain of love. God's full delight in his own perfections overflows in his merciful will to share that delight with the nations. We may reaffirm then the earlier truth that worship is the fuel and goal that drives us in missions, because it is the fuel and goal that drives God in missions.

Missions flows from the fullness of God's passion for God and it aims at the participation of the nations in the very passion that he has for himself (cf. John 15:31; 17:13,26; Matt 25:21,23). The power of the missionary enterprise is to be caught up into God's fuel and God's goal. And that means being caught up in worship.

GOD WORKS FOR PEOPLE WHO WAIT FOR HIM

This remarkable vision of God as one who "exalts himself to show mercy" (Isa 30:18) impels world missions in more ways than one. One way we have not pondered is the sheer uniqueness of this God among all the gods of the nations. Isaiah realizes this and says, "From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides thee, who works for those who wait for him" (Isa 64:4).

In other words Isaiah is stunned that the greatness of God has the paradoxical effect that he does not need people to work for him, but rather magnifies himself by working for them, if they will renounce self-reliance and "wait for him."

Isaiah anticipated the words of Paul in Acts 17:25, "God is not served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything." The uniqueness at the heart of Christianity is the glory of God manifest in the freedom of grace. God is glorious because he does not need the nations to work for him. He is free to work for them. "The Son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Missions is not a recruitment project for God's labor force. It is a liberation project from the heavy burdens and hard yokes of other gods (Matt 11:28-30).

Isaiah says that such a God has not been seen or heard anywhere in the world. "From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God beside thee." What Isaiah sees everywhere he looks are gods who have to be served rather than serve. For example, the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo:

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops, their idols are on beasts and cattle; these things you carry are loaded as burdens on weary beasts. They stoop, they bow down together, they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity. "Hearken to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am He, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save (Isa 46:1-4; cf. Jer 10:5).

The difference between the true God and the gods of the nations is that the true God carries and the other gods must be carried. God serves, they must be served. God glorifies his might by showing mercy. They glorify theirs by gathering slaves. So the vision of God as one whose passion for his glory moves him to mercy impels missions because he is utterly unique among all the gods.

MOST SHAREABLE MESSAGE IN THE WORLD

There is yet another way that such a God motivates the missionary enterprise. The gospel demand that flows from such a God to the nations is an eminently shareable, doable demand, namely to rejoice and be glad in God.

"The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!" (Ps 97:1).

"Let the peoples praise thee, O God; let all the peoples praise thee! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy!" (Ps 67:3-4).

"Let the oppressed see it and be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive" (Ps 69:32).

"Let all who seek thee rejoice and be glad in thee! May those who love thy salvation say evermore, God is great!" (Ps 70:4).

What message would missionaries rather take than the message: Be glad in God! Rejoice in God! Sing for joy in God! For God is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in him! God loves to exalt himself by showing mercy to sinners.

The liberating fact is that the message we take to the frontiers is that people everywhere should seek their own best interest. We are summoning people to God. And those who come say, "In your presence is fullness of joy and at your right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Ps 16:11). God glorifies himself among the nations with the command, "Delight yourself in the Lord!" (Ps

37:4).

His first and great requirement of all men everywhere is that they repent from seeking their joy in other things and begin to seek it only in him. A God who cannot be served⁴ is a God who can only be enjoyed. The great sin of the world is not that the human race has failed to work for God so as to increase his glory, but that we have failed to delight in God so as to reflect his glory. For God's glory is most reflected in us when we are most delighted in him.

The most exhilarating thought in the world is that God's inexorable purpose to display his glory in the mission of the Church is virtually the same as his purpose to give his people infinite delight. God is committed to the holy joy of the redeemed, gathered from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, with the same zeal that moves him to seek his own glory in all that he does. The supremacy of God in the heart of God is the driving force of his mercy and the missionary movement of his Church.

THE SUPREMACY OF GOD IN MISSIONS

Against the background we have developed so far we may now be able to feel the full force of those biblical texts that emphasize the supremacy of God in the missionary impulse of the Church. The motives we see will confirm the centrality of God in the missionary vision of the Bible.

We have seen some of the Old Testament texts which make the glory of God the centerpiece of missionary proclamation: "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!" (Ps 96:3). "Proclaim that his name is exalted" (Isa 12:4). There are many others. But we have not yet seen the straightforward statements of Jesus and Paul and John that say the same thing.

LEAVING: FAMILY AND POSSESSIONS

When Jesus turned the rich young ruler away because he was not willing to leave his wealth to follow Jesus, the Lord said, "It will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19:23). The apostles were amazed and said, "Who then can be saved?" (v. 25). Jesus answered, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (v. 26).

Then Peter, speaking as a kind of missionary who had left his home and business to follow Jesus, said, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What shall we have?" (v. 27). Jesus answered with a mild rebuke of Peter's sense of sacrifice: "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life" (v. 29).

The one point of focus for us here is the phrase, "for my name's sake." The motive that Jesus virtually takes for granted when a missionary leaves home and family and possessions is that it is for the sake of the name of Jesus. That means for the sake of Jesus' reputation. God's goal is that his Son's name be exalted and honored among all the peoples of the world. For when the Son is honored, the Father is honored (Mark 9:37). When every knee bows at the name of Jesus, it will be "to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 1:10-11). Therefore God-centered missions exists for the sake of the name of Jesus.

GOD'S NAME TO BE HALLOWED

The first two petitions of the Lord's Prayer are perhaps the dearest statement of all in the

teachings of Jesus that missions is driven by the passion of God to be glorified among the nations. “Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come” (Matt 6:9-10).

Here Jesus teaches us to ask God to hallow his name and to make his kingdom come. This is a missionary prayer. Its aim is to engage the passion of God for his name among those who forget or revile the name of God (Ps 9:17; 74:18). To hallow God’s name means to put it in a class by itself and to cherish and honor it above every claim to our allegiance or affection. Jesus’ primary concern—the very first petition of the prayer he teaches—is that more and more people, and more and more peoples, come to hallow God’s name. This is the reason the universe exists. Missions exists because this hallowing doesn’t.

HOW MUCH HE MUST SUFFER FOR THE NAME

When Paul was converted on the Damascus road, Jesus Christ became the supreme treasure and joy of his life. “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8). It was a costly allegiance. What Paul learned - there in Damascus was not only the joy of sins forgiven and fellowship with the King of the universe, but also how much he would have to suffer.

Jesus sent Ananias to him with this message: “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16). Paul’s missionary sufferings were “for the sake of the name.” When he came near the end of his life and was warned not to go to Jerusalem, he answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” Acts 21:13). For Paul the glory of the name of Jesus and his reputation in the world was more important than life.

FOR THE SAKE OF HIS NAME AMONG THE NATIONS

Paul makes crystal clear in Romans 1:5 that his mission and calling are for the name of Christ among all the nations: “We have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations.”

The apostle John described the motive of early Christian missionaries in the same way. He wrote to tell one of his churches that they should send out Christian brothers in a manner “worthy of God.” And the reason he gives is that “they have gone out for the sake of the name, taking nothing from the Gentiles” (3 Jn 6-7).

John Stott comments on these two texts (Rom 1:5; 3 Jn 7): “They knew that God had superexalted Jesus, enthroning him at his right hand and bestowing upon him the highest rank, in order that every tongue should confess his lordship. They longed that Jesus should receive the honor due to his name.”⁵ This longing is not a dream but a certainty.

At the bottom of all our hope, when everything else has given way, we stand on this great reality: the everlasting, all-sufficient God is infinitely, unwaveringly, and eternally committed to the glory of his great and holy name. For the sake of his fame among the nations he will act. His name will not be profaned for ever. The mission of the church will be victorious. He will vindicate his people and his cause in all the earth.

WHEN LOVE FOR THE LOST IS WEAK

Compassion for the lost is a high and beautiful motive for missionary labor. Without it we lose the sweet humility of sharing a treasure we have freely received. But we have seen that

compassion for people must not be detached from passion for the glory of God. John Dawson, a leader in Youth With a Mission, gives an additional reason why this is so. He points out that a strong feeling of love for “the lost” or “the world” is a very difficult experience to sustain and is not always recognizable when it comes.

“Have you ever wondered what it feels like to have a love for the lost? This is a term we use as part of our Christian jargon. Many believers search their hearts in condemnation, looking for the arrival of some feeling of benevolence that will propel them into bold evangelism. It will never happen. It is impossible to love “the lost.” You can’t feel deeply for an abstraction or a concept. You would find it impossible to love deeply an unfamiliar individual portrayed in a photograph, let alone a nation or a race or something as vague as “all lost people.”

Don’t wait for a feeling of love in order to share Christ with a stranger. You already love your heavenly Father, and you know that this stranger is created by Him, but separated from Him, so take those first steps in evangelism because you love God. It is not primarily out of a compassion for humanity that we share our faith or pray for the lost; it is first of all, love for God. The Bible says in Ephesians 6:7-8: “With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.”

Humanity does not deserve the love of God any more than you or I do. We should never be Christian humanists, taking Jesus to poor, sinful people, reducing Jesus to some kind of product that will better their lot. People deserve to be damned, but Jesus, the suffering Lamb of God, deserves the reward of his suffering.⁶

THE MIRACLE OF LOVE THAT WEEPS

Dawson’s words are a wise and encouraging warning not to limit our mission engagement to the level of compassion we feel for people we do not know. However, I don’t want to minimize what the Lord is able to do in giving people a supernatural burden of love for distant peoples. For example, Wesley Duewel of OMS International tells the story of his mother’s remarkable burden for China and India:

“My mother for years carried a hunger for the people of China and India. For many years practically every day as she prayed during family prayer for these two nations she would break down and weep before she finished praying. Her love was deep and constant, and she will be rewarded eternally for her years of love-burden for those lands. This is the love of Jesus reaching out and meditated through Christians by the Holy Spirit.”⁷

I emphasize again that the motive of compassion and the motive of zeal for the glory of God are not separate. God-centered compassion (which is the only kind that cares for people eternally) weeps over the misery of people who reject God’s glory and drink the cup of his wrath. But this weeping is not because of the loss of Christian joy.

If that were true unbelievers could blackmail the saints and hold their happiness hostage for eternity. No, the weeping of the saints at the loss of precious souls is, paradoxically, the weeping of joy in God. And the reason joy can weep is because it longs to be extended and expanded into the lives of others who are perishing. Therefore the weeping of compassion is the weeping of joy impeded in the extension of itself to another.

THE CALL OF GOD

God is calling us above all else to be the kind of people whose theme and passion is the supremacy of God in all of life. No one will be able to rise to the magnificence of the missionary cause who does not feel the magnificence of Christ. There will be no big world vision without a big God. There will be no passion to draw others into our worship where there is no passion for worship.

God is pursuing with omnipotent passion a worldwide purpose of gathering joyful worshipers for himself from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. He has an in- exhaustible enthusiasm for the supremacy of his name among the nations.

Therefore let us bring our affections into line with his, and, for the sake of his name, let us renounce the quest for worldly comforts, and join his global purpose. If we do this, God's omnipotent commitment to his name will be over us like a banner, and we will not lose, in spite of many tribulations (Acts 9:16; Rom 8:35-39).

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. The Great Commission is first to delight yourself in the Lord (Ps 37:4). And then to declare, "Let the nations be glad and sing for joy" (Ps 67:4). In this way God will be glorified from beginning to end and worship will empower the missionary enterprise till the coming of the Lord.

"Great and wonderful are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the ages! Who shall not fear and glorify your name, O Lord? For you alone are holy. All nations shall come and worship you, for your judgments have been revealed" (Rev 15:3-4).

END NOTES

1. Quoted in Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), p. 140.
2. I have tried to unfold this wonderful truth of the Father's delight in himself, that is, his Son in *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1991), Chapter One, "The Pleasure of God in His Son."
3. See especially "Appendix One: The Goal of God in Redemptive History," in *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Portland: Multnomah Press, original 1986, 2nd edition 1996), pp. 227-238; and the entirety of *The Pleasures of God*.
4. I am aware that the Bible is replete with pictures of God's people serving him. I have dealt in some detail; with the way service can be conceived biblically so as not to put God in the category of an employer who depends on wage earners. See *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* pp. 138-143.
5. John Stott, "The Bible in World Evangelization," in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds., *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981), Chap. 4, this volume.
6. John Dawson, *Taking Our Cities for God* (Lake Mary, Florida: Creation House, 1989), pp. 208-209.
7. Wesley Duewel, *Ablaze for God* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press of Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), pp. 115-116.
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