

Isaiah 40:1-5; John 1:1-14

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[0 : 0 0] Johann Sebastian Bach, the German composer whose life straddled the 17th and 18th centuries, signed his musical scores with three initials. I wonder if you have got any idea of what those three initials might have been. One possibility that would seem reasonable would be JSB, the initials of his name. That would seem a reasonable way to mark your composition.

But of course, that's not the right answer. He signed his compositions with the letters SDG, Soli Deo Gloria, to God alone be the glory. Bach's concern was that praise for his musical compositions be directed not to him, but to God. Soli Deo Gloria. And this motto, this expression, Soli Deo Gloria, is the fifth of the five solas of the Reformation. And there is a certain gravitas to the expression. I suppose anything in Latin, you know, gives it a bit of gravitas. But what does it mean? Soli Deo Gloria. I think the key to understanding, or certainly our key to understanding the expression is to understand the meaning of the word glory and its verbal form glorify. And that's what we want to try and grapple with in the time that we have available this morning. And to reach some understanding of the meaning of these words, we need to go back to the beginning, and I mean right back to the beginning. With a question as fundamental as this, what is God like? Of course, even that question that seems such a fundamental one, what is God like, is a question that presupposes two big truth claims. It presupposes that God exists, and it presupposes that God is one. If you pose the question in that way, what is God like, that is that assumption, not only that He exists, but that He is one. That is, of course, the Bible's starting point. The very beginning of the Bible, we find these words, in the beginning God. There isn't some argument for God's existence. It is taken as a given. God is, and He is one. In the beginning God. And then, of course, it continues to recount the story of creation. Now, I don't know if you're convinced by these basic presuppositions that we're going to be working with, and if you're not convinced, well, that's okay. But for the purpose of this morning's exploration, work with me on the basis of these two presuppositions, that God exists and that He is one. This God who exists and is one, what's He like, to get back to the question we posed a moment ago. And in answering that question, we turn to the Bible as our source. And the Bible tells us that God is spirit, and as spirit, is invisible to the eye, which at the very start of our inquiry presents us with a difficulty. How can we know what God is like if He's invisible? How can we see Him if He is invisible? What the Bible does is present us with a record of how the invisible God has, in a measure, made Himself visible, and more importantly, made Himself knowable. And in the Bible, the glory of God, to get to what we're trying to understand in terms of the meaning of these words, the glory of God is principally, God made manifest or visible. The glory of God reveals who God is and what God is like in a manner that we can see and process and understand. We can't see God, but we can see His glory. By His glory, He makes Himself visible to us.

Now, at this point, I'll pause and indicate two hows that I want to tackle this morning. Really, two questions that begin with the word how. First of all, how has God made Himself visible? How has He revealed His glory?

That's the first question. We're saying that that's the way we can see Him. That's the way we can find out what He's like because He makes Himself visible. But the question is how? How has He done that? That's the first question. And the second question is how are we to respond to the God who has made Himself visible, who has made Himself noble, who has opened Himself up in a way that we can know Him? How do we respond to such a God? These are the two questions we want to tackle. First of all then, how has God made Himself visible? How has He revealed His glory? I think we can answer that by saying that He has done so. He has made Himself visible in creation and in history. I'll touch on creation just very fleetingly and then dwell a little bit more on history and then very particularly focus in on one key event in the course of history. But first of all, in creation.

Now, this is something that the Bible states very explicitly.

[5 : 39] You might argue that you could come to this conclusion even without the aid of the Bible. But the Bible is very explicit in making this claim that God is made visible in and through His creation.

Perhaps the classic text that we would turn to, or we would often turn to, to ground that claim, is in Psalm 19. At the very beginning of Psalm 19 we read, the heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of His hands. And the Psalm goes on to speak of the manner in which creation itself is a means whereby God makes Himself visible. We can see something of God. We can discern something of what God is like in His creation.

What is it that we see or discern of God in creation? Well, let me suggest some possibilities. You can take your own view, whether you think these are all legitimate or not. We see His creativity. That seems an obvious one.

We see His power. We see something of His wisdom. We see something of His beauty. We see something of His generosity in providing for all our needs in the created order. All of creation, including and especially you and me, made in His image and likeness, reveals something of the nature and character of God.

creation reveals His glory in a measure. Now, what creation reveals about God is true, but it is limited.

[7 : 20] Think of it this way. Think of creation or the universe as the theater or stage. Now, observing the theater or the stage tells you something about the creator of the theater or the stage, but the stage serves a greater purpose. It is the setting for the play or the drama. In the case of the universe, the drama to be played out is history. God reveals something of Himself, something of His glory in the creation of His theater, but He reveals so much more in the drama that is then played out on His cosmic stage and very specially on our wee planet Earth. And why it would be on our wee planet Earth is for God to explain when He chooses to do so.

Or think of it this way, maybe just another way of illustrating this that might capture some of you more than the previous attempt. At some of the bigger football clubs, you can go on a stadium tour. So say a club like Manchester United and Old Trafford. You can go, you can buy your ticket, and you'll be given a tour of the stadium. Now, a stadium tour can be fun. It can tell you something. You can stand in amazement at the size of the stadium, at the multiplicity of the facilities that are available there.

But if you really want to know the team, you need to go to a match. The stadium really is nothing without a match being played. And it is as you watch the match that you discover really what the team is all about. Now, God reveals something of Himself in the stadium or theater that He has created, but He especially reveals Himself, His glory in the match that is played in God's theater of dreams, the universe, that He has created. Which takes us on to this second means whereby God makes Himself known that we've suggested, which is history. Everything in history reveals something about the playwright, the one who has penned the drama. But the Bible is clear that within the big or broad story, there is one dominant thread. And that dominant thread is God's mission to save a people for Himself. And it is in the execution or the carrying out of this mission that God reveals Himself, reveals His glory with greatest clarity.

The psalmist captures something of the reality in his song of exultant praise that we began our service with this morning. Come see what God has done, His mighty works of old, His deeds towards the human race, how awesome to behold. He's saying, you see what God has done, His awesome deeds, and from that you discover what God is like. In saving His people, there is a real sense in which God comes down or comes close to His people. And so as He comes down, as He comes close, His glory is more visible, it's more immediate.

[10 : 43] We can see more clearly what He is like. So in the very psalm just quoted, the psalmist identifies one of those awesome deeds, one of those awesome saving deeds, in the following verse where he says, to let His people pass on foot through waters broad. He turned the sea into dry land, let us rejoice in God.

So the psalmist points to a historic event, saving event, where God's people were saved from slavery in Egypt, and he says, look at that, look at that, and discover what God is like. There God makes Himself known.

But still in the Old Testament, there is anticipated a time when God will come down and reveal who He is and what He's like, His glory in an unprecedented manner. And that is the passage that we

read in Isaiah chapter 40 and verses 1 to 5. We won't read all five verses again, but in the final verse of these verses we read these words, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed. So Isaiah is looking forward to a day when in an unprecedented way God's glory would be revealed. The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. And as becomes clear from the fulfillment of that prophecy in the New Testament, Isaiah was looking forward to the coming of Jesus. The passage speaks of the coming of Messiah Jesus, that moment in history when the central act in God's drama is played out.

The coming of Jesus, when the eternal Son of God became a man, became one of us, takes place within history but is worthy of a category by itself. So God's glory is revealed in creation, it's revealed in history and supremely within history, in the incarnation, in the coming of Jesus, in the eternal Son of God becoming one of us. Jesus supremely reveals what God is like. And what does He reveal? Well, this is what we discovered in the passage that we read in John chapter 1, especially in verse 14. The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory. Notice again this same theme, we have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father full of grace and truth. We have seen His glory, the glory of God in the person of Jesus. And what does His glory reveal about His Father, about God?

And just to have the contrast, when we were thinking about creation, we said, well, creation tells us about His creativity and His power and His wisdom. What does the coming of Jesus reveal about God? Well, John tells us, full of grace and truth. We beheld His glory. What did we see? We saw grace. We saw truth. What Jesus preeminently reveals about God is that He is a God of grace and truth or faithfulness. Of course, not everybody got it. Not everybody saw that. Even John, who writes the Gospel, only saw it as he looked back with greater insight and understanding. But as we, also looking back, behold Jesus, what is it in particular that reveals the grace and truth of God? Well, here John again helps us by recording something very significant said by Jesus. Further on in His Gospel, in chapter 12 and in verse 23, Jesus speaks in these terms as He anticipates His death. He says this about His death, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Jesus is speaking about His death. He's speaking about the cross and about how at the cross [14:59] He would be glorified. Now, what does that mean? Well, it means that at the cross, Jesus reveals most clearly the glory of God, the grace and truthfulness and faithfulness of God. At the cross, at Calvary, at that gruesome place of execution, we see God most clearly. And you really couldn't make this up.

You see God's grace, His love and compassion and mercy. You see God's truth, His faithfulness towards His people. The grace that was willing to die in the place of sinners. The love that found such fulsome expression in dying for us. His faithfulness as the covenant God who had promised to redeem a people, finding expression, concrete expression in the death of Jesus in our place. So, God reveals His glory. He makes Himself visible and knowable in creation, but preeminently in history, and within history, preeminently in the coming of His Son Jesus, and within the coming of Jesus, preeminently at the cross of Calvary, where we see the grace and faithfulness of God in, I won't say all its splendor, but in as much splendor as we are capable of processing. But we have to move on to our second question, which really is the one that leads us into the matter of the motto that we're interested in, Soli Deo Gloria. The second question is, how are we to respond to the God who has made Himself visible and knowable? And as I say, the question of our response is what lies behind the Reformation motto, Soli Deo Gloria. How then are we to respond?

Well, listen to Paul as he presents his logic with regard to the manner of our response. And we find that in Romans chapter 11. In Romans chapter 11, now this is a passage we haven't read yet, but we'll do so now. In Romans chapter 11 and from verses 33 to 36, the little section there in our Bibles is entitled doxology or praise. And Paul praises God in the language that we find in these verses. And just to give the context of these verses, in the first 11 chapters of this letter to the Romans, Paul has been outlining all that God has done to save His people, all His awesome saving deeds in the person of Jesus.

And having done so, and all the implications of what Jesus has done for us, having done that, having outlined that for us, He now erupts in praise and identifies what we might call the logical conclusion of all that He has been outlining. If you wish, what we have here is logic on fire. And what is it that He concludes in the light of all that He's been talking about concerning God's saving mission in Jesus? And we read, Paul says, Paul says, this is the only reasonable response to the God who has revealed Himself in this way, in the person of Jesus, coming to save sinners, to draw

together a people to Himself. This is our response, to Him be the glory, *solidale gloria*. But what does giving glory to God look like?

[19 : 15] You know, you can express it in a duxology, and again, it can sound very grand, but what does that look like? I think what giving glory to God looks like is best captured in one word, and in what that word means, of course, and it's the word worship. We give glory to God by worshiping God.

We can maybe break that down by identifying three intertwined elements of worship, and thinking about each of them just very fleetingly. First of all, to worship is to acknowledge. Secondly, to worship is to praise. But then thirdly, to worship God is to live. So, to acknowledge, to praise, and to live. Let's begin with that first one. We worship or glorify God alone by acknowledging God.

We acknowledge Him as the only true God, as the Creator God, as the God of salvation who is full of grace and truth. We acknowledge all that He declares and reveals about Himself. We acknowledge those things to be true. To glorify God is not to grant to God something that He does not already have.

It is not in any sense to make God more than He is. That's impossible. But it is to acknowledge who He is and what He is like. And so, as we worship God, as we glorify God, it begins there where we acknowledge Him to be who He is. We acknowledge what He has done. But we worship or glorify God alone by praising Him. Worship must be more than bear or even grudging acknowledgement. To worship God is to praise God for who He is and what He has done. It is to express our joyful gratitude for His creativity and power and wisdom and beauty and generosity and supremely for His grace and truth that we have seen, that we have experienced in the person of Jesus, our Savior. For a believer, for a Christian to praise God, it's not something weird or peculiar, but rather something reasonable and delightful. And so, we do sing, as we will in a few moments, to God be the glory. Great things He hath done. So loved He the world that He gave us His Son.

[21 : 48] We worship God by acknowledging God. We worship or glorify God alone by praising God. But then we have this third element. We worship, glorify God alone by living for Him and to His glory. We can see how Paul builds on his dexology that we read just a few moments ago in the following chapter at the beginning of Romans 12. So, having established that in the light of who God is and all that God has done, to Him alone is all glory due. Having established that, Paul then says, well, what does that look like in your life? What does that look like in our lives? And he immediately goes on to explain.

So, at the beginning of chapter 12, we read, therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, in view of all that we've been considering about what God has revealed about Himself and His mercy.

In view of God's mercy, offer your bodies or your lives as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual or reasonable act of worship. Paul says that to glorify God, to worship God involves your whole life. We can maybe, to kind of tease that out a little, we can say two things about living as an act of worship or as a means to glorify God. Living as an act of worship is central to who we are and encompasses all that we do. So, there's two elements in that sentence. Living as an act of worship is central to who we are and encompasses all that we do.

First of all, living as an act of worship is central to who we are. And that takes us back to the big questions of life. What is the purpose of life? What is the purpose of your life? Let me just pause there for a moment.

So, you can do some work. In your own mind, answer that question for me. What is the purpose of your life? You don't need to shout out. I hope you've got an answer. I hope you can at least give some kind of response to that.

[24 : 12] It's a pretty basic question. What's the point? What is the purpose of your existence? Why are you here? They're big questions. I wonder what your answer to that question is.

The first question and answer of our shorter catechism, which is a small catechism that captures in few words, biblical truth. The first question and answer relates to this very matter that we are considering. What is man's chief end? What is the chief purpose of men and women? And what is the answer that is given, grounded in biblical truth? Man's chief end. The chief purpose of men and women is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. And so, the question is, is that true of you? Is to glorify God your chief end? Is it at the very core of who you are and why you exist? So, living as an act of worship is central to who we are. But then the second element that I am

suggesting is that it encompasses all that we do. Again, if we see what Paul says on this matter to help us, in 1 Corinthians 10 and in verse 31, we read these words, words. So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, a real stress on that, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. So, living as an act of worship is central to who you are, but as we see there, encompasses all that you do.

One of the outcomes of the Reformation was the removal, at least in part, of the false wall of separation between the sacred and the secular. We are not to worship God in church and on Sunday and serve self or any other deity or God at work on a Monday. To worship or glorify God, acknowledge who He is and praising Him for what He has done encompasses all that we do. We sing to God's glory, but we also eat and drink to God's glory. We pray to God's glory, but we also work and study and investigate and build and play to God's glory. There's no distinction. In all of these things, we are to act to God's glory. Our end in view is the glory of God, and one is not more important than another. All together, they're all encompassed in living as an act of worship.

We began by making reference to Bach and how Bach captured this truth by marking every musical score with the same inscription, solid Deo Gloria. Now, those of you who are more knowledgeable in the field of music will no doubt be able to explain this better, but Bach in his various compositions, there would have been those that you could have described as religious. They dealt with religious themes or sacred themes and others that did not do so. Did Bach say, oh, well, I'll put solid Deo Gloria on the religious ones, but the other ones, well, that's different. No. All of them bore the same inscription, to God alone be the glory. Who can live such a life to the glory of God? Well, you can. [28:12] Everybody can. Everybody can. The preacher and the plasterer, the missionary and the midwife, the evangelist and the electrician, all are called and all can live to the glory of God.

What kind of life is a life lived to the glory of God alone? Well, a moment ago, we referred to the first question of the Shorter Catechism, the answer to the first question. What is man's chief end?

To glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. It's always struck me as remarkable that in that very first question, in a document that might be by some derided as the expression of a doer Calvinism, you have this language, man's chief end, the chief end of men and women is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. To glorify God is to enjoy God. It is to delight in God. It is to rest contentedly in God. To live life to God's glory is not slavery, but freedom, not drudgery, but delight, not misery, but marvel. Soli Deo Gloria, to God alone be the glory. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for who you are. We thank you that you are a God who has made himself visible and, even more wonderfully, who has made himself knowable. And we thank you for the manner in which you have done so in the person of your Son, Jesus. And we thank you that in Jesus we are able to see a God, and what we see is one who is full of grace and truth. We thank you for the most remarkable revelation of grace and truth in the death of Jesus on the cross as we see most powerfully and most eloquently your love and your faithfulness. And we pray that in the light of these things, in view of God's mercy, to use the language of the apostle, we would offer up our lives as living sacrifices, which is our reasonable act of worship. That our lives would be acts of worship as we acknowledge you for who you are, as we praise you with joyful gratitude, and as we live our lives for you and to your glory. And we pray in Jesus name. Amen.