



# Derek Tidball

We have seen his glory,  
The glory of the One and Only,  
Who came from the Father,  
Full of grace and truth.

# Meeting the SAVIOUR

The glory of Jesus in the Gospel of John

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# The glory of Jesus according to John

On several occasions when the media have conducted one of those competitions to find out who has been the most influential person in history, they have excluded the figure of Jesus of Nazareth from the start. It seems that they know he is without equal. No one is in the same league as he is, whether judged by his teaching, his life, his death or his impact. But just what was it about him that made him so special? One of the answers to that question—the answer that the writer of John’s Gospel would give—is that what made him special was his ‘glory’. Let me explain.

The majestic opening words of John’s Gospel reach a climax with the words, ‘The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth’ (1:14). John’s testimony is that as he and his friends watched, listened and shared in the life of the one they knew to be Jesus from Nazareth, the son of Mary and the carpenter Joseph, they saw ‘glory’ in him and radiating from him. His life pulsed with glory.

Matthew, Mark and Luke write about Jesus disclosing his glory only when they record his ‘transfiguration’, the occasion on which his appearance changed, becoming radiant, to reveal his true nature. For them, the glory of Jesus mostly lay hidden, to be revealed in the future at the time of his coming again. But John’s recollection of Jesus was that his glory was evident in his life on earth and manifest time and again in what he said and did. His life was, as it were, one prolonged transfiguration. Consequently, ‘glory’ becomes one of the

big words of John's Gospel, along with 'light', 'life' and 'truth'.

What is 'glory'? Originally, in Greek, the word meant 'an opinion', but meanings change and grow. 'Opinion' came to be associated with 'a high opinion' or 'a good reputation', which in turn grew to mean someone worthy of honour, esteem, even worship. The Bible uses the word like this to speak of the honour that is directed to God. To worship him is to glorify him. But it also uses 'glory' to speak of the amazing power, magnificent beauty and majestic splendour that shine out from him.

Glory belongs supremely and uniquely to God. Moses and Miriam asked, 'Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?' (Exodus 15:11). David declared, 'Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and on earth is yours' (1 Chronicles 29:11). Israel repeatedly celebrated God as 'the King of glory' (Psalm 24:10). God is glorious.

God gave the world a glimpse of his glory in various ways and on many occasions. His glory was his signature that could be traced in creation itself. It was seen in momentous events—as he manifested his divine power in the deliverance of the children of Israel from oppression in Egypt, and as, in thunder, lightning and cloud, the law was given on Mount Sinai. It was equally seen in the more ordinary but no less spectacular provision of daily food, as manna was deposited in the desert. The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle and, later in Israel's story, was also to infuse and overflow from every part of Solomon's temple.

It was intended that God's glory should dwell among his people. Early in their experience, however, they became so well practised in sin that a woman named her son Ichabod, meaning 'the glory has departed from Israel' (1 Samuel 4:21). Centuries later, Ezekiel was to lament that he saw the glory depart from Jerusalem (Ezekiel 10:18). Its withdrawal triggered the catastrophe of the exile. Later, Ezekiel had another vision—a vision of a time when the glory would return, when divine displeasure would be spent and a new day

would dawn, with the glory of the Lord again filling a new temple (Ezekiel 43:1–3). It was that day John believed he had seen arrive in the coming of Jesus. The glory of God was, henceforth, to be seen in the person of Jesus.

Two things are particularly surprising about John's claim. First, God's people had learned that, because of their finite humanity, they were unable to bear too much of the revelation of God's glory. Moses had asked to see God's glory but was given a mere glimpse of his back as he passed by (Exodus 33:18–33). Yet John says that in Jesus the invisible had become visible and God's glory shone plainly. Second, Isaiah, the prophet of glory, whose image of God is awesome, stated that God does not share his glory with anyone else (Isaiah 42:8, 48:11). He guards it jealously and reserves it for himself. Even more surprising, then, that John should say of Jesus, a fellow human being, that his followers saw him as the one who bore and revealed God's glory.

John presents the glory of Jesus in all the colours of a rainbow. His glory was something that he shared with God 'before the world began' (17:5, 24), and that Isaiah foresaw (12:41), but was now embodied in the incarnate Christ, living among his people (1:14; 13:32). Several miraculous acts—John calls them 'signs'—revealed his glory (2:11; 11:4). Paradoxically, though, the glory was most apparent not in the dazzling acts of power but in the disguised acts of servanthood (13:1–5), and never more so than on the cross (7:39; 12:23; 13:31). To human eyes, the crucifixion was far from glorious. It was designed to humiliate, degrade and shame. It was the most dishonourable act that human beings have ever perpetrated. Yet God triumphed through it to reveal his glory at Calvary as never before and, beyond it, the even greater glory of his risen Son.

These are the primary colours with which John paints the glory of Jesus. His glory is evident throughout the Gospel, not only when the actual word is used or the radiance patently obvious. More subtle colours, too, complete the masterpiece of Jesus' glory in John. This book surveys the primary colours, the pastel shades and

the subtle hues that go to make up the portrait. We view each part of John's Gospel and ask the same question each time: 'How did people see glory in what Jesus was saying or doing here?' It is not intended to suggest that reading the Gospel through this lens exhausts its teaching. John's teaching is certainly richer and fuller than will be evident from reading it through this filter alone. Not all his ideas or doctrines will come to the surface this way—but many will.

My prayer is that we shall meet the Saviour and see again 'the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6), and that it will lead us to a renewed adoration of the one with whom it is all too easy to become overfamiliar. May his glory shine brightly now and grow ever more in intensity until one day we bask in the full measure of it.

# The glory of the eternal word

JOHN 1:1-18

John's Gospel begins on a fortissimo. Not for him the quiet building of musical themes until they reach a climax, nor the gentle lulling of the listener, to be led seductively to a grand finale. The opening resounding chords arouse our senses and grab our full attention from the start. Strangely, John begins with his conclusion. Immediately he confronts us with a stunning, mind-blowing, spirit-racing description of Jesus. The glory of the man of Nazareth is unmistakably the focal point, yet he is portrayed on the widest possible canvas.

John presents us with five great facts about Jesus that show him to be the matchless, peerless, unrivalled, supreme and pre-eminent one.

## Jesus holds the supreme title in the universe (vv. 1-2)

Celebrities are often awarded titles. Muhammad Ali was 'the Greatest'; Don Corleone, the Godfather; Arnold Schwarzenegger, 'the Terminator'. Jesus is 'the Word'. Jews believed in a God who spoke and in doing so accomplished his purposes. The creation story is peppered with the phrase, 'And God said...'. Each time, what God commanded came into being. So the people of Israel firmly believed that 'by the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth' (Psalm 33:6). The psalmists welcomed and celebrated God's words, for they were

flawless, perfect, righteous, trustworthy, true, eternal, life-directing, enlightening to the mind, sweet to the taste and nourishing to the soul. In Proverbs, his words are essentially seen as wise. Proverbs 8 pictures wisdom as a person who was with God before the creation of the world and assisted him in it. Here, then, wisdom, creation and word flow together in one stream.

For Isaiah, the word of the Lord, spoken by the prophets, always achieved what it set out to do (Isaiah 55:11). It was inconceivable that, when God spoke, he should fail to accomplish his purpose. God's word, then, was not only effective in creation but also in matters of judgment and salvation. When John designated Jesus as 'the Word', it was all this and more that was in his mind.

Greeks thought about 'the word' in a different way. To them, it stood for reason or thought: the rational basis on which the universe ran. In spite of the different nuances, however, Jew and Greek would have understood John to be saying something similar about Jesus. The mind of God was expressing itself in Jesus. God was making himself, his ways and his purposes known. God was in communication with the people he had made.

The opening verses of John's Gospel make three assertions about this Word. First, they speak of *his existence in eternity*. He was 'in the beginning'. The place to start in understanding Jesus, says John, is not with his baptism and commissioning in the River Jordan, as Mark suggests, or with his childhood in Nazareth, to which Luke alludes; nor is it sufficient to go back to his birth in Bethlehem, as both Matthew and Luke do, or even to trace his ancestry through the generations of Israel's history. To understand Jesus, we must go back to before creation, to the beginning of all things, to before the worlds were. Beyond him you cannot reach. There was never a time when he was not.

Second, the opening verses speak of *his place in the Trinity*. Twice John states that the Word was 'with God' in eternity. Here we are being given a hint of the inner life of the Trinity, which John will speak about more fully later in his Gospel. It is clear that he means more than that Jesus was merely attendant upon God—an acolyte

or an angel—for he goes on, thirdly, to speak of *his nature as deity*. Not only was he ‘with God’ but he was God; not just partly divine but fully divine. Here is the most momentous claim to be made about Jesus. Those who shared their lives with him were in no doubt that he was a full flesh-and-blood human being. Yet, he was no mere man. He was God in a human body, fully divine as well as fully human.

Dermot McDonald captures John’s meaning when he says, ‘There is nothing beyond him, nothing before, nothing after, nothing more. He has no before and no after. In this “title of eternity” we have a solemn affirmation of Christ’s eternal deity.’<sup>1</sup>

### Jesus plays the supreme role in creation (vv. 3–4)

This creative Word brings something into existence out of nothing. Jesus was God’s agent in bringing into being all that there is in our universe: ‘Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.’ This affirmation is repeated in different but equally majestic ways in Colossians 1:15–20 and Hebrews 1:2.

It declares that there is no corner of our universe, no detail of our galaxy, no section of our wonderfully complex world that does not owe its origin to Jesus. Nothing is too big to have been created by him, and nothing too small. The highest ranges of the Himalayas, the vast reaches of the Urals, the desert stretches of the Sahara, the deep recesses of the oceans and the dense beauty of the world’s forests come from his hand. The highest, widest and deepest are his creation. So too is the subatomic particle, the humble amoeba, the tiniest muscle of the body and the busy ant. The hidden things of the earth—the DNA helix, the quasars and quarks—were designed and produced by him. The far-flung stars and things we cannot readily grasp with our eyes, let alone understand with our minds, are the result of his creative genius. The sum and the parts owe their existence to him. He alone does not owe his life to another; nor did

he derive it from those who have gone before. He has life in himself. All other life is dependent on him and sustained by him.

This means that Jesus is the key to the riddle of our universe. It is not fully understood by science, nor fathomed by philosophy. Its ultimate secrets are not unlocked by a mechanistic approach or by an anthropological principle. They are unlocked by knowing Jesus.

Light is essential for life. Until God spoke, 'the earth was formless and empty [and] darkness was over the surface of the deep' (Genesis 1:2). But when the lights of heaven were switched on at his command, order was brought to the chaos, meaning filled the emptiness and life sprang out of nothingness. The world began to teem with life of every kind. No one can live without his light. The Word continues to enlighten all people, reminding them of their creatureliness before God and of their need to live in communion with him.

At the heart of our universe stands neither scientific law, nor fate, nor blind chance, but a person who can be known: the person of Jesus.

### Jesus is the supreme agent of regeneration (vv. 10–13)

Men and women have perversely and consistently tried to snuff out the light that is so essential for life. They have sought to go their own way in the universe, trodden unlit paths and got lost in the fog of sin. Darkness rather than light seems now to cover the face of the earth and to be a truer description of the world in which we live. As happens in fog and darkness, we are separated from one another and alienated from our true family. We try to cope as best we can, but all our efforts testify to our lack of success. At root, our problems stem from our rejection of the light-giver who made the world. The rejection sometimes arises out of ignorance or a lack of recognition, as when we say to someone, 'I'm sorry I didn't know who you were', rather than deliberate rebellion. Either way, the result is the same: forsaking a life of dependence for one of self-

centred independence causes us to be estranged from our Father and ill at ease in the world that he intended to be our home.

The Word came to make it possible for us to re-enter the family and to be received as genuine, fully accepted children of the Father once more. He has the power to bring the change about and the authority to change our status in relation to God. Just as his word was used to create the world originally, so his word is now able to recreate our lives again and reconstitute God's family.

This act of regeneration does not happen in the way in which normal human procreation takes place. It happens because the grace of God wills that it should be so. John tells us that from our side it is only necessary to recognize Jesus for who he is, receive him as Saviour and Lord, trusting that he is able to provide the means by which we can begin again, for regeneration to occur. He alone is the one through whom we can experience rebirth into the family of God.

## Jesus performs the supreme wonder of incarnation (v. 14)

The Word is genuinely able to bridge the gulf between the God of eternity and his fallen human family because 'the Word became flesh'. John underlines the point with a series of echoes between verses 1, 10 and 14. In verse 1, the Word 'was'; in verse 14, the Word 'became'. In verse 1, the word 'was with God'; in verse 10, the Word 'was in the world.' In verse 1, the Word 'was God'; in verse 14, 'the Word became flesh'. In verse 1, we deal with infinity and speak of an eternal beginning; in verse 14 we deal with history and speak of an event in time.

John's words speak to us of *the humility of his humanity*. In becoming a human being, the incarnate Word entered into a new condition, not experienced by him before. What an act of divine condescension: 'Our God, contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man', in John Wesley's memorable words! 'Flesh' seems to stress the frailty and vulnerability to which the incarnate Son was

exposed. What an amazing risk God took when, as Father Neville Figgis has graphically written, ‘the God who roared, who could order armies and empires around like pawns on a chess board, this God emerged in Palestine as a baby who could not eat solid food or control his bladder, who depended on a teenage couple for shelter, food and love’.<sup>2</sup> But the folly of God is wiser than the best of human wisdom.

This act of immense humility was to have ongoing consequences, since, in Bruce Milne’s words, ‘the act of self-humbling on the part of God is irreversible—he is eternally Emmanuel, God with us’.<sup>3</sup>

John’s words equally speak of *the reality of his humanity*. In saying that Jesus ‘made his dwelling among us’, John emphasizes that Jesus came to reside, to be watched, tested and examined. Unlike the mythical deities of Rome, he did not continue to live in ethereal luxury, only occasionally popping into the realm that belonged to humans. Nor did he shoot down to earth as if he were some celestial politician arriving at the scene of a tragedy for a brief photo opportunity. He came to stay. Those who lived and worked with him were, then, in a good position to testify to the reality of his humanity. He was no spirit, temporarily clothed in a human body while actually escaping the real-life pressures and temptations to which ordinary beings were subject. He was one of us.

John chooses his words carefully. In saying that Jesus ‘dwelt among us’, he uses the language of the tabernacle in the wilderness. For the children of Israel, fresh out of Egypt, that was God’s home on earth. Now, says John, the home of God could be found in Jesus—the man from Nazareth.

## Jesus accomplishes the supreme act of revelation (vv. 14–18)

The fifth sphere in which Jesus is unrivalled is the sphere of revelation. No one has revealed God, and no one can reveal him, more fully than the Word. If we ask how we can know what God is

like, the Christian has only one answer: God is Christ-like. All that we need to know of God, we find in Jesus. In him the invisible God has become visible, the infinite God has been expressed in the finite, the unknown has been made known and the mystery has been revealed. Jesus is the prism through whom the glory of God shines into our world.

Not content with the bald statement, however, John adds a few pointers to the kind of God Jesus revealed him to be. 'Grace and truth,' he writes, 'came through Jesus Christ.' Through Jesus, the grace of pardon, forgiveness, restoration and new life can be received. In Jesus, the truth of God can be found, trusted and followed. We need look no further.

John shows us one who was supreme as Lord of eternity, master of creativity, saviour of humanity, like us in identity yet the revealer of divinity. In him was glory, 'the glory of the One and Only'. What should be the impact of this on us? To adapt Bruce Milne's words, we should realize that 'if Jesus Christ shows us the nature of God, we are called to worship him without cessation, obey him without hesitation, love him without reservation, serve him without qualification and follow him without renunciation'.<sup>4</sup>



## Questions

1. J.B. Phillips wrote a famous book called *Your God Is Too Small*. In the light of John 1, is your Jesus 'too small'?
2. Of all the claims made here about Jesus, which matters most to you, and why?

We have seen his glory,  
The glory of the One and Only,  
Who came from the Father,  
Full of grace and truth.

Just what exactly is so special about Jesus of Nazareth—his teaching, his life, his death, his impact on human history? John's Gospel has a one-word answer: 'glory', one of the key themes of that gospel, alongside 'light', 'life' and 'truth'. John's testimony is that as he and his friends watched, listened and shared in the life of the one they knew to be Jesus from Nazareth, the son of Mary and Joseph the carpenter, they saw 'glory' in him and radiating from him.

This book reflects on key stories and teaching in John's Gospel, considering how they portray Jesus' time on earth as in effect one long transfiguration that revealed, to those able and willing to see it, the glory that is the signature of God in creation. And we too are invited to meet the Saviour, allowing ourselves to be transformed by his touch.

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