

FATHER, GLORIFY YOUR NAME: GLORIFYING GOD IN DEATH

The setting for this essay is John 12. Jesus, who had already been triumphantly welcomed into Jerusalem, knew that in a few days he would be crucified. He said, *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified"* (v. 23). This would not be an easy task for Jesus, for his death contained turmoil that we can only begin to imagine. He continued: *"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it was for this very reason that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name"* (vs. 27,28). Did God answer his prayer? Oh, yes! Listen: *"Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again'"* (v. 28). And indeed God was glorified in the death of Jesus and in the events surrounding the crucifixion!

Jesus faced his coming death with a sense of purpose and resolve. It was something he had to do; it was part of his mission on earth and he wanted to do it well, bringing glory both to himself and to God the Father. Yet Jesus was candid enough to let us know that with all his lofty goals, he had some troubled thoughts as well. This is further demonstrated in the Garden of Gethsemane where he revealed that he would have liked to have avoided the cross UNLESS it was God's will for him, which, of course, it was.

Recently I noticed the word "glorify" being used in the message Jesus gave to Peter after his resurrection: *"When you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."* Jesus said this to indicate **THE KIND OF DEATH BY WHICH PETER WOULD GLORIFY GOD** (John 21:18,19). Tradition says that Peter was crucified in an upside down position, feeling unworthy to die the same way Jesus did. Perhaps there was some reluctance to die when or how he did ("where you do not want to go") but Peter certainly did honor God in his death. And Peter was a human being, as we are. If we desired to glorify God in our deaths, would it make a difference in how we faced old age with its infirmities?

In Webster's dictionary, "glorify" is defined this way:

1. To praise; to magnify and honor in worship; to ascribe honor to, in thought or words.
2. To make glorious; to exalt to glory, or to celestial happiness.
3. To praise; to honor; to extol.
4. To procure honor or praise to.

And "glory" also has wonderful definitions, among them: Brightness; luster; splendor; magnificence; praise ascribed in adoration; honor.

What joyful, positive words these are! Just having looked up the definitions has given new meaning to familiar passages such as Psalm 34:1-5 where David says:

"I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame."

These verses alone cover almost all the aspects of glory given above, including procuring praise for God from others. Does your heart respond like mine? I say, "Yes, David, I will glorify the Lord with you. I will also follow your example and give my testimony so that others will join us in honoring God, who is most worthy of praise!"

The radiant faces mentioned by David makes me think of Moses, whose face would shine whenever

he spent time in the Lord's presence. The story is told in Exodus 34:29-35. The radiance was so profound that it frightened the onlookers, just as later the transfiguration of Jesus would astound the witnesses. To think about: Is there an aura around God's people today? One that can be seen and felt? If not, should there be? If there were, who would get the glory?

Look at the prayer Jesus prayed just before he died, as recorded in John 17. This chapter is full of glory! In verse 22 Jesus says to his Father, *"I have given them the glory that you gave me ..."*; and for what purpose? *"... that they may be one as we are one."* This prayer was not just for the believers at the time of Jesus, for he says in verse 20, *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message."* So we have glory within us that has come from God. Our job now is to let it show. And how can we do that? Several ways are suggested in John 17:

- By living in unity with all other members of God's faith family (v. 20-23).
- By completing the work God gives us to do (v. 4).
- By our deaths (v. 1,5).

It was the latter that Jesus had in mind for himself in John 12. After all the glory he brought to his Father in his lifetime, he prayed that he might glorify him in his death. And how that prayer was answered! Looking back, it is easy to see that glory swallows up all the pain, the shame and the abuse of all sorts associated with the cross.

And the latter is the focus of this essay. I want to tell of others who have impressed and encouraged me by the way they faced death. May these thoughts encourage you as well.

Stephen comes immediately to mind. He was facing a sudden, violent, painful death (Acts 7) and had little time to think about how he wanted to behave when dying. Therefore his actions had to be the result of who he really was in his every day life. We are told that he was full of the Holy Spirit; that should be the normal condition for believers, but it's not. That's why we are enjoined in a number of places (Ephesians 5:18, for example) to be filled with the Spirit. While the Holy Spirit resides within every believer, being filled – letting God take over – involves choice. The result of saying yes is glory for you and glory for God. However, there are no guarantees as to how and when you will die, and what "adventures" you will have in the time before you approach death.

Important in the story of Stephen is the introduction of a young man named Saul, who later became the apostle Paul. We are told in Acts 7:58 that the witnesses who were stoning Stephen laid their clothes at the feet of this young man. And 8:1 says *"Saul was there, giving approval to his death."* Imagine the impact on Saul when Stephen announced that he saw heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God; when he prayed, *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit"*; and when he asked God to forgive those who were stoning him!

Then multiply that powerful influence by the unknown number of the Lord's disciples that Saul arrested and brought to Jerusalem as prisoners. Surely many of them faced death as gloriously as Stephen did. As certain as Saul was that he was doing God's will by destroying those who belonged to the Way, he was also being set up by God for a dramatic conversion when Jesus met him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). The vision that Saul had, which included a light so brilliant that it blinded him for three days, was overwhelming. He lived the rest of his life in awe of the fact that God would accept a sinner such as he.

Paul's strong point was that he had no fear of death at all. His writings are full of his certainty about life after death, of the truth that whether living or dying we are the Lord's. He took the assurance that he had seen in Stephen and others and made it his own, with many word pictures that we can mull over as we formulate our own philosophy of life and death (and surely, we should each have one!).

Look at 2 Corinthians 5:1-9, for example: *"We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord."* No wonder Paul could sit in jail for years at a time and still carry on his ministry: he was completely free, not held down by chains or sickness or fear of death. Does Paul's conclusion resonate in your soul as it does in mine? What glory he passes on to us through his life and writings! Oh, that we might do the same.

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Stephen is considered to be the first martyr of the church, but he certainly wasn't the last! Years ago I read about the martyrs of the catacombs and again was impressed with the way the Christians faced death. How would I react if I thought I might be burned at the stake, thrown to the lions, or ... shot? We can't ever know for sure unless it happens, but we can at least DESIRE to glorify God should we be in such a position, so we have a foundation on which to build.

The possibility of martyrdom is very real in many parts of the world right now. Organizations like the Voice of the Martyrs keep track of such trends and report stories just as compelling as Stephen's. Just think of the devotion of believers who risk death by gathering together for worship or Bible study! *"Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).* Many will be awarded that crown in eternity!

Hebrews 11, that great chapter of faith, tells of people who performed exploits for God and for whom God performed miracles. But in verse 35 there is a change, and from there to the end of the chapter we see how God feels about those who are martyred for his sake, plus an idea of what motivated those martyred:

"Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goat-skins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what was promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."

Glory is what I see in this passage. How these people glorified God by their steadfast hope in a resurrection day when their faith would be rewarded! And how God has glorified them by saying they were head and shoulders above the ordinary, much too worthy to remain on earth! What is the "something better," the perfection that awaits us and them? I don't know, but I do know this: it is something worth living and dying for. It will be glorious!

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There are wonderful stories in the Bible about people who went to their "deaths" but were spared at the last minute by divine intervention. They, too, glorified God immensely and their stories are so inspiring! I suppose that means that, through their stories, their glory continues until today and will never end. Might the glory generated on earth by God's people of faith be part of the glory in eternity? What an awesome thought!

The first person I'm thinking of in this category is Isaac, and the story is in Genesis 22. Isaac was the miracle child of Abraham and Sarah, the one through whom God had promised to build a great nation. When Isaac was about seventeen and Abraham one hundred and seventeen, God asked Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice on a certain mountain, and Abraham set out to obey the orders. Hebrews 11:17-19 tells how Abraham was able to do this:

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the

promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

Abraham's reasoning is amazing. He really thought he was going to have to kill Isaac, but he was just as certain that God would bring him back to life in order to fulfill the promises. That's why he said to the servants who stayed at the foot of the mountain, *"Isaac and I will go up and worship and then we will rejoin you."* Glory streams from Abraham's mature faith and the actions impelled by it. But what about Isaac?

It had seemed strange to Isaac that they were carrying all the necessary equipment for sacrifice up the mountain except the animal itself. When he asked his father about that, Abraham had told him that the Lord would provide. Imagine the trauma when Abraham explained the situation to Isaac at last! And here's where the glory comes in: because of their ages and relative strengths, Isaac had to cooperate in the plan. He had to allow his father to tie him up and place him on the altar. He saw the upraised knife heading in his direction before God intervened and provided a substitute for Isaac. In God's eyes, Isaac was considered to have died and returned to life, and how he glorified God in his "death"!

The next story is from Daniel 3 and concerns Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, three young Jewish men living in captivity in Babylon. They refused to worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar set up, even though the penalty for refusal was to be thrown into a blazing furnace. Their sublime statement of faith when punishment seemed immanent just blazes with glory. Listen:

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold that you have set up."

The men were bound and thrown into the furnace which had been heated seven times hotter than usual: certain death, thought the angry king. But our Lord himself met them in the furnace and unbound them, to the astonishment of the king. So complete was their deliverance that upon their release all the officials *"saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them"* (3:27). Awesome, isn't it?

A few years later the Babylonian empire was overthrown by the Medes and Persians. King Darius was fond of Daniel, another of the Jews in captivity, and gave him a high position in the government. Other officials were jealous of Daniel and plotted to have him killed. With the king's permission, they wrote a law that if anyone prayed to any god or person except to the king in the next thirty days, that person would be thrown into the den of lions. Daniel was not going to let a law like that change his habit of prayer! He continued to kneel in prayer three times a day before windows that opened toward Jerusalem.

The trap worked. Despite the king's desperate efforts on his behalf, Daniel spent a night sealed into a den of ferocious lions: again, certain death. Except it didn't work! King Darius spent a restless night and at the first light of dawn, rushed to the lion's den. He called out as he approached: *"Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?"* You know how the story ends. Daniel had spent the night in the presence of an angel who had shut the mouths of the lions. When he came out of the den, not even a wound was found on him!

I love these stories so much that I find it hard to stop writing about them. But surely I have written enough to show that the people involved glorified God in their "deaths," and in so doing glory came

to them as well. What would we do in similar circumstances? Do we at least have a yearning to glorify God in death as well as life?

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Years ago I heard a story about a Christian woman who found out that she had a fatal illness. She called her children together and said to them, "All your lives I have been showing you how a Christian lives. Now I'm going to show you how a Christian dies."

How fortunate are those children, I thought. What a mother they have! How she glorifies God with her attitude! Her godly influence will last long after she has left this earth. And I desired to be like her.

Now my chance has come. My neurological disease will eventually take my physical life unless, of course, I die of something else first. None of us knows what will happen tomorrow! I knew as soon as I was diagnosed that I had to talk about it personally with each of my children. That accomplished, my mind turned to my grandchildren. How could I influence them for the Lord now and after I am gone? I decided both to invest monetarily in their lives and to send them each a legacy letter, besides talking with them in person.

I have a plan in mind for going through this illness, my ultimate goal being to bring glory to God. I am counting on God's grace (which has always been sufficient for me in the past) to help me accomplish this goal. Here are some of the components of my current plan:

1. I will accept this disease just as I have accepted my chronic illnesses and other sicknesses – as from God whose daughter I am and who always works things out for the good of those who love him. I realize that God's ways and thoughts are higher than mine, so I will not try to figure out what they are in my case. I know the Everlasting Arms are around me and that God is holding my hand. I have nothing to fear.

2. I will let as many people as possible know about my situation. How can God be glorified if no one knows what is going on? Having an illness is nothing to be ashamed of. In December of 2003, before the diagnosis was complete, I wrote a Christmas letter explaining my condition and mailed it to as many people as I thought would be interested, far more than I had ever contacted before. What a response I got from that letter! If you wish to read it, see my essay, "Living Incarnately."

3. I will let people help me as the need arises. When I was healthy and able to get around, I enjoyed helping people in need. I believe what Jesus said: whatever we do for others we do for him. Why shouldn't I let people serve Jesus by serving me? Then too, having others help me means that there are more people to influence for God!

4. I will not complain. Conversely, I will be thankful. The two cannot coexist. I do not believe that honestly describing your symptoms, when asked, is complaining. Nor, in my opinion, is taking medication or undergoing surgery or physical therapy to relieve symptoms. Or drawing on God's grace to get through the day. But whining is out!

5. I will not set my sights too low. I do not like the current phrase "hang in there." That sounds like barely coping to me. Instead I want to soar on wings like the eagles do. But if by "hang in there" you mean "persevere" or "Don't be discouraged," well, that's different. I do want to persevere.

6. I will look upon the move to Drum Hill Senior Living Community as a positive move with a new set of opportunities for serving my Lord. Here are some of the components of the plan I formulated for Drum Hill:

- a. Not knowing how long I will be able to minister, I will try quickly to get to know as many

people as I can and to let them know me. I will locate those who are already involved in Bible studies and religious services.

b. Jesus said his followers should be known by their love. Hence, I will not advertise my beliefs on the clothing or jewelry that I wear. Nor will I visibly give thanks for my food in the dining room. The Lord knows I have a grateful heart. On the positive side, I will allow the love of Christ to flow through me to the residents and staff as best I can.

c. I will respect all those with personal faith in God, whether Jewish, Catholic or Protestant, as my brothers and sisters in God's faith family. I will be ecumenical in my thinking and if I ever start a worship service, it will be open to everyone and all will feel welcome. This said, I will still teach what I truly believe.

d. I will not take part in anything that is polarizing or divisive, including talking about the staff or services received at Drum Hill. Except when doing otherwise may prove beneficial, I will keep my opinions to myself. I will appreciate, rather than criticize, what I am given.

7. I will do my best to write my thoughts on ageing and dying, hoping that many will benefit from them as my friends have – all for the glory of God. Knowing that this is God's work that I am doing, I will leave it up to my heavenly Father whether my project is ever finished or published. I am having a good time reviewing my life by writing, and that alone makes it all worthwhile.

It has been ten months since we moved into Drum Hill and many awesome things have happened since then. Ten days after I got here, I was teaching a Bible study in the absence of the Catholic priest who usually taught the class. I had no idea if my voice would hold out for a whole hour, but as my new Catholic friend kept passing me good material to read, I kept drawing on the Lord's strength and soon the hour was over. "We can understand you because you speak slowly," more than one person said. "That's the only way I am able to talk!" I explained. And I thought that was really funny! I could picture God preparing my speech for the place where I was to serve him and laughing with me as I caught on.

Since then the priest and I have become co-teachers of the weekly Bible class. He and I work so well together, both of us loving the same scriptures and the same Lord Jesus. What a pleasure!

On the first Friday evening in May, three-and-a-half months after our arrival, I conducted my first worship service in the recreation room at Drum Hill. It was forty minutes long (by design) and well received by those in attendance. I had no idea that my son George, his wife Janet and their son Andrew (age twelve) planned to attend the service, but they did – and they have been there ever since. My husband Leo and Janet help with setting things up in the room and George and Andrew take part in every service. Now that my voice is less dependable, George does most of the talking, though I plan the service, including the sermon. We sit side by side and work so well together.

Each week the congregation – for that is what we have become – consists of six to ten people from "the outside," each one with a special connection to me, and about twenty faithful residents of Drum Hill, some of whom had not worshiped for years. The recreation room is "church" on Friday evenings. When the service is over, there is a hush; people don't want to leave. "Here I find the peace that passeth understanding," says one member. How could I possibly despise my illness when such wonderful results as these – and more – have ensued? I can't! To God be the glory!

Post Script:

When my friend Vallie read this essay, she said she was reminded of a song that asks the Lord to be glorified in our lives. Immediately I said, "What if we added a new verse:

'In my death, Lord, be glorified, I pray.' "

Do you think that verse would be well received? How does it sound to you? I am sure of this: it is a Christ-like prayer, exactly what Jesus was praying in John 12. Sentiments such as the above might help us see our deaths as normal and natural, as another opportunity to bring praise to God. Sounds good to me!

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Verna Kwiatkowski

www.vernakwiatkowski.com