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Glorification in John's Gospel: Not only the Cross

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“Glorification” in John’s Gospel: Not *only* the Cross

“⁵And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” John 17:5 (English Standard Version)

This note records some thoughts on what “glorification” means in this verse in John 17:5, and generally in John’s gospel. It suggests that, despite a tradition that has developed of reading it this way in evangelical circles, the “glorification” of the Lord Jesus in John is not always, or even usually, a reference to the **cross alone**. Instead, it is suggested that the concept of “glorification” of the Son of God in John’s gospel is a complex idea, and that the best way of summing up what it means is that it refers to the *whole sequence* of events whereby the Lord Jesus is crucified, rises from the dead, ascends to be with the Father in glory, and sends the Holy Spirit. Some references will be primarily to one aspect or another of this complex “glorification event”, and so in some cases it will be appropriate to say that what Jesus means when he speaks of being “glorified” is indeed his death on the cross; but in other cases it will mean something else. Each use will need to be determined by taking into account the context and meaning of the usage.

In particular, it is suggested that in John 17:5 Jesus’ prayer is **not** that he be taken to the cross viewed as a separate event- it is a prayer that he should undergo the whole process of cross/resurrection/ascension which will lead to him sharing in heaven the place of honour with his Father that has rightly been his since before the foundation of the world. Since this is the case, then his prayer in John 17:1 “glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you” will mean essentially the same thing: “bring about the events that need to take place so that you, the Father, will be glorified by eternal life being given to all those whom you have determined will share in this life” (see v 2). It is true to say that this prayer includes the implicit acceptance that these events will include the cross- so that this prayer is saying something very similar to the prayer in Gethsemane recorded in Luke 22:42: “yet, not my will but yours be done”. But the prayer also looks forward confidently to the fact that the Lord will raise his Son, the Messiah, from the dead, and bring him back to sit with him in the heavenly realm.

Full demonstration of these propositions would require more work, but I suggest that they follow from the following evidence of use of the words “glory” and “glorification” (and the related concepts of “being lifted up” or “exalted”) in John’s gospel (to which all verse references refer, unless otherwise specified).

1. The primary or foundational meaning of “glory” (*doxa*) is to do with recognition of the appropriate status and value that belongs to God and hence to the Son of God. In 1:14 we are told “we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹ This is the “the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (17:5). Jesus refers in 17:24 to “my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world”.

¹ Quotations from the ESV unless otherwise indicated.

While it has been shared with the Son, true and ultimate glory and worth belong to God the Father alone, and lies in his gift: see 5:44 "the glory that comes from the only God". Jesus does not seek glory that comes from men alone- 5:41 "I do not receive glory from people." The Pharisees were sinful, for "they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God."

2. Jesus the Son seeks in the end the glory of his Father- see 7:18, where he refers to himself as "the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him"; 8:50 "Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge." In 12:27-28 his prayer is: "[F]or this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."
3. But Jesus the Son of God, the Messiah, being glorified, achieves the ultimate glory of the Father. We know from 1 Cor 15:24-28 that this is a temporary state of affairs in one sense, for the Messiah will rule only until the day when "all things are subjected to him", when he will hand the Kingdom over to the Father. But in this interim period, God the Son being elevated to a position of power and rule works the glory of God the Father. So in 8:54 "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.'" The linkage of the glorification of the Father, and that of the Son, can be seen in the comment about the illness of Lazarus in 11:4: it is "for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." God's glory involves the Son of God being glorified. At the end of that story Jesus tells Martha: "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus proclaims the glory of God! See also 13:31: "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him." In 14:13: "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." In 17:1- "glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you."
4. So *when* do we see the glorification of God through the glorification of the Son? The gospel account suggests to us that there is an event, or set of events, after which it can be said that the Son has been glorified. In 7:39 we read that Jesus spoke of "the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because *Jesus was not yet glorified*." In 12:16 we read: "His disciples did not understand these things at first, but *when Jesus was glorified*, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him." So there is a point in time after which it can be said that Jesus "has been glorified". That time is probably after the moment when Jesus says in 12:23: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."
5. There are some comments which might even suggest that this glorification has occurred before Jesus finishes speaking to his disciples in the upper room: 13:31 "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him"; 17:4 "I *glorified* you on earth, having

accomplished the work that you gave me to do." But it seems clear that this is not so, because other comments look forward to a glorification not quite accomplished: 13:32 "If God is glorified in him, God *will* also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once"; 17:1 "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you."

6. In the end it seems to make most sense of all the data to conclude that the glorification of the Son of God is accomplished through the whole sequence of events of Jesus' miraculous works, his death for sins, his resurrection, and his ascension and giving of the Spirit.
 - a. That Jesus' **miraculous works** are part of him being glorified seems to be implied in 2:11 "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory". See also the references to God's glory being manifested in Lazarus' resurrection (eg 11:4 noted above.)
 - b. The **death** of the Lord Jesus is part of his glorification and glorifying God. Interestingly this is less clear than sometimes thought. The only explicit reference in John to a death being linked with the glory of God is that to Peter's in 21:9: "This he [Jesus] said to show by what kind of death he [Peter] was to glorify God." But there are other places where the point is made in slightly different words. In 12:23-24 we read: "²³And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." This is a clear indicator that the means by which the Son of Man would be glorified would be his death. (Although it should also be noted that the point of the saying is not the burial, but the subsequent fruit!) In 12:32-33: "³²'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' ³³He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die." The "kind of death" is a "lifting up" (referred to previously, of course, in 3:14-15: "¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.") The word for "lifting up" is particularly appropriate, as it not only refers to the cross, but the "exaltation" that will occur after the cross, when, having been raised, the Lord Jesus ascends to heaven to sit on the right hand of the Father in authority. (In this context note also that in 3:13, immediately before the reference to the serpent being lifted up, Jesus refers to the one who "has ascended into heaven".) So Don Carson comments in his commentary on ch 12 at p 444: "Jesus is not only 'lifted up' on the cross, he is 'lifted up' (ie exalted) to glory." But, this said, the cross is an essential aspect of the glorification, for it resounds to the glory of God that his beloved Son is willing to give his life for sinful people. Carson seems to get the balance right when he says at p 437:

It is not just that the shame of the cross is inevitably followed by the glory of the exaltation, but that the glory is already fully displayed in the shame.

- c. The **resurrection** from death of the Lord Jesus, however, and his **ascension**, is also an essential part of his glorification. The reference to the subsequent “fruit” of the death of the seed in 12:24 is particularly helpful here. If the Lord Jesus had stayed dead, he would not have been shown to be the Messiah. He would not have been able to rise to power and to send the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In 17:2, after praying for glorification, Jesus says: “you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.” That authority is honour and exaltation in splendour- the splendour that the Son enjoyed in eternity: “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” It is just worth stressing again that it seems unlikely that this particular prayer for “glory” can refer only to the cross- it is a reference to the place where the cross *leads*.
 - d. The final result of this glorification, the **giving of the Spirit** to God’s people to give them new hearts, and the power to take the message to the world, is implied in 16:14 “He [the Spirit] will glorify me”, and in the repeated assurances that it is for the benefit of the disciples that the Lord Jesus goes, so that in his exalted and kingly role he can distribute the gift of the Spirit (see 16:7; see for the narrated events Acts 2, and for theological explanation Eph 4:7-13). (See also 7:39 for the fact that the Spirit’s gift follows the glorification of the Son.)
7. And once the Son of God is glorified, we see that he is glorified by his people, and his people have the privilege of glorifying God the Father through their obedience to him: 15:8, 17:10. Indeed, as the Father shared his glory with the Son, we see in 17:22 that the Son shares his glory with his people! “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one.” As his glorification involved the suffering of the cross, of course, so will theirs involve suffering and persecution- eg 17:14 “the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.” But in the end Jesus’ prayer is that they will see the eternal glory which he enjoyed, together with him: 17:24 “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

In this brief note it has been impossible to do justice to the marvels unpacked by the concept of “glory” in the Gospel of John. But hopefully it will be agreed that it is a complex idea that sees a climax in the obedience of the Son of God on the cross,

but its ultimate fulfillment in his resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father, having done the work that his Father gave him. It has been God’s purpose since the creation of the world to see a heaven and earth filled with people in his image who love and glorify him. He could not do that while these people were tainted with sin and unforgiven. The great Work that the Son had to do was to give eternal life to that group of people, by offering his own life as a substitute and sacrifice for sin on the cross, and then rising to life to rule them, and to send the Spirit to both give them new life and empower the further proclamation of the message! This, after all, is eternal life: to know God, and to know Jesus, whom God has sent. (17:3) When Jesus prays in 17:5 that the Father “glorify him”, he is praying for and committing himself to that whole sequence of events of which the cross is the first, though not the last, step.

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