

Foreword by

MATT CHANDLER

GLORY



HUNGER

God, the Gospel, and
Our Quest for Something More

JR Vassar

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Glory Hunger: God, the Gospel, and Our Quest for Something More

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To Ginger,
spice of my life,
follower of Jesus,
supportive wife,
invested mother,
and hospitable friend

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Foreword

I find in my heart an insidious desire to be recognized and applauded. I work hard, I have some natural giftings, and I want people to notice this and say something to me and to others about how awesome I am. Notice that I used the word *awesome* there. If I had typed the word *glorious*, then all of us would have raised an eyebrow. In fact, as I read over the sentence and replace the word *awesome* with *glorious*, I feel a sharp stab of conviction, and my legs feel weak, and I feel as though I am in danger. Glory is ultimately God's, and though I might reflect it, any glory I have is my creator's, not mine. JR is right when he says that we all possess a legitimate glory hunger. I feel it in me, and it's broken badly.

Here's the thing about my insidious desire and why I am writing the foreword to this book: I hate that the desire to be recognized and applauded is in me, and although it varies in intensity and frequency, I must constantly be aware of it so that I might, by the grace of God, suppress and confess it. In my saner moments I am well aware that I am fragile and that God has not made me the hinge upon which his kingdom will swing. But sin isn't sane. I know what the Bible says about the proud. I am almost haunted by John 3:30, which says, "He must increase, but I must decrease," and by Psalm 138:6, which says, "Though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar." I want the fight within me to be over. I want to be aware of the pull in my heart toward being self-exalting and therefore God-belittling.

I have learned in this fight that certain battles will be fought until Jesus, who won us all when he won the war, returns. That's

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what makes this book such a gem. It's ammunition for the battle that will rage in me again. At the time of writing this foreword, my heart is in a good place; it is tuned in, and my mind is crisp and clear about who God is. Right now I have a healthy picture of myself and my meager work ethic and giftings. I also know that it won't be long until a skirmish erupts again, and I will need the truth of God's Word and the insight of godly men like JR Vassar who are in the fight with us and have some expertise that will serve and help each of us as we seek to decrease while Jesus increases.

Matt Chandler

Introduction

Built for Glory

My oldest daughter, Neeley, will tell you that, to date, her greatest moment in life happened on the playground in the fifth grade. A few years have passed, and she is still talking about it. Admittedly, my daughter is not the most athletic kid, but this was her one shining moment. On this particular day, the physical education teacher scheduled a kickball game. Neeley was playing just behind second base. Toward the end of the game a student on the opposing team kicked a ball right to her. It was lifted sky-high, and Neeley, summoning all the courage she could in the moment, drifted directly under the ball, I'm sure with her eyes closed. It miraculously landed in her arms. She still relives that moment, but in her imaginative replay, all her friends pick her up on their shoulders and carry her around the playground chanting, "Nee-ley! Nee-ley! Nee-ley!"

Glory hunger. We all have it. It begins as kids, when we have visions similar to my daughter's of great exploits, with the attention and applause that accompany them. We want to stand out and feel significant, and we are terrified by the prospect of obscurity. We imagine heroic feats like winning the race, scoring the winning touchdown, or taking one deep in the bottom of the ninth with the bases loaded and down by three runs—full count, of course. No one ever dreams of giving up the homer, just of hitting it. Others grow up dreaming of taking the stage, starring in the lead role or winning *American Idol*. Little girls see themselves in every Disney flick and imagine one day being prized and swept off their feet by a handsome prince.

Maybe that doesn't describe you at all. You may never imagine yourself winning the race or securing the victory for your team or attracting the attention of a cheering crowd. You may be a shy wallflower who hates the spotlight and shrinks from the attention. But that does not mean you are not hungry for glory. You may be just as glory hungry as the Olympic athlete. For you, perhaps the pursuit of glory is less about achieving exploits and more about avoiding embarrassment. Maybe for you, seizing glory means sidestepping humiliation. You don't care about winning the race and taking the podium; you just don't want to trip and come in last. The applause of the crowd is not the prize for you; the prize is avoiding their jeers.

A passion for praise or a fear of humiliation—it's all glory hunger. As we grow out of our childhood dreams, our glory hunger only intensifies and moves into more mature domains: social status, academic exploits, career advancement, wealth, marriage, and family. These all become means of "making it," and making it is an effort to satiate our glory hunger.

This glory hunger is not new. It is why ancient kings waged war and rode out into battle. It is captured in the epic poem *Beowulf*, where the sentiment of the warrior is, "Let whoever can, win glory before death." And glory he wins, even as he is dealt a mortal blow. To kings, death with glory is better than life without it. Tolkien depicts this in *The Lord of the Rings*. As his army at Helms Deep is outnumbered by the enemies of Isengard, King Theoden addresses his troops:

Now is the hour come, Riders of the Mark, sons of Eorl! Foes and fire are before you, and your homes far behind. Yet, though you fight upon an alien field, the glory that you reap there shall be your own for ever. Oaths ye have taken: now fulfil them all, to lord and land and league of friendship!

For the ancient warrior, death was better than humiliation. Yet we are no different. We preserve this instinct in our figures of

speech—“I was so embarrassed I wanted to die”—even though we don’t really mean it. Embarrassing moments make us cringe. Even years later when we are all grown up and should be over them, their memory still brings a rush of red to our cheeks. No one wants a steady diet of humiliation. We are glory hungry.

We share this hunger not only with ancient kings but with God himself. *Glory* is a biblical term. The dominant words for *glory* in the biblical text are the Hebrew *kabod* in the Old Testament and the Greek *doxa* in the New Testament. Literally, the word *kabod* speaks of fatness. It carries the idea of being weighty or heavy. It can be used literally to speak of the size of a person or an object, but more often it carries the idea of significance. The point is not the girth of something but its greatness. In this sense, to be weighty is to be consequential or impressive, possessing grandness or splendor.

When the writers of Scripture speak of the “glory of God,” they are communicating his incomparable greatness and beauty. God set his glory “above the heavens” (Ps. 8:1), and he is passionate about his glory. The Psalms are replete with commands to praise the Lord and to ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name. To give glory to something means to deem it impressive and to attribute worth to it as something that possesses significance and importance. It is right of God to command that we give him glory. He is more worthy and more impressive than anyone or anything, and ultimately he alone deserves worship. He is the glorious one, and when we truly come to grips with his glory and greatness, we can’t help but respond with praise.

In fact, we are hardwired to ascribe glory and praise to what we deem impressive. We feel wonder over a breathtaking vista, or shock and awe when our bones are rattled by rolling thunder. Giving glory is a natural human response to witnessing greatness, which is why our world is infatuated with celebrities. We are addicted to greatness. And when we see it, we ascribe worth and value to it.

Our glory hunger is not just a desire to see and respond to greatness. It is a desire to possess greatness and have others respond to it. Deep down we have a desire not only to ascribe worth to an object but also to have others ascribe worth to us. We want to be perceived as impressive and be affirmed as significant and important. Deep down we want glory. And here is why: we were made for it. We were made for glory. This hunger for glory is universal because it's part of humanity's intended design. What we will see on the following pages is that something has gone horribly wrong to twist this legitimate longing. Though our glory hunger has made us slaves to the applause of people, God has built us for glory and intends to satiate our hunger for it.

Glory in a Garden

In January of 2005 my family and I moved to New York City. We were not there long, when I received a jury duty summons. Welcome to New York. I had never served on a jury but had read enough John Grisham and had seen enough *Law & Order* to know that this could be really thrilling. After going through the screening process, I was selected as juror number thirteen—the alternate. I was to sit through the entire trial and be prepared to weigh in on the verdict in case one of the twelve jurors got knocked off by a cartel member or got the flu. No one caught a bullet or a bug, so I sat through three days of trial and in the end was dismissed. I missed out on deliberating with the jury and handing down a verdict on an accused man.

During the ordeal, I watched the man on trial. His head was down during most of it, but occasionally he looked up at us, the jury of his supposed peers. I'm sure he was searching for some hint of hope in our eyes that we might declare him innocent. It also dawned on me that I'm not much different from that man. Though I don't have a criminal record, I sit on trial every day in the court of human opinion, craving a positive verdict to be handed down on me from a jury of my peers. I'm constantly stacking up evidence, trying to sway the court to bestow upon me its approval. I argue my case for people's acceptance and appreciation. I look to other people for any trace of hope or hint that I am perceived as important. I am

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hungry for recognition, affirmation, applause, and love—to hear a *yes* spoken over me by everyone, sometimes anyone. And I fear hearing a *no* spoken over my life. With this desire for approval and acceptance comes an accompanying fear of rejection. I despise the thought of being invisible, unappreciated, or unloved.

I'm glory hungry. We all are, and we have been since the beginning when our first parents were placed in the garden of Eden.

Adam and Eve were the crowning achievement of God's creation. That is a stunning statement when you consider what God made as a warm-up. Galaxies, quasar clusters spanning four billion light-years, stars and constellations, sun, moon, oceans, mountains, and vast canyons, all crescendo in the triune God saying, "Now, let's turn it up a notch and make something in our image."

God created Adam and Eve so together they might bear the Trinitarian image. He filled them with his breath, blessed them, and gave them commands that served as directives for their collective life with him. As image bearers, God commanded them to multiply, filling the earth with his image, and to subdue the earth by exercising dominion over it. With these commands came three colossal privileges that set them apart from the rest of creation.

First, they would relate to God in a unique way. Adam and Eve enjoyed an up-close-and-personal relationship with God. Every day, at sunset, God would visit them and invite them to take a walk in the cool breeze (Gen. 3:8). God was to Adam and Eve a father and intimate friend, a privilege they enjoyed as one made in God's image. They found their significance, purpose, and joy in belonging to him and being with him. God delighted in them, and they delighted in him in the unbroken fellowship of intimacy.

Second, they would reflect God. Adam and Eve must have been stunningly beautiful. Their proximity to God would have made them radiant. Similar to how Moses in later generations would

commune with God face-to-face, absorbing the glow of God's glory and reflecting it to Israel (Ex. 34:29–35), Adam and Eve shone with the radiance of God's glory as they lived in a face-to-face relationship with him. Not only did they reflect the visible glory of God, but also they reflected his attributes as those made in his likeness. In their state of innocence they possessed uncorrupted goodness that made the beauty of God's holiness and love tangibly evident in their interactions with one another.

Third, they were to represent God, Adam serving as God's deputy with Eve by his side, together carrying out God's purposes for his creation. In Genesis 2:20 God delegates to Adam the responsibility of naming the animals. In the ancient Near East, to name something was to exercise control and authority over it, so by naming the animals, Adam was executing his rule over them. Adam and Eve were to cultivate the garden of God, creating culture and enhancing the beauty of all that God had made. As his image bearers they were set apart from the rest of creation and given unparalleled dignity and status. They were his intimate ones, precious and commissioned with divine purpose. These unique ones eclipsed any other work of God's hand. Their response was to live in humble gratitude to God, glorify God, and enjoy him for his perfections. They were to serve him as they carried out his directives for their lives. And as the scene closes in the first chapter of the Scriptures, God looks upon all he has made, Adam and Eve his proudest making, and hands down the verdict "very good."

Psalm 8 is a song that celebrates this moment in creation. It highlights God's special attention toward mankind as his pride and joy:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

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Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas. (vv. 3–8)

In the garden God bestowed glory upon Adam and Eve. In spite of all the beauty and wonder put on display in the heavens, God's attention is riveted on the man and his wife. He set honor upon them, giving them an intimate place of prominence and purpose and voicing his affirmation over their lives.

Think of the greatest compliment you have ever been given. It might have been about your appearance or personality or some great accomplishment. Compliments do something to us. They bring a smile to our face and puff up our chest. They make us feel important. Now, imagine the explosion of joy and sense of worth that must have swelled up in the hearts of Adam and Eve as they hear, "Very good." It's one thing for your significant other to praise you for your appearance, or a colleague to compliment your work, but to have the God of the cosmos announce over the totality of your life and being, "You are very good!" is an incomparable compliment. What an amazing declaration. The *yes* of God, saying, "I approve of you! I delight in you! I am thrilled by you! I'm so glad that you are here and that you are mine!" What a verdict.

And Adam and Eve gloried in that verdict. It was the most important thing about them and the greatest thing that could be said of them. The end of Genesis 2 tells us that they were "naked and were not ashamed" (v. 25). In their state of innocence, with the pleasure of God over their lives and his approval ringing in their

ears, they had nothing to hide and nothing to prove. As image bearers who related to God, reflected God, and represented God, they were the apple of his eye, and he was supreme in their hearts, and everything was very good.

This is the remarkable state we were created to live in—the glorious God crowning us with praise and approval as his image bearers. This is why there is a primal longing in all of us to be visible and feel valuable. We want to be lauded and loved. We were made to live in the privileged place of intimacy with God, reflecting the radiance of his glory, with everything under our feet. But things are not as they are supposed to be. Something has gone horribly wrong.

If the opening chapters of Genesis were put to a soundtrack, the music would shift to a dark and minor key in chapter 3. As the chapter opens we are made aware that something is amiss. A serpent suddenly appears, who is described as crafty. The New Testament unmasks this Serpent as our great enemy, Satan (Rev. 12:9). In his hatred for God, Satan went after those made in God's image, the part of creation that mattered most to God.

He approached Eve, and Eve engaged him in conversation. Satan sought to discredit God and convince Eve that God was somehow holding out on her. In spite of her glorious position and the crown that God had placed upon her, she began to long for a promotion. She could be more than a creature made in the image of God; she could become just like God. If she took of the forbidden fruit, she could have open eyes and Godlike discernment, knowing the difference between good and evil. Eve began to believe that she could have a glory—a glory of her own—that surpassed what had been bestowed upon her.

At the heart of this temptation was the pursuit of radical independence from God and rogue glory. Eve bit on the temptation and led Adam to join her in this treason, reaching for Godlike status.

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Immediately Satan's promise was realized. Their eyes were opened, and they saw the sharp distinction between good and evil—God was good, and they were evil. Their attempt to secure glory independent of God left them in a foreign state of guilt. The ones who held their heads high, crowned with the “very good” of God, now hung their heads in shame.

The rest of the chapter shows us that though Adam and Eve maintained the image of God, there was a tragic diminishing of that image and a loss of the glory that had crowned them. Instead of relating to God in intimate love and joyful dependence, they hid from God in shame and fear. God banished them from the garden, no longer walking with them in intimate face-to-face fellowship (Gen. 3:24). Instead of reflecting the beauty of God's perfections, they had become corrupt in their nature. Augustine of Hippo described their new, fallen condition as *incurvatus in se*, a turning in on oneself.

Adam and Eve curved inward and were no longer living toward God and one another in love but were bent on living for themselves. Their relationship with one another had become marked by a selfish grasp and struggle for power, the woman desiring the husband's position and the husband ruling over his wife (v. 16). The great privilege of representing God in creation was retained but frustrated by the disintegration of creation. Filling the earth and subduing it was now to be a painful, sorrowful, and difficult process (vv. 16–18). They suffered the loss of greatness, becoming weak and susceptible to their environment, and they would now experience the greatest of all inglorious events: death. The very ground that Adam was to subdue as God's representative would now subdue him as he returned to the dust from which he had been formed (v. 19). All creation, including Adam and Eve, had fallen under the curse of God.

The “very good” was vandalized, and Adam and Eve experienced the fracturing of the image of God within them. They were

still valuable and loved as God's creation, possessing indescribable dignity and worth, but they had lost what their hearts were made to possess. God's gavel came down with a new verdict. They were guilty, cursed, alienated, exiled, and sentenced to death. They lost the smile and commendation of God and were separated from him by their willful rebellion.

This is the world we were born into. We were made God's image bearers, having intrinsic dignity and worth. We are not worthless or colossal wastes of space. Humans possess profound significance and should value life, our own and everyone's. But, what we were made to be and experience was tragically lost by our first parents when they sinned. We have joined them in that rebellion and share their guilt. The Scripture tells us in Romans 3:23 that all have sinned and continually fall short of the glory of God. We are cut off from the present glory that God intends for us, because of our rebellion. As his image bearers we were made to walk with him in intimate friendship, but we are alienated from him. We were made to hear the commendation of God spoken over us, but we are condemned before God. The beauty we were made to reflect is obscured by our inner corruption. And the greatness of ruling over creation with God is frustrated by our weaknesses, suffering, and death. Our greatest need is to have that glory restored to us. Deep down, it is the unnamed ache of every life. We need to have his commendation over us, his image renewed in us, and greatness reclaimed for us.

That is the legitimate glory hunger we all possess—to be restored to a glorious image and crowned with honor by God. Every glory-hunger pain we have for approval, acceptance, or achievement betrays a greater pain that exists in all of us. Our craving to be visible and valuable to people is really a legitimate and primal pang for what we are meant to have with the ultimate person. Glory hunger is the passion and ache we are born with to have that “very good”

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spoken over our lives. You can see that ache in the heart of every little boy who says, “Daddy, aren’t I fast?” Or in little girls who say, “Daddy, am I pretty?” We never grow out of it. We exhaust ourselves for the A, the starting position on the team, or the corner office so that we will know in our eyes and in everyone else’s that we are very good.

And though it is a legitimate hunger, it has illegitimate and idolatrous expressions. We attempt to satiate that hunger in futile ways by creating an image for ourselves that others will assess as “very good.” Just as Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together to cover up their lost glory, we continue to sew fig leaves in hopes of compensating for our lost glory. We hope to be praised for the fig leaves, but fig leaves wither, and the praise is never enough. We think if we can string together enough accolades, accomplishments, possessions, beauty, physique, intelligence, or exploits that we will build an image upon which the court of human opinion might render a positive verdict and satisfy the glory hunger that gnaws at us.

One of the privileges of pastoring in New York City was regularly receiving the ministry of Tim Keller. One of his classic illustrations deals with our glory hunger. In the movie *Rocky*, Rocky Balboa is talking to his future wife, Adrian, about the impossibility of beating the champion Apollo Creed. Rocky knows he can’t win, so his goal is to survive, to go the distance and to stand when the final bell rings. For Rocky, this is the one thing that will prove to him and to everyone else that he isn’t “just another bum from the neighborhood.”

We are glory deficient and feel it. And no accomplishment or airbrushing will ever make up the deficit. Our passion to be visible and valuable, to create an unfading image that will carry a lasting verdict of very good, is beyond our reach. And now the natural trajectory of fallen humanity is to seek that lost glory in the praises

and affirmation of other people. Like the builders at the Tower of Babel of Genesis 11, who literally tried to build a name for themselves by constructing something great that would gain them fame, we strive to save ourselves from a felt insignificance by making a name for ourselves. We construct an image and build up a reputation so that we will know, along with everyone else, that we aren't just another bum in the universe.

Yet there is hope. Even in the judgment God pronounces upon Adam and Eve, there is a promise that one is coming who will crush the head of the Serpent and overturn this tragic situation (Gen. 3:16). God will make a way to renew his commendation over us, restore his image in us, and reclaim lost greatness for us. But our reaching for glory will not bring about this transformation. No, God will come to us, and it will be his work, not ours. It is reaching that robbed us of this glory in the first place. Grasping for glory is the one sure way to miss it.

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