



Meditations
on
The Glory of Christ



John Owen

CHRISTIAN HERITAGE





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THIS EDITION

The Glory of Christ was first published in 1684. Three hundred and twenty years later, those who are not fluent in archaic English may struggle with some of the language in the original edition. Owen uses certain words now so rare that they are not listed in the largest single-volume dictionaries. His most likely intended meanings for some of those words are therefore displayed near their first occurrence. In addition, words such as ‘unto’ become ‘to’ and ‘doth consist’ becomes ‘consists’.

Beyond this, the text is unchanged except where the following features, designed to make the book more user-friendly, required minor changes:

1. Subheadings, sometimes extending to four levels and largely based on the original numeric structure, have been inserted. The contents pages include primary and secondary subheadings to aid navigation.
2. Sentences enumerating more than five or six items, lists of more than one sentence, selected notes, and some ‘short digressions’ are broken off from the main text and displayed.
3. The style and placement of biblical references has been made consistent with modern practice and Roman numerals have been changed to Arabic.

Philip S. Ross





Contents

This Edition	13
Introduction	15
An Oxfordshire Teenager	15
Faith and Family	16
An Influential Ministry	17
The Glory of Christ	18
<i>Focus of His Early Ministry</i>	19
<i>Rich Nuances of Jesus' Words</i>	20
<i>A Preacher's Bonus</i>	21
Making the Most of Owen	22
Preface	23
Christ—Humanity's Only Boast	24
<i>Crowns us with Glory and Dignity</i>	24
<i>Secures the Union Between God and Our Nature</i>	26
<i>Gives Our Nature Victory over all Opposition</i>	27
<i>His Ascension Declares Our Nature Fit for Glory</i>	27
Meditate upon the Glory of Christ	28
<i>For Encouragement in the Trials of this Life</i>	28
<i>For Comfort as Death Approaches</i>	31
I The Explication of the Text	41
'That They May Behold My Glory'	42
<i>The Greatest Goal and Privilege of Believers</i>	42
<i>Unbelievers Oppose Christ's Glory</i>	43
<i>Christians must Testify to His Glory</i>	44
The Ways of Beholding Christ's Glory	44
<i>By Faith or by Sight</i>	45
<i>Now or Never</i>	45





6 THE GLORY OF CHRIST

<i>Not with the Naked Eye</i>	47
<i>Diligently</i>	48
The Benefits of Beholding Christ's Glory	49
<i>It Will Prepare Us for Heaven</i>	49
<i>We Will Be Transformed into His Likeness</i>	50
<i>Satisfaction and Peace Will Result</i>	50
<i>It Is the Source of Everlasting Blessing</i>	50
2 The Only Representative of God to the Church	53
'The Image of the Invisible God'	53
The Blindness of Unbelievers	55
<i>Part of Sin's Punishment</i>	56
<i>The Source of all Evil</i>	57
How May We See God's Glory?	59
<i>The Desire of Saints in all Ages of the Church</i>	60
<i>In Christ Alone</i>	61
Reasons to Behold Christ's Glory	64
<i>It Is a Privilege and a Duty</i>	65
<i>It Is not a Secondary Concern</i>	67
<i>Help for the Lukewarm</i>	69
God Glorified in Christ	72
<i>His Glory is Great in Salvation</i>	72
<i>Faith in Christ is Faith in God</i>	73
<i>Human Wisdom Disorientates</i>	73
3 The Mysterious Constitution of His Person	75
Two Distinct Natures—One Person Forever	75
<i>Satan's Ruin; the Church's Foundation</i>	76
<i>Promised and Prefigured in the Old Testament</i>	77
How to Stimulate Contemplation	78
<i>Do Not Waste Your Thoughts</i>	78
<i>Study the Scripture</i>	81
<i>Be Disciplined in Meditation</i>	84
<i>Take Every Opportunity to Think of Christ</i>	85
<i>Admire, Adore, and Give Thanks</i>	88
4 His Condescension in the Office of Mediator	93
Great Condescension	95
<i>Infinite Transcendence</i>	95
<i>Infinite Self-Sufficiency</i>	96
Exceptional Condescension	97
<i>Wrong Teaching Rejected</i>	97
<i>The Truth Declared</i>	101



	The Mystery of God's Wisdom	103
	<i>A Sanctuary and a Stone of Stumbling</i>	103
	<i>The Principal Act of Faith and Motive to Self-Denial</i>	105
5	His Love in the Office of Mediator	107
	The Nature of Christ's Love	107
	<i>Determined by the Father's Love</i>	107
	<i>Realizes the Purpose of the Father's Love</i>	108
	How to Taste Christ's Love	112
	<i>Get Your Mind into Shape</i>	112
	<i>Be Specific in Your Thoughts</i>	113
6	The Discharge of His Mediatory Office	115
	He Obeyed Freely and Willingly	115
	<i>He Did It for Us</i>	116
	<i>Supreme Obedience to the Law</i>	117
	<i>Against Unparalleled Opposition</i>	117
	<i>The Lord of All Became Obedient</i>	117
	His Suffering—A Spring of Glory	118
	<i>'I Will Put Myself in Your Condition'</i>	119
	<i>Folly to the Perishing; Wisdom to Believers</i>	120
7	His Exaltation After the Accomplishment of the Work of Mediation	121
	'The Glory that Should Follow'	121
	<i>Christ Prayed that His Disciples May See It</i>	122
	<i>His Brilliance Is Uneclipsed</i>	122
	<i>The Human Nature of Christ is Glorified</i>	123
	<i>He Is Exalted Above All Creation</i>	125
	<i>The Father's Approbation Magnifies Christ's Glory</i>	125
	<i>His Unique Glory in Redemption is Fully Manifest</i>	125
	Revelation Not Imagination	126
	<i>Have You Seen His Glory?</i>	126
	<i>Put the Concerns of Christ First</i>	127
8	Representations of the Glory of Christ Under the Old Testament	129
	The System of Religious Worship	129
	The Song of Solomon	130
	Appearances in Human Form	131
	Prophetic Visions	132
	The Incarnation Revealed	133
	Promises, Prophecies, and Predictions	134
	Metaphorical Expressions	134

9 His Intimate Conjunction with the Church	137
It Was Just that Christ Suffered	137
<i>Some May Suffer Justly for the Sins of Others</i>	139
<i>Divine Justice Is not Erratic</i>	139
<i>Christ and the Church Share the Closest Bond</i>	140
Some Effects of Christ's Sin-bearing	144
<i>He Is Resplendent in Justice and Mercy</i>	145
<i>He Is Glorious in His Fulfilment of the Law</i>	146
10 The Communication of Himself to Believers	147
Divine Communication from the Beginning	148
<i>The Essence of God's Glory</i>	148
<i>God Created for His Own Glory</i>	148
<i>Everything Depends on God</i>	148
<i>His Glory Made Plain in His Workmanship</i>	149
<i>Three Persons—Equal in Power and Glory</i>	149
Divine Communication in the New Creation	150
<i>The Purpose of the New Creation</i>	150
<i>Christ is the Primary Recipient</i>	150
<i>The Sole Repository for the Church's Needs</i>	150
<i>The Riches in Christ's Person Imparted in His Office</i>	151
<i>God Set Apart the Substance of the Church</i>	151
<i>From the Father; through the Son; by the Spirit</i>	152
<i>The Spirit Animates the Elect</i>	153
<i>Life Flows Incessant from Above</i>	153
How We Receive Christ	153
<i>By the Father's Sovereign Grace</i>	154
<i>By the Acts of Christ</i>	155
11 The Recapitulation of All Things in Him	159
The Work of Divine Wisdom	159
<i>God Is Infinite Being and Goodness</i>	160
<i>Nothing Can Be Added to God</i>	160
<i>His First Outward Work</i>	161
<i>God's Creative Properties Preserve Creation</i>	161
<i>Two Families—Men on Earth; Angels in Heaven</i>	161
<i>God—Immediate Head of Both Families</i>	162
<i>Sin Wrought Pandemonium</i>	162
<i>Angels Rejected; A Remnant of Mankind Elected</i>	163
<i>Restoration into One Family</i>	163
<i>Immediately Dependent on One Common Head</i>	163
<i>Christ Is Head of the New Family</i>	164

<i>God Communicates Solely Through Him</i>	164
<i>How He Brings Angels and Men Together</i>	164
A Vista of the Incomprehensible	165
<i>None But Jesus Could Bear the Weight of Glory</i>	165
<i>All the Concerns of God's Glory Centre in Christ</i>	165
<i>He Restores the Glory of God in Creation</i>	167
<i>He Expresses all the Treasure of Divine Wisdom</i>	167
<i>He Provides Security from Ruin</i>	168
12 Differences Between Beholding the Glory of Christ by Faith in this World and by Sight in Heaven	169
The View from this World	170
<i>A Mirror Image</i>	170
<i>Through a Telescope</i>	171
<i>Obscured by Dark Sayings</i>	171
<i>A Wall Needs to Be Demolished</i>	172
The View from Heaven	174
<i>'Face to Face'</i>	174
<i>With Eyes to See Him as He Is</i>	175
Press on Towards Christ	181
Learn from Old Testament Saints	183
The Marks of a Hypocritical Profession	186
13 The Second Difference Between Faith and Sight	189
Why Christ Hides from Us	191
Discerning Christ's Withdrawal	192
<i>Growth in Grace Decreases</i>	192
<i>A Sense of His Love is Lost</i>	197
Faith Interrupted and Obstructed	202
<i>Passions and Desires Blind the Mind</i>	203
<i>Evil Cravings Increase; Faith Weakens</i>	205
<i>Satan Does not Give Over</i>	206
An Uninterrupted View	208
<i>Our Minds Made Perfect</i>	208
<i>We Will Walk By Sight</i>	209
<i>No Dark Nights</i>	210
<i>Our Eyes Will not Be Dim</i>	211
14 Other Differences Between Faith in this World and Sight in Heaven	213
The Partial Will Pass Away	213
<i>Scripture—the Horizon of Faith</i>	214



10 THE GLORY OF CHRIST

<i>Heaven Has no Limits</i>	215
The Different Effects of Faith and Sight	216
<i>Sight is Totally Transforming</i>	216
<i>The Work of Faith Is Imperfect</i>	219
<i>Sight Brings Perfect Rest</i>	220
<i>Faith Is Sanctifying, not Glorifying</i>	221

Part II

1 An Exhortation to Such as Are Not Yet Partakers of Christ	227
Reasons to Close with Christ	228
<i>Consider Your Latter End</i>	228
<i>Do Not Make Presumptions</i>	229
<i>Be Convinced of Your Woeful Condition</i>	229
<i>Jesus Has Given You Many Invitations</i>	231
<i>Unbelief Makes Christ a Deceiver</i>	232
<i>Christ Cannot Save Unbelieving Sinners</i>	233
<i>Coming to Christ Glorifies God</i>	234
<i>All His Glory Will Be Yours</i>	235
<i>Do Not Out-Sin the Devil</i>	235
<i>Today Is the Day of Salvation</i>	236
<i>Christ Has Lingered for You</i>	236
Shelters of Unbelief	237
<i>'What Do I Still Lack?'</i>	237
<i>'I Can Make Nothing of It'</i>	239
<i>'Now Is Not the Best Time'</i>	241
<i>'A Clean Break Is too Severe'</i>	243
<i>'Believers Are no Better than Me'</i>	244
2 The Way and Means of the Recovery of Spiritual Decays and of Obtaining Fresh Springs of Grace	247
Grace Thrives Towards the End	247
<i>The Righteous Flourish</i>	249
<i>An Autumn Spring</i>	252
Decay and Deliverance	253
<i>Spiritual Life Entails Growth</i>	254
<i>Believers Sometimes Fail</i>	259
<i>Dig up the Root of Evil</i>	263
<i>Curing the Sickness</i>	272





CONTENTS 11

Collecting the Fruit of the Promise	281
<i>Nothing Without Christ</i>	281
<i>By Faith Alone</i>	282
<i>With a Steady View of Christ's Glory</i>	282
<i>The Course of Recovery</i>	283





INTRODUCTION

Sinclair B. Ferguson



John Owen, author of *The Glory of Christ*, was undoubtedly the finest English-speaking theologian of his time. Even today, it can still be claimed he was perhaps the greatest theologian to have graced church history in England. To read any of his works is to be introduced to a mind that soared to the heights of Trinitarian theology, penetrated deeply into the heart of the gospel, plumbed the depths of human sinfulness and grasped the wonder of God's grace. He was a pastoral theologian *par excellence*. To read his works is inevitably to come to the conclusion that much contemporary Christian literature seems like wood, hay and stubble by comparison with the gold, silver and precious stones with which this master builder worked.



AN OXFORDSHIRE TEENAGER

Owen was born at Stadhampton, near Oxford, in 1616, the second son of Henry Owen, the local vicar. Educated first in a small grammar school, his immense intellectual ability must have been apparent early in his life. He entered the University of Oxford at the age of twelve and graduated with a BA in 1632 (aged either fifteen or sixteen!). A lifetime later would see him bequeath to the future church materials that now fill twenty-four volumes each around 600 pages in length.

Life was not all study for Owen. In his teens, he threw the javelin; he was musical, particularly enjoying playing the lute. Nevertheless, towards the end of his life he lamented that

elements of his ill health were the result of the indifference to his physical well-being in earlier days—in particular deliberately depriving himself of sleep to permit more time for study (the College day began with a Latin sermon at 6 am). There can be little doubt that in his youth he was driven to pursue great learning—a pursuit in which he obviously enjoyed considerable success.

Owen later became a master scholar, writing and lecturing in Latin as well as English, commanding encyclopaedic learning in a variety of theological disciplines. He was a consummate intellectual, but by no means an ‘ivory-tower theologian’. As was said of John Calvin before him, he became a theologian in order to be a better pastor, and throughout his writings it is clear that the heartbeat of his life was not ultimately the pursuit of learning for its own sake, but a desire to know, to love and to serve Jesus Christ.

FAITH AND FAMILY

We know relatively little of an intimate nature about Owen’s personal life and habits. Like many of his Puritan contemporaries he may well have kept a personal journal—but like them also insisted on its destruction at the time of his death. Only occasionally, even in his correspondence, are we given an insight into his domestic life. But occasionally his biographers are able to give us a glimpse of the inner workings of his soul.

Having been born and reared in an English vicarage with deep Puritan sympathies, Owen must have learned the message of the Christian gospel from his infancy. But like some others who have ‘drunk in godliness with their mother’s milk’ (as John Calvin once aptly put it in reference to Timothy) his own faith flourished only after a period of some personal struggle.

Following his university studies and a period serving as a domestic chaplain, Owen moved to London in 1642. An early biography suggests that for several years he had struggled with melancholy and consequently lacked a sense of assurance. But soon after his arrival in the capital he was to have an experience that would leave its mark on the rest of his life.

Owen had gone one Sunday, accompanied by a cousin, to hear the famous Edmund Calamy preach at St Mary’s, Aldermanbury, only to be disappointed that a substitute was

to occupy the pulpit that day. Yet, in the providence of God, the anonymous preacher's sermon, on the words of Jesus after stilling the storm, 'Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith' (Matt. 8: 26 *Geneva Bible*), were the means of bringing Owen to a settled assurance of faith.

During the next forty years, Owen rose to great public prominence in ecclesiastical and national life. But prominence is no guardian from what his contemporary William Shakespeare made Hamlet so eloquently describe as 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. While he enjoyed thirty-one years of marriage to Mary Rooke, and together they had eleven children, only one of them survived into adult life. Personally and politically, he knew high points and low points.

AN INFLUENTIAL MINISTRY

Called to the ministry he served parishes at Fordham in Essex and later at Coggeshall, soon coming to public notice in one of the most tumultuous periods in British history. He was only thirty years old when he first preached before Parliament. Later, at the still tender age of thirty-two, having probably witnessed the public execution of Charles I in January 1649, he was the appointed preacher before Parliament on the following day. It was not long before he was on relatively intimate terms with some of the most significant figures in the body-politic, including Oliver Cromwell. He became Dean of Christ Church, Oxford and in 1652, University Vice-Chancellor.

The heady days of the Cromwellian period passed within the decade. Owen's star was by that time already in the descent, since he had opposed moves to make Cromwell king. From 1660 until 1683, his service was largely of an unofficial nature, writing and ministering privately, until the last decade of his life when it was possible for ministers with his Puritan convictions to serve churches in a more public way. This he did in the then 'quiet village of Ealing' in London until his death in 1683.

Owen was an intellectual, a scholar, an academic leader, a figure moving in the most influential circles. He was sufficiently influential to have his name linked with various plots—including one to bring down Richard Cromwell. One of the most attractive stories about Owen, however, underlines that he had a deeper passion than either political influence or the



pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Asked on one occasion by the King why he went to hear an uneducated tinker like John Bunyan preach, he gave the wonderful and memorable reply, 'Could I possess the tinker's abilities for preaching, please Your Majesty, I would gladly relinquish all my learning.'

Owen was almost certainly one of the very first people ever to read Bunyan's immortal work *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It was at Owen's suggestion that Bunyan took his manuscript to his own publisher, Nathaniel Ponder. The rest, as they say, is history. Ponder had such a best seller on his hands that he soon became known as 'Bunyan Ponder'!

THE GLORY OF CHRIST

These incidents give us an important clue to Owen's deep spirituality, as do the words spoken by his assistant David Clarkson in his sermon at Owen's funeral:

I need not tell you of this who knew him, that it was his design to promote holiness in the life and exercise of it...He was a burning and a shining light, and you for a while rejoiced in his light. Alas! It was but for a while; and we may rejoice in it still.

Perhaps none of Owen's writings highlight this dimension of his ministry so much as the one here reprinted. Its title in full is *Meditations and Discourses on The Glory of Christ in his Person, Office, and Grace with the differences between faith and sight; applied unto the use of them that believe*. It is a great and beautiful book, essentially containing his final testimony to the grace of God in the gospel. Like some of his other work it began life in his own meditations, and then became the substance of addresses he gave to 'a private congregation' during his last illness. On the final day of his life his ministerial friend William Payne called on him to let him know it was proceeding to publication. Owen's response was as follows:

I am glad to hear that that performance is put to the press; but, O brother Payne, the long looked for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done yet, or was capable of doing in this world!



FOCUS OF HIS EARLY MINISTRY

This focus in his ministry on the person of Jesus Christ can be traced back to Owen's first pastorate in Fordham. He was installed there in 1642, when he was no more than twenty-six years old. Three years later, burdened to find a way of helping his congregation to know Christ, he wrote two catechisms. He recognised ministers have a special responsibility for the children under their care, and for those of simple mind, as well as a calling to provide solid meat for the mature. He was very concerned that many of his parishioners were 'grossly ignorant' of Christ and the gospel. His experience was identical to that which led Richard Baxter to give similar teaching in his parish of Kidderminster. Doubtless, he would have echoed these words in Baxter's great book *The Reformed Pastor*:

For my part, I study to speak as plainly and movingly as I can, (and next to my study to speak truly, these are my chief studies) and yet I frequently meet with those that have been my hearers eight or ten years, who know not whether Christ be God or man, and wonder when I tell them the history of his birth and life and death, as if they had never heard it before. And of those who know the history of the gospel, how few are there who know the nature of that faith, repentance, and holiness, which it requireth, or, at least, who know their own hearts?...I have found by experience, that some ignorant persons, who have been so long unprofitable hearers, have got more knowledge and remorse of conscience in half an hour's close discourse, than they did from ten years' public preaching.

The catechism for the young has thirty-three questions, eight of which focus on Christ. The catechism for adults contains twenty-seven chapters, again with six chapters that focus directly on the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. In them, he summarises the teaching he would later give at great length in a number of his works, focusing his attention on three principles:

1. Jesus Christ is God and man united in one person.
2. Jesus Christ saves us by—
 - (a) Becoming our Prophet, Priest and King.
 - (b) In his incarnation experiencing a state of deep humiliation and then a state of glorious exaltation.
3. He does this specifically in order to save those for whom he died.

Already we can see from this early period of his ministry that the themes he would unravel in his later, greater works are foundational to his thinking. The distinction is that in his later writings he expands on these, sometimes in a more obviously technical and theological way, sometimes in a more clearly expository way, and sometimes in a more thoroughgoing devotional way. A truly model theologian, Owen worked to communicate the gospel to every age and stage and level of ability in the church.

RICH NUANCES OF JESUS' WORDS

Owen does not write *The Glory of Christ* primarily as the polemicist he was in some of his works, vigorously deconstructing heresy and expounding biblical orthodoxy. Such work is always important; Owen pursued it and was a master of it. But he regarded all demolition work as important only because it cleared the ground for Christ to be truly expounded to the church and exalted among its members. So here, in this work, he takes as his starting place the marvellous words of John 17: 24: 'Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.'

Here the church enjoys the inestimable privilege of eavesdropping on the extensive 'High Priestly Prayer' of Christ prior to his arrest. It is a high point of biblical revelation, and of intercession, since Christ prays that his people will be with him where he is to 'behold my glory'.

Owen probes the text. He questions its message, seeking to listen to the rich nuances of Jesus' words. He asks three basic questions:

1. What is the glory of Christ that we are able to see?
2. How do we see it?
3. What is the difference between our present 'sight' of Christ's glory and the future sight we shall have of him in heaven?

The book is a penetrating and rich exposition of the answers.

Sadly, it almost goes without saying, these are questions rarely asked today by theologians, and rarely handled by ministers

of the gospel. They seem far beyond the kind of ‘practical’ questions sermons—even biblical sermons—are expected to answer. Yet it will be clear to any reader of this work that these issues, once contemplated and then penetrated, will have a profound practical effect on the way we live the Christian life. More than that, such deep knowledge of Christ will add a much-needed sense of *gravitas* to our conduct in the world.

C.S. Lewis was surely right to warn Christians last century never to speak of those who are ‘too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use’. Lewis knew enough about how the gospel works to affirm it is precisely those who are most heavenly minded who leave the longest and deepest impressions on their contemporaries, and ultimately on history. A deep and intimate knowledge of Christ resolves most ‘practical’ issues of the Christian life. Those who live most fruitfully on earth realise they have priceless treasure in heaven. This is precisely the way Jesus taught his followers to live in his kingdom.

A PREACHER’S BONUS

Those who read to the end of these pages, perhaps particularly ministers and preachers, will find a valuable ‘bonus’. *The Glory of Christ* was eventually published in 1684, the year following Owen’s death. Only afterwards, among his papers, were found two further chapters in which he applied his teaching first to those who are not yet Christians, and then to those who need help in recovering from ‘spiritual decays’. These chapters are wonderful in their own right, but they will also serve as models to preachers, constantly faced with the question ‘How do I turn exposition into application?’ Owen’s contemporaries regarded application as the most painstaking aspect of preaching and it is where many preachers feel they need greatest help. Owen provides it because he was a master theologian whose

‘A master theologian whose theology was pastoral; a devoted pastor whose pastoral ministry was always deeply theological.’

theology was pastoral; a devoted pastor whose pastoral ministry was always deeply theological. As he himself knew, the sermons he preached with greatest power were the ones first preached with greatest impact to his own heart and conscience. This is surely the kind of theology and preaching the church of Christ always needs.

MAKING THE MOST OF OWEN

A few words of general counsel will help anyone who turns to read Owen for the first time. Do not rush. He yields his best fruit to patient reading, accompanied by personal meditation and reflection. Take time to read this book. Savour each page. Appreciate the depths of what he says. Allow yourself to be analysed, searched, exposed, deconstructed, edified, enlightened, engraced, and refocused on the glory of Jesus Christ.

You can trust Owen to do this for you as a pastor. For this is the last testimony of a man whose final letter, dictated the day before his death, confessed:

I am going to Him whom my soul hath loved, or rather who hath loved me with an everlasting love; which is the whole ground of all my consolation...I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm, but whilst the great Pilot is in it the loss of a poor under-rower will be inconsiderable...the promise stands invincible that he will never leave thee nor forsake thee.

We miss the value of Owen's teaching if we fail to ask ourselves the questions he had so obviously asked himself: How seriously do I pursue the knowledge of Christ—this seriously? How central is Jesus Christ in my thinking, loving, and living? Can I say with Paul 'to me to live is Christ', that 'I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, share the fellowship of his sufferings, be made like him in his death and at last attain to the resurrection of the dead'? These are the riches of Christ that Owen had such a passion to communicate to young and old alike.

Being dead, Owen still speaks and continues to challenge us to be satisfied with nothing less, ultimately, than seeing the glory of Christ.

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