

# Our Supreme Concern

by John Vissers

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of glorifying God and declaring His glory among the nations as the motivation and purpose of the church's mission.*

**Duration:** 33:20

**Scripture:** Psalm 96:3-4, Psalm 96:6-7, Psalm 96:9, Matthew 28:19-20, Romans 15:20

**Topics:** "Concern"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the nature and motivation for mission. He starts by emphasizing the importance of declaring the praise and glory of God, as commanded in Psalm 96. Mission is not an option for the church, but an obligation. The speaker references the Great Commission in Matthew 28, where Jesus commands his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. The sermon encourages listeners to have a passion for the glory of God and to participate in the great missionary task that God is leading in the world.

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## Transcript

This evening I want to talk a little bit about the character or the nature of mission. We're going to look at a text from Romans 15 tonight. But this morning I want us to think together a little bit about the motivation for mission.

What is our motivation for mission? And I'm taking the theme text from Psalm 96 as our text this morning. And I invite you to turn to Psalm 96 as we read it, and as we hear God's word, and then as we begin to think into this passage together. A wonderful psalm.

Let it ring in your ears as we hear it, as I read it, and as you follow along. Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord all the earth.

Sing to the Lord, praise his name. Proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations.

His marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise. He is to be feared above all gods.

For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him. Strength and glory are in his sanctuary.

Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations. Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name.

Bring an offering and come into his courts. Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness. Tremble before him all the earth.

Say among the nations, the Lord reigns. The world is firmly established. It cannot be moved.

He will judge the peoples with equity. Let the heavens rejoice. Let the earth be glad.

Let the sea resound and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant and everything in them. That all the trees of the forest will sing for joy.

They will sing before the Lord for he comes. He comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness.

And the peoples in his truth. Let's pray. Gracious God, our Father, we thank you this morning for your word.

Speak to us now by your spirit, through your word. Speak to our hearts and to our minds. And uncover for us our motivation to serve you.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen. I could not endure existence if Jesus Christ were not glorified.

It would be hell to me if he were always thus dishonored. I could not endure existence if Jesus Christ were not glorified. It would be hell to me if he were always thus dishonored.

These were the words of a young man named Henry Martin. Spoken shortly after he arrived in India at the age of 24 in 1805. Martin had given up a brilliant academic career at Cambridge University in order to respond to God's call to India.

To become a servant of the gospel. But when he arrived in India, he was overcome by what he saw and by what he experienced at that time. And he knew that the poverty and the hunger and the homelessness and the despair and the idolatry that he saw and that he experienced broke God's heart.

And he knew that God was not being glorified. And Martin gave his life to India so that the glory of God might be declared. He had a passion for Christ that energized him, that motivated him, that propelled him forward in the missionary task.

Now my question for us this morning is, what is it that motivates you? What is it that motivates us as a congregation? What is it that motivates the Church of Jesus Christ to be engaged in mission today? What is our supreme concern? What is it that energizes us, that motivates us in the Christian life and in our desire to serve God? Psalm 96, I want to suggest to you this morning, was written with the same kind of passion that was exhibited by Henry Martin. The supreme concern of the psalmist is that God be glorified. And someone has described Psalm 96 as a mission song.

This does not necessarily mean that it's a song about mission, but it certainly is a song of mission. So much of it is filled with missionary emphasis and the task of declaring the praise of God. And the psalmist invites the people of God to participate in mission by singing this song.

And as we sing this song this morning, we are drawn in to the world of God. We participate in the mission of God and we become missionaries. Our supreme concern is the glory of God.

We sing for the sake of the glory of God, for the sake of the song itself. And the song begins with a command to the Lord's people to sing a new song to the Lord. But the people of God, in singing this song, are only the section leads, because the song is to be sung by all the nations and indeed by all the earth, by all creation.

And so at the beginning, on this first Sunday of the missions conference, I want to suggest that this psalm paints the world of missions on the broadest possible canvas, if I may mix my metaphors. And it's that canvas that I want us to consider this morning. It's that song that we want to sing together.

It's that passion, that passion for the glory of God, that we want to catch. So let's enter into the world of this psalm. I invite you to come with me into this psalm, and we're going to do so by verse 3, the first part of verse 3, which is the theme of the conference.

Declare His glory among the nations. Now notice in the first place that this verse begins with the word declare. There is a command here.

There is an imperative. Psalm 96 begins with a command, and Psalm 96 indeed is filled with such commands. Sing to the Lord a new song.

Sing to the Lord all the earth. Sing to the Lord. Praise His name.

And the psalmist uses the same kind of rhetorical repetition in verses 7 to 9. Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name. And the psalmist repeats again and again, sing, ascribe, proclaim, declare, worship, speak forth.

And imagine, if you will, in your mind, the psalmist here as a choir director, directing the choir in the same way that our dear brother Roger does every Sunday. The psalmist here is tuning up the choir, and one by one each section joins the chorus. Sing to the Lord a new song.

Sing to the Lord all the earth. Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations, join this song. Let the heavens rejoice.

Let the earth be glad. Let the sea resound. Let the fields be jubilant.

Let the trees of the forest sing for joy. And you can imagine this rising crescendo of praise and worship. And the psalmist drives the chorus forward by ordering the various parts to sing.

As Roger will tell you, a choir director does not invite you to sing. He commands you to sing. He directs you to sing.

And so he commands the authority to drive the chorus forward, and that's what's happening here. And we're all being enjoined to join this great chorus. Now, what does this mean for the mission of the church today? Well, let me suggest two things briefly by way of application.

In the first instance, I want to suggest to you that it reminds us that mission for the church, the declaring of the praise of God, the declaring of the Gospel, the declaring of the glory of God, is never an option. It's always an obligation. The people of God are commanded to declare His glory among the nations.

It is something done in response to God, something done in response to God's command, in response to God's Word. We participate as God leads us forward in the great missionary task, the great missionary endeavor that God is leading in the world. The Great Commission, Matthew 28.

Jesus didn't give His disciples a great option. He gave them a great commission. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you, and I will be with you to the very end of the age.

Jesus leading His disciples forward, commanding them, inviting them, yes, to participate with Him, in union with Him, but never as an option. The church of Jesus Christ does not exist for itself. It exists to serve God and to declare the praises of the One who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Knox Church does not exist for itself. It exists to declare the glory of God among the nations. This is a given.

This is an obligation. It is not an option. But it is an obligation undertaken in freedom and in joy, in joyful obedience as the people of God to God's will and way and word in response to the divine conductor.

But we shouldn't stop there because there's a second way, I think, in which this point applies to the missionary task of the church today. Yes, mission is an act of obedience, but I want you also to notice that missions is an act of worship. When the psalmist commands the people to declare the glory of God, in the first instance, he has worship in mind.

The people of God declare the good news of salvation as they worship God. And when the people of God sing a new song to the Lord, the Gospel is declared. And when the people of God praise His name and proclaim His salvation, day after day the marvelous deeds of the Lord sound forth to the very ends of the earth, declared among all people.

When the church is truly engaged in mission, God is worshipped. And when God is worshipped in spirit and in truth, then mission is taking place. Now, we often think of mission and worship as two distinct and separate entities of the church's life.

But I want you to notice that in Psalm 96, as is often the case in the Bible, these two are really one, they're one movement, one act of the church, of the people of God. As they worship God, as they declare the praise of God, then that praise sounds forth, and the Gospel is declared. A church that is vibrant in worship is a church that is evangelizing.

And a church that is evangelizing is vibrant in worship. And in fact, the movement in this Psalm makes it clear that the people of God are the first fruits of mission. We are the first fruits of God's missionary activity, having been chosen by God to lead in the praise of God as the vanguard of a new humanity, men and women redeemed by the grace of God called to sing the song to the Lord, as the priests of all creation, as the recipients of God's grace and mercy in mission.

So we declare the glory of God in obedience, in joyful obedience to the command of the Lord, and as an act of worship, as the first fruits of those who have been called and saved by God's missionary activity. That brings us now to the second part of verse 3a. What is it that the church is to declare? And here we come to the very heart and center and soul of Psalm 96.

The psalmist says, declare His glory. Declare the glory of God. Throughout this Psalm, the psalmist again and again tells us what it is the people of God are to declare.

We are to proclaim, he says, the Lord's salvation. We are to declare His marvelous deeds. We are to say the Lord reigns.

But the theme that is emphasized again and again is the one introduced in verse 3a. The glory of God. Verse 4, the Lord is most worthy of praise.

Verse 6, splendor and majesty are before Him. Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary. Verse 7, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

Verse 9, worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness. The psalmist talks about the fear of the Lord. About reverence before the Lord.

About the judgment of the Lord. About the power of the Lord. About joy in the presence of the Lord.

And the people of God are to sing to the Lord so that the glory of the Lord will be known. This is the mission of the church. Now what is the glory of God? Well, the glory of God refers to a number of things.

It certainly refers to God's greatness, to God's majesty, to God's holiness, to God's splendor. But I think C.S. Lewis captured the idea of glory, the glory of God best, when he talked about the weight of glory. That when we're talking about the glory of God, we're talking about God who has weight, who has substance.

Who is. The basic meaning of the Hebrew word, in fact, is heaviness or weight. And when we speak about the glory of God, we mean that God alone is worthy of worship.

That God alone is the ultimate reality with whom we have to do. That God is the one who gives weight and meaning and substance to life itself, to our world, and to the church's faith and life, and to the church's mission. And where the church loses its understanding and its vision of the glory of God, it loses the weight, the weight and the substance at the very heart and the very center and the very core of the missionary task.

And when we lose that, we simply become fleeting and flighting of no consequence, moving to and fro, tossed about by every wind of doctrine as the Apostle says in Ephesians 4. And we might spend our time talking about strategies and about programs and about all kinds of nice things that we might wish to do. But if we lose this vision of the glory of God, missions comes to naught. In the Old Testament, the glory of God accompanied the people of Israel out of Egypt when they were led by a cloud through the wilderness.

The glory of God. The cloud rested on Mount Sinai where Moses saw the glory of God. The prophet Isaiah witnessed the glory of God in the temple and he was undone.

In the New Testament, the glory of God shone around the shepherds when Jesus was born. Some of the disciples witnessed the glory of God in the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. And in John 1, the Gospel writer says, the Word became flesh and lived for a while among us.

We have seen what? His glory. The glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth. Later in John's Gospel, Jesus describes His own cross, going to the cross, as the place where the Son of God will be glorified.

The resurrection and ascension are manifestations of the glory of God. And Paul in Corinthians says that the glory of God is revealed where? In the face of Jesus Christ. The glory of God is the heartbeat of the church's message and ministry.

The Westminster Catechism reminds us that our chief end is to glorify God. To glorify God and enjoy Him forever. And that is the missionary task.

And when a church is engaged in mission, it is glorifying God and it is enjoying God but as it is propelled forward, we proclaim the majesty of God as we proclaim the majesty and meekness, the glory and the humility of our Savior in whose face the glory of God is revealed. There may be many different reasons for sharing the Christian Gospel with others today. We may do it out of obedience to the Great Commission.

Sheer obedience. We may do it out of excitement about a newfound faith. We might do it out of compassion for those who are suffering.

We might do it because we want to see the church of Jesus Christ grow. We might want to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world because we believe it will hasten the return of Jesus. We might be constrained by the love of Jesus.

And sometimes, quite frankly, the church has engaged in mission for all kinds of wrong reasons. They may be political or social or cultural reasons. And some think, in fact, there is no justifiable motivation for missions today at all and that Christians ought to mind their own business.

But my question to you on this first weekend of the Knox Missions Conference is this. What is it that motivates you to be engaged in the missionary task? Are you indeed motivated? And if so, what is your motivation? Is it to glorify Jesus because you cannot endure existence but to see that your Savior and your Lord is glorified? That brings us then to the last part of verse 3a. The psalmist says, Declare His glory among the nations.

This psalm, as many psalms are, is filled with language about the nations. The psalmist refers to the peoples and to the nations a number of times in this psalm. Verse 2, verse 3, verse 5, verse 7, verse 10, and verse 13.

And the psalmist also refers to all the earth in verses 1 and 9. And he refers to the world in verse 10. The last stanza of the verse refers to all creation. The heavens, the seas, the fields, the trees.

The psalm is filled with a grand picture of all the peoples and all the nations and the whole earth. It is all-encompassing. And the perspective of the psalmist is clear.

And it's a Biblical pattern. The psalmist recognizes that God has made a covenant with a people. And He's made a covenant with a people to praise and to declare and to glorify His name.

But the psalmist also knows that that's not the end of the matter. That in fact, God has made all peoples to glorify Him. And that God has made all creation to glorify Him.

And the mission of the church is to sound the note of praise to declare that glory so that all the nations will hear the sound of praise and be led up the mountain to glorify and praise the living God of all creation. We see a similar movement in the book of Acts where Jesus says to His disciples, you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and

Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. And some think that somehow this is a new commission and certainly there's a new dimension to it now that Jesus has come and the Spirit is about to be poured out.

But it's the fulfillment of the same pattern that we see already in the Old Testament. A people called, covenanting together with their God to declare the praises of Him who has called them out of darkness into His wonderful light. You see, when you understand the theology of missions in the Bible, you begin to understand that you are part of God's grand design, part of the grand sweep of history.

That missions is not just about some program the church does because it wants to market itself a little bit more effectively. But it's about declaring the praise of the God of all creation, the God who has redeemed us. The Bible uses the word in this psalm and again and again for the nations, not in terms of what we think of as modern nation states, but the peoples.

The ethnos. All the peoples are to praise God. Every language, every ethnic group, every race.

Because all creation and all creatures have been called to the praise of God. This is God's world. And the Gospel makes a claim on the world in its entirety.

And God's world finds its fulfillment in the praise and the glory of the one who created it. And that's why men and women of faith are broken when they see the world, God's world, and see it in such division and hatred and so much pain and so much sorrow. God has uniquely positioned this congregation.

I firmly believe this. God has uniquely positioned this congregation among the peoples. I want you to think about Knox Church in terms of the last part of the text.

You are among the peoples. You have a history, yes, of sending out missionaries to the furthest ends of the earth to declare the glory of God among the peoples. But now, in a wonderful way, God in His providence and in His grace is also bringing people into Toronto, into Canada, so that you're no longer simply among the peoples through the missionaries whom you send out, whom we honor and whom we support and whom we love.

But you together with them now are among the peoples here. And together, the world is at our doorstep. And God is glorified and the task of mission is advanced as Sunday by Sunday you worship God and declare His glory.

And as you send out men and women called by God to declare the glory of Jesus, whether it's in downtown Toronto or whether it's in Malawi or whether it's in India or Guyana, wherever God's praise is sounding forth. Last year in Montreal I became the interim moderator of a new congregation in our presbytery in the city of Montreal. It's the Ghanaian Presbyterian Church of Montreal.

This is a congregation that consists almost entirely of Christians from Ghana in Africa who have migrated to Montreal over the last number of years. And the congregation began about a year ago when a small group of Christians from Ghana, a small group of Presbyterians actually decided that they wanted to form a church under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Their primary motivation was to worship God and to reach out to their own community and to raise up a reformed evangelical witness within the city of Montreal for the Ghanaian community.

As they saw what was happening in the city of Montreal with their own community, as they saw the struggles and the pain that their community, their colleagues, their brothers and sisters experienced as

they began to make a new life in Montreal, they wanted to see in the midst of that Jesus glorified and his gospel sounded forth. And now, I was just there a couple of weeks ago, their services range from about 100 to 150 people. They worship God in five languages every Sunday.

In Twi, Ga, and Iwi, three African languages, and then English and in French. When I preach there, it's a very interesting experience because I'm translated usually into Twi, but you can hear all kinds of other whispering going on in the congregation as it's being translated at least two or three more times. As people are listening for the gospel.

Every week, these people sing to the Lord a new and a lively song, and every week they declare his glory among the peoples I preached or was involved with their first anniversary service. They started at 10 o'clock in the morning. Do you know what time we went home? I'm watching my watch, by the way.

We went home at 3.30 in the afternoon. Now, mind you, they served lunch halfway through the service. But these are people who are filled with the Spirit of God, filled with the joy of the Lord, determined to declare his glory among their own people and in the city of Montreal.

And it's one of the good news stories for the Presbytery of Montreal because Presbyterianism in Montreal has fallen on hard times. But here we are seeing by God's grace a group of African Christians setting the pace and setting the example of what it means to be a church engaged in mission in the city of Montreal. Do you have a passion this morning to see Jesus glorified? As I've said, there may be all kinds of reasons for engaging in mission.

There may be all kinds of motivations, many of them good, many of them worthy. But the question is, what is your supreme concern? I could not endure existence if Jesus Christ were not glorified. It would be hell to me if he were always so dishonored.

Amen. Let us pray. Lord God, I thank you this morning for these dear sisters and brothers in Christ, these friends and family in this congregation.

We give thanks this morning for the long history of witness and mission, the heritage of gospel proclamation in word and in deed locally and globally that belongs to this church. But Lord, we also acknowledge that we live in a new day with new challenges. And as we face those challenges today, help us, we pray, to refocus our motivation and enable us by your grace to make our supreme concern the glory of Jesus.

And Lord, if there's any here this morning who do not know the glory of Jesus in their lives, we pray that by your spirit, your saving power, your glory might touch their lives. In Jesus' name.

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