

Demetrius was right to be worried. The Ephesian silversmith made shrines for the goddess, Artemis. Up until a missionary named Paul arrived, the silver trade in Ephesus had been rather profitable. The worship of Artemis “brought in no little business for the craftsmen” (Acts 19:24). But Christianity meant the end of idolatry, and this posed a threat to their livelihood. So Demetrius called the silversmiths together and said: “Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshipped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty” (Acts 9:25-27). The silversmiths wanted to defend the honour and majesty of their queen. More importantly, they wanted to keep their jobs. A massive protest was held in the giant theatre of Ephesus. For two straight hours, as many as 20,000 people shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (Acts:19:34). Eventually the city clerk was able to quiet the crowd. He said: “Men of Ephesus, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven” (Acts 19:35). Yes, the whole world did know this, for the temple of Artemis was one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. It took two centuries to build it - entirely of marble. Inside it stood the ancient and enormous statue of Artemis herself.

The goddess seemed immortal, but Demetrius was right to be worried. The coming of Christ meant the end of Artemis. She has now been tossed on the scrap heap of history. With the exception of a few scattered columns on a plain near ancient Ephesus, the last fragments of her temple are now on display in the basement of the British Museum in London. The death of Artemis has turned Paul’s doxology into a hymn of triumph: “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (v.17). Paul addressed these words to Timothy in Ephesus, the guardian city of Artemis. The contrast between God and the goddess could not be more absolute. God is immortal; she proved to be mortal. He is invisible; she was a statue. He is unique; she was mass-produced. While he will be honoured and glorified forever, her praise and worship have ceased. This verse forms the basis for the opening stanza (verse) of the great hymn, “Immortal, invisible, God only wise”. Paul’s doxology sounds like part of an early Christian hymn - and since the language is Jewish, it may have been a song which was carried over from the synagogue into the early church.

But why does Paul use it here in his letter? The apostle has just, in vv.13-16, given his Christian testimony. He has testified how God rescued him from a life of violence and blasphemy and gave him the grace, faith and love which are in Jesus Christ. The mercy of God was shown to him, the chief of sinners. It is easy for a personal testimony to become self-centred, however. And so, Paul ends his spiritual autobiography by glorifying God. Having explained the one true gospel, he worships the one true God. Having praised God for what he had done in his life, Paul moves on to simply praising God for who he is in himself.

1. The King Eternal

The verse begins with God’s kingship: “Now to the King eternal”. God is praised first for his sovereign rule over the universe. Paul especially emphasizes the duration of God’s reign - God is literally “the King of the ages”. This title is found nowhere else in the Bible and it refers particularly to God’s rule. God’s kingship is everlasting - it will never come to an end. God is the King of ages past. He ruled over the deeps when they were formless and void. He governed the galaxies when they were brought into being. He was God and King to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to Moses and all the prophets. He was the King of all the kings of Israel. God is also the King of the present age, which commenced with the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God is sovereign over the church in this gospel age. He rules over the worldwide expansion of his kingdom. He will rule over

every subsequent era of human history, however long it may last. Then, at the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15: “the end will come, when he (Jesus Christ) hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power” (v.24). Then God will rule forever and forever. God was the King, he is the King, and he will be the King forever. No other king can make the same claim, can he? Every earthly monarch is temporary. Even the greatest of royal dynasties must come to an end. But God is the King of the ages.

This raises the most practical of all spiritual questions: Will you let God be King? Will you submit to his rule in your own heart and life? A bumper sticker reads, “God is my co-pilot!” This is the kind of relationship many Christians want to maintain with God. They want to stay in the captain’s seat - and are willing to hand over the controls only when there is an emergency. If you relegate God to co-pilot you are headed for trouble. God is the King, not a co-pilot. So will you let God rule your life? Will you let him govern your moral behaviour? Will you let him control your work situation? Your family? Your finances? Your life and future are best left in God’s hands. This is what it means to be a servant of the King. A true King does not take orders - he gives them. If God is the King eternal, he needs to be trusted and obeyed.

2. The King Immortal

God is also immortal. In Paul’s doxology, eternity refers to God’s kingship, whereas immortality refers to God himself, to his being and essence. The word “immortal: is perhaps better translated as “incorruptible”. It means that God, unlike the milk in the fridge, does not have a use-by date. He is imperishable - he cannot decay. This makes God different from everything else in his world. The natural world is changeable, corruptible. Mountains erode. Entire galaxies collide and stars collapse into black holes. Indeed, the entire universe is running down.

Our bodies are also running down. Human beings grow old and die. The aging process goes on inside the body all the time (as well as on the outside). Corruption is a fact of daily human existence. Appliances stop working. Clothing gets torn and stained. Shops and factories close. The demographics change, the population shifts, and cities go into decline. Indeed, entire civilizations are corruptible. Things fall apart. Persons, families, town, cities, nations, empires, civilizations - they all fall down. But not God. He is not eroding or falling apart. Unlike everything else he has made, God is immortal. Not only will he live forever, but every one of his divine attributes will remain undiminished throughout all eternity. God is every bit as powerful, loving, just and holy as he has ever been, and always will be.

The best place to see God’s immortality is in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. King David made this prediction about the Messiah - it was a prophecy about Jesus: “you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay” (Psalm 16:10). Jesus of Nazareth died, and was buried, but he did not perish in the grave. He was raised on the third day in an incorruptible body. By raising Jesus from the dead, God gave immortality to mortals. Jesus Christ was the first to be raised with an everlasting body, but only the first. Part of his work is to give his people immortal, incorruptible bodies. As Paul writes to the Corinthian church: “So it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable.... For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:42,53). Because God himself is immortal, he can guarantee eternal life to mortal human beings.

3. The King Invisible

The eternal, immortal God cannot be seen. God is invisible. Later on in the letter, Paul refers to God as the immortal King “who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (6:16). By his very nature, God is invisible.

But that doesn't mean that he is unknowable. There is abundant evidence for his existence. He has revealed something of himself in the things he has made (Romans 1:20). When we see the things that God has created, our thoughts and desires are lifted from the seen to the unseen. The visible creation draws us to praise the invisible God.

For some, the invisibility of God may come as something of a disappointment. Human beings have a natural curiosity. We want to uncover what is hidden and gaze upon what is unseen. But we cannot lift the curtain on God. Invisibility is of the essence of his deity. Therefore God is to be praised for his invisibility. This may be one of God's most underrated attributes. The fact that God cannot be seen shows that there are aspects of his divine being which are not subject to our scrutiny. God is without limits and without boundaries. We must accept that there are some divine mysteries which the human mind cannot penetrate. There are some things about God - like his invisibility - which are so great and so far beyond our comprehension that they are known only to God. Otherwise, God would not be God.

God knows that his invisibility makes him inaccessible, so he made himself visible in and through Jesus Christ - who is both human and divine. Jesus Christ is God in the form of a human being - he is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). To see Jesus in all his majesty is to see the glory of God. The hope of every Christian is to see Jesus face to face, and in seeing Jesus, to see the image of the invisible God. Even after he had lost everything else, Job never let go of the hope that he would meet his Saviour face to face: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God. I myself will see him with my own eyes - I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (Job 19:25-27). Job could hardly contain himself. By faith, the resurrection was as certain to him as death, and the prospect of seeing the invisible God filled him with inexpressible joy. The apostle John in his first letter expresses the great hope of every Christian: "We know that when he (Jesus Christ) appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). In the beautiful face of Jesus Christ, the invisible God will be made visible. If you know God through faith in Jesus Christ, then one day you will get to see this for yourself.

4. The Only God

God is not only immortal and invisible, but he is also incomparable. The last divine attribute Paul mentions is God's uniqueness. He is "the only God". The King James Version famously calls him "the only wise God", but the word for wisdom is not found in the best and oldest Greek manuscripts. God has no rivals. There is no other being in the universe who shares his attributes.

The fact that the eternal, immortal, invisible God is also "the only God" opens up the mystery of the Trinity. It is sometimes pointed out especially by Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, that the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible. On this basis, they proceed to argue that there is only one person in the Godhead, not three. But the truth is that the doctrine of the Trinity finds abundant support throughout the New Testament. For example, look at the Great Commission Jesus gave in Matthew 28:18-20 and Paul's benediction at the end of 2 Corinthians (13:14). Since the early days of the church, Christians have made this confession. The Athanasian Creed stated the doctrine quite simply: "The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; and yet they are not three Gods, but one God".

Admittedly, the doctrine of the Trinity is easier to state than it is to explain, yet the truth is that the doctrine of the Trinity has a great deal of relevance. It is relevant for our salvation, where each person of the Trinity plays a part in redemption - the Father plans redemption, the Son accomplishes redemption, and the Spirit applies redemption. It is in the name of the Triune God that Christians are baptized. But even apart from the plan of salvation, knowing that the one and only God exists in 3 persons is relevant to our worship, which makes it relevant enough! This is how God has told us to address him - as

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. True Christian worship is always Trinitarian worship. Many of the most profound Christian hymns simply praise God for his triune being. The hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy" reminds us that the thrice-holy God is the thrice-holy personal God: "God in three persons, glorious (blessed) Trinity". Another hymn begins, "Glory be to God the Father, glory be to God the Son, glory be to God the Spirit, great Jehovah, Three in One!" The Doxology with which many churches used to begin their worship (or end it) concludes: "Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost". God can receive no higher praise than to be addressed and adored as One God in three Persons, both in our private and in our public worship.

5. Be Honour and Glory for Ever and Ever, Amen

All that is left to do is to praise God, giving him: "honour and glory for ever and ever". Paul is simply listing God's attributes - he is praising God for them. He is giving honour and glory to God for his kingship, his eternity, his immortality, his invisibility and his uniqueness. To give "honour" is to give God his due - to show him the respect and reverence his kingship deserves. To give God the "glory" is simply to testify that he is "glorious".

The English word "doxology" is derived from the Greek word for glory ("doxa"). Our praise cannot add anything to God's glory because he is completely glorious in himself. But we can at least acknowledge his splendour and majesty for what it is.

We do this with our songs and praises - but we also do it with our lives. And let us do so forever. If God is the King of the ages, then he deserves to be praised for all eternity. The destiny of every child of God is to be wrapped up in the adoration of God throughout the endless ages.

To this we can only say, "Amen", as Paul does. "Amen" is a word of agreement and affirmation. When we say "Amen" at the end of a hymn or a prayer, we are making that hymn or prayer our own. In effect, we are saying, "Yes, Lord, I give you from my heart all the praise I have just uttered with my lips". The "Amen" at the end of Paul's doxology in 1 Timothy 1:17 invites a personal response. When Timothy first read this letter aloud to the church at Ephesus, he undoubtedly paused when he came to the end of this verse, so that all the people in the congregation could say "Amen".

In his "Personal Narrative", Jonathan Edwards, the great American evangelist and theologian of the mid 18th century, records his life-changing experience of reading 1 Timothy 1:17 as a young man. "As I read the words, there came into my soul a sense of the glory of the Diving Being; a new sense, quite different from anything I ever experienced before....I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up to him in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him for ever! I kept saying, and as it were singing over these words of Scripture to myself; and went to pray to God that I might enjoy him, and prayed in a manner quite different from what I used to do; with a new sort of affection...And my mind was greatly engaged to spend my time in reading and meditating on Christ, on the beauty and excellency of his person, and the lovely way of salvation by free grace in him".

May these words of Paul - "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen" - make a similar impression on our soul so that we might truly live to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Amen

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