

The Beauty of God

The beauty of God presents humans with both the most sublime of possible thoughts and the most difficult of theological understandings. We affirm it because the Bible does, but we struggle to articulate it in a way that is meaningful to us. Few have done so better than Jonathan Edwards who wrote, 'For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory; God . . . is the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty.' [1] He adds that all definitions are insufficient, due to the "imperfection of language to express things of so sublime a nature." [2]

We can know confidently God's beauty as God has chosen to express it. This is primarily in three categories; Trinitarian love, creation's majesty, and Jesus. We shall take these in that order.

Trinitarian Beauty

God's beauty is like any wonder we long to know or experience—somewhat understandable but not completely discernable. There is no better example of this than God's *threeness and His oneness*. This is known in Christian theology as the doctrine of the Trinity. The word *trinity* isn't found in Scripture. It's a shortened version of the fuller term 'tri-unity'. Although the word isn't used in Scripture, descriptions of the Godhead as one God and three persons are common. Our first glimpse of plurality in unity is in Genesis 1:26, where God says, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' Who is the 'us' in precreation existence? It is God; but we find that God is actually a small group comprised of three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16–17; 28:19–20; 1 Corinthians 8:6). This would be potentially comprehensible if Scripture stopped there. We would have three gods, a little pantheon of gods.

However, these three persons are of such unity and oneness that they are actually one God: 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one' (Deuteronomy 6:4). God is one and God is three. This divine relational diversity existing in harmonious unity is the core and genesis of all beauty. God delights in this. It is infinitely good and holy. He considers it inherently beautiful.

God's delight in his threeness in oneness is reflected in our own delight in plurality in unity. We celebrate it in everything: music (melody and harmony), architecture (forms and shapes in one 'design'), athletic teamwork, and food. Even the mystery and pleasure of sexual union is a God-designed metaphor of unity in plurality. Trinitarian metaphors go beyond the physical world to harmonies of relationship and truth. The greatest joys we experience in life are relational—think family, marriage, friendship, and community. These strike us inwardly as being essentially good things that bring meaning to life in significant ways. Our senses are drawn to these reflections of God's own beauty as our enjoyment of beauty is also a reflection of God's own delight in Himself.

God's beauty is also displayed in the *radiance of his absolute perfection*. God is perfect. He

doesn't rise to the level of perfection—He *is* perfect. The psalmist declares, 'From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth' (Psalm 50:2, NIV). Jesus tells His followers, 'You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48). God is perfect. His perfection permeates all his other attributes. God has no potential to be less perfect or more perfect. He has eternally existed, with His every attribute existing in absolute completeness. He cannot be anything more than He is and He will never be anything less than He has always been.

Our difficulty here is that there is nothing in our creaturely experience to adequately compare to His perfection.

An illustration of this can be found in a rose. What would a perfect rose look like? There would be no deficiency to it. No petals drooping. No lack of fragrance. No browning anywhere. How do we evaluate the perfection of a rose, or anything else? It is the absence of anything lacking. That is how God is perfect. He doesn't lack anything. He is lovely in His completeness.

We begin to understand God's desirability by the value we place on perfection. His beauty to us is not what He lacks (nothing), but what He possesses in His character (everything). Try to conceive of this. God is absolute perfection: perfect power, perfect love, perfect justice, and perfect faithfulness. He is perfect everything. All He is matches every good desire we possess. God's beauty is the bouquet of His perfections in His person, unveiled in His purposes, and displayed in His glory.

Another aspect of divine beauty is the *infinity of God*, which means, literally, that He is 'nonfinite'. To be *finite* means to have limits or bounds. So *infinite* is defined as 'without bounds or without limit'. God is infinite in His being; He possesses all of His perfections to their fullest potential degree. He is without boundary or limit, whether physical (omnipresent), of force (omnipotent), temporal (eternal), or of knowledge and wisdom (omniscient). This is impossible for us to comprehend because we are completely the opposite—finite. We leave infinity to symbols like the circle as a line without end or the ∞ symbol. These symbols both help and hurt our understanding. They provide a visible symbol of endlessness, but they don't allow us to understand that God's infinity is personal. Not a line. Not a symbol. But a person.

If there is a center to the beauty of God in his tri-unity it is in his self-giving love. What makes God's infinity so beautiful is that His personhood expresses itself eternally as love: the Father's love for the Son and the Spirit; the Son's love for the Spirit and the Father; the Spirit's love for the Father and the Son. The essential nature of the Trinity is *agape*, self-giving love. Within the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit give of themselves for the good and joy of each other.

The result of their eternal self-giving is eternal and perfect happiness within themselves. Their self-giving is beautiful both as an attribute of their nature and as a description of their relationships. True and essential beauty is love's joyous outflow of perfect, infinite, and eternal divine self-giving within the Trinity. 'The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand' (John 3:35). 'Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me"' (John 8:42). 'For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again' (John 10:17). The Bible describes the essence of our God this way: 'God is love' (1 John 4:8). Most people read this little phrase and think it describes how God relates to us—and that is gloriously true. More importantly, though, it describes how God relates to Himself and within Himself: perfect,

selfless, joyous love.

God gave this love expression in the drama of the incarnation and life of Jesus. Christ's earthly ministry was an unveiling of the inherent self-giving glory of the Son (Phil. 2:5-8). Why? The essence of the Trinity is self-giving. Christ gave Himself over to the will of the Father. What was the Father's will? It was to display the glory of the self-giving Son to the Father as Son and to display that glory to mankind as Servant and Savior (Col. 1:18). Herein lays great irony. In the culture of its day, the cross was so profane that you would never talk about it in polite company. A cross would seem completely out of place in a discussion of beauty. How could there be any beauty in it? The essence of beauty is self-giving love. 'This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us' (1 John 3:16, NIV). The cross gives finite human beings a small taste of what it is like to be a member of the Trinity. In the moment of His sacrificial death, Jesus gave to us what He had given to the Father for all eternity: *everything*—the total surrender of self. The cross is love's highest human expression and beauty's ultimate source.

Before a sunset or a mountain range or a painting or a song can be relished as beautiful, our souls have to awaken to true beauty. The cross is real beauty. Everything else is reflection.

Creation's Majesty

Scripture poetically and powerfully describes what created beauty's purpose is when it says, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world' (Psalm 19:1-4, NIV). How do the heavens declare God's glory and why are they so aesthetically beautiful? The significance of this question is not obvious on the surface, but religions and ideologies turn on the answer. It was Jean-Paul Sartre, the famous atheist philosopher, who insightfully noted that the basic philosophical problem is that something is there rather than nothing.^[3] To his observation, I would add this question: Why is what is there so beautiful? If the mere existence of matter confounds us, explaining its universal symmetries and harmonies is baffling. Matter is a problem. Beauty is a marvel.

Naturalists and materialists would suggest that our concept of beauty is just a form of cultural conditioning, and that there is no such thing as objective beauty. The worldviews of Eastern religions wear this truth inside out, not by denying creation's beauty but by worshiping it. This is a kind of backhanded compliment to God's creative ability. What He made is so spectacular that humanity mistakes it for God Himself. The naturalists hold beauty too low, while the pantheists elevate created beauty too high. Christianity's answer to the question of why creation is so beautiful is that it flows from the character of a beautiful creator. Nature is God's self-portrait. It is not God, since God transcends what He has created, but it reveals in physical form what He is like spiritually. God creates beauty so we can know what He is like. Since He is and always has been glorious and beautiful, creation reflects this with seeable, tastable, touchable, hearable, and smellable reflections of His glory and beauty. As seventeenth-century Puritan theologian John Owen points out, 'All goodness, grace, life, light, mercy, and power, which are the springs and causes of the new creation, are all originally in God, in the divine nature, and that infinitely and essentially. In them is God eternally or essentially glorious; and the whole design of the new creation was to manifest his glory in them by external communications of them, and from them.'^[4] Creation speaks to us—every day, all the time, constantly shouting truths about spiritual reality - truths about the nature and character of divine beauty. Calvin says there is not an atom of this universe in which you cannot see some brilliant sparks, at least, of His glory.^[5] It

is glorious for humans to consider that everything we feel, hear, smell, taste, and touch transmits the beauty of God through the beauty of creation. He is the beauty behind all beauty.

The Beauty of God in Christ

The Apostle Paul writes: 'If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. . . . For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' 2 Corinthians 4:3–6. Satan is described as 'the god of this world' who has blinded the minds of unbelievers from seeing the true glory of Christ.

Because of spiritual blindness, however, His beauty and desirability are lost to the eyes of the unbelieving heart. They cannot 'see' His glory nor wonder at His beauty. They don't see it and they don't get it.

Mankind needs the light of understanding to see the beauty that we long for. When God shines this light into the darkness of human despair, something is perceived with the eyes of the heart. And that 'something' is the glory and beauty of Jesus Christ. By human standards, He didn't look like a Messiah. Isaiah 53:2 tells us that 'he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.' Significantly, the New Testament includes no description at all of Jesus' physical appearance. Scripture doesn't put a face on the Lord so that His real beauty can shine through. Jesus' beauty had nothing to do with His physical appearance. His was the arresting beauty of truth, purity, servanthood, passion, power, mercy, and love.

Jonathan Edwards described His glory as the 'admirable conjunction of diverse excellencies in Christ.' Jesus was a tapestry of all that is glorious in God intertwined with humanity's capability to reflect the image of God. His beauty and His desirability were of a different—and more wonderful—kind.

He is beautiful as the perfect image of God

Again, the Apostle Paul says that when we are made alive to God, by God, we are able to see 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (2 Corinthians 4:4). God is infinitely glorious and ultimately beautiful. Christ is the image of this beautiful God. Other Scriptures emphasize the same truth: 'He is the image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15). 'He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature' (Hebrews 1:3).

Mankind is made *in* the image of God; Christ *is* the image of God. We resemble God's nature; Christ shares it. This is like the difference between seeing someone's picture and meeting them in person. When we meet someone whose picture we have previously seen, we will often say something like, 'That photo doesn't do them justice.' What do we mean by that? A person is so much more than can ever be conveyed in a photograph. Jesus is the exact representation of what God is like. 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). Jesus doesn't show us what God is like by being *similar* to Him; He shows us what God is like by being *the same* as Him. Similar to the way a sunray carries the essence of the sun, Christ is of the same essence as God. He is an extension of God's glory. He is the radiating glory through a human nature like ours.

The apostle John refers to Jesus as the one 'which we have heard, which we have seen with our

eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands' (1 John 1:1). He 'became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory' (John 1:14). Jesus' glory shone through a normal human body to display His glorious deity. When we see and know and understand Him as Scripture reveals Him, we are actually seeing and knowing the essence of God's character.

He is beautiful in the perfection of His life

What is it about Jesus that captures people from all the cultures and religions of the world? I would argue that it is His glory. Those closest to Him wrote of His majesty: 'For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty' (2 Peter 1:16). 'We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).

Is there any other person in human history that has the power of example that Jesus has? What other movement or religion or cause has a leader that can match up to Him? Try to think of a moral or spiritual category in which He is not the highest expression ever. Think of His compassion, self-sacrifice, giving, love, and kindness. Think of an attribute that you wish was better represented in your life. Strength. Courage. Wisdom. Integrity. Leadership. Power. Humility. He is the ultimate standard for every noble characteristic we admire.

The tragedy of 2 Corinthians 4:3–4 is that we are naturally blind to the glory of Christ. It is 'veiled' from the spiritual understanding of sinners. Until the veil is removed, we can't 'see' Him for who He is. This is the wonder of salvation. Paul goes on to say that God 'has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6). God's vehicle for this is the Holy Spirit, who makes us spiritually alive through regeneration by the power of the gospel. The result is that, for the first time, we can 'see.' John Newton wrote of this in his now-famous hymn, 'Amazing Grace': 'I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see. Our newly awakened spiritual vision allows us to see the glory of Jesus as Savior and Lord. We see His beauty, and we want Him.

Once we are spiritually awakened, we apprehend the beauty of Christ and wonder grips our soul. Wonder leads to worship. Wonder at His beauty leads to worship of His glory. This is the death of the lie that something other than Christ can satisfy us—and the birth of new life in Christ. It is the restoration to what we were made for: wonder at and worship of the living Christ. Here beauty comes full circle to its creative purpose. All beauty is a breadcrumb path that leads us to Christ, the one beauty for whom our soul most longs. Is this not what Jesus told the woman at the well? She thought she needed physical water, but Jesus knew what she truly longed for. Jesus pointed out to her that everyone who drinks physical water will be thirsty again, but 'whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again' (John 4:14). The woman's response speaks for us all: 'Sir, give me this water' (verse 15). Our thirsts show us what we need, and what we are thirsty for is Him. He is satisfyingly beautiful, and our desires reveal how much we need and long for Him.

Endnotes

[1] Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue: A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 252–53.

[2] Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1995), 119.

[3] Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1972), 1.

[4] John Owen, *Meditations on the Glory of Christ* (Geanies House, Fearn, Rossshire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 150.

[5] Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003), 89.



Steve DeWitt

Steve DeWitt is Senior Pastor of Beth Church in Crown Point, IN, USA. He is the author of *Eyes Wide Open: Enjoying God in Everything* (Credo, 2012).

Trinity, Jonathan Edwards, John Owen, Beauty, Attributes of God