

Eternity in Our Hearts: the God of Beauty, the Beauty of God

In the Summer of 2006 I spent some time studying Creative Writing abroad at the Glasgow School of Art in Glasgow, Scotland. It was amazing in many ways. It was the first time I'd ever been out of the country. I saw things, met people, and went places I only could have dreamt of seeing, meeting, or going. I got to spend a weekend in an old castle. I was the most productive in my writing during that time than any other in my life. One particularly memorable highlight: I had my first beer ever in a Scottish pub, July 4th, during the World Cup. But it was pretty rough too. I spent the entire time having to play mommy and daddy to a bunch of drunks, including this one guy whose dad thought it would be a good idea to send his newly-graduated-from-Alcoholics-Anonymous-son to Scotland of all places. He was the first person in the history of the program to be sent back early to the states because of the alcoholism that erupted in him during that trip. In a group of 40 or so people, I was literally the *only* Christian. There wasn't anyone who even pretended to be a Christian or even thought they were. It was just me trying to spiritually survive with no accountability and no relationships as I lived with a bunch of art students and writers with no inhibitions.

The third week or so into the program, we had a free weekend and were allowed to do whatever we wanted. I and a few others decided to spend the weekend in Scotland's capitol, Edinburgh. We took the bus there, and as soon as I stepped off the bus - literally, *as soon as I did* - I felt something different. In the book of Daniel, in chapter 10, there's this really bizarre

account of an angel coming to Daniel, who had been praying and fasting for God to come and speak to him. This angel shows up and pretty much says, “Hey, sorry I’m late. I meant to get here earlier but as I was on my way, the ‘prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me for twenty-one days’ until Michael could come and give me hand. So yeah - sorry.” Now, I’ve heard people take this theology *way* too far, but the verse does imply that different geographical areas have different spirits over them, contributing to different spiritual climates in different places. Have you ever just gone somewhere or driven through an intersection or something and it really does just feel different?

Well, I got off that bus in Edinburgh and it felt so wicked. My soul just felt heavy and my heart felt so weighed down. Something was so tangibly dark about that place. I still don’t quite know what it was, but that Sunday I did end up finding a church and attending this amazing service. Afterwards, I just started walking around the city. I ended up following my map up to this place called “Calton Hill.” The bottom of this hill was shrouded in trees. I walked in the shade of the trees around the base of the hill and found these little stairs to my right. I followed those stairs and as I reached the top, the trees broke just right, and the light fell so precisely, and I turned at just the right that I suddenly found myself standing above the entire city of Edinburgh looking out for miles. As I turned around 360 degrees, I could see the ocean on one side, the city on the other, and the giant hill to my left a mile or so away called Arthur’s seat that they say figures into the King Arthur legend.

I began to cry almost immediately. One thing you’ll realize about me over time: I’m either the most rational romantic or the most romantic rational. To the charismatics in an old church of mine in Richmond I was the cold, dead theologian. To the seminarians in Philadelphia

I was the feely, emotional charismatic. They're both right. But regardless, I broke down on top of this hill because I was staring at the most beauty I've ever seen. I felt small, I felt sinful, I felt worshipful, and I felt the presence of God more tangibly in those few hours I spent on top of that hill than at any other moment of my life. It's like I was reborn . . . again. At the very same time I felt the most complexity and simplicity of emotions. I was so at peace, yet I wanted to scream.

So why is it that beauty draws those sorts of things from us? What is it anyway? How do we know what is beautiful and how to respond to it? We live in a world of such paradox. Pain and ugliness are the primary soundtrack of our lives, it seems, and yet most of us don't live in a constant state of despair. We seem to live off those little oases of beauty in life. So how do we understand what beauty is and how it works in the midst of the seeming vanity of all life? Well, there was another man in history that pondered these things and recorded them in the book of the Bible we know as "Ecclesiastes". He looked out on his own existence and the nature of life and saw it for what it was: full of useless strivings and the vain repetitions of repeated history as all reality just keeps turning, turning, turning. We know him today by the Hebrew word for "Speaker" or "Preacher" and that is what he does. In the text we'll look at he tells us about life and beauty and how these things relate.

But first-- my goal in writing this is fairly simple. I want to paint a picture of God, his creatures, and his creation that is so beautiful that we are able to be swept away by it and respond appropriately to it. Some of the material to follow is very dense and there is much here, but the ultimate goal of all of this is that you might be given the tools to spend the rest of your life thinking through these things on your own and in those contemplations be drawn to enjoy our God as beautiful and enjoy what comes from his hand as beautiful as well.

The Text (Ecclesiastes 2:22-3:15)

To help us find the source of our desire for Beauty, let's look at **Ecclesiastes 2:**

Verses 22-23: *What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.*

Now, I'm going to write out this next verse as the Hebrew literally says it, and how it can legitimately be translated.

Verse 24: *Nothing is better unto mankind than that he should eat and drink and see his soul as beautiful in the midst of his toil.*

Verses 25-26: *for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.*

The "toil and striving of the heart" the writer talks about here is the work that we do in light of our deepest desires. It's the pursuits to fulfill all we want and all we long for. It is those pursuits that can never be accomplished, those longings that can never be fulfilled. It's the deepest drives within us that motivate everything we do. The writer says that these desires, these strivings can never be satisfied. We can try all we want, but no matter what, that pain and vanity will always be the constant state of our lives. But why? Why is it so vain to work so hard at this? For this we look at

3:1-8: *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.*

You see, it's vain because all things already have their proper predetermined season.

Everything you work to *accomplish* will *only* come in it's appointed season for you, and everything you work to *avoid* will *always* come in its appointed season for you. That is why our toil is all in vain. But yet we strive anyway. So why do we still strive in this life? The Preacher asks this very same question: *What gain has the worker from his toil?* (**verse 9**) He then tells us that he thinks that God has given him a special perspective to give us some insight on why we do (and should do) the strivings that we do. He says: *I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.* (**Verse 10**) He says that he thinks he sees it. He has looked out over history and life and he thinks he sees why it is we strive. Though it's in vain, God still births something in us to toil. The Preacher has seen the proper striving that God has given humans to do. So what is it? Well, his answer to that is our main text tonight:

3:11-15: *He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from*

the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man. I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.

The writer says *I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end.* Does anyone else see how weird this sounds? The writer says *this is the business of man* and then goes on to talk about *God* doing things and what we can't do. So what's going on? This is what I think the writer is saying: God has a picture of what a good and beautiful world looks like and He is forming this world into that picture as he is making all things beautiful. This beautiful world is an Infinite, eternal one. So, He has *put eternity into our hearts*, or in other words, put a deposit of this eternal beautiful world in our hearts, causing us to long for it. This seems to be so we can recognize the beauty that God is making while not seeing the exact mechanisms that God is using to do it. It forces us to enjoy what God is doing while still having to trust Him rather than trying to predict Him. Apparently the business of man, then, is to see, recognize, and enjoy the beauty God is doing. But, in our sinfulness, we don't like not being able to find out what God is doing from the beginning to the end, so we like to form our own pictures in our heads of what a good and beautiful world looks like. So every action of every human being is to make the world

out there match the world *in their head*. The task of the Christian, then, is to make the world they want in their head match the world the God has placed a longing for in their heart. The rest of our text describes what this looks like, so we'll get to that later when we talk about how we respond to Beauty.

(*Side note:* Quickly, a translation issue. If you are following this in another translation it may not say "He has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from beginning to the end." It may say something like: "He has set the world into their heart, without which man cannot find out the work that God makes from the beginning to the end." The two main differences are whether or not God has put "eternity" or "the world" into their hearts, and whether he did this "so that" they couldn't know what he's done, or "without which" they couldn't know these things. Both options really do change the meaning of the text. But, it's usually older translations that don't translate it the way I said it tonight. The Hebrew really could go either way. But in the "world" or "eternity" situation, the writer of Ecclesiastes uses this same word 7 or 8 more times in the book and every time he means "eternity". In the other case (the "so that" or "without which" thing), this construction never means "without which" anywhere else in the Bible. Various Rabbi's writing about this passage years later use that phrasing but the Bible never does. It always means "so that". Okay, with that out of the way, let's get to business.)

So, let's first get down a definition and an idea of what Beauty actually is. My basic outline for this is: First, what is beauty? Secondly, we'll go through how different things fit this definition. And lastly, we'll talk about our response to beauty.

What is Beauty?

Whenever you go to study a particular topic in the Bible, the first place you go is the concordance. You go online, or you look in a book, and you search for every time that word is used. If you're lucky, you'll find some place in the Bible where the the writer gives you a direct definition for that topic. You look for statements like "This is love" or "Faith is" or "This is the will of God". The Bible never gives a definition of Beauty. It calls God, creation, and people all beautiful. It says some people *are* beautiful. It says some people *do* beautiful things. It calls both good things and evil things beautiful. It calls for us to seek after certain beautiful things. It tells to avoid certain other beautiful things. So, just simply looking at the whenever the Bible uses the word "beautiful" doesn't help us tremendously, but it's a start. We can start to see that beauty is a bit more complex than we're sometimes told. We start to see how a lot of common definitions we hear sometimes aren't true Biblically. We see that:

- it's not perfection.
- it's not just when something reflects God.
- it's not just order or symmetry. We all know there can be beauty in chaos sometimes.
- it's not just in the eye of the beholder. There is *some* objective sense of beauty.
- it's not just an attribute of *things or people*.

So, the next step in studying something topically is to look at the original language to see what the English translation "beauty" meant in the Greek and Hebrew. When you do this, things get even more frustrating with Beauty. In the ESV alone, there are over 20 *very* different Hebrew and Greek words all translated as "beauty" or "beautiful"--but we can still learn a few things. First off, we see that the Hebrew mindset is a lot richer than the Greek one. The Hebrew

words range in literal meanings such as pleasant, dignified, adorned, sweet, delightful, precious, boastful, arrogant, glorious, and vigorous; one word used only once even means “scraped of all impurity”. The Greek words, on the other hand, simply mean good and beautiful. But there is some depth here. The most common NT word used for “beautiful”, but most often translated as “good”, originally comes from a verb which means “to call”, speaking to the attractive nature of beauty. The other word used comes from the word for “hour” which describes beauty as being “within one’s hour”. In the attached appendix, you will find a full breakdown of every instance each of these words appear in the Bible, their form, their frequency, and what each of these Greek or Hebrew words most literally mean.

So now we have a fuller idea of beauty, but still no working definition. At this point you just have to pray, read, and think a *lot* while looking at the broader context of theology. We use the things we clearly know about the nature of God, humankind, and reality to shed light on the ambiguous things and help us get closer to a definition. When you do that, some things come up that we need to keep in mind.

First, our definition needs to make God the most beautiful Person in the universe, it needs to make the cross the most beautiful event in history, it needs to make Jesus the most beautiful man who lived the most beautiful life this world has ever known, and lastly, it needs to make the Gospel (or the message of Christianity) the most beautiful thing anyone could ever hear or believe.

Secondly, we see that there is a tension that has to be held when it comes to talking about Beauty. It seems like Christians throughout history have fallen into one of two errors when thinking about it: either a pantheistic view or deistic view of beauty. The pantheistic view would

say that *God is Beauty* so only things that join him in *His* beauty can be beautiful. Nothing can have beauty in and of itself. It's only beautiful as much as God shines through it. This definition would say that bad music made by Christians will always be more beautiful than really good music made by non-Christians. Now we all know *that's* not true, because we've all heard *really* bad Christian music. This is the purely objective view of of beauty. The other view, the deistic view would say *God is beautiful*, so He put beauty on earth that's completely separate from Him so we can have a beauty that's all our own, and it doesn't relate to God in any way. God is beautiful. Humans are beautiful. There's no connection. We don't share in God's beauty. This view would say that there is absolutely nothing more beautiful about one song that talks about the depths of who God is as opposed to another that doesn't. They're just songs. This view is a purely subjective view of beauty.

The Biblical view is different from both of these. The Bible teaches that God is separate from His creation, but He's still present. God is not in created things, but those things can and do preach about who God is. Man is not God, but God has become a man so that He might communicate Himself to us and accomplish for us what we could not do for ourselves. So God is completely other, but He's near. So, our definition of beauty has to reflect this. It has to be something that is connected to the nature of God but is still something humans can possess, but not in the same way. It has to be objective for God, but subjective for us.

After doing all that, are you ready for an actual definition? The best definition that my arrogant, immature, and prideful 24-year old mind has been able to come up with for beauty is this:

Beauty is the attribute of something that expresses complexity, simply.

That's it. Beauty is what makes infinity, finite; it makes transcendent things seem near. So the more "stuff" that is represented more "simply", the more beautiful that something is. The best image I've been able to think of to explain beauty is the Hebrew word *shalom*. Many people know that this word is usually translated as "peace" but it has a much richer meaning than this. The Old Testament uses this word to describe the ultimate goal and end of history and all that God is doing--peace. Now, when we think of peace, we usually define it negatively- no fighting, no war, no hunger, no pain. But this word in the Hebrew carries with it the connotation of *reknitting the very fabric of the universe*. It paints a picture of a world that is made up of an infinite number of "strands" of sorts, and *shalom* is when these strands are re-woven together into a sort of tapestry. Beauty, therefore, is when some or many of these complex strands are woven together into a tapestry that we can perceive with our senses, both physical and spiritual. The more complex strands contained in one simple "tapestry", the more beautiful that thing is.

This is the objective idea of beauty. But, this definition also has the benefit of having an appropriate subjective component as well. You see, we as individuals over time become more sensitive to certain ones of those strands of the universe and less sensitive to others. Our culture, experiences, natural make-up, and ultimately our spiritual state all cause us to sense and value various strands differently, making us value different "tapestries" differently.

Perhaps the best way to further illustrate this is by showing how various things fit this definition. This brings us to our next section:

What is beautiful?

First and foremost, the Triune God is beautiful.

He is Three Persons (complexity) existing in One Deity (simplicity). Just think of that word *God*. That is the human term that he has chosen to be acceptable for us to call him. Those three letters contain the simplest expression of the Sovereign Creator and Lord of the Universe. Most old school systematic theologies are structured the same basic way: the first actual section of theology is reserved for “the Doctrine of God”, and the first thing you learn about God is his “unknowability”. This is the fact that God is infinite, inexhaustible, holy, and completely separate from all things we could ever conceive or understand. We cannot know him. Any pursuit we go on to know him will *always* be futile. Just the fact that the Infinite God has revealed *anything* to us in a way that we can actually understand is beauty itself. He is the perfect and complete tapestry within which all things are woven together in the first place. He is peace. He *is shalom*. He *is* Beauty. But let’s look at His distinct persons as well.

God the Father is beautiful.

In Exodus 3, Moses is talking to this God who is showing Himself through a burning bush and he asks this God “Who are you?” The huge transcendent God simply says “I am that I am”. So, in the Bible and in the creation, God the Father reveals Himself clearly enough that we can know who we should worship. Think about it. The infinite God who is outside of time and space uses finite things within time and space to communicate himself. This Infinite Head of the Godhead reveals the Infinite strands of who He is in one of the simplest of tapestries: “I AM”. This is beautiful.

God the Holy Spirit is beautiful.

1 Corinthians 2 says, “As it is written, ‘what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him’” We often stop there. We talk about all those infinite promises God has made that no one has seen and no one can know. But this isn’t the case. Read on. Paul writes that *all* these things that no one has seen, *all* these infinite and glorious promises that would blow our minds “*God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.*” The Infinite complex Spirit of the Infinite complex God dwells within finite simple believers and what’s more, he communicates the previously unspoken thoughts of God Himself. So through the mediator of the Holy Spirit, God weaves his thoughts into the tapestry of our souls.

God the Son is beautiful.

Of course, we go to John 1 for this: “*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth*

came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." He is the ultimate earthly reflection of beauty. He is the living Word of God. He is God of God in the flesh of man. The ultimate, infinite, precious, all-consuming, King of Kings and Lord of Lords takes on the form of a child born in a manger. Oh the humility. Oh the beauty in this act we call the Incarnation, where the infinite God takes on finite humanity.

So, not only is God beautiful, but God's creation is beautiful.

The Bible clearly tells us in several places that nature proclaims God's Glory, and that many of God's invisible attributes are made plain to us by Creation. Thomas Aquinas, in his book *Divine Names*, in the section on God being called "Beauty" says that divine beauty is the motive for God creating all of this. God loves his own divine beauty so much that he wants to share it as much as possible. So, he creates creatures and mysteriously communicates this likeness of Beauty to them. God intends everything in creation to become beautiful in the fullness of His divine Beauty so, just like he has placed a deposit of eternity into our hearts, He has placed a deposit of that Beauty in creation.

Modern science was birthed out of an awe for this Beauty. People looked out on the earth and saw that it worked on ordered processes, and these people determined to find out what those laws and processes were. Science and medicine are simply humanity accomplishing what theologians call the "Dominion Mandate" - when God commands the first humans to "subdue the earth". Science is the process of looking deeply into the tapestry of the created world and seeing what strands comprise it. They get to stare into the inner workings of the Beauty of God in this

world. It's sad that the Church has so divorced itself from this endeavor of worship. The comedian Steve Martin is also a novelist and playwright. He wrote one of my favorite plays called *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. The premise is pretty simple: what would happen if Pablo Picasso, five years before he painted his definitive painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* met a young scientist named Albert Einstein in a small cafe a year before he published a little book called "The Theory of Relativity"? It's one of the smartest and funniest plays I've ever seen. There's a scene about halfway through where Picasso lays out his creative process and then looks at Einstein and says, "But what do you know about it anyway? You're just a scientist. You just want theories". Einstein replies with, "Yes, but like you, the theories must be beautiful. Do you know why the sun doesn't revolve around the earth? Because the idea is not beautiful!" He further explains this and then Picasso says, "Ah, I see. So you [as a scientist] bring a beautiful idea into being." God's creation, and the laws that run it, are beautiful.

Humans are beautiful.

Humans are the crown of God's creation. In the opening chapters of Genesis you see that with each day of creation, what God creates grows increasingly complex and nearer to the heart of God, until you reach that final creative act, where God intimately makes humans in his very own image. We can't lose this. *All humans have dignity, worth, and beauty, no matter where they end up eternally.* God loves all humanity, and so should we. Being image-bearers gives us all innate worth and innate objective beauty. But, as we are all very aware of, humans also have a very subjective sense of beauty as well. This is where we get to talk about physical beauty briefly. Though I can't do full justice to this topic here, I'll try to give you some tools to

better think through these things on your own. I know there's a lot of brokenness over this issue. There's lots of pain and baggage that I wish I could deal with more; people whose beauty has been abused or insulted; people who have used their own beauty to fill that eternity in our hearts, but to know avail.

Though I can't hit every issue involved in this, I do want to say two main things that I hope are helpful. First, remember our definition of Beauty? Beauty is *complexity expressed simply*. Everything about us is always expressing the almost infinite complexity that comes from just being human in the first place. Physical unattractiveness, it seems to me then, is when this human complexity is not *physically* expressed very simply, orderly, or harmoniously. Does this make sense? Is it not true that the ideas of "ugliness", "grotesqueness", and similar descriptors carry with them a sense of "busyness", "disarray", and "too much going on"- the opposite of simplicity and order? I say this not only to give an understanding of physical unattractiveness, but to remind us that our physicality expresses parts of our humanity. In the tapestry of being human, our physicality and embodiment - how we carry, dress, work-out, make-up, and build-up ourselves - emphasizes and expresses different strands within that tapestry. What parts of the beautiful artwork that you are are you trying to accentuate and emphasize with your physical beauty? Your own strength? Your ability to draw eyes to yourself? Or do you use your beauty to point others away from yourself to the one of whom your beauty is but a shadow? Here we must draw an important distinction between *True Beauty* and *Seductive Beauty*. True Beauty is whatever attracts us towards our ultimate fulfillment and happiness. It draws us towards higher, more complex joys, excellencies, and goods. Seductive Beauty on the other hand is beauty that tries and draw us away from our highest good and draws

us towards lower things- baser pleasures, compromises, and harms that will eventually be our ultimate unhappiness and destruction. If you are not trying to draw people to their greatest good, then you're drawing them to destruction.

Secondly, regarding physical beauty, I want to say this: recall earlier when I said that some people, because of culture, experiences, *et cetera* value different "strands" of that tapestry of the world differently? This is a complex way of saying that different people find different things beautiful, and that's okay. That's good. Humans were made to make value judgments. This is so that we who have been changed by God can look at him and rightfully and freely declare him as all Beauty. We were made this way so that we could assign true value to true things. But this good purpose of assigning value to things has become distorted because of sin and we often give the wrong value to wrong things. We long for Beauty, so we often (especially when we are not joined with God who is Beauty Itself) try to fill things with more meaning, more complexity, more "strands" in order to make them seem more beautiful, but it's a false beauty that will never really deliver. It's imposed on things and not recognized from within things. This is what the Bible calls *idolatry*. Assigning things a greater worth than they deserve, and thereby robbing God of that assignation. We steal these value judgments from God and use them to prop up other things/people/activities as our temporary "god" that we will then serve and appease to get them to approve us. We fill them with meaning to make them appear more beautiful to us so that we can justify filling them with our own identities. We make value-judgments, and the simple fact that we do is not a bad thing. We should not feel guilt over this.

Physical beauty, then, is an outward reminder of the original goodness, order, and "complexity-expressed-simply" that people were made for, just like physical deformities are

outward reminders of the fallenness of this world. We are supposed to be drawn to physical beauty. That's okay. But sin takes that one strand of the tapestry of what makes someone *completely* beautiful on account of simply being a human, and makes it more valuable than all the other strands. The problem is not when we *recognize* and enjoy physical beauty, it's when we *prioritize* it above other things. So, feel free to pursue romance with someone you are physically attracted to (*amen!*) and feel free to acknowledge when you see physical beauty. But, the encouragement I'll give you is this: as you do so, make sure you are spending plenty of time enjoying and rightfully calling "beautiful" the God Who's Beauty overshadows all others. Practicing right value judgements with the One of highest value helps us see ourselves and the rest of the world more properly. Humanity is beautiful.

Next, Humanity's creations are beautiful. This is where we get to talk about art.

Art is a really tough thing to talk about. It's a huge topic that everyone has an opinion on, and as time has gone on, the conventions of art and what it is have broken down and definitions have broadened almost to the point of not really being definitions at all. And all along the way you seem to have people forgetting some very important things that we all must be reminded of.

First off, we are too quick to call God the "Supreme Artist". That's taking a description of humans and describing God with it. We're right in starting with him trying to understand art, but seeing Him as the "Supreme Artist" generally makes us picture in our minds the type of artistry we like best, and then begin thinking that God values that kind the most. This ends up being a bottom-up kind of description of art rather than top-down. Before God is Artist, He is a

Creator, so we must start thinking of art *creative-ly*. This means that the way God is an artist is by making things that are not him and weren't around before. So when we refer to God as Artist, this is what we should have in mind.

Secondly, we must keep in mind that God Himself was the first abstract artist. I kept reading all these books and articles written by Christians about art and so many of them seemed to not have room in their "theologies of art" for the abstract. The opposite of "abstract" art is "representational" art - art that "re-presents" something we know exists. When God did *His* artistry, it was all abstract. There was nothing to "re-present." So that being the case, I can't think that God isn't glorified in even the most abstract of art. There may even be an argument that abstract art is closer to the heart of God than representational. I'm not making that argument, but someone could.

Thirdly, as most Christians recognize, we create things because God does. In Genesis 1:27, the first passage in the Bible that talks about people being made in the "Image of God", the logical question that follows is: what exactly does that mean? Now, theologians and philosophers have argued about this for thousands of years, and I'm not going to try and finish that fight right now, but I will say that it's interesting that at the time this verse shows up, there's only one thing we know about this God that humans are apparently in the "image of"- He has the desire and ability to make things. I imagine that's where we get *our* desire and ability. As G.K. Chesterton points out in his book "The Everlasting Man", whatever role evolution may have played in the development of this world, it can't by itself explain art. You don't monkeys in caves making bad art and humans now making good art. There's something about art that reflects what makes us *unique* among all created things.

So when we *do* create and we *do* make, what does this have to do with beauty?

Everything. I really do believe that art, like science, is a necessary endeavor in furthering God's plan in History. God's creation merely *points* to God's Beauty. It doesn't make beauty itself. Humans, on the other hand, actually make beauty and play an integral part in God "making all things beautiful in their time". Let's go back to our definition of beauty. *Complexity expressed simply*. The more complexity of "strands" that are represented in a piece of art, the more beautiful it is. And remember: different people, due to many factors, will find and feel different "strands" running through different pieces of art.

Imagine every "strand" that makes up the universe is there before an artist preparing to do a piece. You have *suffering* over here, *hope* here, *joy* here; *God, evil, life, humanity, death, birth, redemption, pain* - all there before the artist. In art, the artist grabs as many of those strands as they can and crams them into the piece. And the more there are, the more beautiful it is. That's why many people don't like Postmodern art. There's no complexity. It's too simple and says nothing. There are not enough strands in it to strike the heart of a person so they can actually call it beautiful. A complexity of ideas makes art beautiful. In the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde writes out his thoughts on Beauty and art. He writes: "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital. When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself." Though I disagree with Wilde on some of what he says in the preface, nevertheless he is noticing that different strands in any piece should resonate with different people. Some people will be offended. Others will praise it. It's just the way something beautiful is. After all, it's how both God and His Gospel are.

I'll end this oh-too-brief section on art with a few comments on the distinction between "Christian" art and "secular" art. As Phil Ryken writes in his book *Art for God's Sake*: Bad Christian art "ultimately dishonors God because it is not in keeping with the truth and beauty of His character. It also undermines the church's gospel message of salvation in Christ." How? Well, the kind of modern art that most Christians scoff at is art that is completely void of goodness, light, and truth. But Christian art tends to do the same thing by being void of other very real things in this world: depravity, pain, and sin. When our art shies away from these things, in effect, we're avoiding showing the world what they need salvation from. Jesus didn't come to save some cute coffee mug or bumper sticker kind of world. He came and suffered, bled, died an ugly death that we celebrate as the most beautiful event in all of history. We must make room in our art to explore the darkness and pain of this world so we can show them that Christ can and does engage and enter into brokenness to see it redeemed.

In conclusion, some thoughts on the use of art in God's purposes of Redemption. As will be further discussed in the next section, "History" is not the story of the present hurtling through time towards some future endpoint we call "heaven". Rather, it is the beauty of that future world invading the present, even as we sit and read this. If "Beauty" is the end goal for which God is making all things in their time (Ecclesiastes 3:11), then whatever floods the world with Beauty is actually furthering this process of redemption. Artists, both saved and secular, are actually missionaries of sorts, as they help reweave the fabric of the universe with the beauty of their creations.

Oh that we would see why we need artists! Good artists doing good and beautiful work and not trite, kitschy, cute things that keep us away from the real world out of fear that we might

“catch it”. A creation always reveals something about its creator. If you are a Christian, may I urge you to show the world through your creations that you have been saved by a Gospel that makes you care about excellence engaging darkness, beauty engaging filth, order engaging chaos, and redemption conquering sin? Let our art -- our creations -- speak of a beautiful work that a beautiful God has done in us, whether or not it is an explicitly “religious” piece. Art is beautiful.

History is beautiful.

As our text says, History is the context in which all things are being made beautiful. This is where the Beauty of God, His creation, humans, and their creations all collide and interact in order to bring about this beauty and *shalom* in the world. It is the ultimate tapestry in which all these strands are being woven together. One of the best understandings of history I’ve ever heard came from a message called “Continuous Worship: Is ‘Worship’ the Only Word for Worship?” given by Harold Best, dean of Wheaton College’s Conservatory of Music and author of the incredible book everyone should read before they die, *Unceasing Worship*. In the message, Best points out that the Eastern mind sees time as circular: life repeats itself and moves in consistent cycles. The Western mind, on the other hand, sees time as linear, with a definite beginning and a definite ending. Now most of us have heard this before and then were told the various reasons why the Western idea is right.

Best and Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, both point out how our modern Western bias is misguided. Our text tells us some of the “ingredients” God uses to make all things beautiful in their time (Ecclesiastes 3:1-7). God employs this same list of things over and over and over

again through time. In fact, one of the consistent themes of the book of Ecclesiastes is the vain repetitions and cycles that seem to make up life. In Best's message, he points out that time is in fact neither linear nor circular. It's *helical* - in the shape of helix. That shape, so essential to the creation and sustenance of life, is actually woven into time. Life moves circularly as it linearly moves through time.

Assuming that's true, let's apply our definition of Beauty and see what happens. History is the story of God liberating all of creation from its bondage to decay and ugliness into participation in the Glory and Beauty of God. If this is true, then every moment that goes by means the further "Beautifying" of the world. Imagine then that "History" is Time moving in this circular fashion towards the Glory and Beauty of God, with the earlier parts being made of less woven "strands" and the later parts being an ever increasingly tight "weave" of the tapestry of the universe. Slowly -- over the years -- through time, God employs people, situations, art, Jesus, and the Cross to weave these strands ever and ever more securely together into the Image of Heaven.

What this means is (as we said earlier concerning art in Redemption) that time isn't merely moving forward toward some point in the future we call "Heaven" or "the end of time", Heaven is actually invading the present as we speak, as we sit here, as art is made, as people are seen as beautiful - we are actually ushering in Heaven on earth as those strands are pulled tighter and tighter together to form this epic tapestry of History. In Marilynne Robinson's book *Gilead*, she writes from the perspective of an old Congregationalist preacher about to die. This man, reflecting on life and heaven says this as he thinks about this very topic we're talking about:

I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know names for and then has to close his eyes again. I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is human beauty in it. And I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us. In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety [and a love for what God has done on this earth] forbids me to try.

Jonathan Edwards, writing about Ephesians 2:7-8, described history flowing into the Beauty and Glory of Heaven saying that as time moves forward now and on through eternity, it's as if God's people are ever steadily rising higher and higher into the Glory of God, perhaps with an increasing velocity, towards a height to which they will never attain. This history is beautiful; therefore let's not waste it on trivial, lower, ugly things.

How do we respond to Beauty?

We've discussed what beauty is, what things are actually beautiful, and why they are beautiful. But there's one more very important thing left to discuss: how are we meant to respond to Beauty? We used our text to give us a context to figure out a definition of Beauty,

and then we applied that definition to different things, so let's go back to it and see how we are supposed to respond to this beauty:

Ecclesiastes 3:12-15: *He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I **perceived** that there is nothing better for them than to **be joyful** and to **do good** as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man. I **perceived** that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.*

The ultimate response, the final goal, of seeing all the Beauty God has put in our hearts, put in the world, and is doing in and around us, is joy and doing good. But the writer did something before he could declare this: he thought about it and “perceived” this to be the case. You see this in the final verses of this section as well. After declaring the joy that should come from seeing Beauty, he then steps back and sees the bigger picture. He tells us what first must be true about God if we are going to ultimately respond to beauty the way we should.

Reading this reminded me of something C.S. Lewis once said. In one of his philosophical works (I honestly don't remember which one) he says that humans interact with things by **contemplating** and **enjoying**. He says that they cannot do these things at the same time though they can rapidly move back and forth between the two. I think this is a great way of saying what the author in Ecclesiastes is saying. We first must “perceive” (or contemplate) Beauty and then

we enjoy the Beauty that God is making all things into and that he has placed into our hearts and world. Often, this distinction between contemplating and enjoying happens so rapidly that it seems like it is happening at the same time; I'm not *necessarily* saying that you can't enjoy beauty before sitting down and thinking about it, researching it, and writing out some paper. Even before contemplating something and learning its complexities you can enjoy the Beauty of it. But this is the same way that a husband can enjoy his wife on the first day they're married, but he must spend time and effort after that contemplating and getting to know his wife, so he can enjoy her *more fully* and *more comprehensively*. Contemplation is not necessary to *enjoy* at first, but it is necessary to enjoy *fully*.

But what do I even mean by "contemplation?"

Basically, the "contemplation" I have in mind is thinking through what "strands" or what "complexity" is being represented in the thing in front of you. So what does it look like? Formally in philosophy this endeavor is called "Aesthetics" or "Metaphysics". It's the philosophical study of Beauty and Beautiful things. In the real world, for the rest of us, I thought of two ways this could look.

First, when presented with something that your senses find beautiful, ask yourself, "What is it that's actually being stirred in me?" Is it romance? Sorrow? Reminders of childhood joys? That stirring is your soul resonating with the strands that are in the tapestry in front of you. This is what art critics are really good at doing: teasing apart the strands that make up any given piece of art. The second way to contemplate is when you are encountered with something or someone that *everyone* seems to think is so beautiful but you just don't get it. Maybe it's the Mona Lisa.

You may think: “Yeah, it’s a good painting, but what’s the big deal?” Maybe it’s some piece of abstract art that everyone else is swooning over but you. Maybe it’s a book, poem, or song you just don’t understand. In this case, I would encourage you to do research, read criticism, and try and understand the complexity behind the tapestry that others are noticing, but not you. It seems like people that know music theory really well seem to like Jazz and Classical more than others that may not know this discipline. It seems like trained poets like weird abnormal poetry that the rest of us tend to disregard. The better you can understand the complexity in something, the easier it is for you to appreciate and ultimately enjoy the fullness of its beauty. This is why it is helpful to be very curious about as many topics as possible. It’s not for the sake of more knowledge, but so that you can better enjoy the world around you and see it’s Beauty in everything. How much more important, then, might this be for the Christian -- to better enjoy the goodness of the world and its process of Redemption?

Now, the above description of the “contemplation of Beauty” is more suited for everyday use and understanding subjective, created Beauty. But more importantly, we must learn what it means to contemplate objective, ultimate Beauty -- the Beauty of God. In Christianity this endeavor is called “Theology”. If Theology is in fact “the study of God”, then it is *by definition* the study of *Beauty Itself*. This is what Theology was meant to be. It’s the kind of theology God calls us to do. Theology is the contemplation of the various complexities and revealed “strands” of God in order to better enjoy Him. John Calvin talks about this in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He says that if your quote-on-quote “theological study” isn’t leading you to greater praise and enjoyment in God, then you’re not really studying theology! At that point it’s

just studying literature -- getting a better idea of this “character” named God in this “novel” called “The Bible”.

This is one of the reasons I left seminary. I was in the midst of such beauty and I was numb to it! I was too immature. I didn't have the spiritual infrastructure to see it for how beautiful it was! This infinite complexity being placed in front of me day in and day out was not leading me to *enjoy* Him. How many of us live day in and day out surrounded by the objective beauty of Christ and it does nothing to us?

Charles Spurgeon once wrote:

“There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. No subject of contemplation will tend to more humble the mind, than thoughts of God.”

May I challenge all of us to press in and seek the complexities of Who this God is and how He has revealed Himself? Understanding the Beauty of God is of the utmost importance to the Christian, because His Beauty is *completely pointless*. It can't be manipulated, used, or abused. It can only be enjoyed. Something I've learned over time: whenever spirituality of any kind goes awry and goes off track, the Beauty of God is one of the first things to go. The inability to accept the mysterious complexities of God is the beginning of all heresy. You can't have a right enjoyment of the Beauty of God and be a legalist, libertine (someone who abuses grace), or a hypocrite. Seeking to enjoy the Beauty of God is a guard against all these things.

In my reading, one of my favorite things I came across was from a Catholic theologian named John Navone. He says in his book *Toward a Theology of Beauty* that Christian

theologians (which I would argue should be all of us) are people given the task of articulating and putting into words how *everything* in life is given to us by God. Navone calls this the “givenness” of life and selfhood. This means that all of life is grace - unmerited favor; and that even things that are usually seen as secular (types of visual art, media, culture, jobs, and types of “non-Christian” music) are actually things that

mediate the mystery of the dawn of Christ’s Kingdom, as epiphanies or manifestations of grace. We as theologians [and (I would argue) as artists and beholders of beautiful things] are charged with the task of ushering in and articulating the mysteries of beauty which we will rest in forever.

That’s amazing. He goes on to say that “Theologians [(and I’d say even Christian artists)] are engaged in a dialogue, not only with their public, but with the object of their contemplation.”

This should be one of the distinguishing factors between artists that are Christians, compared to those that are not: non-Christian artists can only use their art to dialogue with other people (speaking horizontally) and other art (speaking down). Only the Christian can make art with the confidence and hope that it also speaks and dialogues upwards to a God pleased to see, hear, or watch it.

Now what if you’re reading all this, but you wouldn’t say you’re a Christian? First, if your interest has been piqued, but you just don’t get it, I’d give you the same encouragement I gave to those earlier that don’t understand the Beauty of things that others find beautiful. Learn about this God. Stick around. Ask questions. Seek answers. Try to see the infinite complexity of this God and how simply he has revealed Himself. Look into how He has revealed Himself and start to pick apart the strands of the incredible tapestry he has revealed Himself as. Secondly, let me

encourage you: there is objective Beauty. Your heart yearns for it and longs for it, and it is out there. Objective beauty is when the fullest possible complexity is expressed to us. So God - *infinite* complexity - is that objective Beauty Itself. But people don't know full objective beauty before they know God. This complexity cannot be comprehended until God changes someone to comprehend it. If you're not there yet, that's fine. Pray. Ask God to change you as He has changed many of us. Contemplate this God. Contemplate His world. Contemplate all Beauty. Why?

So we can enjoy it to the fullest.

Our text says that God's gift to man is the ability and call to enjoy and take pleasure in all things. After contemplation, there comes the time when we must engage with what we have contemplated. Even in Christianity, our theological study and discovery of who God is is not complete until we actually close the Bible, look up, and enjoy this revealed God. But how? What does this enjoyment look like? I've broken it down into four different stages. To enjoy Beauty, we *praise* it, *participate* in it, *proclaim* it, and *produce* more beauty.

First, we praise the beautiful things.

This seems fairly simple at first, but it has a deeper level to it. In its external form, praising the beauty of something is as simple as calling it beautiful. But what about nature? Or art? Or a book? Or a poem? Perhaps the original artist is dead or not available for you to communicate to them the beauty of their work. Those cases help show us that "praise" goes deeper than mere

words. “Praise”, more accurately, is a turning of our affections toward the object of the beauty before you. It’s acknowledging beauty at the deepest part of who you are.

Now, there is a distinction between the affections we turn towards these things and the affections we have for God. Those that have been changed by God to see His Beauty have had their deepest affections changed so that God is highest in those affections. But it’s absolutely fine and proper to have an affection for the same things that God loves and has affections for. Having affection for His Church, His people, your family, and Beauty (even the Beauty of “non-religious” things) is completely in line with someone who has been changed by God to see Him as most beautiful.

The implications of this more accurate idea of “praising” are huge. First, it means that you can be “praising” with your lips and not actually be praising. It also means that you can be praising something fully, accurately, and appropriately without ever having uttered a word. Imagine staring at a beautiful piece of art. It’s just you and the art while everything else fades away, and every distraction disappears. In that moment, as your affection swells for this thing of Beauty, you are calling it beautiful - you are praising.

Baptized in Beauty

But praising is not enough. Seeing something beautiful and calling it such does not complete the purpose for which that beauty exists. Beauty has an attractive quality. It calls you toward itself at a very deep level. The next step therefore, after *praising* this beauty, is to allow it to draw you in. I call this “*participating*” with the Beauty of that thing or person.

Practically, this looks lots of different ways. With other *people*, it's drawing near to that person; conversing with them. Viewing more of the nuances of the Image of God in them that makes them beautiful. For *art*, it looks like accepting the art on its own terms and letting it draw you in whatever way it's asking of you. For plays and films, for example, this is the idea of "suspension of disbelief", where you allow yourself to forget that you technically "know" this isn't real, and you let yourself get sucked into this beauty. Other forms of art tend to ask us to get lost in the object itself and explore its nuances. Closing your eyes during a musical piece and hearing every note; letting the words of a poem get inside of you and change the vocabulary you use to describe its own beauty or the world around you; letting distractions fade as you stare at a painting and see every stroke, every color (anyone who has seen a piece in real-life by John Singer-Sargent or Vincent VanGogh knows this feeling most definitely). Have you ever cried because of Beauty? This is participating with it. In the contemplation stage of this process you ask yourself "what is the beauty of this thing asking of me? It's drawing me to itself, but to what end?"

But what about God? This is where His Beauty shows especially brilliantly. All other forms of beauty can only draw you *near* to itself. God can and does actually draw you *into* Himself and Himself in you. We can participate with Him in a way that every other form of beauty only faintly strives for. How? Well, He takes the first step upon changing someone by actually sending his very Spirit to dwell within them. After that, we do what the Bible calls "abiding" in Him, where we draw near to Him through various things the Church calls "sacraments" or "means of grace" -- physical, tangible things that we participate in and by faith He meets us there. The clearest one of these is communion. Just think of the word: "Commun-

ion”. It’s where we “commune” with God. That bread and wine is a symbol, but not just that. It is in those elements that we His people are actually drawn further into God to “commune” and participate with Him in His Beauty. This is why Communion is such a big deal in the Bible. God kills people - even Christians - because they misuse this beautiful thing (1 Corinthians 11). He will let no one lightly and trivially participate and be drawn into His Beauty.

This should lead us to a “sacramental” view of life, where we see all of life and the world as things God is using to communicate Himself and His Grace to us. Let everything -- every good-tasting piece of food, every sunset, every cool breeze, every joyful moment -- all be moments where God communicates Himself and His grace to you so you might participate and be joined to Him in His Beauty and further praise Him even more.

Historically, the Christians that do this well have been referred to as “mystics”. They are the ones that say seemingly crazy things. Brother Lawrence was a 17th century monk and he said: “I have at times had such delicious thoughts on the Lord I am ashamed to mention them.”.

John Owen, my favorite Puritan, says

O to behold the glory of Christ...Herein would I live; herein would I die; herein would I dwell in my thoughts and affections...until all things below become unto me a dead and deformed thing, no way suitable for affectionate embraces.

Oh that we longed in that way for God! There is a participation in the Glory, Beauty, Majesty, Goodness, and Love of God that is at hand for those who believe and far for those who don’t.

Please, I beg of you, if you are not a Christian: *seek the Beauty of God*, for it’s only suitable response is to be drawn into it and know His intimacy in this way. He, the fountain of all good

things, the One for Whom your soul was made, does not disappoint those who seek to know Him. Participate in Beauty.

Proclaiming Beauty

But the process is still not over. First we *praise* the thing as beautiful, then we *participate* in its beauty on its own terms. Thirdly, we *proclaim* it as beautiful. “Proclamation” is not the same as praise. C.S. Lewis once said that joy in something is not complete until it is shared with someone else. Proclamation is the telling of the Beauty of this thing to *someone else*. It is sharing in this affection with someone else. Here we start seeing something about Beauty that will lead into our final response: Beauty longs to be known and spread - almost like a virus. It wants to inspire you to tell others about it, so that those people might participate in it as well.

For creational Beauty this is done in many obvious ways like writing up reviews or just telling someone else about it. For Divine Beauty this is typically referred to as preaching. Speaking of this God should be the natural response to someone who has praised and participated in the Beauty of God. It is out of the overflow of this in someone’s heart that they should speak. Not out of begrudging compulsion or sheer white-knuckled obedience. We tell others about the things we find most beautiful. Should this not also apply to the highest of all beautiful Persons - God?

Produce Beauty

This brings us to our last part in the process of responding to beauty. It’s very much tied to the previous one and has to do with Beauty replicating itself. God, in His love for us, calls us to

respond to beauty not only by *proclaiming beauty in word*, but also *producing beauty in deed*.

Producing is the last way we respond to Beauty. We are built in the Image of a God who doesn't just desire, delight in, and display Beauty, but a God who also *does* Beauty. In the same way, we *all* have abilities to produce beauty.

Further, our response to beauty is not even complete until it has inspired us to likewise create beauty. Every musician knows what it's like to be at a show or concert, seeing someone play the instrument that they play and suddenly having their mind swirling with musical ideas they want to try out when they get home. There's an entire field of art history that tries to find the obscure pieces that inspired some of the greatest pieces of art we adore today. It works off the assumption that nothing that beautiful exists without inspiration before it.

The longer I live, the more I am convinced that *everyone* has some creative ability in them. I don't care how "uncreative" you think you are. You are built in the image of a Creator God! You have not only the *ability* but I fully believe the *responsibility* to bring forth more beauty in this world and further participate in God's "re-knitting" of the universe. Of course, this "creative" ability will look different in *each person*, so don't think you have to stick to conventional forms of "creativity". Really, *anything* that makes beauty does this. It can be gardening, serving, counseling, or raising your kids, even. I would argue all those take a certain type of "artistic eye" to do them well. We all have it. Find it. Do it well. Do it often. And do it as a response to the Beauty that is around you in both God and Creation.

This also shows itself in the Christian life (and in our text) as holiness -- or "doing good", as the author of Ecclesiastes puts it. Seeing the Beauty of God should inspire us to holy living and loving of others. Serving those around us in order to share with them and replicate the

Beauty of God that we have seen. The process of beholding the Beauty of God is not complete until it has changed how we actually live our lives. And, as was said before about proclaiming the Beauty of God, this change in action comes not from a begrudging heart, heavy with the burden of “acting a certain way”. But rather it comes from a heart liberated and freed by Beauty Itself to respond most fully and appropriately to God’s Beauty. It is our *joy* and God’s gift to grant us the freedom to let Beauty affect us so profoundly and fundamentally. This Christian life *is* an art; it takes thought, care, creativity, intention, improvisation, and “weaving” to see it flourish and reflect the intention and Beauty of its God. May we learn to value the tapestry of our souls and help one another reknit the frayed fabric of our hearts and of the world around us.

The Gospel is Beautiful

In conclusion, I want to talk about the thing that ties every one of these things together. The thing in which there exists a glorious and beautiful harmony between all the different things we’ve talked about tonight. The last part of our text tonight, **Ecclesiastes 3:15** says

That which is, already has been; and that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.” “God seeks what has been driven away.”

Lastly, *the Gospel is Beautiful*. The Gospel, in short, is the story and message of Christianity. It comes from the Greek word meaning “good news”. So what is this good news for us? It is the news that God did the ultimate act of Beauty -- the ultimate act of condescension -- of filling this finite world with the most Infinite of Beings for the sake of knitting it together once more, and ultimately filling it with Himself.

God began History and ordered it in such a way that it was beautiful. He filled this simplicity with the marks of Himself, so all things pointed to Him and reflected Him perfectly. Humans came on the scene and were made in His image so that they as well truly and purely reflected, represented, and “Imaged” (would be the theological term) this God on earth. But sin entered into the world, and made this world fallen from its original place of beauty. And we all have followed suit. You see, sin is not finding certain things, people, or places beautiful. It’s that we find them *more beautiful than God* and give to them the responses that are only due God. We worship and “image” and express fallen simple things rather than the Holy complex God. We all have done this. I have done this. You have done this. We have soiled our beauty and abandoned it to our lusts! We no longer represent the One whom we were meant to mirror and reflect and therein find our beauty! We merely represent and reflect the world -- the lowly fallen world. Fallen people imaging fallen things. There’s no beauty in that.

But God is rich in mercy. Though we have abandoned His beauty and our own true beauty, God has not abandoned them. He loves His Beauty. And He loves the Beauty of His creation. So this God, for the sake of the worship and enjoyment of His Beauty, comes. The most perfectly knit together tapestry in the universe chooses to come and express the most Holy Complexity in the most intimate simplicity. This perfectly woven tapestry walks the earth, lives the perfectly woven life, and then stares into the cup of God’s perfectly woven wrath reserved for all things and people that are not beautiful in this world. And he drinks it. This perfect tapestry of complexity expressed simply goes to the cross willingly and allows the tapestry of His soul to be torn apart strand by strand by strand as the wrath of God that hung over everyone who would believe was gathered by God and poured it on Himself. That wrath that hung over

many of us. That wrath that perhaps still hangs above some of us. It *will* be poured out on something. Either on Christ at the cross, or in you in Hell. Did you know that Hell is beautiful? Not for those that are there, but it is. It is pure, white, Justice and Wrath poured out on all that was wrong in the world.

And history revolves around this cross. At the same time that Christ, Beauty Itself, was literally being torn apart, he was reconciling all things to Himself. In other words, he was taking every stray strand in the universe - every bit of evil, suffering, and fallenness there will ever be in history - and reserving its proper place in the final tapestry of History that we call Heaven. He was making Himself the common glorifying thread that would reknit the broken fabric of a broken creation. And so we live now in the process and story of God putting all those strands in their proper place. As more and more beauty floods the earth He is still inviting his people to join Him in this epic Story. He is calling his people to praise Him and draw near to Him, and out of the overflow of that to proclaim His Beauty to others and produce more beauty so as to usher in this New creation - or to put it in our terms - the New Tapestry of Creation. Better than before. It is the one that has woven in it the purpose for all pain, sickness, death, and dying that God has ordained and allowed to take place so that this tapestry might make good on it all to the praise of the Beauty of God's name.

And we, His people, His Bride, those that are "in Christ", that are simple people Imaging and expressing the most complex of Beings, are woven into that tapestry that is Heaven and the New Creation. We're not just going to live in it, we *are part of it*. Second Corinthians 5:17, in most Bibles reads: "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." But that's not what it says in the Greek. It doesn't say "if anyone is

in Christ, he is a new creation". There is no "he is". The Greek literally says "If anyone is in Christ: new creation!" More accurately, I think it should be translated "If anyone is in Christ, this is the new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." I remember an old professor at Westminster named Richard Gaffin. He used to go up to students, stop them, and just say to them "you are just as resurrected now as you will ever be". We often forget that. Yes, we will get new bodies and the penalty, power, and presence of sin will be done away with, but as far as our souls go, we are as resurrected now as we will ever be.

We are the new creation. The new tapestry. We have been woven into the fabric of this ever-increasingly redeemed world that is being flooded with the Beauty of God. The new has come in Christ. Through the Gospel. The good news of our salvation is that all that has been ugly with the world and in ourselves has been conquered. Beauty is here, and Beauty is ever increasingly filling the earth, and this Beauty is our salvation from ugliness and sin. George Marsden in his incredible biography of Jonathan Edwards ends the whole book with this summary of Edwards' view of all of life and salvation. He says that

[Edwards believed that] God's trinitarian essence is love. God's purpose in creating a universe in which sin is permitted must be to communicate that love to creatures. The highest or most beautiful love is sacrificial love for the undeserving. Those . . . who are given eyes to see that ineffable beauty will be enthralled by it. . . They will not be able to view Christ's love dispassionately but rather will respond to it with their deepest affections. Truly seeing such good, they will have no choice but to love it. Glimpsing such love . . . they will be

drawn from their self-centered universes. Seeing the beauty of the redemptive love of Christ as the true reality, they will love God and all that he has created.

The Gospel -- this salvation -- is beautiful.

And we receive this salvation by seeing its Beauty, turning our stirred affections toward this God, and trusting that we cannot reknit our own souls but Christ has reknit them for us. And as our affections are further stirred we press into Him ever increasingly as He draws ever-nearer to us. I pray, I plead, that those that have not done so, would trust this beautiful God to have accomplished for them what they could not do for themselves. Please, consider this story, this message. See if it is not the most beautiful thing you could ever conceive. Just for a moment, see if something in you is stirred for this God. Even if you don't believe He exists, or that He is the particular God spoken of here, is there something in you that at least wishes it were true? Wishes it were this way? Wishes that God did in fact arrange everything to make it all beautiful in its time? Even if you won't admit it, if that's true, if you do wish this were the case, don't ignore that. You have been designed to long for the Beauty of this Gospel, this story. Don't ignore it. *Sovereign, Beautiful Father, Lover, and Lord, save people reading this.*

In conclusion, I'm going to break every rule I learned in my preaching class about how to end a message and end mine tonight with a poem. But not someone else's poem. This is a poem I wrote in one take one particular afternoon through broken tears standing on top of a hill looking out over the city of Edinburgh as I was taken over by the most beauty I've ever seen. Let this encourage weary saints, and let it perhaps woo those that have yet taste what these words have been about.

Subj: Dear,

by Paul Burkhart

God,
How I love thee as I sin,
How I love thee as I cry;
How I love thee as I look upon
The work your hands have made.

But I fear
 I fall more
 and more
In love with You for Your
 Works, when
I want to fall in love with You.

Re: Dear,
I am in my works
I am He:
Who was,
 and is,
 and is to come.

I am.
I am He who gives mercy on whom I will,
And I have
 opened your eyes
Given you life, given you freedom
And you have taken my mercy,
My favored child whom I love.

This, this Beauty before you: Take it.
I give freely to you; Love it.
Partake in all my Goodness- Taste it.

Come, rest thy head in me
My beloved child whom I love.
Yes, cry.
Feel it.
Feel me more in you,
 and to you,
 and through you.

Seek not me.
Just fix your eyes,
 open your arms,
 and allow Me
 to allure you
with all that is before you;
Allow me to smash your idols as I
Whisper tenderly in your ear:
 Sweet Everythings

Child,
 I plea,
 I cry,
 I run,
 I will,
 I endeavor,
 I die
That you will allow this burden to fall
And just taste
(that's all you will need,
but return as you might,
To all Beauty I surround you with.)

Child, just taste
 and you will see
 I am Good.

I do all things for the sake of my children,
Child.
I love you.

Enjoy,

APPENDIX

This is a breakdown of every instance of the words translated in the English Standard Version of the Holy Bible (ESV) as “Beauty” or “Beautiful”. In parentheses I have provided how many times the word is used, then a transliteration into English, followed by the range of possible literal meanings (to give a feel for the full meaning of the word), followed by the forms that each one of those words take within the text itself. I hope many of you find this helpful.

Old Testament Hebrew

(55) yefa: fair, beautiful, handsome, “pretty”

יִפְתַּ	יָפִי	הַיָּפָה	יִפְיֹךְ
יָפָה	יָפִיָּהּ	הַיָּפָה	יָפִי
יִפְתַּ	יָפָה	יָפָה	יִפְיֹךְ
יִפְתַּ	הַיָּפִי	יָפָה	יִפְיֹךְ
יָפָה	יָפָה	יָפֹו	יָפִי
יָפָה	הַיָּפָה	יִפְיֹת	יָפִי
יִפְתַּ	יָפָה	יָפִי	בִּיפְיֹךְ
יָפָה	יָפָה	בִּיפְיוֹ	יָפָה
יָפָה	יִפְתִּי	תִּתְיָפִי	וַיִּיָּרֶף
יָפִיָּהּ	יִפְתִּי	יָפָה	בִּיפְיוֹ
יִפְתַּ	יָפָה	יָפָה	יָפָה
יִפְּוֹת	יָפָה	יָפִי	יָפָה
יִפְיֹךְ	יָפָה	בִּיפְיֹךְ	יָפִיו
יָפָה	יָפֹו	בִּיפְיֹךְ	

(19) tif'aret: glorious, victory, greatness (spiritual)

תִּפְאַרֶת	תִּפְאַרָה	תִּפְאַרֶת	תִּפְאַרְתְּךָ
תִּפְאַרֶת	כְּתִפְאַרֶת	וְתִפְאַרְתְּךָ	תִּפְאַרֶת
תִּפְאַרֶת	תִּפְאַרְתְּךָ	וְתִפְאַרְתְּנוּ	וְתִיפִי
תִּפְאַרֶת	תִּפְאַרְתִּי	תִּפְאַרְתְּכֶם	תִּפְאַרְתְּךָ

(7) tova: pleasant, good, beneficial, happy

טוֹבָה
טוֹבָה

טוֹבַת
טוֹבַת

טוֹבוֹת
טוֹבוֹת

וְטוֹבִים

(5) tzevi: beauty, glory, goodly

לְצַבִּי

צַבִּי

צַבִּי

וּצַבִּי

צַבִּי

(4) shafer: be pleasing, beauty, fairness, clearness

שָׁפַר

שָׁפְרָה

שָׁפִיר

שָׁפִיר

(3) fa-er: glorify, beautify, adorn

פָּאָר

פָּאָרָךְ

לְפָאֵר

(2) no'am: pleasant, sweet, delightful, beautiful

בְּנֵעָם

נִעְמָתָ

(2) chemeda: desire, pleasant, precious

חֶמְדָּה

חֶמְדָּה

(2) pa'ar: glorify, beautify, adorn

לְהַתְּפָאֵר

פָּאָר

(1) meruqe: beautification, scraping, rubbing

מְרוּקָה

(1) chesd: lovingkindness, mercy, steadfast love

חֶסֶד

(1) na'wu: beautiful, befitting

נָאֻוּ

(1) ma'reh: appearance, well-fed

מַרְהַ

(1) 'afa'er: boastful, arrogant, beautiful

אַפְאֵר

(1) hod: splendor, majesty, vigor, glory, honor

הוֹד

New Testament Greek

(4) horao: within one's hour

ὥραῖοι

ὥραῖαν

ὥραία

ὥραῖοι

(2) kallos: good, beautiful

καλὸν

καλὸν

(2) asteios: beautiful, aesthetically pleasing to the eyes

ἀστεῖος

ἀστεῖον

(1) euprepeia: beauty, dignity

εὐπρέπεια

(0) Substantive: (not actually there)

ἀφθάρτω