



**Beauty
Is Your
Destiny**

PHILIP RYKEN

How the Promise of Splendor Changes Everything

“It is clear to me as an artist that God has built beauty into our world as a testimony to his own loveliness and creativity. We are better people when we allow beauty to elevate us to more exalted things, and in *Beauty Is Your Destiny*, Philip Ryken explores this wonderful theme. It couldn’t be timelier. Our culture has embraced a fascination with ugliness. It’s evident in our museums, movies, popular music, and books. I applaud Ryken’s desire to help us see how beauty reminds us that there is more—far more—to life than a colorless, mundane ‘functioning.’ If your heart is hungry for vibrancy and joy, color and meaning, then I heartily recommend this volume.”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International
Disability Center; author, *Joni: An Unforgettable Story* and *Songs of Suffering*

“I have been studying beauty and teaching my students about it for years. Finally, *Beauty Is Your Destiny* is here, a lovely and compelling book that gathers up a treasure trove of insights on one of the most essential qualities of our Christian faith and our very humanity. I will return to these pages again and again and will encourage others to do the same.”

Karen Swallow Prior, author, *The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images, and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis*

“Philip Ryken has made a career out of studying complex truths and delivering them to readers in accessible ways. This book about beauty stands apart from others on the subject by way of its theological heft, biblical precision, and topical range. *Beauty Is Your Destiny* is a gift to Christians everywhere, and I’m so glad it is in the world.”

Russ Ramsey, Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee;
author, *Rembrandt Is in the Wind: Learning to Love Art through the Eyes of Faith*

“In a skeptical world of scarcity that doubts the necessity and value of biblical beauty, Philip Ryken’s work shines to illuminate ‘the substance of things hoped for’ and to help us ponder the extravagance of God. As an artist, I am grateful for this book, which affirms my path and calling to create the beautiful.”

Makoto Fujimura, artist; author, *Silence and Beauty* and *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making*

“The encouragement to ‘behold’ runs powerfully throughout Scripture, with some translations using the word over 1,200 times. It’s a clear exhortation to live with our eyes wide open, and this brilliant new book from Philip Ryken is more of the same. Every page reads like an invitation to recognize and respond to what is beautiful. We learn that beauty may be found everywhere, from a starry night sky to a science lab to an act of kindness—even an ancient crucifixion scene in the form of God’s self-giving love. *Beauty Is Your Destiny* is a wonderfully written book that ushers us before the glories of our God and his world—it will no doubt lead many into worship.”

Matt Redman, songwriter; worship leader

“We are made for beauty by our beautiful triune God. Therefore, we are compelled to look for beauty everywhere, even in a broken world with so much ugliness. Philip Ryken has given us a gift in *Beauty Is Your Destiny*. With masterful clarity and simplicity, he displays the variegated manifestations of beauty in this world and the sure triumph of eternal beauty through the cross of Jesus Christ.”

Irwyn Ince, Coordinator, Mission to North America; author, *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best*

“We are painfully and achingly aware of the decay and fractures to the beauty that God designed. In *Beauty Is Your Destiny*, Philip Ryken stirs the longings for beauty not simply as a keen aesthetic but as an impetus for deeper connection to God and holiness in life. Ryken reminds us that in Christ and his ‘old, ugly cross,’ there is a transfixing beauty—a glory worth gazing on with fresh eyes of faith and wonder—and a transforming beauty that seeks to reconcile a broken world and a broken people. This book is an ode to redemptive beauty worth relishing.”

Walter Kim, President, National Association of Evangelicals

“In *Beauty Is Your Destiny*, Philip Ryken reminds us that beauty is found in God himself. Our glorious God created a world and a people to reflect his beauty. But the reality is that we live in a fallen world in which beauty is often redefined, distorted, and idolized. So God sent his beloved Son into the world as the incarnation of divine beauty. And he is transforming us into the image of his Son. One day, we will behold the Son and be like him—truly beautiful. Until then, we can make sense of the brokenness of our world and appreciate the Creator’s beauty as reflected in his creation. If you want to grow in your delight of the beautiful, beginning with our beautiful God, Ryken is a trusted guide.”

Juan R. Sanchez, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas; author, *Seven Dangers Facing Your Church* and *The Leadership Formula*

“Some books on beauty are more bookish than beautiful—they engage the mind but not the heart. Ryken’s *Beauty Is Your Destiny* doesn’t fall into that trap. This is a book that simultaneously stimulates our minds and stirs our affections. It’s informative but also pleasurable to read, leading us not only to grasp a full-orbed theology of beauty but also to worship the source from which all beauty flows.”

Brett McCracken, Senior Editor, The Gospel Coalition; author, *The Wisdom Pyramid: Feeding Your Soul in a Post-Truth World*

“Philip Ryken has written a masterpiece on the subject of beauty. He has immeasurably helped us see it. Beauty is something we know, but we often fail in our attempts to describe it. Ryken depicts beauty in all its contours, showing that beauty emerges even from ugly things, such as the cross of Christ. This book combines deep and extensive knowledge with a writing style that is, well, beautiful.”

William Edgar, Professor Emeritus of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

Beauty Is Your Destiny

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Beauty Is Your Destiny

How the Promise of Splendor Changes Everything

Philip Ryken

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*To Elisabeth Martha Ryken,
a child of the covenant,
with gratitude to God
for the new beauty she brings into the world*

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Preface

THERE IS BEAUTY ALL AROUND US. Our eyes see it in the flash of blue as a belted kingfisher dives for prey in a secluded forest pool. Our ears hear it when a soprano soars to reach the climactic notes of a love song. Our fingers feel it as we softly caress a baby's cheek. Our hearts feel it too when sworn enemies fall into a forgiving embrace. Every day we have fresh opportunities to witness the beauty of God.

The purpose of this book is to help readers both inside and outside the church become more alive to divine beauty and more aware of its place in God's plan for our lives. I hope to awaken a deeper desire for beauty that will lead to lives that are more holy, more joyful, more hopeful, and more just.

This simple yet hopefully substantive book began with a series of chapel messages at Wheaton College. That series was also titled "Beauty Is Your Destiny." It was the fall of 2021, and we were coming out of COVID (or at least we thought we were). During the pandemic I had spent more time at home and in certain respects had become more aware of God's beauty. Looking out my window every day, I saw how my garden grew. I took more long walks, which

made me more attentive to the world around me. Through a season of forced isolation, I sensed a greater need for beauty—and found it.

As our students returned to campus, I wanted my chapel talks to bear witness to the beauty I had experienced. I believed that our campus community needed more beauty too. It had been a difficult time for everyone. Social distancing, mask mandates, virtual classrooms, sickness, even death—COVID-19 had taken its toll. In the United States, we had also experienced ongoing social turmoil, political polarization, and personal distress over racial injustice. Sensing our need for healing, I wanted to point our students back to God's beauty in all its dimensions.

The evangelical community has not always considered beauty a serious topic for theology or an important aspect of the Christian life. I am saddened by the story of John Muir, the Scottish American naturalist who is often regarded as the father of America's national parks. Muir was raised in a devoutly Christian home. His parents, unfortunately, did not regard his explorations in the wilderness an appropriate vocation for Christians. In fact, Muir's father pleaded with his son to abandon his "cold, icy-topped mountains" and come home "to our lovely Jesus." Not surprisingly, perhaps, Muir eventually left behind his childhood faith. Or did he? At the very same time that his father was telling him to come back to Jesus, one of his editors was telling him to stop using the word "glorious" so often to describe the American West.¹ John Muir was caught in a false dichotomy between his love for natural beauty and his impulse to praise the God of creation.

1 The story of John Muir's relationship with his parents is briefly related in Belden C. Lane, *Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45.

Appreciating beauty—in all its splendid forms—can and should be an avenue for worship and a call to faithful Christian discipleship. Focusing on beauty also affords us an opportunity to consider a wide range of practical doctrines in fresh perspective. Over the course of this book, we consider creation and the incarnation, the Trinity and the attributes of God, the crucifixion and the resurrection, sexuality, race, justice, ecclesiology, and eschatology—all from the vantage point of sacred beauty. Indeed, one of my aims for my annual series of chapel talks is to provide a lens for Christian doctrine. Each year I try to address some of the most important topics in the Christian faith and relevant issues in contemporary life in a new and hopefully compelling way. Beauty is a worthy subject in its own right, but theological aesthetics also shows the interconnectedness of Christian doctrine.

Maybe it is important for me to say as well that this book is not just about what is beautiful; it is also about what is ugly and why. In a fallen world, any responsible discussion of the subject requires wrestling with all the ways that beauty is broken. But there is still hope. I mostly agree with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who claimed,

The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.²

2 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (New York: Scribner, 2009), 96.

Beautiful people do not just happen, that is true, but I want to say more. What makes us beautiful—after all our wounds and scars—is God the Holy Spirit.

Like most of my books, this one was written more out of a sense of need than out of any sense of confidence in my own expertise. Some people write what they know; I tend to write about what I want to know better. Writing about beauty makes me especially aware of my own limitations (although, admittedly, writing about topics such as the life of prayer and loving people better has been humbling too). A book about beauty should be, well, beautiful. All I can say is that I tried to write this book as beautifully as I could. You may notice that I have done a lot of quoting in its pages. Think of this book partly as a sourcebook for other Christian authors—who have written more splendidly—on the vital subject of beauty.

Thankfully, this book is much better written than it would have been without the loving labors of Andy Abernethy, Karen Lee, Dyanne Martin, Marjorie Mead, Matt Milliner, and Betsy Rocky. Each of them made invaluable improvements, both large and small. So did the editorial team at Crossway. You will have to judge whether the results are beautiful. What I know for certain is that the people who helped me write this book are beautiful, as we all should be. Beauty is our birthright and also—through Jesus Christ—our destiny.

*One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD.*

PSALM 27:4

*Lord, may we be so transformed in Your beauty that
we may be alike in beauty, and behold ourselves
in Your beauty, possessing Your very beauty.*

JOHN OF THE CROSS

In the Eye of the Beholder

The Beauty of Eternity

WHERE HAVE YOU SEEN THE BEAUTY that God is bringing into the world?

I have glimpsed it in a flaming meteor streaking across the August sky and disappearing with a flash over a darkly shimmering lake. I have heard it in the laughter of a baby girl climbing up into a chair for the first time and chortling over her unexpected little triumph. I have seen it in the face of a radiant bride on her wedding day and the irrepressible tear on the cheek of her beloved groom.

I have also seen beauty rising from the ashes of a burning world. Pastor Steve Wood bore witness to such beauty as he surveyed the ruins of St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in April 2018. After a long legal battle, the congregation finally had secured possession of its church building. Then disaster struck. A few hours before worship services were scheduled

to begin one fine Sunday morning, fire ravaged the church. Although rescue workers salvaged the cross, the baptismal font, and the Communion table, the building was a total loss. Yet as Pastor Wood stood in the smoking ruins, he said to a reporter, “The Lord promises to bring beauty out of ashes. And we’re taking Him at his word.”¹

Beauty out of ashes. The promise that Pastor Wood had in mind comes from Isaiah the prophet, who foretold a suffering Savior, anointed by the Spirit to

provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair. (Isa. 61:3 NIV)

Even when his culture was crumbling, Isaiah had the faith to see beauty rising. He knew that one day God would restore his people to their forgotten splendor.

There is beauty all around us in this grace-filled, sometimes smoldering world, if only we have the eyes to see it. There is a basis for it in the beauty of our triune God and in what he calls beautiful. There is a purpose for it too. *Beauty is our destiny.* We were born to be beautiful—to behold the beauty of our God and to be so transfixed and transformed by it that we become beautiful ourselves.

1 Jamie Dean recounts this true story in “Beauty out of Ashes,” *World*, March 27, 2021, 38.

What Is Beauty?

My simple goal in writing this book is to awaken a longing for beauty and the eternal love of God that can be fully satisfied only in the face of Jesus Christ. My hope and prayer is that its readers will be able to look toward eternity and say, in all sincerity, what David said:

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple. (Ps. 27:4)

Whether we know it or not, David's one desire is also our deepest longing and enduring destiny: to behold the beauty of the Lord. But as soon as we start talking about "beauty," we have difficult problems to address, starting with the conundrum of definition. What *is* beauty?

Great thinkers have wrestled with this question at least since the dawn of philosophy in ancient Greece. Today we do not seem to be much closer to an answer than we were two thousand years ago. In his book *The Beauty of the Infinite*, David Bentley Hart reluctantly concedes that it is "impossible" for anyone "to offer a definition of beauty, either in the abstract or in Christian thought."² Traditional definitions include concepts of beauty such as order,

2 David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 15.

proportion, symmetry, simplicity, harmony, and the pleasure they produce. Yet by themselves, these qualities do not guarantee that something is beautiful. We can all think of beautiful things that contradict the classical ideals. In fact, some of the world's most famous works of art creatively violate certain aesthetic principles. According to philosopher Roger Scruton, "Rules and precepts are there to be transcended, and because originality and the challenging of orthodoxies are fundamental to the aesthetic enterprise, an element of freedom is built into the pursuit of beauty."³

Even if we have trouble defining it, however, we know there is such a thing as beauty. We know this *biblically*. If we scan the pages of Scripture, we can derive a long list of things that God calls beautiful: people (Judg. 15:2; Isa. 33:17) and their melodious voices (Ezek. 33:32), animals (Jer. 13:20; 46:20), plants and trees (Dan. 4:12; Hos. 14:6), clothing (Josh. 7:21; Isa. 61:3), cities (Pss. 48:2; 50:2) and their fine buildings (Isa. 5:9), ships at sea (Isa. 2:16), and royal crowns and other treasures (Ps. 16:6; Prov. 4:9; Isa. 28:1; Ezek. 23:42).

If the Bible stipulates certain things as beautiful, then there really is beauty in the eye of the Beholder, with a capital *B*. Almighty God is inexpressibly beautiful in his own being. One early theologian thus described him as "the all-beautiful," "the superabundant source in itself of the beauty of every beautiful thing."⁴ Beautiful in himself, God has also promised to "set beauty in the land of the living" (Ezek. 26:20). Whatever God sees and says is beautiful *is* beautiful! The Bible tells us so.

3 Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 119.

4 Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, quoted in Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2002), 56.

We also know beauty *experientially*. In a talk titled “Why Beauty Matters,” the poet Dana Gioia mentions four stages of engaging with something beautiful.⁵ First, it arrests our attention; the world stops while we look or listen. Second, we have a sudden thrill of pleasure in the presence of what is truly beautiful. As the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar testified, “Within the beautiful the whole person quivers.”⁶ Third, we have a sense that we are in touch with ultimate reality. Beauty is transcendent, reminding us of God. Fourth, the moment passes, and all we have left is the happy memory, which never quite matches the experience.

To Gioia’s list we can add the instant desire that beauty brings to share the joy of our experience with someone else. The point is that we *all* experience beauty, and in that sense it is universal. What we see as beautiful may vary across cultures (which is yet another reason to value diversity—it helps us behold more beauty, as we see with new eyes). We also have different capacities for recognizing beauty (an aesthetic appreciation that we can develop). But beauty is more than merely a personal preference or a social construct. If God is beautiful and his creation is beautiful, then beauty is objectively there! Jonathan King summarizes by saying, “The beauty expressed in God’s outward works is objectively real and subjectively experienced.”⁷ God has put his beauty into the world, and we are witnesses.

Our struggle to define beauty is an important signal in and of itself. Rather than giving up on beauty because it is hard for us

5 Dana Gioia, “Why Beauty Matters,” *First Things*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.firstthings.com/>.

6 Hans Urs von Balthasar, quoted in Thomas Dubay, *The Evidential Power of Beauty: Science and Theology Meet* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999), 127.

7 Jonathan King, *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics*, Studies in Historical and Systematic Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018), 50.

to agree on how to explain it, we should accept the fact that the beautiful is ineffable. In other words, beauty always goes beyond what we can describe or define, and this is an unmistakable sign of its transcendence. The overabundance of beauty in our present existence is intended to point us beyond this world to an eternal reality, “in which our immortal longings and our desire for perfection are finally answered.”⁸

Beauty, Broken

We will return to beauty and eternity in a moment, but first we need to address another problem: the many ways that beauty has become broken.

In a fallen world—a world in bondage to decay (Rom. 8:21)—even the best things can become the worst. Human beings take what God made to be beautiful and turn it into something ugly. So we plunder the earth, making unsustainable demands on natural resources and devastating the visual landscape in our relentless pursuit of more. We exchange the beauty of our sexuality for the degradation of pornography. We take the ethnic diversity that ought to be one of the most beautiful things in the world—a signpost of divine creativity—and turn it into a source of damage and division. Sadly, even God’s holy, beautiful church can become a place where people experience ugly abuse.

We see some of this brokenness in the world of art, where we expect instead to see rare beauty. While ugliness has its place in art that responds to a fallen world, beauty ought to have its proper place there too. Unfortunately—and although there are

⁸ Scruton, *Beauty*, 145.

many notable and delightful exceptions—we continue to suffer tragic loss in the visual arts, where beauty too often is dismissed, diminished, or even derided. Roger Scruton observes that

recent art cultivates a posture of transgression, matching the ugliness of the things it portrays with an ugliness of its own. Beauty is downgraded as something too sweet, too escapist, and too far from realities to deserve our undeceived attention.⁹

One result of this contemporary attitude, writes Marilynne Robinson, is that beauty “as a conscious element of experience, as a thing to be valued and explored, has gone into abeyance among us.”¹⁰ Even if these complaints are overstated and the tide is beginning to turn,¹¹ surely we can agree with Scruton and Robinson that there is not as much beauty in the contemporary art world as there could be or ought to be.

We also struggle with our own desire for beauty. This too is broken. Not that wanting to be beautiful is wrong in itself. If beauty is our destiny, then our desire to be beautiful is divinely ordained. Yet our perceptions are problematic—both of our own beauty and of the beauty of others. We focus on what is merely external rather than on what is truly and intrinsically beautiful. Too often we see ourselves as a distorted image. Then we find ourselves asking the haunting question that Bono asks in “City

9 Scruton, *Beauty*, 140.

10 Marilynne Robinson, “Story, Culture, and the Common Good,” *Breaking Ground*, October 16, 2020, <https://breakingground.us>.

11 See, for example, Matthew J. Milliner, “Makoto Fujimura and the Art of New Creation,” *Marginalia*, May 6, 2022, <https://themarginaliareview.com/>.

of Blinding Lights”: “What happened to the beauty I had inside of me?”¹²

Consider, as one example of broken beauty, the anxiety many people experienced when the world moved online at the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Students and workers had to look at themselves on the screen all day long. Under their own critical gaze, many struggled with the reality gap between the way they looked and the way they wanted people to see them.

The constant barrage of images of so-called beauty on social and visual media only makes matters worse. So do beauty products, beauty salons, beauty pageants, and almost anything else that begins with “beauty.” It is unsettling to know that many film stars dread being recognized in public because they do not look as good in person as they do in the movies. If celebrities struggle with body shame, then what hope is there for the rest of us? In her widely read essay on the damaging effects of cultural attitudes about physical beauty, especially for women of color, sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom closes with this haunting line: “Ugly is everything done to you in the name of beauty.”¹³

Sadly, someday whatever beauty we *do* have will be lost—this too is a problem! As the aging process accelerates, our bodies become less beautiful, and with our inevitable demise will come the loss of our ability to witness the world’s beauty. Nothing seemed more futile to the French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir than the end of beauty that death would bring. She

12 U2, “City of Blinding Lights,” compact disc, track 5 on *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, Interscope Records, 2004.

13 Tressie McMillan Cottom, *Thick and Other Essays* (New York: The New Press, 2019), 72.

wrote, “I think with sadness of all the books I’ve read, all the places I’ve seen, all the knowledge I’ve amassed and that will be no more. All the music, all the paintings, all the culture, so many places: and suddenly nothing.”¹⁴ The melancholy chorus in Johannes Brahms’s setting of *Nänie*—a poem by Friedrich Schiller—puts us in a similar mood. “Even beauty must perish,” the choir sings, “and all the perfect must die.”¹⁵

Dust we are, and to dust we will return. How then will beauty rise from these mortal ashes?

The Beatific Vision

It helps us if we see how the story ends. In Psalm 27, when King David expressed his one and only heart’s desire, he was looking forward to an enduring beauty. The king said that he wanted to gaze at God all the days of his life. He longed for what theologians call “the beatific vision”—the blissful visual experience of beholding the very face of God. “The Beatific Vision,” wrote the brilliant Puritan theologian John Owen, is such a “sight of God and his Glory, especially as manifested in Christ, as will make us *blessed* unto eternity.”¹⁶

We can see some of God’s beauty now, as we explore throughout this little book. In coming chapters, we consider the beauty that God has for us in himself, in his fair creation, in the people he made in his image, in the church (of all places), in culture and

14 Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, quoted in Dubay, *Evidential Power of Beauty*, 99.

15 Johannes Brahms, *Nänie*, funeral song for orchestra and mixed chorus, musical setting of a poem by Friedrich Schiller (Leipzig: C. F. Peters, 1881). Public domain.

16 John Owen, *Christologia*, quoted in Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 322.

the arts, and most of all in the life-giving sacrifice of his beautiful Son, who in time will make us gloriously beautiful as well. Yet the beauty we see now is only a glimpse of the surpassing beauty that we will experience forever in the life to come—what the Bible calls “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

Too many Christians are unaware of this thrilling biblical promise or else have neglected to consider its implications for Christian discipleship. But here is the gospel truth: if we are children of God through faith in the suffering death and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, then our destiny is to gaze on his enthralling beauty forever.

“Now we see in a mirror dimly,” the Scripture says, “but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). There are hints of this promise throughout Scripture. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, for example, his face was unbearably radiant, for he had been in God’s very presence (Ex. 34:29–35). When Job was in despair, he consoled himself with this assurance:

I know that my Redeemer lives,
 and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
 And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
 yet in my flesh I shall see God. (Job 19:25–26)

When Peter, James, and John ascended the Mount of Transfiguration, they saw the resplendent glory of God radiating from the face of Jesus Christ (Luke 9:28–36). When we read all the way to the end of the story, we learn that the saints who live forever in Christ’s glorious presence “will see his face” (Rev. 22:4).

Throughout church history, our fathers and mothers in the faith lived in the hope that they would see the beautiful face of God. Irenaeus said, “For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God.”¹⁷ “Every face has beauty,” wrote Nicholas of Cusa, “but none is beauty itself. Your face, Lord, . . . is absolute beauty itself, which is the form that gives being to every form of beauty. O immeasurably lovely Face.”¹⁸ On her dying day, Teresa of Avila told the loved ones at her bedside that it was time for her to move on. Then she addressed her Savior directly: “O my Lord and my Spouse, the hour that I have longed for has come. It is time for us to see one another.”¹⁹ The same hope motivated the five missionaries who participated in Operation Auca and were martyred in the Amazonian jungle. Afterward, Olive Fleming bore witness to the hope she held for her husband, Pete, who was one of the martyrs: “Pete had one great desire in life. His one desire was to see Christ. Now he sees Him, and therefore I’m happy, because I know that Pete’s one desire has been fulfilled.”²⁰ There is also Dante Alighieri, of course, whose entire *Divine Comedy* is a quest to experience the beatific vision. Dante wrote, “O plenitude of grace, by which I could presume to fix my eyes upon eternal Light until my sight was spent on it!”²¹

17 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, quoted in King, *Beauty of the Lord*, 110.

18 Nicholas of Cusa, *De visione Dei*, quoted in Boersma, *Seeing God*, 397.

19 Teresa of Avila, quoted in “Did You Know? Nuns, Prophets, Queens, Witches, Wives,” *Christian History* 131, 2019, 1.

20 Olive Fleming, in the audio recording of a 1956 talk by David Howard, the brother of Elisabeth Elliot, whose husband Jim also participated in Operation Auca and was one of the five martyrs; shared by the courtesy of Janet Howard.

21 Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander, ed. Robert Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 33.82.

Or consider the thrilling invitation that the Puritan Thomas Watson gave his congregation in London, England:

Imagine what a blessed sight it will be to see Christ wearing the Robe of our human nature, and to see that nature sitting in glory above the Angels. If God be so beautiful here in his Ordinances, Word, Prayer, Sacraments, if there be such excellency in him when we see him by the eye of faith through the prospective glass of promise, O what will it be when we shall see him *face to face!* . . . There will be glory beyond *Hyperbole*; if the Sun were ten thousand times brighter than it is, it could not so much as shadow out this glory; in the heavenly Horizon we shall behold beauty in its first magnitude and highest elevation; there we shall *see the King in his glory* [Isa. 33:17]. All lights are but Eclipses, compared with that glorious Vision.²²

Many New England Puritans expressed a similar hope by carving a striking image into their gravestones: the outline of a simple face with lidless eyes. This image expressed their gospel anticipation that in the resurrection they would look on the lovely face of Jesus Christ with unblinking gaze.

Both the promise of Scripture and the consistent record of Christian history bear witness that beauty is our destiny. This beauty is not just in the eye of the Beholder, notes the artist Bruce Herman; it is also in the face of our Beloved!²³

22 Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes: or, A Discourse upon Part of Christs Famous Sermon on the Mount* (London, 1660), 336.

23 Bruce Herman, "Wounds and Beauty," in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, ed. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 118.

We Become What We See

On the day we see this beauty for ourselves, something amazing will happen to us: we ourselves will become gloriously beautiful. The Bible promises a marvelous transformation, in which we *become* the beauty we have always longed for. The beatific vision, wrote John Owen, is “perfectly and absolutely *transforming*. It doth change us wholly into the Image of Christ.”²⁴

The basis for this miraculous change is the beauty of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3). To see the face of our risen Redeemer truly is to behold the glory of God, for as Jesus himself said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

When we see our Savior’s divine glory with our own two eyes, its resplendence will so illuminate us that we will radiate with the glory of God. In short, seeing is becoming! To see Jesus is to become beautiful—as he is. We know this from David’s declaration: “Those who look to him are radiant” (Ps. 34:5). We also know it from the promise of the apostle John: “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). When John says that we will be like Jesus, he means that when our physical bodies are raised to resurrection life, then we too will “bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor. 15:49) and will shine like the sun (see Matt. 13:43), in moral and physical perfection. We are waiting for “the redemption of our bodies”

²⁴ Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, quoted in Boersma, *Seeing God*, 324.

(Rom. 8:23), when by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus “will transform our lowly bod[ies] to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21; cf. 1 Cor. 6:14). We really were born to be beautiful!

When theologians throughout church history have contemplated the beatific vision, they have considered not only what we will behold but also what we will become. To behold the beauty of the Lord is to enter ever more completely and gloriously into the light of our Savior. As we gaze at him in wonder, he looks back at us with love. This face-to-face encounter causes an interchange of glory, which Jonathan Edwards described as “both the *emanation* and the *remanation*. The refulgence shines upon and into the creature and is reflected back to the luminary.”²⁵ As a result of this interchange, we are changed from the inside out. Edwards again:

The pleasure of seeing God is so great and strong that it takes the full possession of the heart; it fills it brimful, so that there shall be no room for any sorrow, no room in any corner for anything of an adverse nature from joy. There is no darkness can bear such powerful light. It is impossible that they that see God face to face, that behold his glory and love so immediately as they do in heaven, should have any such thing as grief or pain in their hearts.²⁶

The Puritan Isaac Ambrose compared our face-to-face encounter with Jesus Christ to the long, adoring looks that lovers share:

25 Jonathan Edwards, *Dissertation concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, quoted in Owen Strachan and Douglas Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards on Beauty*, Essential Edwards Collection (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 17.

26 Edwards, “Pure in Heart Blessed,” in Boersma, *Seeing God*, 366–67.

They look, and gaze, and dart their beams: and reflect their glories on each other. Oh the communications! Oh the darting of beams betwixt Christ and his Saints! Look as when two admirable persons, two lovers meet together, their eyes sparkle, they look on, as if they would look through one another. And such is the effect of these looks.²⁷

When as believers who live in the eye of the Beholder we gaze on the face of our Beloved, we will become beautiful beyond anything we could ever imagine.

Based on the promises of the Bible, the beautification of believers in glory is instantaneous; it happens the moment we behold the risen Christ. But it also appears to be eternally progressive. As beautiful as we will become when we finally see Jesus face-to-face, we will become even *more* beautiful in the infinite ages to come, when “we all, with unveiled face,” will be “transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Seeing God’s Beauty

What difference does it make to know that beauty is our destiny?

As believers in a beautiful Savior, we should have a heightened awareness of the beauty of creation, of the brokenness of beauty in a fallen world, and of the beauty God is bringing in our redemption. The world is more beautiful for us and also more painful. But we are not without hope because by his beautiful life and death and resurrection, Jesus has the power to bring beauty out of ashes. “In Jesus Christ,” writes Jeremy Begbie, “divine beauty

²⁷ Isaac Ambrose, *Looking unto Jesus*, quoted in Boersma, *Seeing God*, 318.

has, so to speak, got to grips with the wounded and deformed beauty of the world; in the incarnate Son, crucified, risen and now exalted, we witness God's re-creation of the world's beauty."²⁸

Redemptive beauty is for now as well as later. Even as we await our final beautification, we catch present glimpses of God's redeeming beauty. These previews of the beatific vision give us rising hope that one day we will see the face of God.

As president of Wheaton College, I see God's beauty on our campus every day. I see it in ardent student worship. I see it when summer turns to fall and the trees show the colors from their autumn collection. I see it in the love that caregivers in our Community School of the Arts show to children with special needs as they share the gift of music. I see it too when roommates have a conflict and then reconcile.

I also see beauty across the subjects we study in our Christ-centered liberal arts curriculum. It is in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, in all their literary variety. It is in cultures and communities and in the mysteries of the human heart and soul. It is in the beauty of words—how they are written and spoken in English and other languages. It is also in the austere beauty of numbers and equations. Edna St. Vincent Millay rightly declared, in the title to one of her poems, "Euclid Alone Has Looked on Beauty Bare."²⁹

Scientists also see beauty everywhere as they study the natural world. To give just one example, a team of lab physicists thrilled

28 Jeremy S. Begbie, "Created Beauty: The Witness of J. S. Bach," in Treier, Husbands, and Lundin, *Beauty of God*, 27.

29 Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Euclid Alone Has Looked on Beauty Bare," Poetry Foundation, accessed December 19, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>.

the world in 2021 by exposing the inner workings of the aurora borealis, or northern lights. Working in UCLA's plasma labs under the leadership of Jim Schroeder, these scientists demonstrated for the first time that when electrons shooting out from solar winds collide with earth's upper atmosphere, they surf electromagnetic Alfvén waves to reach speeds up to forty million miles per hour, thus producing the spectacular colors of the polar lights.³⁰ This discovery adds more wonder and awe to our experience of beauty, as science often does. When we keep our eyes wide open, we see the beauty of God everywhere we look, from earth to sky.

Pure Beauty

Our loving Lord gives us these varied glimpses of intrinsic beauty to awaken in us a transcendent, expectant desire that will be fully and finally satisfied when we gaze into the face of Jesus Christ. In the meantime, seeing the grandeur that God brings everywhere into the world helps us “live in eternity’s sunrise,” as the poet William Blake once expressed it.³¹ Such experiences awaken our aesthetic appreciation, sharpen our spiritual sensibilities, and produce in us a deep longing to go beyond these earthly glimpses and get to the place where we can gaze.

The Bible makes it clear that “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18), “who dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16), because no sinful mortal can behold the glory of God’s unmediated holiness—and then live to tell about it (Ex. 33:20). But the Bible

30 Tiara Walters, “Making Heaven in a Lab: Scientists Solve the Mystery of the Aurora,” *Daily Maverick*, June 12–18, 2021, 168.

31 William Blake, “Eternity,” Academy of American Poets, accessed December 19, 2022, <https://www.poets.org/>. Public domain.

also promises that one day we will see God's glory for ourselves, in the face of our beautiful Savior.

I will never forget the moment when my daughter Kathryn was baptized. Since we are faithful Presbyterians, this was infant baptism, and I was holding my baby girl in my arms. The minister reminded us that the name Kathryn comes from the Greek word for pure. Then he quoted a blessed promise that includes her precious name—a promise Jesus gave in his Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). The whole spinning world stopped in that moment as I looked down into the face of my beautiful Kathryn—blessed and pure—and knew how her story would end: one day *my* beloved would look into *her* Beloved's face.

This promise is for all God's pure ones—his precious sons and daughters. If you are a child of God, made pure by the righteous blood of your Savior, then beauty is your destiny too—the eternal, shining beauty you will behold and become forever when you see your crucified, risen Lord Jesus face-to-face.