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Chapter 1

The Beauty of God

One day I was waiting for a flight in Concourse C of Chicago's Midway Airport. I had time to mill around, with my coffee in hand, and people watch. Chicago's musical scene regularly welcomes the best musicians in the world. As I walked by the restroom area, I heard a lovely sound emanating from the women's bathroom. From a bathroom? Yes, a violin was being played by a very skilled violinist. Who was she? I sat down near the door to enjoy this impromptu concert. She kept playing and playing. I saw women coming out of the restroom with strange looks on their faces. What they saw and heard was an unfamiliar experience.

As she continued to play, I was transfixed. It was beautiful. Eventually, my flight had to leave, and I left not knowing the musician behind the wall. I would have liked to meet her and thank her. I have told and written about this in other places.

One day I received a letter from someone on the East Coast who heard of my airport violin story and told me they have a

friend who is a concert violinist and regularly practices in airport bathrooms because of the acoustics. Perhaps it was her!

This story illustrates the spiritual challenge beauty presents. We see, hear, taste, touch, and smell created loveliness. It envelopes us every day. We delight in the pleasures big and small. But where did they come from? Who or what made them? What do they tell us of the One who created them?

The psalmist wrote, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard” (Ps. 19:1–3).

Discovering the beauty of God generally requires working backward from the created to the Creator. The psalmist urges us to look up to the sky and the stars. The preaching voice of the galaxies is materially declaring a spiritual truth: God is glorious, majestic, and excellent. Similarly, the prophet Isaiah has a heavenly vision and records for us the seraphim’s antiphonal chant, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isa. 6:3).

How is a created material planet filled with the glory of a spiritual God? We look in vain for the same kind of visible glory seen during the exodus or in the face of the transfigured Christ. The earthly glory the angels celebrate is creation as a reflection of the worth of divine majesty. It is symbolic worth, as wedding rings are emblematic of something much deeper and more valuable. Creation is God’s self-portrait.

I have two young daughters. My wife, Jennifer, and I fulfilled a long desire this year by having a portrait painted of our beloved daughters. The artist amazed us. We sent her pictures of our girls. She never met any of us. Yet what she did with brush and canvas so closely resembles them that friends thought the painting was a

photo. The accuracy of the portrait is not lost on me either. When it comes to my daughters, I am the stereotypical doting and blubbering father. Before we received the painting, the artist sent us video footage of her painting it and the finished product. I watched the video over and over again, tearful each time. Why? Because of the paint and canvas, colors and shapes? No, I wept because what she created so visually resembled those I love; my heart went from the creation to the object of the creation. I treasured the art because I love the subjects of the art.

THE DIVINE PORTRAIT

Creation is not God. That would be pantheism. Rather, creation is God's self-portrait. I wouldn't mistake a painting for my daughters. Yet many have mistaken creation—God's stunning self-portrait—for God Himself.

Creation is magnificent in scale, symmetry, balance, depth, variety, and harmony. These descriptions apply in every dimension, element, particle, and galaxy. God's self-portrait is multidimensional, a diverse spectrum of color and sound and wonder, reflecting His beauty and character. The universe's scale, scope, and symmetry are a finite indication of God's infinite worth. What do we call such majesty? We call it the beauty of God. God defines beauty by His very essence, as He is the source and standard of all beauty. He is the measure of morality, truth, love, as well as their absence—evil, hate, injustice, and falsehood.

Yet the concept of God's beauty can be challenging. For one thing, God is spirit (John 4:24; 2 Cor. 3:17). We are limited in our ability to understand God's beauty in that our experience of beauty is essentially sensory. We cannot see God or smell God or touch God. He is "the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). Yet this invisible

God chose to express the fullness of His beauty in physical ways. The spectacle is not the beauty itself. We must not confuse God's expression of His beauty with its essential character. The created world is an expression of God's beauty, but it is not the essence of His beauty. We are accustomed to thinking about beauty as visual; considering an invisible God as beautiful requires a definition that goes beyond the senses to the core of essential beauty.

Our second problem is with the common understanding of beauty itself. We often say, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." This reinforces personal preferences or social influences as the measure of what is beautiful. Studies show that we are heavily influenced by our parents' and our culture's definitions of loveliness and attractiveness. Art and architecture tend to have cultural and geographical similarities. Or consider ancient paintings of what was deemed to be feminine beauty of the past. They would never be allowed on the front cover of a glamour magazine today. Even home décor is constantly changing, and it is easy to identify which era houses were built in by their shape, look, and color. Today's beauty ends up in tomorrow's museum, or worse.

The beauty of God doesn't fit into our cultural or conditioned evaluation. God's beauty is divine, eternal, and infinite. He *is* beautiful. He always has been and eternally will be. God's beauty defies our ability to comprehend. A helpful word in grappling with divine beauty is *ineffable*. This word is one of the few that apply because it means "beyond comprehension." God transcends all aesthetic definitions. Human language cannot produce a word that adequately describes something infinitely desirable.

A popular phrase captures the ineffability of God's beauty: it blows our minds. We cannot see God's beauty (God is spirit) and we cannot comprehend it (God is infinite, and we are not).

So why even attempt to wrap our minds around the beauty of

God? For the same reason we enjoy other things that appear infinite and beyond our ability to understand completely. Why do people enjoy gazing out at the seemingly endless ocean or looking up at the starry sky?

They are visually ineffable. Still, people flock by the millions to the world's beaches. And who hasn't found themselves lost in the magnitude of the night sky?

We seek out these expressions of beauty because what we can see and comprehend draws us to wonders too awesome not to enjoy. Their ineffability entwines with their desirability. What I cannot comprehend is mysteriously interesting to me and compels me to look all the more. The same is true of God's beauty and attributes. He is more than we can know and beyond our capacity to absorb. Our finitude limits our comprehension, but what we can see draws us to wonder—which is the prelude to worship.

ATTRIBUTE OR ADJECTIVE?

Before we can understand the true essence of God's beauty, we must ask whether God's beauty is essential to God as an attribute or merely a description of God. Is it objective or subjective? This requires "seeing" past the visible to the invisible. Similar to describing a person as beautiful could mean many things. She may be beautiful in appearance like Bathsheba was beautiful. Or it could mean, as in Proverbs 31, the beauty of character.

God is beautiful both *outwardly* in His visible glory and *essentially* in the splendor of the holiness of His character. God's beauty is more than a description; it is inherent to His eternal being. We rightly describe Him as glorious and radiant, yet His beauty is core to His existence. As Jonathan Edwards describes it,

For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory; God . . . is the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty.¹

This is what the galaxies shout and what every alluring beauty in our experience declares. God is Himself beautiful and is the sum of all that is desirable. As the Beauty beyond and behind all created beauty, He is the measure of what is truly beautiful.

A yardstick provides us with a simple illustration. A yardstick

measures a yard and is itself a yard.

His beauty is essence and source, attribute and adjective. He is what all the beauties we experience flow from and reflect.

God's beauty is like that. He is beauty, and He is the measure of all beauty. But God is far more than just the measure of beauty. He is the source and standard of beauty. In one sense, He is like the sun.

When you pick paint colors for your home, consultants advise you to look at the paint sample outside the store. Why?

If you want to see the actual color, you must place the sample in sunlight. The sun is the source of light, and its rays reveal the true nature in everything else. God's beauty is like that. He is what He measures. His beauty is essence and source, attribute and adjective. He is what all the beauties we experience flow from and reflect.

THE RADIANCE OF ABSOLUTE PERFECTION

God is perfect. Think about that for a moment. He doesn't rise to the level of perfection—He is perfect. The psalmist declares,

“From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth” (Ps. 50:2 NIV). God’s perfection is the necessary quality of His excellence. Excellence is a qualitative attribute applied to all that God is. Second Peter 1:3 extols God as the One “who called us to his own glory and excellence.” His excellence expresses His perfection, which permeates all His other attributes. God has no potential to be less perfect or more perfect. He has eternally existed, with His every quality living in absolute completeness. He cannot be anything more than He is, and He will never be anything less than He has always been. Our difficulty here is that there is nothing in our creaturely experience to adequately compare to His perfection. At best, we have meager comparisons to help us.

What is it about a sight or sound that leads you to conclude that it has inherent beauty? Let’s consider a rose. Why is a rose considered beautiful? It begins with vivid color. A further look at the rose reveals the symmetrical formation, the softness of each petal, and the appearance that the rose is unveiling itself. A rose is a multi-sensory experience. It is delicate and fragrant. Having a bouquet of them only adds to the effect. How would a perfect rose look? There would be no deficiency to it. No petals drooping. No lack of fragrance. No browning anywhere.

How do we evaluate the perfection of a rose or anything else? It is the absence of anything lacking. That is how God is perfect. He doesn’t lack anything. He is lovely in His completeness.

Or consider a diamond. A diamond is viewed through its many facets. A jeweler looks at each facet to see if there are any flaws. A flaw reveals an imperfection. A flawless diamond would have no imperfect facet. If we could turn the personhood of

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God before us like a diamond, we would see that every facet of His character is without flaw.

We begin to understand God's desirability by the value we place on perfection. His beauty to us is not what He lacks (nothing) but what He possesses in His character (everything). God's beauty is the bouquet of His perfections in His being, unveiled in His purposes and displayed in His glory.

TRINITARIAN WONDER

Three yet one. $1+1+1=1$? This is either gibberish or a wondrous mystery. How many things can you fully understand that ever produced a "wow" in your heart? God's "three yet one" nature provides ample opportunity for wonder if we are willing to think about it on a deeper level. God's beauty is like any wonder we long to know or experience—somewhat understandable but not completely discernible.

There is no better example of this than God's threeness and His oneness. This is known in Christian theology as the doctrine of the Trinity. Although the word *Trinity* is not in Scripture, descriptions of the Godhead as one God and three persons are plentiful. Our first glimpse of plurality in unity is in Genesis 1:26, where God says, "Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness." God is three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:16–17; 28:19–20; 1 Cor. 8:6). This would potentially be comprehensible if Scripture stopped there. We would have three gods, a little pantheon of deities. However, these three persons are of such unity and oneness that they are in essence one God: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4). God is one, and God is three. This divine relational diversity existing in harmonious unity is the core and genesis of all beauty.

God delights in this. He appraises it as inherently beautiful.

John 17 is known as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. Here, in the upper room on the night He was betrayed, God the Son opens His heart to God the Father and gives us a look into what their relationship is like.

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

(John 17:20–23)

Jesus makes very radical claims here. First, He speaks to the God of Israel as “Father.” This alone was blasphemous in the Jewish religious culture, for it was an indirect claim to be God’s Son. Even more startling are His claims to oneness with the Father (see vv. 11, 21–22). Christ prays for the unity of His people, and the prototype is the oneness between the Father and the Son. This gets even more bewildering when a divine nature is also applied to the third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). This is eternal Trinitarian beauty. Barth got it right when he said, “The tri-unity of God is the secret of God’s beauty. It is radiant and what it radiates is joy. It attracts and therefore it conquers. Once we deny God’s threefoldness, we immediately are left with a lusterless and joyless . . . God.”²

Let’s trace the genealogy backward from created beauty to Trinitarian beauty using the example of color. Diversity of color is a source of great joy. A monochrome world is not quite as exciting

as the colorful one we enjoy. The more color there is, the more diversity of visual beauty. From black-and-white to color TV, the revolution continued to high-definition color. My home HDTV brags of eight million individual pixels, each showing different colors at varying intensity—eight million dots of diversity yet unified in one screen.

Massive diversity in unity multiplies our pleasure. We celebrate it in everything: music (melody and harmony), architecture (forms and shapes in one “design”), athletic teamwork, and food (do I need to explain this one?). Even the mystery and pleasure of sexual union is a God-designed metaphor of plurality in unity.

Trinitarian metaphors go beyond the physical world to harmonies of relationship and truth. The greatest joys we experience in life are relational—family, marriage, friendship, and community. These strike us inwardly as being essentially good things that bring meaning to life in significant ways. We enjoy holidays (the coming together of the family), weddings and anniversaries (celebrations of the union of marriage), and Fourth of July parades (the unity of community and nation). Relational unity is humanity at its supreme and highest ideal. Think about your best memories. They probably have something to do with times of closeness with a parent, a child, a spouse, or a friend. Relational unity is beautiful because it whispers of the wondrous beauty of the Godhead’s relational threeness and oneness.

THE SELF-GIVING GOD

We have finally come to the epicenter of all beauty. God’s core is self-giving love (*agape*): the Father’s love for the Son and the Spirit; the Son’s love for the Spirit and the Father; the Spirit’s love for the Father and the Son. Eternal, infinite, selfless love! Within

the Trinity, the Father gives of Himself to the Son and the Spirit. The Son gives of Himself to the Father and the Spirit. The Spirit gives of Himself to the Father and the Son. The result of their eternal self-giving is eternal and perfect happiness within themselves. Their self-giving is beautiful both as an attribute of their nature and as a description of their relationships. True and essential beauty is love's joyous outflow of perfect, infinite, and eternal divine self-giving within the Trinity.

“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.” (John 3:35)

Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.” (John 8:42)

“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.” (John 10:17)

What do you notice in these verses? The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father. How do they express this love to each other? Sending. Giving. Laying down. The Bible describes the essence of our God this way: “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Most people read that and think it describes how God relates to us—and that is gloriously true! More importantly, though, it describes how God relates to Himself and within Himself: perfect, selfless, joyous love.

So that we might know His love, God gave it expression in the drama of the incarnation and life of Jesus. Christ's earthly ministry was an unveiling of the inherent self-giving glory of the Son:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count

equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5–8)

This famous passage is debated for what it says of Christ's nature. What is often missed is what it tells us about the Trinity's nature—specifically, the selflessness of divine love. He did not view His rights and privileges as the Son of God as glories for Him to self-manage. Instead, He relinquished them in obedience to the Father.³

In the mystery of eternity past, before the world's creation, God the Father made His will known to the Son. This plan included the creation of the world, the creation of man in His image, the fall of man, the role the Son would play in saving people from their sins, and His final return at the consummation of history. The Son willingly agreed. Why?

The essence of the Trinity is self-giving. Christ gave Himself over to the will of the Father. What was the Father's will? To display the glory of the self-giving Son to the Father and to display that glory to humanity as Servant and Savior. The Father's love motivates the unveiling of the Son's glory, and the Son's love motivates obedience to the Father. This divine summit of love is the source of all beauty everywhere. Jeremy Begbie helpfully points out,

As far as divine beauty is concerned, if the “measure” of beauty is outgoing love for the sake of the other, it will not be long before we are forced to come to terms with *excess or uncontainability*, the intratrinitarian life being one of a ceaseless overflow of self-giving. There is still proportion and integrity, but it is the proportion and integrity of abundant love.⁴

Do you see the great irony of the cross of Christ? The cross represents the most gruesome death man has ever devised. In the culture of its day, it was so profane that you would never talk about it in polite company. A cross would seem entirely out of place in a discussion of beauty. Yet the cross gives finite human beings a small taste of what it is like to be a member of the Trinity. In the moment of His sacrificial death, Jesus gave to us what He had given to the Father for all eternity: everything—the total surrender of self. The cross is love’s highest human expression and beauty’s ultimate declaration. Before a sunset, mountain range, painting, or song can be relished as beautiful, our souls must awaken to true beauty. The cross and resurrection of Jesus shine as supreme demonstrations of beauty. Everything else is a reflection.

THE GRANDEUR OF GOD’S GLORY

Like most pastors, I perform weddings—lots of them. If there is any compensation for the effort a wedding entails, it is the “moment” every pastor relishes. In a typical American wedding, the minister stands at the front of the church, with the view of views, as the bride makes her entrance. Over the years, I have learned to keep one eye on the bride and one eye on the groom. The look on his face is precious. He’s dazed. He’s befuddled. He’s speechlessly experiencing something nearly transcendent, and his facial expression and eyes (and often beads of sweat) shout his wonder without him saying anything at all. It is the look of delight.

After doing weddings as a single pastor for many years, my day finally came. I would often joke I was always the minister, never the groom. My groom moment allowed me to feel what all those grooms I married off were experiencing. When the bride was my bride, and she came down the aisle to me, it was delight and

The greater the beauty, the higher the joy, and the higher the joy, the more it radiates outwardly.

wonder of the highest kind. I was the flabbergasted groom in the presence of stunning bridal beauty. And she was mine.

We might not suppose that delight would be so effusive. After all, we experience it every day. I sip my morning coffee. I enjoy it, but my facial expression hardly changes. I delight in my coffee on a certain level, but not on the bride-coming-down-the-aisle-toward-me level. Why? The greater the beauty, the higher the joy, and the higher the joy, the more it radiates outwardly.

These thoughts lead us to the subject of the glory of God. There is often confusion about this, as God's "glory" is mentioned in the Bible in two different ways. One is the worth or honor of God. We are to do everything "to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31), and we are to "ascribe to the LORD glory and strength" (Ps. 29:1). In these and many other Scriptures, God's glory is revered and celebrated as His inherent worth and supremacy.

The other description of glory is its most dazzling and famous. The Bible records many sightings of the glory light. The most notable among them occurred one night on a mountain in Galilee. Jesus took Peter, James, and John and went up to a mountaintop, "and he [Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light" (Matt. 17:2).

Can you imagine being there? Jesus lit up like a lighthouse. Two men appear with Him: Moses, representing the Old Testament law, and Elijah, preeminent among the prophets. The disciples, who were "heavy with sleep" (Luke 9:32), were now wide awake and filled with an adrenaline rush of terror.

What happens next truly terrorizes them. "[Peter] was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and

a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.’ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified” (Matt. 17:5–6).

Notice two essential truths here. *Beloved* in the original language means “esteemed, dear, favorite.”⁵ It is an effective term of endearment and delight. *Well pleased* carries the meaning to enjoy or “take delight.”⁶ Put these two terms together, and we discover a divine truth about the relationship between the Father and the Son. Within the Trinity, there is a boundless and infinite delight in one another. What do we learn about the beauty of God here? Before you ever had a happy moment, or your great-grandparents had a happy moment, or Adam and Eve had a happy moment—before the universe was created—God the Father and God the Son and God the Spirit enjoyed a perfect and robust relational delight in one another. This inner-Trinity pleasure is God’s most cherished beauty.

What the disciples saw was a fleeting unveiling of the glory of the second person of the Trinity. His glory was cloaked in a human body from the moment of conception in Mary’s womb. This glory light had emanated from Him for all eternity past, but for these thirty years, it had remained hidden. On that mountain, for just a few moments, Jesus let some of it out. It was glory. Glory is the light of divine delight. Specifically, it is the brilliant, emanating overflow expression of God’s infinite joy in being God. Glory light expresses God’s glorious worth.⁷

God chooses to express His invisible, infinite worth in a visible, created way.⁸ Glory to us looks like light. It is bright. It is radiant. But it is not light. It is like light, only whiter and purer. If we could capture a beam of glory light and put it under a microscope, we would discover that glory is much different than a sunbeam. A sunbeam carries within it the nature of the sun. Glory light carries the likeness of God Himself. It is a visible expression of the nature of God;

it is holy and spiritually intense. Its brilliance is described repeatedly in the Old Testament as “splendor” and “majesty” (1 Chron. 16:27; Pss. 21:5; 29:2; 96:6).

And there is remarkable consistency in the response of all who have seen it: terror and humility. Why? The glory of God is a visible display of the beauty and worth of who God is. It is the light of delight. It is what God’s joy in Himself looks like when He allows us to see it.

That blessed and beautiful vision is what our souls crave. The outward joy of a groom for his bride portrays it. Our tears betray our longing for our own perfect experience of it. Some day we will see the reality. Then our suspicions will be confirmed: we were made for a more profound beauty, and the glorious vision of His beauty is the only experience that will satisfy the cravings of our soul.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Can you remember having a spontaneous encounter with beauty (like the story described at the airport)? What was it and why does it stand out in your memory?
2. How do you sense a craving for beauty within you?
3. Have you ever really considered the notion that God is beautiful? How might this way of thinking be new or different to you?
4. Take a few minutes to ponder the Trinity. Don’t get frustrated or discouraged at the difficulty of understanding it fully in your mind—just let it produce a “wow” in your heart.
5. How do your closest human relationships (e.g., with a parent, spouse, children, friends) help you relate to the endearment and delight experienced between the members of the Trinity?