

Christian Living in God's Splendor

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Seeking Beauty in the Christian Life

Scripture

Psalm 19 Describes both the natural world and the law as “telling the glory of God.”

Psalm 50 Describes Zion as the “perfection of beauty” and assures us that the whole world belongs to God.

Psalm 96 An invitation to “worship the LORD in holy splendor.”

Prayer

Blessed are you, O God, giver of all good gifts, for you have created a world that shows forth your majesty, filled it with creatures splendid and varied, and opened our eyes to your ever-present, all-encompassing beauty and glory. Amen.

Introduction

The Psalms are filled with praise for the beauty, majesty, glory, splendor, and holiness of God. Nature proclaims God’s majesty. The Law displays God’s glory. Zion mirrors God’s beauty. Worship expresses the splendor of God’s holiness. The temple provides a place to gaze on God’s beauty. The Psalms never draw a sharp distinction between natural beauty and social justice. The splendor of the stars and planets, of the mountains and streams, mirrors the beauty of lives, relationships, and communities ordered by God’s law. In the spiritual life of the psalmist, beauty is central. It characterizes both the ordering of nature and the right ordering of human life. Beauty flows out from God’s majesty and glory and manifests itself in the wonders of nature, in the giving of the law, and in the vision of Zion made complete.

When we speak of the Christian life, we can do no better than to take our bearings from the Psalms. But so often, when we speak of the Christian life other language and metaphors become dominant. We focus on guilt and debt, transgression and expiation, repentance and conversion. How would it change our perspective on Christian life if we experienced it as a journey into beauty and splendor? How

would it shape us as the people of God if we focused on a life lived in praise of God’s glory and majesty? What would our communities look like if we understood God’s law as an expression of beauty?

Throughout the six sessions of this study, we propose that the Christian life grows out of a sense of God’s beauty and strives to enact beauty by bringing harmony and peace between people and with nature. In this session, we explore how experiences of beauty invite us toward spiritual disciplines of mindful simplicity.

The Character of Beauty

When we hear *beauty*, we are tempted to think of it as something existing only in the eye of the beholder. But for the psalmist, beauty is part of the character of God and the structure of the world. Let’s begin with a simple illustration. We all recognize there is a difference between the sound of pots and pans clanging as they strike the kitchen floor and the sound of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*.¹ In both cases, we have struck many of the same notes. Why is one simply intolerable noise and the other inescapably beautiful? Part of the answer lies in the pattern, order, and harmony present in the relationships among musical notes but missing in noise. Beethoven arranged the individual notes in a harmonious way. Beauty is a way of being related in harmonious and fitting ways. In a beautiful object, the parts are properly related and form a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts.

When we think of beauty as proper relatedness, we can begin to understand why the psalmist sees it in nature and the human community. In the natural world, we observe that the mountain is not beautiful by itself, but only as it stands in relation to the ever-changing sky and clouds, in the way evergreens and wild flowers cling to its rocky crags. We observe that each element—the rock, the tree, the cloud, and even the hiker—finds its peculiar, beautiful place amid the splendor of the whole. Likewise, what the psalmist longs for in human community is shalom, connectedness, and a way of “relat[ing] to all things in a manner appropriate to their relations to God.”²

Psalm 19 insists that at bottom, the law and nature both “pour forth speech” in praise of God’s majesty. Worship in the temple

1. The character George makes a similar point in Tom Stoppard’s *Jumpers* (New York: Grove Press, 1972), p. 53.

2. James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Volume 1: Theology and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 113.

and the vision of the restored city of Zion offer glimpses of God’s intention for all humanity, a vision in which we honor God and live in peace with one another. The city of God, Zion, is “the perfection of beauty,” the place where exiles find a home, where resources are shared so everyone has enough, where people of every race and nation acknowledge God’s glory and are reconciled.

If God invites us through the Christian life to journey into beauty, then we are called into a profoundly new posture toward God and the world and into a comprehensive and properly patterned set of relationships. These relationships are marked by mutuality rather than hierarchy, complementarity rather than competition, and reconciliation rather than conflict. Christian life invites us to come into relationship

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with all other creatures with the same humility and delight that bid us come to the Communion Table. We come from every compass point to receive what we cannot earn and do not deserve. We come to a table where independence gives way to interdependence and where domination is abandoned for mutual empowerment.

True and False Beauty

Speaking of the Christian life as a journey into God’s beauty requires we distinguish this beauty from the false forms of beauty that surround and tempt us in contemporary culture. Our consumerist culture offers many forms of false beauty at well-established prices. We are told we can beautify our skin, hair, wardrobes, homes, cars, and yards, for example, and that doing so will make us more desirable to others and bring us happiness.

Such false beauty might better be called *ornamentation*. To ornament something is to adorn what is already beautiful with unnecessary, artificial embellishments that obscure its true worth. We come to desire and delight in the ornamented thing not for its intrinsic beauty but for its usefulness in fashioning a false vision of human fulfillment. The least subtle forms of such ornamentation show themselves as kitsch and gaudiness, and we usually meet them with laughter.

But more refined and dangerous forms of ornamentation confuse “beauty” with what can be purchased, consumed, and discarded. These subtler forms of false beauty deceive us into believing that if we are properly ornamented we can make ourselves more lovable and pleasing to God and neighbor.

When we lose ourselves in such false beauty, we fail to see that it ultimately distorts the pattern of relationships that bring genuine fulfillment and meaning to life. We distort our bodies, stress our spirits, overextend our finances, limit the scope of our friendships, and confuse social respectability with worth before God. We trade the proper pattern of relationships that God desires for us for the distorted pattern of relationships that perpetuate our brokenness and spiritual hunger. To live in God’s splendor thus involves journeying out of our bondage to the false beauty and ornamentation that clutter our lives into a mindful simplicity rooted in life-giving ways of relating to God and other creatures.

The false beauties of consumerism lure us into distorted relationships with our bodies, other people, the creation, and, ultimately, God. Consumerism equates *beauty* with *more*, suggesting that our worth can be measured by the square footage of our homes and the size of our cars. A consumer culture demands more and more: larger plates to accommodate larger portions at meals, cavernous big-box stores, and extensive wardrobes. Never is there space to be satisfied with *enough*.

Living in God’s splendor calls for spiritual disciplines that intentionally cultivate simplicity and attend to the connection between ecological and economic justice. Living more simply offers the possibility of choosing a diet and lifestyle that nourish the body and honor the intimate connection between health and spiritual

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wholeness. Living more simply offers the possibility of consuming less fossil fuel and emitting less carbon dioxide, thus living in interdependence with all God’s creatures and in a sustainable relationship with the earth’s limited resources. Living more simply offers the possibility of relating justly to the many peoples of the world who do not live with *enough* so that we may live with *more*. Living more simply offers the possibility of living out our

profession that “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Psalm 24:1).

The Spiritual Power of Beauty

Let’s consider the way beauty affects us and what kinds of spiritual disciplines we might develop in journeying toward God’s beauty. Consider, for instance, your response as you watch the sky as a summer storm blows in. The clouds darken and build; they rumble and roil and cast a pall of darkness and silence over everything below. There is something about those moments before the skies open and the rain begins to fall, before the lightning flashes and the thunder cracks that is powerful, dangerous, even frightening. But it is also beautiful, so beautiful that you almost cannot tear your eyes away from it. The beauty of the threatening evening sky draws us in and impresses itself upon us. It attracts us, disturbs us, and reorients us. After the storm, we see things differently. The skies and streets are washed clean; the colors of the grasses, flowers, and leaves that had browned and wilted under the summer sun are saturated and refreshed. Some of our most profound encounters with beauty are like the summer storm in that they leave us with a new vision.

Let’s focus on the way beauty attracts us and how we might become open to it through the spiritual discipline of simplicity. We do not need to do anything to make beauty attract us. It is the very nature of the beautiful storm to draw us toward itself. We can, however, cultivate sensitivity to beauty, an expectation that we will encounter God’s splendor in everyday life. We can cultivate receptivity to the beauty all around us and remove the barriers and distractions that keep us from experiencing it. The spiritual disciplines that heighten our attentiveness to beauty begin by overcoming the habituated and hurried ways we routinely encounter our world. We rush through meals we scarcely taste, attempt to text and converse simultaneously, and fill our children’s days and evenings with endless “enrichments.”

Spiritual disciplines focused on the attractive power of beauty must train us into new habits of mindfulness. Such disciplines may be as simple as regularly preparing a meal from raw ingredients and eating it slowly with friends. Or we may choose to walk our neighborhoods, paying attention to new flowers in bloom, greeting neighbors we’ve rarely spoken to, and noting rezoning proposals that may change the ecology of our neighborhoods. By

becoming intentional and mindful in our seeing and listening, even in our tasting, touching, and smelling, we can heighten our attentiveness to the creation's splendor and God's majesty. By seeking simplicity in our lives, we can slow ourselves down, remove the consumerist blinders from our eyes, and learn to experience the world as "this most glorious theater," the theater of God's glory.³

In future sessions, we'll explore how this attractive power of beauty also brings to our lives gracious disruption and reorientation, which are equally important dimensions of our journey into God's beauty.

Spiritual Practice

Write down one barrier that makes simple, mindful living difficult. Then, list three practices that will help you overcome the barrier. Choose one of those practices and commit to living by it for the coming week. Choose partners and check in on one another.

Questions for Reflection

What have been your most powerful encounters with beauty?

How does the idea of the Christian life as a journey into beauty fit with or differ from other ways of characterizing it?

What are the benefits to describing Christian life in this way? What are the challenges?

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3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.6.2.