

# CHAPTER ONE

## *beauty can save the world*

Perhaps the most natural place to start thinking about the relationship between beauty, worship, and the arts is by asking the question: *What role does beauty play in your understanding of the salvation story?*

### *movement one – lovely*

Consider for a moment the words of the Psalmist: Psalm 84.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *How lovely is your dwelling place,  
LORD Almighty!*

<sup>2</sup> *My soul yearns, even faints,  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh cry out  
for the living God.*

<sup>3</sup> *Even the sparrow has found a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may have her young—  
a place near your altar,  
LORD Almighty, my King and my God.*

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are NIV unless otherwise noted.

- <sup>4</sup> *Blessed are those who dwell in your house;  
they are ever praising you.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Blessed are those whose strength is in you,  
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.*
- <sup>6</sup> *As they pass through the Valley of Baka,  
they make it a place of springs;  
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.*
- <sup>7</sup> *They go from strength to strength,  
till each appears before God in Zion.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Hear my prayer, LORD God Almighty;  
listen to me, God of Jacob.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Look on our shield, O God;  
look with favor on your anointed one.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Better is one day in your courts  
than a thousand elsewhere;  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.*
- <sup>11</sup> *For the LORD God is a sun and shield;  
the LORD bestows favor and honor;  
no good thing does he withhold  
from those whose walk is blameless.*
- <sup>12</sup> *LORD Almighty,  
blessed is the one who trusts in you.*

The Psalmist describes the dwelling place of the LORD as *yididot*—"lovely" and therefore also "beloved" (v. 1). We know from the Old Testament that that Tabernacle and, later on, the Temple were, in fact, strikingly beautiful. They were embodiments not only of Yahweh's own beauty, but of his beautiful design of and desire for the created order—microcosms of divine splendor.

As such, the dwelling place of the LORD had a kind of magnetic draw for the worshiper—which is what the Psalmist expresses here: *My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God* (v. 2). Awakened by the beauty of the LORD embodied and revealed in the Temple, the Psalmist felt himself inexorably drawn to it.

But the Psalmist is not drawn to it simply because it is “lovely” but because—in perfect coincidence with its divine loveliness—there is also a *power* there, a divine power that transforms. Three times he uses the word “blessed” (fortunate, well-off, happy) to describe those who stand in proper relationship to Yahweh, to his Temple, and to the divine beauty embodied and revealed therein. In verse four it is *those who dwell in God’s house* who are blessed. That much we might have expected—what better position could one imagine than living near the divine presence? Of course to so live would be blessed. But then we note that in verse five it is *also those who are making pilgrimage to God’s house* who are blessed. And in verse twelve it is *those who put their whole trust in Yahweh*—that is, they put their life in Yahweh’s hands—who are blessed.

In other words, it is not just those who *live* amid the beauty of the Temple who experience divine power, but those who *ache for it and quest towards it* do as well. “*They go from strength to strength,*” says the Psalmist (v. 7). Favor and honor are bestowed on them (v. 11). Places of hardship (“Baka” means “weeping”) and deprivation become fertile and abundant (v. 6). Power rests on them. Power courses through them.

It is as though the desire for the divine beauty embodied in the Temple, a beauty which is the destination of those who dwell in the Temple, has had a transformative impact on them. *They themselves, we might say, are beautified in their desire for this beauty.* Not only so, but they also *beautify the world around them* as they sojourn towards it. When all is said and done, they will find themselves at perfect rest and peace in the dwelling place of God, covered with the garments of divine beauty that God is and has. And they will have transformed the world around them in the process.

I would like to suggest to you that Psalm 84 is not just a description of the single experience of a solitary worshiper, but is in its own way a signpost to the entire redemptive work of God in Christ—an image-in-miniature of where the cosmos is headed. You might recall that in John’s vision of the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21-22), he looks around to see if he can find a Temple there and cannot. He notes:

*22 I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. (Rev. 21:22-23)*

The Temple, which was to that point an embodiment and revelation of the divine beauty yet to come, *was now no longer necessary because the divine beauty had arrived in full and*

was co-extensive with the new heaven and the new earth. With the advent of divine beauty, God's redemptive story was now complete.

The cosmos, once marred by sin, had been finally and fully beautified, healed, and restored—and God's people along with it:

*<sup>1</sup> Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup> I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup> 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." <sup>5</sup> He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Rev. 21:1-5)*

The beatific vision of Psalm 84 is fulfilled in the new heaven and the new earth.

### ***movement two – entering beauty***

Which takes us back to the question we began with: *What role does beauty play in your understanding of the salvation story?*

For many Christians, *beauty plays no role whatsoever*. It is an optional extra. It's nice if things are beautiful and nice to think about beautiful things, but beauty itself is totally unrelated to the "real stuff" of salvation.

For other Christians, *the role of beauty is adornment*. Beauty helps to make the gospel or preaching or worship more attractive. It serves a purpose; it points beyond itself, but itself is not the point.

But for the better part of the Christian tradition—a fact that is lost on many modern Christians—beauty is central and pivotal to the salvation story. To the great Christian thinkers, beauty is no mere adornment. Rather, beauty describes *both* who God is *and also* where we are headed with God. Let's take those in turn.

***Beauty describes who God is.***

God is beautiful. Christianity has traditionally asserted not only that God is the ground and source of all beauty, but that he is Beauty itself. In the perfect proportion and harmony of Father-Spirit-Son, the Triune God's nature as the Beautiful One eternally shines forth *within Godself* in all its glory and light,<sup>2</sup> and subsequently *spills out beyond Godself into the created order*. To put it one way: in *created* beauty we see the *Uncreated* Beauty itself; in beautiful *things* we see the Beautiful *One*.

Listen to the words of the great St. Augustine on this score:

*My love of you, O Lord, is not some vague feeling: it is positive and certain. Your word struck into my heart and from that moment I have loved you. Besides this, all about me, heaven and earth and all they contain proclaim that I should love you, and their message never ceases to sound in the ears of all mankind, so that there is no excuse for any not to love you...<sup>3</sup>*

Augustine heard the call of God in the proportion and harmony and beauty of the created order. But then he goes on to ask:

*But what do I love when I love my God? Not material beauty or beauty of a temporal order; not the brilliance of earthly light, so welcome to our eyes; not the sweet melody of harmony and song; not the fragrance of flowers, perfumes, and spices; not manna or honey; not limbs such as the body delights to embrace. It is not these that I love when I love my God. And yet, when I love him, it is true that I love light of a certain kind, a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace; but they are of the kind that I love in my inner self, when my soul is bathed in light that is not bound by space; when it listens to sound that never dies away; when it breathes fragrance that is not borne away on the wind; when it tastes food that is never consumed by the eating; when it clings to an embrace from which it is not severed by the fulfilment of desire. This is what I love when I love my God.<sup>4</sup>*

2 It is important to remember that God did not need creation to fill out, fill up, or enhance his beauty; God is complete in himself, and completely beautiful.

3 Augustine, *Confessions*: Book 10, Chapter 6 (New York: Penguin Classics, 1961), 211-212.

4 *Ibid.*

The great bishop of Hippo grasped that there was a transcendent Beauty behind the created “beauties” he saw; and that transcendent Beauty was none other than God himself. His language is stunning at this point. God is...

*the light not bound by space  
the sound that can never die  
the fragrance not borne away on the wind  
the food not consumed in eating  
the embrace that is not severed by the fulfillment of desire*

God is the Infinite Light behind light; the Infinite Sound behind sound, the Infinite Fragrance behind fragrance, the Infinite Food behind food, the Infinite Embrace behind every human embrace. Only the Infinite God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—can be described as the “non-material beauty” whose splendor neither waxes nor wanes. God is beautiful. God is Beauty itself. He is the Beauty that never evanesces, the Strong Splendor that can never be exhausted. But there is more.

***Beauty is where the salvation story is headed.***

We are headed to union with God, to a final, eschatological engulfment in God’s beauty, where God, as Paul says, will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28), a state the ancients often referred to simply as “the beatific vision.” C.S. Lewis described the desire for the beatific vision brilliantly when he said:

*We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it...At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in. When human souls have become as perfect in voluntary obedience as the inanimate creation is in its lifeless obedience, then they will put on its glory, or rather that greater glory of which Nature is only the first sketch. For you must not think that I am putting forward any heathen fancy of being absorbed into Nature. Nature is mortal; we shall outlive her. When all the suns and nebulae*

*have passed away, each one of you will still be alive. Nature is only the image, the symbol; but it is the symbol Scripture invites me to use. We are summoned to pass in through Nature, beyond her, into that splendor which she fitfully reflects.*<sup>5</sup>

You see, beauty has a magnetic quality. It calls us, summons us, draws us, just like the Psalmist described in Psalm 84. In beautiful works of art, in the splendor of creation, in brilliant musical arrangements, in theater and dance, we can feel our Final Beauty—the Triune God—calling us through the beautiful. At the level of the soul, we sense that it is not enough just to behold and bear witness to beauty. We want, as Lewis said, to be one with Beauty, “to pass in through Nature, beyond her, into that splendor which she fitfully reflects.”

And this, as we have said, is where the story of Scripture claims the cosmos is headed. All death, decay, and ugliness will one day be driven out in the gracious advent of God’s beauty. Augustine one more time:

*How great will be that felicity, where there will be no evil, where no good will be withheld, where there will be leisure for the praises of God, who will be all in all. . . All the limbs and organs of the body, no longer subject to decay, the parts which we now see assigned to various essential functions will then be freed from all such constraint, since full, secure, certain, and eternal felicity will have displaced necessity; and all those parts will contribute to the praise of God. For even those elements in the bodily harmony of which I have already spoken, the harmonies which, in our present state, are hidden, will then be hidden no longer. Disposed internally and externally throughout the whole body, and combined with other great and marvelous things that will then be revealed, they will kindle our rational minds to the praise of the great Artist by the delight afforded by a beauty that satisfies the reason. . . [God] will be the goal of all our longings; and we shall see him for ever; we shall love him without satiety, we shall praise him without wearying. This will be the duty, the delight, the activity of all, shared by all who share the life of eternity.*<sup>6</sup>

United finally and fully to God in Jesus Christ—Christ, who is the Incarnation of the beautiful God—our humanity and indeed the entire created order will make manifest the beauty of the Beautiful One.

5 C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 1949/2001), 42-43.

6 Augustine, *City of God*, Book 22, Chapter 30 (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 1087-1088.

So, then, beauty as a category is not tangential to the Christian proclamation. It is not adjacent to the good news. It is central. The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky perhaps said more than he knew when he wrote: "Beauty will save the world."<sup>7</sup>

He was right. Indeed, in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Beauty has and is so saving; and at Christ's return again in glory, that saving work will come to its glorious consummation. The beatific vision will have arrived.