

Jesus Is Precious Because We Yearn for Beauty

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon explores how our yearning for beauty points to the ultimate beauty found in God and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Duration: 34:36

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 3:7

Topics: "Preciousness Of Jesus"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher explores the human desire for beauty and glory, which he believes is rooted in the image of God within us. He explains that even in the most perverted forms of seeking beauty, there is a distorted remnant of the longing for God. The preacher emphasizes that the ultimate source of beauty and glory is found in the gospel story of God and His Son, Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, we can see the beauty of God's power and mercy, and when we see Jesus, we see the very essence of God's beauty. The preacher concludes by stating that our insatiable hearts can only be satisfied by beholding the glory of God, and this can be attained through the open statement of the truth in the gospel.

Transcript

The morning text comes from 2nd Corinthians, chapter 3, starting at verse 7. I invite you to follow along. 2nd Corinthians 3, 7 through 4, 6. Now if the dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such splendor that the Israelites could not look at Moses' face because of its brightness, fading as this was, will not the dispensation of the Spirit be attended with greater splendor? For if there was splendor in the dispensation of condemnation, the dispensation of righteousness must far exceed it in splendor. Indeed, in this case, what once had splendor has come to have no splendor at all because of the splendor that surpasses it.

For if what faded away came with splendor, what is permanent must have much more splendor. Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendor. But their minds were hardened, for to this day, when they read the Old Covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away.

Yes, to this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds. But when a man turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word. But by the open statement of the truth, we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case, the God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

For it is the God who said, Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. I'm going to assume this morning, as the basis for everything I say, that there is a God, a personal God, who created us and has a purpose for everything that he made. Not many atheists come to church at 8.30 in the morning, or 11 for that matter, and therefore I'm just going to offer one brief evidence for why I assume this, and it's a good introduction to what else I have to say.

If there is no personal God, then the concept of beauty dissolves into personal idiosyncrasy. That is, unless beauty is rooted in God's mind rather than your mind, whenever you say, That's beautiful, all you really mean is, I like that. Unless there is a God, your praises of beauty are no more than expressions of your own personal preferences.

But, I think every one of you would be dissatisfied with the notion that your judgments about beauty are of no more validity than your preferences for coffee over tea or tea over coffee. You wouldn't like that if that were the case. And I think that your dissatisfaction with that is a reflection or a remnant of God's image in your heart and an evidence for his reality.

It's an echo left over from his call to you to come into being. Suppose that you were standing by the Grand Canyon with a couple of other people. And as the sun went down, you were moved to say, This is beautiful.

This is gorgeous. And the person next to you said, Beautiful is just a big ugly ditch that the river dug in a few million years. And the third person said, I think I hear what you both are saying.

And I think that both of those judgments are of equal validity. Now, that would be true, that they are both of equal validity if there is no higher aesthetic court of appeal than the mind of man or the individual. And even people who say that they believe in this kind of man-centered relativism so that what you think is just as valid as what another person thinks, even people that believe in that in principle, they don't like it when you treat their judgments about truth or beauty as mere personal idiosyncrasy that can just be dispensed of as easily as anybody else's can.

And the reason they don't like it, I think, is because God has put in every human heart the sense that beauty must have a meaning bigger, more permanent than my little judgment or my personal quirks. And that urge for ultimacy in beauty is, I think, evidence that we are created by God and in His image. Therefore, I'm going to assume that there is a personal creator, as we try to understand a little bit about

beauty this morning and our hunger for it.

If there is a personal God, and He has created all that is, and He has given purpose and form to everything, then we must define beauty in relationship to this God. So try to picture with me something impossible here. Try to imagine God before there was any creation at all, before He had made anything from angels right on down to dirt.

Once there was only God and nothing else. And God is the way He is always. He never was influenced by something outside Himself to become what He is.

And therefore, what He is, He has always been forever and ever and ever. When I tell the kids this in my kids' class at 945, they just shake their heads. He had to have had a beginning.

We need to become children again and be dumbfounded by what we simply say when we believe that God is God and never became anything. He never had a beginning, and therefore He always is what He is. And therefore, if the beauty we behold on earth has its roots and its origin in God, there must have been beauty in God forever and ever and ever.

And what is this beauty in God? What is the beauty of God? In one sense, that's a very hard question. And in another sense, it's the easiest question in the world. It's hard in the sense that there is no pattern of beauty to which we can say, well, God is like that, and therefore God is beautiful.

Because if there were such a pattern to which God had to measure up, that pattern would be our God. Because it would be more great, more ultimate, more eternal. But there is no such pattern, and therefore the answer is very simple.

Beauty is what God is. God is the ultimate pattern of beauty. There is no court of appeal beyond what God is.

If there is beauty, God is that beauty. He's the original pattern. His wisdom is beautiful wisdom.

His power is beautiful power. His love is beautiful love. Everything about God is beautiful.

But what makes the attributes of God beautiful is not merely that they are eternal and unchanging and infinite, because there could be an eternal and infinite power that is evil, and therefore ugly. I think the reason that the attributes of God are beautiful is because of their relationship to each other. Just as paintings do not derive their beauty from the isolation of color and shape and texture, but rather from the interplay of these, the harmony of these, the relationship of these, so it is with persons, and ultimately the person of God.

It is the peculiar proportionality and harmony and relationship of all the attributes of God in His eternity and infiniteness and unchangeableness that make Him infinitely beautiful and the fountain of all beauty in the world. Now how does this infinite divine beauty relate to our longing for beauty? I really believe that every human being has deep in his heart a hunger for beauty. Why do we go to the Grand Canyon? Why can they build restaurants and sightseeing places around the Grand Canyon? Why do we go to the Boundary Waters? Why do we go to art museums? Why do we go to beautiful gardens? Why do we plant trees and gardens around our house? Why do we paint the walls inside the house? There is no rain inside the house.

Why is it man and not monkeys that in the caves always had paintings? Why is it that in every human culture we know there is either art or craftsmanship that goes beyond utility? Is it not because in every soul created in the image of God there is a hunger to see and to be changed by beauty? We crave to be moved by some glimpse of greatness. We yearn for glory. That's even why high school students want to see their team have a swish through the basket with one second later and carry away that star afterwards.

It's glorious. It's beautiful. That kind of skill and poise.

Isn't it true that the poetry that endures from generation to generation endures because it captures the deepest emotions and longings of the human heart? Nathaniel Lee, I think, spoke truly when he said concerning poetry, "Tis beauty calls and glory leads the way." Emerson speaks for every great poet when he writes, "He thought it happier to be dead, to die for beauty, than live for bread." And Emily Dickinson loved to put death and beauty together. "Beauty crowds me till I die. Beauty, mercy have on me.

But if I expire today, let it be in sight of thee." William Butler Yeats expresses his longing for "A land of heart's desire where beauty has no ebb, decay, no flood, for joy is wisdom, time, and endless song." There is in the human heart an insatiable longing for beauty. And I am persuaded that the reason it is there is because God is the infinitely beautiful one and he made us for himself. Even the most perverted desires for beauty, say, the desire of people to relish the excellence of skill and strength and speed as gladiators hack themselves to death, even that longing for beauty is a distorted remnant of something God put in the human heart that will not be satisfied until it is satisfied with God.

We can know that these desires are from the Lord because we are unsatisfied until we find him, the all-satisfying object. Only one vision is sufficient for our insatiable hearts, the vision of the glory of God. That's what we've been made for and that's what we long for.

Now, how shall we attain it? Who is worthy to behold the beauty of the all-holy God? We have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. None of us has loved the beauty of God with anywhere near the fervor and the devotion that that beauty merits. And sin is evil.

And God is of purer eyes than that he can look upon evil or behold wrong. And therefore, the wages of sin is death, eternal death. And unless someone intervenes, we simply will perish under the judgment of God for having scorned his beauty so often.

Paul put it like this in 2 Thessalonians 1.9. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the face of the Lord and from the beauty of his might. In other words, for people who in this life have neither seen nor delighted in the beauty of God, their punishment will be to be cut off ultimately and forever all vestiges of beauty, including the beauty of the Lord. What then can we do? For we have sinned, and not only sinned, but in our sin we have become hard so that the remnants of glory that are manifest in that sunshine out there and in the coming of spring and in a baby's face and in the word of God shine in our minds so dimly.

How then shall we escape from our bondage? How shall the veil be lifted? And that's what our text is about this morning, and I'd like you to look at it with me and we'll trace the thought of Paul from 2 Corinthians 3, verse 6, through 2 Corinthians 4, verse 4. The plight is pictured here and the pathway to eternal joy and beauty is described for us. In verse 6, Paul says that he is a minister of a new covenant, not in the old letter, but in the Spirit. The old covenant was the law given through Moses at Mount Sinai, and it was a good and holy and just word from the Lord, and it pointed the true way of salvation.

But apart from the gracious enabling of the Holy Spirit, the only effect of that law was to point out sin and to pronounce judgment and death upon those who read it. But now a new era, an era of the Spirit, has come with the Messiah and His death and resurrection and the falling of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And as the gospel spreads throughout the nations, that Spirit falls on all flesh that will receive the gospel.

And the mission that Paul says he has here is to be a minister of this new covenant, to announce the good news that whoever believes in this gospel will have forgiveness for their sins and receive the Holy Spirit, to enable them to fulfill the just requirement of the law. And then in verses 7 to 11, Paul contrasts this old and new covenant, and more specifically, he contrasts the beauty, splendor, glory, I think they all mean the same thing, of the old covenant and the new covenant. Verse 7, If the dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such splendor, glory, beauty, that the Israelites could not look at Moses' face because of its brightness, fading as it was, will not the dispensation of the Spirit be attended with greater splendor? The old covenant brought death because, as verse 6, the letter kills and only the Spirit gives life.

And the contrast here in verses 7 and 8 is between the dispensation of death and the dispensation of the Spirit, rather than the dispensation of life, because it is the Spirit who gives life, and the letter kills. Therefore, Paul infers that if there was a glorious manifestation of the beauty of God at a time when there was simply a dispensation of death, can we not infer that when the new covenant comes and the Spirit is poured out and there is the dispensation of the Spirit, the beauty of God that will be manifested will be greater, vastly greater, than in the old covenant? He repeats that same argument twice. In verse 9, the glory of the dispensation of righteousness will surely surpass the glory of the dispensation of condemnation.

And in verse 11, the glory that is permanent will surely surpass the glory of what is fading away. Paul is absolutely sure that everyone who comes under the sway of the new covenant will perceive and be drawn into an experience of beauty that far surpasses any of the theophanies, the revelations of the glory of God in the Old Testament. And that's an amazing confidence for us who are indeed part of the new covenant.

But verses 12 following portray something very sad. There's a barrier. There is a great barrier to this experience, and we need to see it and how to overcome it.

Paul said in verse 12, since I've got a hope to be a minister of such a fantastic covenant, I don't speak quietly. I speak boldly, openly, forthrightly. He contrasted then in verse 13 with the way Moses acted.

I'm not like Moses. Moses put a veil over his face so that the brightness that reflected from the glory of God which started fading away couldn't be seen by the people. And Paul sees a symbol in this Mosaic act, a symbol of the fact that under the old covenant, by and large, the people were not granted to see that the glory of the law was a temporary, fading glory pointing beyond to a new coming glory.

Just as Moses concealed his face and the fading glory, so, in verse 14, Paul says, even to this day the true significance of the old covenant is veiled. When it's read, its true significance was to point beyond itself to the fact that one day a Messiah would come, He would atone for sin, the Spirit would be poured into the heart, the law written on the heart, and we would be caused to walk in the statutes of the Lord. That's the new significance, and by and large, it is veiled to those who read it whenever the old covenant is read.

Or, as verse 15 says, which means the same thing, I think, the veil lies over the mind. It either lies over the reading or it lies over the mind. In each case, it comes between the heart and the understanding of what's there.

And that's not only true for Israel, which is the main context here, it's true for us too. And so the question for everybody in this room who is not ravished day by day by the beauty of God is, how can the veil be lifted? How can I come to see more clearly the beauty of God that shines more brightly than the sun? And here's the answer. Paul noticed in Exodus 34, 34 that Moses, when he turned away from the people to go back into the tent, he took that veil off and walked in to the presence of God.

And Paul saw a type, a symbol, a lesson in that act. And he said, in verse 16, when a man turns to the Lord, the veil is lifted. Now, our blindness, therefore, and our hardness to the beauty of God is overcome when we turn from all that detracts us, all that competes with the glory of God, and turn and look to Jesus, look to the Lord.

Then, verse 17, he explains what he means by this turning to the Lord. The Lord is the Spirit. He's linking back in now with the fact that he is in a dispensation of the Spirit and a minister of the covenant of the Spirit.

The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Now, since at the end of verse 14, Paul had said that only through Christ is the veil lifted or the veil taken away, I conclude that what he means in verse 16 when he says that if we turn to the Lord, the veil is lifted, the Lord is Jesus, even though the Lord Moses had in mind was Yahweh. Paul does that all the time because he believes in their oneness.

The Lord is the Spirit, Jesus is the Spirit, Christ is the Spirit, and so to turn to the Lord is to turn to the Spirit. Open yourself to the Spirit. Seek the fullness of the Holy Spirit, for where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

If we want freedom from our blindness, our deadness, our hardness to the things of the Lord and all their beauty, we must have the Spirit, for it is the Spirit who loves the Lord within us. We are slaves. You all know this.

I know this. We are slaves to the competing beauties in the world until our minds are filled with the Spirit and the veil is lifted and God shines with a brightness that puts everything else to shame. And then verse 18 describes the result, what happens when a person turns to the Lord and has the veil lifted by the Spirit.

And we all, with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. When a person turns to the Lord and opens himself to the Spirit, the liberating rule of God comes into his life and two of the deepest longings that we have begin to be satisfied. One, we really see a glimpse of all satisfying divine beauty in the Lord Jesus.

And two, not only see it, we begin to be changed by it, shaped by it. And the more we begin to be changed by it, the more we become like that beauty. And the more we become like it, the more capacity we have to delight in it and there is a spiral of glorification that will never end for all eternity.

We will never exhaust the beauty of the Lord, nor our own transformation into its likeness. But what more precisely in conclusion is this beauty in the Lord that we are granted to behold by the Spirit? Drop down

with me to chapter 4, verse 4. And I think we have an answer here. It's repeated again in verse 6, but we'll only look at verse 4 in the last half.

Paul says that for those who have been liberated from the dominion of Satan, who is blinding the world, what they see is the light of the gospel, of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. When we turn to the Lord and the Holy Spirit removes the veil from the eyes of our hearts, what we see is light. Without light there can be no beauty at all, but it is not the light that our physical eyes crave.

But that is no disadvantage because you all know that the light and the beauty that you want for your physical eyes is really not satisfying unless you sense in your heart that it is a reflection and an outward form of a deeper, personal, moral and spiritual beauty. That's why without God all our glimpses of beauty in nature ultimately will not satisfy. And so the light, Paul says, that we are given to see is the light of the gospel.

And the gospel is a story. It's not a painting. It's a story about God and His Son and a conspiracy of love that they have to undermine the kingdom of Satan and to bring the kingdom of Christ into the world and save the world.

And out of that story, Paul says, there shines more than anything else the glory, the beauty of one man, the God-man, Jesus Christ. And that glory and that beauty that we see in Jesus in the gospel story is all-satisfying glory because, as the text concludes, He is the image of God. When we see Jesus in the gospel story, we see God and the very essence of God's beauty.

We see the beauty of His power in the gospel because what the law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did. Sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh. We see the beauty of God's mercy because God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself and not holding against you your trespasses of the law.

We see in the gospel the beauty of His justice because God put Christ forward in the gospel as a propitiation for our sins through His blood that He might demonstrate that He is righteous and prove that He is both just and the justifier of him who has faith in Jesus. And finally, we perceive the beauty of God's wisdom in the gospel because in the gospel we do impart a wisdom, not a wisdom of this age, but a wisdom of God which He decreed before the ages for our beauty. He has decreed His wisdom before the ages for our beauty, both the beholding of it and the being changed into His image by it.

And whether you know it or not, all your longings for beauty are longings for this. For this we were made, the light of the gospel of the beauty of Christ who is the image of God. Turn to the Lord, open yourself to the Holy Spirit, and the veil will be lifted.

Let's pray together. I'm going to pray a prayer that any one of you, and I hope every one of you, could follow with me and by virtue of this sincere prayer experience the lifting of the veil. O most glorious God, you are worthy of all our trust and obedience and adoration.

Yet I have sinned and see you so dimly. But I now turn to the living Lord, Jesus Christ, and I invite your Spirit to fill my life. Remove the veil from my heart and grant me to behold your glory and help me to be changed from one degree of glory to another.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

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