

The Beauty of God

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, and let me add my word of welcome. My name is Martin Ayres. I'm the rector of St. Silas Church, and this morning we're beginning a new series for the coming weeks at St. Silas.

We're looking at knowing God. Our regular diet as a church family is to look at books of the Bible, chapter by chapter, so that we're letting God set the agenda.

We're connecting the right things together in the way that God has ordered things in the Bible, and we're just listening to what he has to say to us. But from time to time, it can be helpful to take a theme and explore how it unfolds across the whole of the Scriptures.

And we're going to do that with qualities about God and his character, what's sometimes called the attributes of God. And this morning we're thinking about the beauty of God. So let's bow our heads and I'll pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we are worried by many things, and there are many things that can distract us. Father, please give us ears that are attentive to your word, minds focused clearly on you, eyes to see you, and hearts that are willing to change and follow you.

[1 : 12] For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, we're based in this great Psalm, Psalm 27, and the big idea comes in verse 4, if you just look there.

One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.

What's David describing there? An experience of being with God that he's had before, of God's presence. In verse 8, he tells us more. He says, My heart says of you, Seek his face.

Your face, Lord, will I seek. Well, the Lord's face is his presence. And David, who writes the Psalm, has clearly had some experience of God's presence that was so full on and rewarding that that's what his heart longs for and yearns for again.

So we're going to think together about the power of beauty, then about the nature of beauty, and then about the heart of beauty. The power of beauty, then the nature of beauty, what it is, and the heart of beauty, where you find it.

[2 : 23] It's power, it's nature, it's heart. First, the power of beauty. David is ruthlessly focused in verse 4. Did you notice that? One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek.

And there's an extraordinary thing about that, being his only request. It's that David is in monumental distress. Look at verse 2. The wicked advance against me to devour me, my enemies and my foes.

Verse 3, he talks about an army besieging me. War break out against me. In verse 5, he mentions the day of trouble. He's in distress and he's in danger.

And we're not in that same situation ourselves as David. It was unique for David. But we do find ourselves today in distress, don't we? In danger.

Just imagine being able to say to friends at the moment, could you pray one thing for me, that I would see the beauty of the Lord?

[3 : 26] That's what I really need. But this is the power of beauty. That when you see real beauty, it changes your perspective on what's going on around you.

If you just think about it, where do you go when you're fed up, when you're troubled, when you're stressed out? Lots of us run to beauty. If we experience, if we sense something beautiful, it gives us a different perspective and we can rest in that and be satisfied in that and find joy in that.

Maybe for some of us, it's going to the highlands. Maybe that's what it is for you. Getting up into the mountains, getting up a mountain, seeing the spectacular scenery, seeing a lock.

These things are natural beauty that fills our minds and we just feel the stress coming off us. Maybe it's that you put on your favourite album or you watch your favourite movie again or you look through YouTube for a clip of your favourite sporting moment, Usain Bolt breaking the 100 metres world record or whatever it might be for you that's this beauty in human achievement.

Whatever it is, these things lift our spirits. They change our perspective on what's going on around us. And in a way, these things are a clue to there being a God.

[4 : 54] These things make much more sense if there's a God than if there's not a God. If you just think about where you yourself most sense beauty, whether it's listening to Mozart or it's watching Messi score a great goal or it's looking at the night sky, at the cosmos, whatever it is, it's hard to continue enjoying that if you're going to be consistent with the view that there's no God.

Because you need to remind yourself that this feeling that you have that seems to be so transcendent and uplifting is just a chemical reaction that helped your ancestors find food or avoid predators.

It's just a survival mechanism because we're nothing more than complex survival machines and you could be looking at anything. The only way to enjoy beauty if you reject the idea of God is actually to shield yourself from your own worldview that tells them that your enjoyment of this sunset is just a by-product of chemical forces.

So it's as we meet God in the Bible that we find that his existence makes better sense of our experience, that some things really are objectively beautiful.

We might even say that they're transcendent, that they're a taste of heaven. So that our glimpses of beauty in the created world point us to where they're ultimately fulfilled, in the beauty of God himself.

[6 : 20] So that in the midst of terrible danger and distress for David, he's able to say, that's the one thing I seek, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord.

Because of that, he's not afraid, verse 1, whom shall I fear? And his head is held high, verse 6. So that's our first point, the power of beauty. Secondly then, the nature of beauty, what it is.

David says, he seeks the Lord in his temple. So he's describing wanting to sense God's presence in a way that would give him pleasure. Beauty is different to usefulness, isn't it?

It's not that the thing is useful or the person is useful, the thing that you're going to sense. It's that it gives you pleasure. And David sees that about God.

That's a revolution for some of us in our thinking. When I was growing up, I think I thought that people who were Christians were serving God to get stuff from God.

[7 : 22] So they might endure something like a church service. And maybe I did think they were a bit of an endurance or they might have a chore like prayer.

Maybe I thought that was a chore. But they do that stuff to get other stuff from God. But when you have an encounter with the God of the Bible, what you discover is that you don't serve God to get stuff from him.

No, you seek God to get more of him. If you've never experienced that about God, if that idea sounds very strange or unfamiliar to you, would you be willing to come on Tuesday evening to our Christianity Explored first session to take the time to explore this?

We see the nature of beauty in Isaiah chapter 33, verse 17. God promises to save his people in the future and he says this, your eyes will see the king in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar. Your eyes will see the king in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar. So beauty here is not the language of Disney princesses. It's the language of brilliance, of magnificence.

[8 : 34] God's king, brilliant, bringing joy and hope and relief to God's people and sensing this kind of excellence gives us pleasure.

Hopefully you can think of an example of that in your own experience. When I was a teenager, I played a musical instrument, the cello, and I remember signing up one school holiday for a day-by-day orchestra camp, if you like.

We weren't residential, but going and spending all day every day with an expert conductor and working on some pieces with an orchestra. Now why did I do that? Well, I basically mainly did it because it was time with my mates and they'd signed up when I wanted to be with them.

It was also to put on a concert which gave me a sense of achievement and it got me a pretty decent CV as well, all this music. I mean, not that it's done me any good now, but you know, the idea was it's good for your record of achievement.

So the music itself didn't mean a lot to me, but being in the orchestra was useful. But now what I find is that I listen to the music that we used to play.

[9 : 50] I'll listen to Beethoven or to Haydn or Vorjax and it's not useful to me anymore. I just listen because it is beautiful. It's extraordinary to hear the excellence of the music and that excellence as I sense it gives me pleasure.

That's a glimpse of what beauty is. But our satisfaction in enjoying beauty from things around us never lasts. It wanes because everything around us is finite.

Only the beauty of God can limitlessly satisfy us because he is endlessly magnificent. And we see God as a whole.

Of course we can't see all of him. We'll spend forever discovering more about God. But what I mean by that is what's sometimes called the simplicity of God. Not that God is simple but that God can't be divided up into different elements.

You get the whole of God at once and whichever way you look at God because of his simplicity you see everything else as you see his love. If you think about going in to contemplate the love of God what you find is that his love is a holy love and it's an eternal love and it's a merciful love and it's a sovereign love and it's a gracious love it's a just love.

[11 : 18] So he is unsearchable and inexhaustible and magnificent. So that in Psalm 16 verse 11 David looks ahead to being with God forever in heaven and he says you make known to me the path of life you will fill me with joy in your presence with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

He will literally be saturated in joy. He knows that when he gets into the presence of God he will have so much joy it couldn't be better.

It's in beholding God in all his fullness that he will be saturated with pleasure and joy. God is going to be the highlight of the new creation.

So we've thought about the power of beauty in difficulty and despair we've thought about the nature of beauty what it is finally we'll think about the heart of beauty where we find it.

David says you find it in the temple he longs to be in the temple verse 4 that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to see him in his temple.

[12 : 29] We get it in other psalms Psalm 63 verse 3 I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory because your love is better than life my lips will glorify you.

If you want the beauty of God you go to the temple. That's the reality for an Old Testament believer. So for us where do we go to enter the temple today?

Well when John records for us Jesus meeting with the Samaritan woman John chapter 4 they meet at the well she asks him that question once she realises he's a prophet she says to him our ancestors worshipped on this holy mountain but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.

And Jesus says this woman believe me a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the spirit and in truth for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.

God is spirit and his worshippers must worship in the spirit and in truth. Now she gets that that's going to be made clear when the Messiah comes and she says that to Jesus and he says I the one speaking to you I am he.

[13 : 56] In other words when now that God has sent the Holy Spirit the Holy Spirit is a gift from God the Father to open our eyes that we can see the beauty of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Why do we see him there? See it there? Well the temple was the place of the presence of God and all the fullness of God dwells in Jesus and the temple was the place where people encountered the grace of God sacrifices of atonement were made sin offerings were brought and in Isaiah chapter 53 looking ahead to God's servant coming we get this prophecy verse 2 he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him nothing in his appearance that we should desire him he was despised and rejected by mankind a man of suffering and familiar with pain like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised and we held him in low esteem what's going on?

well the king who'd been promised who would look magnificent and excellent came without any beauty into our world and was beaten and disfigured and strung up on a wooden cross the ugliest form of execution ever invented why?

it's because in our own sin we were ugly so this is the beauty of God supremely that he laid aside his beauty to die for his people to bear the ugliness of our sin so that one day he can transform us and we will be radiant and glorious so that in Revelation there's this picture of the future union of Christ with his people and it says that we are like a bride beautifully dressed for our husband for Jesus the temple was the place of God's presence and we go to Jesus for that the temple was the place of God's grace and we go to Jesus to see the beauty of God in his work of grace in his atoning work so friends let's go to him together in the coming weeks Sunday by Sunday as we look at knowing God better and day by day in lockdown would you pray ask God that his spirit would open your eyes to see the beauty of God in Christ the coronavirus gives us this opportunity as things are taken away to realign our lives with the infinite worth of knowing Christ don't waste your boredom if the things you would have filled your time with have been taken away don't waste that go to him as other things are lost just a personal example one of the passions idols in my life is my sports team

Middlesbrough Football Club now football is a good thing so don't mishear me it's a gift to be enjoyed it's good to miss it when it's not on but for me when Middlesbrough lose I get grumpy and I'm bad company and when Middlesbrough win instead of thinking about Jesus Christ I find I'm thinking about the goals Middlesbrough scored and people like me who are have this kind of affliction whether it's Middlesbrough or it's Kilmarnock or it's Partick Thistle when we see a good goal we describe it as poetry our team being behind and coming back to win with a last minute winner that is beauty for us now what's going on well that is good except when it starts to replace God in our lives and then we find that we're filling our lives with junk food when all the while there's a hearty healthy meal that will sustain us and satisfy us on offer now for you it's probably not football you're probably more sophisticated maybe it's a Range Rover or a Tesla or it's the latest iPhone or electronic device or it's the holiday home that you want even the spouse that you dream of my football team even becomes my refuge so if I'm having a bad day instead of running to God and filling my mind with whatever is true and noble and right and pure and lovely about God and Jesus instead of that

[18:35] I'll go on my smartphone and I'll look for articles about my football team it's my place of distraction it becomes my safe place what would that be for you your place of distraction your safe place so what has God done in the coronavirus for someone like me well he stopped sport hasn't he so in this lockdown of cancelled music festivals and cancelled holidays and cancelled sport and cancelled hobbies there is sadness in that of course there is loss in that but could God be inviting us to learn to love those things a bit less so that we have room in our hearts to be filled with what will really satisfy us the majesty the excellency of Jesus Christ to have that we need to learn some new daily disciplines you don't just automatically delight in God we need time spent dwelling on God in the scriptures day by day with a good Bible reading plan meditating and reflecting on God's word time spent deeply in prayer not just asking for stuff from God although it's fine to ask God for things but not just doing that but rather prayer praising God for who he is talking to God about who he is for many of us it will be time spent in worship with songs that give us the time as we listen to them the space and they give us the words to contemplate the beauty of God sometimes it's as we lose what we thought we needed that God shows us his beauty by teaching us that he is enough and strengthening us and sustaining us in our loss of other things what losses are you experiencing because of COVID-19 that you could take to God and ask him to help you fill your life with more of him instead could we learn to pray like David one thing

I ask from you this only do I seek to gaze on the beauty of the Lord let's pray together we praise you gracious heavenly father for your holiness your character your glory would you so fill us with your spirit that we would see more fully your beauty in the face of Christ move us we pray to daily discipline in these unstructured and uncertain times that we would let go of whatever distracts us and commit ourselves to saturation in your word and devotion in prayer and we pray this not just for our joy and rest and satisfaction but also for your great glory in Jesus name Amen