

God's Beauty

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One of the incongruities of Christianity is the occasional use of the term beautiful to describe God. It really does not make sense since God is spirit and is, therefore, indescribable. Jesus was described by Isaiah in chapter 53, verse 2, like this, *"He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him."* It is also a fact that we have no valid description of Jesus. There are those who believe we have a picture of him on the Shroud of Turin, but this belief is contested. Why then does one of my favorite worship songs begin with the words "You are beautiful beyond description"? This term is not used in the Bible to describe either God or Jesus, so why do we use it? It is also true I could not find hymns that use the term to describe either God or Jesus. Then too, if we think about it, the images of Jesus found on paintings, crucifixes and icons are what men thought he looked like and not what they know his appearance really is. I have to say that this is not an obsession of mine, but I have wondered for a long time how God is related to beauty – if he is. Then a few days ago as I was praying on my way to work I received what I think is the answer.

We have had a terrible drought in the Southeast this year. As a matter of fact, we have had droughts in the last five years late in the summer. This year, though, has been particularly bad. Still some remarkable things have happened.

I love the fall because of the beauty of the leaves, but this year I anticipated the fall color to be drab because of the drought. I suspected this because the leaves on some trees, like the tulip poplars and a few maples, dried up and fell off rather early. A maple we see outside of our back window that is ordinarily resplendent with color had a little color for a short time and then the leaves dried and fell off. But something remarkable still happened. Those trees that did not prematurely shed their leaves began to develop color. The colors as usual were beautiful. There were not a lot of the yellows that one usually sees on the poplars, hickories and maples. Instead there were many trees that were orange, red, burgundy and purple. The sweet gum trees often had a deeper purple hue than usual. The most beautiful sight, though, was the occurrence of more red leaves than I have ever seen. The most gorgeous display was on red and white oaks that were a brilliant red. The woods seemed to be on fire. These are not the usual colors we see. The leaves on oaks usually turn brown with only a minimal amount of color. Even better, these oaks who do not shed their leaves until late winter have lingered on to adorn the woods while gradually turning a reddish brown.

By now you are wondering what this has to do with God and beauty. As I pondered the question I realized that God created us with the ability to perceive beauty. Beauty elicits the emotion of awe. To perceive beauty and be awed by it we had to receive it from God who has to possess the attribute of beauty. Not only do we see beauty in the fall color, but we see beauty everywhere in nature. This was emphasized at a conference sponsored by Sigma XI (a scientific research society I belong to) some years ago. Its title was "Dimensions of Beauty in Science." Top scientists, including two Nobel

Laureates from around the world, brought pictures of their research that revealed the beauty in such things as the solar system, the cosmos, butterfly wings, life in the deep sea and in fractals. I could not restrain my joy when several of the presenters commented that the beauty they were showing was what God had created!

On a personal level, besides fall color there is nothing more beautiful than a fresh heavy snow fall. I remember seeing several when we lived in Montreal. The temperature would be 25 below zero and as I walked up Mount Royal to catch my ride to the hospital I was awed by the beauty of the sights and sounds along the way. As I climbed the stairs the snow would crunch and screech under my feet. I was awed. Then when we were hiking on the Sierra Crest trail we came to places where we could see forever. We were awed. Also along the trail we came upon bristlecone pines that could have been a thousand years old. Realizing their age, we were awed. We stood in Muir Woods and the Sequoia National Forest and looked up into the canopy of these giant trees above us and were awed by their size and beauty. Then, when I was canoeing in the Quetico wilderness and saw forests, rivers and lakes unspoiled by civilization I would be awed by their beauty.

On a hot air balloon ride over Masai Mara in Kenya we looked down and saw giraffe, ostrich, elephants and lions on the ground below us and we were again awed by what we saw. When we landed we had breakfast near an acacia tree that was festooned with the nests of weaver birds. That too was an awesome sight. Then once when I was flying back from Spain in the late afternoon we passed over Cape Cod. From 35,000 feet we

could see the entire peninsula on a background of gold. The sea was colored by the setting sun to create that awesome sight. In Nepal while flying parallel to the Himalayas we saw the plume of condensation as the jet stream flowed over the crest of Mount Everest. In our view also were the many other mountains that make up the Himalaya chain. It was a beautiful and awesome sight.

When I lived in Panama we had storms that came up each day. Some were awesome. There were big black clouds that swept in from the Gulf of Panama and they deluged us with buckets of rain. Those too were awesome. Similar to those storms was one I encountered on the Appalachian Trail in North Carolina. A severe thunder storm developed as we were crossing Roan Mountain. This huge black cloud came sweeping toward us with lightening and thunder. We were not close to shelter so we hiked on through the storm with lightening striking trees all around us. That too was awesome. Then when I worked at the Veterans Hospital in Durham, NC, we had two hurricanes. They decreased in intensity somewhat as they came inland, but as I worked on the 10th floor I could feel the building sway in the wind. Not much, of course, but enough to recognize the awesome power of the storm.

Then it was said by Herbert Spencer that no one can contemplate the universe and not believe in God. Have you ever looked at the sky uncontaminated by the light of civilization on a clear night and seen the millions of stars and not been awed by the beauty? We did that once in the Sierras! We stopped to camp for the night, and after dinner Elizabeth and I climbed up on a huge smooth outcropping of granite and lay

looking at the heavens. I could not restrain myself as I lay on the mountain top and viewed the sky so full of stars. I had to praise God for his awesome creativeness.

As I remember the things I have seen I am reminded of the statement Paul made about mankind not having an excuse for not believing in God and obeying his commandments. He said *“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”* It is apparent that he meant the beauty and power of God is seen in what he has created. Since God created beauty and created the ability for us to appreciate beauty it has to be one of his attributes.

Most of us do not know the attributes of God! I certainly didn't during the first years of my walk with the Lord. I have, though, tried to learn what they are. Here are the things I have learned. It may not be a complete list, but it is close to complete.

1. God is love! I need not comment on this since the Bible makes it clear that love is what he is.
2. God is wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to devise perfect ends and to achieve these ends by the most perfect means. God does not make mistakes. He is truth personified.

3. God is infinitude. There is no time and space in God – no beginning or ending.
4. He is sovereign. Calvinists make much of this attribute and rightfully so. But God did not create us to be marionettes that have no will of our own. Just as he has free will so do we. Yet he is still Lord of the universe and we have to recognize that fact.
5. God is Holy. He is perfect in every way. There is no sin or evil thought in God.
6. God is three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Still he is one. This is a mystery for many people, but since he is supernatural it is possible for him to be three persons in one.
7. God is omniscient. He is perfect knowledge. He is the only genuine “know it all.”
8. He is faithful. If he promises anything it will happen. He also will never desert or leave us.
9. God is omnipotent. He is all powerful. He can alter the laws of nature and miracles happen.
10. He is omnipresent. He is everywhere. When he installs himself in us we do not have to ask him to come to us. He is where we are.
11. God has always existed. He has no beginning or end. He is eternal.
12. He is self sufficient. He needs nothing.
13. God is immutable. He never changes.
14. He is the source of all mercy.
15. God is just. Everyone is equal in his sight so he judges us all fairly.
16. God is beauty.

I add the attribute of beauty that I wrote about at the beginning because others do not usually mention it. If he is not then he would not have created the capacity to appreciate it in us for we are created in his image.

How do we know his attributes? The answer is simple. He revealed himself in his creation, in his miracles and guidance of the children of Israel, but most importantly he revealed himself in Jesus. Jesus was the visible evidence of the invisible God. He was not a prophet like Mohammed or Buddha. He was God. He said he was, but when people did not believe him he said that they should believe the evidence provided by his miracles. They could only have been empowered by some supernatural being. That supernatural being was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Those of us who have accepted his deity by faith are sure of the things we hope for and certain of the things we cannot see.

We can also believe because of the things he does in our lives. Elizabeth and I came from Christian families. She was saved in her adolescence. I was not saved until I was 44 years old, but my father was praying for me all those years, so God worked in my life. His promise was that he would rescue the children of a righteous man (Proverbs 11:21 LB) and he did. Elizabeth and I, reflecting on the way we met in the most unlikely of places, are convinced that God was behind our courtship and marriage, and in his wisdom knew who we needed as husband and wife. Fifty-seven wonderful years of marriage has convinced us of his guidance and wisdom.

Then God supplies all our needs through his riches. He has always provided us with enough food, clothing, housing, knowledge, wisdom, and transportation to meet our needs. We were rich because we were satisfied with what we had. We did not need to covet the possessions of others. Our goal in life was not to make money, but to rear children of worth and to serve our fellow man. By guiding me into psychiatry he gave me the opportunity to proclaim the gospel, heal the sick, cast out demons and raise the dead. (The dead who were raised by his power were spiritually dead.). I do not know how anyone could be more grateful, so I give thanks everyday for the wonderful things he has done. After all this I am sure you wonder, "Well, has he not had any troubles?" Certainly I have had troubles. There have been many of them, but he leads me through them, and I am able to overcome them and carry on.

When I was young and still a pagan I went to church and we sang a hymn entitled "Count Your Many Blessings." All too often we do not do enough counting. It is not a hymn we sing today in most churches, even though we in the USA are some of the most blessed people in the world. Try counting your blessing one by one and see what God has done. It will fill you with awe!

I must conclude by explaining how the emotion of awe fits into our religious life. After spending my life studying emotion I came to the conclusion that there are twelve emotions. Nine of them are unpleasant, three are pleasant. The dictionary says to be pleasant is to be agreeable. Agreeable is to be pleasing or harmonious. Then it says harmony is a congruent arrangement of parts. You can see that we cannot get very far understanding awe by defining it in words. We must then ask ourselves what it does to us when we experience it. If we inspect ourselves when we experience it we find that it makes us feel good. We seem to merge with the sight or the music or whatever the stimulus that elicited it is, and we tend to forget ourselves. We become part of something beautiful whether we see it or hear it.

Awe is an esthetic emotion. Music and art elicit it. I love Beethoven's works. His Eroica Symphony as well as his 5th Symphony always elicit awe when I listen to them. Wagner's operas are awesome. But country music is awesome too. It expresses the joys and sorrows of a people as well as their struggles with life.

Above all religious music is awesome. The great hymns such as How Great Thou Art, Oh for a Thousand Tongues to Sing, Great is thy Faithfulness and many others elicit awe. As for art, I have visited most of the major art galleries of the world. My favorites are the Uffizi in Florence and the Prado in Madrid. Even though the paintings in them are beautiful and awe inspiring, nothing compares to the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. It really is awesome.

Interestingly, the three pleasant emotions love, joy and awe are a major aspect of our faith. God is love, and when he comes into our life he amplifies our love. Joy comes from knowing him and serving him. Awe comes from contemplating his holiness and his creation. No other religion can make such a claim.