

The Chorus of Beautiful - Psalm 19

Van Gogh wrestled his whole life not just to make it as an artist, but more importantly he wrestled with his mental health. And the 19th century wasn't exactly a time we knew how to deal with mental illness, so it at one point landed him in an asylum.

He painted multiple self portraits during his stay, each capturing the bandage where his ear had been. These paintings are now worth millions. Paintings by a man who lived in poverty, out of the spotlight of success and within an asylum.

Culture has this pattern - we initially reject so many creatives and artists for not being more useful ...only to turn to them later when we find a world without beauty to be lacking.

Tonight I want to talk about how we so often do the same with not just specific artists, but beauty itself.

Going further, we'll see tonight beauty is at the bedrock of who God is, and yet we actively engage with it far too infrequently. And as we'll see... this effects our faith.

PSALM 19:1 – in the very first verse “Heavens” and the “sky” (which is more directly translated “firmament” or “dome of the sky”) are clear references to the creation account and its order, as God created the heavens and the earth and then on the 2nd day created the firmament. And at the end of that second day, what did he say as he did at the end of each day of creation?

Genesis 1 – *and God said it was good.*

In the first translations of the Hebrew Bible into another language, the Greek word for “**beautiful**” was used instead of the word for good, as the Hebrew word carries both meanings.

When God's chorus becomes “*God said it was beautiful,*” the whole tone pivots. Dramatically!
- “Good” in our perspective gives off vibes of functional. Serviceable. A utilitarian tone

But God wasn't utilitarian in his creating.

There are regions of earth and galaxies and planets that we'll never even lay eyes on.

We quickly come to realize creation wasn't just “good” in a utilitarian sense.

It's not there for us to use, and God doesn't need it – he has no needs!

So much of creation simply exists to be beautiful.

God first shows himself in the Bible as an artist - creating a repeated chorus of beautiful, and then he places mankind in it.

Hebrew scholars and Jewish tradition contend that God sang creation into being.

Makoto Fujimura writes that the word “radah” or dominion that God commands of mankind to have over nature... it isn't about “having dominion over,” but loving stewardship and Fujimura says: “*one aspect of our stewardship is to become poets of creation, to sing alongside the Creator over creation*”

Isaiah 53:2 speaks to how we would behold God the Son, Jesus, in his humanity:
There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to draw us to him.
The source of all beauty walked among us, and we saw no beauty.

Now clearly it speaks to Jesus' appearance.

But less clearly - does it also speak to our eyes? To our ability to see beauty?

I think also of ten chapters previous in Isaiah where he talks in chapter 43 about those who have eyes but can't see, and those who have ears but can't hear.

Jesus in his teaching ministry as he spoke in parables also speaks to **“those who have eyes but cannot see, and ears but cannot hear.”** (quoting Jeremiah)

How did they become this way?

Well they had abandoned God and turned away from him to idols.

They had turned from beauty and lost the ability to recognize it.

What I would ponder tonight: *When we turn from and lose sight of the source of all beauty, can we devalue beauty to the extent we lose our appetite for it, or even fail to recognize it?*

Going further and more significantly – when we neglect beauty, do we hinder our relationship with the God who IS beauty? Isaiah 53 would certainly seem to at least hint at this possibility.

Psalm 19 opens highlighting the **Beauty** of creation in verses **1-6**

Then we see David discuss God's **Truth** – vs **7-11** – *perfect instructions, trustworthy decrees, clear commands, etc.*

And in the same breath God's **Goodness** – vs **7-11** – *more desirable than gold, sweeter than honey, a great reward*

I break it down like this because these three are what is known in philosophy as the **Three Transcendentals**.

But they are called transcendentals because everything else in every category participates with them in some degree. They are universal realities that extend beyond our everyday sensory experience and are therefore considered non-physical, conceptual...

...even spiritual. *In fact we find these truths in scripture, grounded in the nature of God.*

Peter Kreeft: *“Truth, goodness, and beauty are the three things we all need, and need absolutely, and know we need. These are the only three things that we never get bored with, and never will, for all eternity, because they are attributes of God, and therefore of all God's creation: three transcendental or absolutely universal properties of all reality.”*

I find it fitting when studying Psalm 19, that for a long time there was considerable discussion about whether the first half and second half of what we know as Psalm 19 are the same composition, because of the seemingly disconnected pivot at verse 7 from beauty to God's truth and goodness. And it's fitting, as we've often separated beauty from goodness and truth as a transcendental with lesser value, just as many have wanted to separate Psalm 19.

Do we pursue God in his truth? Absolutely.

Do we pursue him in his goodness? Yes.

Do we pursue him in his beauty? Far less. And it impacts our relationship with Him

But HOW? How do I walk in beauty? How to I contribute beauty to the world?

But before we get there we should ask – WHAT is beauty by definition in the Bible, and WHY does the Bible say we need it?

Isaiah 33:17 – it speaks to the Lord in his beauty, and the Hebrew here speaks to **excellence**. There's something alluring about excellence. Our soul knows it when we see or hear it – it's beautiful. Which leads to a second facet we see in scripture...

Psalm 50:2 – says from Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth. This speaks to **attractiveness**. That's relatable. My wife is beautiful. I'm attracted to her. What's beautiful attracts.

Psalm 27:4 – says in one translation that David wants to *behold the fair beauty of the Lord*. The word here speaks to “pleasurable perception.” Perception that isn't just about an increased awareness, but an increase in pleasure.

That's the WHAT of beauty. And it speaks to WHY we need beauty.

Why does David want to go to the temple and gaze upon the LORD in Psalm 27? His life was hard. His life had trouble. There was suffering. There was pain. It's what the rest of Psalm 27 laments.

But we will all have a common experience balancing joy and pain. Tragedy and beauty. And for all of beauty's pull, tragedy has its own. Anger and fear are the fuel our culture runs on. My life is already painful, but then the culture pulls me toward more pain and more outrage, more tragedy and more fear.

Van Gogh: **“Art is to console those who are broken by life.”**

We often treat art and beauty as superfluous, a side hobby to a purposeful pursuit of God, or even a useless distraction... so we neglect it... until we find ourselves broken and hurting.

Beauty is no longer some distraction in those moments. It's vital.

We see David's recipe in **Psalm 27**. He was struggling and what does he ask? To behold God's beauty. There is something in our soul that is satiated our beautiful God and in doses by his beautiful creation.

Psalm 46 in the MSG version - *Attention, all! See the marvels of God! He plants flowers and trees all over the earth... “Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your High God, above politics, above everything.”*

The HOW of beauty... that same verse of Psalm 46:10 in the version we're probably more familiar with reads: **“Be still, and know that I am God.”**

Be still. And as the MSG version notes – take a long loving look. Behold. Hundreds of times in the Bible we’re told to behold. Behold God and behold his creation. God did it in Genesis... he paused to behold his creation... and note its beauty. We need to practice this more and more and more.

It was Albert Einstein once said *“He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.”*

If this man and his immense understanding had to stand again and again in awe before creation and its beautiful design. How much more should I?

But you see, we are disciplined by our culture to not gaze or take long looks as it’s a waste of time. We are trained to make quick interpretations. We live with a daily rush toward efficiency and forsake any time or call to posture ourselves before beauty. We need to slow down, be still as Psalm 46 commands us... and behold.

National Gallery of Art in DC with Steph.

Good art it makes us slow down and behold. In fact, art grows our mindfulness.

Raj’s “hyper-fixation” that is his ability to behold. We all need more of his “autistic awe.”

We live in a camera ready culture.

We live with fidgety fingers which leads to a fidgety focus, and we miss the beauty around us. And we rush to capture an image rather than being captivated by beauty.

Finding Grace in the Face of Dementia

“As we begin to think about the changes in our brains that occur over time, what might impress us is not that they can fail but that they ever worked in the first place.”

It calls to mind another GK Chesterton quote on wonder:

“Wonder at the permanent thing, not the exception. Be startled by the sun, not the eclipse. Not the earthquake, but the earth.”

We ache to be awed. Our wonder leads us to worship.

The ache was made for God and his creation. And that worship was made for God.

You see - creation summons and beauty attracts, but it doesn’t save.

So as is good practice in art museums – don’t stop at gazing upon the creation... **Read the plaque!**

Go from gazing upon God’s beauty to reading His Word. His truth. His revelation. It helps us walk in greater understanding of the beauty that surround us and how to engage with it.

How do I join in the chorus of beautiful that’s been sung since God sang it over creation?

This is where we start.

David says again and again in different ways in Psalm 19 – God’s truth IS good.

His commands are life giving... and they are beautiful.

And according to Jesus what are these commands, when you boil them down? LOVE.
The 2 greatest commands: Love God and Love people.

Isaiah 53 - Jesus didn't have a physical beauty which appealed to anyone's eyes.
Isaiah 53's word for "beautiful" speaks to our vision, what we see with our eyes.
Yet Jesus' attracted a following of thousands of clamorous people without visual beauty.

What they heard from Jesus' mouth? Was beautiful.
The love and care and attention they felt? Was Beautiful.
His life? Beautiful. When we love like Jesus – we join the chorus of beautiful.

Hans Urs von Balthasar: the beauty of Jesus was not merely an “**object to be looked at**” but an “**action in and upon the world**” which “**requires a self involving response of engaged action from ourselves.**”

*This is how we most readily join the chorus of beautiful that's been sung since Creation.
Not just creating objects to be looked at. But action in and upon the world.
Living like Jesus did – beautifully.*

Jesus died – it is commonly believed - at **33**.
Van Gogh, to come full circle, also died in his 30s, at **38**.

But where Jesus achieved his purpose and was able to say with his dying breath, “it is finished”
Van Gogh took his own life prematurely.

He was closer than he could have imagined to the success that had eluded him.
Had he lived a few more years, he would have witnessed it.

Ecclesiastes is 3:11: ***God has made everything beautiful in its time.***
If it isn't beautiful ... God isn't not done yet.

Jeremiah and the potter's house. We are clay in God's hand. God is intimately hands on.
Not on some assembly line. Not mass produced. We are intimately shaped by God.
We have to give God the gift of time to craft and shape us.
We have to give the same gift to those around us – the time to grow.
But also? Our time.

Ephesians 2:10 – ***we are God's craftsmanship.***
Greek – POEMA – where we get the word poem.

We don't skim poetry. You linger over it. Soak in it. Give it your time.
If people are God's poems... we need to slow down. Sit. Ask questions. Reserve judgment.

As I was looking at this portrait this week, I had the thought that if we are painting a portrait of
the Body of Christ, we often paint a portrait like Van Gogh's here... We don't have ears to hear.

The Bible doesn't say Jesus rubbed shoulders with sinners. Or crossed paths with sinners.
No it went deeper - Jesus was a friend of sinners.
He knew their name, occupation, questions about life, emotions...

I wonder how many people like that Van Gogh consistently had in his life.
Van Gogh: ***"someone has a great fire in his soul and nobody ever comes to warm themselves at it, and passers-by see nothing but a little smoke."***

CS Lewis: *There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.*

Like Van Gogh's many portraits. We are called to paint a portrait with our lives.
We're called to paint a portrait of Christ with our lives. (see: Romans 8:29)
We don't know what Jesus looked like physically. But that's not the point.
The point is that Jesus's heart becomes our heart.
That's the portrait we're supposed to show the world.

And every day we can treat like another brush stroke.

What if the church was a place we could be honest in our pain, and honest in how we portray ourselves, like Van Gogh with his bandaged ear. Like the now priceless portrait of Van Gogh – honestly capturing his bandaged ear to his own shame - we are broken and bandaged, yet of incalculable worth.

The poet Propaganda: ***worth, value, and beauty is not determined by some innate quality / But by the length for which the owner would go to possess them / And broken and ugly things just like us are stamped "Excellent" / With ink tapped in wells of divine veins***

Said plainly – worth and beauty are determined by the cost the buyer is willing to spend, and Jesus spent his very life.
The beautiful life we're called to emulate, the portrait we're called to paint with our life.

Dostoyevsky's "The Idiot" - "beauty will save the world."

The reality is it already did some 2000 years ago.
The beautiful life of Jesus, perfectly lived, given to save us.

But our hope is also that Jesus in his beauty is coming again.
And that eternity will no longer be this dance between beauty and pain.

We will be new creations amidst a new creation,
but the chorus of beautiful sung in Genesis 1 will continue on through eternity.

And we will get to join in.