

Beautiful God

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[0:00] All right, so the aim of this class is to explore how God is beautiful, hence the term or the name of the first class in the series Beautiful God. We might gain insight into God's beauty by using two different methods which structure the class today. The first method is finding where the term beauty comes up in scripture, like doing a word search on a computer.

This is a term-focused method. In studying the context of some of these passages, we'll find that whatever is considered beautiful reflects God's beauty. In the second method, we think about what scripture has to say about a dictionary definition of beauty. I call this method integrationist as we're looking to connect scripture to our dictionary studies. One prominent definition of beauty in the dictionary is what is pleasing to our culturally senses. Though there is no such definition of beauty in the Bible, scripture pays attention to what is pleasing to our senses.

There is overlap between the dictionary definition of beauty and the content of scripture. So this is a structure, so the first part, the first method, we'll look at the Psalms, Zachariah, Hosea, Isaiah, Ezra, and then for the integrationist method, we'll look at 1 Samuel, the Psalms, and Hebrews. Finally, we'll look at what scripture has to say about Jesus and how God sees Jesus as beautiful. So the term beauty in scripture. The first method. In the Old Testament, terms that get translated as beauty often appear in passages with the theme of salvation, the process of gathering people formally scattered physically, morally, and spiritually. So we have about 14 terms in Hebrew that often get translated as beauty. There are far less terms in the New Testament that get translated as beauty. Psalm 27 begins, the Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?

After the psalmist expresses confidence in the Lord to defeat enemies, he writes about his desires to be with God forever, and then to see the beauty of the Lord, and then to know him more.

Beauty also rises in the context of Zachariah's message of salvation. Zachariah speaks not many years after King Cyrus of Persia had decreed that the Jews could return to their land after the Babylonian exile.

[3:08] And though many were indeed in Israel, only the foundations of the temple had been laid. As Ezra recounts, people including Babylonians from Samaria who worshiped the God of Israel in addition to other gods, had attempted to deter the building of the temple.

In addition to the unfinished temple, the Jewish people let financial pressure from the Persian Empire discourage them. At the time, King Darius was preparing for battle against Egypt and was collecting high amounts of taxes for their campaign.

So while the Persian Empire did allow for the Jews to return under Cyrus, there were still some years after this return, as Zachariah writes, days of small things. And the people had indeed put their hope in idols in the land of Israel.

After several prophetic visions, Zachariah proclaims how God will restore his distracted people in large and visible ways that will completely change what the land looks like.

For like the jewels of a crown, they shall shine on his land. For how great is his goodness and how great is his beauty. The chapter concludes with an image of natural bounty, one which Moses conjures up in his final blessing on Israel earlier.

[4:30] Grain shall make the young men flourish and new wine the young women. The beauty of God appears through the gathering of his people in order for them to thrive and flourish to glorify him in the land of Israel.

Hosea ascribes beauty explicitly to the people of Israel in contrast to the greatness of the Lord's beauty, which we just saw in Zachariah. Still, the context of the passage in which the term beauty arises, his beauty shall be like an olive, is the result of God's plea to the people of Israel to repent and his faithful healing of their iniquities.

Israel is beautiful like the olive because Israel has been saved by God. In the case of Hosea, God saves the people by calling them to repent from worshipping the Baals.

Baalism, or the worship of Baals, consisted in visiting various shrines with names such as Baal-Gad and Baal-Pur. In sacrificing to these gods, Israel could indulge in overconsumption of alcohol and illicit sexual activity that they believed would make them and their land more fertile and prosperous.

Baalism was especially prevalent given that Israel was an agricultural society. Hosea also evokes sacrifice to Baal through images of vanity.

[5:58] Israel is like an ornamented lover, vying for the attention of Baal or going after Baal in the terms of Hosea. In Hosea, God's salvation involves making beautiful this lover.

No longer would they be like a promiscuous wife, an illegitimate child, or a silly dove. Rather, the Lord's judgment, call to repentance, and healing would make Israel beautiful like an olive.

Very valuable item. The end of Isaiah focuses on God's creation of a multinational and incredibly diverse community that will be united in worship of him.

So this is another context in which the term beauty arises. Eunuchs, sojourners, rich and poor, those near and those far, with the gems of their cultures, will be drawn to the glory of God by his very own hand.

In the above passages, those far include nomadic people from Qadar, modern-day Saudi Arabia with their flocks, animals from Nebaith, present-day Jordan, and people with their vegetation from Lebanon.

[7:16] In gathering people who are not Jewish from different cultures, God makes his dwelling place beautiful. The gathering of God even affects those in Israel who witness their community grow.

They will see the salvation of God and become radiant, says Isaiah shortly after these passages. Such was the case for those several hundred years after Isaiah's prophecy, and God would continue to save his people following that.

In the time of the reconstruction of the second temple, the king of Persia, Artaxerxes, appoints the scribe and priest Ezra to instruct the law to the leaders of Israel.

Ezra rejoices at the king's desire to see the restoration of the temple, which included the instruction of the Jewish people. So in the Psalms, we see the gathering of the psalmist's affections on God in the context of battle.

In Zechariah, we see flourishing that was expected soon after the return to Israel, but that is really to come. In Isaiah, we see, sorry, Hosea, we see the promised gathering of God of his people to worship him and only him.

[8:44] The healing of their apostasy. And in Isaiah, we see God's radiance through the gathering of his people who aren't Jewish into a multinational community. So a question that I have for you all is, have you ever been part of a beautiful gathering?

Yes. Yes. Do you have an answer to that, Sammy? What? What kind of beautiful gathering have you been a part of? I've been a part of the youth group, and now I'm part of the Bible study.

That's great. That's pretty similar to what I was thinking. Gathering on Sunday, to me, is a very beautiful gathering, seeing how God brings different people together.

And then in the morning, feeling like I'm gathered spiritually in his word. Does anyone have any other examples of a beautiful gathering that they have been a part of?

A wedding. A wedding, yeah. I did a mission trip in South Africa, and my small group had a very mix of different tribes and cultures.

[9:59] And we had a prayer time, and everybody agreed to pray in their own language. And it was the most moving thing I think anyone had ever really experienced.

We didn't know what the other people were saying, but we felt like God. Yeah, it's almost reminiscent of the Isaiah passage, God gathering people from different places in different countries through worship of him.

Anyone else? The Christmas music program and Trinity. That's a really good example.

Thank you. Thank you. All right. So now I'd like for us to transition to the second method of inquiring about beauty.

Connecting a common conception of beauty to scripture. Hopefully, this is an exercise of holding every thought captive to Christ. The Oxford English Dictionary, as you can see, has a few definitions of beauty.

[11:05] These are kind of the first ones that come up. A beautiful person, especially an attractive woman. The prevailing standard of what is beautiful. The fashion. That quality of a physical object or animal, which is highly pleasing to the sight.

It is worth noting that this latter definition has been formed and developed over the years, and the ones also before it, by many philosophers, including 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant.

He was pretty important. He was pretty important. For Kant, if a representation gives someone the feeling of pleasure, and there are other conditions for this feeling being turned into a judgment, this thing could be considered beautiful.

So most importantly here for Kant and for most philosophers of aesthetics, it is primarily the person who has the feeling of pleasure through the senses.

If someone looking at this Japanese work of art from the 18th century derives a feeling of pleasure, they might judge it beautiful. You can read more about the conditions of beauty in Kant's critique of judgment.

[12:31] So this theme resonates with scripture, where not just people, but also God experienced pleasure through the senses. These two subjects, God and people, however, sometimes diverge in their feelings of pleasure or in their judgments of what is beautiful.

This is particularly recurring in the context of worship, specifically through sacrifice. So one early example of sacrifice, a sacrifice that is not pleasing to God, though implied that it is pleasing to people, comes up in 1 Samuel from the 10th century BC.

This book tells the story of the prophet Samuel whom God would use during the time of judges to permit a monarchy for Israel. The beginning of the story tells of the reverence of the reverence of the sons of the priest at Eli.

These sons or priests did not do what was in the heart and mind of God. They serve as a foil in the narrative to Samuel, who one day recognizes the voice of the Lord calling him at night.

These sons and priests of Eli also anticipate that God would soon raise up a new priesthood, in the words of Samuel. The law does not instruct the arbitrary procuring of meat, which the sons of Eli did by sending their servant to thrust a three-pronged fork into a pan with a meat offering in it, maybe an ox or a sheep.

[14:01] That the priest sought to procure the meat directly from the worshiper demonstrated that they did not care for Moses' instructions regarding sacrifice given to him by God.

That it is pleasing to the Lord for the priest to burn the fat of the animal on the altar. The priest here also disregards the particular parts of the animal that he is to consume, namely the shoulder, the cheeks, and the stomach, as recorded in Deuteronomy.

Because of their irreverence demonstrated by their neglect of the Levitical and Deuteronomical laws, the sacrifices of the sons of Eli and Samuel were displeasing to the Lord.

There are plenty of other examples in scripture where we find sacrifices that are not pleasing to the Lord. And I'll ask some friends to read from Genesis 4, 1-5.

Now, after the new age, he's wife, and she conceived and bore me, saying, I have gotten a man with the help of the man. And again, she was born with brother Abel.

[15:08] Now, Abel was a keeper of sheep and pain, a worker of the ground. In the courts of time, he brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground.

And Abel also brought up the firstborn of his flock and of the effect portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but he had an empty offering, and had no regard.

So Abel was very angry, and he's fell. Amos 5, 21-27. I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. And the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs, the melody of your harps, I will not listen.

We'll let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-glowing stream. Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings during the forty years of the wilderness, O house of Israel?

[16:13] You shall take up Sukkot, your key, and Kenan, your star god, your images that you made for yourselves. And I will send you into exile beyond Damascus, says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts.

Micah 6, 6-8. With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves and your old?

The Lord, be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil. Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, with the fruit of my body, for the sin of my soul?

He has told you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to work humbly with your God? Jeremiah 7, 9-10.

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations?

[17:21] Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. All right, so these are examples of sacrifice that are given by people, but not received as beautiful by God.

So, a question I have is, what are the sacrifices that we make that aren't beautiful to God today, that are misdirected, and perhaps worshipping not God, but another desire, another institution?

So, I thought of two things. Anorexia. What do we consider beautiful? The fashion industry has for a long time delighted in skeletal models, though perhaps a little bit less recently.

Advertisements and runway shows might still sanction giving up the appetite, which is a sacrifice. The hanger in your closet inspires the human frame that the fashion industry presents as beautiful.

In the abundant line of God, however, grain and new wine make the young men flourish. Selfish ambition is maybe another example of an object of beauty, probably in many professional spheres, including academia, the one that I am familiar with.

[18:50] I am here for them to take pleasure in intellectual achievement and production, and there is nothing wrong with that. The university, though, does not pressure me to reflect on the motives and ends of the sacrifices that I am compelled to make.

Sacrifices of community, of relationship, and of rest. The certain kinds of intellectual ambitions entail. So, I'd love to know if you agree that anorexia and selfish ambition entails sacrifice that the world thinks is beautiful, and if you can think of any other worldly sacrifices that elicit the delight of people, but maybe not of God.

I can think of a lot of things that have been shared on social media, even by people who are not Christians, which I think is a bit of cool, that are like, what is that with glorifying burnout, and sort of self-abuse and not getting sleep?

And there was this really powerful, like, cartoon with one of these articles of a person whose back was a giant, like, three-pronged plug, and then their bed had a giant outlet on it.

And so, like, or like, it was, I think it was actually their brain, like, behind their head was the outlet plug, and so the only purpose of getting rest was that they could be charged to just do more. And, yeah, I thought it was really powerful, but how often, like, oh, I didn't get to sleep last night, or I'm running on three days straight, and caffeine is glorified by their culture.

[20:26] It's like, wow, they're so committed, they're so productive, and how in God's eyes, that can be about glorifying self or worshiping work and success.

All right, and, like, perhaps working really hard and getting less sleep than usual could be a sacrifice to God, and it's really hard to make those judgments for other people, probably sometimes including ourselves.

Paul talks about running the race with endurance and perseverance and discipline. So, yeah, it's definitely a complicated thing, but it could also really serve, like, our desire to just be productive and to see ourselves as useful, which is not really the end goal.

Haney? That's why I really like what you said about motives and ends being important, because with anorexia, we could say, like, holding your appetite is also what you do during fasting, but the motives and ends are really different, and selfish and efficient.

Motives and ends are really different from, like, working hard into the Lord, but it might look the same externally. We could bring that today. Yeah, I think Zachariah talks about that, like, what are your intentions for fasting?

[21:49] I think the family is sacrificed a lot by being too concerned about making sure our children are successful successful in regards to what the world considers successful, so running from thing to thing, so you're never eating dinner as a family, you're never spending time in the Word together in a prayer, because you're making sure they're in every activity, and so the family gets sacrificed a lot.

It's like this family gets sacrificed for the family. Yeah. That's just the sacrifice, yeah. For the sake of the children, almost like wanting your children to look a certain way to the people around you, while my children are successful, well, are they successful in God's eyes, or are they successful in regards to how other parents are seeing your kids?

Right. Or their peers, even. Yeah, and it's like that competition, like, maybe both, like, maybe they're successful in God's eyes, maybe they're successful in other people's eyes, like, again, it's these, like, competing, like, intentions sometimes, and, like, yeah, having really one intention is probably pretty hard.

All right, so to return to the context of sacrifice in Scripture, Psalm 40 refers to sin offering, the offering of animals like goats, partially consumed by the priest, and partially burned on the altar.

This differs from burnt offering, which is also in this psalm, which was given wholly to the Lord. So in this prayer, the person offering sacrifice receives more than what to give.

[23 : 33] In sacrifice and offering, you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Which, when translated literally, means, you have dug for me an ear, the divine creation of a physical body.

Transitioning into Hebrews, in Hebrews, Christ assumes the body of the psalmist. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me.

In burnt offerings and sin offerings, you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written for me in the scroll of the book.

Indeed, Christ's reference, as Psalm 40, clearly represents Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thesis, that Christ prays the psalms with us. Jesus elaborates on the psalm, moreover, through his allegiance to God.

Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written for me in the scroll of the book. Here, Jesus says that what is pleasurable or beautiful to God is not the sacrifice of a goat, but the doing of his Father's will.

[24 : 47] The author of Hebrews specifies shortly after that the will of the Father is to sanctify people through the offering of the body of Jesus once for all.

The following verse from John shows that this offering, I'm sorry, it's not up. Oh, yeah, it is. It shows that this offering of Christ is for people to dwell bodily with God forever.

Eternal life comes from looking at the Son who offered his body once for all. We can even anticipate Jesus' beauty through the broken spirit that sinners like that in Psalm 51 in Isaiah have.

A broken spirit compels us to look to the Son who gave himself as an offering to forgive the sins that wear at our hearts. We get another glimpse of the contrite spirit as a foil for animal sacrifice in Isaiah.

Most importantly, again, the contrite spirit signals the need for a Savior who will gather people once again in him. In Ephesians, Paul confirms that this gathering is indeed fragrant to God.

[26 : 01] This God not only sees that things in creation are good at the beginning in Genesis, but goes on to smell a variety of sacrifices before the most fragrant sacrifice of Christ.

And when Jesus was back, sorry, that's the wrong verse, follow God's example, therefore as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

God indeed finds himself beautiful in his offering that reestablishes relationship between him and his people.

We are actually introduced at the very beginning of the gospel narratives to God's beauty. In the baptism of Christ, the Spirit comes upon Jesus and the Father expresses his delight.

When Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.

[27:12] And behold, a voice from heaven said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. We see that again in Luke, the pleasure of the Father in Jesus, and also in Mark.

So the beauty of God reminds us that there is indeed a difference between what God and people find beautiful. God's suffering servant would have no stately form or majesty to attract people in the prophecy of Isaiah, but God found Jesus pleasing.

We see this in his life and especially in his sacrifice. Indeed, they are quite different from our own sensibilities, as God finds himself beautiful, and we do not.

The question I want to leave you with is, have you ever found something off-putting or ugly, but later, in light of God's character, found it to be beautiful?

So I'll give you a few minutes to think about that, and then I invite you to share with the people next to you one of those experiences, and to pray together, and that'll be it.

[28:45] Here's the question, if you missed it. I haven't found anything off-putting or ugly at all.

Wow. But in the light of God's character, I find everything to be beautiful, especially when I'm wearing my new glasses.

I got these yesterday. They're really nice. Wow. And they make me look more mature. Yeah, feel free to turn to the people around you when you're ready.

I'm trying to see you. I'm trying to see you. I'm trying to see you. I'm trying to see you. I have some good things. I'm trying to see you today. I think you're going to see you today.

I don't like it. Technically. You're going to see me here. I'm going to see you tonight. I'm trying to see you.

[30:17] I'm having a $\pi\epsilon\rho\iota\tau\omicron\upsilon$ so next week. So I am really king, especially $\mu\epsilon\lambda\lambda\omicron$ s, I agree with you. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Fantastic. Great cos I often see anything that I did, like, oh yeah, won that argument.

Oh, and then I realized I didn't win the person. And then it's like, well... that thing that I'm like, oh yeah, I got that great rhetorical flourish at the end.

[32:24] It didn't do anything and it kind of probably didn't help in the relationship. So I've found in my experience more often finding things, misjudging them to be beautiful and then them turning out not to be as beautiful as I thought.

Right, that kind of points out the validity of the dictionary definition of beauty is an object of intellectual beauty, intellectual perfection, but with wrong ends, it could also be incomplete and black.

Anyone else want to share? Can I ask a follow-up question to both of you and Kevin? So where does that change happen? Like, either the change from seeing something as beautiful as I'm realizing it might affect God's character, it's not, or it's the opposite direction, like, how does that change happen?

Or what are some ways? I think knowing him more and just learning more about him. When we say, like, in light of God's character, knowing his character. Yeah.

Knowing him more in scripture. So that's, like, a really long-term process? Yeah. Probably a lifetime. Mm-hmm. I've found it often happens when I'm saying silence afterwards when the emotions are down and you've kind of withdrawn rather in prayer or just thinking about the discussion and then realize, I was wrong.

[33:59] I did that. I went about that indirectly. But then it reveals itself in the long-term process. But also, you kind of realize that sometimes you're pretty quickly. That's when you know you really screwed up.

Okay. Anyone else want to share? Response to either?

I believe I already have. Yep. Thank you, Sammy. No problem. Yeah. Sammy's already seeing things as beautiful. Just, it's great. I was going to say that I think in my life there are times when I see something off-putting or as ugly and then find out that it's beautiful.

I think it's often when maybe I misjudge someone or I thought poorly of someone and then I find out about their history or what they've suffered.

And I start realizing that God is pushing their lives way more than he's working in mine. And it's what they're doing so you in his sight.

[35:05] And it's a very humbling kind of thing to acknowledge. Yeah. Yeah. I think, yeah. Your experience, too, reminds me of just Haney's question of, like, how does this happen?

How do we, in light of God's character, like, yeah, how do we start to see things more like him to delight, partake in his delight in the sacrifices that we make and carrying his son?

So I hope to talk a little bit more next class about the implications of God finding himself beautiful and Jesus dwelling in his church next class.

But, yeah, feel free to pray with those around you and then go up for service now. Thank you for attending. Thank you. Thank you.