The Beauty of the Lord: 
the good, the evil, and the ugly 
Stephen Hague, January 2019

“. . . that I may dwell in the house of the LORD 
all the days of my life, 
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD.” Ps 27:4

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“From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth.” Ps 50:2

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I. Beauty, Good, and Evil

How is it that beauty, one of the richest words and concepts in theology, is now so convoluted and transmorphic that it has come to mean something rather trivial? The very idea of beauty has fallen into such a confused array of notions, and especially when speaking of God and beauty, that it may be nearly impossible to reflect on it meaningfully, so please bear with me as I give it a meager effort.

We have come into a time when many people refuse to own any faith in God, especially the God of the Bible because he is so much in need of a moral defense in the popular imagination. Against the moral high-ground of those who sincerely think of themselves more highly than God, they accuse him of gross immorality and injustice for creating such a world as this, or at least one in which evil is possible. Not that the problem of evil is an easy one, nor that we gloss over it, but we live in a time when many people have been persuaded that God, if there is one, cannot be good, at best, and may even be evil (even though they in the same breath do not want to define evil for fear of judging). This being the situation, how then can we speak of God’s beauty? How are we even to define beauty itself? Is it at all possible?

Consider the kinds of buildings and architectural aesthetic wasteland of many places in the world, and in the USA. The American urban aesthetic has created such an extraordinary blight of ugliness that one must marvel at the seeming incomprehension or concern of the American consumer. We live near such an area, one we must drive through to get to our cloistered neighborhood. It is a well-serviced compilation of random businesses and “strip malls” of which consumers seem to be oblivious to its visual blight, since it has absolutely no aesthetically redeeming virtues and yet people keep shopping. It may be convenience that matters more than appeal, and perhaps the idea that the janky looking and kitschy places have the better prices. Since those fancy highfalutin places are always more expensive, we
assume they must charge more for all those unnecessary trappings. In consequence, the visual oppression we fund is real, and is a kind of aesthetic abuse on our sensibility and sensitivity to architectural beauty and that of our environments. The word desensitized may be quite inadequate here; we come to submit to the bland vision of the corporations or business owners whose least concern is to create humane aesthetic environments for us beleaguered consumers.

Our aesthetic ignorance may be forgivable, since surely we all need educating in this area, and have plenty of room for growth. I know well. Yet, unwillingness to evaluate the cultural environments and landscapes that we have created, and refusal to envision a world of greater beauty than the ones we have created, is really not excusable when we consider the glory God reveals through his world and how we were created to reflect his glory, as the “crown” (Ps 8) of his creation. We the created were created to be creative with what he has given us to that end. How is it that we who have tasted of the overwhelming good bounty of God’s glorious presence and his creative extravagance beyond all measure, that far surpasses our human comprehension, so often have such tawdry gratitude and kitschy responses?

“... to attune one’s aesthetic sensibility is ipso facto to attune one’s moral sensibility. Otherwise put, to improve one’s ability to make aesthetic judgments is to improve one’s ability to make moral judgments.”

Consider for a moment the idea that a good God could not create this world we know. We must ask, how do we speak of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, without something to give us a backdrop for definitions of these concepts? Against what do we paint a picture of evil, by contrast, to understand precisely what evil is. What makes something evil by definition? What makes something immoral or ugly in our eyes, and to our judgment? Could such categories exist alone without antonyms whereby we have a context in which to find defining contrasts? Can we understand what the bad is without knowing the good, the counterfeit from the original? Can we ask that if there is no good God, no gloriously beautiful God who is morally perfect, could there be any such categories as evil and ugly and immoral? Would not all things be counted equal and beyond assessing? Is this not where we have been headed as a society that finds it increasingly difficult to pass judgment, even on what would have in the past been considered a great evil (e.g., the Nazi genocide of the Jews)? Judgments are considered passé old-fashioned morality, and so we are left with personal preferences, likes and dislikes at best, so that my good can be your evil, and your beautiful can be to me quite ugly, even reprehensible. This is not just fear of being judgmental, this is a complete loss of a context to define such categories. How can one even consider the question of whether there is a God who is good or evil? We may be left only with the unanswerable question, “Is there a God?” But could we ever truly ask whether God could be good or evil, beautiful or ugly, since we would have no test to judge such categories except personal taste or preference. In other words, when the source of our ethical and aesthetic evaluation is purely subjective, as rooted in each individual, and not in any objectively universalizable criteria based on absolute categories, then we will be left with no criteria or standard by which to even discuss whether something is good or evil, beautiful or ugly.

The poet W.H. Auden identified several dilemmas the modern world-ethos has created for us and the contemporary artist, summarized as follows:

1 James S. Spiegel, “Wisdom,” in Austin and Geivett, Being Good, p. 68.
• **The loss of belief in the endurance of the physical universe.** The artist has no confidence that what he makes will endure.

• **The loss of belief in the significance and reality of sensory phenomena.** The artist has no confidence in the nature of the world and can be true only to subjective sensations and feelings.

• **The loss of belief in the norm of human nature** which will always require the same kind of man-fabricated (tradition) world to be at home in. The artist has no assurance that the next generation will comprehend or understand his work.

As generalized as these trends may seem, we can summarize the impact of these losses with two key thoughts generally accepted in our time:

- **Types are truths that are found, but since there are no universals there are no types to be found.**
- **Tropes are truths that are made, and since there are no types the artist must create tropes**

There has been a dramatic shift from seeking types as truths as found (and thus transcendent), seeing **significance** in nature as signs (of God), or as signifying meaning (types), to having the burden of making meaning from within, and without reference to universals or transcendent truths. Meaning then becomes about tropes, or particular instances of a property that have no universal or typological relation to other instances or properties.

In the realm of scientific inquiry into the nature of the universe, this shift was escalated by Charles Darwin’s hypothesis about nature that led to a divorce of the human spirit and nature (and of course, God, and the idea of God, from all of nature). In this divorce, nature and its beauties (and signifying qualities) become **nothing**, but out of which each artist must vainly struggle to make one’s own truths. There is no **design** to be found in the universe, because there is no intelligence behind it. In his autobiography, the fruit of such ideas is seen in Darwin’s despair at no longer even enjoying music and art:

> I have said that in one respect my mind has changed during the last twenty or thirty years. Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds, such as the works of Milton, Gray, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare, especially in the historical plays. I have also said that formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry: I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also almost lost my taste for pictures or music. Music generally sets me thinking too energetically on what I have been at work on, instead of giving me pleasure. I retain some taste for fine scenery, but it does not cause me the exquisite delight which it formerly did. . . . The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.  

There becomes no means for the artist anymore to “strain out” the truth from a knowable external reality, but must create it from the “carnival of random beauty in senseless motion.” In this shift, it meant a seeming loss of any God behind the world of creation, and a silence so deafening that the world qua world had nothing more intrinsically to say.

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We can add that Sigmund Freud accentuated this silencing of creation, as well, with his internalization of the process of actualization and realization of what it means to be a person in relation to the world, and especially with the notion that, at best, God (and such concepts) is but a projection of the mind of the human person.

“How are we to believe in anything if we consider truth to be something that has been created entirely by our desire to believe rather than something that has been discovered through our capacity to learn and receive?”

Beauty in such a world is whatever the eye says it is. Beauty, as such, is strictly “in the eye of the beholder,” that is, along with the concept of “truth,” just tropes to be created not discovered.

In the realm of economics and philosophy, Karl Marx also escalated the shift from an objectifiable understanding of the world in his desperate effort to discredit all critiques of his (delusional) economic ideas. As Von Mises put it, Marx severely attacked reason and logic in claiming that “There is no such thing as a universally valid logic. What mind produces can never be anything but ‘ideology,’ that is, in the Marxian terminology, a set of ideas disguising the selfish interests of the thinker’s own social class.” This revolt against reason was a sleight-of-hand, that while attempting to undercut all evaluation and criticism of his radical ideas, it ironically undermined his own economic theories about class in relation to his elevation of the supposedly superior ‘bourgeois’ mind versus the ‘proletarian’ mind. Beauty in his universe thus became only what he envisioned was suitable to advance his utopian vision of a remade society, created largely through violence and the destruction of the old order of civilization.

Perhaps it can be to the credit (or discredit) of Friedrich Nietzsche who famously had one of his characters, as a madman, declare that God [or the idea of God] is entirely dead, and that we are the ones who have killed him, that he thus pushed the logic of atheism to the greatest extreme thought possible. As Os Guinness summed it up, “If God is dead and ‘no new god lies as yet in the cradle and swaddling clothed,’ there is no alternative except to face the nihilism and then from the ashes of former values and ideals to exercise the will to power which creates overman.”

For Nietzsche, beauty was no longer just a surrogate for belief, as in many others, but “simply one more product of the will to power.” To him the virtues considered beautiful in Christianity, as weakness and humility, are the greatest misfortune humanity has ever seen. The truth has become the will to power, not meakness or weakness (which is an evil), and is one of pride and strength, to be noble and outstanding and splendid as the entirely self-sufficient god-like “Overman.” Nevertheless, with this idea he peculiarly seems to come full circle with claiming to have discovered truths (out of his nihilism) not just invented them, albeit they are his truths to replace all Christian truths but objectifiable ones all the

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7 Ludwig von Mises, Human Action: a Treatise on Economics (San Francisco: Fox and Wilkes in cooperation with The Foundation for Economic Education, 1963), p. 74. This is the problem with all theories that relativize human efforts to find and objectify types and truth; that is, they also relativize themselves: “Marxian polylogism asserts that the logical structure of the mind is different with the members of various social classes. Racial polylogism differs from Marxian polylogism only in so far as it ascribes to each race a peculiar logical structure of mind and maintains that all members of a definite race, no matter what their class affiliation may be, are endowed with this peculiar logical structure” (ibid, p. 75). In reality, these subjectivizing notions have never, and can never, be established, since they are indeed self-refuting. If it is true that classes and races display different logical structures of mind, then all efforts to engage in a “disinterested search for truth” or “beauty” are disqualified, including the Marxian conclusions that there are such polylogisms!
same. Despite his efforts to put forward art as a kind of new religious transformation brought about by this will to power, the question remains whether art as traditionally envisioned is still even possible in Nietzsche’s view of the universe. Indeed, since his vision anticipates a violence against the universe by the self-satisfied and superior new man he hopes to create, it would seem he creates only in order to destroy. His new Dionysus becomes the human god of madness and religious ecstasy, who must embody the uninhibited “will to power” as the only means of overcoming the nihilism of his “God is dead.” Humanity must become its own god of brute independence and will to power to overcome the God of humility and love found in the Judeo-Christian faith of the Bible. In this case, we must conclude that evil becomes good, and what has been characterized as beautiful in Judeo-Christian tradition is now seen as the ugly, and even as evil. Has not this honest and logically consistent philosopher upended all hope of ever discovering what is good, true, and beautiful in God’s universe? If he has not actually succeeded in anything so radical as that, then can we still consider the questions of what is beautiful, true, and good? Ugly and evil? And, can we consider them in our creative works?

Nevertheless, can we define anything apart from that which constitutes it, apart from its source and origin? If God alone is the source of life, truth, love, and beauty, then he is of necessity the sole criteria for defining those same things. Yet, if God is not the sole originator and source of all things, then there are absolutely no criteria available to give us definitions of anything. Surely, we can discuss water without knowing which river or spring it flows from, but can we break it down into its respective truths of how it came to be, that it is rather than that it is not, who made it, how does it hold together integrally, how is it to be understood in relation to all other things, how all things are somehow contingent and dependent on it as the necessary substance for life to exist? The same can be asked of all air, matter, every molecule and atom and component in our space-time universe. That it is, that is the big question. That is the question. To be or not to be is not the question. Rather, that we are, that is the question. “Why is there something rather than nothing?” is a beautiful question. That we are is a true statement, and that is what makes it beautiful. Unless, of course, if we intend to deny that we are, as the flat-earthers deny our round globe, we will be kin to the conspiracy folks who would have us believe that this life is but a chimera, an illusion, a charade, that really is not. That this life is but a slight-of-hand or trick of aliens, or that we are but a dream, and of course the moon-landing was staged by the U.S. government. Then, perhaps I am not writing this sentence, that everything including me, my pen (keyboard actually), are not. They do not exist. Ugliness, in this case, would be most fully epitomized, for such a view requires belief in absolute absurdity, illogic, a total denial, a nihilist belief in nothing, or nothingness. Such a self-refuting notion is ugly because it requires something – or someone – to affirm nothing, and that this is all that is! It is ugly since it asks us to deny what is, to affirm it to be nothing. But to be is something, and one who is cannot not be, and thus cannot deny one’s existence, nor affirm nothing, while at the same time existing.

Beauty must be a good to be something worthy of our consideration. Indeed, we must begin with an agreement that in the very least there must be categories of good and evil, regardless of whether we agree on what is good or evil, right or wrong, true or false, beautiful or ugly. Otherwise, we cannot ever say anything at all about God, the universe, creation, or humanity in relation to our definitions of those categories. This is not to say we can agree on those definitions, but without agreement that there are such things, then we cannot even have a discussion or a real thought about them. This is to say, that we must agree that if A cannot be non-A (the law of non-contradiction), we cannot say that A is non-A without absolutely refuting oneself. That is, if there is no “law of non-contradiction,” if nothing true and good can be said about anything, then there is an end to all discourse, discovery, discernment, and differentiation of the good, the true, and the beautiful. The result of nihilistic denials of differentiation, as in the law of non-contradiction, is exemplified in concepts like those found in the movie, “The Purge,” in which all bets are off and everyone can do as they like for one day without any moral or legal
The beauty

ramifications. Ironically, and bitterly, is the idea that to vent all violence and hateful aggression in people’s hearts will push the crime rate lower in the following year, since all that immorality and evil violence will be vented. Yet, immorality and evil vented without check will not produce non-violence nor shalom; violence does not beget non-violence, nor does evil beget the good and the beautiful. Beauty cannot originate in the ugliness of deceit or hatred or evil and violence. Beauty is found in God alone, its originator, the source of all that is good, true, and beautiful. That means we do have a context to determine what is good, true, and beautiful, and by contrast identify and define their contraries.

II. Beauty, God, and Ugliness

When discussing aesthetics, and questions of the good, the beautiful and the true, we must have a coherent theology of the beauty of the Lord our God. A theology of beauty must logically begin with the beauty of God. Yet, the beauty of God is beyond our measuring and depicting in words. Even so, his glory is manifested in what he has made, and it gives us glimpses of his infinite and gloriously beautiful person. God’s glory revealed in his creatures and creation speaks of his magnificence, and as all human words it falls short of fully capturing our meaning. This is a subject not often addressed, because we rightly shy away from any pictorial presentations of God in his essence. Indeed, the latter would be impossible. We can, nevertheless, find considerable scriptural warrant for seeking to know the glory of the Lord revealed, which is the magnificence of his essence manifested in his creation revealed to the ancient prophets.

But what is glory?

- God’s glory could be said to be the [holy-separate] sinless perfections (magnificence) of God’s essential being that consists of all his perfect attributes.

And, what is holiness?

- God’s holiness can be considered as the [holy-separate] sinless perfections (purity) of the attributes of God’s glory (his essential being). Yet, this should not be taken to suggest any separation of God’s attributes from his essence.

Defined in this way, we can conclude that glory and holiness are most beautiful, since they denote God as gloriously and perfectly good in every possible sense, and therefore God is inexhaustibly beautiful in all of his perfections. The tautology is a deduction, from

- If there is a Creator God who is infinite and eternal, who is all glorious in his being and holy in all his perfections,
- then this God must be beautiful beyond all measure and imagining (though we are not speaking of physical attributes, even so, if we were to behold God in his glory we could never see anything more beautiful).

The conclusion to this sentiment is,

- therefore, truth is one example of what is beautiful, since God in his perfections is true and therefore all that he creates reflects the truth. All the same, beauty is not the truth (they are not

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10 As Wayne Grudem expresses it, “This attribute, beauty, is defined in a positive way to show that God actually does possess all desirable qualities: ‘perfection’ means that God doesn’t lack anything desirable; ‘beauty’ means that God has everything desirable” (Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, InterVarsity Press], 1994, p. 219).

11 We might also add here that beauty is not just an attribute of God, as Lindsey states it in discussing Jonathan Edward’s theology of the beauty of God: “... beauty is not merely an attribute of God but is that by which God is primarily distinguished as God. In addition to being the distinguishing perfection of God, beauty is the perfection of all God’s natural and moral perfections” (F. Duane Lindsey, “Essays Toward a Theology of Beauty: Part I: God is Beautiful,” Bibliotheca Sacra, April 1974, p. 127).
to be equated, even though we can say that the truth is beautiful, and that the beautiful is beautiful because it truthfully reflects and reveals the glorious and infinitely beauteous Creator;

- therefore also, integrity is beautiful: honesty, faithfulness, truthfulness, kindness, compassion/love, righteousness, holiness, generosity, and yes creativity, and all the virtues are beautiful when they truthfully reflect the Creator God;
- and therefore the beauty of the Lord correlates with the holiness of the Lord, his excellences and loveliness:

> “His goodness renders him beautiful, and his beauty renders him lovely; both are linked together (Zech 9:17): ‘How great is his goodness! And how great is his beauty!’”

> “For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent; and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation, is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fulness of brightness and glory.”

> “. . . God is beautiful in the eternal reality of his triune being, and God is beautiful in the unique reality of his incarnate being.”

But what is evil and ugliness?

Since God is perfect in all of his glorious being and sinless attributes, then departure from such a person, in rejection of his beautiful integrity and truthfulness, will lead to characteristics unlike his perfections. As I heard someone astutely say, to become unlike God leads us to dislike God. The consequence of human sin (Gen 3) brought harm to the harmony of creation, and in large part because it was a rejection of integral truth for a belief in lies. Therefore, this loss of harmony and unity is ugly because it produces discord, disharmony, and terrible brokenness. This brokenness includes the moral, spiritual, and the physical. Brokenness in our relation to God the Creator, in our relations to other humans and to the creation. Brokenness, especially within ourselves, characterizes all humans who are born in imperfection. I have yet to meet a person who claims to be without imperfections, though there are plenty of people who will quibble over words like sin, and who do not want to consider themselves sinners. Sin suggests guilt against someone, and for those who deny God they do not want to be accountable to someone they do not believe in. All-the-same, regardless of what words we use, we are a broken and wounded people, each of us, and have broken and wounded others and this creation in untold ways. As sinners, we are a “glorious ruin” (Francis Schaeffer’s term). That is, we are beautiful, but a wounded and broken beauty.

This I hope we can all agree is an example of what is ugly, as well as the following:

- Deceit is ugly because it is untruth that misleads.
- Bribes are ugly because they are dishonest and distort the truth.
- Fraud is ugly because it deceptively takes from others what is undeserved.
- False credentials are ugly because they claim credit for oneself that is unearned.

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12 This is in strong contrast to the Romantic notion found wherever beauty is construed as truth: “I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of imagination - What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth - whether it existed before or not - for I have the same idea of all our passions as of love: they are all, in their sublime, creative essence of beauty” (John Keats letter to Benjamin Bailey, November 22nd, 1817, in Keats’s Poetry and Prose, ed. By Jeffrey N Cox,[New York: WW Norton & Company, p. 102).  
• Slander is ugly because it untruthfully does real unjust harm to others who are innocent.
• Theft is ugly because it falsely takes gain without honest labor and thus lacks honor.
• Hate is ugly because it rejects the fundamental character of God who is love.
• Evil is ugly because it inverts the beauteous integrity of God who is perfect in glory and holiness.

I hope we can agree on these evils as truly lacking in beauty, are false and ugly, whether or not you acknowledge God at all, and even if you deny that he is the originator of all truth, goodness, and beauty. All-the-same, without an infinite and all-creative God who is glorious and perfectly beautiful in all attributes and characteristics, and who is the backdrop that enables us to have true definitions, then there is no real context to differentiate beauty and ugliness, good and evil, right and wrong, as reflected in human words, thoughts, and actions.\textsuperscript{17}

True beauty is honorable, faithful, truthful, and just, since what is good in God’s estimation is beautiful. All of the vices of sin create discord and disrespect for God, others, and the creation. It is thus dishonorable to treat God, others, and the creation untruthfully. That is, to live according to what is false is to live an ugly life, one unchecked by the holiness and beauty of the Lord. Contrarily, when anyone or anything reflects God’s glory in integrity, there is a revelation of God’s beauty. In this way, truth, beauty, and goodness can never be separated.

\begin{quote}
“Alongside its partners, goodness and truth, beauty is a signpost of God’s glory and, rightly perceived, this glory is so great that neither the brokenness of this world nor our false piety can block its rays from bursting forth.”\textsuperscript{18}
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“The beauty of our lives is so important to Christ that his purpose now is to sanctify the entire church ‘that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish’ (Eph 5:27). Thus, we individually and corporately reflect God’s beauty in every way in which we exhibit his character. When we reflect his character, he delights in us and finds us beautiful in his sight.”\textsuperscript{19}
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“We are most human when love is our motive. It is the same with creativity. God created us through the universe’s most creative and intimate act. We are the result of the creative act of a creative God. He designed us in his own image; he designed us with both intellect and imagination; he designed us with both reason and passion; he designed us to dream, to risk, and to create.”\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

The creation itself is mostly beautiful, and often beyond comprehension and adequate words to describe and discuss it. Humans and animate and inanimate creation reveal the glory of God and thus convey his beauty. We all have a memory of sorts, as in most all world-mythologies and religions, as if we long for something that was good, and beautiful, and desirable – so good – but now out of reach, that we may mistake the memory for the reality, as C.S. Lewis states it:

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\textsuperscript{17} Beauty is in this way not to be construed as strictly a \textit{subjective value}, as in “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” since as I am defining beauty here it is an \textit{absolute value} in so far as it is rooted in the person and character of God, even though it has many and diverse \textit{subjective expressions} as it is revealed in God’s world as people \textit{experience} that beauty.
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\textsuperscript{19} Grudem, \textit{Systematic Theology}, p. 220.
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\textsuperscript{20} Erwin Raphael McManus, \textit{The Artisan Soul: Crafting Your Life into a Work of Art} (San Francisco: HarperOne), 2014, pp.11-12.
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Most people frequently marvel at the beauty of the world, and often so much so that they even come to revere and worship it as god in various ways. Nevertheless, the broken world of creation is a fickle god, and it does not leave the worshipper satisfied, since indeed many things in the creation can destroy the worshipper. Since earthly beauty is temporary, a fading flower (Isa 28:1; 40:6-8), it cannot possibly be an ultimate reference point, nor the source of our integration. For example, Ezekiel condemns those in Jerusalem who trusted in their beauty and renown (Ezek 16). Certainly no finite creature can find an infinite reference point of integration and integrity in what is finite. Further brokenness is the only possible fruit of something finite seeking its integration in what is finite. Only God who is infinite is perfectly suitable for us as finite creatures to find our integration. And this is why it is another example of ugliness when broken people make broken things (that might even appear beautiful) out of a broken creation and bow down to worship them, and especially so when they make broken idols that mostly resemble the worshippers themselves. This is to live according to something altogether false, and lacking in integrity, and this is why it is not beautiful but a great evil. This kind of loss of integrity is an evil that is ugly, and when the worshipper becomes increasingly like the ugly finite thing being worshipped, and beauty and integrity are altogether lost.

We have not yet addressed the fact that perhaps beauty is not the best word here in this discussion, for it has had feminine connotations in English, as well as stress on strictly physical and external features (“handsome” has been used historically for males). Beauty is not a matter of appearance, as in petty surface aspects (especially not something like “pretty”). Rather, the idea as rooted in the Creator is of infinite grandeur, incomparable magnificence, intrinsic nobility, everlasting splendor, resplendent beyond measure, and boundless munificence of perfections. We must be careful in such a definition of beauty in this world not to fall into the classical notions of beauty that are represented in idealized forms absent of any indications of decay or death or the fall. In this Neo-Platonic idea of Ideal Forms, and in Aristotle’s notion of beauty as forms that are embodied in the physical world in proportion and harmony, the objective is to represent the transcendent perfections, not the brokenness of the world. All-the-same, in a biblical presentation of beauty, that beauty is both internal and external. And where

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21 C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, Harper Collins, 2001, pp. 135, 136-137. Similarly, Lewis famously wrote, “It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased” (The Weight of Glory, and Other Addresses, p. ). Lewis’s insight has great value, but it lacks in two regards: he does not make it clear that drink and sex in themselves are not bad, but a gift from God, when he could have also said more clearly that removing God’s good gifts from their proper context are far worse than just being too easily pleased, they can be death to us. Grudem’s comments seem to me more balanced here: “Nevertheless, there is value in affirming this positive aspect of God’s possession of everything that is desirable. It reminds us all that our good and righteous desires, all of the desires that really ought to be in us or any other creature, find their ultimate fulfillment in God and in no one else” (Systematic Theology, p. 219).

22 See John Walford, “The Case for a Broken Beauty,” in The Beauty of God, Trier, Husbands, and Lundin, pp. 87-89. Also, see Bruce Herman, “Wounds and Beauty,” ibid., pp. 110-120.
the internal reflects the integrity of God and the external is a faithful representation of that integrity, there must also be brokenness presented because a truthful representation can only be properly beautiful when it is truthful. A beautiful picture, as a beautiful story, should encompass the full range of human experience, the joy and sorrow, suffering and pain, and even ugliness, can be truthfully and thus beautifully presented in works of art. Such presentations are not beautiful because they show the brokenness for the sake of showing brokenness, but in order to convey the deep meaningfulness of life and the struggle to be human and to live integrally in a world filled with exquisite delights often accompanied by great griefs and loss and failure.

“All forms of beauty touch our desire for wholeness, yet a broken beauty offers something different. A broken beauty is not only true to the human condition, but it can embody the essence of the gospel of redemption, or at very least, manifest its fruits.”

The story of beauty is that of God sovereignly bringing redemption to his broken people and world, and the stories of redemption are not just all perfection of form and order, but rather a seemingly haphazard path of going from darkness into light, from damnation to deliverance. Thus beauty is shown because of the transfiguration of the deformed character and lives of broken people. This may also explain why at the very heart of all human life, stories, cultures, and religions is a deep memory of something lost that is only matched in intensity by a pervasive longing for the beautiful and redemption; and even when that longing is utterly distorted by our brokenness, since this especially reflects a residual sliver of hope to find that beauty in redemption, deliverance, the good and true winning despite all odds. Beauty in this sense must include this vital element of hope, true hope, in the eventual restoration of God’s creation. Our longing for beauty is both retrospective, yearning to return to Eden, but in terms of redemption it is mostly prospective, looking in faith to the day of our restoration. We do not seek a lost Paradise but await the coming Paradise of God in a renewed creation. As Wolters states it, “We must choose restoration rather than repristination.”

“. . . a broken beauty can be a redemptive beauty, which acknowledges suffering while preserving hope.”

Without hope, the story of a disfigured world of broken and misaligned people would be one of nihilism. There is no beauty in nihilism, because there is no truth in that rendition of the story. If the evil wins in the end, if wicked character is not transformed into a righteous one, and love fails to conquer hatred, if the liar never repents to tell the truth, then the story only ends in an ugly tragedy. Thankfully, this is not the final or true story of reality, even if it is the story of some in the larger story. The whole story is the one we tell of the gospel: God sovereignly purposes in creating and redeeming his creation, and it is uniquely and inexpressibly beautiful. As Paul declares, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Rom 10:15). In response, we must worship and praise God that the whole story is one of a divinely orchestrated romance of redemption that ends with a great Wedding Feast of rejoicing at having finally by his great mercy and grace become a people that reflect God’s glorious and beauteous integrity in Christ. Because all creation is in God’s presence, we must see that truth, beauty, and goodness can never be separated within creation or in the process of redemption. Beauty and virtue, becoming good and walking in truth is the essence of truly restored integrity, with the image of God fully regenerated, and is requisite to dwell in his everlasting holy and glorious presence in the new creation. In all of this,

23 As so often in modern media and culture, there is both a fascination with, and relishing in, the grotesque, horrible, and transgressive.
our aesthetic response is part of our praise, for we delight to create and to enjoy creation as included fully in the redemptive work of God; we also can take immense joy in the aesthetic creations of others, since all things reveal the glory of God himself!

“Now if God is most beautiful and in fact the well-spring of all other beauty, then any beautiful objects we apprehend in nature or among the arts are just so many reminders of God. In this way, then, aesthetic experiences of all kinds will improve one’s knowledge of God and thus are a direct boon to one’s epistemic well-being.”

III. Beauty and Love in Human Relations

But what is love? God is love, but love is not God. Many films today seem to treat romantic love as God, as that which completes and fills up and completes both the lover and beloved; they also show the search for romantic love as the highest religious-like experience one could hope for. Yes, romantic love is beautiful, since love itself is rooted in the character of God and characterizes everything about God, but such love is no more able to sufficiently supplant, or replace, God himself than any of his other gifts and virtues he shares with us. To remove the giver of love, the giver of virtue, the giver of shalom, from his gifts is to remove the river from the spring. Without the love of God, all romantic love is like a kind of theft that never satisfies: stolen fruit is sweet, but . . .

Prov 20:17 Food [bread] gained by fraud tastes sweet, but one ends up with a mouth full of gravel.
Prov 9:17 Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!
18 But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead.

Francis Schaeffer often made the point in his works that the word love has so lost any clear meaning today, that he felt it necessary to qualify it as beauty in human relations. That is, beautiful human relations can only be called loving if they exhibit the virtues of true relational beauty. It is not enough to claim love and truth, but lack the reality of either. “Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful[trustworthy] man who can find?” (Prov 20:6). After Schaffer witnessed real ugliness in the relations of his associates during a stage of his life when he was involved in a painful and costly seminary and denominational conflict, he went through a deep soul-searching experience, pacing many weeks in the loft of a Swiss chalet, and walking in the Alps, trying to determine if what he believed was real. If people professing faith and claiming to know the truth could be so mean and unkind and ugly in their relationships, in how they treated one another, he could not make sense of what he believed. He could not understand how people who have the beautiful gospel of Jesus could be so harsh and unloving towards one another, untruthful, and more grasping at power and prestige than at honoring Christ with beauty of character. Thankfully, he came out on the other side of his dark night, and the great ministry of Labri was born on that same mountain. In sum, beauty, truth, and goodness can never be separated in God’s order, and especially in his works of redemption in us and his creation.

To have the truth without love is as unworthy, and ugly, as having love without the truth.
To have a truly beautiful witness of the glory of God in Christ, our love for one another (in our beautiful relations) is our most crucial testimony to the truth we claim to love.

IV. Beauty and Beautiful in the Bible

Select biblical words for beauty or related to beauty:

Old Testament

Select biblical texts for beauty/beautiful and related motifs

Ps 27:4 One thing I ask of the LORD,
this is what I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple.

Ps 50:2 From Zion, perfect in beauty (דֵּ蔹), God shines forth. (cf. יִסֵּד - 3636, note that God himself is not connected with this root in the OT)
Ps 71:8 My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor (יִּנְשָׁפַת) all day long.
Isa 60:7 All the flocks of Kedar will be gathered together to you, The rams of Nebaioth will minister to you; They will go up with acceptance on My altar, And I shall glorify My glorious house.
Isa 63:12 Who caused His glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, Who divided the waters before them to make for Himself an everlasting name, (Isa 63:12 NAS)
Isa 63:14 As the cattle which go down into the valley, The Spirit of the LORD gave them rest. So didst Thou lead Thy people, To make for Thyself a glorious name.
Ps 96:6 Splendor and majesty are before Him, Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.
Ps 84:1 How lovely (מִמְּדָה) is your dwelling place,
O LORD Almighty! (לְדָי - lovely, beloved)

Cf. Is 5:1 I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.

Isa 4:2 In that day the Branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel.
Isa 28:5 In that day the LORD Almighty
will be a glorious crown,
a beautiful wreath
for the remnant of his people.
Isa 61:3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
The beauty

13

P a g e

The oil of gladness
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendor.
Jer 11:16 The LORD called you a thriving olive tree
with fruit beautiful in form.
But with the roar of a mighty storm
he will set it on fire,
and its branches will be broken.
Ezek 16:14 And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty,
because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign LORD.
Gen 6:2 the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose.  


Gen 12:11 As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are.
Gen 12:14 When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman.
Gen 24:16 The girl was very beautiful, a virgin; no man had ever lain with her. She went down to the spring, filled her jar and came up again.
Gen 26:7 When the men of that place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," because he was afraid to say, "She is my wife." He thought, "The men of this place might kill me on account of Rebekah, because she is beautiful."
Gen 29:17 Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form, and beautiful.
Gen 49:21 "Naphtali is a doe set free that bears beautiful fawns."
Num 24:5 How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob,
your dwelling places, O Israel!
Deut 21:11 if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife.
Josh 7:21 When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”
1 Sam 25:3 His name was Nabal and his wife’s name was Abigail. She was an intelligent and beautiful woman, but her husband, a Calebite, was surly and mean in his dealings.
2 Sam 11:2 One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful.
2 Sam 13:1 In the course of time, Amnon son of David fell in love with Tamar, the beautiful sister of Absalom son of David.
2 Sam 14:27 Three sons and a daughter were born to Absalom. The daughter’s name was Tamar, and she became a beautiful woman.
1 Ki 1:3 Then they searched throughout Israel for a beautiful girl and found Abishag, a Shunammite, and brought her to the king.
1 Kings 1:4 The girl was very beautiful; she took care of the king and waited on him, but the king had no intimate relations with her.
Esther 1:11 to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.
Esther 2:2 Then the king’s personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king.
Esther 2:3 Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king’s eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them.

[1] Or delicate
[1] Or free; / he utters beautiful words
[1] Hebrew Shinar
[1] That is, about 5 pounds (about 2.3 kilograms)
[1] That is, about 1 ¼ pounds (about 0.6 kilogram)
Esther 2:9 The girl pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king’s palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem.

Esther 2:12 Before a girl’s turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics.

Job 38:31 “Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades?
Can you loose the cords of Orion?
Job 42:15 Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job’s daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers.

Ps 27:4 One thing I ask of the LORD,
this is what I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple.

Ps 37:20 But the wicked will perish:
The LORD’s enemies will be like the beauty of the fields,
they will vanish—vanish like smoke.

Ps 45:11 The king is enthralled by your beauty;
honor him, for he is your lord.

Ps 48:2 It is beautiful in its loftiness,
the joy of the whole earth.
Like the utmost heights of Zaphon a is Mount Zion,
the b city of the Great King.

Ps 50:2 From Zion, perfect in beauty,
God shines forth.

Prov 6:25 Do not lust in your heart after her beauty
or let her captivate you with her eyes,

Prov 11:22 Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout
is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.

Prov 24:4 through knowledge its rooms are filled
with rare and beautiful treasures.

Prov 31:30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

Eccl 3:11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

S of S 1:8 f you do not know, most beautiful of women,
follow the tracks of the sheep
and graze your young goats
by the tents of the shepherds.

S of S 1:10 Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings,
your neck with strings of jewels.

S of S 1:15 How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes are doves.

S of S 2:10 My lover spoke and said to me,
“Arise, my darling,
my beautiful one, and come with me.

S of S 2:13 The fig tree forms its early fruit;
the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.
Arise, come, my darling;
my beautiful one, come with me.

S of S 4:1 How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!

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a Or the twinkling; or the chains of the
b Zaphon can refer to a sacred mountain or the direction north.

© Or earth, / Mount Zion, on the northern side / of the
Your eyes behind your veil are doves.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
descending from Mount Gilead.

S of S 4:7 All beautiful you are, my darling;
there is no flaw in you.

S of S 5:9 How is your beloved better than others,
most beautiful of women?
How is your beloved better than others,
that you charge us so?

S of S 6:1 Where has your lover gone,
most beautiful of women?
Which way did your lover turn,
that we may look for him with you?

S of S 6:4 You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah,
lovely as Jerusalem,
majestic as troops with banners.

S of S 7:1 How beautiful your sandaled feet,
O prince’s daughter!
Your graceful legs are like jewels,
the work of a craftsman’s hands.

S of S 7:6 How beautiful you are and how pleasing,
O love, with your delights!

Isa 3:24 Instead of fragrance there will be a stench;
instead of a sash, a rope;
instead of well-dressed hair, baldness;
instead of fine clothing, sackcloth;
instead of beauty, branding.

Isa 4:2 In that day the Branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel.

Isa 28:1 Woe to that wreath, the pride of Ephraim’s drunkards,
to the fading flower, his glorious beauty,
set on the head of a fertile valley—
to that city, the pride of those laid low by wine!

Isa 28:4 That fading flower, his glorious beauty,
set on the head of a fertile valley,
will be like a fig ripe before harvest—
as soon as someone sees it and takes it in his hand,
he swallows it.

Isa 28:5 In that day the LORD Almighty
will be a glorious crown,
a beautiful wreath
for the remnant of his people.

Isa 33:17 Your eyes will see the king in his beauty
and view a land that stretches afar.

Isa 52:7 How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”

Isa 53:2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

Isa 61:3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendor.

Jer 3:19 "I myself said,
"How gladly would I treat you like sons
and give you a desirable land,
the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.'
I thought you would call me ‘Father’
and not turn away from following me.
Jer 6:21 I will destroy the Daughter of Zion,
so beautiful and delicate.

Jer 11:16 The LORD called you a thriving olive tree
with fruit beautiful in form.
But with the roar of a mighty storm
he will set it on fire,
and its branches will be broken.

Jer 46:20 Egypt is a beautiful heifer,
but a gadfly is coming
gainst her from the north.
Lam 2:15 All who pass your way
clap their hands at you;
they scoff and shake their heads
at the Daughter of Jerusalem:
"Is this the city that was called
the perfection of beauty,
the joy of the whole earth?"

Ezek 7:20 They were proud of their beautiful jewelry and used it to make their detestable idols and vile images. Therefore I will turn these into an unclean thing for them.

Ezek 16:7 I made you grow like a plant of the field. You grew up and developed and became the most beautiful of jewels. Your breasts were formed and your hair grew, you who were naked and bare.

Ezek 16:12 and I put a ring on your nose, earrings on your ears and a beautiful crown on your head.

Ezek 16:13 So you were adorned with gold and silver; your clothes were of fine linen and costly fabric and embroidered cloth. Your food was fine flour, honey and olive oil. You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen.

Ezek 16:14 And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign LORD.

Ezek 16:15 But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his.

Ezek 16:25 At the head of every street you built your lofty shrines and degraded your beauty, offering your body with increasing promiscuity to anyone who passed by.

Ezek 20:6 On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of Egypt into a land I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands.

Ezek 20:15 Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would not bring them into the land I had given them—a land flowing with milk and honey, most beautiful of all lands—

Ezek 23:42 "The noise of a carefree crowd was around her; Sabeans were brought from the desert along with men from the rabble, and they put bracelets on the arms of the woman and her sister and beautiful crowns on their heads.

Ezek 27:3 Say to Tyre, situated at the gateway to the sea, merchant of peoples on many coasts, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"You say, O Tyre,
"I am perfect in beauty."

Ezek 27:4 Your domain was on the high seas;

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b Or became mature
d Most Hebrew manuscripts; one Hebrew manuscript (see some Septuagint manuscripts) by. Such a thing should not happen
f Or drunkards
your builders brought your beauty to perfection.

Ezek 27:11 Men of Arvad and Helech
manned your walls on every side;
men of Gammad
were in your towers.
They hung their shields around your walls;
they brought your beauty to perfection.

Ezek 27:24 In your marketplace they traded with you beautiful garments, blue fabric, embroidered work and multicolored rugs with cords twisted and tightly knotted.

Ezek 28:7 I am going to bring foreigners against you,
the most ruthless of nations;
they will draw their swords against your beauty and wisdom
and pierce your shining splendor.

Ezek 28:12 “Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

‘You were the model of perfection,
full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.

Ezek 28:17 Your heart became proud
on account of your beauty,
and you corrupted your wisdom
because of your splendor.
So I threw you to the earth;
I made a spectacle of you before kings.

Ezek 31:3 Consider Assyria, once a cedar in Lebanon,
with beautiful branches overshadowing the forest;
it towered on high,
its top above the thick foliage.

Ezek 31:7 It was majestic in beauty,
with its spreading boughs,
for its roots went down
to abundant waters.

Ezek 31:8 The cedars in the garden of God
could not rival it,
nor could the pine trees
equal its boughs,
nor could the plane trees
compare with its branches—
no tree in the garden of God
could match its beauty.

Ezek 31:9 I made it beautiful
with abundant branches,
the envy of all the trees of Eden
in the garden of God.

Ezek 33:32 Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.

Dan 4:12 Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the beasts of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.

Dan 4:21 with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air—
Dan 8:9 Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land.

Dan 11:16 The invader will do as he pleases; no one will be able to stand against him. He will establish himself in the Beautiful Land and will have the power to destroy it.

Dan 11:41 He will also invade the Beautiful Land. Many countries will fall, but Edom, Moab and the leaders of Ammon will be delivered from his hand.
Dan 11:45 He will pitch his royal tents between the seas at the holy mountain. Yet he will come to his end, and no one will help him.

Zech 9:17 How attractive and beautiful they will be!

Grain will make the young men thrive,
and new wine the young women.

Mtt 23:27 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean.

Mtt 26:10 Aware of this, Jesus said to them, “Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.

Mk 14:6 “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.

Lu 21:5 Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said,

Acts 3:2 Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts.

Acts 3:10 they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Rom 10:15 And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

Ja 1:11 For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

1 Pet 3:3 Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes.

1 Pet 3:4 Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.

1 Pet 3:5 For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands,

V. Select Bibliography


----- Or the sea and

----- Isaiah 52:7
Why Do We Hunger For Beauty?
Jim Croegaert, ©1989 Meadowgreen Music Co./Heart of the Matter Music
Dark are the branches reaching for light
High is the path of the hawk in its flight
Turning and gliding greeting the night
Why do we hunger for beauty?
Moon hanging lonely there in the sky
Looking so holy; a host held up high
Off in the distance train going by
Why does it move us cause us to sigh
Why do we hunger for beauty?
Frost on the window never the same
So many patterns fit in the frame
Captured in motion frozen in flame
And in the patterns is there a Name
Why do we hunger for beauty?
Why do we hunger for beauty?

Beauty is found in God its source:
- Biblical revelation
- The gospel of redemption
- Romantic love
- Agape love
- Familial love
- All creation

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