

ON DWELLING IN THE BEAUTY, WISDOM, AND GOODNESS OF GOD

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The tradition often admonishes us not to try to know God, either because we simply can't, or because it is dangerous for us. The fathers of the Eastern church were especially adamant about this, while the Western fathers, most notably St. Augustine, craved to know God in order to love him better. How could he love what he did not know he constantly asked himself (and us by extension)?

Scripture gives us tantalizing hints about the qualities of God that people often desire to catch hold of and make their own in order to love God the more. Here are three such qualities, brought to our attention by Scripture. I offer them in canonical order.

Vignette 1: Moses, you recall, was the one with whom God spoke face to face as with a friend. A couple of their conversations were pretty intense. In Exodus chapter 32, Moses has just come down from Sinai to find the Israelites worshipping the Egyptian calf-god and righteously smashes the tablets. After he calms down, he goes back to God to try to atone for the sins of the people, but God is really miffed, too, and not interested. He is so angry that he wants to send them into the land of promise without him, for he was afraid that the power of his anger would destroy them along the way. God was in a tizzy; he needed more time out. He didn't know what to do with his stiff-necked people.

Well, Moses waited a little while longer—he was able to calm down—and tried to approach God again, this time a little further away from where the people were camped, for he knew that they could not continue in the desert unless God was in their midst. Relying on his personal friendship with God, Moses proposes a plan to him. Moses, so to speak, agreed to stand surety for the people if God would go with both him and the people together. God, at first, had wanted to go just with Moses, but he said, nothing doing. He would not budge unless God accompanied both him

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and the people. Finally, because God loved Moses, he relented of his anger, agreed and said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "YHVH" and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and have mercy on whom I will be merciful."

Vignette 2: The Psalmist, in this case, the author of Psalm 27:[4,] gives another bit of insight into human desire. He writes plaintively: "I have asked one thing of God, and that I will seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all my life, and see the beauty of God and visit in his temple."

Vignette 3: At the beginning of First Corinthians, Paul plays a lot with the notion of wisdom—Sophia. Wisdom was greatly desired in the Greek world in which Paul lived, and Socrates and his student Plato spent their lives trying to help people desire it and be transformed by it. They tried to wean people away from a desire for brute power or to climb the corporate ladder and engage them instead in learning to love and desire wisdom.

Paul does not disparage the Greek love of wisdom, but he does contrast what he calls the wisdom of the world, let us call it street wisdom, with another sort of wisdom, the wisdom of the God of Israel that looks foolish to most people, but is the redeeming power of righteousness for those who recognize the wisdom of God found in Jesus Christ. With Socrates, Paul is inviting people to dedicate their lives not to their careers but to the love of wisdom, in Paul's case the wisdom of God.

It is most surely the case that the beauty, wisdom, and goodness of God are too deep for us to understand well, but try we must, else the disorder, injustice, and ugliness of reality would take us under. God is, indeed, a mystery, endlessly rich, prolific, ambiguous, alluring, at times frightening, always escaping our grasp, yet always carrying us along, provoking our desire still to understand, to see more, to experience more deeply. To recognize our shallowness, or, as the fathers put it, that we cannot fathom the divine nature, does not mean, however, that we cannot understand these traits at all, and enjoy what little we grasp.

Moses saw God's goodness, even though he knew his anger. Paul knew that the cross of Christ was the wisdom of God, even though it looked utterly ridiculous to secular eyes. The Psalmist simply craved to sit quietly and behold the divine beauty. Surely, he lived in a world in which it was hard to come by. This is all to remind us that knowing the beauty, wisdom and goodness of God is the art of knowing that we discussed yesterday. Experience is confusing, and seeing and knowing well a demanding task.

We have here then leadings that describe our God as good, beautiful, and wise. Of course, many other verses could be cited that point to God's mercy, righteousness, love, and so on. I have selected beauty, wisdom, and goodness, almost arbitrarily. They represent, but do not define traits that stimulate us to crave God, another art lost to the modern world.

ON KNOWING THE BEAUTY, WISDOM AND GOODNESS OF GOD

Although Scripture urges us to consider the beauty, wisdom, and goodness of God, the modern world had trouble attaching these traits to God. Knowing God became impossible on modern terms. The mind was thought to be taut with conceptual prowess and acumen, yet its power was limited, Kant taught, to the phenomenal realm. The noumenal world in which God dwells lies beyond the soul's grasp. For most, however, the soul must be honed by being patient of an answer, respecting the difficulty of the task, humbly

learning to attend to new data, scrutinizing data that does not fit the expected outcome, sitting quietly with loss and failure, and submitting to the material at hand. In all of these labors, the soul contributes to the production of good knowledge, even if its result remains hidden for a time.

All the while, however, the soul's training in these virtues gives it access to wisdom and beauty that it scarcely identifies at first. The patience, the respect, and the tender care, give access to precisely the noumenal or spiritual reality that Kantian rationality could not scale. The painstakingly cultivated virtues yield access to knowledge that is, in a quite deliberate way, both public and transcendent.

How is good knowledge ascertained by carefully, respectfully, patiently, and humbly both public and transcendent? The virtues allow the object being sought to emerge on its own terms, without being overpowered by an ulterior agenda imposed by the seeker. They allow things to be and take shape as themselves. As these virtues allow things to emerge of their own accord, the showing that they make is not of the seeker's invention. Rather, the findings emerge of their own accord and the seeker must account for them. Whether it be the structure of a nucleic acid chain, the engineering of a building, the character in a novel, the coherence of a schedule, or organization of an institution, the seeker is able to see a whole into which the parts fit. The pattern is pleasing. It suggests that the whole will work, each part contributing to its given end. Attention to detail pays off. The whole is enhanced by virtue of the care, deliberation, patience, and submission to the broader task. At the conclusion, the seeker can sit back, even if only briefly, and enjoy the accomplishment.

The result of careful work is public. It is shared with a designated public. Its good execution, however, bring more than personal satisfaction. To the spiritual soul, it can disclose traits of God. Here is where stillness is needed. The designer begins the spiritual journey admiring the beauty of the accomplishment, just as God finished creating the world and stopped, rested, and admired his accomplishment. If one reflects on the accomplishment, the wisdom, goodness, and beauty found there can take on a life of their own. When this happens, the aesthetic enjoyment moves beyond personal satisfaction to become independent of the self. Thus, one is not puffed up, but humbled by the beauty, wisdom and goodness that have passed through oneself.

That is, the attentive soul can extrapolate from the wisdom experienced in one context to wisdom itself that enabled it to happen. Thus, in stillness, one can see that the wisdom that she has discovered has a life of its own. "I want that," a student once said in class. It enables the one who knows it to dwell in it, to have it, to see and enjoy it. The pleasure comes in enjoying the goodness, beauty, and wisdom themselves.

In having and dwelling in the wisdom discovered, one can see that the goodness, beauty and wisdom enjoyed are not of one's own making. They are a gift of divine grace. Joy comes from having access to them, even if only fleetingly. Even if the immediacy of the goodness fades into no more than a vague impression or memory, the soul senses that it has participated in something wonderful: it has tasted happiness. The Christian spiritual traditions would say that one has glimpsed heaven, or the beauty, wisdom, and goodness of God.

Tasting heaven in this way occurs by virtue of having experienced divine beauty firsthand, yet often quite serendipitously and in pursuit of a different goal. The chemist in the

lab is not seeking to know God, but to eliminate a negative side effect of a medication. Knowing God in this sense, often catches one unaware and can turn one in a fresh direction where desire is no longer private advancement but for the beauty and wisdom that extend the scope of the soul toward heaven. God is made known without being sought, but in epiphanies of beauty, justice, goodness, and wisdom. Finally, the enjoyment gained is not private. How is it the work of divine grace?

A REMARK ON CURRENT TREATMENT OF THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Before discussing each trait separately, we should consider why we should talk about traits or qualities of God at all. In popular Christianity, for example, the doctrine of God scarcely functions at all; everything focuses on the personality or events in the life of Jesus. For its part, professional theology has turned toward talking about the trinity rather than about the unity of God, the work of God rather than the attributes or the being of God. The reasons for this, I think, are several. One is that, as I suggested yesterday, the modern world likes dynamism—movement and action. Stasis, stability has lost its appeal because it doesn't seem to go anywhere. It has no pizzazz.

For example, twenty years ago, a pair of patristic scholars teamed up to write a book rehabilitating the heretic Arius. His conviction—that the Son was a creature—sparked the formation of Nicene orthodoxy that the Son is one in being with the Father. Gregg & Groh argued that Arius was condemned because he had a dynamic view of God that was ethically motivated (“our hero!”). This challenged the preference for eternal essences that characterized the orthodoxy created by Athanasius of Alexandria, the mastermind of Nicaea.

At a twentieth anniversary celebration of the publication of the book, I asked one of its authors whether in the 1960s when they were working, the quest for change in the culture was not a factor behind their work. He agreed that it was. Change is more preferable to us than stability, or at least it then seemed, and so we have difficulty relating to theologues with inverse preferences.

Another way of putting this is that we value action. My graduate students often say that they do not like theologies that talk about being. Being has no meaning for them. They understand becoming, growth, and change. We want to move forward, not stay in place. The present is bad; the future is better (?). The economy must expand in order to stay strong. Mistaking change for improvement, we have come to value change for its own sake.

Being a contrarian, whenever a proposal is made to fix something, I always look to see what will be lost in the process. Let us return to God. Current discussion of the doctrine of God, as I mentioned, is now focused on the trinity rather than the unity of God. Wait, you say, this is an artificial division. Yes, it is, and it is sad that Christian theology has talked about these separately since the Middle Ages. The theological protocol is to discuss the doctrine of God under three heads: the divine unity, or the being of God, that includes the divine attributes; the essential or immanent Trinity, and the economic Trinity that discusses the missions or sendings of the Christ and the Spirit in the Incarnation and Pentecost. It is similarly tragic, in my judgment, that the protocol for discussing Christ is discussed separately as person and work. What began as formal conventions for ease of discussion has taken on substantive significance in both cases.

In the case of the doctrine of God, there is not much current interest in the being of God because we are saved by the death of Christ that is the action of God in the economy of salvation. If the being of God is rhetorically separated from the work of God it suggests either that the being of God does not save us or that we are saved by a God we do not know. That is, if the divine unity but not the Trinity defines God, then, since Christ saves us, the being of God does not save us. The most common suggestion being offered in response to this problem is that we ought to think of the being of God as constituted not by the unity of the attributes, but by the relationships among the three Persons or identities of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is, relationality, not traits or essence constitutes God. This shifts the nature of God from an eternal to a relational quality. In terms of our discussion here, it means that God is not constituted by being good, beautiful, and wise, but by the Father's being the Father of the Son, the Son's being the Son of the Father, and Holy Spirit's proceeding from the Father (and the Son).

One of the psychological implications of this shift would be to suggest that if God's internal relationships constitute him, we are like God in that we too are who we are by virtue of the relationships we have. Now, just as in the '60s, change was the major catchword of the day, by the 1980s, relationships had become the watchword of the day. We are caught up in, devastated by, or lifted up by our relationships. This was a time when relationships between parents and children disintegrated, marriages began crumbling at breakneck speed, and the trauma incurred in getting into and out of relationships made depression a household word.

A theological corollary of course, became fixation with one's relationship with God. Is it good enough? Is it working for me? Can I make it deeper, better? What if it is really bad, but I benightedly think it is good? If these questions bother you, it suggests that we have landed right back in the anxiety that drove Martin Luther to rebel against the religion he learned. We are drowning in worry about our relationships and how we are doing at them, since—like our bodies—they always need to be worked at to keep them in good shape.

The turn to the divine traits of beauty, wisdom, and goodness is a way of saying that it is time to come up for air from all of this, that is, to put the case psychologically. Let me put this in historical perspective. In the first millennium, that is, half of Christianity's life, the economy was not an end in itself, but a means to the sanctification of believers through their dwelling in the shareable divine attributes that include beauty, wisdom and goodness. Salvation meant being drawn into the very being of God by the story of God's life among us as told in Scripture and summed up for us in the Creed. It was precisely the longing to become as wise, good, and beautiful as God that kept seekers enthralled with God.

In the rush to lift up relationality, the stability of identity that the qualities of God offer us for our salvation is in danger of being lost. To put the case psychologically again—and I see no harm in this—unless we can be still and dwell in the house of the Lord, beholding his beauty, wisdom, and goodness all the days of our life, we will not be fit for the relationships we crave. Put theologically, unless God shares himself with us in ways that actually, literally saves us from danger and harm, salvation becomes merely an idea that we tell ourselves repeatedly to buoy ourselves up. Unless God gives himself to us our eschatological hopes will eventually become alienated from the lives we actually lead. More to the moment, unless God accomplishes the destiny he holds out to us, our praise of him

will ring hollow, even to ourselves. Put yet one last way, unless we can enjoy God in this life, our enjoyment of life itself will be incomplete.

Now, one further note is needed about divine attributes or what we may call the character of God. We need to be clear that divine characteristics are not all comparable. We can divide them into two types, unshareable and shareable. The unshareable characteristics of immutability, eternity, and perfection are not shareable with us because of the limits of our humanity; we cannot not change, for example; we are mortal. The divine characteristics that we looked at in Scripture are shareable. Knowing and internalizing the beauty, wisdom, and goodness of God sanctify us and make us beautiful.

DWELLING IN DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

With this much said, we may discuss the divine characteristics to which Scripture points. I suspect that many of you noted that I selected three traits. Three is, after all, the magic number. I am not; repeat **not** implying that each trait is to be associated with one of the three persons of the Trinity. The doctrine teaches that divine characteristics characterize all of God. The traits we consider here, beauty, wisdom, and goodness are predicated of all the divine persons equally.

The more serious issue for us to ask what it says about us and about God to suggest that we can be graced with divine characteristics. I have argued that knowing God is not discontinuous from knowing other things. Rather, beginning by knowing well, we may eventually experience the beauty or goodness of what we are discerning apart from the context in which we discovered it, and see it standing alone in testimony to beauty or goodness itself. In such moments, we delight and enjoy beauty or goodness for their own sake, and not because they add anything to us in any way. This is pure joy. If we believe Scripture, we may dare to say that we have tasted heaven. We have been lifted up out of ourselves and graced with spiritual truth that we Christians understand to be God.

Yet, even as we enjoy them for themselves these divine characteristics are benefiting us, expanding us by the experience of having them. Knowing them cannot but shape us, and that reshaping in turn affects what and how we know. It increases our acumen and ability to attend to what we experience, so that we can taste more of God. That is, experiencing the beauty of God trains us to know him better. It is knowledge that carries us up into itself or if you prefer, sinks itself into us ever more deeply. In this way, the godly traits come to indwell us, purify us, invigorate us, and enable us to enjoy life at a higher or deeper level. That is, knowledge of God works on us until it becomes us.

Perhaps the discussion is a bit abstract at this point, and some examples will help. Now, recall that yesterday we warned that knowing God well is hard work. That is, it is emotionally hard. The vignettes of Moses and of Paul that we began with took place in painful situations. Psalm 27 is about a man surrounded by enemies and filled with fear that offers shouts of joy and sings songs to God in whom he takes shelter. Knowing the beauty, wisdom, and goodness of God is not easy. We must train like athletes or musicians to do it well. Let us take one divine trait at a time.

ON DIVINE BEAUTY

Several years ago, I was traveling to a theological lecture in New York City. I had to

take a commuter train and two subways. I switched trains underground at Macy's 34th Street. As I passed by Macy's windows, they were covered with big blow-ups of Godiva chocolates. Just across from the display was a large newspaper kiosk that also sold candy and sundries. As I looked, I began to see small children standing at each of the steel girders holding up the station. As I looked around, I saw an older child, perhaps 11 or 12 watching the younger ones. A mother with a baby stroller sat on the steps leading up to the street. I knew the children were from the Martinique, the infamous welfare hotel also above our heads. I asked the older child his name. Brent, he said. He had a scar across his jaw line and was already missing several teeth. "What are you doing?" I asked. "We are begging money to buy candy, motioning toward the kiosk."

Here I was outside of Macy's, on my way to a theology lecture by an important theologian, and I was stopped by the beauty of God flowing out from this battered child taking care of littler ones. Brent was utterly unaware of this of course. In an instant, the experience softened me, expanding my grasp of God, and beauty, and Christ. The divine beauty that I experienced that day has dwelt in me ever since. It is a permanent gift. I had glimpsed the divine beauty.

ON DIVINE WISDOM

The juvenile murderer I mentioned earlier in this talk is my foster-son. When my family was sojourning with the Quakers, we met a child of the street who had been taken in by a white middle-class family of the Meeting when he was six years old. He was eleven at the time. Shortly after we met him, his surrogate father died of cancer.

The boy, the product of stereotypical poverty, abuse, and neglect, began to be troubled. As adolescence set in he became more troubled and confused; he was torn between white and black culture with white middle-class expectations grating on him. The whole thing exploded one night when he got into a fight over money with his foster-mother and bludgeoned her to death. Years later he told me that he really wanted to murder his natural mother. She subsequently died of Hepatitis and AIDS leaving five children by four men.

To cut to the chase, this boy-murderer of sixteen years passed into our care. He was convicted of second-degree felony murder and is serving a minimum 35-year sentence in a maximum-security prison. He is part of our family, our son. God has transformed him in prison. He knows he would be dead if he had stayed on the street. He is becoming a beautiful, mature man, making the tragedy of his life even greater, if that is possible.

The wisdom of God revealed in the cross of Christ is the only image I know to explain what I have witnessed over these past seventeen years with this child whom God placed in my hands. It is not a wisdom that I can explain or justify; but that it is God's wisdom I have no doubt. It came to me amidst great ambiguity to testify to God enfleshed for our salvation. Romans 5:7-8 alone makes sense of the fact Anita allowed herself to be murdered that Dwayne might be saved. And so it has come to pass.

ON DIVINE GOODNESS

Two days before Christmas this year, my beloved husband and companion of forty years was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer. He had never been sick a day in his life

and does not smoke. The doctors all agree that they cannot save him. The cancer is now devouring his body at a rapid rate, but it does not harm him, thanks be to God.

In the midst of this crisis, the justice of which we cannot fathom, we both experience the goodness of God in miraculous ways. With the exception of one hardened heart, our immediate and extended families have drawn close together and old wounds healed in ways that will endure. Our daughter, who had been dawdling in late adolescence seven years too long, grew up immediately. She came to herself, as Luke 15 put it, and returned to her parents, as did the prodigal son, amidst great rejoicing.

Our nephew, noting this, asked, "Did you do this just to bring the family together? Our daughter put it more directly. She said, "OK, I get the point, but does he have to die?" Their observations are pointed. Health and safety improvements and legal protections are only put in place in response to problems. The reason is that we rarely attend to potential problems, but wait until they become pressing problems, often in the form of people being injured or killed. I cannot say so for sure, but would bet money that school crossing guards were instituted because children were killed by cars or trucks on their way to school.

This is to observe that we are dense. That is, we need dramatic events to pierce through our resistance to attending to things around and about us. I say this not with a sense of disappointment or blame, but simply as a fact of human psychology. We try to get by with as little fuss as possible; we only tend to things at the point of crisis. Regular auto inspections would not be required by the state if automobile owners tended to the safety of their vehicles of their own accord.

Let us put this in theological terms. Calvin argued that looking at our toenails or our eyeballs—any detail of creation should be wondrous enough to turn us godward in surrender to the divine majesty. Regretfully, we are so thick, or dense, blind, or hard hearted, that God had to embark on a set of tragic antics to secure our attention. Only our voyeuristic glee at seeing God himself impaled on a tree stopped us in our tracks. Why is it that the gruesomeness of Christ's death arouses our devotion?

CONCLUSION

I have been developing a Christian humanism that I hope will work for our day. It depends on the possibility of knowing God, a highly disputed contention in our culture. On this view, knowing God is continuous with knowing other things and can come from knowing other things, as St. Augustine taught. Good knowing takes hard work, and knowing God is no different. I do think that longing for God is itself a miracle, a work of divine grace, perhaps assignable to the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.

Although our culture is noisier than others are, finally, the greatest impediment to knowing God well is the reality of evil and suffering to which I have pointed this morning. Perhaps the examples of Moses, Paul, and the psalmist together forge the most poignant comment in this regard and offer us the most encouragement as we continue to groan in our bodies, longing for God's beauty, wisdom, and goodness to redeem us. Right in the midst of being practically overwhelmed by God's wrath Moses insists that God be present with the people whom God fears he will destroy, displaying his goodness even as he struggles to overcome his anger. Moses was a bold fellow.

Paul pointed to the shameful and horrible execution of a man powerless against the forces of church and state that he threatened, and called it the wisdom of God. Finally, a man surrounded by enemies who seek to devour his flesh, filled with fear, asks but one thing of God—to see God’s beauty every day of his life. Scripture, read with imagination and care, is our salvation.