

“Beauty and the Beast”

Psalm 48

April 5, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

I want to talk about beauty today. As we are in the throes of the ugliness of this Covid-19 pandemic, I find this the perfect time to talk about the opposite of such ugliness. Not only is beauty the opposite of ugliness, when understood as the Bible understands it, beauty is the remedy for ugliness. I am reminded of the Disney movie, *Beauty and the Beast*.” A self-centered, arrogant young prince is cursed by an enchantress and turns into an ugly beast. The only way to have the curse removed is through love, which must happen before the last rose pedal falls. A beautiful young woman named Belle, which means beautiful in French, enters his castle and in time comes to love the ugly beast, and the curse is lifted. The beast turns back into a handsome prince, not only in outward appearance but also in inward character.

Psalm 48 speaks similarly about the power of beauty and where we see such beauty. This psalm is joyful in its mood. Psalms are like life. Just as life involves both tearful moments and joyful moments, so do the psalms. There are many tearful psalms that grieve over the brokenness of life. These are what we might call psalms in a minor key. But there are other psalms where it seems the heart of the psalmist wants to burst with joy. These are the psalms in a major key, and Psalm 48 is one such psalm. It starts with this joyful proclamation, **“Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised.”** It then concludes with the celebration of the truth that this God is **“our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever.”** So what we want to do today is really expressed perfectly in another psalm. **“One thing I have asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: 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 inquire in his temple”** (27:4). We want to gaze upon the Lord’s beauty today and be changed by doing so.

I. The Source of All Beauty – v. 1-3

The psalmist writes that God’s holy mountain is so beautiful that it is the joy of all the earth. Then he identifies the holy mountain as Mt. Zion. Mt. Zion is where the temple was located, and the temple is the place where God chose to dwell among his people. The reason Mt. Zion is referred to as beautiful is not that it has the greatest natural beauty. I’ve never been to Jerusalem to see Mt. Zion, but those who have report that there are other mountains that are higher and offer a more panoramic view. The reason for its beauty is the simple fact that God dwells within her. God is the source of all beauty.

It helps me to think of it like this. When God created the earth, he saw it and gave his evaluation that it was very good. He has created a beautiful earth. And he created a garden and put Adam and Eve within it. In that garden, Adam and Eve beheld all the beauty God had made. Even more, they had face-to-face interactions with God in all his beauty. But then sin entered, and with it came the ugliness of deformity, of things not working as they were designed. Death, sickness, deprivation and violence entered. But in his grace, God did not give up on his world and his image-bearers, men and women. He established a beachhead that he beautified with his presence once again. That beachhead was the tabernacle he commanded Moses to make, which was later made more permanent in the temple that Solomon erected on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. It is this presence of God that is here called the joy of all the earth. It is the restoration of paradise, of life as it was meant to be.

When we come to the New Testament, Jesus is called the temple of God. He fulfills everything the Old Testament temple only hinted at. The temple pictured forgiveness in the sacrifices made there. Jesus actually provides forgiveness. The temple was adorned with gold and beautiful furnishings. Jesus actually brings beauty back into our lives. The temple was where prayers were offered and fellowship with God took place. Jesus provides us with access to God now and sweet fellowship with him. Jesus is now the presence of God with us. It is in him that we see all the beauty of God.

The New Testament also says that we, the Church of Christ, are now the temple of God. We are the beachhead of the coming age, when once again paradise will be restored in the new earth where God will dwell with his people. The Church is, as I like to say, the outpost of the coming kingdom. We are to be an “alternate human society based on love and justice rather than on power and exploitation” (Keller, Psalms, p. 100). We are to be the joy of the whole earth, bringing hope of better things to a world mired in despair and darkness.

Part of the beauty of the presence of God is his provision of safety, protection and security. Verse 3 speaks of that. **“Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress.”** Notice here the mix of mundane precautions and miraculous help from God. The mundane precautions are seen in the reference to citadels, the structures we erect to provide protection. But no amount of human protection can provide ultimate security. Only God can do that. We are seeing the same thing with this Covid-19 virus. We do what we can to protect ourselves and others, but there are limits to what we can do. Ultimate security is found in God alone. He is our place of safety. The hymn we are going to close with is based on this psalm, and it says it well. “With salvation’s walls surrounded, thou mayest smile at all thy foes.” This brings us to our next point.

II. The Threat to Beauty – v. 4-8

Not everyone sees the presence of God as beautiful. The temple in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament encounter formidable opposition. The psalmist writes of “kings” assembling against the city of God. Note the plural; he is speaking here of a coalition of many powerful people allied against God’s people. But the walls of God’s protection prove to be more than sufficient. When these enemies see the presence of God, they are not filled with awe at his beauty. Instead, they are filled with panic. **“As soon as they saw it, they were astounded; they were in panic; they took to flight”** (v. 5). I picture an orderly march toward Mt. Zion, with vast armies and formidable weaponry, determined to wipe out God’s people. But then God acts, and panic ensues, leading to a speedy and disorderly retreat. **“Trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in labor”** (v. 6). He then mentions a second powerful force, the ships of Tarshish. It’s not clear how these ships have become enemies of God’s people, but it is clear that they are. But this show of human force is also no match for God’s great power. He simply sends an east wind and they are shattered completely. God will allow no force to overcome his work of beautifying the earth through his people.

This section ends with the promise of verse 8. **“As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever.”** The “Lord of hosts” is the name of God in all his power and military might. He brings all his might to bear in order to defend his people. Such security and safety are beautiful, and they become more beautiful when we feel the force of the threat. N95 respirators are not innately beautiful. But if you are on the front lines of this battle against the Covid virus, you behold them as a thing of beauty. Perhaps we are all feeling more keenly our vulnerability in these days. If so, let us take our eyes off the threat and put them on the promise of God. By the power of God’s Spirit, let us trust in this promise so much that we do what the hymnwriter says, and “smile at all our foes” as we take refuge in the safety of God’s walls around us.

There is something else of great beauty that I want to point out here. This is the age of God’s grace, the time when he conquers his enemies not by destroying them, but by converting them into his friends. What enemy does the church in America face today? I believe that our most formidable enemy is secularism. This enemy believes that this life is all there is. Belief in a transcendent God is merely a comforting fiction that some people might choose. More extreme forms of secularism claim that belief in God is worse than a comforting fiction, rising to the level of being harmful. There are many today who believe the church and the theism it espouses are the problem with the world, not the solution for the world’s problems. They are the armies of verse 4 that are marching forward to destroy the church. They will not succeed; the promises of God assure us of that. But the outcome is better than their

failure to destroy the church. They will see the beauty of God's presence and be converted.

As the church fights this enemy of secularization, I believe that one of our great weapons is beauty. Our God is beautiful, and there is something inside all of us that is drawn to beauty. What is your instinct when you see a strikingly attractive person? You do a double-take, don't you? Or when you see a beautiful sunset, you pause and simply enjoy it. Beauty is attractive, and one of our greatest resources in fighting secularization is the innate beauty of our God.

I heard an interview this week with Bart Ehrman, professor of Religious Studies at UNC, Chapel Hill. Though he grew up a conservative Christian, receiving his undergraduate training at Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College, he now professes to be an agnostic atheist. The interviewer asked him if he missed anything about Christianity. With Easter coming, he replied something like this: "Though I don't believe in Jesus' resurrection, or anything of life beyond the grave, I still find myself drawn to the idea of hope in the midst of despairing times." It was as if his heart wanted to believe, but the rest of him wouldn't allow it. That suggests to me that the beauty of God may be one of our best resources for reaching this generation. As in the Disney movie, Beauty continues to transform the beast. What might that look like? That brings us to our final point in this exuberant psalm.

III. The Appreciation of Beauty – v. 9-14

The final stanza of the psalm invites us to incorporate the beauty of God's presence into our everyday lives. It invites us first to think about God's steadfast love. **"We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple"** (v. 9). You'll know that you have thought about it appropriately when the response of verses 10-11 occurs. That response is one of praise to God and gladness and joy. **"As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth... Let Mount Zion be glad!"**

We see the steadfast love of God even more clearly than the psalmist could have possibly seen it, because we see its perfected form through Jesus. The love of God is displayed in the fact that Jesus became ugly that we might be made beautiful. The prophet said of Jesus, **"He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him"** (Isaiah 53:2). He removed the ugliness of our sin by becoming ugly in our place. He replaces our ugliness with the beauty of holiness, given to us as a gift in our justification and imparted to us by his power in our sanctification.

Not only are we encouraged to think about God's beauty, but we are also commanded to rehearse his beauty as we go about life. In verse 12, we are told

to **“Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels.”** Whenever the Bible speaks of our “walk,” it is talking about our everyday lives. So we are being encouraged here to see the beauty of God in everyday things. This is a skill that is improved with practice. Even challenging times like our current time can open us to the beauty of God. For example, the threat of the loss of health or even the loss of life points us to the beauty of health, whether it’s health in this life or the promise of health in the next life with our resurrection bodies. Or consider a second example. Many are able to stay at home these days and are experiencing a much simpler lifestyle and finding it to be a good thing. When the noise of busyness is reduced, the heart becomes more open to the simple gifts God gives. There is beauty in the gift of time to be still, sharing meals with family, spending extended time with spouses and children.

We are told to look about Zion, numbering her towers, considering her ramparts and going through her citadels. What would that look like in our everyday lives? I think it refers to the promises of God. Nothing is more solid in life than God’s promises. Those promises are our tower, our ramparts and our citadel. God promises that nothing can separate us from his love. God promises that he will never leave us or forsake us. He promises that what others might intend for harm, God will use for good. The solid ground beneath us will pass away, but not a single one of God’s promises will fail to be fulfilled.

CONCLUSION:

The psalm concludes with an encouragement that we tell the next generation of this beautiful God we have. And then it closes with one more promise. **“This is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever.”** You can’t say that about anything else in your life. You can’t say about your house, “It is mine forever and ever.” You can’t say it about your current position or your current job. But you can say it about your God. This glorious God, in all his beauty, is yours forever. Nothing can separate you from him. Beauty is more than something you learn to appreciate in a momentary way. It is the destiny of all who know Jesus. The last sentence has an alternate reading that may be listed in your footnote. “He will guide us beyond death.” One day, by God’s grace, we will stand on the grave of death. It will be a vanquished enemy, and lying before us will be what the Bible describes as everlasting joy. Our joy will be everlasting because our beautiful God will be with us forever. Beauty will have transformed the beast.

Small Group Questions
Psalm 48

1. What stands out to you as a thing of beauty that you have seen in God's creation?
2. What stands out to you as a thing of beauty made by mankind?
3. Describe what a life might look like that is captivated by the beauty of the Lord frequently throughout the day.
4. How do you think beauty might be used to reach secular people like Bart Ehrman (the man mentioned in the sermon who grew up as a Christian but who has renounced Christianity)?
5. We are told to think on the steadfast love of the Lord (v. 9). What would that look like in your life?
6. Are there ways you forget the steadfast love of the Lord?
7. The psalm concludes by encouraging us to incorporate beauty into our everyday lives (v. 12, "walk about Zion"). One of the ways we do that is through careful consideration of the promises of God. These promises are our tower, rampart and citadel. As you think of God's promises, which ones are especially meaningful to you right now?