

God *as* Artist



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 64:5–8, Ps. 51:10, 1 Chron. 23:5, Heb. 8:1–5, Rom. 11:33–36, Acts 9:1–22.*

Memory Text: “One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD” (*Psalms 27:4, NKJV*).

Key Thought: God as artist?

So far, we've looked at various aspects of the Lord: the Trinity, God's holiness, and God as Redeemer. There is one picture of God in Scripture, however, that is rarely given attention—God as artist.

Many people claim they have no interest in art. Many Christians know little about it. They may know what they like, but that is nothing more than knowledge about themselves. Others acknowledge that art exists, but they never consider its value or relevance. Christianity has often been ambivalent about the arts. At times, the arts have been denounced as irreligious and evil; other times, aesthetics have become a secular “religion” with serious devotees. There are also plenty of Christian writers, but they have seldom made attempts to relate the concept of “beauty” to the central Christian doctrines.

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” wrote poet John Keats. While Keats certainly overstated the case, God is indeed Truth, and the Truth is beautiful. Creation itself testifies to the fact that God is an artist and a lover of what's beautiful.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 17.*

God as Potter

“But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand” (*Isa. 64:8*).

When is the first time the Bible reveals God displaying His skills working with “clay”? *Gen. 1:26, 27, 31; 2:7.*

Scripture opens with God creating the first humans out of the “dust of the ground.” In fact, the Hebrew word for “man,” *adam*, is closely tied to the Hebrew word for “ground,” which is *adamah*—a linguistic link that enforces the amazing truth about God’s skill as a “potter.” He truly formed us out of the clay of the ground. It’s hard to imagine how a human being, with our blood and bones and skin and nerves and all of the amazing parts of our body, could have been formed from the ground. Our existence is a miracle that far surpasses human understanding.

In a sense, though the “potter” image works, in that the Lord used clay to form us, in other ways (as is with most imagery seeking to explain God’s work and power) it hardly does justice to His creativity and artistry. After all, what potter can take clay and turn it into a living, breathing thing?

Read Jeremiah 18:3–10, Isaiah 64:5–8, Psalm 51:10. How is the imagery of God as potter used in some of these texts?

Among the concepts revealed in these verses is the idea of just how helpless we are before the power of God. We are, in a sense, like clay in the hands of a potter; the potter, not the clay, is in charge.

At the same time, God is working to re-create in us His image. However much God cares about His physical creation, how much more would He care about the beauty of what He can do in us? We are to surrender, to die to self, and to cooperate with the Lord, who seeks to re-create and restore to us, as much as possible, the original spiritual and moral beauty that we once had. Sure, outside appearances can be beautiful, but inner beauty is what really matters.

Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky created a fictional character who had, Dostoevsky said, a “beautiful soul.” What is your idea of a “beautiful soul,” and what things in you do, and do not, correspond to that ideal?

God as Architect

After God dramatically delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, He brought them to Mount Sinai. There, He joined them to Himself in a sacred covenant. Among all the varied instructions He gave them there, how was beauty included? *Exod. 25:1–9*.

The first half of the book of Exodus details the miraculous deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The second half of the book deals with issues that include beauty. The divine instructions of Exodus 25:1–9 are followed by Exodus 25:10–31:11, with God’s “blueprints” for the portable tent sanctuary, its furnishings, and the priestly vestments. From Exodus 35:1 to the end of the book (*Exod. 40:38*) are found God’s detailed descriptions, along with the record of the precise accomplishment of them. This record includes extensive details of artistry.

This collection of details is tedious reading to many modern Christians. But it pleased God not only to present these many instructions to the newly freed slaves but also to include them in Scripture.

There are almost fifty chapters in the first five books of the Bible that record God’s precise directives regarding a beautiful sanctuary. He provides not only the architectural blueprints but also the exact directions for the furnishings. It is significant that on Mount Sinai God gave not only the Decalogue, His instructions for obedience within the covenant, but also specific directions of how to fashion a lavish structure involving almost every type of artistic skill.

God was architect of it all, even inspiring the artisans to craft the minute details of decoration. Nothing was left to human devising. There are more chapters regarding the plans for, and consequent building of, this sanctuary and its furnishings than for any other subject in the first five books of Moses.

Upon what was the earthly sanctuary modeled, and what does that tell us about God’s love of beauty? *Exod. 25:9, Heb. 8:1–5*.

If the earthly sanctuary was only a “shadow” of the heavenly, we can hardly begin to imagine the kind of beauty that must exist in the real sanctuary, the one made by God Himself.

Why do you think it was important for the sanctuary to be so beautiful? Perhaps to give the people a sense of awe before the power and grandeur of God? Maybe to help them sense their own need before such grandeur? How can understanding the glory of the sanctuary better help us to grasp the character of God in contrast to our own earthliness and sinfulness?

God as Musician

“**Four thousand are to be gatekeepers and four thousand are to praise the LORD with the musical instruments I have provided for that purpose**” (1 Chron. 23:5, NIV).

Try to envision the scene above: four thousand people playing musical instruments in praise of the Lord! That must have been an amazing worship service.

God’s artistic expression is not restricted to the representational arts. In Scripture we find that, along with sacred architecture, Israel’s liturgy was inspired by the Lord. God is a lover of beautiful music, as well.

How does King David describe his composition of the psalms Israel used in worship? 2 Sam. 23:1, 2.

David was clear that he was inspired by the Lord to write the songs that he did. Although this doesn’t mean that the Lord wrote the words and music for him, it does mean that the Lord cared about the kind of music that was played. Otherwise, why bother to inspire it?

Read 2 Chronicles 29:25. What does this verse tell us about the role of the Lord in the music that was played in Israel’s worship services?

Throughout the Old Testament, when temple worship is recounted, music is evident and impressive. Picture, for instance, the worship atmosphere described in 1 Chronicles 23:5. Four thousand instruments! Whatever the music must have sounded like, it certainly wasn’t boring or dry!

It might be argued that aesthetic dimensions could be expected within sacred worship and that throughout history all nations have exhibited such in worship of their gods. However, Israel alone insists that God Himself designed every aspect of His worship, including architecture, furniture, priestly attire, and liturgy. There can be no doubt that artistic design is sanctioned in the Word of God. Anyone who rejects the aesthetic dimension, or who denies that being an artist can be a relevant vocation for a Christian, does so against the record of Scripture.

Although we don’t have the music that accompanied Israelite worship, it must have been beautiful, and it certainly must have lifted their souls toward the Lord. How does music in our church function today? How can we be sure that it does the same thing, that is, lift our souls toward the Lord, as opposed to pushing us in another direction?

God as Author

Bible scholars have often been impressed by the incredible literary quality of the Bible. Many secular colleges also teach courses on the Bible simply for its literary beauty, not because they view it as God's Word.

As Christians, we have the blessing not only of enjoying the literary beauty of the Scriptures but of learning the truths about God as revealed in the Bible. No doubt, too, the artful construction of the narratives and the poetry, all influenced by the Spirit of the Lord (yet written out through the words of God's prophets), goes a long way in helping us to understand the truth contained therein.

The apostle Paul, for instance, with his complex theological discourse, regularly punctuates his theology with powerful literary devices. For example, in the first eleven chapters of the book of Romans, Paul gives a comprehensive account of the gospel. Look through these chapters and note the various topics Paul weaves together.

Read Romans 11:33–36. Compare these texts with Romans 11:1–32.

Like a hiker who has reached the summit of a high mountain, the apostle—who has taken in the vast panorama of salvation history—now bursts into praise. Before Paul goes on to outline the practical implications of the gospel, he worships.

Paul exhibits this subtle literary rhythm several times in his epistles and letters: intricate theological reasoning interlaced with praise to God before concluding with practical counsel.

The book of Revelation also is filled with an imposing mosaic of literary devices through which God portrays salvation history. Much of the book was taken from the Old Testament. The reader is presented with an exceedingly complex tapestry of words, phrases, and themes borrowed from other biblical writers but now woven together into an entirely new fabric. This final book in the Bible is in a style vastly different from what Paul and the Gospel writers used. Instead, we are almost overwhelmed with a profound aesthetic display carefully structured around seven scenes of the heavenly sanctuary, each one opening with deeper access into the heavenly court.

The book of Revelation is an extensive aesthetic display. God could have furnished John with a standard historical document to present the course of the salvation story. Instead, what we find are stunning pictorial vistas portraying the working out of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, and expanding on the imposing apocalyptic display given earlier to Daniel and Ezekiel.

Imagine reading the Bible only as literature. Talk about missing the point! What lessons can we learn about how easily we can have truth right before our eyes and yet miss it completely?

God as a Sculptor

God is also a sculptor, but not one limited to granite or marble. Instead, He sculpts our characters. He can take a sinful human being and mold and chisel and hammer away until that person reflects something of heaven's glory. God has given extensive evidence of such profound skills. From cover to cover in Scripture, we find God taking persons we might disregard as unattractive and unworthy and fashioning them into something beautiful.

Who are some characters in the Bible who needed a bit of spiritual sculpting, as it were? What needed changes were made in their lives? For instance, **Jacob** (*Gen. 32:22–30*); **David** (*Psalms 51*); **Peter** (*Luke 22:31, 32*); **Paul** (*Acts 9:1–22*). **Whom else can you think of, and what kind of changes came about in them?**

Another good example is Mary Magdalene. “Mary had been . . . a great sinner, but Christ knew the circumstances that had shaped her life. . . . It was He who had lifted her from despair and ruin. Seven times she had heard His rebuke of the demons that controlled her heart and mind. She had heard His strong cries to the Father in her behalf. She knew how offensive is sin to His unsullied purity, and in His strength she had overcome. . . . [This woman] who had fallen, and whose mind had been a habitation of demons, was brought very near to the Saviour in fellowship and ministry. . . . Mary stood beside the Cross. . . . Mary was first at the tomb after His resurrection. It was Mary who first proclaimed a risen Saviour.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 568.

Salvation history is full of divine creativity, restoring in fallen men and women the lost “image of God.” The gospel is no cosmetic face-lift but a matter of life-changing orientation running deep and swift in its power to cleanse, shape, and beautify. The gospel of Jesus Christ creatively builds with integrity and wholeness. Genuine newness is the result of an inward dynamic at work, a divine creativity that restores beauty to a fallen, sinful life.

Sculpting involves chiseling, filing, maybe even the breaking off of parts. What areas in your life need to be sculpted a bit more? How much resistance do you put up during a process that isn't always fun?

Further Study: “Let the converting power of God be experienced in the heart of the individual members, and then we shall see the deep moving of the Spirit of God. Mere forgiveness of sin is not the sole result of the death of Jesus. He made the infinite sacrifice not only that sin might be removed, but that human nature might be restored, *rebeautified*, reconstructed from its ruins, and made fit for the presence of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 6, p. 11, emphasis added.

“How earnestly and perseveringly the artist labors to transfer to canvas a perfect likeness of his model; and how diligently the sculptor hews and chisels out the stone into a counterpart of the copy he is following. So the parents should labor to shape, polish, and refine their children after the pattern given them in Christ Jesus. As the patient artist studies, and works, and forms plans to make the results of his labors more perfect, so should the parent consider time well spent that is occupied in training the children for useful lives and fitting them for the immortal kingdom. The artist’s work is small and unimportant compared with that of the parent. The one deals with lifeless material, from which he fashions forms of beauty; but the other deals with a human being whose life can be shaped for good or ill, to bless humanity or to curse it; to go out in darkness, or to live forever in a future sinless world.”—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, pp. 476, 477.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What opportunity have you had to develop and use any artistic skills? As you created something of beauty, how have you been mindful that this act of creation is one way in which you are reflecting the “image of God”? That is, by being creative, how are you in your own way reflecting the creative power of the Lord.
- ❷ Look around at the created world, at nature, even after it has been so long defiled by sin. In what ways does it powerfully testify not only to the creative power of God but to His artistic mastery and love of beauty? What things in nature do you find truly beautiful and why?
- ❸ As we said in the introduction, Christians have always had some ambivalence about the arts. Why would that be? What are some of the pitfalls in art? At the same time, how can we use our own artistic gifts in a way that glorifies God and advances His kingdom?

Summary: God’s skills as an artist have been underrated. His created world is often appreciated, but the expression of His artistic skills extends His great abilities much further. God designs that Christians especially should be a source of “beauty” in a dark and dying planet.

One Year for God

One doesn't think of Denmark as a mission field, but with just 2,500 Seventh-day Adventists in the country, there's a lot of work to be done in this post-modern secular society. To help finish the work, youth are volunteering to spend a year serving in various ministries in a program called One Year for God, sponsored by the Danish Union and Adventist Volunteer Services.

Among these youth are Bjarne Rasmussen and Kim Larsen, two young men in their twenties. Bjarne, a pastor's son, wanted to get serious about his faith. He took a short-term study course in lay evangelism and hoped to become a Bible worker in the Danish Union. When finances didn't allow the union to hire him full-time, he volunteered to serve. "Who am I to call myself a Christian and not introduce others to Jesus?" Bjarne asks.

A learning disability made advanced studies tedious for Kim, so he took a break from his studies. God led him to the One Year for God program. "It's a good fit," he says.

The two young men work together to find people who are searching for something in their lives. Danish law forbids them from going door-to-door to sell books, so Kim and Bjarne give out flyers offering a free Bible along with Bible studies. Then they follow up with interested people. After four months they were studying with seven people. In Denmark, that's a good result.

Danes love to read, so the men sometimes give out free books to people who pass by on a street corner. And they held an open church worship service to celebrate the 125th anniversary of one of the oldest Seventh-day Adventist churches in Denmark. People came.

"It's difficult to find people in Denmark who are interested in God," Kim says. "People live comfortable lives with plenty of material things. But we've found people hungry to know God."

One man reported reading the Bible to give him peace at work. Even though he's not yet a practicing Christian, he's discovering God's Word and His love. Another woman who is studying the Bible lessons grew up in the state church. She says that God had never been part of her life until she faced difficult times. Now she is turning to Christ for answers.

"Working One Year for God is strengthening my personal walk with God. I'm so grateful to be a part of His plan," Kim says.

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