

All Creation Sings  
The Joy of  
Our Creator, Creation, and the Beatific Vision



A Devotional

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## Preface

Beauty and exquisite light touch me deeply. There's nothing better than drinking a cup of Kona coffee with my husband and spending a couple of hours watching the glorious colors of sunrise light up the morning sky.

I've been on a journey these past two years. I've found new ways to pray as I've come to understand more about the theology of our Creator, his creation, and how joy and beauty and light are gifts he gives to us. Sadly, there hasn't been much written for the lay person regarding the theology of the Creator, or Creation, for the last one hundred years. (Perhaps we've been so focused on debating the interpretation of Genesis 1-3, and arguing with materialists over the age of the earth and Darwin's theory of evolution, that we haven't talked about the theology.) If there had been more discussion, I doubt understanding the role of joy and beauty would have been such a revelation to me. I've come to understand God longs for us to look beyond joy and beauty to see him, our Savior, the Giver of all good gifts. I have found that when my mind cannot engage with the Bible or come up with words to pray, I can still pray with joy in my heart. I now know how to let joy and beauty lead me to Jesus.

Similarly, the study of seeing God's face has also been lost in the post-modern era. Even though I am a seasoned Bible teacher, I had never researched the beatific vision. I knew that one day we would see Christ at his Second Coming, but I did not know the richness of what Christians have understood about the Beatific Vision during the last two thousand years. Unlike joy and beauty, *seeing* is a rich metaphor—one we are quite familiar with. Seeing is also inherently connected with joy and beauty, but I get ahead of myself.

This devotional is intended to expand our *internal, heartfelt* response to God, his creation, and the staggering promise of seeing him. We will consider how to let joy and beauty cause us to be filled with praise. To expand our worship of Jesus, we'll take nuggets of theological truths, one after another, and juxtapose them against the focus of the church year (the Incarnation during Advent; the Crucifixion and Christ's Resurrection during Lent, Easter, and the 50 days following; the indwelling Holy Spirit on Pentecost; and seeing God during Ordinary Time—the summer and fall months) so that we can ponder the tremendous mystery of God with us. Jesus will be central to our contemplation.

You'll be encouraged to record your journey, creating for yourself a personal book of worship for private use. You'll be nudged to reflect deeply on the implications of theological truths. We'll intersperse poetry and art with theology and personal reflection with the hope that your heart is set free to love your Creator God with joy.

With just a couple of thoughts per week, you won't be rushed and it's okay if you fall behind. Not to sound cliché, but the benefit of turning our attention to these topics is found during the journey. We don't have to wait until the end to receive the benefits of the process. Interestingly, theologians conclude that we will never arrive at the end, the full vision of God, because there will always be more for us to enjoy, new beauty to discover, more of God's essence to see. But again, I get ahead of myself.

I encourage you to start at the beginning with Creation Calls and when you get to the section on the Incarnation, if it isn't Advent, skip to the season you are in and work your way through the rest of the year. Or skip around as you prefer. This is not a devotional to be read quickly but one to chew on for a while and keep coming back to. Follow your heart into what brings you joy. In my disorientation during the pandemic, I stumbled upon a feast. This devotional is intended to point you to where I found food.

*May the truths about our Creator God and the rich tradition of theology we have inherited regarding his nature and attributes, his creation, and the blessing of seeing him help you to draw near to him with hearts full of joy each day.*

Luann Budd

San Jose, California

## Suggestions if you want to create a personal *Book of Worship*

### Type of Blank Book

I recommend that you purchase a new blank book in the mid (5" x 7") to large size (7" x 9"). I prefer ones with lines. However, if you enjoy calligraphy and art you may want one without lines and perhaps, you'd like one with heavier paper for painting. My favorites are Paperblank Journals, Strathmore's 400 Series Hardbound Watercolor Art Journal (8.5 x 5.5), and Pentelic AF Aqua Journal (5" x 8") 140 lb. These journals have become my most treasured books, so investing in good quality, archival paper is important. I usually spend between \$15-\$25.

### Organization

Leave ten pages blank at the front. As you create your Book there will be verses of Scripture, quotations, key insights, perhaps a Table of Contents that you'll want space for. Create your cover page with your name and contact information and the date. Number the pages (you can also number just the even pages). At some point, you may want to add a Title, or include an overarching theme (e.g. grace, imagine), or a key verse. At the back of your Book, have a page for books you find helpful during your journey.

### Purpose

I like to use my Book during my devotional time to aid me in worship. So as I spend time with the Lord, I copy Scripture, copy quotes, write reflections, lyrics, poetry, engage in devotional activities and art in my Book. Sometimes I keep the even pages for these entries and the odd pages for personal reflection. In this way, I am documenting my journey. Once my Book is completed, I go back and revisit the entries, using them over and over. **Create your Book to be whatever you will find useful as you seek to worship the Lord.** I'll make some suggestions highlighted in blue boxes, but it is totally up to you to decide what to include in your Book.

### Audience

I'm creating my *Book of Worship* for me. I've never shared my Book. I don't think what I write in it is private, in the same way I think of my working journal as being for my eyes only. Your Book is to record your thoughts and what you believe God is showing you.



# Creation Calls

Come, let us bow down in worship,  
Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker! (Psalm 95:6)

When we sit along Kauai's south shore with vacationers from all over the world, gathering night after night to enjoy the beauty of sunset, I know why everyone is there. We love the beauty of the changing sunset colors; we delight to watch the sea turtles come ashore to rest. It's mesmerizing. Simply gorgeous. For my husband and me, it's also holy. Our hearts are lifted to praise the Lord our Maker. We close our day sitting in the sand, silent, in reverent worship of God.

When we love to watch the sunset and invite others to come enjoy it with us, we are responding to creation as God intended. If we didn't admire it, we would be the great losers missing the extraordinary wonder of the gift we'd been given. It seems creation calls everyone. It's universal. Hopefully, in our delight, we will become curious: *Who is responsible for all of this beauty? Why do I love it so?*

Creation is intended to lead us to its Creator the Supremely Beautiful One. She lifts our eyes and hearts to him. As Paul explains to the people in modern-day Turkey, "turn from these worthless things to the living God, who *made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them . . . he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.*" (Acts 14:15-17, emphasis added). Creation testifies! To enjoy the sunset, twinkling stars, sleepy turtles, and to know there must be a good God is simply to be awake in the real world. It's how we and all of creation are designed.

## *Devotional Activity*

Would you like to copy Psalm 95:6 into your journal? Perhaps you have another Scripture that calls you to worship?

How would you define worship? "Worship for me is . . ."

Reflect on how joy ("fills your heart with joy") testifies *to you* we have a Creator God.

# His

Psalms show us the appropriate response to creation is to shout with joy. *Hallelujah!* Creation elicits joy and gladness. Creation calls us to worship *our* Creator because we realize that we, too, are his creation. *We are his.*

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.  
Worship the Lord with gladness;  
Come before him with joyful songs.  
Know that the Lord is God,  
It is he who made us, and *we are his,*  
We are *his people,* the sheep of his pasture.

Psalm 100:1-3 (emphasis added)

“It is he who made us, and *we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*” When we open ourselves to reflect on nature, we realize that we, too, are part of creation which means *we* have a Creator. Since he created us, we belong to him.

As we marvel at the goodness of what God has provided, the rain and good crops, food and joyful hearts (Acts 14:17), we become aware of his enduring love *for us,* his faithfulness *to us* down through the ages, and we feel gratitude:

Enter his gates with *thanksgiving*  
And his courts with praise.  
Give thanks to him and praise his name  
For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;  
His faithfulness continues through all generations.

Psalm 100:4-5

The beauty of creation reflects the beauty of her Creator. Our God is supremely beautiful. His beauty delights us and calls forth our gratitude and praise. When we hear creation singing, her choir invites us to take off our shoes and enter into the holy of holies to join in. Creation teaches us who we are and our relationship to the Maker of heaven and earth.

## *Devotional Activity*

How do you feel when you are outside in nature? Do you enjoy it? Explain.

# A Witness

For the past year, my ten-year-old grandson and I have been zooming for an hour, four days a week. It's been delightful. He's curious and full of fun facts. We talk about whatever interests us and explore the world via Google maps. This week, besides talking about Minecraft skins and the size of Alaska, we traveled to see where the Japanese snow monkeys live, learned about sea otters' fur (a million hair follicles per square inch!), and watched teams of Alaska sled dogs run the 1,000 mile Iditarod in thirty degrees below zero temperatures. Yesterday, he asked me how we can know who God is since he is invisible. "If we can't see him," he said, "how can we know what he's like?" I explained, the Bible says God has left himself a witness. Snow monkeys and sea otters and puppies testify. They tell us who God is.

Not only does creation reflect the beauty of God, not only does creation help us realize we belong to him because he created us, but creation also speaks to us about who God is. God reveals *himself* through what he has made: "For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse" (Romans 1:19-20). God has made his power and nature plain through creation.

*What can creation teach us about the Creator?* If God can hold the universe in the palm of his hand, he is enormous! [Pause. Look at the palm of your hand and imagine holding the universe.] Is there any place we could go where he wouldn't be? The psalmist ponders:

Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there,  
If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn  
If I settle on the far side of the sea  
Even there your hand will guide me  
Your right hand will hold me fast.

Psalm 139:7-10

If God is present wherever we go, then we are never alone. God is everywhere I am.

Creation leads me to my Creator and summons my worship and praise. Creation shows us we are his. Creation shows us what he is like. We learn we are never alone. Our God is strong and powerful, omniscient and omnipresent. Creation sings, calling us to worship. So we sit in our beach chairs, toes in the sand, waiting for the sun to dip below the horizon, and worship.

### *Devotional Activity*

Is there a quote you'd like to add to your journal from today's reading?

As you reflect on creation, what does she teach *you* about God?

How would you describe God?

What is your relationship with him like? Reflect on why your relationship with him is as it is.

Would you like it to be different than it is?



# Creation Calls us to Worship

I didn't have a very robust understanding of worship and I had never given much thought to creation's connection to it. As I read about the theology of creation and the Creator, I sensed God was inviting me on a journey. I began to create my own *Book of Prayer and Worship*, a journal I filled with Scripture, quotes, prayers of others, and reflections on what I was learning.

In the past, I've tried to learn to praise God. I've used the alphabet (A, B, C) to help me praise him for his attributes: "Lord, I praise you that you are the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning, the Creator...." And I've also used the names of God, and the I AM statements of Christ, and the praise prayers in the psalms to give me characteristics of God that I could praise. I've copied prayers from the *Book of Common Prayer* and borrowed from the Puritans their prayers of praise. These were all helpful exercises. Although I didn't know it at the time, they were like a toddler's wobbly first steps. She's so proud of herself and everyone rejoices with her, but they are just the beginning.

In *The Mystery of God, Knowing the Unknowable*, the authors note that there are four elements of praise. *Really?* I thought. *Four elements? How could I be a Christian all these years and not know the four elements of praise?* I had to go back and re-read the paragraph and then I copied it into my Book. The four elements of praise:

Sing joyfully (Psalm 100:2-3, Psalm 89:11-12, Psalm 149)

Marvel at his glorious attributes (Psalm 146:5-6, Proverbs 3, 8)

Delight in his providential care (Psalm 104:24, 27-28)

Let creation summons us to remember his awesomeness (Jeremiah 32)

It's obvious once stated: "Sing joyfully" is a key component of praise. Marvel, wonder, and delight in his attributes and providential care are parts of praise. Creation summons us to praise as we stand in awe and are filled with wonder. I understand that. And here was a clue. When I tried to praise God during my morning devotions, I was missing an immediate experience of joy, marvel, wonder, and delight. These elements were what was missing from my first attempts. I could think of all the reasons that God was praiseworthy, but that exercise wasn't necessarily *prompted by my personal experience of joy, wonder, or delight*. I could read with

sincerity the praise prayer of another, but it wasn't *my* spontaneous outpouring at having been overwhelmed by the goodness of God. The problem with how I was approaching praising God was that my words were a step or two removed from *my feelings of joy*. My head was leading, but *at that moment* my heart wasn't feeling joyful; my thoughts were engaged but my passions were sleeping.

I didn't see this immediately.

## **Invitations**

For many months, the *invitational* aspect of joy, marveling at his attributes, delighting in his providential care, and letting creation reveal God's majesty remained hidden from me. And then the pandemic hit. During the months that followed, I learned that these four elements are not just ways we should feel when we praise the Lord, they can also be *portals to usher us into times of heartfelt worship*.

When our county went into lock-down, I gradually felt disoriented. For a month, I couldn't engage with the Lord in my normal ways. I found nature's beauty and art were my saving graces. Why was this? Why, when we are overwhelmed with uncertainty and ambiguous losses, or feeling the dampening impact of anxiety, or despair, do our daily devotions become dead at just the moment we need them the most to experience the comfort and care of the Lord? It's so frustrating!

In my disorientation, I was compelled to follow the beauty I found in nature and the Arts to enter into devotion. Bible reading, Bible study, reading my favorite books, and prayer just wouldn't engage me. I learned from Dr. Henry Cloud that *my mind* was probably overwhelmed; I was in the fog of grief. I needed to rely on *my heart* but this was new for me. The psalmists tell us to worship the Lord with joy (Psalm 100:2-3). In the fog, my voice could sing a joyful song, but my heart wasn't in it. And worship is supposed to be *my* external expression of *my* internal devotion. I was experiencing a serious disconnect.

A godly spiritual director once shared with us, "We have to engage with God as we can, not as we can't." Actually, what choice do we have? We have the record of many followers of Jesus who have experienced this disconnect. Perhaps it is St. John of the Cross' "dark night." We can't will ourselves into worshiping with heartfelt devotion. We simply have to do what we can, not what we can't. And wait.

What I have learned is, my best way of feeling a closeness with God is through *enjoying what I love*. But, I didn't feel comfortable that this was really biblical. Is it right to spend my quiet time looking at an old portrait I love of my children? As I looked at their innocence, I felt love well up. I was brought to tears with gratitude that the Lord blessed me with them. My spiritual director surprised me when she called it my prayer.

When my mind was overwhelmed by the pandemic, my heart could find joy in the sunrise, the songs of birds, or the delights of a vase of sunflowers, but not in reading the Scripture or praying for people on my prayer list. I came to deeply value connecting with God through what brought me joy. My devotional time felt heart-to-heart, a drawing near and being deeply grateful. I was enjoying God's goodness and his beauty displayed in his creation and receiving his gifts as the gifts he was giving to me personally.

Each morning I asked myself: How is the Spirit inviting me to enjoy him? What do I *feel like doing* during my devotions?

My heart led me into times of beautiful communing with God. Some mornings I stood at my window appreciating the beauty of color as the first light of dawn brought the slightest tinge of green to the horizon. Venus sparkled so brightly some mornings. It was just lovely to watch the gradual bowing of the earth to the rising of the sun, clouds transforming from grays to every shade of cotton candy, then watch as brilliance burst over the hills. Every morning was a new display of God's beauty giving light and warmth. I marveled at the sunlight coming 93 million miles, through my window, to me, reaching me where I stood watching, warming my skin. Perhaps David was watching out his window when he marveled:

The heavens declare the glory of God  
The skies proclaim the work of his hands.  
Day to day they pour forth speech  
Night after night they reveal knowledge  
They have no speech, they use no words  
No sound is heard from them  
Yet their voice goes out to the ends of the earth  
Their words to the end of the world  
In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun  
It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,  
Like a champion rejoicing to run his course

It rises at one end of the heavens  
And makes its circuit to the other  
Nothing is deprived of its warmth.

As we marvel and delight our senses with nature (enjoying a beautiful dawn), its beauty leads our hearts to worship with deep devotion and awe. We commune with our Maker.

As I read Psalm 19, I knew David has experienced a sunrise. Its glory speaks to him of God's glory; his goodness, wisdom, beauty, and majesty bring David's heart to marvel in wonder and adoration. David's reflection on the goodness of the morning sun shifts from meditation on the sun, to contemplation of the Creator God who warms all with his goodness, and the beautiful way he orders human life through his law. David sees how God's law is different from the pagan cultures around him:

The law of the Lord is perfect  
Refreshing the soul  
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy  
Making wise the simple...  
They are more precious than gold  
Than much pure gold  
They are sweeter than honey  
From the honey comb  
By them your servant is warned  
In keeping them there is great reward.

The splendor of the Law reaches and warms us like the sun. The sun becomes the perfect metaphor. David feels warmth as the sun drives away the pre-dawn chill and experiences its goodness. Goodness for all.

God uses the pleasure of the sun's warmth to open David's heart to worship during which he writes lyrics to his song. This expression, his creative response, engages his thoughts further, and further still: morning by morning God gives the gift of warmth and light, his sun to shine, his Law to illumine the way, and David realizes we are intimately known.

Who can discern their own errors?  
Forgive my hidden faults  
Keep your servant also from willful sins

May they not rule over me.  
Then I will be blameless  
Innocent of great transgression.

Contemplating the sunrise, loving its beauty, enjoying the physical pleasure of its warmth, and being moved by it to create a poem to express heartfelt devotion leads to an experiential knowing that our Creator is very good. His creation is such a gift we can barely take it in. His ways are more precious than our most treasured possessions. And yet, he is safe. He draws us near. He is for us, not against us. We can run to him for help. Our Creator loves us and we respond with heartfelt devotion: worship and praise. Joy.

The goodness of dawn is experienced and God becomes known. Sunrise leads David to write one of the great poems in the psalter. David's heartfelt worship experience is what I was experiencing. Creation was leading me into worship. Does looking out the window at a beautiful sunrise during my devotions please the Lord? I think so. I think David thought so, too. At least, he concluded his poem praying it would: "May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight. Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14).

### *Devotional Activity*

Perhaps you can carve out an hour from your schedule this week to immerse yourself in nature and let creation lead you into worship. If you are moved to create a poem, draw a picture, or take some photographs, be sure to do whatever will bring you joy. Record your experience in your Book.

# Joyful, Joyful

One beautiful morning, Henry Van Dyke (1907) was staying with the president of Williams College where he had been invited to preach. Van Dyke was an ordained Presbyterian minister but served most of his career (1899-1922) as a professor of English literature at Princeton University. Many concerns in the news troubled them during those bleak days before World War I. Moved by the beauty of the Berkshire Mountains, joy broke through. Van Dyke was inspired to write.

[May I invite you to pause here. Please close your eyes and spend thirty seconds in silence, centering yourself, becoming mentally focused in the present, then opening your heart as a flower opens to the sun. Let Van Dyke's joy become your own, and let it lead you to praise your Creator.]

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee  
God of glory, Lord of love  
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee  
Opening to the sun above  
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness  
Drive the dark of doubt away  
Giver of immortal gladness  
Fill us with the light of day!

All Thy works with joy surround Thee  
Earth and heaven reflect Thy rays  
Stars and angels sing around Thee  
Center of unbroken praise  
Field and forest, vale and mountain  
Flowery meadow, flashing sea  
Chanting bird and flowering fountain  
Call us to rejoice in Thee.

Thou art giving and forgiving  
Ever blessing, ever blessed

Wellspring of the joy of living  
Ocean depth of happy rest.  
Thou our Father, Christ our brother  
All who live in love art Thine  
Teach us how to love each other  
Lift us to the joy divine.

Mortals join the mighty chorus  
Which the morning star began  
Father love is reigning over us  
Brother love binds man to man  
Ever singing, march we onward  
Victors in the midst of strife  
Joyful music leads us sunward  
In the triumph song of life.<sup>1</sup>

Enjoying God is what we are created for. I've learned it's good to follow my heart into devotion. God's beauty in nature, Scripture, and the Arts are God's gifts of himself to us. As we receive them, we receive him; we draw close and worship.

At breakfast Van Dyke handed his friend a piece of paper, saying, "Here is a hymn for you. Your mountains were my inspiration. It must be sung to the music of Beethoven's 'Hymn of Joy.'"<sup>2</sup>

Don't discount the value of paying attention to what brings you joy as you seek to draw near. This is how God intends creation to guide us.

It's good to follow our hearts. Perhaps it will lead our gaze to the beauty outside our window and raise a song in our hearts. When our minds are weary, perhaps the joy we feel as we bask in nature's beauty will lead us to heartfelt devotion.

### *Devotional Activity*

Perhaps you'd like to copy a favorite psalm or poem into your journal, or sing a joyful song.

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<sup>1</sup> Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee by Henry Van Dyke. Public Domain.

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul*, p. 264.

# Compelled

The disciples saw Jesus command the wind and walk across the lake like he was walking across a mud puddle. Their eyes were opened and they knew he was the Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth. Seeing Jesus as God made Peter want to walk on water, too. Back in their fishing boat, Peter dripping wet, the disciples didn't have to try to worship—they were compelled to worship Jesus.

“And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him saying “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:31).

When we see our Maker revealed, we worship. It's the only reasonable thing to do.



*1 Peacock, Filoli House and Gardens, Woodside, California*

## *Devotional Activity*

Centering Prayer: Worship the Lord for three minutes, thinking about the vastness of creation. Use the phrase, “Son of God” to focus your thoughts on Jesus. If your mind wanders, simply pray, “Son of God.” Lift your heart to him in heartfelt adoration. Close by reading Matthew 14:31 three times.



# Created to Worship

We are made to worship. If we don't respond to the revelation of God by turning toward God to give him glory and our gratitude, we harden our hearts and end up worshipping something of our own creation. We are designed to worship and worship we will do. The only real question is, whom or what will we worship? Paul says we see this pattern played out repeatedly in history:

For *although they knew God*, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish *hearts were darkened*. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and *exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images* made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore, *God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts* to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. *They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen* (Romans 1:21-25, emphasis added).



2 Bridalveil Fall, Yosemite Valley, California

Every decision we make either turns us toward our Creator God or away from him, either opens our hearts to his goodness and beauty, or darkens us.

## *Devotional Activity*

Sit silently before the Lord. Review your previous twenty-four hours. Think about the decisions you made and your conversations. When were you turned toward the Lord? When were you turned away? Reflect on how you glorify God.

# Invited to Come

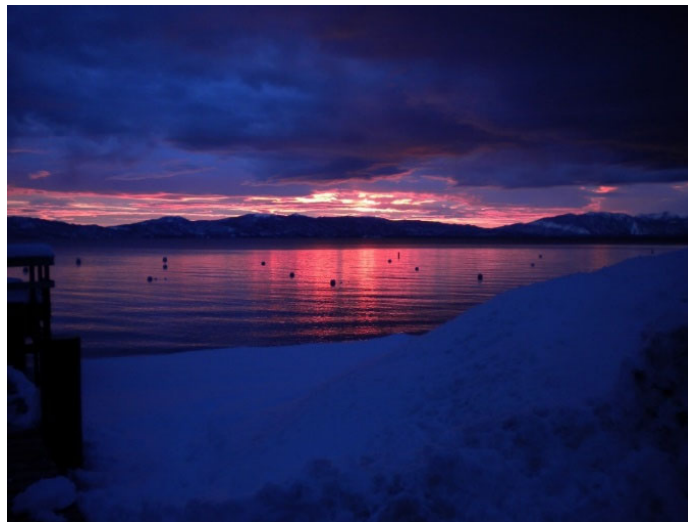
Jesus prays to his Father, “Lord of heaven and earth” and then he issues a sweeping invitation: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:25, 28-30).

Jesus invites everyone who is exhausted and in need of rest to come to him.

Feeling weary but unsure how to come to Jesus? Sometimes our lives hit a bump and we become lost in the swirl of uncertainty or the fog of grief. Sometimes we run ourselves ragged to the point of having absolutely nothing left to give. Feeling weary, exhausted, or like your spiritual life isn’t working the way it used to? Perhaps like me, you feel unsure about how to come to Jesus when the normal ways just don’t engage you as they have. Know that the Lord of heaven and earth is with you. You are not alone. Jesus offers us rest . . . deep soul rest. Come to Jesus. Let creation and what brings you joy show you the way.

## *Devotional Activity*

Follow your heart. Is there an activity that brings you joy? Perhaps you could go outside and enjoy a walk or go surfing or listen to your favorite music without interruption? Spend 2 hours doing something you love in nature. Receive it as a gift from Jesus.



3 *Winter Sunrise, Lake Tahoe, Nevada*

# God's Gift of Beauty

Beauty is God's gift that we experience with our senses  
—sights, smells, tastes, sounds, and softness to touch.

Beauty reflects God's goodness as a mirror reflects features of our face.

When the sun comes out from behind the clouds and the blues and greens of Kauai take my breath away, when I smell the sweetness of a gardenia and just have to close my eyes and breathe in its fragrance again, when the moon rises over the ocean and my heart soars, I am awake to God. I desire to draw near to enjoy his goodness. Delighting in his gifts, experiencing the sights and sounds and smells of nature's beauty, marveling at the wonder of his love, these are some of the ways we receive the immediate presence of God who is with us. We taste the goodness of his character and become confident of the all-sufficiency of his care. His supreme beauty fills our soul—a taste of joy divine. We will feast on his beauty for all eternity: “Thou art giving and forgiving. Ever blessing, ever blessed. / Wellspring of the joy of living, ocean depth of happy rest.” I pray with Van Dyke, “Lift us to the joy divine.”

Beautiful landscapes, wondrous animals, delightful flowers, the golden hour before sunset, the brilliance of dawn, sweetness in the breeze, wafting mana in the tropical forests, birds, fish, insects, reptiles, the island of Borneo's stunning birds of paradise<sup>3</sup>—the natural world displays the glory of God the Creator of heaven and earth.

There's so much beauty all around us but also a lot of brutality since the fall. Nature groans, as we do, awaiting our release from the curse. But altogether, the very best in each one, taken as a whole in nature's entirety, reflects the goodness and beauty of our Maker.<sup>4</sup> When we are at all sensible to the wonder that surrounds us, when our hearts soar at creation's songs, we are enjoying God. Our hearts spontaneously respond with praise. The deepest enjoyments

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<sup>3</sup> Watch this YouTube playlist displaying the wonder of the birds of paradise and outer space:  
<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMD1ogVPdU2SHJdaLTIHud-bHLDeYoN7h>

<sup>4</sup> Right now, during this time after the Fall (Genesis 3) creation has been subjected to futility and is subject to death (Romans 8). But one day, she will be set free.

of life are used by God to “lift us to the joy divine.” We can’t help but want to share what we see and call others to come along with us; we want them to love it as we do.

When beauty touches us, for a moment, we are filled with joy and lifted in rapture; the gift perfectly fits us, satisfies our longing, and, for that instant, consumes us in love. Maltbie Babcock (1858-1901) was called to pastor the First Presbyterian Church in Lockport, New York. (Interestingly, he followed Henry Van Dyke<sup>5</sup>.) Babcock would “tell his secretary, ‘I’m going out to see my Father’s world,’ and he would run or hike a couple of miles into the countryside where he’d lose himself in nature.”<sup>6</sup> After his death, his wife published his writings including this song:

This is my Father’s world,  
And to my listening ears  
All nature sings, and round me rings  
The music of the spheres.  
This is my Father’s world:  
I rest me in the thought  
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas  
His hand the wonders wrought.  
This is my Father’s world: the birds their carols raise  
The morning light, the lily white,  
Declare their Maker’s praise.  
This is my Father’s world. He shines in all that’s fair.  
In the rustling grass, I hear Him pass, He speaks to me  
everywhere.  
[Yes the world is broken. Yes, nature is writhing under the curse.  
But...]  
Why should my heart be sad? The Lord is King: Let the heaven’s  
ring! God reigns; let the earth be glad!

Nature points our gaze to Jesus. “The Lord is King: / ... God reigns, let the earth be glad!” Sharing the experience of the beauty we see in nature, the experience of Jesus’ beauty reflected in nature, brings us joy. And when we have the opportunity to share it with others,

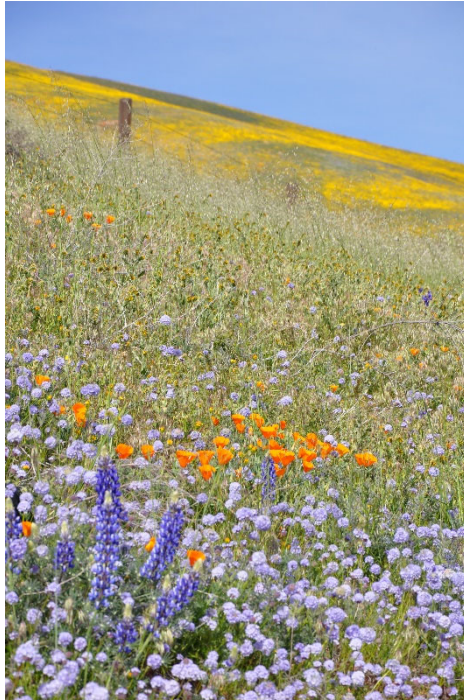
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<sup>5</sup> *Then Sings My Soul*, Robert J. Morgan, 265.

<sup>6</sup> *Then Sings My Soul*, Robert J. Morgan, 255.

our joy is complete (I John 1:1-4).<sup>7</sup> Corporate worship is coming together to share the beauty we see and join with others to praise our Maker together. “Show me the beauty you see! I’ll show you what I see. Praise the Lord with me!” We worship externally demonstrating our internal devotion to God.

Beauty brings us joy. We experience pleasure and delight and sense a call to worship. We feel gratitude. Beauty is our experience of God’s goodness. It brings us joy because God created it to delight us, to awaken us.



4 Wildflowers, Gorman, California

### *Devotional Activity*

Do you have photographs of places or people you love? Spend an hour this week looking at them. Let joy and gratitude bubble up. Perhaps you can add photos to your Book.

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<sup>7</sup> I John 1:1-4: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.”

# A Gift

*Beauty is God's gift of himself to us.* We have been created to live awake to God, and once awakened, we thoroughly enjoy him in what he has made. When we enjoy something beautiful, we are enjoying God himself. Enjoying him is what we were made for. Enjoying him is where we find our fullest completion and deepest sense of well-being. When I engage with something beautiful and let its beauty bring me joy, I am living alive to God's very immediate giving of himself to me.

When God created us, he had a plan in mind. He wasn't forced to create humans. So what was his purpose in making us? Scripture reveals he created us to be in a relationship with him. We have been created for union with the one true God, the three divine Persons of the Trinity. We are designed to glorify and enjoy him forever. God is our end: oneness with Christ, glorification, and enjoyment of him without end is our telos—our ultimate purpose for being. Relationship with him (glorifying and enjoying) is the reason he created us.

God designed us to delight in his beauty and goodness and enjoy him forever. Our life with God does not start after we die and go to heaven, it begins with him here, today. Our chief end according to the catechism is “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” Fully enjoying God is what it means to glorify him.<sup>8</sup> Glorifying and enjoying are actually one and the same. We have been created to find God, to glorify and enjoy him. God created us to find our richest, most fulfilling satisfaction and deepest enjoyment in him today and tomorrow and every day on into eternity. This is what we have been designed for. He placed this desire in our hearts when he created us.

When the Scripture calls us to glorify him, to give him praise, it is inviting us to enjoy our Creator. What if we thought of our time of morning devotion as an activity designed to help us achieve what we have been designed for? What if we designed our quiet times of devotion to help us receive and bask in the goodness of God, to experience joyous pleasure in beauty,

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<sup>8</sup> See *The Westminster Catechism*: “Man's chief end is to glorify God, [a] and to enjoy him forever. [b] Scripture References [a] Ps. 86:9; Isa. 60:21; Romans 11:36; 1 Cor. 6:20; 10:31; Rev. 4:11 [b]. Ps. 16:5-11; 144:15; Isa. 12:2; Luke 2:10; Phil. 4:4; Rev. 21:3-4”

contentment, peace, complete satisfaction, and perfect love in him? How would this approach to our time with God change us?

God longs to give us the gift of himself in the fullness of his beauty, goodness, love, and mercy so that regardless of the circumstances that have captured the news of the day, or the personal losses that have overwhelmed us, we know we are his.

A year ago, I went to visit a dear friend who had lost her husband suddenly to pneumonia during the holidays. He caught a cold, it went into his chest, and due to a prior medical condition within a week he was gone. The suddenness of his death, the fact that he was relatively young and died during the holidays, just seemed overwhelming to me. It would be my worst nightmare. When I visited his wife in April, as we walked through the courtyard to get a latté, I asked her how she was doing. She paused slightly and looked into my eyes. “I’m doing well,” she said. “Sure I have my moments but, you know, *God has been generous with joy.*” As she went on to share how grateful she was that her son said he would spend a day with her every week, my mind kept pondering her statement, “God has been generous with joy.” Her testimony is we can experience deep contentment and even be delighted with joy in the middle of deep loss and grief. *God is generous with joy.*

God is generous with joy. He graciously gives us joy even when we are deeply grieving. If that is true, and I believe it is from the testimony of believers throughout the ages, no matter how our world is swirling around us, we can follow our hearts into devotion.

*The beauty or goodness that brings you joy is what will draw you close to Jesus.* What brings *me* joy is what the Spirit will use to draw me close. What brings *you* joy is what the Spirit will use to draw you close. What we are seeking during our devotional time is to come near, to commune with our Creator, to have a tall drink from his living spring. Beauty and goodness will lead the way. What brings us joy will open a path to heaven.

I think it’s important for us to understand that our communion with our Creator today, our rich sense of joy regardless of whether we are experiencing a time of deep loss or celebration, is a taste of our ultimate, eternal communion with him in heaven. Various passages of Scripture give us a glimpse of heaven. I tend to think of heaven as a beautiful paradise, Eden restored: a beautiful garden without the serpent of old; loved ones and hopefully, our pets reunited; angels and elders around the Lamb’s throne praising him; throngs of people from every tribe; and a wedding feast for billions. But I am not lost in the sea of worshiping creatures, just one creature among billions. No, I am particularly, personally, welcomed in.

And not just welcomed into the fellowship of the saints but eternally welcomed into intimate fellowship with God, one to One. We are invited to enter into the complete and perfect love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are personally, individually, enveloped in the love that our Three-Person God share together within their Trinity. Entering into their love is the purpose for which we were created and to which we are called. And each time I enter into a worshipful experience today, I am tasting what I will feast on for eternity.

The sense of longing we all feel to be completely and thoroughly known, and loved even still, will be ours in heaven. In the words of C.S. Lewis: “I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now . . . Come further up, come further in!”<sup>9</sup> God’s supreme beauty fills our soul—today it is a taste of joy divine that we will drink to our fill, eternally.

### *Devotional Activity*

Write for ten minutes about beauty and those things that are most beautiful to you.

Can you let what you find to be beautiful bring you joy?

Reflect on how beauty helps you to draw close to God who has given it to you as a gift.

How would you describe God’s beauty? And what does it mean to you to ‘belong to him’?



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I hope you have enjoyed this sample. The complete book (183 pages) is available on Amazon in Kindle and paperback formats. Please email me if you have questions:

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<sup>9</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, page 54.