



Today

refresh, refocus, renew

May/June 2022

THE BIBLE:
A STORY OF
Beauty

ALSO: THE APOSTLES' CREED

Friends:

Since the early centuries of the church, many Christians around the world have used the Apostles' Creed as a confession of faith summarizing the Bible's teaching about God's gift of salvation in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. For the month of May, I had the privilege of writing devotions centered on the Apostles' Creed. My prayer is that as we reflect on the creed this month, we will be renewed in our love and service for the holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.



In June, Pastor Rebecca Jordan Heys focuses on the theme of beauty in the Bible. Though God made us and the world “very good,” our rebellion against him has marred the beauty of our relationship with him, with each other, with our selves, and with the world around us. Through his Son, Jesus, however, God is restoring us and his world. These meditations share the Bible's perspective on beauty now and look forward to the day of Christ's return, when God's vision of beauty will be complete and we will enjoy full life forever with him.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed as you reflect on God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Kurt Selles

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"The Apostles' Creed"
Kurt Selles



**"The Bible: A Story of
Beauty"**
Rebecca Jordan Heys

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**ReFrame
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The Bible: A Story of Beauty

Rebecca Jordan Heys

This month, let's focus on the Bible as a story of beauty. God created a beautiful world. Human sin brought struggle, suffering, death, and destruction into that world. God's love, however, is so beautiful that it reaches beyond our sin to provide the beautiful sacrifice of Jesus. And Jesus calls us to follow him in a beautiful life of service. What's more, we look forward to the day when Jesus will return and the beauty in and throughout all of God's creation will be restored. Beauty is not just on the surface; it's present everywhere in the greatest story ever told.

Rev. Rebecca Jordan Heys is a pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is married to Kyle Heys, and they have two children.

GIVING VOICE

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech. . . .

—Psalm 19:1-2

Think of the ways we can give glory to God. When we speak, we can glorify God with our words. We can talk about God in ways that honor him. We can communicate God's love for us and for the whole world. We also learn and grow to know about God's glory when we hear others speak about it.

Psalm 19 shows that we can even learn about God's glory through nature. It says, "The heavens declare the glory of God." Another way to put it, according to this psalm, is that "the skies proclaim the work of his hands." This is a strange and poetic picture. The sky can't talk! The psalm acknowledges this in verse 3: "They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them." And yet the sky, by its simple, beautiful existence, communicates to the world about God, its creator.

God has created a beautiful world. This world, simply by being what God created it to be, gives voice to the beauty of God himself. People can glorify God with their words, by loving each other and themselves, and by caring for the world that God loves.

The sky uses its clouds, rainbows, and shades of gray and blue to tell about the glory of God. Think of all that we can do as we use our words and even our whole life to share about the glory of our great God!

Glorious God, just as the sky proclaims your creative love and power, let me give you glory in all I think, say, and do. Amen.

IT WAS GOOD

God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. . . ." —Genesis 1:25-26

Imagine an artist who works hard at a sculpture day after day. Often she'll stand back to look at her work, and if she's not satisfied with how it looks, she'll keep working on the sculpture. When she's happy and proud of what she's completed, she'll say that the work is good. She'll look on it with satisfaction and joy.

When Genesis 1 speaks of God creating the heavens and the earth, it does so by describing a pattern of six days. And several times in the process we read, "God saw that it was good." God took joy and satisfaction in the things he created. God saw that the world was good and beautiful.

God made the world to be beautiful: the light, the sky, the land, the sun, the fish, the animals. God called all of these things "good." And when God created human beings, God

created them in his own image. Men and women are all created in the image of God, beautiful like their creator.

If you are ever tempted to doubt your own worth as a person, remember that the creator of the universe made you in his own image. Remember that God looks on his beautiful creation, including you, and calls you "good" and beautiful.

Creator God, thank you for making a good world and for making us in your own image. Help us to recognize your beautiful image in others and in ourselves. Amen.

BEAUTIFUL VARIETY

How many are your works, LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. —Psalm 104:24

Some of my friends have gotten into birding in the past few years. They keep a list of every type of bird they see. They travel to parks and other special places where they are likely to see a new species of bird to add to their list. When they tell me about it, I am amazed at the number of different species of birds that are out there to be seen. This is true across the animal kingdom: scientists say that the number of different types of creatures on the earth is in the millions.

This vast diversity is a beautiful part of God's creation, as Psalm 104 shows. In his wisdom God made so many different animals and plants that we haven't been able to count them all. And in his wisdom God made many different cultures and people as well. This psalm uses poetry to tell about the powerful and beauti-

ful way God made the world. It invites us to praise God for such diverse beauty and for creating the world in the best way possible.

Each of us brings our own type of beauty to the world. Each little brown sparrow sings just a few notes. And God combines with that the huge variety of sounds and other signs of beauty in this world. In all these ways God displays his love for his creation. Let's praise God for creating a world that is so beautiful and diverse!

Creative God, I praise you because you knew exactly what to create to make the world so beautiful. Thank you for this world that bursts with more variety than I can understand. Amen.

I AM BEAUTIFUL

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. —Psalm 139:14

It's easy for us to think that we lack beauty. For example, you may feel that you don't meet the beauty standards set by the world today. If you don't look like a fashion model, maybe you feel less beautiful than others. Or you may feel that your life doesn't meet the standards of a beautiful life. Maybe you have made mistakes in the past that you continue to regret. Perhaps your family and professional life haven't turned out the way you had hoped. Or you may have habits and behavior that you aren't proud of. You may also feel that you don't have much internal beauty either.

But God has something different to say. In Psalm 139, God assures us that we are "wonderfully made." God's creative power was at work not just in forming galaxies at the beginning of time, but also in form-

ing each unique part of you. God made you beautiful.

Psalm 139 assures us that the God who formed us before we were born is still intimately involved in our lives. The God who made you beautiful at the beginning continues to show you grace and to restore you to beauty every day. By God's grace, you are not defined by the mistakes you have made or the ugly parts of your life. You are defined by the love of the God who created you in beauty.

Ever-present God, you know everything about me, even my failures, and yet you love me. Thank you for creating me to be beautiful. Thank you for your grace that sees me as beautiful still. Amen.

BEAUTY BEYOND UNDERSTANDING

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!"
—Job 38:4-5

In a poem, the Dutch writer Corrie Ten Boom compares her life to a tapestry woven by God. She says that God weaves both joy and sorrow into her life, and it is as though she sees only the back of the tapestry. She says she cannot understand how the strands could ever make something beautiful. But God understands and has a plan for how everything in her life will come together for his beautiful purpose.

Job, to whom God is speaking in our reading today, is a bit like that—seeing only the back of the tapestry of his life. Job has had to deal with terrible suffering and tragedy, and he does not understand why it all happened. God responds with a poetic speech about the creation of the world. God is the one who created everything, including things that are so mysterious that we don't even

know how to speak about them. God reminds Job of this in order to both challenge and assure him. God challenges Job to be humble about his own knowledge. And God assures Job that he has a plan, even though it may be hard to understand.

We are like Job in this way too. There are many things about God's purposes that we do not understand. But God promises to provide for us and for the world he has beautifully made.

Provider God, you have assured us that you love us and are at work in our lives. Give us confidence to trust in you. Amen.

CARETAKERS OF BEAUTY

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."
—Genesis 1:28

In earlier parts of the creation story in Genesis 1, we are told that God looked on his work and "saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:9, 12, 18, 21, 25). God knew that his creation was beautiful and good, and God affirmed that goodness as he created new things.

Then, after God had finished creating everything in this world, including humankind, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."

The *very goodness* of God's creation is good for us to remember as we hear the command that God gives to the man and woman in Genesis 1.

God told people to be fruitful, and he told them to subdue the earth. We are often tempted to hear this command as a mandate to use the earth in whatever way we might wish.

But God wants us to care for the beautiful earth that he declared to be "very good." As the story continues, we learn that God placed humankind in the garden "to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). So our calling is to preserve the earth and to tend it well, celebrating the beautiful place God made it to be.

Subduing the earth and ruling over it is something we do with humility and gratitude, giving honor and glory to our creator for the very good place he has given us to live.

Mighty God, we praise you for creating the world to be very good. Give us humility and grace to care for your world and to tend it well, to your honor and glory. Amen.

BEAUTIFUL HOLINESS

Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness. . . . He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.
—Psalm 96:9, 13

God is perfectly beautiful “in the splendor of his holiness.” The more we know about God’s perfect holiness, the more we realize that we are *not* perfectly holy and beautiful. We realize we don’t live up to the way God created us to live. We don’t love other people the way God wants them to be loved. We don’t live the way God designed us to live. Our sin separates us from God, because sinfulness cannot stand in the presence of God’s perfect, beautiful holiness.

Psalm 96 describes the greatness and splendor of God, who is perfectly holy and calls us to come before him with an offering. We are called to “worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness,” and yet we know how often we have failed to live as God commands. How can we truly worship God if we are not holy?

The good news that we know today is that God deals with the imperfection of our sin by giving us his perfect grace. God chooses to get rid of our sin—not by punishing us—but by taking the punishment on himself in Jesus. The more we see God’s perfection, the more we know our own imperfection. And the more we know our own imperfection, the more we are grateful for God’s perfect love, which accepts us by grace through the gift of Jesus’ life for us.

Holy God, we confess that our lives do not reflect the perfect beauty of who you are. We need your forgiveness and grace to bring us back to you. Amen.

BEAUTY LOST AND RESTORED

Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle.
—Psalm 107:4

One way to understand the beauty that God created is to understand its opposite: the ugliness and sorrow of being separated from God. Because of our sin, this world is not the way it ought to be. Sin has brought hardship and ugliness into our lives and into this world, though God designed it all to be beautiful.

We know that God has restoration in mind because we don't feel "at home" in a world broken because of sin. We are homesick for a world of peace and beauty. We are homesick to be with God. When we're stuck in brokenness and facing the ugliness of this world of sin, we feel homesick for God's world of goodness and beauty.

Psalm 107 points out the sorrow and longing of this homesickness. The world can feel like a wasteland, providing no place where people can

rest, no place where they can settle and be at peace. But the Lord, whose "love endures forever," offers redemption. The Lord hears his people cry out in their trouble caused by sin, and he delivers them from distress. God brings them to a place where they can settle and live in peace. "He satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things."

Ultimately we know that all of life's goodness and beauty will be restored when Jesus comes again, and the new life he provides us even now gives us hope for eternity with God.

Lord, we feel homesick for you and for your peace when we struggle with the hurt and brokenness of this world. Bring us near to you, we pray. Amen.

SINKING

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink into the miry depths. . . .
—Psalm 69:1

Imagine being a sailor or part of a fishing crew at the time the biblical psalms were written. The waters are important for your livelihood, but they can also threaten you. The waters of a river, lake, or sea can turn dangerous and chaotic. Stormy waves can be scary, and heavy rains can bring dangerous, destructive flooding.

Psalm 69 uses this imagery to describe troubles and hardship that threaten to turn God's beauty and order in our lives into chaos. Our own sin and the sins of others can disrupt our lives so much that it can feel like we are drowning.

Some of us know from experience what it's like to deal with flooding or with a storm at sea. And all of us have seen destructive threats to our own lives and in the world around us through broken relation-

ships, addiction, violence, division, and disease.

When we are threatened by such chaos, we can cry to God for help. The writer of Psalm 69 prays, "In your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation." God's salvation is sure indeed, even when we feel afraid. The threatening waters of sin and brokenness will not overwhelm us in the end, because God promises to keep us safe.

Rescuing God, sometimes things in this world and in my own heart threaten to overwhelm me like a flood. Save me, Lord, by your great power and love. Amen.

FADING BEAUTY

The life of mortals is like . . . a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone. . . . But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him. —Psalm 103:15-17

Like many insects, the mayfly has a lifespan of less than a day. Even if it is healthy and isn't squashed by someone's shoe, the mayfly will not live more than 24 hours. This seems so brief to us! But in the grand scope of the universe, human life is also brief. Compared to the age of our planet, a human life of even a hundred years seems short.

Psalm 103 uses the example of flowers in a field to describe how short our life is. These plants are beautiful, but they last for just a season, and some of them bloom for only a day.

The same is true for us. Even though our lives have value and beauty, our bodies will eventually die. This can feel frightening to us. It can make us feel insignificant, and it shows us we have no control over the circumstances of our

own death or when it will come.

But Psalm 103 assures us that we can place our hope in God, who created us and watches over our lives. "From everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him." This promised love will last longer than we could imagine. The beauty of our lives will fade, but the beauty of God's care, protection, and love for us will last forever.

Eternal God, I confess that I can be frightened by the briefness of my life and of the lives of people I love. Teach me to rely on your love, which is "from everlasting to everlasting." Amen.

GOD CLEANSES

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.
—Psalm 51:10-11

Sometimes we use fancy language in our prayers to God. It can sound as if we are trying to make a good impression. Other times, though, we are direct and brutally honest in our prayers, confessing our sin with a broken heart because we know we have failed.

Psalm 51 is a brutally honest prayer. The psalmist describes sin as a great stain on his life. He knows that the sin he has done messes up the beauty of his life. Sin is offensive to God, and it needs to be washed away.

Just as surely as sin stains a person's life, God has the power to wipe that life clean again. The psalmist prays for forgiveness, asking God to cleanse him and make his life beautiful again. The honesty of the confession is possible because of the trust that God will hear and forgive.

Because of the grace of Jesus shown to us on the cross, we can also pray to God with brutal honesty, confessing the stain of our sin and asking God to give us pure hearts again. God promises to cleanse us and make us beautiful again. God promises to take away our guilt and shame and to renew our spirits. Our honest confession is met with God's faithful grace and love.

God, I need your forgiveness. When I'm honest, I know that I have sinned against you. By your grace and love, take away my sin and restore me to beauty and wholeness. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WE HAVE SEEN HIS GLORY

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son. . . .

—John 1:14

Many Christians have sung praise to Jesus for his beauty in these words by Joseph A. Seiss: “Beautiful Savior! King of creation! Son of God and Son of Man! Truly I’d love thee, truly I’d serve thee, Light of my soul, my joy, my crown.”

Jesus is the King of creation. He was present at the beginning of time, and he now rules over all things. And when Jesus came to live among us, to die for our sin, and to rise again in victory over death, we saw his beauty and his glory. We saw the beauty and glory of God revealed to us in Jesus.

The gospel of John begins by telling us about “the Word,” which is how John describes Jesus. “The Word became flesh,” says John—and this means that we can know the glory and beauty of God be-

cause we know Jesus, who became human like us.

John states that “no one has ever seen God.” But John also explains that God’s perfect beauty doesn’t have to be just a distant concept or an unreachable mystery to us. In Jesus, God offers us his beauty. In Jesus, we are invited into the beauty of God forever. We can respond just as the hymn says, by promising to our beautiful Savior that we will truly love him and truly serve him.

“Beautiful Savior! Lord of the nations! Son of God and Son of Man! Glory and honor, praise, adoration, now and forevermore be thine!”

Jesus, our Savior, Word-made-flesh, hear our thanks, we pray, and receive our praise. Amen.

COLORS OF HOPE

"I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth." —Genesis 9:13

If the sun is shining while rain is falling, that is often a good time to look for a rainbow. The sunlight shines through water droplets to form a beautiful spectrum of color across the sky.

The beauty of the rainbow can be surprising and spectacular. A rainbow that appears after a frightening storm can bring a hopeful promise of clearer weather ahead.

God used the rainbow to give a sign of hope to Noah, and that is a reminder for us still today. After the world was destroyed by a flood because of the people's sin, God promised never to send such a flood again. God promised not to let sin come between him and his people. The rainbow is a beautiful sign of hope because it is like a bow without arrows, as if hung on a wall after battle, never to be fired again. That

reminds us of the promise that God will always love us.

When you see a rainbow, you can see it as a part of God's beautiful creation. You can also see it as a sign of God's beautiful promise of salvation, a promise God is sure to keep.

God of promises, we praise you because your promises are sure. Give us hope in the future you have promised to bring. Assure us with signs of your love for us. Amen.

HIS NAME IS GRACE

"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness . . . forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."
—Exodus 34:6-7

What do you say when you introduce yourself? Most people introduce themselves by saying their name, and they might tell about something they like to do, what their work is, or where they are from. People can learn some important things about you right away, just from the words of your introduction.

In our reading from Exodus today, God meets with Moses and pauses to describe himself so that the people can know who he is. God calls himself "the LORD" and says he is "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." Similar descriptions of God are included in many places in the Bible. The gracious nature of God is at

the heart of his identity. How beautiful!

Knowing who God is, we can take comfort that nothing from our past, present, or future will separate us from God's love. When we meet the God of grace, we can find peace, knowing that God is forgiving, patient, and loving. God's grace and forgiveness lead us to know him, and his patience and lovingkindness faithfully guide us to follow him forever.

Lord, I praise you for your beautiful name. You are compassionate and merciful. I praise you for forgiving my sin, and for guiding me to follow you always. Amen.

SO MANY WONDERS

Many, LORD my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. None can compare with you.

—Psalm 40:5

Sometimes we act as if we can fix the problem of sin in our lives. We imagine that if we improve ourselves, we can be free of sin and guilt. We think that if we just work hard enough, our lives will become better. And if our friends and family would just listen to us, our relationships would become better too.

But the problem is too big for us. We cannot save ourselves from the problem of our separation from God. We cannot even stop ourselves from sinning. Only God can do that.

Psalm 40 sings praise to the God who saves us. It sings praise to the God who is strong enough to conquer sin and is gracious enough to do that for us. It sings praise to the God who chose not to stay separated from us but came to save us and restore us to himself.

Psalm 40 sings of a salvation so great that only God could accomplish it. God has loved us in so many ways.

The psalmist says to God, "Were I to speak and tell of your deeds, they would be too many to declare." The many wonders God has done to save us are beautiful. Our abundant and beautiful salvation comes from God, the only one who can save us.

God of salvation, I am overwhelmed by the beauty and greatness of your love for us all. Thank you for saving me; I could not save myself. Help me to praise you for the wonders you have done. Amen.

BEAUTY REVEALED

"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it. . . . How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God."
—Genesis 28:16-17

I often pray that God would give me more clear examples of his presence and beauty in my life. I hear about Christians who have a vibrant prayer life, or who feel the presence of God so surely, and I wish that I had those experiences more often myself. I pray that God would show up more in my life.

Those are good desires to have and good prayers to pray. But I could also pray for the ability to see God's beautiful salvation that is already present in my life and in the world.

That's what Jacob was able to see. He had a dream about a stairway with the angels of God going up and down on it. God spoke directly to Jacob in that dream, reminding him of God's promises to love him and to care for his family. When Jacob awoke, he said, "Surely the

LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." The beauty of God's salvation had been with him all along.

That doesn't always happen in dreams, but God does assure us that he is true to his promises. I am thankful that God's presence is always with me, whether I recognize it or not.

I pray that God will be near, and I also pray that I will be able to recognize God's presence and beauty all around.

God of Jacob, I praise you for your presence in my life. Thank you for the times when I am surprised by your beauty and your loving presence, assuring me that you are always with me. Amen.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL KINGDOM POSSIBLE

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."*

—Matthew 5:3-5

People often say that they are "blessed" when they are enjoying good things in life: a beautiful sunset, time with their loved ones, a comfortable place to live, exciting travels. But when we hear what Jesus taught about being "blessed," we get a different picture. Jesus describes a number of people who seem to be the opposite of blessed. The list includes people who are broken down, struggling, or even persecuted. How could Jesus call them blessed?

Through his life and teaching, Jesus introduced a new kind of world. It was a new way of understanding what a beautiful community looks like. Jesus called this beautiful new community "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven." And in God's kingdom, the typical priorities of our world

(wealth, pride, winning at all costs) are turned upside down.

In God's kingdom, Jesus says all people are welcome, not just those who are rich or respectable. In God's kingdom, a beautiful life of mercy and peace is possible by God's grace. We may feel disoriented at first when we follow Jesus, because his values are not the values of the world. But the right-side-up kingdom of God is good news for us and for the whole world, because it is the most beautiful kingdom possible.

Jesus, thank you for bringing the kingdom of God. Thank you for teaching us about a beautiful new kind of world, even though it can seem upside down to us at first. Amen.

BEAUTIFUL DEATH

[Jesus] gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

—Matthew 27:50-51

You might wonder why the title of this meditation is “Beautiful Death.” The Bible affirms life, so how could any death be considered beautiful?

But, in a way, this title is similar to the name “Good Friday,” which we use to refer to the day of Jesus’ death. In some ways that day was not good at all. We mourn the death of Jesus, and we regret the sin that caused him to die. But in other ways the day has been very good indeed. The death of Jesus is good news for the world, because in his death Jesus tore down the barrier between God and sinful humanity. Now we can be united with God because of Jesus’ death. So we can say that the death of Jesus was beautiful.

The book of Matthew adds that at the moment of Jesus’ death, “the curtain of the tem-

ple was torn in two from top to bottom.” That curtain barred the way to the holiest room in the temple. It represented the separation between the holy God and his sinful people. But because of Jesus’ death, the curtain was not needed anymore. People could be united with God again. God loved the world so much that he sent Jesus to die, uniting us with himself again—and that is beautiful!

Lord Jesus, we praise you for your great love, shown by your death for all who believe in you. Thank you for your beautiful death, which unites us with God again. Amen.

BEAUTIFUL LOVE

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

—1 Corinthians 13:1

Imagine that you want to impress a friend with a special party. You put all your energy and attention into getting the details just right. But you get so stressed out in the process that you ignore your friend. Your friend might say, "I don't want a fancy party; I just want to spend time with you!" In your efforts to make something beautiful, you end up missing the point. Your friend doesn't require a lot of fanfare and expense; your friend just wants the beauty of your personal time and attention.

Some of the Christians in the city of Corinth had the special gifts of speaking in tongues and prophesying. They thought these gifts were impressive, and the whole community tended to focus on these displays of faith. As a result, though, they ended up missing the point of Christian community, which is

to love one another. The apostle Paul wrote them a letter (1 Corinthians) to encourage them to get back to the basics. And in chapter 13 he describes the self-sacrificial kind of love (*agape*) that follows the pattern of Jesus himself.

Jesus has shown us the most beautiful way, the way of love. Following his example, we can let go of worrying about being impressive. Instead, we can focus on what's truly beautiful—and that is self-sacrificial love.

God, sometimes we get distracted and forget about the most beautiful thing of all. Restore us again to the beauty of your love in Jesus. Amen.

THE GOOD LIFE

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.
—Psalm 1:3

A group of volunteers planted some new trees last spring in the neighborhood where I live. As a resident, I received the gift of two trees in front of my house. My responsibility now is to make sure the trees are well-watered so that they can flourish and grow. The huge old oak trees in my backyard do just fine with rainwater alone. But the new young trees need some extra watering until they grow deep roots and can survive on their own.

The Bible's message is that God created us in love and has saved us through faith in Jesus, by grace alone. As people saved by grace, we are invited to live the good life that God has designed for us. We live this way not to earn our salvation, but to show our gratitude to God, to grow in faith, and to flourish in the good life God wants for us. God has given us

salvation as a free gift, and we gratefully aim to follow God's law because it's the best way to live. It's what we were designed for.

Psalm 1 says that living this good life is like being a tree planted by streams of water. That tree will yield fruit and will not wither, because the tree is living the way it is meant to live, nourished by the water of life given by its creator. So it is with people. When we are planted and nourished by God's way of love, we will flourish.

God, make me like a tree planted by streams of water. Root my life in your law of love, so that I can live the way you have designed me to live. Amen.

SANCTIFIED LIVING

God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.
—Romans 5:5

In the film *Tender Mercies*, a man and a young boy are baptized. Afterward, the boy says, "Everybody said I was gonna feel like a changed person. I guess I do feel a little different, but I don't feel a whole lot different. Do you?" The man responds: "Not yet."

It's a charming, light-hearted conversation, but it gets at something true about the Christian life. When you are saved by Jesus, or when you are baptized as a sign of your salvation, you do not instantly become a good person. We even notice that sometimes non-Christians are more kind or more generous than some Christians are.

The Bible explains that the Holy Spirit is at work in every person's life. When a person is being transformed by Jesus, the process is gradual. The person's life begins to change, to

become more beautiful—and it might happen so slowly that we barely notice it. But Romans 5 promises that the Holy Spirit is at work both now and in the future, in good times and in bad. The Spirit uses even the suffering in our lives to shape us into people of perseverance, character, and hope.

If you have committed to following Jesus, you might not feel different yet. But you can trust that the Holy Spirit is working in your life.

Holy Spirit, change me to make me more like Jesus. Give me patience with your steady work in my life. Make my life a beautiful reflection of God's love for me. Amen.

IN THE SANCTUARY

One thing I ask from the LORD . . . to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.
—Psalm 27:4

The word *sanctuary* can refer to two different things. It describes a place that is holy, set apart for worship. It also describes a place of safety, where someone in danger can go to find shelter and protection.

Psalm 27 helps us understand how the two meanings of this word overlap. When we have received salvation from God, we are called to worship God. We go to the sanctuary to offer God our worship. We do this not for our own sake, but for God's sake. God is holy and beautiful and calls us to worship him, so we offer God our worship.

But when we give God our worship, we receive a wonderful gift as well. Psalm 27 describes the presence of God as a place of safety. Because God is our Savior, we receive comfort and security in God's presence. When we go to the

sanctuary to worship God, we give God worship, and we receive peace from God.

This is why the psalmist longs to worship God. The beauty of the Lord compels the psalmist to go to the sanctuary of the Lord and worship him.

We can rejoice in following God's command to worship too. For as we worship God, we receive his comfort, peace blessing, strength, and renewed energy to live for him. God is our stronghold—of whom shall we be afraid?

Beautiful Lord, help me to worship you. May I humbly offer you all my praise. Thank you also for granting me peace and security in your presence. Amen.

THE SERVICE OF LOVE

"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example. . . ."
—John 13:14-15

A few days ago (June 19) we reflected on 1 Corinthians 13, which gives a picture of the beautiful love that Jesus calls us to live by. It's a love that is patient, kind, does not envy, does not boast, and is not proud. We show this kind of love in humility and with acts of kindness and service.

Jesus showed this kind of love when he washed his disciples' feet. John 13 tells us about it. Jesus dressed himself like a servant, wrapping a towel around his waist and getting down on the floor. The disciples felt embarrassed that Jesus would do such a thing. But he explained that a beautiful life consists of receiving this kind of servant-love from him and then sharing it with others.

This is one of the most direct commands that Jesus gives us in the Bible about how to

follow his example. Though washing people's feet may not be a part of our culture today, there are many other ways to serve people with the love of Christ. We can listen to them; we can advocate for them; we can share our time and gifts. We can show people everywhere the humble love of Christ, and we can encourage them to show Christ's love to others. In this way the love of Christ can spread everywhere and transform the world!

Jesus, our servant-King, we are so grateful for the humble love you have shown to us. Give us the humility to receive this love from you and to share it with others everywhere. In your name, Amen.

SMELLS BEAUTIFUL

"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me."
—Mark 14:6

After Jesus died, his body was supposed to be anointed. That was the custom with dead bodies, to honor the deceased and help keep away the smell of decay. But when a group of women came to anoint Jesus' body in the tomb (Mark 16), they could not find it! Jesus had risen from the dead.

This helps to explain an important detail in our reading for today. A few days before Jesus died, a woman anointed him at a dinner gathering using expensive perfume. Some of the guests were offended at the waste, but Jesus was not. He said, "She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial" (v. 8). Even if the woman didn't know it then, her act of honor and devotion hinted at the resurrection; she was anointing Jesus because he wouldn't be anointed later.

Jesus said that what she did was beautiful. Any action that points to the resurrection of Jesus is beautiful. When we preach about the resurrection today, it is beautiful. When a hospice nurse gives tender care to a dying person, it is beautiful. When we raise children to live with courage in a world of fear, it is beautiful. When we are willing to give up trying to control things that we can't control, even though it makes us afraid of our limits, it is beautiful. Jesus rose from the dead, and celebrating that fact is a beautiful way to live.

Risen Lord Jesus, we praise you for your victory over death. We praise you that as the anointed King, you would die and rise again to give us new life. Amen.

BEAUTIFUL UNITY

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head. . . .

—Psalm 133:1-2

The unity of God's people is a beautiful thing. The Bible calls it "good and pleasant."

"Good and pleasant" unity is not always easy to see, however. You may not feel the beauty of unity with other Christians when you disagree with them. Or when you feel that they are cruel to you or to others. Or when you simply do not understand why they act and believe the way they do. You might find yourself thinking, "How could unity with *them* be beautiful?"

Psalm 133 says that the unity of God's people is like oil anointing a priest, or like dew on a mountain. Those were both considered beautiful things by the people of Israel. And those were both seen as gracious gifts from God. The people didn't give the priest his authority (represented by

anointing oil); that was God's doing. And the people didn't put the dew on the mountain; only God could do that.

Similarly, we cannot create Christian unity by our own efforts. Only the grace of Jesus can unite us with each other in Christian community.

We know that each one of us is saved only by the grace of Jesus. This means that none of us deserves salvation—and yet we receive salvation anyway. We can live in unity by the power of that grace.

God of grace, show me the beautiful and gracious gift of Christian unity. Unite me with Jesus and with all who follow him. Amen.

BEAUTIFUL COMMUNITY

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. —Acts 2:42

God has redeemed us in Jesus and called us to live beautiful lives of gratitude and joy.

Each of us can do that alone in some ways. Alone, I can pray to God, read Scripture, and enjoy and care for God's creation.

However, God also calls us to live beautiful lives of gratitude and joy *together*, as a community.

The first followers of Jesus provide us a model of how to do this well. Their ordinary, everyday habits helped to make this community beautiful. They committed their time to doing ordinary things like learning from their teachers, spending time together, eating together, and praying together. They didn't worry about accumulating money and possessions; they shared with anyone who was in need. They celebrated

the Lord's Supper and shared celebratory meals together.

Participating in a local church is the best way to live out this kind of beautiful Christian community today. And if that isn't possible, perhaps you can connect with a Christian ministry online or by phone or mail. Join with others in correspondence and prayer, and try to participate in Christian community as much as possible, expressing the beauty of life together in the name of Jesus.

God, thank you for the gift of Christian community. Show us opportunities to follow you in the way we live our lives together. Shape us into a beautiful community, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

MOUNTAIN FEAST

*On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast. . . .
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces. . . .*

—Isaiah 25:6-8

As we reflect on the beauty of God, the beauty of his creation, and the beauty of living and serving together as God's people, it's important also to look ahead. The Bible includes many promises about the restored beauty that Jesus brings, and about the beautiful life that this restoration invites us to live.

The world we live in now is still tainted by the pollution and ugliness of sin, but we need to remember that it is also filled with signs of beautiful hope. The Bible promises that one day Jesus will return to make all things new.

For example, Isaiah 25 points to a future celebration, a feast on the holy mountain of God. The joy and happiness that we feel at a wedding celebration or at an anniversary party is like a glimpse of the future

celebration that God has in store for us. And in that beautiful future, Isaiah says, God will take away all sadness and sorrow and disgrace. The prophet was speaking to people who were in exile, who had reason to be afraid—but he gave them words of hope.

We too live in hope as we await this beautiful future. We can trust that God will keep his promises.

God of the future, thank you for the promises you give us in your Word, saying you will make all things new. Give us hope and help us to serve you as we await that beautiful day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

MESSENGERS ON FOOT

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation. . . .
—Isaiah 52:7

When I watch or read the news, I sometimes feel sad because of all the pain and violence in the world. Other times I feel angry, and it seems that the news is even designed to make people angry. I'm ready to hear good news.

The prophet Isaiah spoke to God's people at a time when they needed to hear good news. They were in exile, and they longed to return to their homeland and the city of Jerusalem.

God had such good news for the people that Isaiah said the feet of those who brought this news were beautiful. It's not that the messengers' feet were actually beautiful; they were probably dirty, blistered, and smelly after a long journey! But the news of restoration was so good and full of the hope of blessing that it helped people

to appreciate the feet that brought this news to them.

The good news was that God reigns. No matter what bad news we hear, God is still in control of this world. No matter how sad or angry we might feel about the news of the world, God promises us a future of beauty and perfect peace. Just as God restored his people in ancient times, so too God will one day restore the world for all time. This is such good news that it helps us to persevere, looking ahead to the day when God will renew all things.

God, you rule over all things, and you will make everything beautiful again someday. Thank you for that good news! Amen.

BEAUTIFUL NEW DWELLING PLACE

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.
—Revelation 21:2

God doesn't tell us exactly what his coming kingdom will be like. But God does give us some pictures in the Bible to help us look forward in hope.

In Revelation 21, John describes a vision of the new heaven and new earth. He sees the city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. In the world as John knew it, the people could go to the temple in Jerusalem to be with God. But in this vision, the city comes down out of heaven to be with the people.

John describes the city as "a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." The city was radiant, looking beautiful for the sake of celebration and love.

All of this sounds nice, but the best news comes when John hears what this means. A voice tells him that the coming of this beautiful city means that

God will now live with his people. Because of the presence of God, in the new heaven and earth there will be "no more death or mourning or crying or pain." God will restore his creation to complete wholeness and peace.

When you face death or mourning or crying or pain in your life today, take courage. Though these things are very difficult, they are not forever. God will make all things new.

God of hope, be near to us in our struggles. Give us courage to face the unknown future. Give us trust that we can know that you will make all things new. Amen.

FILLED WITH WONDER AND PRAISE

I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you. . . .

—Psalm 145:1-2

In the hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” Charles Wesley describes our life in God’s coming kingdom: “Changed from glory into glory . . . we [will] cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

Living in the presence of God, we will be so filled with wonder, love, and praise for the Lord that, in a way, we won’t be able to think of anything else.

The celebration in Psalm 145 is similar. The psalmist is filled with praise and wonder at the beauty of God and all God’s works. The writer sings about it in grand language. He says he will praise God “for ever and ever . . . every day.” He says that no one can fathom God’s greatness. God’s majesty is described with “glorious splendor,” and God’s goodness is

described as “abundant.” God is “gracious and compassionate,” and all his works “tell of the glory” of his everlasting kingdom. With such an amazing God, no wonder the psalmist is filled with praise.

Because we have such a great and beautiful future promised to us, we can resonate with some other phrases in Wesley’s hymn as we look forward to God’s kingdom in hope: “Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be. Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee.”

Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Fill us with wonder, love, and praise as we reflect on your beauty. We praise you for being such a great and loving God. Amen.

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