

# God *as* Artist




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## 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” (*Psalm 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.*

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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?

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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 Dostoyevsky created a fictional character who had, Dostoyevsky 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 for 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! However the music may have sounded, 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?

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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.

## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Psalm 27:4*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Describe how the designs of God—as revealed in the sanctuary, the natural world, and other artistic works—help us to understand and appreciate His character.

**Feel:** Absorb the beauty whereby God illustrates His inner loveliness.

**Do:** Accept God’s right to mold us, as well as the personal love that the Divine Potter displays as He models us into vessels for His glory.

► **Learning Outline:**

### I. Know: The Great Designer

**A** How is the prodigious amount of attention that God paid to the details of the sanctuary indicative of God’s character? What does this teach us about worship?

**B** In what ways does the Great Designer work, and what do they teach about the character of their Maker?

### II. Feel: Beauty of Holiness

**A** What aspects of God’s beauty—as revealed in nature, music, the architecture of worship, and His Word—help to re-create our souls into God’s likeness?

**B** What environments help us to be most receptive to God’s influence?

### III. Do: We Are the Pots

**A** Sometimes it’s easy to forget that we are the pots being molded and not the Potter doing the molding. What is the benefit of allowing God to fulfill His role as Potter?

**B** What can we do to make it easier for God to mold us?

► **Summary:** God, the great Artist, has revealed His beauty through many artistic expressions, one of the greatest of which is the development of His likeness in our hearts.



## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** This week’s lesson focuses on the infinite creative genius of God. Although sin has marred God’s creation, it has not blotted out the beauty of God’s creative expression, which is found in the spiritual and physical realms.

**Just for Teachers:** As you lead your class in discussion of this week’s lesson, examine the artistry of God versus that of fallen human beings. While we are capable of tremendous artistic achievements, they still pale in comparison to that of God.

Art is often subjective. The paintings of Monet move many people, but a great many more don’t quite understand why they fetch tons of money at auction. Many also have visited cities and wondered at the “art” dotting business districts and town squares.

When human beings express their creative power, beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder. However, when God creates, few can dispute the elegance and beauty of His work, even if they do not ascribe such beauty to Him.

**Consider This:** Ask the class to share things that they would consider to be beautiful pieces of art. After all have had a chance to share, ask the class to create some criteria for what can be considered beautiful and what cannot.

### ► **STEP 2—Explore**

**Just for Teachers:** As you explore this week’s Bible Commentary section, focus on the elegant solutions that underpin God’s creative genius. In other words, God’s creativity is not simply expressed in order to serve His need to see beauty. The beauty that God creates always has a deeper purpose that blesses humanity and honors God.

## Bible Commentary

### I. The Marriage of Beauty and Purpose (*Review Exodus 25:1–9 and 1 Peter 2:9*)

Compare, for a moment, the awesome beauty of the portable wilderness sanctuary with the building made up of human beings alluded to in 1 Peter 2:9. As Monday’s study beautifully illustrates, God leaves no detail to chance in the construction of His temple. God designed it all

Himself, selected all the materials, directed the construction, inspected the workmanship, and blessed the finished product.

Could God be similarly particular about the people who bear His name and claim to follow Him? Consider for a moment 1 Peter 2:9, the oft-quoted call to be God's witnesses to the world. The people of God are chosen, royal, and peculiar, but this group is more than just a bunch of pretty faces. They are to "proclaim the praises of Him who called [them] out of darkness into His marvelous light" (*NKJV*). The word *praises* literally means "excellencies" or "perfections," with emphasis on these qualities actively manifested in deeds. Reference here is to God's glorious character, abounding love, and gracious provision for the salvation of sinners (*see Exod. 34:6, 7*). God acquired the church as His own special possession in order that its members might reflect His precious traits of character in their own lives, and proclaim His goodness and mercy to all people.

**Consider This:** Compare and contrast the beauty of God's wilderness sanctuary with all the beauty that should adorn the people of God. For instance, God was very specific about the priestly garments that should adorn those who minister before Him. Is God any less peculiar about dress today? How do we reconcile God's beauty standards with the "come-as-you-are" ethic found in Scripture?

## II. More Than a Song (*Review 1 Chronicles 23:5, 2 Chronicles 29:25, and 2 Chronicles 5.*)

Worship is a key theme in the Bible. The entire great controversy is about whom we human beings will choose to worship. Perhaps no two books in the Bible give us a better picture of God's response to music in worship than 1 and 2 Chronicles.

We learned this week from 2 Samuel 23:1, 2 and 2 Chronicles 29:25 that God directed King David's choice of music. How awesome is that? If God delivered an entire nation from captivity so that they could worship Him and He dwell among them (*Exod. 25:8*), why wouldn't He be careful about every aspect of the worship experience?

At the dedication of the temple built by Solomon, God responded powerfully to the certain happenings in the dedication service. Once the ark of the covenant arrived, "The trumpeters and musicians joined in unison to give praise and thanks to the Lord. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals, and other instruments, the singers raised their voices in praise to the Lord and sang: 'He is good; his love endures forever.' Then the temple of the Lord was filled with the cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple

of God” (*2 Chron. 5:13, 14, NIV*). This gives new meaning to the phrase “inhabits praise,” doesn’t it?

**Consider This:** Music in worship continues to be one of the most controversial subjects in the church today. If we have the blueprint of musical expression in Scripture, why is there so much rancor about what is and is not appropriate in worship? What was it about the music played at the temple dedication service that attracted the presence of God?

### ► **STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** Encourage your students to answer the personal inventory questions below. Allow time for those who may wish to share their responses.

#### Thought Questions:

- 1 God’s beauty is always purposeful, meaningful, and ennobling. If humans are created in God’s image, why do we struggle with the way we look? How much of this insecurity is due to secular messages about beauty that are uninformed by Scripture?
- 2 Read Psalm 139. Why is David so overwhelmed by God’s creativity? Given the awesome craftsmanship of God in the act of creating human beings, how can we become better stewards of our bodies?
- 3 Thursday’s lesson study documented God’s efforts to sculpt and remake human beings into His image. What most prevents God from finishing the job in our lives? What role does the Holy Spirit play in the process?

#### Application Questions:

- 1 This week’s lesson makes it clear that God’s sculpting can be painful. What aspects of your character would you most like God to beautify? Have you submitted them to Him?
- 2 How can you help others to see the beauty in themselves? How can you use God’s Word to show them how valuable they are to Him?

#### Questions for Witnessing:

- 1 Ellen G. White wrote that “Jesus had called His disciples that He might send them forth as His witnesses, to declare to the world what they had

seen and heard of Him. Their office was the most important to which human beings had ever been called, and was second only to that of Christ Himself.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 291. What beauty do you see in God’s willingness to share such a high and noble responsibility with fallen human beings? What does this tell you about that which God sees in us?

**2** What parts of the Bible are most beautiful to you? Select two or three of your favorite passages and share them with a friend who may not be a believer. When you share, focus on how these passages have helped you in life.

## ► **STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** Distribute slips of paper to the class, and read John Keats’ quotation aloud. Then ask the class to answer the following question: what on earth or in heaven is more beautiful than truth? Once the class has answered this question, consider its implications for the groups of people mentioned below.

The introduction to this week’s lesson quoted a snippet of “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” John Keats’s famous poem on beauty. The whole quotation reads, “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

In John 14:6, Jesus declares, among other things, that He is the Truth. Did you get that? Truth is a Person. Is there anything more beautiful or more important than knowing Jesus? Broadly speaking, how might the lives of the following groups of people be informed, changed, and enhanced by the truth as it is in Jesus?

1. Orphans
2. Politicians
3. Teenagers
4. Military commanders and soldiers
5. The wealthy
6. The sick and dying
7. Spouses
8. Parents
9. Pastors
10. Lawyers