

## CHAPTER 1

  
*The Beauty  
of God*  


**W**hat is the starting point of Christian faith? When you wake up and begin your morning study of the Bible, what are you seeking to find out? Or, to go back in time a bit, why did you begin to study the Bible in the first place?

The starting point of religion or spirituality for many today is the individual and his or her subjective feelings. What do I want? What do I need, in a spiritual sense? How can religion, and whatever superpower lies behind it, serve me and meet my desires? In short, what can I get from this deal? Sadly, even Christians are not immune to these questions.

Though biblical spirituality certainly addresses and responds to the heart-cries of lost sinners, its starting point is nothing

other than the living God. From the awe-inspiring opening of Genesis 1:1—“In the beginning God”—to the cataclysmic ending of Revelation 21:22—“in the city . . . is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb”—the Bible declares without interruption or apology that God is the starting and ending points of true religion. As portrayed in the Bible, God does not bow to man. Man, lost and helpless, bows to God.

The great New England pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards seized upon this central truth early in his life. When he was a young, budding scholar at Yale University, he suddenly discovered in his daily meditation on the Scripture “a sense of the glory of the divine being” that transformed his life (*Works* 16, 492). Reflecting later on this chrysalis moment, Edwards preached that with genuine faith “There is not only a speculatively judging that God is gracious, but a sense how amiable God is upon that account, or a sense of the beauty of this divine attribute” (*Works* 17, 413). When a sinner comes to understand the graciousness of God, and the majesty of His character, they see with piercing clarity that “There is a divine and superlative glory in these things; an excellency that is of a vastly higher kind, and more sublime nature than in other things; a glory greatly distinguishing them from all that is earthly and temporal” (*Works* 17, 413). In this chapter, we examine the center of Edwards’s theology, the Lord God, who formed the first link in a cycle of beauty that begins with creation and runs its course to heaven.

## The Starting Point of Theology

When the young Yale tutor pushed past the muddle of everyday life and became aware of God's ineffable character, it was as if scales fell from his eyes. The theater, the cosmic drama, of God's reign over the world came into view, and Jonathan stood transfixed. He saw heaven and hell, man and Satan, in clearer view than ever before. But above all, Jonathan saw the Lord. He knew then that God was no abstract deity, but was a personal being whom all creation could not contain. In his sermon "God's Excellencies," preached in 1720, the same year of his spiritual breakthrough, Jonathan considered the qualities of God that robbed Him in splendor. He prefaced his analysis with a warning of his unworthiness for the task:

WHAT POOR, MISERABLE CREATURES, then, are we, to talk of the infinite and transcendent gloriousness of the great, eternal, and almighty Jehovah; what miserable work do worms of the dust make, when they get upon such a theme as this, which the very angels do stammer at? But yet, although we are but worms and insects, less than insects, nothing at all, yea, less than nothing, yet so has God dignified us, that he has made [us] for this very end: to think and be astonished [at] his glorious perfections. And this is what we hope will be our business to all eternity; to think on, to delight [in], to speak of, and sing forth, the infinite

excellencies of the Deity. He has made us capable of understanding so much of him here as is necessary in order to our acceptable worshipping and praising him, and he has instructed us, and taught us, as little ignorant babes and infants, and has helped our weak understanding by his instructions; he has told us what he is, has condescended to our poor capacities and described himself to us after the manner of men: as men, when they teach children, must teach them after their manner of thinking of things, and come down to their childish capacities, so has God taught us concerning himself. (*Works* 10, 417–18)

The one who spoke of God, in Edwards's mind, did so as a created, lowly being, a "worm of the dust." This is a striking beginning for the study of God. One did not discuss the Lord as an abstract concept. One begins the study of theology lying in the dust beside the prophet Ezekiel, heart pounding, eyes straining to shut out the piercing glory of God (Ezekiel 1:28–2:10).

Beginning his study of God with the Word of God, Edwards, like Ezekiel, raised himself from the ground and began to speak of what he saw. God's beauty had numerous facets and required all man's senses to comprehend it. Edwards identified seven attributes that demonstrated God's excellency, or beauty. Edwards's descriptions of these are worth quoting at length. One should ponder them slowly and meditatively, for they provide rich food for one's spiritual nourishment.

## Eternality and Self-Existence

The first of these was longevity and independence of existence. Edwards strove to wrap his mind around the reality that God had always existed. He wrote:

[I]T IS NECESSARY THAT that which hath a beginning must have some cause, some author that gave it a beginning, but God never had a beginning; there was none before him, and therefore none that gave him his being. He thanks no one for his being; doth not, nor ever did depend upon any for it, but receives his being from himself, and depends alone on himself. Neither doth he thank anyone for anything he enjoys: his power, his wisdom, his excellency, his glory, his honor, and [his] authority are his own, and received from none other; he possesses them and he will possess them: he is powerful and he will be powerful; he is glorious and he will be glorious; he is infinitely honorable, but he receives his honor from himself; he is infinitely happy and he will be infinitely happy; he reigns and rules over the whole universe, and he will rule and do what he pleases, in the armies of heaven and amongst the inhabitants of the earth. Poor nothing creatures can do nothing towards controlling of [Him]; they, with all their power conjoined, which is but weakness, can't deprive Jehovah of any

of these things. He was just the same, in all respects, from all eternity as he is now; as he was, infinite ages before the foundations of the world were laid, so he is now and so he will be, with exactly the same glory and happiness uninterrupted, immovable and unchangeable, the same yesterday, today, and forever. (*Works* 10, 419)

As Edwards saw Him, God dwelt in a realm of glory untouched by time and age, dependent on nothing for His timeless existence. Theologians use the term aseity to describe the utter independence and power of God. God “thanks no one for his being,” as Edwards put it. His existence is underived. He is altogether powerful, needing no one, never aging, never changing, never growing weary. From the beginning of time until the end of the universe, God exists.

One of the central ironies of the Christian life is that the more we come to learn about God, the more awesome He appears. No matter how high-powered one’s mind may be, He is the “immovable and unchangeable” one, a timeless figure from a realm outside our own. Finite creatures simply cannot comprehend His duration of existence, hard as we try. The more we understand, the more we realize how little we truly know.

## Greatness

God’s greatness, or exalted status, stands beside His length of existence as a second element of His excellency. Over every living thing, Edwards preached, stands God:

GOD IS INFINITELY EXALTED above all created beings in greatness. This earth appears to us as a very great thing. When we think of the large countries and continents, the vast oceans, and the great distance between one country and another, the whole, together, appears very great and vast; but especially doth the great universe surprise us with its greatness, to which, without doubt, this vast earth, as we call it, is less than any mote or dust, that ever we saw, is to the whole earth; but how shall we be surprised when we think that all this vast creation, making the most of it we can, is infinitely less, when compared with the greatness of God, than the least discernible atom is to the whole creation! (*Works* 10, 419)

Over all the heights of the universe stands the Lord God. There is no point of comparison between God and all else, wrote Edwards; He “is infinitely exalted above all.” God has no end, and one cannot map out His coordinates. He is vast and mysterious, greater than the greatest things we can imagine. His scope speaks to His majestic beauty.

### Loveliness

The third attribute that shows God’s beauty is His loveliness or splendor. Edwards used picturesque images to describe God’s bountiful loveliness:

THE BEAUTY OF TREES, plants, and flowers, with which God has bespangled the face of the earth, is delightful; the beautiful frame of the body of man, especially in its perfection, is astonishing; the beauty of the moon and stars is wonderful; the beauty of [the] highest heavens is transcendent; the excellency of angels and the saints in light is very glorious: but it is all deformity and darkness in comparison of the brighter glories and beauties of the Creator of all, for “behold even to the moon, and it shineth not” (Job 25:5); that is, think of the excellency of God and the moon will not seem to shine to you, God’s excellency so much outshines [it]. And the stars are not pure in his sight, and so we know that at the great day when God appears, the sun shall be turned into darkness, shall hide his face as if he were ashamed to see himself so much outshined; and the very angels, they hide their faces before him; the highest heavens are not clean in his sight, and he charges his angels with folly. (*Works* 10, 421)

While a pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts (1726–1750), Edwards loved to take long walks or ride his horse through the stunning New England countryside. Though he relished the outdoors, he knew that the beauty of the earth was nothing but a passing shadow compared to the beauty of God. The shining stars and the brisk Northampton nights, though grand, were still “not pure in his sight.” Even the very realm of the

Lord, “the highest heavens,” pale in comparison to Him. God’s beauty is perfect, and all appears unclean in comparison.

## Power

The fourth attribute that displayed the beauty of God was His power. Over the most powerful people of the earth, God reigned as King:

WHEN HE PLEASES, one king must die, and who he pleases must reign in his room; armies conquer or are conquered according as he will have it: “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, and he turns them as the rivers of water” [Proverbs 21:1]. Thus he holds an absolute and uncontrollable government in the world; and thus he has done from the beginning, and thus he will do to the end of all things. Neither is his dominion confined to the children of men, but he rules the whole creation. He gives commands to the seas, and has appointed them bounds which they cannot pass; “which removeth the mountains, and they know it not who overturneth them in his anger; which shaketh the earth out of its place, and the pillars thereof tremble; who commandeth the sun and it riseth not; who seaeth up the stars, which maketh Arcturus and Orion, and the chambers of the south; who doth great things past finding out; yea, wonders without number” [Job 9:5–7, Job 9:9–10]. (*Works* 10, 422)

Edwards summarized this material by noting:

WHAT A VAST and uncontrollable dominion hath the almighty God. The kings of the earth are not worthy of the name, for they are not able to execute their authority in their narrow bounds, except by the power and assistance of their subjects, but God rules most absolutely the whole universe by himself; kings rule, perhaps sometimes for forty years, but God's kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and of his dominion there is no end. Well, therefore, may he be said to be the blessed and only potentate, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. (*Works* 10, 422)

Over against the self-importance of earthly rulers, Edwards asserted the sovereignty of the God of the Bible. Kings thought that they governed with unchallenged authority, but Edwards's God "rules the whole creation," "gives commands to the seas," and oversees "most absolutely the whole universe by himself" while He advances His "everlasting kingdom." The Lord controls the hearts of men but is Himself "uncontrollable." The power of this God is itself a work of beauty, an aesthetic performance. In the hurricane's squall, the shuddering of the earth, the eruption of a volcano, we glimpse the force that formed this world and rules over it until the end of the age.

## Wisdom

The fifth element of God's excellence and beauty is His wisdom. Edwards turned again to the best of human beings to compare them to God:

THE WISEST OF MEN, how little do they know, how frequently are they deceived and frustrated, and their wisdom turned to foolishness, their politic designs undermined; but when was the time that God's wisdom failed, that he did not obtain his end, although all the bleak army of hell are continually endeavoring to counterwork him? When was it that God altered his mind and purpose, or took a wrong step in the government of the world? (*Works* 10, 425)

Edwards revealed that God's purposes are not frustrated. What He plans according to His stores of wisdom, He does. The earth and all who live in it take their cues from Him. He is quite unlike even "the wisest of men," who cannot help but see "their wisdom turned to foolishness" and their "politic designs undermined." God may face resistance to His plans, but only for so long as He tolerates it. No man can stand before Him, and no one can resist His will (Romans 9:19).

Edwards believed strongly in the infallibility of God, His inability to make an error or mistake of any kind. God's infinite knowledge undergirded this trait:

SOLOMON WAS SENSIBLE that there was need of uncommon and extraordinary wisdom to rule such a kingdom as he had; but what wisdom, what vast knowledge and infinite penetration must he have, who has every being in the world to rule and govern; who rules every thought, and every purpose, every motion and action, not only of angels and men, but of every creature, great and small, even to every little atom in the whole creation, and that forever and ever? What infinite wisdom and knowledge is necessary and requisite in order to this! But this God doth; this he hath done and will do. All the changes and alterations that happen in all the world, heaven and earth, whether great or never so small, he knows it altogether, even to the least insect that crawls upon the earth, or dust that flies in the air, and it is all from his disposal, and according to his eternal determination. (*Works* 10, 423)

Edwards compared the Lord to Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived. Solomon, Edwards noted, used his intelligence and discernment “to rule such a kingdom as he had,” but God “rules every thought, and every purpose, every motion and action” of all that will ever live and breathe on the earth. To reign wisely, Solomon collected whatever knowledge he could; God, however, possesses all the knowledge of the world without sending so much as a solitary angel from heaven to report back. In Edwards’s simple phrase, “He knows it altogether.”

The knowledge of God extends over and into all things. The Lord is by definition not a limited, finite being like a human. He knows all and exercises complete control over all. If it were not so, Edwards's words indicate, He would not be God.

### God's Beauty: Holiness

The sixth quality of God that rendered Him beautiful in the mind of the Massachusetts theologian was His holiness. "Now God is infinitely holy," Edwards declared:

AND INFINITELY EXALTED THEREIN, above the holy angels and all creatures; there is not the least tincture of defilement or pollution in the Deity, but he is infinitely far from it: he is all pure light, without mixture of darkness; he hates and abhors sin above all things, 'tis what is directly contrary to his nature. This, his great holiness, has he made known to us by his justice, truth, and faithfulness in all his dispensations towards us, and by the pure holiness of his laws and commands.

Holiness used to be for a distinguishing attribute between the God of Israel and other gods, Daniel 4:8, "But at last Daniel came in before me, whose name is Belteshazzar, according to the name of my God, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods"; and so in the next verse, "because I know the holy gods is in thee." Likewise, in the



GOD IS INFINITELY EXALTED above all created beings in goodness. Goodness and royal bounty, mercy, and clemency is the glory of earthly monarchs and princes, but in this is the Lord, our God, infinitely exalted above them. God delights in the welfare and prosperity of his creatures; he delights in making of them exceeding happy and blessed, if they will but accept of the happiness which he offers.

All creatures do continually live upon the bounty of God; he maintains the whole creation of his mere goodness: every good thing that is enjoyed is a part of his bounty. When kings are bountiful, and dispense good things to their subjects, they do but give that which the Almighty before gave to them. So merciful and so full of pity is God, that when miserable man, whom He had no need of, who did Him no good, nor could be of any advantage to Him, had made himself miserable by his rebellion against God, He took such pity on him that He sent His only Son to undergo his torment for him, that he might be delivered and set free. And now He offers freely, to bestow upon those rebels, complete and perfect happiness to all eternity upon this, His Son's account. There never was such an instance of goodness, mercy, pity, and compassion since the world began; all the mercy and goodness amongst creatures fall infinitely short of it: this is goodness that never was, never will, never can be paralleled by any other beings. (*Works* 10, 424)

Edwards compared the potent goodness of God with the goodness of the most powerful earthly figure, the king. His comparison showed how much greater God was than even the most majestic emperor. The king could show “bounty, “mercy,” and “clemency,” but all his goodness paled before the supernatural kindness of the Lord.

In Edwards’s conception, God’s goodness meant that “he delights in making” His people “exceeding happy and blessed.” The highest expression of this goodness was the crucifixion of the Son of God. In the death of Jesus Christ, God showed His kindness and love to sinners on a scale only infinity could contain. “There never was such an instance of goodness, mercy, pity, and compassion,” Edwards asserted, for “this is goodness that never was, never will, never can be paralleled by any other beings.” No one else could qualify to take on the sins of mankind, bear the wrath of God, and cleanse the guilty but the Son of God. One could spot God’s goodness in countless forms throughout the world—whether in His general care for mankind or His special care for His people—but nowhere in greater measure than in the death of Jesus Christ.

The beauty of God was, in the eyes of Edwards, a multifaceted diamond, a precious collection of attributes in their purest form: self-existence, greatness, loveliness, power, wisdom, holiness, and goodness. Over all the earth and all the created order stood this Lord, beautiful for the perfections of His person. Edwards discovered these perfections in Scripture and thus began his spiritual life and theological thought from a God-centered starting point.

## Making God's Beauty Known

Because of His majesty, unfolded in the seven attributes examined above, the Lord properly delighted in Himself and the mere presence of His own beauty. Before one discussed creation, or Christ's incarnation, or the church, or heaven, one had to realize that God's self-sufficiency, His perfect fullness and majesty, rendered Him the only figure in existence who could justly glory in and be satisfied by Himself. Edwards articulated this foundational point in his 1749 work *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, where he argued that:

GOD'S LOVE TO HIMSELF, and his own attributes, will therefore make him delight in that which is the use, end and operation of these attributes. If one highly esteem and delight in the virtues of a friend, as wisdom, justice, etc., that have relation to action, this will make him delight in the exercise and genuine effects of these virtues: so if God both esteem and delight in his own perfections and virtues, he can't but value and delight in the expressions and genuine effects of them. So that in delighting in the expressions of his perfections, he manifests a delight in his own perfections themselves: or in other words, he manifests a delight in himself; and in making these expressions of his own perfections his end, *he makes himself his end.* (*Works* 8, 437)

Edwards elaborated on this point, developing the idea that God's focal point in His existence was the enjoyment of His own glory:

THE MORAL RECTITUDE of God's heart must consist in a proper and due respect of his heart to things that are objects of moral respect: that is, to intelligent beings capable of moral actions and relations. And therefore it must chiefly consist in giving due respect to that Being to whom most is due; yea, infinitely most, and in effect all. For God is infinitely and most worthy of regard. (*Works* 8, 421–22)

The essence of this section is that God's majestic nature not only enables but calls Him to glory in Himself. As a perfect being, a figure of absolute eternity, greatness, loveliness, power, wisdom, holiness, and goodness, God deserved to celebrate and glorify Himself. This assertion of Edwards intensifies one's understanding of the beauty and worth of God. Because of His excellent nature, God is wholly justified in seeking glory and honor and praise and worship for Himself. This is the foundation for Edwards's entire theological system, and it shapes his view of creation, Christ, the church, and heaven, as subsequent chapters will show.

Edwards's treatment of the traits of God offers a framework by which to comprehend and approach the Lord. God alone is self-sufficient and worthy of worship. Writing three hundred years ago, Edwards illuminated this fundamental

reality of Scripture and showed that God, possessing beauty beyond human comprehension, is the only being deserving of worship. We began our study in the dust, like the prophet Ezekiel, and we end like another Old Testament figure, Moses, coming down from the mountain with faces shining from the glory of God we have just glimpsed.



## *Pursuing Beauty*

### *The Necessity of Humility*

**I**n the current day, we are taught by many writers and preachers, religious or otherwise, to begin our spiritual quests, our faith journeys, with ourselves. We are encouraged to seek God because He can meet our needs and satisfy our deepest desires. There is some truth to this claim, but the fundamental duty of every person before the holy God is to humble themselves (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Unlike what certain leaders tell us, we do not come to God and begin articulating a list of deep-seated desires and needs. If we have biblical faith, we must fall before our majestic God, trembling to be in His presence, rejoicing that because of the blood of Christ we have access to Him and will not be crushed by the weight of His glory. If we have been taught that religion is all about us, if we find ourselves breathing the “me-centered” air of our

day, then we must cleanse ourselves, reorient our minds, and approach God in a new way.

Because God is God, He must first be honored and treasured and revered. In our hearts, we must follow Edwards as he follows various biblical figures, and humble ourselves before the Lord (2 Chronicles 7:14, for example). In doing so, we will truly care for ourselves. In dying to ourselves, we will live to Christ (Philippians 1:20). We need not reject concern for our souls and our eternal good, but we do need to rightly focus that concern upon a righteous, holy God.

This will mean that we may have to make some changes in our spiritual lives. Some of the books that we read, the preachers that we listen to, the things that we've learned to tell ourselves, we must set aside. We must take practical steps in our self-centered world to embrace the radically biblical truth that life is about God first, and then about us. We are not Him, and we must not live as such. True knowledge of God begins with humility, quietness before the Lord, and a willingness to listen to God's Word and to order our lives according to it (Proverbs 1:7). Only when we possess and practice this mindset can we fully appreciate the beauty of the One who in His mercy has claimed us through the death and resurrection of His Son and the regeneration of His Spirit.

### *Applying the Knowledge of God to Our Lives*

**T**he study of God's attributes provides nearly endless fuel for the daily life of the Christian. Contrary to what many

think, these doctrines are not dry or lifeless, but packed with spiritual food by which to nourish our lives. It would help to take considerable chunks of time to think about each of the seven attributes of God explored by Edwards in his priceless sermon. Meditating on and applying each attribute to real-life situations will transform our daily lives. We may not be able to change all of the circumstances that affect us, but we can make our lives beautiful as we study the beauty of the God we serve.

There are many applications of the seven attributes of God to our lives. The fact that God is eternal can give us great encouragement as our lives hurry on (Revelation 22:13). Reigning over us is a timeless God who holds each moment of our lives in His hands and who has planned each of them to give Him glory in some way. Pondering this reality can free us from anxiety as we realize that the Lord has counted each of our days and is using them for His purpose. Remembering His timelessness will calm us and restrain us from a frenetic pattern of life.

The Lord is great (Psalm 96). Though it can be initially puzzling to think about how God's grandeur applies to our lives, we can find incredible comfort in this fact. God is not small, He is not limited. He is limitless. He is majestic. We are small and finite. Even the most fleeting recognition of this reality can free us from pride. Compared to the living God, what is the wisest person, the strongest athlete, the scariest enemy? Remembering this will cause us to rein in our natural arrogance and to worship the great God of heaven and earth.

Our God is lovely (Psalm 90:17). His beauty is undimmed. Nothing can or will change this aspect of His nature. Though

we are so often tempted by beautiful things on this earth, we believers have been claimed by a being far more beautiful and lovely than anything in creation. We have not of course seen God in person, but we have seen His character, and read of His splendor, and discovered His excellent Son, and these vistas can lift us from giving in to temptation to lesser things if we simply raise our vision on a regular basis to behold the beauty of the Lord.

The Creator is powerful (Psalm 93). He is the only one who truly deserves the title *awesome*. His strength, like His scope, is limitless. He can do whatever He pleases. Contemplating this trait will enable us to claim strength in areas where we are weak and to find release from self-dependency. Sooner or later, our strength will fail. We will inevitably and repeatedly lose the ability to control our lives and create good for ourselves and our loved ones. How helpful it will be for us to think about the might of God and to allow our understanding and of this strength to shape the way we live our lives in dependence on the Lord.

The Lord is wise (Proverbs 2). Over all the false wisdom that we trust, and over all the foolish thinking we think is wise, the wisdom of the Lord is right and true. In a world where so many clamor for our allegiance, we must remember that only the Lord is truly wise. Our hearts are calibrated by our sinful natures to stray from Him and His wisdom. We cannot forget this reality, and we need to constantly read Scripture to come into contact with divine wisdom and to keep ourselves from embracing folly.

The Most High is holy (1 Samuel 2:2). He is spotless and pure. He has no blemish, and none can find fault with Him. As the Lord is holy, so are we called to be holy (1 Peter 1:13–16). The chief way to become holy is not to start out by following a list of rules, but to examine the Lord’s character, to know His Word, and to follow the example of His Son. The local church will help us greatly in learning what it means to be holy, for there we find people who are living holy lives not to check off legalistic boxes, but to present their entire beings as a thank offering to God. How crucial, then, that we join and become active members in our local churches, where we can learn God’s Word and encourage one another to conform our lives to it.

Our heavenly Father, finally, is good (Psalm 135:3). His goodness extends throughout our lives. Perhaps the best way to apply the doctrine of God’s goodness is to live a perpetually thankful life (1 Thessalonians 5:18). In so doing we will honor Him who gave His Son for us—the greatest expression of mercy and kindness the world has ever known.

Meditation on these attributes is meant to provide fuel for faith and love of God. Every Christian would do well to consider them in personal devotions and to be involved in a God-centered local church dedicated to a “high view” of God, with preaching that expounds the truths of God’s nature. A vibrant devotional life and involved congregational life cannot trouble-proof one’s Christian walk, but each will greatly assist the believer in looking beyond this world to the realm where our Redeemer dwells.

