

When in the wilderness we find opportunities for worship and celebration. This seems strange to us since the wilderness is also a place of testing and suffering. Why would this be the case? The wilderness is a place where we get the chance to unite heaven and earth, because the wilderness is a place we meet with God. Art is also something that exists to unite heaven and earth, and so this week we will be looking at a number of aesthetic principles and seeing what they can teach us about our spiritual lives.

## Day 1

### Continuity and Repetition

It is easy to lose meaning and joy in drudgery. When one day rolls into the next, when encountering another worship service, or when telling your kids to brush their teeth for the 500th time, we can find ourselves being bored out of our mind, and that boredom leads to something like contempt very quickly. Contrast this with the excitement of firsts. The first time you drove a car, the first time you taught your child something, the first time you worshiped God with your whole heart. Why doesn't God give us nothing but the excitement of firsts? The demand for novelty is really the demand to make everything about us and our experience. We are subtly claiming that this experience has no value or meaning outside my particular emotions about it, outside my ability to find it new and exciting. Excitement in novelty is like priming the pump, it is an extra kick to get us to see the value and joy of something, but it needs to wear off so that we can appreciate the thing for its own merit. There is something else important about continuity and repetition, and that is that any instance draws some of its meaning from being part of the set. We get numerous chances to perfect different aspects of our lives, and each chance takes its place in the set of experiences that make up our lives. If every interaction with your child about brushing their teeth turns into a fight, that becomes a relational catastrophe that colors each person's perception of the other, perhaps forever. When we remember fishing with dad, or Christmas at home, these memories are usually amalgamations of different individual experiences that come to represent the whole. If we have a couple of experiences that aren't so great, we get to redeem them with others that are. If we have a string of great experiences, we can work at making them even better. So, rather than being bored with repetition, we can celebrate it and the grace that God has given us to do something worthwhile again and again.

Verses: Colossians 1:10-12, Hebrews 12:1-3, James 5:11

Prayer Topics: Joy, Excitement, Longevity, Desire, Hope, Endurance

## Day 2

### Specificity

Many people, especially young people, want to save the world. I was recently watching a movie reviewer that was expressing a tiredness that every superhero movie has to have saving the universe as the stakes, rather than saving a couple of characters that we can get to know and love. It seems like there is something cultural about this phenomenon. People seem to think that securing the adoration of strangers on social media is somehow more important or worthwhile than making sacrifices for friends or family members, and most of us have seen biographies of celebrities that spent their lives chasing the admiration of fans while having personal lives that were bereft of close relationships. This, I believe, comes from a mistake in understanding the hierarchy. We move from the specific to the general, from individuals to categories as we move up the hierarchy. But that does not mean that we should pursue love or admiration as a general concept, because it loses its force when pursued outside of the specific. We do not love in general; we love specific people. We love those individuals that God has put in our lives, and the way to experience greater love is not usually to love more people, but to love those in our

lives more deeply. Love that is 100 miles wide and one millimeter deep is not a satisfying alternative to loving your family, friends, neighbors, and fellow congregants in a meaningful and sacrificial way. We can avoid sacrifice by generalizing, but it will not make up for a costly and satisfying love of the one spouse, one family, one community and one church that God has given us.

Verses: Ephesians 4:4-6, John 17:20-26, 1 Corinthians 7:7

Prayer Topics: Focus, Center, Wholeness, Union, Friendship

Day 3

Symmetry

Actor Rege'-Jean Page is said to have the most symmetrical face in the world, and has been declared the most handsome man in the world. I did not place. Symmetry has long been known to be one of the most important principles in aesthetics and design. It is not surprising that symmetry is an important spiritual principle as well. The Lord's Prayer asks that God's will would be done on earth as in heaven. In the ancient world, there was a view that there should be a symmetry between the spiritual world and the physical world, that one was made to reflect the other. In fact, from a biblical perspective, our job as priests is to stand in the center point of that symmetry, to understand the spiritual world and to translate that into the physical world through our actions. In this way, all things get "connected" to God by having their proper relationship to him through reflecting the glory of their creation by His word. Things don't become god in a pantheistic way, but things reflect the glory of their creator by taking their place in His creation hierarchy, reflecting his glory and majesty as they fulfill their role that his calling gave them. Our endless task is to understand ever more about the spiritual realm and God's intention in creation and to take joy in perfecting the physical world's reflection of that glory. There is endless work to do, but that is a blessing since the work has meaning and brings joy.

Verses: Matthew 6:9-13, Romans 11:29, Romans 12:3-8

Prayer Topics: Glory, Beauty, Enthusiasm, Charm, Refinement

Day 4

Contrast

One of the few memories I have of the many art classes I took as a teenager is my art teacher telling me to use more contrast. He told me that the darkest thing on the page should be black, and I remember arguing with him that it wasn't black in real life. His point was that for the picture to look good, there needed to be some contrast even if it didn't exist in the real-life thing that I was drawing. In our lives, we often wish for things to be nothing but sunshine and rainbows, but the reality is that if we were to get our way, we would be bored. You don't really know how great the sunshine is without the rain, and you don't really appreciate joy until you have experienced sadness. The sadness can seem overwhelming at times, and sometimes we wonder if we can endure it because in the moment it seems eternal. When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, I'm sure they had no idea what they were getting themselves into. The bible speaks of knowledge not as the mental assent to a piece of information, but as experience. When Adam and Eve ate from the tree, we were on a course to experience the good and the bad, we had signed up for a life of contrast, and we would get it. This can seem overwhelming to us, but in the end there is only one question: Do we trust God? Can we believe that the darkness of our troubles will be light and momentary compared with the blazing glory of His goodness that will be ours in the end? Life is full of contrast, sometimes hard, sometimes joyful. Let's learn to give thanks for the glory of the contrast.

Verses: Matthew 5:1-12, Psalm 34:18, John 1:5

Prayer Topics: Variation, Contradiction, Craft, Perception, Darkness

Day 5

Ratio and Balance

The golden ratio is 1 to 1.618 and is related to the Fibonacci sequence. If you have not heard of the golden ratio, it is claimed to be the ratio of beauty and is found in a surprising number of places throughout creation. From shells to tree branches and pinecones to flowers, this ratio is visible every time you go outside, and is the foundation for many classical works of beauty from Greek statues to architecture. What is fascinating to me is that the golden ratio is not 1 to 1, because it would be boring. What most of us want in the world is even and predictable, but what we get is a ratio that, while not fair, creates a world of beauty. As a child, if I ever complained about something not being fair, the response from my parents was that life wasn't fair, which really irritated me. As an adult I understand that this is true, and am constantly surprised about how much complaining this garners. Neuroscientists will tell you that a 1 to 1 ratio on effort and reward is not the best way to feel a sense of accomplishment over the long term, but rather a ratio that rewards intermittently, which is why many people find casino's more addictive than their jobs. In fact, in all of life, a 1 to 1 ratio is hoped for, and complained about when absent, but is rarely satisfying. We cannot hope for a 1 to 1 ratio of joy and sadness in our lives, or of pain and pleasure. We will not find an even distribution of light and darkness, or sin and grace. In all of life, God will give us the ratios that glorify Him, and if we trust Him, we will find at the end a balanced picture that paints a masterpiece of His grace and mercy.

Verses: Isaiah 60:17-18, 2 Corinthians 4:6, John 9:5

Prayer Topics: Light, Exchange, Straightforward, Tediousness