

Danger in Beauty

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Several years ago in mid-December, we found ourselves driving down Reliance Road in the middle of an ice storm. I recall remarking how beautiful the trees looked as they were covered with ice from the day's storm. Yet, even as I spoke, I was aware of the danger inherent in this beauty. Trees lay bent and broken from the weight of the ice and fierce winds that accompanied the storm. Reports on the radio told of many accidents happening on the roads because of the icy conditions. The reason we were even on the road and not at home was that the ice storm had taken out power lines. Our house had been without electricity for several hours, necessitating a trip to find someplace open where we could get something to eat.

These events got me thinking about the danger often present even in the midst of beauty. This thought struck me awfully hard when Rod and I visited the pyramids of the Sun and Moon in Mexico. In this lush green valley, studded with ancient artifacts, the beauty of nature and architecture combine to create a sense of grace and wonder. Hundreds of years ago, in this same lush valley, from these impressive stone pyramids, humans were routinely sacrificed to pagan gods during the height of the indigenous civilization that inhabited the area. The question echoing in my mind as I viewed this scene was, "How can beauty and evil exist in the same place at the same time?"

From the beginning of time, people have learned that just because something is beautiful, that it is pleasing to the senses, does not guarantee that the object of beauty is good for you or that beauty and evil are exclusive. In the Garden of Eden, which we are told was the most beautiful and peaceful place on earth, Eve encountered evil in the form of the serpent. The fruit that she was enticed to eat was a delight to the eye and offered a pleasant sensation on the tongue. However, the act of eating that pleasing fruit presented to Eve by the wily serpent led to death entering God's perfect Creation.

Absalom was the handsome and much beloved son of King David. Absalom used his good looks and status to turn the people away from his father in an open rebellion that eventually cost him his life and led to dangerous intrigue within the royal courts.

King Solomon, another of David's sons, loved beautiful women. He built fantastic buildings to house his many wives and concubines. Shrines and temples to pagan gods were erected by Solomon who was so besotted by the beauty of the women he loved. Within the walls of those beautiful buildings these women led Solomon astray, far from the Lord who had so richly blessed him with wisdom and power.

Queen Jezebel was known for her outstanding physical beauty. But as Elijah and others learned, her beauty was only skin deep. She was responsible for the deaths of many men of God. Beneath her outer beauty lay an evil beast that used her power and status to corrupt God's chosen people. However, she learned that her beauty could not save her in the end. Having applied her

makeup before calling to the conquering King Jehu, perhaps to ask pardon, her servants pushed her out the window to her death.

King Herod was so taken with the dance of his beautiful stepdaughter, he offered her anything she wished, up to half his kingdom. Her request was to have the head of John the Baptist presented to her on a platter. Once again, we see evil lurking behind a beautiful façade.

As any camper will tell you, there is a certain beauty to a glowing campfire against a clear night sky. But once that beauty is released from the bonds of a fire ring it can turn into a powerfully destructive force. While the gentle lapping waves on the seashore have a grace all their own, those same waves can form into a tsunami with deadly consequences. These observations are not new to our generation.

When God called Saul to be king over Israel the Bible notes that Saul was a “young man without equal among the Israelites – a head taller than any of the others.” (1 Samuel 9:2) To the people he might have appeared, if not exactly beautiful, at least he would fit their vision of what a king should look like. Although Saul was blessed with God’s Spirit at the outset of his time as Israel’s anointed king, once pride had entered his heart he was no longer “beautiful” to God. Samuel was called on by God to anoint a new king and found himself falling into the beauty trap as well.

When Samuel met the eldest of Jesse’s sons, he thought his job was already done. But God had a word for Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his

height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance (the beauty), but the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7) This pattern would repeat itself through the introduction of seven of Jesse’s sons!

The physical beauty and strength men associate with status and power were confounded in God’s choice of Jesse’s youngest son when God said to Samuel, “Rise and anoint him; he is the one.” (1 Samuel 16:12) The adolescent David, although we are told was “ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features.” (1 Samuel 16:12), it was not his beauty that made him God’s choice. David’s heart was attuned to God all his life. He is known even today as a man after God’s own heart.

Jesus would pick up this theme of the dangers in beauty when he addressed the religious leaders of his day. In Matthew 23, he says this:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.

Jesus speaks directly to the danger of beauty. The Pharisees, Sadducees, the teachers and scribes of the Temple were wealthy, well-educated, and handsomely dressed men. The danger in this beauty was that it concealed hearts that had been hardened toward God and his people. These men reveled in their personal beauty and the beauty of their surroundings but neglected to give honor to the God who had provided such beauty for them to enjoy. They

had fallen into the trap of being beguiled by beauty and letting evil enter their lives through that portal.

God does not let the trade of evil for beauty go lightly. Hear these words from Isaiah 3:

The LORD enters into judgment
against the elders and leaders of his people:

¹⁶The LORD says,
“The women of Zion are haughty,
walking along with outstretched necks,
flirting with their eyes,
strutting along with swaying hips,
with ornaments jingling on their ankles.

¹⁷Therefore the Lord will bring sores on the heads of the women of Zion;
the LORD will make their scalps bald.”

¹⁸In that day the Lord will snatch away their finery: the bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces, ¹⁹the earrings and bracelets and veils, ²⁰the headdresses and anklets and sashes, the perfume bottles and charms, ²¹the signet rings and nose rings, ²²the fine robes and the capes and cloaks, the purses ²³and mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls.

²⁴ Instead of fragrance there will be a stench;

instead of a sash, a rope;

instead of well-dressed hair, baldness;

instead of fine clothing, sackcloth;

instead of beauty, branding.

²⁵ Your men will fall by the sword,

your warriors in battle.

²⁶ The gates of Zion will lament and mourn;

destitute, she will sit on the ground.

The Lord knows that if all the trappings of beauty are removed, the true spirit will be revealed. As His people, we need to look past the outward appearance and obvious appeal to see what is lying below the surface.

Don't be fooled into thinking that the deception of beauty is a thing of the past. Watching an hour of television, with its shows about people living in plush and powerful surroundings, adorned with the latest fashions can lead us to believe that these are indeed the "beautiful" people, only to see their faces in the newspapers days later under headlines of fraud, embezzlement, and even murder.

Commercials tell us that all will be right in our lives if we simply buy the newest, most stylish gadgets, clothes, or automobiles. How many people who, having given into the lure of surrounding themselves with worldly beauty, have found themselves falling into the depths of despair because these trappings did not bring happiness, in fact brought them financial ruin with all

the attendant stresses on relationships both personal and professional? They can attest to the danger in beauty!

You might be wondering now, if God created all things, it follows that He created beauty. If God is good, how can beauty be a bad thing? Beauty in and of itself is not a bad thing. It is the beauty that acts to attract us to things contrary to God's plan for our lives that is dangerous. Even Jesus himself was tempted by beauty in the desert. The devil said, "I will give you all the kingdoms of the world, if you will only bow down to me." (Matthew 4:9)

What an attractive and appealing offer, to have all the kingdoms of the world at your feet! Jesus knew that the appeal of this offer was destructive to his purpose here on earth. He did not give into the attractive temptation presented to him.

We, too, must be vigilant today to be able to see past the apparent beauty of a thing to see any hidden dangers. Beware of the lure of quick financial gain, for it has been the ruin of many. At the same time be sure that groups and organizations that you give your money to are truly involved in the work they claim to be doing. Many people have been deceived into thinking they were doing good, only to find their donations fattened the wallets of those who claimed to be helping others. There are many people sharing the Word of the Lord today. Test their words against what you know Scripture says to discern what is truly beautiful. There are many modern-day serpents that will come to us in beauty with the goal of leading us into destruction.

We do not need to be fearful of beauty, for beauty does come from God. We should seek out that beauty that leads us to a deeper relationship with the Lord. We will be richly rewarded when we do so.

Lord,

You have created so much beauty in the world – the sunrise, the sunset, stars in the heavens, newborn babies, old men and old women, butterflies and rainbows. Help us to see Your beauty in and around us every day. Also help us to see through the beauty of this world that would lead us away from you. We long to see the beauty of your kingdom here on earth. All this we ask in Jesus' name. AMEN

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