

The Contemplation of Beauty: An Avenue to Communication with the Lord

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One of the prevailing and enduring challenges that man faces during his sojourn on this earth is how he can learn to effectively communicate with God. How can man open the channels of communication? How does God reveal Himself to man? What can man do to receive assurance that God is aware of man's existence and his problems? Questions such as these have been asked by men throughout the ages, sometimes very poignantly and eloquently by philosophers, poets, and prophets.

Prophets, of course, viewed from the average man's frame of reference, seem to enjoy a very special relationship with our Heavenly Father and appear to communicate with ease. After all, they have direct access to the Lord and can speak with Him face-to-face, and sometimes they do so in a most remarkable and human manner.

Speaking with God Face-to-Face

To me, Moses is the finest example in biblical history of a prophet speaking with God face-to-face in a manner that reveals a unique and intimate relationship between God and man. Let me recall the famous dialogue as it is recorded in the book of Exodus. Moses had fled from the Egyptian court and was tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro, when one

day he approached Mount Horeb, a mountain which was sacred to the Lord Jehovah. Attracted by a burning bush that was not, however, consumed by the flames, Moses hears the voice of Jehovah calling him, "Moses, Moses!" and he answers, "Here am I."

The Lord then warns him not to come any closer and to remove his shoes from his feet for he is standing on holy ground. Next, He identifies Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the distinguished ancestors of Moses.

. . . I am the God of thy father; the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. . . .

. . . I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land . . . flowing with milk and honey. . . .

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Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.

Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt. [Exodus 3:6–10]

Now let us assume for a moment that we were in Moses' place and had just been given these instructions. Besides being frightened and barely able to mumble our consent, we would probably attempt to hurry as fast as we could out of the Lord's presence and carry out His command as expeditiously as possible. But not Moses. Not only does he keep his composure, which is extraordinary enough, but he communicates in an utterly uncomplicated and human way his profound reservations. In short, he says he cannot do it.

And Moses said unto God, who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt? [Exodus 3:11]

Why should he question the Lord's choice? Had he not been carefully trained at the Pharaoh's court in the art of statecraft, administration, and leading people? And did he not know how to deal with kings and court officials? Who was better prepared than Moses? Nevertheless, the Lord understands and empathizes and assures His servant that He will be with him. But Moses thinks of new objections: "The Israelites will put me to the test and ask about thy name." Patiently the Lord tells Moses how to reply and then charges him to gather together the elders, go with them before Pharaoh, and request permission to perform sacrifices. Again He assures Moses that He will be with him and manifest His power unto Pharaoh. Now, after this long and patient discourse, does Moses go? Listen!

And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee. [Exodus 4:1]

So the Lord performs several miracles to demonstrate His power and to convince Moses He indeed will be able to protect him and be at his side. Does Moses go now? Slowly we are getting the impression that Moses is not really too anxious to do what Jehovah wants him to do.

And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. [Exodus 4:10]

I really find no evidence in the text or in the dialogue that Moses is either slow of wit or slow of tongue, and he certainly does not seem to lack courage. I find him rather quick of wit and quick of tongue. But still the Lord is long-suffering, although I now detect a touch of impatience in His answer, which is much shorter than previous replies and has a distinct curtness to it.

And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord?

Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, hand teach thee what thou shalt say. [Exodus 4:11, 12]

Now, certainly Moses will finally go. He is running out of excuses. But no, he simply informs the Lord that He has chosen the wrong man for this assignment:

. . . O my Lord, send, I pray thee . . . him whom thou wilt send [but not me!]. [Exodus 4:13]

At this time we expect lightning to strike, but although the Lord becomes angry, He

controls His wrath and still accommodates Moses by telling him that He will permit his brother Aaron to accompany him and be the spokesman.

And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses, and he said, Is not Aaron the Levite thy brother? I know that he can speak well. . . .

And thou shalt speak unto him, and put words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do. And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people: and he shall be . . . to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God.

And thou shalt take this rod in thine hand, wherewith thou shalt do signs. [Exodus 4:14–17]

With that the conversation abruptly ends. It seems that the Lord quickly disappears and leaves Moses to ponder the momentous events that have transpired. The rest is history.

I cannot help but admire and envy the marvelous relationship that prophets have with God. To speak with Him in such an honest and forthright manner, to tell Him of reservations and anxieties, and to have Him respond in a patient and understanding way must appear to most of us to be an impossible dream. Why can't we speak with the Lord like Moses? Or like Abraham, who bargained for the lives of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah and wrestled from God a promise that He would spare the cities if ten righteous people could be found inside them? Or Jonah, who, much like Moses, tried to avoid carrying out a difficult mission so that God had to prepare a huge fish to transport him back to the shores of Nineveh? Then, when he had preached, and the inhabitants of the city had repented and turned to the Lord, he became angry with God for sparing the city. Can you imagine being angry with the Lord, or, even more so, the Lord understanding and forgiving such behavior?

Communicating Through the Spirit

I have made the point that prophets are privileged to communicate with God in a marvelously direct and wondrous manner. Such direct, face-to-face communication will forever remain an impossibility for the vast majority of mankind; nevertheless, communication with God is possible for us also. Although it is not likely that Jehovah will summon us from a burning bush, we can approach Him in the privacy of our room or some secluded spot in nature and tell Him our frustrations, our reservations, our failures, our inadequacies, and our faults. It may seem to us that such a conversation is rather one-sided, that we hear but one voice—our own. However, we can learn to hear the Lord's voice also, but we must be patient and we must be prepared to wait—sometimes for a long, long time—and we must listen carefully. Perhaps we have to struggle at first, like Enos did.

And my soul hungered; and I kneeled down before my Maker, and I cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication for mine own soul; and all the day long did I cry unto him; yea, and when the night came I did still raise my voice high that it reached the heavens. [Enos 4]

To Enos the voice of the Lord Jehovah came through the spirit:

And while I was thus struggling in the spirit, behold, the voice of the Lord came into my mind again, saying . . . [Enos 10]

In section 8 of the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord tells us how He communicates His will to most of us:

Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart. [D&C 8:2]

These remarkable scriptures tell us that we can also communicate with the Father—even, perhaps, as honestly as Moses and Abraham and Jonah, except not face-to-face like Moses did, but through the Spirit like Enos. Sometimes, after we may have tried for a very long time unsuccessfully to open the windows of heaven, we might despair—but so did the prophets, even the Savior. Remember the agonizing cry when Christ was hanging on the cross and the Father had withdrawn:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
[Matthew 27:46]

Many of us here can identify with that soul-wrenching question. Certainly the great German reformer Martin Luther could, who, after years of painful and desperate struggle to understand God’s will, was finally able to love and trust God again, when he learned to understand that Christ’s terrifying forsaken state was but temporary, that Elohim had left Him only for a while to receive Him to His bosom after He had accomplished His great atoning sacrifice. When Luther finally comprehended this truth, he began to understand that the Lord had not abandoned him permanently either, but was preparing him for the work of the Reformation. We recall also the terrifying months during which the Prophet Joseph and the Saints in Missouri had to endure all manner of humiliation, degradation, and terrible persecution while he was helplessly imprisoned in that abominable jail in Liberty, Missouri.

O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?

How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye . . . behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries? . . .

O Lord God Almighty, . . . stretch forth thy hand; let thine eye pierce; let thy pavilion be taken

up; let thy hiding place no longer be covered; let thine ear be inclined; let thine heart be softened, and thy bowels moved with compassion toward us. . . .

Remember thy suffering saints, O our God; and thy servants will rejoice in thy name forever. [D&C 121:1–6]

Some of us, especially the older ones among us, understand this kind of communication all too well. Have we not wondered and cried: “Why hast thou forsaken me?” or “Where art thou Lord?” However, if we are humble and patient enough, we will learn that God has not forsaken us, as He did not forsake His son or His prophet Joseph.

While the avenues of prophetic communication are not open to us in the same way as they were open to Moses or Joseph, and while communication through the Spirit may be difficult and sometimes frustrating, there is another avenue that is readily available to all of us—an avenue which we might try, if we have not yet done so, an avenue which will certainly lead us to experience God’s beauty and love in a most remarkable way. For the rest of my time today, I wish to suggest such a way which has been a source of much inspiration and joy to me in my life and has revealed God to me. This is the way of beauty—the aesthetic experience.

The Contemplation of Beauty

For Latter-day Saints, the aesthetic experience (that is the experience with beauty), should have special significance, since beauty is an important avenue to the enjoyment of reality, toward learning about our own sensitivities and the deeper levels of our soul, and it is—at the same time—an avenue to encountering God and communicating with Him. Greek and medieval philosophers believed that man could get closer to the absolute ideal—we would call it God today—through contemplation of beauty. Absolute beauty, according to Plato, is not encountered on earth. However, various reflections of it can be encountered by mortal man in what Plato calls “an ascending

order" (*Symposium*, 211). This order begins with the physical beauty of nature and art and then ascends upward through various fair forms and ideas to fair practices and, finally, to what Plato calls "beauty absolute" and which the church fathers call God. "He who has learned to see beauty in due order and succession, when he comes towards the end, will perceive a nature of wondrous beauty . . . beauty absolute" (*Symposium*, 211). Allow me to paraphrase what the philosopher is saying here so that we can understand it from our frame of reference. As we learn to see beauty in nature and in art we will progress in our thinking toward the author and creator of such beauty, who is God. Thus the contemplation of beauty will lead us into communion with God, which should be one of man's greatest quests. "This is the life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute," says Socrates in the *Symposium*, or, in other words, "This is the life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of God." He continues and says that once we have learned to behold the beauty of God we will no longer seek after mundane things like "gold" or beautiful "garments." Then he makes a profound observation on which I will elaborate:

Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he [the observer of beauty absolute] will be enabled to bring forth . . . true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may.
[*Symposium*, 212]

We are surrounded by the beauty of nature, even on this university campus. How I appreciate the efforts of those men and women who labor to plant the flowers, prune the trees, and groom the lawns, and yet how many there are of us who pass by heedlessly or who mar the beauty by thoughtless action. In his prayer "For This World," Walter Rauschenbusch expresses my feelings rather eloquently:

We thank thee [O Lord] for our senses by which we can see the splendor of the morning and hear the jubilant songs of love, and smell the breath of the springtime. Grant us, we pray thee, a heart wide open to all this joy and beauty, and save our souls from being so steeped in care or so darkened by passion that we pass heedless and unseeing when even the thornbush by the wayside is aflame with the glory of God. [A Rauschenbusch Reader; the Kingdom of God and the Social Gospel, compo Benson Y. Landis (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 151]

This ability to see, this vision—the contemplation of beauty absolute—has been the pursuit of the poet, the painter, the musician, the prophet—in short, of the sensitive man. Yet it is very difficult for most artists to successfully translate the vision into reality, and only some have been blessed with that ability. One of these is Michelangelo, who beheld the glory and beauty of God and revealed it to us in the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel and in the statues of *David*, *Moses*, and the *Pieta*. Here the vision has been painted in brilliant color and chiseled in glorious white Carrara marble. The ideals of youth and wisdom and courage and beauty and godliness have been cast into perfect form, the harmonious fusion of idea and form perfectly achieved. Such a miracle stirs our soul to the very depths because here we encounter beauty in its sublimest revelation, in the realization that God has revealed Himself in the form of this magnificent art. And as we thus confront *David* or *Moses* or the *Pieta*—or, rather, as they confront us—we communicate with God. We are made aware of our own capacity to feel and to love, to feel the majesty and grandeur of God and His magnificence—feelings that are difficult to describe. Perhaps you have not yet experienced such feelings as you were confronted with great art or great music or great literature, but perhaps you have as you contemplated the "driving clouds, the

constellations in the sky, or the everlasting hills.” Again, it is the poet who verbalizes this experience in language that uplifts us. As he views the stars and the galaxies moving in their appointed ways, his soul begins to expand and yearn for union with the Creator:

Und meine Seele spannte

Weit ihre Flügel aus,

Flog durch die stillen Lande,

Als flüge sie nach Haus.

(*My soul spread out its wings widely and was lifted up as if it were to meet God in our heavenly home.*)

[Joseph von Eichendorff, “Mondnacht,” in *Gedichte* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1957), p. 306]

As we are humbled by the grandeur and magnificence of beauty in art or in nature, we are at the same time also elevated and lifted up—brought home, as the poet says, brought into communication with the Lord, who is beauty and truth.

It is only through the morning gate of the beautiful that you can penetrate into the realm of knowledge. That which we feel here as beauty we shall one day know as truth. [Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller, quoted by Charles N. Douglas, *Forty Thousand Sublime and Beautiful Thoughts*, vol. 1 (New York: The Christian Herald, 1904), p. 152]

Out of this dual mood—humility and exaltation—arises man’s awareness of his own inner depth and of his internal resources and the realization that the author of the sublime beauty and of the feelings of exaltation is God, the creator of heaven and earth.

And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very [beautiful]. [Genesis 1:31]

Actually, as you know, the scripture does not read “beautiful” but “good,” but the beautiful and the good are really one and the same, and the philosophers, of course, have made us

aware of the intimate relationship between the aesthetic experience and morality. Let me recall Plato’s profound statement in the *Symposium* which I quoted above: The observer of beauty absolute, the person who beholds eternal and divine beauty “will be enabled to bring forth . . . true virtue” so that he becomes “the friend of God” and, in a sense, “immortal.” Only through the contemplation of beauty—divine beauty, not the beauty of the world and of fashion, which is so prominently displayed around us today—does man become good. In one of his sonnets, Michelangelo, the painter of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, expresses this idea: Any beautiful thing raises the pure and just desire of man from earth to God, the eternal font of all (see *The Sonnets of Michael Angelo Buonarroti*, trans. John A. Symonds [London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1878], nos. LIV and LVI). This was also the credo of the German idealists, Goethe and Schiller, who believed that there is no more powerful antidote to sensuality, wickedness, and selfishness than the adoration of beauty, and they considered beauty at once as the ultimate and the highest aim of art and literature.

You may have noticed in your own experience with divine art or music that a calmness descended upon your soul which gradually stilled all passion and selfish desire. The next time you view a magnificent work of art, or the expanse of the universe at night, or as you listen to the words of an inspired poet or prophet or the sublime chords of a musical composition, take inventory and watch if that calmness does not descend upon your soul again. Do we not resolve in those moments to become a better person? Does not the Spirit of Christ—or the Holy Ghost, if you wish—draw us toward the bosom of the Father and purify our soul?

I would like to emphasize that I am not speaking of fads or fashions, the type of art and music and poetry and dress and grooming and behavior which is frequently identified with a particularly popular group or pseudophilosophical movement. Some call this beautiful,

but I do not. Here, I believe, beauty and grace are sacrificed all too often to vulgarity and temporary fixation, and we would seek in vain for inspiration or a lifting up of our soul. That beauty which uplifts and ennobles is godlike and unchanging and transports us into His eternal divine presence. It makes us aware of His glory and majesty, it makes us feel the warmth of His love, which manifests itself in Christ, who atoned for us on the cross and opened wide the doors leading into the realms of everlasting beauty.

It was on the morning of a beautiful, clear day . . . when . . . I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description.

He had on a loose robe of most exquisite whiteness . . . beyond anything earthly I had ever seen; nor do I believe that any earthly thing could be made to appear so exceedingly white and brilliant. . . . His whole person was, glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning.
[Joseph Smith—History 1:14, 17; 31, 32]

These are they whose bodies are celestial, whose glory is that of the sun, even the glory of God, the highest of all, whose glory the sun of the firmament is written of as being typical. [D&C 76:70]

And if your eye be single to my glory [my beauty], your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things.

Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you, and it shall be in his own time, and his own way, and according to his own will. [D&C 88:67–68]

May we draw near to the Lord and feel communication with Him as we learn to reach Him on His level and in His sphere.

I pray that the Lord will unveil His face and His glory unto us when we contemplate His beauty as it is revealed in the art of the masters and the splendor of nature that surrounds us, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.