

The Colorful Creator

The Big Idea: **Don't miss the creative wonder of the Artist's masterwork.**

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I grew up in a family that never had a color TV set. All the ballgames, all the TV shows, including the “Colorful World of Disney,” were in shades of black and white.

A few years ago my kids gave me, for a Christmas gift, a set of videos about pro football in the ‘60s—the era when I was growing up. I watched one of them, and the whole family laughed at my naiveté when I said, “I had no idea football uniforms were so colorful back then. My memories of them are in black and white.”

Do you dream in color? I have heard people ask that question, and I have heard people argue that no one does—although how they could know such a thing is beyond me.

But I am interested in a different question: Do you live in color? Or is your existence, especially your spiritual life, a mean and uninteresting acknowledgment of a bad-news, black-and-white God?

What I'm saying is that our concept of the Lord, of our salvation, and of the message of the gospel, may be as dull and unattractive as my memories of football in the ‘60s—and we need to awaken to the colorful reality of our multi-dimensional, breathtaking, unpredictable Creator, who is not vague, but specific, not demeaning, but expansive, not mere bad news that we can't bear, but truly Good News that changes everything.

One problem common among those who follow Christ is the tendency to make the gospel, the Good News to define all good news, to sound decidedly grim, hopeless and unappealing. You can find this throughout the 2000-year history of the church. Most of you can find it in recent experience, and all of us can find it in the New Testament.

You find it in a lot in well-intentioned sermons, maybe even some of mine, that make it sound as if it's all on your shoulders, and if you'd just straighten up and do a few impossible things, maybe then God would call you His own.

That is why the letter to the Galatians is in our Bibles. The Galatians were a church of people who had received the Good News of Christ with joy initially, but were now listening to teachers who said to be real Christians you have to do a lot of overwhelming stuff. This teaching was dividing the church, making some people proud and overbearing, and making others feel hopeless and defeated. To get into the real Good News of this letter, we need a context. And the context we need first is NOT the context of who the Galatians were, where they lived and what was going on, which we can learn as we study the letter. The context we need first is the Lord in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28), the Lord who created us (Genesis 1:1), and who continually sustains us (Hebrews 1:3), the Lord who has revealed Himself to us as the beautiful, creative, creating, abundant-life-giving, soul-enriching, colorful, transcendent, breathtaking God He really is.

In other words, God, the Sovereign Creator, is the colorful Reality in which we receive and live out the gospel. Without *trusting* the Sovereign Lord and *enjoying* the Creative Lord, we will neither fully experience nor fully communicate His gospel.

We need to know not only that the glorious Lord of all has revealed Himself to us, but *how* He has revealed Himself to us: namely, He has revealed truth about Himself to everyone through creation—we call this “general revelation”—and He has revealed more specific truth about Himself to His people through His Word, which is “special revelation.”

We’re going to look at both, and I want you to notice *not* lifeless formulas but the colorful wonders in God’s revelation.

1. General Revelation: God reveals Himself in His creation.

Before God ever made known the specifics of His character and purposes for His creation, He revealed Himself *through* His creation. You and I do not begin existence as abstract truths comprehended by disembodied minds. We grow in awareness through experiencing bodily the wonders of creation around us—sound, feel, light, shape, color, motion, smell, taste. Those experiences are wondrous for the simple reason that they might not have been at all.

The more we learn about our world, the more wondrous we find it that it should sustain life at all. It requires the perfect properties of water and atmosphere in the essential proportions, the exact gravitational pull, the precise speed of the planet’s rotation, the ideal distance from the sun, and a host of other essentials for physical life to exist. Change any of these factors and we all die.

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard” (**Psalm 19:1-3 NIV**)

The stars have always mystified us, and the more we know about them, the more detail we discover in space, the more expansive is our wonder at their Creator. With all our knowledge of cellular biology, subatomic physics and the nature of light itself, we are increasingly impressed with the masterful complexity pointing to a super-intelligent Designer.

In a culture that has made every effort to reduce the wonders of nature to scientific data, why is it that the unexplainable beauty of a flower, or a sunset, or a storm, or a panorama can still take our breath away?

Through all this artistry around us, two things should be obvious: There is a higher knowledge, a superior reality behind it all, and His power is beyond limit.

“God has made it plain. . . Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (**Romans 1:19-20**).

When Job demanded an explanation from God for what he had suffered, how did the Lord answer? He spread before him the wonders of creation.

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? . . . Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? . . . Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death?” (**Job 38**).

He goes on in magnificent poetry to flash images of light, snow, hail, lightning, winds, rain, desert, frost, constellations, lions, ravens, mountain goats, bears, the birthing process, wild donkeys, wild oxen, ostriches and storks, eggs, feathers, horses, hawks and eagles. This overwhelming display of the wonders of creation causes Job to reply, “I didn’t know what I was talking about. I’ll shut up and listen” (**Job 40:4-5 paraphrased**), and later, “I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. . . Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know” (**41:3**).

Like Job the psalmists, the prophets, and Jesus Himself, call forth praise for the wonders of creation around us. It is abundantly evident that such a Creator is in no way my inferior. I could never realistically stand in judgment on Him—nor could I reasonably conclude that He was small-minded, petty, and a kill-joy.

One June my dad and my brother and I were driving on a family history-finding exploration through the American southeast. We had seen Jamestown, where John Shelley arrived in 1622, and we were heading south into North Carolina, where Shelleys farmed land in the 1700s.

Dad wanted to head straight for Edenton along the wilderness path that our forefathers would have traveled. But Marshall and I wanted to swing to the outer banks, the barrier islands of nearly tropical dunes between the Atlantic Ocean and Albemarle Sound—where the first English attempts at American colonies took place. Marshall and I prevailed because Marshall was driving and we outnumbered Dad.

We climbed out of our air-conditioned rental car at a public parking lot in Kitty Hawk, a place made famous in 1903 by two bicycle builders from Ohio who managed to glide a winged craft along the dunes for the length of a football field or so.

We noticed that every home on the island was built from the second story up. What we would call the first story was a series of 8x8 stilts, which we recognized as attempts to minimize the damage from storm surges caused by the hurricanes that frequent those islands. So before we ever saw the waves, we saw evidence of the awesome power of nature, and of human attempts to deal with that power as a fact of life.

In the 100-degree heat, under an oppressive afternoon sun, we climbed a boardwalk up over the 12-foot dunes, between sea grasses and wind-blown palm trees, and came in sight of that vast horizon of rolling waters we call the Atlantic Ocean.

Few sights in life—the view across countless peaks from above tree-line in the Rockies, the view of the mile-deep, multi-hued Grand Canyon from the rim—can compare to the humbling effect of gazing across the unknown depths and imagination-stretching distances of the ocean.

As Dad snapped photos and Marshall and I kicked off our shoes and waded in the first few inches of those awesome, green depths, the salt wind whipping our faces, the countless grains of sand giving way under our cooling feet, I thought of the exotic places this ocean could take me to, the multi-shaped masterpieces that swim in its dark world below the surface, the people who walked these shores centuries ago—and the Creator

who conceived it all, and sustains it all, and still cares specifically about me, a speck on a speck of His universe who can't even do what I know I'm here for without failing Him.

I had been reading a book about recognizing the great invisibles of life in relationship with Him, and I prayed, "Lord, You grant blessings like this to take my breath away; free me from my chronic proneness to be nearsighted and petty—to treat insignificant things as though they were big, and great things as though they were small."

What was it that impressed on me this profound conclusion? Creation overwhelmed me with the awareness of a Master-Artist who made all this in awe-inspiring detail—Someone so great and powerful that He could sustain every molecule, Someone so intimate and intricate that He knows every atom, knows me inside and out, Someone so unlimited he cares about a nobody like me and every other nobody in His marvelous creation.

Now where did I get the imagination to see these invisible realities? I've been to aquariums in Chicago and Monterey and San Diego, so I've seen colorful wonders that inhabit the unseen deep. I've seen the glimpses brought to us through the Hubbell telescope, so I have an inkling of the colors of the cosmos. I've read captivating stories of people over the millennia, and I've been to places where many of them lived, so I have a connection that transcends time.

I can make these vivid connections with unseen things as I stand on the Outer Banks because of two things: a wonderful imagination I inherit as a man made in the image of a Creator, and the special revelation that He has given us.

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And He is not served by human hands as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:24-28).

He is the God of wonders. I beg you, don't turn His amazing story into a mere math problem. Don't present the gospel as though God were petty. Proclaim His glory. **The Lord whose gospel we proclaim is the Source of the beauty and wonder that inspire us. Don't miss the creative wonder of the Artist's masterwork.**

2. Special Revelation: God reveals Himself in His Word.

It is no minor thing that God has spoken to us in words. The ancients believed that language, the spoken and written word, was our direct link to the divine, the essential element that gives meaning to all of life.

The Bible comes from the same perspective. God made Himself known to us by means of His LOGOS, His Word. By His Word God created all things, and nothing exists without being spoken into being by God's Word (**John 1:1-3**).

Not only is our dependence upon God's Word for existence, but we are further dependent upon God's Word for the meaning and purpose in our existence. When we

ignore the Word of the Creator, we shut ourselves off from our Source and therefore from our very meaning of our existence.

God has revealed Himself not only generally in His creation, but specially to His chosen people, and specifically in His written Word, the Bible. Those who do not read the Bible as God's revelation of Himself do not discover in it, then, the fascinating meaning and purpose in life. They treat it as a merely human text and question the ability of Almighty God to communicate with the people He created. I can see no logic in their train of thought.

But my purpose at present is not to give you reasons to believe the Bible. My purpose is to help you see the brilliant creativity of God in His literary masterpiece. And I need to precede that by pointing out what God's written Word is NOT:

It is NOT dry, abstract doctrine, disconnected from real life. You cannot take the Bible seriously and come to that conclusion. Every part of Scripture is inseparably rooted in time-and-place life situations of actual people. God did not choose to make Himself known as a formula understandable only in abstraction. He's a personal Being calling into life other personal beings that they might know Him. In other words, you cannot separate doctrine from story.

The minute we take the living, active Word of God and filter it through an abstract principle we risk filtering out the very life that the Word brings.

If God's word is NOT abstract doctrine disconnected from real life, what IS God's Word? God's Word is story. It is the record of the actions of God in direct relation to His people. It is the workings of God in the material world, in human history, in meaningful interaction with His creation. That is, God has made Himself known to us not only through His material and cognitive creation (His general revelation), but also more specifically through His direct, personal and verbal communication of Himself to His people (special revelation).

His people know that God has made Himself known to us through His written Word, because He has told us this in His Word, and we know it through personal and corporate experience. As we get to know Him through faithful attention to His Word, we experience His powerful, life-giving work through it.

But we tend to drift away from reading it as He has given it to us, and we gradually read it as a reference tool. What do I mean by a reference tool? I mean a source you go to for individual pieces of information—like a dictionary or a phone book.

When you treat God's Word that way you dissect it, taking what you want and ignoring the rest. But worse, you think of the whole as nothing more than a list of facts, or regulations, and you become blind to the overarching work of God through the history of His dealings with His people.

The *form* in which God gave us His Word is not accidental. He could have written it more like the Department of Motor Vehicles Handbook, and right and wrong would have seemed easier for us to understand, but then we wouldn't really know what God is like, would we? We would have clear rules, but not a vital relationship. God gave us the whole story, because in His wisdom, that is the means He determined to enable us to know and follow Him.

The beginning of the story

Notice the opening of the story in Genesis 1. The beginning is poetry. You can discuss the specifics of how you believe God went about creating everything that is, but the simple fact is, He describes it to us in poetry. Anyone with more than a rudimentary experience of literature, anyone who pays attention to participatory song, recognizes the form. Every verse begins, “And God said . . .” Each verse ends, “And there was evening and there was morning, the next day.” It has a rhythm to it, a form, a flow.

And what about the content? Well, it’s a tidy summary for the wonders of all creation that we’ve already thought about. The Lord summarizes what it is, but He does not make it out to be less than it is. To the contrary, we’re the ones who tend to take the wonder out of it by turning it into an argument instead of enjoying the awesome wonder of all that God has made.

The resolution of the story

Notice the ending of the book in Revelation 21-22. It’s full light and color, sound and action, beauty beyond description. The Revelation is written in the most intricate of poetic literature to vividly contrast the horrors of our fallen world with the glories of Christ’s reign, Paradise restored.

I point out the opening and closing of the book to emphasize the unending, extravagant wonders of this Creator, this Author of authors—Whom we risk portraying as a grumpy old man, griping about the irresponsibility of kids these days and threatening to sell the lot of us for dog food if we don’t start pulling our weight.

Notice Heaven itself, never portrayed in Scripture as a place of colorless, cloudy blankness, but always as the kind of place that would take your breath away, the kind of vivid, abundant, never-ending, invigorating place you’d never want to leave.

The story in between

What happens after the first few chapters of the book? The Lord unfolds a story, not a fantasy, but real people in real places learning to deal with real struggles in their relationship with God in a fallen and broken world. In the process, the Lord calls a man named Abraham and establishes a covenant relationship—not an impersonal, take-it-or-leave-it contract, but rather an “I will be with you through thick and thin to the very end” kind of relationship.

And the thin times show up in vivid drama—Abraham leaving the greatest civilization on the planet to wander in the wilderness, Jacob running for his life, Joseph falsely accused and thrown into an Egyptian prison, then Joseph surprisingly given the opportunity for revenge, and instead recognizing his story as part of God’s redemption story.

Salvation is glaringly displayed to an enslaved people, who, once led into freedom, go along griping and demanding to return to the slavery they once knew. Before that is the teaching of Romans 6, it is the dramatic experience of Exodus and Numbers. Hundreds of stories are parts of the Big Story of Scripture.

A language for the relationship

But there is more. We have five books of pure poetry—poetry that grapples with the mysteries of suffering and human passion and practical living, poetry that gives us a

language for talking with God. I'm talking about Job and the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.

Not only does God reveal Himself in real-life story, not only does God speak His truth in words, but He uses the most artistic of human language to express the deepest of our relational dynamics.

From the beginning, the Psalms have been a songbook. The colorful spectrum of sound is not less important than the visual revelation of God. God gave it to us as a language for our relationship with Him. God has always called us to sing our highest praise and our deepest complaint.

I count 36 times the Psalms alone call us to sing, and a third of those are psalms of complaint—dealing not only with praise but also with grief, suffering and the human struggle to understand.

The Prophets, from Isaiah to Malachi, turn the conversation around. Using again the most powerful and colorful poetry, God now pours out his heart to His stubborn, self-destructive people. Graphic images—a man beaten beyond recognition, a heart of flesh replacing a heart of stone, dry bones coming to life, a faithless harlot brought home as wife again, a refiner's fire—all these and countless more are literary expressions of God's relentless heart for His beloved people.

The gospel is there, over and over again, but it is not delivered like a systematic theology text. It's there in poetic language, beautiful language, heart-wrenching and graphic language. God does not deliver it like some secret DaVinci Code for later generations to decipher. He delivers it in language that cannot be ignored by real people in real and perilous circumstances, facing apathy and idolatry, facing oppression and destruction.

Face-to-Face with the Word

Ultimately God spoke His Word not only through human literature, but in human flesh. The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we beheld His glory, the fullness of grace and truth (John 1:14).

The four Gospels are called Gospels because they record the event of God's entrance onto the human stage. It is recorded for us not as a fantasy with make-believe names and places, nor as an allegory with a merely symbolic messiah figure, nor as some kind of generic teacher that might have lived but we can't say when or where.

No, the four Gospel-writers went to great pains to show us a baby born in Bethlehem, Judea, during the reign of Caesar Augustus, while Quirinius was governor of Syria. By adulthood he was known as Joseph the carpenter's son in Nazareth, Galilee. And he lived with and taught and carried out His actions in relationship with and eye-witnessed by Matthew and Peter and John and James, people still testifying as first-hand witnesses when these books were written.

But stories!—all four Gospels are stories full of stories about this man who changes everything—captivating stories that cannot be filed away as philosophical concepts for scholars and mystics.

And when Jesus of Nazareth spoke to groups and crowds of people, He described not mere theoretical concepts, but a Kingdom so radically different from the kingdoms of the world that he had to describe it using stories—amazing, demanding, often shocking

works of fiction. We call them parables, but they are artistic, literary works given to those with ears to hear them as windows into a reality to which we have all become blind.

The culmination comes when this Jesus was crucified by Roman soldiers on a hill outside Jerusalem, dying the righteous, in place of the unrighteous, to bring you to God (1 Peter 3:18), buried in a local tomb, and rising to interact bodily, visibly, vocally, tactilely, historically with real people before, weeks later, He ascended before their eyes.

We dare not lose sight of the fact that God has revealed Himself to us in a wonderful story, a story in which He is the main Character. And now that main Character has a face, and hands and feet and scars, and a name not to be profaned but to be told again and again as the main Character in the story who changes everything.

I beg you, don't turn His amazing story into a mere formula. Don't present the gospel as if it were unrelated to real life. **The Lord whose gospel we proclaim in the main Character of the story that captivates and defines us. Don't miss the creative wonder of the Artist's masterwork.**

3. Conversion & Indwelling: God reveals Himself in relationship.

A woman in a tribe that had never heard the gospel listened as a missionary told the wonderful story to her for the first time. She looked at the missionary and said, "I always thought there ought to be a God like that" (Robert Culver, "The Living God," Victor Books, 1978, p. 33).

Here's the Good News: There is a God like that. He's the Source of every beauty and every pleasure you've ever known or dreamed of. He's the main Character in whose story your story can find its ultimate meaning.

So I want you to hear the story, and I want you to know and live the story for yourself. But here's where everyone runs into a wall: You can't know and live the story. By yourself you won't know it, you won't get it, you won't know *Him* . . . until He makes Himself known personally in you.

Without a personal relationship with the Source, at best you're believing an abstraction. Abstraction is not the same thing as knowing Him personally.

You see, because of sin, you start out spiritually dead. We all do. Death is separation. Physical death is separation of the soul from the body. Spiritual death is separation of the soul from God. Until He gives you His Spirit, you don't have spiritual life that you can know Him. Dead people can't raise themselves.

So we need to be raised into this knowledge of God through **conversion**, meaning He transforms your deadness into His spiritual life. And this life is present in you through His **indwelling**. That means God has brought His Holy Spirit into your spiritually dead existence so that now you're not spiritually dead any more because His Spirit is in your formerly dead but now living bodies. His Spirit indwells you.

Because of this conversion or transformation, in which His Spirit indwells you with His spiritual life, you now know Him in a personal, relational way.

Sometimes this is called **subjective revelation**, meaning God making Himself known to you individually. This kind of subjective revelation will never contradict what

God has revealed objectively through His written Word, but it will be known personally in your specific experience.

Because God chooses to make Himself known to His people relationally, His Spirit then begins to grow in us an awareness of His truth in all areas of life. We don't gain this knowledge mechanistically, as if a switch could be ritually flipped on by our religion. No, we grow in this knowledge as a newborn grows in knowledge in relationship to her parents and world.

But you may ask, "How do I start? If I've been spiritually dead, how can I have His spiritual life?"

God always brings life by His Word. By His Word He spoke creation into being (Psalm 33:6). By His Word He reveals the kind of saving, gracious God He is (Hebrews 1:1-2). And by His Word He calls new life into spiritually dead souls.

Romans 10:8-17 describes the significance of the proclamation of God's Word, so that we hear God's call into His life. We can't give ourselves spiritual life, but He speaks it into us through His Word. He says that this is how we will receive His life—through hearing His Word, and receiving it in faith, and confessing that Jesus is Lord.

We call this the relationship of faith. Hebrews 11:6 says faith involves coming to God believing that He exists—something we can discern through His general revelation in creation—and that He rewards those who come to Him—something we learn through the special revelation of His written Word, and so trusting Him—something we do through His Spirit in us.

So through the special revelation of God's written Word, God effectually calls us into His life. Remarkably, He calls us to call on Him. If you respond to His Word by calling on Him as your Savior and Lord, you shall be saved

Please, don't imagine the life of faith in Christ to be a mere concept or religion. **The Lord whose gospel we proclaim in the present Savior who indwells and transforms His people. Don't miss the creative wonder of the Artist's masterwork.**

People in Galatia knew all this, but they had forgotten it. They were reducing glory to a math problem, turning a gracious relationship into a lawbook. The heresy of the Galatians is what drains the beautiful, colorful life right out of us and turns the wonderful Good News into mean, hopeless news. And often it is the best-intentioned of us who inflict it on the church and on those outside the church.

How does **1 Peter 2:9** articulate our calling? "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, *that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.*" God's people are formed to declare the praises of the One who brought them from darkness into His wonderful light. Listen to what C.S. Lewis said about this in his "Reflections on the Psalms":

"All enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise. . . The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers praising their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game. . . I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious minds, praised most, while the cranks. . . and malcontents praised least. The good critics found something to praise in many imperfect works; the bad ones continually narrowed the list of books we might be allowed to read. The healthy and unaffected man . . . could praise a very modest meal; the dyspeptic and the snob found fault with all. . . Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible. . . Praise not merely expresses, but

completes the enjoyment. . . . Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him” (pp. 90-97).

So I want to reclaim for Christ the term “creative.” In reality, to be creative is to be a participant in the life-giving, soul-expanding, glory-extending activity of God. Creative in the Biblical sense is not the opposite of practical; creative is the opposite of destructive.

Contrary to the cynics, praise is not the opposite of realism; praise is the opposite of accusation, a term which in Hebrew gives us the name Satan.

We don’t have to be biochemists or great painters to recognize the glory in creation, but you will miss out on so much of God’s glory if you cannot see beauty and intricacy where it reflects the supreme Artist. You don’t have to be a lit major or a scholar in Greek to marvel in the masterwork of Scripture, but your own soul will be deformed if you cannot soak-in the richly-textured Word at all. And you don’t have to influence thousands to be a faithful follower of the Lord, but if you don’t know Him as more than a religious concept, now is the time to start calling on Him to reveal His living presence in your life.

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