

A Taste of the Classics



From Augustine to C.S. Lewis, this series encapsulates the classic works that helped shape Western civilization.



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Reflections App will be available this month, something Dr. Boa has wanted to do for a long time! Stay tuned for the announcement of the launch.



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WHEN WAITING IS GOOD

Our entrepreneurial culture has taught us to find viable solutions to our own problems. But as Christians, we often do last what we should be doing first: seeking the Lord's wisdom. Still, preemptory prayers notwithstanding, we sometimes find ourselves in situations of increasing stress, pain, or danger. These experiences can give sharper focus to our hope in the Lord.

For instance, the godly king Jehoshaphat of Judah found himself facing a huge invading army. While he had already renewed Judah's focus on God by tearing down idol altars and teaching the people God's law (2 Chron. 17:6-9), his focus was about to be made much sharper (you can read the amazing story in 2 Chron. 20). He gathered the people together—"All Judah was standing before the Lord, with their infants, their wives and their children"—and prayed for help (2 Chron. 20:13).

The last line of the prayer serves as a wonderful example of faith focused squarely on God: "[We do not] know what to do, but our eyes are on You" (2 Chron. 20:12). Now that's focus. The only resource in Jehoshaphat's field of vision was God. If God didn't do it, it wasn't going to get done.

This is the kind of focus Jeremiah the prophet was talking about in Lamentations. Years after Jehoshaphat's reign, Jeremiah wrote to lament the destruction of Jerusalem. The city and temple were demolished, and most of the people had been taken captive to Babylon. Those who remained in the city faced a disastrous food shortage (Lam. 1:11). But Jeremiah encouraged his listeners to rely on God's goodness, despite this

adversity: "It is good that [we wait] silently for the salvation of the Lord" (3:26).

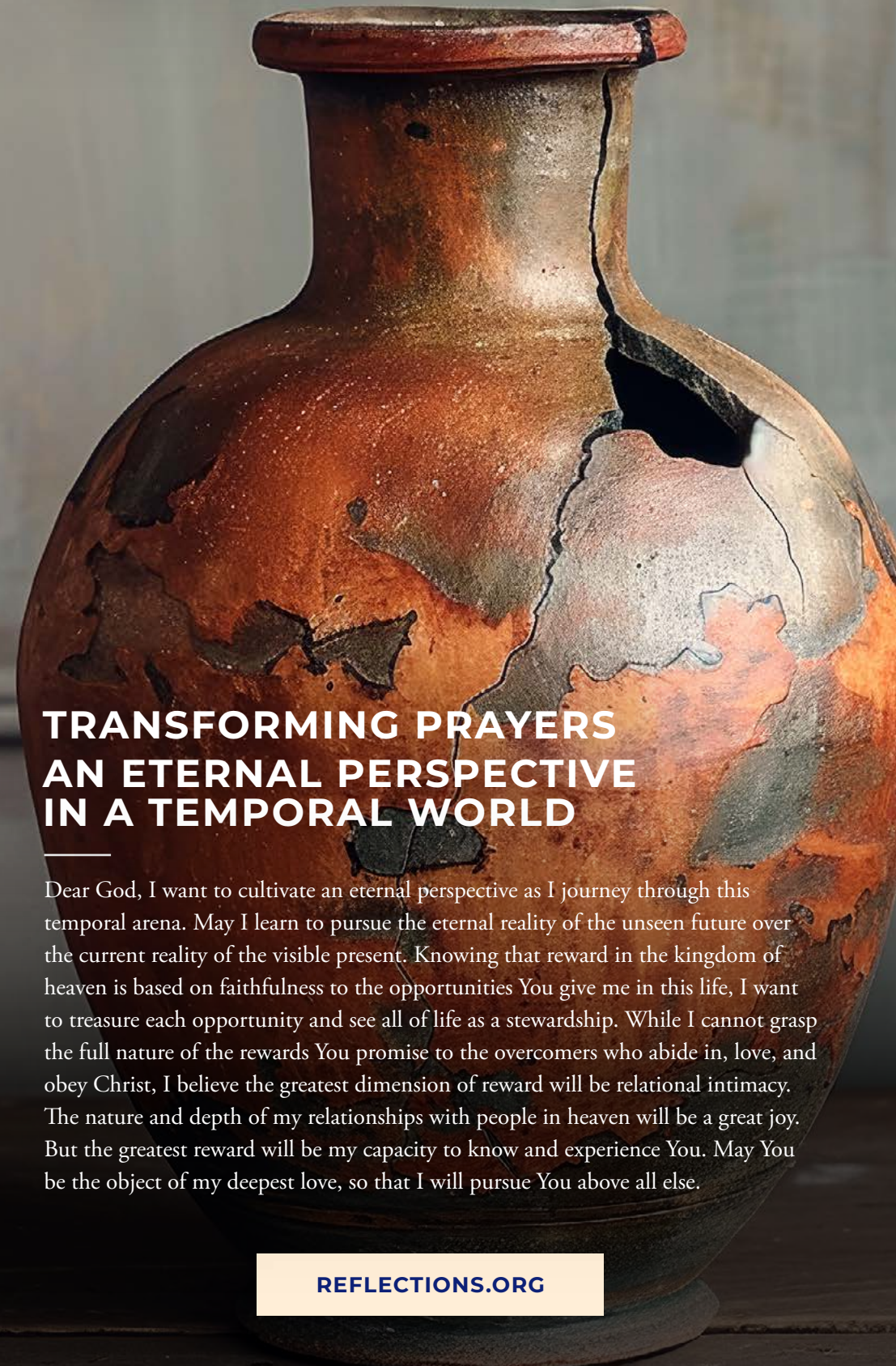
Jeremiah's faith reflected a divinely inspired optimism. Because God's compassions are new every morning, Jeremiah wrote, who knows what tomorrow will bring? "Therefore I have hope in Him" (Lam. 3:23, 24). If you are in a painful place right now, with absolutely nowhere to go or turn, don't invent something to do. Let pain do its focusing work. However difficult it may feel, be content to wait on the Lord. For "the Lord is good to those who wait for Him" (3:25).

God's Promise:

He delights in being your first, last, and only hope.

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A teaching letter encouraging believers to develop a clear mind and a warm heart



TRANSFORMING PRAYERS AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE IN A TEMPORAL WORLD

Dear God, I want to cultivate an eternal perspective as I journey through this temporal arena. May I learn to pursue the eternal reality of the unseen future over the current reality of the visible present. Knowing that reward in the kingdom of heaven is based on faithfulness to the opportunities You give me in this life, I want to treasure each opportunity and see all of life as a stewardship. While I cannot grasp the full nature of the rewards You promise to the overcomers who abide in, love, and obey Christ, I believe the greatest dimension of reward will be relational intimacy. The nature and depth of my relationships with people in heaven will be a great joy. But the greatest reward will be my capacity to know and experience You. May You be the object of my deepest love, so that I will pursue You above all else.

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Beauty, Brokenness, and Art

The Challenge of Beauty and Brokenness

With the best of intentions, many Christian artists aim at beauty but end up with sentimentality. Conversely, others, captivated by modern conceptions of rebellion and emancipation, aim at transgression, only to end up with banality. Both of these conundrums are related. Just as sentimentality consists in an excess of sentiment that's out of touch with reality, transgression for its own sake consists in an excess of ugliness that bears little resemblance to the world we inhabit. An excess of sentiment can give us the cozy escapism of an Amish Romance novel, while an excess of transgression can give us the mangled figures of a Francis Bacon painting. The Amish romance feeds distraction and naivety. Bacon's distortions of the human form breed contempt for people made in God's image.

Striking the balance between beauty and brokenness in a fallen world is a perennial challenge for artists. An overemphasis on beauty, joy, and redemption this side of eternity will come at the cost of truth. Likewise, doing nothing but slogging through the mire of darkness and depravity—the calling card of so many of today's prestige dramas and “realist” stories—also falls short of honesty. Our world is filled with disaster, crime, and corruption, yes, but it's also filled with natural beauty, generosity, and self-sacrifice. Turning a blind eye to either aspect yields a distorted picture. In this regard, it's worth noting that one of the most ambitious celebrations of unadulterated light in Western literature—Dante's *Paradiso*—didn't arrive until the poet had first dragged us through hell and purgatory. We cannot reach any summit without climbing and the higher the summit, the more treacherous the climb.

The life of one contemporary artist in particular offers a poignant example of the tension between beauty and brokenness. Dubbed the “painter of light,” Thomas Kinkade once said, “I like to portray a world without the fall.” His shimmering visions of cottages, lighthouses, and village churches were meant to offer rest and consolation to people who felt beaten down by the brittle circumstances of daily life. These idealized paintings earned him the contempt of the fine arts establishment and the adoration of millions of ordinary people who filled their homes with his work.

One of the more unsparing comments on Kinkade's work came from Joan Didion: “A Kinkade painting was typically rendered in slightly surreal pastels. It typically featured a cottage or a house of such insistent coziness as to seem actually sinister, suggestive of a trap designed to attract Hansel and Gretel. Every window was lit, to lurid effect, as if the interior of the structure might be on fire.”¹ Unsparing as it may be, what makes this observation so shrewd is that it clearly discloses the attempt to dress a fallen world up in paradisaical colors. No matter how well intentioned, such an endeavor will usually end up looking sinister to discerning eyes. From the stranger offering candy to children to the publicity strategy of all manner of cults and utopian societies, the attempt to downplay or conceal the darkness of the human condition is catastrophic. In the words of “Yogi” Berra, “If the world were perfect, it wouldn't be.” The biblical rendering of this principle is that Satan himself sometimes masquerades as an angel of light (II Corinthians 11:14).

Kinkade's own life, however, adds a haunting dimension to his work. Facing numerous challenges, including a DUI, bankruptcy, and accusations of questionable business practices from major art dealers, Kinkade died of an accidental overdose at the age of fifty-four. This tragic end ought to qualify the many dismissals of the man's works as nothing more than kitsch. Indeed, his failures cast a shadow over his bright paintings and make clear that any holistic artistic vision will necessarily include the fallen aspects of human experience. As we'll see, this doesn't mean that we need to wallow in ugliness, but it does mean that an honest portrait of the human experience will include brokenness. For all their sentimentality and narrow escapism, Kinkade's idyllic scenes testify to a noble quest for beauty.² Ironically, they miss the mark by failing to take into account the very reality to which their author succumbed.

Striking the Balance in Art

Consider Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, *Spring and Fall*, as a powerful rejoinder to the many trite attempts to bypass the fallen aspects of human existence:

Márgarét, áre you gríeving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leáves like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! ás the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sórrów's spríngs áre the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.³

As is typical with Hopkins, the poem is jammed with rich imagery and words peculiar to the poet himself—*goldengrove*, *wanwood*, *leafmeal*. The poem is prefaced with the phrase, “to a young child,” and we begin with the striking contrast between the youthful vigor of Margaret and the grand decay of autumn that surrounds her. As this young child watches a tree shedding its leaves, she is filled with an unaccountable sorrow. The poet offers a sobering reply: “Ah! ás the heart grows older/It will come to such sights colder.” By the poem's end it's clear that a cosmic drama is being enacted as this young girl weeps before the shedding tree. The poet names for Margaret what her “heart heard” and her “ghost guessed”—namely, that the true source of her sorrow is her condition as a fallen creature alienated from her Maker: “It is Margaret you mourn for.”

In his book *Poetic Theology*, William Dyrness argues that “brokenness” is an essential feature of a holistic artistic vision.⁴ Some might respond, “That's all well and good, but I don't want to fill my home with paintings cataloging the desperation of the human condition.” It's an understandable thought, but once again, a realistic artistic vision need not be unremittingly bleak. In this regard, Dyrness calls attention to the Dutch painter, Jacob van Ruisdael, whose vivid landscapes are filled with natural beauty, but also subtle indications of the ruin spread throughout our fallen world. Thus a dilapidated cottage rots in a verdant field and a dead tree twists towards the blazing heavens. And yet these paintings are also charged with the hope of redemption in the form of lavish sunlight

and the teeming life of the created order. There is brokenness, but there is also a palpable anticipation of a future healing, giving to these unassuming landscapes an eschatological charge for those willing to see.

We cannot hide from our fallen condition, but nor should we see it as the final word. Rather, as Jacob van Ruisdael and Gerard Manley Hopkins demonstrate so well, we must recognize the gravity of our fallen condition. But our response ought not to be one of denial or despair, but rather one of repentance and surrender. Those who recognize their brokenness will recognize their need for healing, for a savior. In this sense, artists who are willing to honor all aspects of the human experience offer a robust hope. Recall the words of Revelation 21:5, quoting from Isaiah 43:19: “Behold I am making all things new.”

For those who insist on an artistic vision that excludes any hint of our fallen condition, it's worth pointing to the ubiquity of the cross. Not only is this symbol a fixture in our churches. It's also in our homes. What once was seen as a Roman instrument of humiliation and torture is now a beacon of hope. There is perhaps no better portrait of the Christian vision of brokenness that testifies to the healing that comes about through our Lord who, through the most heinous and wicked act in all of history, secured our redemption.

Notes

- 1 Available online: <https://commonreader.wustl.edu/making-art-great-again/>
- 2 These thoughts were inspired by Gregory Wolfe's compassionate tribute in *The Wall-Street Journal*, “Art in a Fallen World”: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303425504577353743803849150>
- 3 Available online: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44400/spring-and-fall>
- 4 William Dyrness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011), 166-173.

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