

SEPTEMBER DEAL
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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.



GOD'S PROMISES

COMMENDABLE SUFFERING

One of the men who suffered as a result of his crimes had no conscience toward God. He "[hurled] abuse" at Jesus while they hung on the cross (Luke 23:39). The other criminal, however, found his awareness of God awakened by the injustice of Christ's death. He asked Jesus to remember him in the coming kingdom (Luke 23:42). Finally, there was Jesus. Although as the sinless Son of God He was guilty of nothing, still He suffered. And because He suffered unjustly, what He did found "favor before God" (1 Peter 2:20). Peter writes that when we as Christians suffer unjustly, we are following the example of Christ, and our suffering likewise commends us to God.

This is exactly Peter's point to the church. He warns us that there is no commendation before God in suffering for doing wrong. But he also says that Jesus "suffered for you, leaving you an example for your to follow in His steps" (1 Peter 2:21). Just as the enlightened criminal's faith did not spare him from his just suffering, so our faith will not spare us either. But if we suffer unjustly, we know that God sees and honors suffering for His name's sake.

God's Promise:
No suffering for God
and His kingdom will go
unrewarded.

But what if we suffer justly? What if we, like the two lawbreakers, "get what we deserve"? Interestingly, the second offender—the one whose conscience was awakened to his need for God—gave the answer to that question: "We are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man [Jesus] has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41). He understood that, if we bring suffering on ourselves, we have no recourse before God. He saw no injustice in his suffering and the other criminal's suffering, but he did recognize the injustice in Jesus' suffering.

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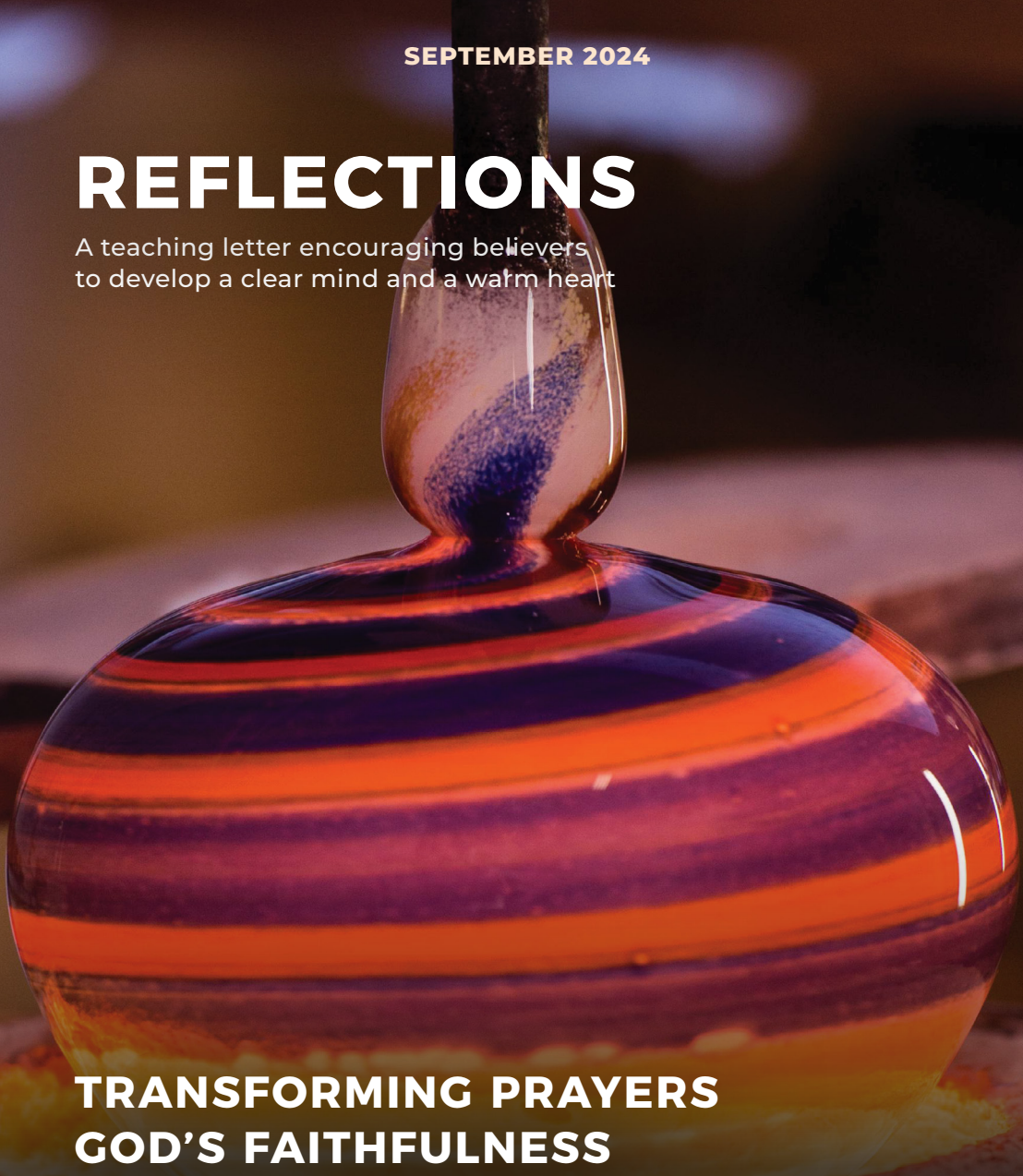
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REFLECTIONS

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



TRANSFORMING PRAYERS
GOD'S FAITHFULNESS
FROM THE BEGINNING

O Lord, there are times when I allow fear and doubt to grip me and cause me to wonder about the reality of my faith. But then I remember Your faithfulness to Your people from the beginning; Your redemptive plan that consummated in the cross of Your Son; His unique life and miracles and teachings and resurrection; and Your great works of provision, protection, comfort, and guidance in my life. When I call these things to mind, I can affirm that nothing in heaven or earth can separate me from Your love in Christ Jesus. Knowing that I am in Your grip, I can be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in Your work, knowing that my toil is not in vain. You will continue to make me more like Your Son, and no loss or grief in this present world can even be compared with what You are planning for those who love You.

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Encountering Beauty in the Arts

In a compelling video essay, actor and director Ethan Hawke argues, “Art is not a luxury. It’s actually sustenance. We need it.”¹ Judging by the speed with which school arts programs get slashed when budgets are tight, many of us disagree with Mr. Hawke about the practical importance of art. Isn’t the function of the arts mainly recreational—a wholesome pastime for afterhours, or the province of privileged connoisseurs who frequent art galleries and maybe indulge in their own private collections? In short, we tend to dismiss the arts as trivial, elitist, or some combination of both. As we’ll see, one of the ways art can sustain us is by guiding our worship.

The Three Major Sources of Beauty

There are three major sources of beauty. Firstly, there’s the beauty on display in God’s world. Humanity down the ages has marveled at both the scale and intricacy of the created order. Invariably, admiration gives way to adoration and the end result is some form of worship or other. True, this worship is often misdirected, but let’s not lose sight of the fact that this is a basic, even primal, human response to the grandeur of the universe. In this sense, the shaman in the rainforest is closer to the truth than the self-satisfied skeptic who substitutes science for religion. The second source of beauty is God’s word. Scripture is filled with celebrations of the exuberance of the created order. The stately verses of Psalm 19:1-6 come immediately to mind. Finally, the third source of beauty consists in our response to the world and, if we follow Christ, His word. Under this responsive heading fall the arts, the sciences, and the constellation of human worship habits.

When we consider a particular work of art (literature, film, painting, music, sculpture, architecture, etc.), a question worth asking would be, What does this work say about our response to the world? What does it say (perhaps indirectly) about God’s word? We’ve remarked in a past issue on what Sir Roger Scruton refers to as “the uglification of everything”—acts of desecration that seek to challenge or overturn the Christian heritage of the West. In this regard, we might think of the work of a modern painter like Francis Bacon whose grotesque and contorted depictions of the human form represent a striking riposte to the exalted representations of artists who thought of human beings as created in the image of God.

If much of what passes for art these days is often willfully ugly, what does this say about the human response to the world? If we take a broad definition of worship, we can recognize that a good deal of pre-modern art constitutes a humble celebration of the created order and humanity’s place in it. Human beings were numbered in

creation’s inventory and stood before powers that vastly exceeded their own. In striking contrast, modern art is often an act of defiance, portraying human beings as masters of their own destiny. Why would this road end in uglification? Much could be said here, but two major reasons are worth mentioning. Firstly, a rejection of *givenness*—the intrinsic meaning and limitations of our human existence—results in various degrees of perversion. In the place of a healthy human body, we’re confronted with distortions of the human form that are meant to communicate power and independence. The second reason for uglification is more sobering. Many modern artists are reflecting on the failures of humanistic endeavors. In a word, they are capturing various aspects of the fallen human condition. Pablo Picasso’s infamous *Guernica* was inspired by the Nazi bombing of the Basque town. It’s certainly a profound work of art, but it is far from beautiful in the traditional sense.

Worship is inevitable. We have no choice in the matter. If this is so, what kind of worship do we see in grotesque acts of artistic defiance? In a word, we often see a worship of humanity. If the human form on display in Michelangelo’s *David* celebrates persons as the pinnacle of the created order, the twisted shapes writhing in so many of the paintings coming out of current art programs are meant to disabuse us of our former starry-eyed illusions. Ironically, however, by seeking to break away from the worship of God, many of these artists simply attempt to replace the worship of God with the worship of humanity. Once again, rather than accept the terms of our finite condition, these works try to pioneer a vision that is iconoclastic, visionary, or avant garde. The results are fittingly grotesque because a rejection of the given forms of creation entails a retreat to perversion. One thinks of Dr. Victor Frankenstein stitching together cadavers and calling it his “creation.”

Well-Intentioned Blunders

Sadly, a good deal of what’s marketed as Christian art constitutes a well-intentioned blunder. This is a strong statement and there’s a good chance it will elicit some defensiveness and perhaps even some offense. Nevertheless, it remains true that today’s “Christian art” is often tantamount to kitsch. Call to mind the inventories of the Christian book stores of yesteryear and you’ll have a clear picture. Why would this be so? One reason would be the uglification discussed above. Reacting against the depredations of some modern and contemporary artists, well-intentioned believers seek to give us sanitized visions of reality in their art. Though the hope is to aim for genuine beauty and goodness, such visions often come at the cost of truth. While it’s true that our world doesn’t necessarily resemble the perverse spectacles paraded in certain corners of the contemporary art world, it most certainly is filled with pain and suffering and any work that seeks to mute this fact or to turn a blind eye to it inevitable terminates in some form of vain escapism and sentimentality.

Genuine Beauty in Today’s Arts

Rather than speak in abstract terms about what constitutes genuine beauty in the arts, it might be helpful to turn to a holistic example. Speaking frankly, many

theologically conservative Christians are often reluctant to engage newer or contemporary artists, even those within the church. There’s a safe pantheon to which we appeal on a regular basis: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien are at the top of the list. However, more adventurous lists might include Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, T.S. Eliot, and W.H. Auden. But what about people working today?

Consider the novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. The story centers on John Ames, an aging Congregationalist minister in a small town in Iowa. Having lost his first wife and child during childbirth, he remarries later in life and, much to their surprise, his new wife becomes pregnant and Rev. Ames is father to a son in his twilight years. Having been given a terminal diagnosis by his doctor, however, the novel takes the form of a series of letters written to his son who will grow up without his father. These letters are meditations on life in the church, the splendors of our world, and the grace of God in our everyday lives. Remarkably, the entire story unfolds in the shadow of death, so to speak, and yet the novel is a consummate celebration of life. It is moving, but never sentimental, grave, but not bleak, and hopeful, rather than optimistic. In closing, consider these words from Ames: “In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don’t imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try.”²

Notes

- 1 Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeCuqtFKLHI>
- 2 Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004), 57.

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