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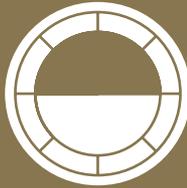
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There is but one good; that is God.
Everything else is good when it
looks to Him and bad when
it turns from him.

—C. S. LEWIS

Being near creative people frees
you to think new thoughts. How
much more an encounter with the
living God and his Word?

—TIM KELLER



—EDWARD DE BONO

There is no doubt that creativity
is the most important human
resource of all. Without creativity,
there would be no progress, and
we would be forever repeating the
same patterns.

—CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

God did not create man in his own
image. Evidently, it was quite the
other way about . . .

1

THE CREATOR OF CREATIVITY

*WHAT GOD
HAS TO DO WITH YOUR CREATIVITY*

When it comes to utilizing the power of beginnings, no creative company does this better than Marvel.

By no means are they the first to harness the power of origin stories. From Aristophanes to Virgil, from Homer to Zola, from Dante's *Inferno* to Gaiman's *American Gods*, we've used stories to make sense of the human experience. Origin stories change us because they set out to address our most fundamental questions, questions like: Who are we? Why are we here? Where did we come from? Where are we going?¹ It is why there are ancient stories of the world springing forth from a lotus flower. It is why the Greeks wrote poetry about Prometheus defying the gods by fashioning humanity out of the soil. It is why Goethe personifies the drama of the human predicament in the characters of Faust and

Mephistopheles. And it is why Camus reframes Sisyphus as our modern-day savior, a messiah who counters the world's absurdity simply with his existence.

Origin stories are Marvel's creative genius. In storylines like *Thor* and *The Avengers*, the writers have tapped into our innate human need to know where we come from and modernized it for a contemporary audience. Marvel writers are modern mythmakers who confront our greatest existential problems through visual narrative. Marvel has spent the last few decades rescuing forgotten heroes from forgotten history books by putting them into the panels of the comic book and the digital projectors in the movie theaters right across the street from us.²

This is why Marvel has dominated the box office recently. Origin stories are the key that has unlocked an entire generation's loyalty, not to mention our wallets. Over the last fifteen years, Marvel has built an entertainment and film catalog unparalleled in the history of stories, modern film, and now television. Holding it together are the central storylines giving us the backstories of our favorite superheroes and villains. These stories bring our favorite characters to life. They pull the masks off their true identities and uncover their hidden motivations. Because we've been in the seats since the beginning, Marvel executives are banking on the fact that we will stay in our seats as long as they remain true to the characters we first gave our hearts to.³

Marvel's modern mythmakers reveal something intrinsic to all of us.⁴ We love origin stories because we were made to love them.

We love them⁵ because they cast light on our own search for meaning and purpose, which usually involves an extensive excavation of the past. We love them because we are temporal beings. Looking back comes natural to us. We think that knowing our past might bring us closer to the truth in the present. As mythologist Joseph Campbell explains, when we look backwards, “what we are looking for is a way of experiencing the world that will open to us the transcendent that informs it, and at the same time forms ourselves within it.”⁶ Knowing where we come from helps make sense of the life-giving questions about who we are and where we are going.

This is why some of us have that session with a counselor later today. We need help confronting our personal origin story. If we can just address the past, we feel like the dark clouds of anxiety enveloping our present (and obstructing the horizon) might finally blow over.

We seek our origin stories because we think they can get us out of our not-so-merry-go-round worlds. We believe that they will point us in the right direction, that they form the runner’s blocks for our future lives. We investigate our origin stories because we believe, as the philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard said, that “life can only be understood backwards” even while it “must be lived forwards.”⁷ We can look to the future only when we have taken care of our past.

But here’s the irony. While storytellers—like those at Marvel—continue to write, film, sing, and draw origin stories that explain the human experience, we wonder how many have taken the time to

explore the *origin story of their own creativity*. Instead, the modern creative community has more often than not replaced the intrinsic search for creativity's starting point with an emphasis on output. We've exchanged a philosophy of creativity for the pragmatism of productivity. The contemporary catchphrase "Never Stop Creating" offers little space to consider where our creativity originates. Our contemporary fascination with creativity's production keeps us so busy that we don't pursue creativity's original purpose. This is creativity's contemporary mission drift: we are concerned primarily with how we are going to fill the shelves rather than why we want to fill them at all. While our portfolios may be full, we will find it tough to explain—beyond subjective or pragmatic platitudes—why our portfolio exists in the first place.

And this lack of an origin story for your creativity shapes you more than you can imagine.

Creativity actually needs direction, which means creativity needs a starting line. Like a traveler on her way, a point of origin helps determine our way. Without a beginning point for our creativity, we end up lost in a wilderness of our own design. We are susceptible to every mirage the culture offers us. Which means we are no longer on our way, or *the way*; it means we are following someone else's way. This haphazard itinerary often has the intersection of exhaustion and superficiality as its final destination.

THE CHARACTER OF CREATIVITY

We want to help you get where you are going, which is why we want to start with your creativity's true origin story, one that clarifies who you are as a creative person and why you even pursue creative work. To do this, we have to pull ourselves away from our own hypnotic self-reflections and look to the source of all creativity, the Trinitarian God revealed in Christian Scripture. The story of your creativity—yes, *your* creativity—begins and ends with God. Every act of creativity (whether we like it or not) proceeds from these familiar words:

**In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
(Gen. 1:1)**

No doubt, barrels of ink have been spilled over the meaning of this renowned sentence. In fact, complete theological systems and world-and-life-views are built on its foundation. Yet often missing in the theological, scientific, and philosophical “shouting match” over this verse is the simple yet profound truth that this sentence confides: *God is creative, and creativity belongs to God.*

The first thing Scripture tells us about God is that He is creative. But our pursuit of a systematized, didactic portrait of God has pushed this attribute into the endnotes of our theological textbooks, if it finds its way in there at all. Though we call Him Creator, seldom do we find creativity credited to Him. But we want to see these come together. We want to show that God's work as Creator flows from His creative nature. We also want to show that God's creativity

defines the paradigm of our own creative lives.⁸ To know this is to know this simple but misplaced truth:

All creativity begins and ends in God.

God is your creativity's origin story. This is the testimony of creation. Many know creation to be the theater of God's glory. But don't miss the fact that His theater is a product of His creativity as well. In fact, the entire world, from beginning to end, reflects God's creative agency. God builds the stage, fashions the cast, pens the story, and directs His characters to His good and glorious ends. To know creation, then, is to know God, not in full, but in truth. He signs all He makes with His character and purpose. His creative work bears the seal of His eternal power and divine nature (Rom. 1:20). Simply put, everything He makes sings His creativity.

We know this because we see it in our world and read it in His Word. His world demonstrates His creativity while His Word interprets it for us. Both books of God's revelation—creation and Scripture—testify to His creative character and skill.

*All creativity begins
and ends in God.*

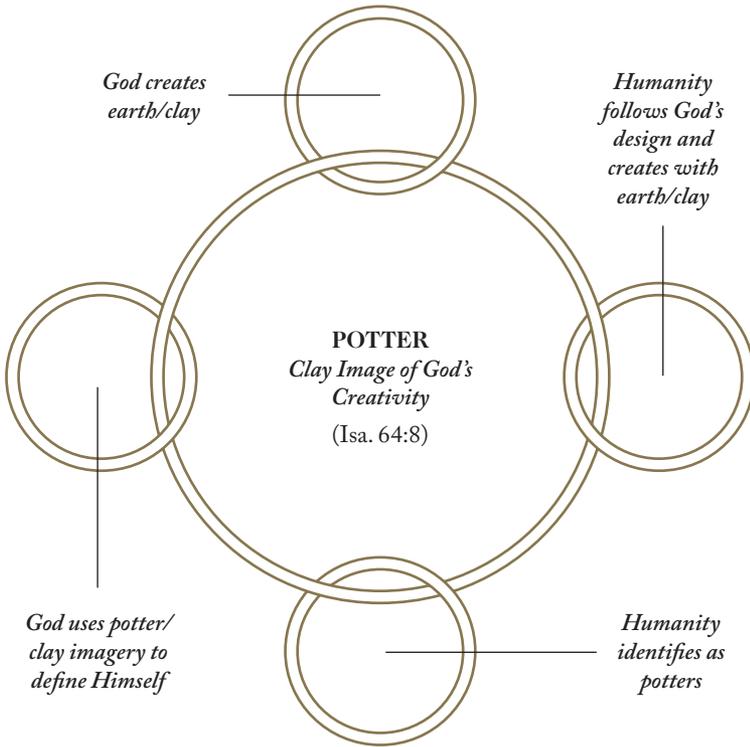
Herein lies the lavish nature of God's ways: God not only created creatively but also interprets this creative work in creative ways. Stop for a moment to appreciate what this means. Our Creator puts His creativity on full display in His creation. But then, so we don't miss it, He interprets and explains His creative work for us in Scripture. Simply creating would have been good and sufficient. But like a detailed artist, God wants us to have a kaleidoscopic vision of His

creative glory. In His kind providence, the Lord creatively interprets His own imaginative work for us through brilliant images—images *He created* in the first place to help us understand Him and feel the worshipful weight of His creative brilliance.

This truth is on full display in Isaiah 64:8, when the prophet declares, “**But now, O LORD . . . we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.**” Here, God uses the poetic metaphor of the relationship between potter and clay to rebuild the hopes of His covenant people. This verse comes on the heels of Isaiah’s lament over Judah’s stockpile of sin and God’s requisite departure from the nation. The prophetic picture of the potter and clay, then, is an encouraging vision. Isaiah uses the imagery to remind his audience (and us today) that God is the one who fashions a people for Himself. God is the potter. He is the creative artist. We are the clay, the work of His hands, a people He creates for Himself whom He will not forsake.

In the passage, God creatively interprets His own creativity. He uses the artistic imagery of potter and clay to demonstrate His creative power and commitment to His covenant people. Remember, too, that God created every aspect of this imagery. God creates Israel, the covenant, the covenant promises, the prophet, the words spoken, and *even the clay, the potter, and the impetus to make pottery are His*. The imagery would remain inaccessible or inapplicable unless God made the reality supporting the employed images. The creative metaphor rings true because God created all aspects of the metaphor to help us understand Him and our relationship with Him. God

creates clay and potters for the production of pottery, but He also creates them to embody the permanence of His covenant promises. What emerges then is a cycle of divine creativity that we often miss, confuse, or distort. It goes something like this:



God not only demonstrates His creativity in creation but also uses His creation to form the images by which we understand Him as Creator. This is why our creativity sometimes drifts. It lacks its

divine anchor point. It doesn't recognize the debt it owes God. Sure, we can be creative outside of Christianity, without recognizing the origin of our creativity, but our work can't help but fall short of its full (and eternal) potential and purpose when we do. God made everything—including His creation and, dare we say, the work of our own hands—to point back to Himself. Creativity makes sense only when it does what it was meant to do.

God the Architect

God, however, doesn't use just one metaphor to display His creativity. He fills the pages of Scripture with images and pictures that make it clear that all creativity begins and ends with Him. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, God's creative glory is not something we simply recognize; it reframes our own creative lives and helps us understand God Himself.⁹

Take, for instance, the image of God as architect. In his meditation on Psalm 19, John Calvin—a Protestant Reformer *not* known for his gratuitous support of human creativity—reaches for a metaphor to connect his audience with the work of God in creation. What he offers us is a vision of God as the preeminent architect, the one responsible for all the cosmos. For Calvin, though, this was not just a fact; it was a call to worship. “As soon as we acknowledge God to be the supreme Architect, who has erected the beauteous fabric of the universe,” writes Calvin, “our minds must necessarily be ravished with wonder at his infinite goodness, wisdom, and power.”¹⁰

What does God's cosmological design do? It shows us God's

glory, helps us grasp His character, and forces us to come to grips with His authority. Calvin is describing what happens when we finally look up at the night sky, miles away from the light pollution of the city. Psalm 19 is about being overwhelmed by reverence for God. It is about God's splendor. Or to sing David's own words: "**The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork**" (v. 1). The sky above is a study in architectural expertise that, when witnessed without distraction, makes God's authority palpable and our finitude overwhelming.

God's cosmological design reveals that the world we so desperately (and inadequately) try to control on our own is actually His world and is under His reign. As Calvin helps us see, "the heavens proclaim to us the glory of God, namely, by openly bearing testimony that they have not been put together by chance, but were wonderfully created by the supreme Architect."¹¹ We didn't make the world, no matter how hard we try to make it ours. The life we live is not even our own, no matter how self-centered we really are. No, it all belongs to its Architect, who builds our world and frames out our lives.

The question is, Do you trust Him to be the Architect of your life? How about of your creative work?

Or do you want only *your* name on the blueprints?

Unfortunately, some of us don't like God being our Chief Architect. We would rather hold that position ourselves. We'd rather keep our heads down and avoid the night sky filled with God's glory, rightfully demanding His praise. We do this by focusing solely on

the trivial creative acts of our own doing—the ones dwarfed by God’s creative work. We do this to shake our fists at the heavens and declare ourselves the engineers of our own lives—and by relativistic proxy, the rest of the world.

But what happens when we do look up? When we recognize and submit ourselves, and our creativity, to God? We would argue that He includes our designs in His overall blueprints for the world. The two are not opposed. We begin to plan in light of His plans and create in light of His architectural genius. We become junior partners in His architectural firm and help build the kingdom of God through the creativity He has given us.

God’s creative design also extends to the world to come. As the author of Hebrews explains, the New Jerusalem, the city-center of the new creation, has God as its **“designer and builder” (Heb. 11:10)**. As with the first creation, God is both the new creation’s “architect” (*technitēs*), the planner of each part and integrator of these . . . parts into a whole” and its maker (*dēmiourgos*) who “focuses . . . on the execution of the plans.”¹² God goes on to use this architectural imagery to clarify how we become residents of the new heavens and new earth (Heb. 11:16; see also Eph. 2:19–22). Jesus is the once-rejected cornerstone that upholds the new, holy temple of the church, which will populate the new creation (Eph. 2:20–22; see also Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Acts 4:1; 1 Peter 2:6–7). From Scripture’s beginning to end, God is the Supreme Architect, who guides and governs His creation into the world that is to come, the world filled with goodness and grace.

God the Artist

God not only plans and builds; He makes everything beautiful. He's concerned not only with making the world, but also with making the world *good*.¹³ His creation is attractive, satisfying, and appealing. Why? Because He is the source of all beauty (see Ps. 27:4),¹⁴ and every work of His creative project showcases His character. God's commitment to artistry, in fact, defines the first couple's first home. You see, Eden is more than just a backdrop for the world's beginnings; it's an aesthetics lecture taught in garden form. Every tree, plant, and fruit teaches us that God is the first and true artist, using the garden's form and function to instruct us that God made us to experience His creative beauty. Eden, by God's design, is not utilitarian provision; it is, by God's own description, "**pleasant to the sight**" (**Gen. 2:9**). This is a garden, not a bleached white cinder-block construction site meant to cloister Adam and Eve away from God and His beauty. There are *no* deficiencies in this garden. Its artist holds nothing back. His perfect beauty is Adam and Eve's only context. His creative splendor is all they know. Like its Creator, Eden is perfect. It is a full-blown garden paradise on the river's edge, teeming with life, lined with monuments of gold and onyx, boasting God's extravagant goodness and glory.

For most, though, the lesson stops here. Many Christians might be thinking, *Okay, okay, we get it. Eden is nice and pretty, but let's get to the snake story in the next part. That's when the action picks up.* We think many of us subconsciously want to fast forward to Genesis 3

because it describes a world closer to our own. But before we turn the page, we need to take a few more steps into Eden.

As with most art, form is driven by function. Eden is no different. The garden's beautiful form follows a more beautiful function. God plants the beautiful garden for a *reason*, and the garden is beautiful for the same reason. Eden provides shelter and nourishment for humanity. But there is more, which we hear in the question, Why did God take the time to make Eden *beautiful*?

To answer this, it helps to see that the two provisions God highlights in the garden are taste and beauty. That which is “**good for food**” is also “**pleasant to the sight**” (**Gen. 2:9**). This isn't arbitrary. Instead, Eden shows us that God always intended for life and beauty to be connected. They are a pair. In God's estimation, to know life is to know beauty, and to know beauty is to know life. To know both, then, is to know God's purposes in this world. Eden is the epicenter of life, which means life and beauty are tethered to one another in God.

Eden clarifies that beauty is essential to human experience because beauty is essential to God and His works. Remember who the actor is in Genesis 1–2. God *creates*. God *plants*. God *forms*.¹⁵ God *put* man in the garden. The first couple receives the garden, just as they received every other gift defining their life. God gives it to them. This makes sense of garden life, and it shows us why Eden is more to Adam and Eve than just a first home. The garden's *ultimate* function is to reflect God's beauty. Eden is the world's first art gallery, with God as its artist *and* with God's glory as the medium of His

art. God etches His beauty into every living thing. He presses His creativity into every detail of life between the Tigris and Euphrates. He adorns the garden's borders with invasive images of His power, sovereignty, goodness, love, holiness, beauty, and creativity.

Eden's beauty also stems from the fact that the garden's Artist is an artist-in-residence. God plants Adam and Eve in the garden to enjoy His work *and* to enjoy His presence (see Gen. 3:8). The question Eden's beauty whispers is, Why settle just for the divine art when you can *also* have the divine artist? So yes, the garden is the first couple's corner lot with a water view, but the garden's true beauty is God Himself, the one who draws near with both bounty and beauty.

And what is more, the image of God as artist does not die when Paradise is lost. With Adam and Eve forced out of Eden, God continues to work creatively among His image bearers. The work takes on a new purpose; it has a redemptive edge now. Yet His re-creation of man is still an expression of creative skill. As we've already seen, God is the potter fashioning a people for His own possession (Isa. 64:8). He is the one who made us (Ps. 100:3) and He is the one who remakes us. As Paul writes, "**For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them**" (Eph. 2:10, **emphasis added**).¹⁶

God as Author

While God builds and paints the theater of His glory, He also writes the drama that has played out, is playing out, and will play out across

His stage. God is an author—we know this truth primarily because it is writ large on the pages of divine Scripture. Through the Spirit, God authors the biblical story of our redemption for our knowledge and salvation.

Everything exists because of God’s word. As the psalmist exclaims, **“By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host” (Ps. 33:6)**. God’s word generates. “God’s word is creative: he speaks, and it is done; he commands and it stands fast. ‘By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.’ Since God’s word is his vocalized breath, it goes forth with the power of his Spirit.”¹⁷ The authority of God’s word creates all things. This includes humanity, the pinnacle of His creative work. Adam lives because God forms him from the ground and speaks him into existence by breathing life into him.

God’s word not only forms the basis for all of creation’s existence but also creates the basis for its perseverance. The world endures because God in Christ upholds the universe by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3). The Lord will not put down His pen until His glory fills the pages of history.

He does this primarily by authoring His people’s deliverance story. From the outset, God writes His people back to Himself. In Exodus, God writes the holy law to be a “road map” to the enjoyment of God’s presence. For Israel, this is more than legal code; it is hope engraved. The written law was the physical identity marker of God’s election of the nation, while Israel’s law-keeping distinguished them

from the pagans and presented the beauty of God's holiness to an onlooking world. The well-documented problem, though, was that Israel, like all of us, went the way of the idols, not the way of holiness.

But that's not the end. God mercifully did not write us out of His story. Instead, He wrote a new covenant. The law His finger engraved on stone (Ex. 31:18) He now etches on the hearts of His new covenant people (see Jer. 31:33; Rom. 2:15).

And how does He do this? Creatively, with His Word. God does more than write our redemptive story; He writes Himself into it. The Word of God writes a way to new covenant redemption. As John tells us, Jesus Christ is God's Word (John 1:1–3), and God's Word was made flesh (John 1:14). Building out of Old Testament images, John boldly humanizes the Word. He shows the *logos* to be a person who simultaneously interprets and reinterprets all that has happened and all that comes after this Jesus Christ, God's Word written into the world.¹⁸ The Word of God enters God's redemptive drama to make a way to the drama's glorious conclusion.

The cross standing at the top of Golgotha is the apex of God's story; the empty tomb is the way to the story's promised end. And in God's impeccable imagination, the Word—the very author of life (Acts 3:15)—also becomes the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2). Remember that we are Christ's workmanship, His *poiema* (Eph. 2:10)—the Greek term from which we get our modern English word *poetry*. In a very real way, then, we are Christ's physical poems. We are the living words of the living Word written into the drama of the divine author.

CREATIVITY ORIGINATED: GOD THE MASTER ARTIST

Creativity begins and ends with God. This has two implications: one centering on God's glory, the other on His goodness. First, creation perpetually broadcasts God's glory. God paints His *transcendence*—His divine otherness, His holy distinction in nature and worth—into His world with the brush of His creativity. Creation pours forth the divine Author's speech day after day (Ps. 19:2). His glory, in other words, always has been, always is, and always will be evident in His creative work regardless of our response (see Rom. 1–2). His creativity is never not here. He stamps and seals everything He does and everything He creates with His character and beauty.

This leads to the second point. Divine creativity does more than demonstrate God's glory; it demands a response. His creativity must be engaged. God creates and is creative for our enjoyment. This is the *function* of God's creativity: He writes His goodness into His world for our "reading pleasure." As St. Augustine explains, all good things come from God:

The highest good, than which there is no higher, is God, and consequently He is unchangeable good, hence truly eternal and truly immortal. All other good things are only from Him, not of Him. For what is of Him, is Himself. . . . For He is so omnipotent, that even out of nothing, that is out

of what is absolutely non-existent, He is able to make good things both great and small, both celestial and terrestrial, both spiritual and corporeal [bodily]. . . . [N]o good things whether great or small . . . can exist except from God; . . . all good things, even those of most recent origin, which are far from the highest good, can have their existence only from the highest good [which is God].¹⁹

Augustine helps us recognize that God *is* goodness and, therefore, the fount of everything good in creation. That means that when we enjoy God's creativity under God's direction, we are basking in God's goodness diffused throughout His creative world. This is why God created us; we've been designed to experience *His* goodness in a variety of ways. It is why we have five senses. We're made to marvel at His glory and goodness with every light wave pouring into our irises and every scent we breathe in. A central purpose in life, then, is to revel in and reflect back to God His creative glory. We were made for this.

If God is the origin point of creativity, then it means that He is the Master Artist. He is the epicenter of all creativity. That means your creativity stems from Him and overflows from His creative work in the world. This has massive implications for who we are as creative beings, what we should do with our creative impulse, and how we use our creativity well. Our creativity makes sense only if it abides in God and points back to Him. This is why most of us avoid the origin story of creativity, because to face it means we have to

face our Creator. As sinners, this is often the last thing we want to do. But we can't gloss over how God's creativity reinforces our own. From the resources we use for our imaginative work to the theory informing it, from the philosophy undergirding our creativity to the instinct to create, we cannot escape God. He is the God *of* creativity and the God *behind* our creativity. No matter how hard we try to rewrite our creativity's origin story, it will always begin and end with Him—because all creativity is His.