

JESUS GIVES BEAUTY FOR ASHES

(What Jesus Gives To Us In Exchange For Our Mourning)

Isaiah 61:1-12 but focusing on verse 3 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

On Thursday morning, I read a Daily Bread Devotional entitled “Beauty For Ashes.” I have memorized Isaiah 61:3, but this time as I read the devotional, Kenneth Peterson asked the question, “What experience in your life made you feel you had lost everything? How did God pull you out of the difficulty?” As I read his devotional, it told the story of a couple in Louisville, Colorado caught in the most destructive fire in Colorado history, which happened on December 30, 2021, burning down over 1,000 beautiful homes. Two people died, and over 1,000 pets died, with the estimated damage being two billion dollars. I read about one couple going through the ashes of their destroyed home meticulously and finding their wedding rings—beauty from ashes. Kenneth Peterson ended his devotional with these words, “God reaches into your ashes and pulls out the one truly precious thing—you.” Then he ended his devotional with a prayer, “Dear God, please turn my ashes into beauty.” I realized I need this devotional personally in my life. I determined then with God’s help, to preach this message today to us all on God’s desire to restore us in our mourning and grieving, and to turn our ashes into beauty.

Throughout the Bible, ashes are often a symbol of deep repentance and grief. Life is not always happy. Sometimes life hurts. Sometimes it’s hard. Sometimes it’s dark. And it leaves its mark, like ashes of grief, in the deepest parts of our souls, where no one but God can really see. Debbie McDaniel, a pastor’s wife, wrote a blog that said, “You may understand if you’ve ever felt these ashes: You’ve lost a loved one or had to say good-bye too soon, you’ve been left behind to journey through dark days of grief, wondering if you’d ever be able to carry on without them at your side... You’ve received a hard diagnosis, faced the fear of the unknown, and felt the effects of disease and pain... You’ve sat at the bedside of a dying friend, and held a hand that once was strong, whose life was being cut short from the ravages of cancer... You’ve been to a funeral for a sweet baby, or a precious child, and watched endless tears flow from hurting souls of a mother and a father.... You’ve been deeply wounded, betrayed, abused, or mistreated... You’ve walked through the fire of hard situations and wondered if you’d come out the other side...” Yes, it’s true, life is not always happy. It’s not always easy. It deals harshly sometimes with each of us. Life sometimes seems unfair. We may wonder where God is, or why He didn’t stop that difficult event or illness from happening.

Job was where we’ve been. That righteous man loved and honored God. Yet, he lost everything. Life crumbled around him; all he held dear. Job knew without God, he was nothing. We find him in the beginning of the book of Job, “...sitting in the ashes.” Job 2:8. Daniel was there. He and the people suffered under Babylonian captivity. Daniel prayed to God on behalf of his people that God would have mercy. He repented, and confessed his own sin, his deep need for God. He knew where true strength and help came from, “Then we read in Daniel 9:3, “ I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.” Daniel 9:3. You may remember David’s son, Absalom, and Absalom’s sister Tamar was beautiful. She had trusted her father, David’s desire to go serve her brother Amnon who was acting as if he was sick. Amnon betrayed her. David’s own daughter was taken advantage of, raped by her brother Amnon. We read in II Samuel 13:19, “And Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe that she wore. And she laid her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went.” Job, Daniel, and Tamar and many others besides you and me

have wondered, “Where was God in it all? Where is He now? Deep grief, crime, captivity, illness, death of loved ones, shattered hope, and broken dreams all send us into times of reeling, wondering if there is hope in our despair.

Today, I want us to discover (1) Who is the Giver of beauty for ashes? (2) Who receives gifts from the Giver of Beauty for Ashes? (3) What three-fold gifts are from the Giver of Beauty for ashes? (4) What is the outcome for those receiving the 3-fold gifts from the Giver of Beauty for Ashes?

WHO IS THE GIVER OF BEAUTY FOR ASHES? (I.) Isaiah 61:1-3a, Lk. 4:16-21.

The answer is Jesus who said in Luke 4: 16-21 that He is the Giver of Beauty for ashes because the Spirit of the Lord God is upon Him, because the Lord anointed Him to preach good news/tidings. Turn there with me and listen to how Jesus, after coming incarnate to earth, born of the virgin Mary, at the beginning of His public ministry, identified Himself in His own hometown of Nazareth, identifying Himself as the Person Isaiah spoke of in Isaiah 61:1-11. We read, “And Jesus came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” And He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus as He gave His “I AM’s in John’s Gospel was saying, I am the One the Spirit of the Lord is on, and I am the Giver of Beauty for ashes.

Jesus was saying to His own townspeople in Nazareth, “I have the Spirit of the Lord upon Me. The Lord God has appointed Me to preach good tidings, good news to the poor.” Do you remember what kind of a preacher Jesus was? When the Pharisees sent the officers to arrest Jesus, and came back without Him, they asked the officers why didn’t you bring Him? They answered in John 7:46, “Never man spake like this Man! No one ever spoke like this Man! Isaiah prophesied of Him, in Isaiah 42:3, “He will not cry aloud or lift up His voice or make it heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break and a faintly burning wick He will not quench.” This speaker Isaiah spoke of was and is Gentleness personified. As Charles Spurgeon said it, “His speech did not fall like a hail shower; it dropped like

the rain, and distilled as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb.” The widow of Nain dried her eyes as Jesus spoke and raised her dead son to life. Jairus no longer mourned for his dead child who was now alive. Mary Magdalene gave up weeping when the risen Christ called her Mary. Thomas stopped doubting when Jesus showed him His pierced hands, feet, and side. When Jesus shows Himself and speaks, hearts leap for joy, tear-filled eyes sparkle again with delight. The Bible tells us this Son of Man, this Son of God, Messiah was anointed and appointed to deliver good news to the poor, (Isaiah 61:1) He will. If He says He knows how to bring beauty out of ashes, He can and He will.

This Jesus, that Isaiah spoke of, is not only a preacher of righteousness. He is the great physician. We read in Isaiah 61:1 that the Lord has sent Him to bind up the broken-hearted. Wounds of the heart are deep, not just flesh cuts, but inner, horrible gashes,

ripping us to the bone. Jesus is Jehovah Rophi and Isaiah tells us, in Isaiah 53:5 that “by His stripes we are healed.” This physician who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows is able to heal us mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Jesus is also our liberator, because the Lord God has sent Him “to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.” Jesus is the herald or proclaimer of the year of Jubilee, the year of the Lord’s favor, as well as the Day of vengeance of our God. (Isaiah 61:1-2) As Paul quoted Isaiah 52:7 in Romans 10:15, “How beautiful upon the mountains, (think of the Mount of Olives, the Mount of Transfiguration, the Sermon on the mount, and Mt. Calvary, how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of Him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” Who is this speaker Isaiah spoke of who wants to comfort everyone who mourns? It is Jesus alone. May the Holy Spirit reveal it to us all, the power of His right arm, the love of His heart, the power in His blood, and the Majesty and Glory of His Name. Secondly,

WHO RECEIVES GIFTS FROM THE GIVER OF BEAUTY FOR ASHES? (II.)

Notice in Isaiah 61:1-3a that the recipients are the poor, receiving good tidings, the broken-hearted receiving healing, captives who will have liberty proclaimed to them, prisoners bound who will be released, and those who mourn in Zion, who will hear the acceptable year of the Lord, the Year of Jubilee, and the Day of God’s vengeance to comfort all who mourn, especially all those who mourn in Zion. Who are those who mourn in Zion? They are the Lord’s people, and that includes Gentile believers like you and me, people who mourn. Paul wrote in Romans 11:11 “that because of the Jews’ trespass, salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.” Paul adds in Romans 11:25, “A partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” In Galatians 6:16, Paul adds, “Peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” Beloved, who receives beauty for ashes? Both saved Jews and Gentiles alike. That’s includes us.

To mourn is a mark of grace. Nature mourns the fall of Adam. All creation groans. Romans 8:22, tells us that all creation is “waiting for the second coming of Jesus and His redemption of the earth from the bondage of sin.” Without God’s grace, we would mourn over our sin eternally. It’s one thing to say, “I am a miserable sinner.” Yet that very confession can be hypocrisy. But to mourn over our own sin, and to know the truth inside, that “I am a miserable sinner,” that is the essence of initial born-again repentance, and it is also the prelude to daily repentance. Those who mourn over past sins—we are not suffered by God to mourn forever, for God’s grace takes our load of guilt away. We may weep over our struggle to surrender to Jesus in making us holy. To mourn after more holiness is an initial sign of growing holiness. To mourn after wanting more times of fellowship with the Lord means our love for the Lord cannot long endure holding in bitterness or anger or unforgiveness, because our love for Jesus cannot stand coldness and the lack of nearness to God when we refuse to repent of sin. Sometimes we mourn because we want to be more useful in God’s hands and in doing His will. Sometimes we mourn over deadness in many we know and love who profess faith in Jesus, but who appear dead in their walk with the Lord. The Lord has beauty for ashes for us as we mourn over our own sin and over the sin of others we love.

Yet there are many other reasons for mourning that God wants to redeem and exchange His mercy for our mourning. We mourn over emotional baggage, and we all have some. We mourn over growing up and the loss of never being allowed to be a child. We grieve

over being abandoned or abused. We grieve the loss of our innocence or knowing more about sin at a young age than we knew what to do with. We can grieve the loss of our identity because of lies others have told. We may grieve the loss of health and life after a severe accident or health reversal. Grief and mourning never looks the same for any two of us. Some of us are covered in the ashes of yesterday or in the ashes and sackcloth of decades of hurt, tears, sorrow, and pain. Who is able to receive beauty for ashes? Jesus the Giver says in Isaiah 61:2 says, “His comfort is granted to all who mourn.” Thirdly,

WHAT 3-FOLD GIFTS COME FROM THE GIVER OF BEAUTY FOR ASHES?

(III.) Isaiah 61:3. To comfort all who mourn in Zion (1) and give them beauty for ashes, (2) the oil of joy for mourning, and (3) the garment of praise in exchange for the spirit of heaviness. Let’s look at these three gifts one by one, and notice the gifts are exchanges that God gives us as we surrender (1) our ashes for His beauty, His garland, or His beautiful headdress. (v. 3) This first surrender and exchange is God’s promise to deliver us from what we have done or what has been done to us. Both are equally important to God. Where we see weakness, God gives His strength. When we pass through affliction, God promises His presence. Where we only see the trash in our lives, God sees potential and the Master Artist with His tender touch, is ready to rework our suffering into His pattern of good and grace. Elizabeth Elliott once said, “Of one thing I am perfectly sure, God’s story in our lives never ends in ashes.”

So, what is this beauty for ashes. It is like the garlands I have received in Africa when I went to minister there, the same in Fiji, the South Sea Islands of Western Samoa, Rarotonga (one of the Cook Islands) and North New Zealand. They call the garland a lei. LEI. It is a necklace of beautiful flowers or a headdress of flowers. God is giving us a garland of His glory in place of our ashes of repentance or grief of any kind. It’s the picture of coming to Jesus with ashes on our head, sackcloth on our body, disheveled-hair, and our spirit covered in gloom like a black robe. But here comes Jesus, with a garland of His fragrant lilies of the valley, anointing our head with oil, and dressing us in a robe of His righteousness. It’s a miracle waiting each of us who surrender to Jesus’ exchange. True, we may stay in our old clothes and mourn a long time, but God is calling us to exchange our ashes for His beauty. For some of us who have lived years in the ashes of our grief, Jesus gives us His beauty not only for our ashes, but after our ashes.

(2) Notice the gifts are exchanges that God gives us as we surrender (2) our mourning for His oil of gladness. (v.3) The same Jesus who gives us His crown of beauty and glory for our ashes of mourning, now wants us to continue to surrender all our mourning and receive from Him the oil of gladness. This doesn’t mean that we will never weep again, but it means we will learn how to grieve, but not as those who have no hope—(I Thessalonians 4:13) Joy doesn’t preclude mourning or grieving, but joy does eliminate despair that often wants to turn to suicide or isolation. Oil is used for cooking, for fuel for lamps, for salve for our skin, for perfume, and for anointing when we are sick. This oil of joy can be mixed with myrrh or other aromatic spices. In the presence of Jesus, Jesus wants the exchange of our hopeless tears, so He can give us the seemingly impossible exchange of finding joy in our tears, learning to even at times smile through our tears. This oil of anointing is spoken of in Psalm 45:7 as God giving His king, David the oil of gladness beyond his companions. The picture is something the Bible calls unspeakable or unexplainable joy. This joy Peter received when he finally gave up his bitter tears for denying Christ three times. He wrote about it in I Peter 1:8, after learning to see Jesus in glory by faith. He wrote, “Though you have not seen Him, you love Him. Though you do

not now see Him, you believe in Him and rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”

(3) The third exchange is instead of a spirit of heaviness, sadness, or fainting, Jesus gives us the garment of praise. (v.3) We don't have to continue to wear black clothes only. This phrase, garment or mantle of praise is a metaphor for the gladness and thanksgiving God's people feel when they are filled with the joy of the Lord. In ancient times, it was customary for a grieving person to wear sackcloth, as Mordecai the Jew did when Haman got the king to establish a law to have the Jews exterminated, an attempt many nations still are attempting in this Hamas war against Israel. (Esther 4:1). The garment of praise is the opposite of sackcloth; it is brightly colored raiment indicative of celebration. The Christian Standard Bible translates it as “splendid clothes. Notice Isaiah 61:10. Tell the story of Alta Downs. I preached this verse at her funeral in 1974. All three of these exchanges are theological pictures. Nevertheless, the first picture has captured my heart the most. God gives us a garland of His beautiful, imputed righteousness for the ashes of our guilt. He brings us a garland of our Heavenly Father's forgiveness for the ashes of our helpless remorse when we repent of our sin. God gives us His resurrection new life after we have repented of our grey ashes of sin and its wages, death. Jesus offers us the garland of joy and peace instead of our ashes of anxious unrest, through and by His cross. And as we see what Alta Downs saw up ahead, we will soon, in Glory, exchange the spent fires and pathetic ashes of our sinful past redeemed by the blood of Jesus, as we enter eternal glory where the roses and the lilies never fade. And as we come to a surrendered place of saying, “I'm trading my sorrows for the joy of the Lord, He does the rest miraculously—a garland of beauty for ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and the mantle or garment of praise instead of a spirit of heaviness and fainting. Fourthly,

WHAT IS THE OUTCOME FOR THOSE RECEIVING THE 3-FOLD GIFTS?

(IV.) All recipients of the Giver giving Beauty for ashes are called by God trees or oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.” (v. 3) As Isaiah began his 66-chapter book, in Isaiah 1:29-30, as he spoke of God's judgment on Jerusalem, he wrote of Israel, “For they shall be ashamed of the oaks that you desired; and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen. For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water.” In Isaiah 61:1-3, that awful chapter of Israel's history was past. The situation was reversed. These trees of righteousness are pillars today—even pillars like some of you here in our church—pictures of strength and stability. But you say, “Trees just stand there.” Yes, they do in the face of storms.

Joyce Kilmer, the poet once wrote, “I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree. A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed against the sweet earth's flowing breast; A tree that looks at God all day and lifts her leafy arms to pray; A tree that may in summer wear a nest of robins in her hair. Upon whose bosom snow has lain, Who intimately lives with rain. Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree.” But when we have received God's beauty for our ashes, His oil of gladness for our mourning, and His mantle or garment of praise for our spirit of heaviness, God doesn't just make us trees, but He makes us trees of righteousness, who are strong, and steadfast, and beautiful, who we also are pillars of strength before our watching world who live in accord with God's law and God's will.

I want to close today with a 10/27 devotional from The Upper Room by Ted Rogers in Texas. Jesus said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.” - John 10:27-28 From time to time a ewe will abandon her healthy lamb.

Shepherds call such orphans “bummer lambs.” When a shepherd encounters one, he picks it up, adopting it as his own. He bottle-feeds it and lets it sleep with its head on his chest, comforting the small creature by the sound of his heartbeat. My wife and I once adopted a bummer lamb and took her to our house to care for her. Whenever we returned home, as soon as the tiny lamb heard our voices she would run to the door, bleating in welcome.

When the lamb grows to be a sheep, it takes its place in the flock; but the bond between it and the shepherd remains. When the shepherd calls the flock to come, the orphan will hear and respond to the shepherd’s voice first, running to greet him, drawing the other sheep to the shepherd. This reminds me of the Good Shepherd: “My sheep listen to my voice; and I know them, and they follow me.” If you have ever been a “bummer lamb,” know this: though you have been wounded deeply, God will cherish you. When we listen for God’s voice and are ready to follow God’s call, we can help lead others to God’s love.” Beloved, that’s my final picture of beauty for ashes. I love you all.