

Isa. 61:1-11; Text - v.3 *beauty for ashes*

Heraldry (according to World Book encyclopedia) is the study of a system of symbols used to represent individuals, families, countries, and such institutions as churches and universities. The basic heraldic symbol is an emblem called *a coat of arms*.

When I came through the Theological Hall I was given a patch that I had sewn onto my sportcoat. That patch was from our own Whitefield College in Ulster. It was a coat of arms of sorts you might say. If you could see that patch you would notice the elements of the armor of God. There's a breastplate of righteousness. And imposed on that breastplate is the shield of faith and a belt-buckle which would represent the truth that we gird around our loins. Imposed on that shield is the helmet of salvation as well as an open Bible with a couple of Scripture texts. There's a crown above the breastplate and below it a banner which identifies the Whitefield College of the Bible as well as the motto — *Endued to Stand*. It's a fitting emblem for all that the Whitefield College endeavors to accomplish.

Now the thing that got me thinking about these kinds of emblems is a phrase that occurs in v. 3 of our text, a phrase which could be described as a perfect emblem for the blessings of salvation — *beauty for ashes*. This verse records for us the blessed effects of gospel power. It lays before us the exchanges that are made by God's grace — *beauty for ashes; the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness*.

Doesn't this text vividly describe the condition that we find ourselves in so often here in this sin-cursed world? There may be those in our midst today whose lives have been burned - even reduced to ashes as it were. And you are in a state of mourning — and aren't there so many things over which we all can mourn? — our own sins and shortcomings, our faults and our failings - not to mention the sorry state of our nation with all its sin and ungodliness.

And as the season of mourning continues to drag on and there doesn't seem to be any end to it in sight - a spirit of heaviness ensues. The weight of the burdens of life seem to become more than we can bear. We can do little more than sigh toward heaven under the heavy load.

What I want you to notice about this text is that it is not the unsaved sinner that is in view — oh these verses can certainly apply to him. He is under the weight of guilt. He bears the heaviness of a conscience that tells him he's storing *wrath unto the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God*. But the ones addressed in this text are *those who mourn in Zion* - i.e. it is the people of God that are in view and are represented as being burned to ashes, in a state of mourning, and in a spirit of heaviness.

And just as the gospel is the solution to the sinner's plight - so is that same gospel the answer to the Christian, who spiritually speaking lies in sackcloth and ashes, and is in a

state of mourning and inwardly knows that spirit of heaviness.

I said a moment ago that the text reveals the exchanges of grace - beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. I will limit my considerations today to the first of these exchanges - *beauty for ashes*. Picture this emblem or this coat of arms in your mind - it's a simple picture that we will impose on our shield. At the base is the picture of ashes - black and gray. Above those ashes is a golden crown embedded with shining jewels.

The word *beauty* you see refers to an ornamental headdress. In between the ashes and the golden crown we inscribe our motto which simply states - *by the power of the blood..* And at the very bottom we inscribe the words of our text - *beauty for ashes*. This is our emblem for the transforming power of the gospel. These communion elements preach that message to us *beauty for ashes*. So in preparation for our time around the Lord's table I'd like you to reflect with me upon:

The Truths that are Pictured by the Emblem of Beauty for Ashes

I. It Pictures Our Salvation — *beauty for ashes*

To appreciate the greatness of God's grace we need to reverse the order of the words of our text. Think about ashes for beauty so that we might realize what man did to himself — he ruined himself. He turned beauty into ashes.

In his willful and wicked rebellion he managed to take that which was created beautiful and good and totally destroy it - i.e. *he turned beauty into ashes*. This is a tragic mystery that we'll never fully understand — How man, created not merely in a neutral state - but created in the beauty of holiness with knowledge and righteousness could nonetheless degrade himself to dust and ashes. It was as if he set a torch to his personal righteousness and burned it to ash. He set a torch to his knowledge of God and burned that knowledge into ashes.

And while it remains a great mystery as far as how man could do such a thing to himself - yet the evidence of the truth of it is everywhere — men and women, boys and girls living their lives with no reference to God - each one doing that which is right in his own eyes - some of them questioning the very existence of God. You can be sure that when a man questions the existence of God he is merely demonstrating that his original knowledge of God has been burned to ashes. His spiritual life is but an ash heap. He's spiritually dead - dead in trespasses and sins, Paul says to the Ephesians.

But thank God today that he didn't leave all mankind to perish in the ashes of sin and misery. In the genius of Divine wisdom and the fullness of Divine love God devised a way to miraculously bring forth *beauty for ashes*. This plan would be executed at a high price

to God - His Son in our place would be spiritually speaking *burned to ashes* - but the reward of His atoning work would be *ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, round the throne saying Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing* (Rev. 5:11,12) - everyone of them a testimony that God has brought forth *beauty for ashes*.

We may marvel at times at the dirtiness of the ash heap out of which sinners are transformed. We use to carry a tract entitled *from Rags to Riches*. It could just as well be entitled *beauty for ashes*. It tells the story of Mel Trotter, a saved alcoholic.

During the lowest days of Mel's life his daughter became seriously ill. A doctor who attended the little girl knowing there would be no payment for his services placed some of his own money in Mel's hand and told him to hurry to the drug store to buy a prescription that could perhaps save the child's life if they could get her the medicine in time. Instead Mel spent the money on booze. He didn't return home until late the next day and upon his arrival discovered that his daughter was lying still in a coffin. Someone had put on her clean new clothes and even a pair of brand-new little shoes. So low had Mel Trotter sunk in sin that he stole those shoes and converted them into more drinking money.

Here was a man indeed from the ash heap. In despair over his guilt and all the misery he had brought upon his family - especially his wife, he decided to drown himself in Lake Michigan. While making his way to the lake on a cold dark night he was suddenly pushed by someone into an open door of a building - turned out to be the Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago. Once inside he heard a preacher who vividly described his condition and pointed him to Christ. Mel Trotter was saved and eventually became a preacher who pointed hundreds of others to Christ. The Lord graciously gave *beauty for ashes*.

And what about your life, this morning? If you're a Christian then you can relate to the truth of this emblem - *beauty for ashes*. What a gracious exchange! What a manifestation of transforming power! You have cause for joining Isaiah in the words of v.10 *I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation*.

And when we think upon the experience of God's transforming grace we're to think especially upon the person and work of Christ. He's the One that interposed His precious blood that we might be delivered from ash-heap of ruin in order to be presented faultless before His throne. It's Christ incarnate and His shed blood that provides the merit that enables you and me to know what it means to gain *beauty for ashes*. So this emblem pictures our salvation.

II. It Pictures God's Dealings with His People — *beauty for ashes*.

We know that in the fall of the human race into sin man turned his original beauty into ashes. But it's also true that under God's plan of redemption - in what we could term *the*

progress of our salvation - God Himself may as it were reduce his people to ashes - i.e. He may see fit to remove every prop you lean on. He may see fit to take away things that you hold dear. He may see fit in His providence to bring you to the place where there's nothing left - its just you and Him - and for a while He can't even be found.

Ye have heard of the patience of Job - James tells us in his epistle (5:11). And what about Job? He had great possessions and lost them. He had what was undoubtedly a beautiful family - and lost it. He had a spouse who became bitter against God - we know nothing about Job's wife after she counsels him to curse God and die. He certainly lost her spiritually, at least for a time.

Job was reduced to ashes. His place throughout the book is to be *sitting among the ashes* as we read in 2:8 *He took a postherd with which to scrape himself, and he sat down among the ashes.*

We look at the sufferings of this man and we're inclined to ask *why? What did he do? How did he displease the Lord in order to bring all these calamities upon himself.* That's what his 3 friends wanted to know. *Job, you must have done something terrible. Why don't you come clean before God? You've put on a good show before men but God knows your heart - God must know that you're committing awful sins.*

In fact, Job's sins were not an issue in these afflictions. At least they were not the cause for God's dealings with him. On the contrary God commends Job to the devil as one who was perfect and upright - a man who feared God and eschewed evil so much so that God Himself would testify that *there is none like him in the earth* (Job 1:8).

Why then would the Lord take one of His own - one that God Himself recognized to be beautiful and spiritually speaking burn him to ashes?

And you know something - if you're able to answer that question you'll go a long way in understanding God's dealings with your own soul. I don't believe, you see, that God treated Job differently than He treats His other redeemed ones. Oh you may not know loss to the same degree and maybe your season of affliction won't be as long or as severe - but I do believe that the emblem of our text is something that applies to every child of God, to every believer in Christ - the Lord will see fit to reduce you from *beauty to ashes.*

And what I would have you see this morning - is that in so doing, God is very simply conforming you into the image of His Son. I know I've made the point before that when we think of being conformed to Christ - we envision Him in His glory. We see Him transfigured in the mount shining with a radiant splendor that outshines the sun. And we think to ourselves - this is what I'm to be. I too will have a countenance that glows with the glory of Christ. And we lift our hands to heaven and pray *Lord, make me like Jesus. I want to be like Jesus.*

But do you remember what Paul said to the Philippians in 3:10 — *Oh that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death*. Conformed to His death! - that explains it. And when you think about it — who more than Christ was reduced from beauty to ashes?

We are altogether at a loss when it comes to comprehending the beauty of Christ and the glory He left behind to visit this world of ashes - ruined by the fall. We may gain a dim perception of that glory when we stand in some high place in the early evening that enables us to see the setting sun. We marvel at the way the sky shifts from light blue and pastel green to ever increasing darker shades of violet as we shift our gaze from West to East - at the same time wondering in amazement at the way the Lord paints the clouds with shades of glowing orange and pink.

Or we may gain a dim perception of the glory Christ left behind when we stand in an open field on a clear night and are able to see that these shining diamonds in the sky really can't be numbered on account of the multitude of them. These give us but slight glimpses of the glory that Christ left behind.

We are able to perceive much more fully with the help of God's Word - how Christ's beauty was burned into ashes through the treatment He received from the hands of sinful men. I'm reminded of the text in Jn. 8:57 where the Jews say to Christ -

thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?

The truth was that Christ in His earthly life was just over 30 and the Jews see Him as approaching 50. Evidently the man of sorrows in bearing our burdens appeared to be aging at a faster rate than most. By bearing our burdens He was already being reduced from beauty to ashes.

But see Him now *bearing shame and scoffing rude*. His face is marred more than any man's. His back is laid bare and whipped. His head is crowned with thorns. His hands and His feet are pierced with iron pins nailing Him to a cross. His bones are out of joint. His heart is melted like wax. His strength is dried up. His tongue cleaves to His jaws and He is brought *into the dust of death* (Ps. 22:15).

We can see Him this far - but no further. For when His Father turns away from Him and unleashes the fury of His wrath upon Him a curtain of darkness must veil the scene and calamities beyond our comprehension become His portion. Our Savior is reduced *from beauty to ashes*. We're to remember this in particular around this table this morning that Christ in His broken body and shed blood was reduced from beauty to ashes.

But you know what - there's something rather amazing about ashes. There's a sense in which they are indestructible. They survive the flames. They can't be burned. So likewise did Christ prevail against the flames of God's wrath. And from the black ashes of Mt.

Calvary there came forth something of even greater beauty - our redemption. So that now God on the merits of Christ's atoning death can exchange beauty for ashes.

This to me is the glorious wonder of the cross - that out of circumstances that appear to be so awful and so black God can bring forth something that is so wonderful. The cross of Christ, you know, had every appearance of tragedy and defeat. Never had hopes been raised so high only to have them completely crushed. It appeared to be the triumph of sin. It appeared to the eyes of the beholders that nothing good could come of it. The Jews nailed to a cross the one we were sure was the long awaited Messiah! What could be a greater travesty of justice or a greater tragedy to His followers?

But such is the genius of Divine wisdom - that out of circumstances that have defeat stamped on them - indeed out of the ash heap of seeming ruin - can come forth something so glorious - even our salvation purchased by the blood of our Savior when He was reduced from beauty to ashes.

How does this help you to understand God's dealings with you? Well for one thing you should learn not to count it strange if you find yourself in the midst of circumstances that seem hopeless and helpless. You may be in such a crisis right now that has brought you to despair. You wonder - how can anything good come out of this? I'm in a no-win situation. The only thing that will prevail in my life is defeat and the triumph of sin and the devil.

You should consider that you're treading a path that Christ Himself has trod. The cross appeared to be defeat. The cross appeared to be the triumph of sin and the devil. The cross appeared to be the reduction of beauty to ashes. Should you count it strange, therefore, if God sees fit to bring you down a path that Christ Himself has walked?

You won't count it strange. And not only will you not count it strange but by faith you will find the grace even to rejoice in the midst of trials. You will rejoice because the cross teaches you to anticipate that however hopeless and helpless your circumstances in life appear to be - God can bring forth beauty from the ashes. The cross of Christ proves it.

I love the second stanza to a hymn we sing. It makes reference to ashes. It may describe you today - it reads:

*Since the way is straight and narrow, All I claimed was swept away;
My ambitions, plans and wishes, At my feet in ashes lay.*

But when we rightly understand God's dealings with us we can sing the refrain of this hymn:

*I will praise Him! I will praise Him! Praise the Lamb for sinners slain;
Give Him glory all ye people, For His blood can wash away each stain.*

So in this emblem of beauty for ashes we see our salvation. We've been saved from the

ashes of sin and misery. In this emblem we understand God's dealings with our souls. There may be times in His dealings with us when He reduces us in His grace to ashes - that He might bring forth something that is even more glorious.

The cross of Christ proves that He can. His purpose to conform us to Christ proves that He will. Most gladly, then, do we remember that Christ was reduced from beauty to ashes. Most gladly do we remember that He left heaven's glory for this sin desecrated world. And He became one of us that He might rescue us from the ashes of a world defiled by sin. He interposed His blood in order to give us beauty for ashes.

Doesn't the phrase remind you of what He took to Himself and what He gives us in exchange. He took our sins to Himself and gave us the beauty of His righteousness in exchange. It's appropriate that in this same chapter we read in v. 10 of being clothed with the garments of salvation and being covered with the robe of righteousness. Such is the exchange God makes by taking the ashes of our sins and giving us the righteousness of Christ in return.