

Beauty for Ashes

“the year of the Lord’s favor . . . to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair” (Isaiah 61:2-3).

Few passages of Scripture are as thrilling and uplifting as those in Isaiah that foretell a coming day when God will reverse all the sorrows of this life due to sin, rebellion and failure. (*Read Isaiah 11:1-10 again right now if you haven’t read it recently.*) When the Jewish Messiah returns, He will not only deliver Israel from its current lowly and despised position, but restore that nation to its intended chief or exalted place among the nations of the world.

Picture a man sitting in the dirt, sobbing, one hand partly covering his tear-streaked face and the other hand throwing ashes onto his head. His heart is broken and he’s filled with despair. What is he mourning about? Sin! Sin, and the guilt of sin, and the deserved punishment for sin that comes from a holy God. The primary or original readers of this passage would have been the righteous remnant among Israel. And they were filled with sadness and grief over their own sins and failures and (especially) Judah’s idolatries and rebelliousness. These are the ones Ezekiel identifies in 9:4, **“those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things [idolatries] that are done in [Jerusalem].”** These were the godly few who feared God, who were pained by the sins of their countrymen, and who knew how it might have been if only their people were righteous. These were the godly few who longed for a future day – a day that long ago had been promised, in Deuteronomy 28-30, for example – when God will reverse the effects of sin and when, instead of indifference, **“the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea”** (Isaiah 11:10). These are the godly few who knew God’s plan of the ages.

But these passages are here in our Bible also for us today. Good thing! We need to understand God’s plan of the ages too. The plan, in a simple, 3-word phrase, is Beauty for Ashes. The “ashes” in our Isaianic text are what people in ancient times who mourned threw onto their head as a sign of the intense grief they felt. In the future, God promises, He’ll replace that grief with something beautiful. But . . . Grief? What grief?

People who are godly are deeply moved, *grieved*, by the sin that besets them and by the unrighteousness that surrounds them – for God’s sake. They know the holiness of God and what He expects of us, and when they see everyone else around them ignoring God, indeed, defying God, they sense the pain that God feels. To be indifferent to the depravity that’s innately ours and that is rampant in our society, and to all the rebellion against the One we dearly love means we don’t have that sense of God’s holiness or nearness to God that we should have. In America today, the forces of evil seem to be unrestrained. In whatever sector of national life, whether education, politics, media, culture, entertainment or business and medicine even, the virtues embedded in Western civilization by centuries of exposure to Christianity are evaporating, leaving behind a substrate of crass paganism. If we’re unconcerned by it all, smug in our expectation of eternal life, something’s wrong. But if we’re near God, we hurt. Yes, there’s always been in America an ungodly segment. And Yes, it certainly may be that God is now withdrawing His blessing from our nation in deserved judgment. Nevertheless, when we see so much injustice and greed, and deceitfulness, and contempt for others, and lust for power and hatred of that which is godly, we should weep.

And in other parts of the world today, in Hindu, Muslim and communist countries, the violence being committed against our brothers and sisters in the faith is almost too painful to think about. Believers in central Africa are hungry and naked—those that haven’t already been massacred—living in squalid refugee camps with no homes or families to return to. In India, believers wake up and wonder if this is the day they’ll be shot dead, or doused with gasoline and set on fire to die a horrible death. In China, Iran and North Korea, believers are in hideous prisons with little hope of ever getting out alive. All over the world, these godly people mourn for their nations and their families. More importantly, they mourn for the ghastly dominion Satan cruelly exercises over God’s good creation. God weeps and they weep with Him.

We in America (and most of the Western world) live on an island of relative goodness, of peace, prosperity and safety. (We’re so privileged some of us have to invent traumas!) But we’re surrounded by a sea of hatred and violence and poverty. We inhabit a miserable and cruel world. All throughout history, humanity has known mostly wars and killing and suffering and a struggle to live. Satan has seen to it that we experience his hatred of humanity. As we think about the vast scope of human history on earth, our hearts should be broken and tears flow. This is not what God intended for us. But what He has intended, the beauty that flows from His ineffable goodness, will indeed one day come.

Jesus wept over His beloved Jewish people foolishly rejecting their own promised Messiah/King. He taught, **“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”** (Matthew 5:4), reprising our text in Isaiah. (*If you haven’t read the Sermon on the Mount lately, you might want to do that right now.*) In that Sermon, Jesus meant by mourning, the grief that we feel because of sin. Sin in the world, sin in our lives. Sin is the hideous monster that destroys us and destroys the beautiful relationship that God intended for us at Creation. Sin is what necessitated the Son being shamed and put to death. Sin is what will necessitate the eternal loss of myriads of unbelievers in hell.

Isn’t the story of the Bible a story of sin, and how it breaks relationships? In the Garden, the Serpent usurped God authority. He promised freedom but delivered bondage to sin. And so sin entered the human race, causing alienation of God from the unique creatures He made in His image. From that point on, the Bible relates how God moved to deal with the evil that Serpent brought and to restore His beloved human creatures to Himself. And our role in this story is take sides. We either willfully and knowingly take the side of God or – by default – we’re on the side of the Serpent. To be on God’s side means we align ourselves with God, His will, and His mission. And it means we too loathe sin, as a holy God does. All sin. Personal sins and the sins of others, and the sins of society.

And if we’re on God’s side, He promises blessings. Those blessings are in the future, when God will make everything beautiful again. We’ll be transformed so that our sin nature is removed and we’ll be as beautiful as the Lord Jesus. Relationships will be beautiful, so will the obedience of God’s chosen people Israel. And all physical creation will be beautiful. The Serpent and his wicked minions *won’t* be there to sow evil. And we’ll be there to participate in that beautiful, restored world.

Unfortunately, eschewing sin isn’t as easy as choosing sides. Our sin nature itself makes us love sin. We want to wallow in it. Pride and the will to be autonomous keeps us in thrall to our sin nature. Our sins make us indifferent to the sins of others. We may chuckle at or even denounce the depravities so prevalent in our nation, but that’s hardly the same as grieving over them. It takes a penetrating work of God in our hearts for us to have God’s understanding of sin. The only way that can happen is if we imbibe the Word of God, reflect on it and then, enabled by the Holy Spirit, express it in our lives.

God didn’t give us the Bible as a source of information about supernatural matters. Israel was given the O.T. Scriptures *to change their lives*. And likewise the Bible is to transform us. If we refuse to be changed by the Word of God, in what way can we suppose we’re on God’s side? We honor a holy God by being holy and by despising sin.

But I hear someone shouting, “Hey. What about the thief on the cross. Don’t you know he went to heaven on nothing more than his simple trust in Jesus. No more of this legalism stuff!” Sure, the thief on the cross had no further obligations to God because . . . you know, he was nailed to a cross! In just an hour or two, he’d be dead. It was by grace he was saved, and it’s by grace that we’re saved. Christ Jesus on the cross took on himself all our sins and the penalty that those sins deserve. So by simple trust in Him we have forgiveness of sin. Of all sin. But just because God forgives our sins, and furthermore by grace one future day we’ll be fully sanctified and glorified, doesn’t mean we can ignore sin. To the contrary, sin in our life should be all the more heinous to us. If we understand all that the Son of God did for us, personally bearing the horrible wrath of God that we justly deserve, sin should be the most despicable thing in our lives.

We need to take our present work of sanctification – and its corollary, mortification – as seriously as God does. We need to obsess over it, mourn over it, and work at it. It’s what “mourning” is all about. It’s what “ashes” is all about. Let me ask you who allege I’m teaching legalism: What is repentance? It isn’t just changing our mind about who Jesus is. It’s vastly more than that. A believer’s life should be filled with repentance, continuous, on-going repentance. Because repentance is changing our mind about sin, and doing something about it. The cross, and the forgiveness of sin that it makes possible, certainly does not free us to sin or be complacent about sin. Or to live as we please. It places us under deep obligation. Let’s get passionate about this!

And as far as sins in others’ lives, we can do a lot about that too. Like what? Get them to believe the Gospel! What could bring God more joy than for a sinner to trust in Jesus, repent of sin and seek to be holy? What could cause God more joy than if we all were obsessed with sharing the Gospel with others, seeking their salvation and ultimate blessing? Doesn’t the fact that our neighbors are condemned to hell because of sin fill us with grief? Doesn’t God’s love constrain us? Don’t we care about God’s holiness, and His love for us? And His justice?