

Beauty For Ashes

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Beauty for Ashes

"The Lord hath anointed Me . . . to give unto them BEAUTY FOR ASHES." (Is. 61:1-3)

This is a precious text. "A garland" for ashes the Revision puts it. The picture is simple. Ashes and sackcloth stand for mourning, sorrow, death. Here sits a weeping woman by the roadside. Her body is clad in sackcloth; her head crowned with ashes. Along comes a sweet-faced little child. She holds in her hand a garland of roses. White, red, and pink are they, breathing forth richest fragrance. The child walks up to the mourner. She brushes the ashes of grief from her bowed head. Then she places there the garland of beautiful roses. She has given beauty for ashes. She has exchanged the doleful symbol of sorrow for the radiant emblems of flowered loveliness.

And this is what Jesus Christ has come to do for you and me—give us beauty for ashes. He says, through the lips of the prophet, that the

Lord has anointed Him for this very purpose. And in His Nazareth sermon, where He quotes this wondrous passage, He declares that this Scripture is this day fulfilled. *That is, it is a reality for us who will believe and appropriate it, that our blessed Christ is standing ready to give us beauty for all the ashes of our earthly experiences, ready to exchange the oil of joy for all our mourning.* And first note that—

Jesus Christ is ready to give the beauty of forgiveness for the ashes of guilt.

A godly old-country pastor was in the midst of his communion service. Suddenly his quick eye detected a woman passing the cup untasted. She sat among the people quietly weeping. At once his kindly heart sensed the situation. For who of us has not at such a time been so conscious of our own unworthiness and sinfulness as to shrink from partaking of that blessed sacrament? But the loving dominie knew the gospel of Christ too well to let one of His little ones suffer thus. He hastened down the aisle. He took the cup from the hands of the serving elder. Stepping up to the weeping woman he pressed it into her hand with the loving, tender exhortation—"Take it woman; take it. It's for sinners; it's for sinners!"

Reader do you sit tonight in the ashes of guilt? Is your soul scarred by the deep, deadly wounds of sin? Is your stained conscience in unspeakable anguish from the remorse of remembered sin? Is your life and influence marred, fettered, and hourly handicapped by

the poignant ever-present consciousness of unforgotten sin? Does it seem an incredible miracle to you that any power, human or divine, could possibly cleanse your soul from all the pollution, and your guilty conscience from all the consciousness of committed sin? Then know, my unsaved friend, that in one moment of time, by accepting the Son of God as the saviour and redeemer of your soul, you may pass from the place where you sit in the ashes of guilt, to the place where the forgiveness of "Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood" becomes the most marvelous, tangible real, and jubilant experience of all your human existence. Take Jesus Christ with instant, absolute definiteness as the saviour of your soul, and you will surely pass from the defiling ashes of guilt to the radiant beauty of a genuine, gladsome, experimental realization of the forgiveness of sin in your innermost soul, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. Take Him, friend, take Him;

He's for sinners!

Jesus Christ is ready to give us the beauty of the Christ-life for the ashes of the Self-life.

Some of you recall the Appian way at Rome. It was the great highway into the city where Paul's friends met him and escorted him on his way. For nine miles of its course outside the city walls it is hedged with tombs. They are the tombs of Rome's great ones whose names have

gone down to classic fame. In those tombs are countless urns. And in those urns are the ashes of the dead. The great road is literally lined with the emblems of death, suffering and sorrow. But Rome has another great road. It is a new and modern highway which they have named, "The New Appian Way." There are no tombs, urns, nor ashes. No emblems of grief, affliction, and death are there. The morning sunshine floods its broad surface with the glory of the early day. The sunset tints it with the tender beauty of Italy's evening sky. The blue heaven overarches it; the birds sing by its borders; it is filled with the fellowship, and everyday joy and friendliness of the common people, as they flock along its broad pathway.

Is it not a parable of the Christian life? We come to Christ. We know the joy of forgiveness. Our guilty past is under the cleansing power of His shed blood. But now two great ways open out before our feet. One is the way of the Christ-life; the other the way of the Self-life. One is the way of the Spirit; the other the way of the Flesh. One is radiant with the beauty of Christ; the other is marred by the ashes of Self. And all too often do our unwary feet stray into that old Appian way of the Flesh, instead of that new and blessed one of the Spirit. The Flesh looks through our eyes upon sights we ought not to see. It listens through our ears to words we ought not to hear. It speaks through our lips grievous words we should not say. The Flesh awakes with us in the morning; it walks with us through the days; it lies down with us

at night. What anguish of soul the self-life brings to ourselves and all that are dear to us! It brings us to our knees in confusion of face for sin; it brings us to the heart because of hasty, bitter words; it fills us with shame at the vision of our own unworth and selfishness; it breaks our hearts by its sharp, dark contrast to the life and love of our blessed Christ. It is indeed a way of ashes in which we sit with blinding tears and a broken heart at the vision of our own appalling self-centeredness. But Jesus Christ has come to give us the beauty of the Christ-life for the ashes of this self-life. God has anointed Him for that purpose. He stands at the door of our hearts waiting to make that wondrous exchange. Do you ask how He does it? Romans 8:2 reveals to us how Christ gives us victory for ashes. The verse begins with the phrase "The law of the Spirit," or as it has been translated "The Spirit's law." What is the Spirit's law? Listen—

*"The Spirit's law of life in Christ Jesus
hath made me free from the law of sin
and death."*

Life in Christ Jesus! That is the Spirit's secret of victory for ashes. To receive that life at regeneration; to yield to it; to serve in it; to bear fruit in it; to be purged and purified by it; to be more and more filled with it—that is the secret of the beauty of victory for the ashes of defeat.

Some one has given this beautiful illustration from the forest trees. You walk into the forest in the dead of winter. All the trees are bare and stripped of leaves except the scrub-

oaks. To them cling the dry, dead leaves with wondrous tenaciousness. The winter winds sweep down upon these oaks with fiercest blasts. But they cannot tear away these sere, clinging leaves. All through the winter they held fast with an unbroken and unbreakable grip. But now comes the time of Spring. The sun comes up from the south with a growing warmth and genialness of ray. Up from the warming earth begins to steal that wondrous, mystic something we call *life*. Up the trunk; out through the branches; into the twigs to their very tips and terminal buds creeps this silent stream of life. Then something wonderful happens. Some bright spring day you walk out into the woods or park. Behold a marvel of nature and nature's life. The dry, dead leaves on every scrub oak in the forest are raining down to the ground until in a couple of days the trees are utterly stripped, and the ground littered with broken leaves. What all the blasts of winter storms could not avail to do is done by the quiet, steady, silent flow of *a new life*.

Nature has no deeper spiritual teaching for you and me than this. And the secret of victory which yields not itself to our desperate struggle and self-efforts unfolds to us like a beautiful flower as we come to know more and more the Spirit's own law of *life in Christ Jesus*.

Jesus Christ is ready to give us the beauty of victory for the ashes of defeat.

Who of us has not sat in the ashes of defeat!

We have uttered caustic words and brought pain to the heart of our dearest friends. We have made hasty decisions and plunged ourselves into perplexity and confusion. We have yielded to besetting infirmities and fallen on our faces before God in utter despair and contrition of soul. We have tried to "do our best" and awakened to the realization that we have done our very worst. We have fought so hard and failed so utterly that we have well-nigh come to the place of hopelessness. What is the remedy? Who will give us the beauty of victory for the ashes of utter and oft-repeated defeat? Listen to a man who has gone through it all, and come out on the victory side. "The good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not that I do. Sin dwelleth in me. I see another law in my members bringing me into captivity to the law of sin. O wretched man man that I am! Who shall deliver me?" Listen to his answer, "*I thank God through Jesus Christ.*" Not the clenched fists and gritted teeth, but—Jesus Christ. Not the unceasing struggles, falls, and risings from defeat again and again, but—Jesus Christ. God has anointed Jesus Christ to give us the beauty of victory for the ashes of defeat and faith in Him and in Him alone can brush the ashes of defeat from our brow and crown us with the garland of victory.

I recall an experience in my own Christian life. My father was dying of a disease brought on by worryment. A great physician had been summoned from the city. He was closeted with my father for a long time. Then he came out of

the sick chamber soberly shaking his head. There was no hope. My father's earthly race was run. Then my dear mother asked the great doctor to take me aside for a conference. For I myself was breaking in body, and from the same dread enemy which overthrows so many Christians—anxious care. So the kind-hearted physician took me into the parlor, and we sat down for a heart-to-heart chat. Very searchingly and with all the skill of an expert did he draw forth from me the humiliating fact that I was a prey of worryment and suffering from its dread results. Then he turned to me and in a few keen, incisive sentences with no attempt at concealment, told me that I had fallen a victim to the same habit which had been my father's undoing, and that unless I overcame it there was no hope for me even as there was none for him.

I went upstairs. I threw myself upon my knees in my bedchamber. I cried out in my agony of soul—Oh Christ! He says I must overcome worryment. And Thou alone knowest how I have *tried* to do so. I have fought. I have struggled. I have wept bitter tears. And I *have failed*. Oh Lord Jesus unless Thou dost undertake for me now it is all over with me." Then and there I threw myself in utter self-helplessness upon Christ. Somehow, where before I had been struggling I now found myself trusting as I had never quite done before. From that time onward Jesus Christ began to give me the beauty of victory for the sombre ashes of defeat.

*Jesus Christ is ready to give us the
beauty of the gospel for the ashes of
idle words.*

There is no more searching truth in the New Testament than the statement that a man must give an account to God for every idle word he speaks. That word "idle" means exactly the same in Greek as it does in English, namely "not working." An idle man is one who is "not working;" a "do-less" man as the expression is in some sections. Up from the printed page starts this great truth of the *stewardship of words*. God expects of you and me not only that our silver and gold, our time, our talents shall be "work" for Him and His Christ, but that our *words* are also to be "doing" something to the same great end. Instead of the stream of ineffective, foolish, empty words; which so often flows from our lips God is looking to us to speak loving words, kind and helpful words; words that uplift, strengthen, inspire, comfort and draw men Christward, instead of earthward. And above all has God anointed Christ to give us the beauty of the gospel, instead of the ashes of idle words. We are to watch for and seize the opportunity of weaving into our daily speech with men some sweet word of testimony concerning this marvelous gospel of His; to pass on to lost men some one of those "wonderful words of life" we sing about, rather than to let our lips become a fountain only of vain, foolish words which are "idle," that is, which are "not working" in the interests of the

Christ who has given us this wonderful stewardship of words. "Let your conversation be with grace *seasoned* with salt," says the Spirit through Paul. Not *all* salt; not *all* preaching to men in our daily speech with them. But "*seasoned*" with salt. Salt preserves life. And our daily speech with men is to have such a touch of the gospel-salt as shall do its work for Jesus Christ in men's lives. This is the beauty of the gospel for the ashes of idle words.

I once knew a godly railroad conductor. He ran an ore-train to the Lake Superior mines. One day he met a poor miner. He was an Austrian and knew but little English. But that did not daunt my friend. For him

*"I love to tell the story
Of Jesus and His love"*

was more than a sentiment of a hymn-couplet. To tell men of His Lord was the master passion of his life. Nor did he have any use for the ashes of idle words when God had given him the beauty of the gospel of Christ. So he told his foreign miner friend the story of Christ's love and sacrifice for him. The poor fellow listened with intense eagerness. He drank in every word he could, with open mouth and listening ears. Day after day, as they met, B— repeated him the old, old story. The summer ended, and B— took his journey southward and homeward. The next spring he returned to his work. The first question he asked was, "Where is John?" They told him he was dead. "How did it happen?" said he. They answered that John had been crushed between an ore car and the

loading platform. For two days he lay in agony in a nearby hospital. All through the weary hours of suffering, whether by day or night, there was one sentence which fell from his trembling lips. It was this. "That man—him said—Jesus love me." "That man—him said—Jesus love me." And when the death-damp was on his brow, and his voice was faint and feeble, the last sentence he uttered was—"That man—him said—Jesus love me."

As B— turned to me with tears in his eyes, and a ring of triumph in his voice, he said, "I know that man was saved. I know the Spirit of God gave me that message to drive home to his lonely heart. I know I shall some day meet him in the glory and rejoice with him in the presence of our Lord."

That was letting Christ use his lips for the beauty of the gospel, instead of the ashes of idle words. What would it mean for His cause and His glory, if all of His servants were doing that!

Last of all,

*Jesus Christ will someday give to us the
beauty of a glorified body for the ashes of
a corruptible one*

A little while ago you laid away a loved one in Christ Jesus. Perhaps it was only last week; mayhap only yesterday. Tonight you sit by a desolated fireside which robber-death has pillaged of its fairest and its best. Perhaps it was a radiant child; or a strong-hearted husband; or

a manly boy, the pride of your heart; or the beloved wife, the companion of a lifetime of unspeakable love and bliss. The wind moans a dirge at your window. Outside the skies are leaden. Inside your heart is heavy with a speechless grief and agony of soul. A great gulf has suddenly yawned in your life which seems tonight to be fathomless, bridgeless. And one of the keen griefs of it all is this thought—that those arms which once encircled you in love must go down into dust; those eyes which searched the love-depths of yours must mingle too with the dust; those lips which often spoke their wealth of that same love must crumble into the same speechless dust. From this tragedy, your soul recoils. This seems to you like a great horror of darkness. But beloved in the Lord Jesus, when your thoughts run out in that way never forget this—

The last great, glorious work of Jesus Christ in His anointed ministry of giving beauty for ashes will be when He comes again to give to your beloved dead in Him the beauty of a glorified body for the ashes of this corruptible one.

For thanks be unto God this gospel of ours does not end at the grave's mouth. It reaches forward through the sullen gates of death, lays hold of the crumbling, corruptible bodies of our dead in Christ, and gives them back to us in the resurrection moment clothed with the deathless glory of Him who shall give us beauty for ashes in a sense and with a richness

which our wildest dreams of reunion could never have conceived, but of which the eternal Word of God makes us unerringly and undefeatedly sure.

Down by the banks of a noble river in a little town most dear to me lie the bodies of five dear sisters of my own. There they sleep amid the wondrous beauty of sky, hill, river, and field. Often as the shadows are lengthening over this bit of God's acre I slip away and stand beside the mounds which hide their mortal bodies. As I stand my heart is well-nigh overwhelmed with the rush of tender memories of a joyous, care-free boyhood of the long ago. Suppose as I linger there one of my boyhood friends draws near and says, "These are your sisters lying here, are they not?" And I reply, "Do you remember the day the pastor laid them away? Do you recall what he said? 'Earth to earth; dust to dust; *ashes to ashes.*' These are not my sisters. They are only their ashes. And some glad day Jesus Christ will bestow upon them His wondrous boon of beauty for ashes in the gift of a glorified body. Some sweet day the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise! These ashes shall be touched by the power of Him whose right it is to give beauty for ashes. Then shall He change the body of their humiliation and fashion it like unto the body of His glory. But oh what a body of beauty, compared with the ashes which lie under these green mounds! Eyes like unto

flaming fire; feet like shining brass; a voice like the sound of many waters. Bodies that know no sickness, pain, nor death; no limitations of mortality and corruption; no weariness, suffering, nor decay. Bodies that at the call of the Lord shall leap like flames of glory into the over-arching heavens waiting to receive them, to exchange the ashes of their corruptness for the eternal glory of their deathless tabernacles. This indeed shall be the transcendent climax of the mighty work of Him who stood among His people, and announced with triumphant certainty and joy unspeakable that God had anointed Him to give to them—

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