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Beauty for Ashes

Hope in the Midst of Devastation—Isaiah 61:3:

This past week has brought unimaginable loss and heartbreak to Southern California. Wildfires have left behind smoldering ruins where homes, memories, and dreams once stood. Tens of thousands of people have been displaced, and over 10,000 homes and other structures have been destroyed. The ash that remains is not just physical—it's emotional, spiritual, and relational. The air SoCal residents breathe carries not just smoke but the weight of sorrow and uncertainty.

And yet, in the midst of this devastation, the Word of God meets us with a powerful promise from Isaiah 61:3:

*“To bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.”*

This ancient promise was given to a people who had experienced profound destruction, exile, and heartache. Through Isaiah, God assured His people that He specializes in restoration and in making all things new. As we step forward together, this promise speaks directly to us, offering hope and a vision of what God can and will do in the ashes of our lives.

1. A Crown of Beauty Instead of Ashes

In Isaiah's time, ashes symbolized grief and devastation. When mourners were in pain, they would sit in ashes or cover themselves with them, publicly displaying their pain. Yet God promises to exchange the ashes for a crown of beauty. This isn't a superficial makeover—it's a radical transformation, a complete reversal of circumstances.

For us, the ashes are all too real—ashes from burned homes, businesses, and landscapes. But there are also the ashes of shattered dreams, displaced families, and hearts heavy with loss. God's promise reminds us that He is in the business of creating beauty from devastation. He can rebuild lives, families, and communities.

What does this look like practically? It means choosing to believe that God is still working, even when all we see are ashes. It looks like neighbors stepping up to serve one another, volunteers offering time and resources, and the church mobilizing as the hands and feet of Christ to bring hope. The beauty God creates may not erase the loss, but it will redeem it. And as we look to Him, we trust that He will bring beauty we cannot yet imagine.

2. The Oil of Joy Instead of Mourning

In biblical times, oil was a symbol of celebration and anointing. When someone was grieving, they wouldn't anoint their head with oil; instead, they would let their appearance reflect their sorrow. But God promises the oil of joy—a restoration of gladness and life in place of mourning.

Right now, joy may feel distant and even impossible. The mourning is real, and it's necessary. We need to grieve what's been lost. But God promises that mourning will not have the final word. His joy isn't shallow or fleeting—it's a deep, abiding gladness rooted in His presence and His promises.

How do we access this joy in the midst of our mourning? It begins by allowing ourselves to mourn while not losing sight of God's goodness. It means looking for the small glimmers of His grace, even now—like a family reunited, a home spared, or the kindness of a stranger. It also means leaning into His presence through prayer and worship, trusting that He will meet us there.

Let's commit to walking with one another through the mourning, while also helping each other get a glimpse of the joy that God is bringing and will continue to bring.

3. A Garment of Praise Instead of a Spirit of Despair

Despair can feel like a heavy weight—a suffocating spirit that robs us of hope. But God promises to clothe us in a garment of praise. This imagery is powerful: where despair would drape itself over us like a tattered and worn out robe, God instead covers us with something beautiful, something that reminds us of His faithfulness and power.

Praise may not come easily right now, but it is one of the most powerful antidotes to despair. When we praise God, we remind our hearts of who He is—our provider, our sustainer, our restorer. Praise shifts our focus from what we've lost to what we still have: a God who is faithful, present, and powerful.

Practically, this means choosing to praise even when it's hard. It might look like gathering with others to pray and sing, even if the words come through tears. It might look like thanking God for His provision, even when the future feels uncertain. It might mean reading Scripture and reminding yourself daily of His promises. As we praise, we allow God's hope to penetrate the darkest corners of our despair.

Moving Forward Together

Many in the Los Angeles community and in our Calvary family are in the ashes. But Isaiah 61 reminds us that the story doesn't end here. God will bring beauty, joy, and praise as we trust Him and walk this road together.

Let's be a church that embodies this promise. Let's rebuild not just structures but lives. Let's bring the oil of joy to those who are mourning. Let's clothe one another with garments of praise by speaking words of encouragement and hope. And let's cling to the God who makes all things new, knowing that He can and will bring beauty out of the ashes.

This week, let's pray, serve, and hope together. God is not done with us. Beauty is coming. Joy is on the horizon. Praise will rise again. And in the midst of it all, we will see His faithfulness!

Let's hold onto this promise together.