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Isaiah 54:11-13

10th Message

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# A CROWN OF BEAUTY

SERIES: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

**You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,  
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. Isaiah 62:3**

It was the summer of 2006 and we were headed to Switzerland with our good friends David and Lauri for the vacation of a lifetime. We rented a chalet in Wengen, a pristine village in the heart of the Bernese Oberland. Wengen is one of a few car-free resorts in Europe, accessed only by a cog railway system that climbs the steep 400-meter ascent from Lauterbrunnen. No matter which direction we looked from our chalet, the view took your breath away. The Lauterbrunnen Valley beneath us was a lush green carpet channeling its way through gigantic cliff faces and mountain peaks. More than seventy Eden-like waterfalls cascade over the rock walls above to water its vegetation. Above us were the towering peaks of the Jungfrau, Eiger and Mönch, which rise over 13,000 ft. and form a massive wall that, in my opinion, is one of the most awe inspiring sights in the Swiss Alps. Hiking seemed effortless, almost dreamlike as we walked through an array of flora and fauna, enraptured by the soft symphonic sounds of cowbells playing in the background. Having our senses assaulted by such pristine beauty left me with an ache – oh to be swallowed up in beauty! C. S. Lewis gives voice to the longing in his book *The Weight of Glory*:

We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else, which can hardly be put into words — to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves — that, though we cannot, yet these projections can, enjoy in themselves that beauty, grace, and power of which Nature is the image. That is why the poets tell us such lovely falsehoods. They talk as if the west wind could really sweep into a human soul; but it can't. They tell us that “beauty born of murmuring sound” will pass into human face; but it won't. Or not yet.

For if we take the imagery of Scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day give us the Morning Star and cause us to put on the splendor of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and the modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy. At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.<sup>1</sup>

This is our theme today, as God continues his love song to the exiles. Can we possess beauty? Can beauty, once lost, be restored? The imagery shifts from a rejected wife who is miraculously redeemed and restored by the Lord, to a city that he will personally rebuild, lavishly adorn, and faithfully protect. As a result of the New Covenant, the one whose life was formerly barren and desolate is now not only

teeming with life, but her many offspring enjoy a blessed state of security and stability that will outlast history. This is truly a mother's dream. If we are able to penetrate beneath the surface of the imagery, we just might behold something of the divine mystery of beauty that is not only our destiny, but also our present heritage.

## The Future Splendor of the New City

**O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted,  
behold, I will set your stones in antimony,  
and your foundations I will lay in sapphires.**

**Moreover, I will make your battlements of rubies,  
and your gates of crystal,  
and your entire wall of precious stones.**

**All your sons will be taught by the LORD,  
and the well-being of your sons will be great. (Isa 54:11-13NASB)**

### I. The Backdrop of the City's Splendor (Isa 54:11ab)

#### A. The dark backdrop of the past (54:11)

**O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted (v. 11a)**

God addresses the exiles by giving voice to their present condition and contrasts it with the glorious future that he is about to create for them. You may have discovered how difficult it is to receive a word of hope if the one giving it has no awareness of the depth of your suffering or the paralysis of your pain. Even though your condition may be temporary, when you are in the pit of despair and consumed by darkness, you have no ability to receive a word of hope.

God doesn't gloss over our condition or dismiss our pain; instead he *names* it – “O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted.” As Oswalt observes, “The threefold description speaks of God's intimate awareness of the feelings of the people and of his compassion for them.”<sup>2</sup> “*Afflicted*,” is a term that describes the poor and destitute of the land who were “bereft of every kind of support.”<sup>3</sup> “*Storm-tossed*” continues the flood imagery from verse 9 and conveys the feeling of being utterly overwhelmed and set adrift with no bearings or anchor point. And “*not comforted*” acknowledges the fact that up until this moment, the exiles have had no evidence that things would ever change.

It is a wondrous feeling when someone takes the time to listen to you and acknowledges your brokenness and the complexity of emotions that surround it. To be known and valued makes you feel truly human again. No longer isolated and alone, you are relieved to think, “Maybe, just maybe, I'm not crazy after all!” But beyond empathy, if a friend can give a name to your warring emotions, that's when a ray of hope breaks through and healing can begin.

#### B. Beauty defaced and stripped (Isa 3:16-4:1)

Upon that foundation of being known, God crafts a vision of hope in language that speaks right to the heart of his people's pain, bringing a complete reversal to all that was lost due to her idolatry

and greed. Earlier in Isaiah 3:16-4:1, the prophet depicts the wanton women of Zion as stuck up supermodels, who strut their stuff in ostentatious finery up and down the streets of Jerusalem. Eugene Peterson captures it well in his translation:

**Zion women are stuck-up,  
prancing around in their high heels,  
Making eyes at all the men in the street,  
swinging their hips,  
Tossing their hair,  
gaudy and garish in cheap jewelry. (Isa 3:16 THE MESSAGE)**

Because they stripped the poor to adorn themselves, God will strip them of their beauty, and exchange their expensive, gaudy wardrobes with garments of shame:

**In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarves; the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; the signet rings and nose rings; the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags; the mirrors, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils.**

**Instead of perfume there will be rotteness;  
and instead of a belt, a rope;  
and instead of well-set hair, baldness;  
and instead of a rich robe, a skirt of sackcloth;  
and branding instead of beauty. (Isa 3:18-24 ESV)**

“Branding instead of beauty” is a reference to the Assyrian and Babylonian practice of branding their prisoners of war like cattle – a sadistic mark we know all too well from the survivors of the Holocaust.

### C. Beauty restored (v. 11b)

**“behold, I will set your stones in antimony” (v. 11b)**

Against that dark backdrop Isaiah says that God will “set your stones in antimony.” The term translated “antimony” (*pūkh*) was used of a black mineral powder used as a cosmetic by women to increase the brilliance of the eyes by darkening the eyelids (2 Kgs 9:30). Eaton suggests that the image of Zion adorned “with jewels and eye-cosmetic ... may relate to her preparation as a royal bride of Yahweh.”<sup>4</sup> The interpretation is confirmed in Isaiah’s words in Chapter 61:

**I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isa 61:10-11)**

In the book of Revelation, John also likens “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” to “a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2; Isa 61:10-11). The image is a wonderful promise by God for those whose beauty was stolen, either by others or as a result of one’s sinful choices. Just as he did with our first parents in the garden, God promises to remove our idolatrous rags and clothe us in the beauty of his holiness. “You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God” (62:3).

In the context of building a city, to “set your stones in *antimony*” refers to the dark mortar that sets off the brilliance of colored paving stones (1 Chron 29:2) as well as securing the stones firmly in place.

God is likened to a master jeweler who, with skillful precision, secures each precious stone in just the right setting that will display its color and magnify its beauty.

The image suggests that the glory of the new city will not only be incomparable to Israel’s dark past when it was stripped of its former beauty and destroyed, but it will be all the more splendid when set against the dark backdrop of the idolatrous cultures within which she will be constructed. Community life within the new city will be so attractive in comparison to the darkness and death of the world around her that the nations will stream into the city like a flood (Isa 2:2-4; Zech 8:23; Acts 4). To carry the imagery even further, I wonder if it might imply that the suffering that surrounds us actually works to strengthen, secure and adorn us with eternal splendor.

### II. The New Materials of Zion’s Splendor: Gem Stones! (Isa 54:11b-12)

**Behold, I will set your stones in antimony,  
and your foundations I will lay in sapphires (or lapis lazuli)  
Moreover, I will make your battlements of rubies,  
and your gates of crystal,  
and your entire wall of precious stones. (vv. 11b-12)**

During my college years I spent my summers as a construction worker. In my sophomore year I studied abroad in Italy and began to see a vast difference in the European approach to building and ours. In California, the average home is built to last forty to fifty years; in Europe longevity is measured in centuries. In the States, homes are often quickly mass-produced in cookie-cutter fashion using sub-standard materials with little attention to detail. Even in custom homes, contractors often cut corners using less expensive veneers that give the appearance of real wood or stone, but have a shorter life span. In Europe, stone is still the basic building block of homes, which makes the building process labor intensive and time consuming. To own a home in Europe is a rare privilege, so much so that homes are often handed down through generations of families, with each generation adding some new signature mark or addition.

In the New Jerusalem there is no shoddy construction, no second-rate veneers, and no budget or time constraint imposed on the builder. In contrast to the temple and city of old, the New Jerusalem will be constructed with precious gemstones, eternal in value and splendid in beauty due to their rarity, clarity, color, luminosity and durability.

“The first stones were apparently the main building stones of the city, the ones that first caught the eye.”<sup>5</sup> We are reminded of Isaiah’s words in chapter 28:

**See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone,  
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;  
the one who relies on it  
will never be stricken with panic. (Isa 28:16 TNIV)**

Underneath these stones, God lays a foundation of lapis lazuli, the blue stone that was highly prized for decoration all over the ancient world. From the blue foundations the poet’s mind soars to the pointed battlements glowing in the sun, and they are to be made of rosy jasper. Then his eye drops to the gates made of crystals and enclosure walls of precious stones.<sup>6</sup>

Gemstones come from organic minerals or rocks that are subjected to powerful forces of nature over great spans of time.

Lapis lazuli forms when magma under the surface of the earth forces its way into an existing rock. The magma is so hot that the existing rock melts and then solidifies. This process creates a new deep blue rock, lapis lazuli, which contains the minerals lazurite, pyrite, and calcite.<sup>7</sup>

Isaiah's vision would have been especially encouraging to the exiles living in idolatrous Babylon where its kings, especially Nebuchadnezzar, boasted that they had built their impressive buildings with precious stones. Claus Westerman quotes F. Stummer:

Mention is often made in particular of the *ünknû* stone, that is, the lapis lazuli or azure stone. In actual fact, of course, what came in question were perfectly ordinary bricks overlaid with blue glass paste.<sup>8</sup>

Like the Babylonian religions, the glory of their buildings was fake, nothing more than a thin veneer with no depth or substance. By contrast, each and every stone of the New Jerusalem, from the foundations and towers, to the gates and outer wall is precious, having been tested by fire, cut with precision and securely set in place. Oswalt concludes,

It could hardly be more stunning. In place of poverty there is wealth from top to bottom, inside and out. In place of the insecurity of a storm-tossed ship, there is the stability of a God-founded city. In place of despair, there is the confidence of endless resources.<sup>9</sup>

Behind it all is the builder who dominates the scene as the sole architect, contractor and supplier of the project.

### III. Education in the New City (Isa 54:13)

All your sons will be taught by the LORD,  
and the well-being of your sons will be great. (Isa 54:13 NASB)

#### A. The transition from “stones” and “sons”

Once the poet has captured our imagination with a bejeweled city, he transitions from speaking in symbols to reality, from stones (‘eben) to sons (ben), the mural crown of a city. The New Jerusalem will not be a bejeweled city to bedazzle tourists from around the world, but something much more valuable – precious sons (i.e. children). It was always difficult to get Israel to make the transition from “stones” to “sons,” as they were held captive by their materialistic thinking. Even when John the Baptist and Jesus tried to shock the Pharisees out of their worldly mentality (Matt 3:9; Luke 19:40), their words fell on deaf ears.

“...do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children (“sons”) to Abraham.” (Matt 3:9 NASB)

“I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!” (Luke 19:40)

It took a great deal of re-education for the apostles as well, who were also enamored of the magnificence of the “stones” of Herod's temple that they could hardly imagine ones more glorious. But eventually they caught on that the New Jerusalem would be built of “living stones” of which Christ himself became the chief cornerstone.

**And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a**

**holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 2:4-5 NASB )**

**So then you are... fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. (Eph 2:19-22 NASB)**

#### B. Every son a disciple

Ask any mother what her greatest dream would be and most will tell you – “To see all my children and grandchildren walking with the Lord.” The book of Proverbs instructs parents that raising children to be godly in an evil world is no easy task. It demands spiritual initiative, discipline and rigorous consistency that are more akin to training a young apprentice than doing flannel graphs in Sunday school. But godly parents took up the mantle in the hope that taking strong initiative at an early age would have a permanent effect on the child.

**Train up a child in the way he should go,  
Even when he is old he will not depart from it. (Prov 22:6)**

A remnant did succeed but, by and large, disobedience arising from a stubborn heart became the distinguishing mark of the children of Israel. In the end Zion's children became so stiff-necked that they were sold into slavery. There was no longer a city, not to mention “peace.” But now, because the work of the Servant, all Zion's children will have the privilege of becoming disciples, to be personally mentored by God. The intimate instruction the Servant enjoyed (54:4-10) with the Father will be there as well.

**The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples,  
That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word.  
He awakens Me morning by morning,  
He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple.  
The Lord God has opened My ear;  
And I was not disobedient  
Nor did I turn back. (Isa 50:4-5)**

In days of the Old Covenant only a remnant in Israel had the Spirit upon them and the masses were taught through mediators. But in the days following the coming of the Servant, the Spirit will be given to all without measure (Acts 2:17). And the Spirit writes the law on our hearts, making us teachable.

**But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him. (1 John 2:27)**

#### C. Character creates *shalom*

As Oswalt affirms, in contrast to Eastern religion, discipleship is the essence of our relationship with God, not metaphysical oneness that strips us of our individuality and removes us from the world.

Throughout the Bible, this is seen as the essence of a relationship with God. It is not metaphysical union with God that is sought but the learning of his ways and replication of his character. It is not accidental that this learning is closely associated with the giving of the Spirit of God. We are not absorbed into him, losing our identity; rather, he fills us with himself, cleansing us from the impurity of sin and allowing us to be seen in truest individuality. The result of all that is peace (*shalôm*). The disciples of the Lord,

the ones filled with his Spirit, are no longer at war with God. They are thus no longer at war with themselves. They are not at war with others: they no longer need to destroy others so that they can aggrandize themselves. They are no longer at war with God's creation; they do not need to carve their initials in it. Such persons have wholeness in themselves, and that wholeness affects all their relationships. Again, it is no accident that this promise should come directly after 53:5, with its announcement that the Servant was punished so that we could have peace.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. What is the Unifying Essence of this City?

When you stand back and look at this city and take it all in, what is the overall impact? What do you feel when you see such beauty, forged by tremendous forces over long stretches of time, each gemstone pure, clear of color, vibrant in its luminosity and enduring durability. The prophet Ezekiel was captivated by this city. Everywhere he goes he is measuring it – the length, breadth, width and depth. Do you know what he is measuring? When the apostle Paul describes the heavenly reality in Christ, he gives us the answer –

**“...that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the *breadth* and *length* and *height* and *depth*, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:17-19)**

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, “love endures all things.” Love is what gives each stone its luster and enduring purity.

How, like Ezekiel, do you begin to measure, to comprehend the beauty of the city, the breadth and depth of God's love? Just ask your brother, ask your sister in Christ to tell you their story. As each tells their story, you will be blown away by the depth and breadth and height of God's love for each one – and that's just one stone! Then you go to the next person, and the next, and on and on until you begin to comprehend the immeasurable dimensions of the love of Jesus.

As our 2006 Switzerland trip came to a close, we came down from the heights of the Jungfrau on the cog train, all of us – Lauri, David, Emily and I, my daughters – and I noticed that Lauri was doing something. In her hand she held a small box, and we were all stunned to discover that Lauri, whose mother had loved mountains, had brought her mother's ashes with her to Switzerland and was now kneeling down to sprinkle her ashes on those mountain heights. In a moment, those majestic mountains became God's backdrop for a daughter to spread her mother's ashes in that sacred place. We felt so privileged to be with her. Here was a mother's wish fulfilled as a loving daughter set her precious stone in antimony, symbolic of the crown of beauty for which we are all destined.

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 1976), 42-43.
2. John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 426.
3. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 426.
4. J. H. Eaton, *Festal Drama in Deutero-Isaiah* (London: SPCK, 1979), 8.
5. John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 536.
6. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 427.
7. “*Gems and Gemstones*,” Globio.org, [http://www.globio.org/glossopedia/article.aspx?art\\_id=51](http://www.globio.org/glossopedia/article.aspx?art_id=51)
8. Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 278.
9. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 427.
10. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 428.

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