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Text: Luke 1:26 – 38

Place: Midweekchurch

Title: The soul of a woman: The glory of a woman in Christ

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It was late afternoon in a small country town. A teenage girl with long dark hair was finishing off her chores for the day. The dust from her sweeping sparkled and danced in the slanting beams of light. And although her chores were routine and a little boring, today she danced through them, a playful smile flickering on her face. Because you see she had only recently become engaged to a young man in town.

Her imagination was filled with wedding preparations when suddenly an angel from heaven appeared before her! She was terrified! And his words turn her life upside down.

The angel said, **‘Don’t be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.’**

Mary answered, **‘I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.’**

With that astounding pronouncement God brings a teenage girl into his plan of salvation for the world. The fulfilment of all his promises since the garden of Eden. Mary will give birth to the one who had been promised for thousands of years. The one who will destroy the work of Satan and the power of sin and death.

Over the past few weeks we’ve been looking at the glorious place women have in creation. You often hear that the Bible is oppressive and mean in its teaching about women. We’re finding that the reality is completely different.

We spent the first week looking at how woman uniquely displays the image of God. We saw right at the beginning of Genesis that man and woman were created by God to together display his image in the world. They are complementary, and each one displays God’s character in special ways.

We saw that women display the glory of God’s character in three particular ways.

Firstly, their capacity to form and nurture relationships. Women show the relational aspect of God’s character in a way men only dream of.

The second way women display the image of God is their capacity for beauty. God is the supreme artist, a maker of stunning beauty in all he has done. It’s no wonder then that woman is his final creative work, the crown of beauty in a beautiful world. And women reflect this capacity for beauty as they bear the image of God. Beauty that is not only skin deep, but beauty of soul as well.

The third way in which women reflect the image of God is by their role as helper. We saw that that word ‘helper’ in the Old Testament is not the picture of a domestic slave but a word more often used of God to describe his life-giving and life-saving power. It’s a strong word describing a strong and crucial role to play in the world.

In our second week we saw that the Bible also explains why a woman's experience of the world is so different from what it was intended to be. Why do women experience so much pain in precisely these three areas: their relationships, their sense of beauty and their role in the world?

The Bible says that when Satan was created he was perfect in beauty. But his beauty was his downfall as he grew proud of it. Cast out of heaven he saw Eve, beautiful in appearance and soul, a life-bringer. In his jealousy he hated her and sought to destroy her. Deceiving her with the fruit she tasted and fell into a living death.

But God promised that one of Eve's descendants would strike back at Satan and destroy him. And so Satan has been at war against women ever since, fearful of the promised one to come from her. We saw that the terrible abuses against women throughout history and in every culture reflect this hatred of Satan for those who bring life and beauty.

As a woman you have faced him and been wounded in the fight.

But Jesus loves you so much he died in your place so that you could live again. So you could be reawakened to become all that you were created to be. So that everything that was lost in Eden could be restored.

We're going to spend tonight looking at the glory of a woman in Christ.

When you and I, man or woman, turn to Jesus for forgiveness and we put our trust in him and follow him, we are transformed. The Bible says we are brought from death to life. We are a new creation.

His purpose for you as a woman is to bring life and beauty and relationships into a world shattered by death, ugliness and isolation. You can bring your brokenness and shame to Jesus and find forgiveness, cleansing and a new beginning. We read in **Isaiah 61** that it will be Jesus' joy **to bestow on you 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.**

We can see the way God does that in a very unlikely place in the Bible. At the beginning of Matthew's Gospel he gives us Jesus' family tree right back to Abraham. And family trees in those days were exclusively male territory. It was always so-and-so *son of* such-and-such. Women didn't get a look in. But scandalously Matthew includes five women. And the women he chose!

Tamar, a woman treated shamefully by a series of husbands and her father-in-law.

Rahab, a prostitute in the doomed city of Jericho.

Ruth, a foreign widow.

Bathsheba, a woman treated like an object, a notch on king David's belt.

And Mary, a young woman who would bear the stigma of becoming pregnant before she was married.

Far from being skeletons in Jesus' closet they become examples of what Jesus came to do. It's as though Jesus is saying, 'Far from being ashamed of these women, I have brought them to myself and given them a crown of beauty instead of ashes. Far from being disqualified, by grace they have become vital links in my story.'

And that story has continued throughout history, for each woman who has put her trust in Jesus.

How does Jesus bestow on you a crown of beauty instead of ashes?

The first way is that Jesus restores your irreplaceable role in the world.

The Bible repeatedly shows what a vital role women have in his plans for the world. I mentioned Ruth. She was a young widow, a foreigner to the people of Israel. Her mother in law Naomi told her to go back to her people and find another husband. But Ruth shows her fierce devotion to Naomi:

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.

When they return to Israel she looks after Naomi. She turns Naomi's bitterness to joy. She brings life into a story filled with death. And she is commended by everyone for her faithfulness and love, and eventually becomes King David's great-grandmother.

Esther is another woman in the Old Testament. Just a young woman when she suddenly becomes Queen of Persia. But we see that God placed her there for a very important role. Her courage and faith saves her entire nation from genocide.

And we read about Mary, a teenager called to be the mother of Jesus. Her faith and trust in God was challenged time and again. She experienced a lot of grief: the threat from Herod when Jesus was born. The death of her husband. Her confusion during Jesus' ministry. Her presence at his crucifixion. But she faithfully fulfilled her great life purpose.

Ruth brought life to one person. Esther to an entire nation. And Mary to the Son of God.

As a woman in Christ, God has called you to be someone who brings life to the world. And I don't just mean child-bearing. In your relationships with others no one can be to them what you can be. And because you belong to Christ, you can bring his life to others, the greatest role we could ever have.

Jeanine is a missionary in the city of Medellin, in Columbia, Central America. It's called the drug capital of the Americas. It's a city infamous for its drug lords, murders, violence. It's a city of death. It's a place with an open hostility to Christianity: sixty pastors a year are murdered there. But as Jeanine served in a University there, she felt called by God to go into the prisons in the city. Bellavista is a prison where six thousand inmates are crowded into space for only 1,500. An average of two murders a day were committed inside.

One day Jeanine, a single woman, walked into Bellavista to begin Bible studies. After fourteen years of dangerous work five hundred inmates are now studying Scripture. Thousands have been saved. And only seven inmates were killed over seven years after she began her ministry.

Jeanine has been used by God to bring life into a culture of death.

Asked about the danger of the work, she said, 'Security is not found in the absence of danger, but in the presence of Jesus.'

Your work for God might not be so dramatic, but it is still dangerous. As a woman in Christ you are called to bring life and nurture life. Satan is still bitterly opposed to you, but in Jesus you can bring life into your relationships. You show the way of life to your children and others. You bring words of life to your friends who are believing the words of death from Satan.

The world needs you to step up and fulfil the great calling God has given you.

The second way Jesus bestows on you a crown of beauty instead of ashes is in your capacity for beauty.

Throughout this series I've recognised that this is probably the most difficult area of your nature as a woman to accept. You have been lied to for so long. Satan's jealousy of your beauty has led to all sorts of corruption of what beauty truly is. Our society has such a narrow and shallow definition of beauty. Against all evidence to the contrary so many women deny their beauty. Or hide it. Or strive to achieve an artificial standard that masks their true beauty.

But listen to what the apostle Peter says in **1 Peter 3:3 & 4:**

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewellery and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.

Now that passage has been misinterpreted to mean a ban on all jewellery and make up. That Christian women must look dowdy.

But that's not what Peter means at all.

In fact he's saying something revolutionary.

He's not saying that accessories are wrong. He's saying they're not necessary!

In Christ you *are* beautiful. God has personally made you unique. He sees you as very beautiful, his exquisite work of art.

Some women hide behind makeup fearful that the real her will be rejected.

Well, Jesus has seen the real you, even with your inner pain, secret shame, fear. And he has loved you completely. And he has bestowed on you a crown of beauty.

Peter describes that beauty as coming from a gentle and quiet spirit. What does he mean by that?

Again he's been misrepresented when people think he means that a Christian woman should be a dormouse: dowdy, rarely seen and heard even less.

Not at all.

A gentle and quiet spirit comes when you are satisfied in who you are in Christ.

Why do brides always look beautiful on their wedding day? Is it the dress, the jewellery, the make up? Well they're all nice, but that's not why she radiates beauty. She shines because today she is the princess she truly is. She is loved and loving.

Your beauty doesn't depend on whether you're following the latest fashion or have your make up just right or anything else like that. Those things change and fade. Your beauty comes from who you are: loved and saved by your Lord, chosen by him and precious.

You might be thinking, 'That's all fine in theory, Michael, but life doesn't work like that. People do judge by appearance.'

Can I ask you two questions?

Firstly, has following the world's lies brought you satisfaction? Do you look in the mirror and only find what you think is wrong? Who trained you to think like that?

And second, would it make any difference if at the beginning of each day you meditated on the wonderful truth that your Saviour loves you dearly and delights in you? That he sings over you with joy? He not only created and knows you, he approves of you!

If that is how your Saviour sees you, then that is what you truly are.

I'll finish with a story I mentioned back at the beginning of the series. An Australian nurse volunteered with the Red Cross during the Vietnam War. Young men would be brought in suffering terrible wounds. They have been out in an all-male environment. They have killed and seen terrible things. She treated their wounds and talked with them.

More often than not when she asked if they needed anything, they'd ask, 'Could you just sit here for a while?'

In a world gone terribly wrong, her beauty, her presence, her life-nurturing was powerfully healing. These men, surrounded by fear and wounds and death, were desperate for beauty. The nurses' presence reminded them of something greater, something worth living for.

In Christ, you bring life and beauty and relationships into a world shattered by death, ugliness and isolation.

God has a great plan for you.

Will you accept his invitation and call to join him in bringing life to this world?