

# *Beauty for Ashes...*

*by Debbie Cox-Schwalbe*



*“...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.”*

ISAIAH 61:3

I don't know about you, but I've been told the following words of "wisdom" more times than I can remember: "All things happen for a reason."

To be really honest, I wish I had a dollar for every time that I've said that. In fact, I carry around a small memento from a dear friend that says those very words. I keep it with me for sentimental reasons, as this was a very dear person who gave this to me after hours of heart sharing conversation between the two of us.

Being the imperfect human beings we are, it's safe to say we all have had things happen to us in our lives on this earth that make us stop and wonder "why?" Sometimes we wonder what good can possibly come out of a situation that is so painful and/or traumatic. And, we may even wonder where God was in this ordeal. So many times we wonder "why" and sometimes God may, indeed, reveal His reasoning as to the "whys" of a situation.

But, more often than not, we may never know the "why" of a situation. I was told once that God is God, and He owes us no explanation. Sometimes I feel like an Israelite wandering around out there in the desert looking for the reasoning behind why things happen as they do. In my job as a counselor, I often wonder how people can possess so much strength to move on and rebuild their lives after suffering from what seems to me to be insurmountable adversities. But, in order to keep my sanity, I then quickly remind myself of the strength and resilience that He has provided for His children.

God never promised us an easy life. There is nothing in our birthright that says we will go through life unscathed of human pain and turmoil. How can we make sense out of things that are often totally out of our ability to change or prevent? I wish I had the answer to this.

I often tell people, "It's not what happens to you so much as it is, what you do with what happens to you". Many of us are left reeling from a difficult event that, if we were given a choice, we would never have chosen to experience. I often ask an individual, "What can be learned from this situation?" or, "how can you become a better person from this?" Of course, I'm most often

met with a response of, "what do you mean"? Actually, I translate that to, "you've got to be kidding, this is one of the most horrible things that have ever happened to me, and you're thinking that I can benefit from this?"

That "you've got to be kidding" response makes total sense to me. After all, our very foundation is often shaken to the point of our faith in God and humanity being challenged. Before my walk with Jesus was strong, I learned of an inspirational Existentialist theorist named Dr. Viktor Frankl. Dr. Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist and neurologist who was also a Holocaust survivor. During one particularly difficult labor detail in Auschwitz, he began to realize the precious gift of hope, and how it can teach us that we can arise above our difficult situation(s) and recover from what life has given to us. Dr. Frankl was not a Christian, but he somehow managed to rise above his dire pain. What struck me as most impactful in learning about Dr. Frankl's experiences was his ability to overcome those horrific experiences. My admiration for Dr. Frankl was developed from his strength to endure and grow from his death filled situation.

Now, as I fast forward to years later in my faith walk, I believe Dr. Frankl would have had an even greater hope had he known the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus. I do believe non-Christians miss out on the main component of hope, and we Christians are so much farther ahead in the game of life because we know eternal Hope. God did give us the gift of Hope, and it is in the form of our precious Savior.

Jesus says He suffered the ultimate sacrifice for us, and that our suffering here on this earth will someday be turned into glory. Acts 14:22 says "...we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God..." Not only do we have the hope of things to come, but we also have the promise of a perfect and everlasting life with those of whom we have loved and lost here in this life.

I'm sure you are probably thinking, "Yes, this is true, but what about the here and now? I am in pain, and how am I going to survive this ordeal, not to mention how am I going to make any sense of it?" Often times, many well-meaning people will suggest we pray to ease our pain. While we

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know prayer is our primary mode of communication with our Father, we may be in so much pain we don't know what to pray for.

Romans 8:26-27 explains how the Holy Spirit intercedes for us when our pain is so great that we are unable to articulate what we are feeling. While we have hope, and the Holy Spirit to intercede for us, we still may wonder how this difficult situation can be in God's plan.

I have a very dear friend whose life was suddenly turned upside down several years ago with the unexpected death of her husband. They had settled in with their lives, and were very happy with the way their life was headed. They were very much in love. Although she continues to grieve and miss her husband, she is beginning to see God had a plan for her. Despite what happened to her, she has developed a desire to reach out to others who are in need of peace and comfort.

While my friend may be over the initial shock of losing her husband so suddenly, she will always have this hole in her heart that was once never there. However, with our friend and Savior's help, she is doing something with her pain. She is growing from it! She is taking this pain and making it work for her, not against her.

This growth is not quick, or magical, or easy. But, growing past our pain is worth every step we take. Isaiah 61:3 reminds us those who grieve receive 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...." Joyce Meyer talks about beauty from ashes as an experience of emotional healing; as a way to move on with our pain and become a healthier person.

As we know, grief isn't limited to just the experience of the death of a loved one. Grief can occur from loss of anything. We can grieve over many things. We can grieve over the loss of a prospective relationship, the loss of a friendship, or moving to another city. We can grieve over major life transitions such as retirement. The things that we can grieve over are as limitless as human experiences.

It is only through our faith in God's plan for us, and the surrendering our will to Him that we find true hope. It is Christ who enables us to heal, mature, and grow. If you doubt this, read Jeremiah 29:11.

This does not mean God spares His children from pain and hardship, but it does mean we have hope as we fulfill His mission for us. And yes, things do happen for a reason, whether we learn what this reason is this side of Heaven, or when we see our Jesus face to face, remains to be seen. But, we do have the assurance that God has it all taken care of. That's what I call Blessed Assurance!

May the peace of God be with you.

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