

BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 25, 1968
at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard
over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

Recently, Clay Derryberry, a student in one of my classes paid this well-written and meaningful tribute to his grandfather, Sherman Derryberry, "My grandfather was a wonderful man. I suppose everyone thinks his grandfather is fine, but mine was unique. He was born in 1889 on a farm in Marshall County, Tennessee, of middle class farm parents. His early years were saturated with hard work and loving discipline. His formal education only included the first eight grades, while the greatest of his knowledge, which was sizeable, came from the living of life. Those horse-and-buggy days gave him a toughness and love for work which he never lost. The last thing he did before he died was to plow a corn patch with a double shovel. He always had corn patches--extra ones with beans and peas so he might give some to his friends and neighbors, and especially to those who did not have any...Somehow, through his limited education and contact with life, he acquired the desire to read. He read, slowly and awkwardly often times, but he read the Bible. His best merit in reading was that he would go back and be sure he understood what he read, and his greatest merit in life was that he practiced what he read devoutly. Not only that, he talked about it whenever he could and was blessed with a tremendous capacity for being fruitful in moral ideas...In fact, he lived what he read so well and in such a humble spirit that almost everyone in Marshall county and the surrounding counties knew his name, his faith, and his good works. Whenever he was around gross sinners they held their tongues and walked carefully. When he was around people who claimed to be Christians but still loved the world, they felt guilty and hid the beer they were drinking at the store at Christmas time when he happened in. I have heard them say so themselves...A well-known and respected person, he was on the county court. He was an elder in the church. He loved preachers and preaching, but even more he loved the righteous living of life. It is believed by many that more people were at his funeral than had been at any other funeral in Marshall County for a long time. No one could say a truthful word against him...His life illustrated the power Christ can have in a life and upon those surrounding it. I believe that his life shows that a person does not have to be highly educated according to the world's standard to be a true and devout Christian. His life and the influence of Christ in it remind of me Micah 6:8--'What doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God.'" This truly is a beautiful tribute to a beautiful life.

A New Expression

In recent months I have heard an expression that at first sounded rather strange to my ears. It is the expression "beautiful people." Sometimes it is used by a young person enthusiastically referring to a musical group like the New Christy Minstrels or the Lettermen, saying, "Oh, they're beautiful people!" Sometimes it is used by a master of ceremonies on a television program, as he speaks to a responsive audience, saying, "You're beautiful people." It may even be a psychedelic term, used by some of the "way out" young people of our day. In any case, it is used to refer to men, to women, or to anyone that you especially like. It does not have any special reference to physical beauty, but rather to the entire person. The more I think of this term the more I like it, for people are beautiful. I do not mean that all people are beautiful, for obviously this is not true. I mean that man has the possibility of great inner strength and beauty. When life is lived as it ought to be lived, people are the most beautiful things on earth.

We live in a world where there is a great deal of beauty. Many of nature's scenes are breathtakingly beautiful. Ours is also an age in which things are becoming more beautiful. There are more beautiful colors than ever before and these colors can now be put into an infinite variety of places. Think of the magnificent possibilities in the realm of photography and printing. Ours is a day in which there are many varieties and textures of cloth, further extending the possibilities of beauty.

When one thinks of the modern homes, with the new and appealing furniture of various kinds, he is impressed with the truly beautiful products of man's creative art. When one thinks of the luxurious apartments, the fine restaurants, the lovely new officebuildings, and the other achievements of our age, he is impressed with the world's increasing beauty. To this we would add the remarkable beauty of the various kinds and varieties of clothing of our day. We would add the luxury of modern cars. With new materials, new designs and new colors man has created hitherto unattainable beauty. Yet, even in view of all of these impressive achievements, there is no beauty more lasting nor more outstanding than the beauty of life. It is in this vein that I would like to suggest to you that the Bible has in it the stories of many beautiful people, stories designed to direct our thinking toward the high, the noble, the good and the beautiful. Let us notice a few of these lives.

Spirituality

In the fifth chapter of the book of Genesis we read that Enoch was the son of Jared. Then, ever so briefly, we catch a glimpse of what must have been a truly beautiful life. We read in verses 21-24, "And Enoch lived sixty and five years, and begat Methuselah; and Enoch walked with God after he begat Methuselah three hundred years, and begat sons and daughters: and all the days of Enoch were three hundred sixty and five years: and Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him."

Here is a man about whom the Holy Spirit guided Moses to write that he "walked with God" and that "he was not; for God took him." What a compliment this is as a brief appraisal of a man's life. He lived in the spirit. He walked with God. So appealing to God was his life that he was exempted from the necessity of death "for God took him." Though the picture is brief, we are given a glimpse of a truly beautiful life.

Courage

A little later in the history of man we read of the Medo-Persian realm made up of one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, stretching from the Pacific across the broad Asian and European continents to the Atlantic. King over this world-wide empire was Ahasuerus. At a particular moment in the history of this nation a Jewish maiden by the name of Esther was queen and a man named Haman was one of the key ministers to the king. This scheming political leader caused the king to sign an irrevocable interdict that all the Jews within his empire should die on the thirteenth day of the month Adar.

It was then that the aged Mordecai wrote a note to his niece the queen, saying, "Think not within thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house more than all the Jews. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but thou and thy father's house will perish: and who knoweth but that thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Esther's reply was forthcoming. "Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days night or day: I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:13-16).

The context of the story indicates that Esther must have been a girl of surpassing beauty, however, her greater beauty was an internal beauty that gave her the courage to go in before this awesome monarch unbidden to ask for the lives of her people. She had that courage even though it placed her life in jeopardy. Hers is a character of strength and ready response to the duties that circumstances placed upon her. Again, truly this is a beautiful life.

Repentance

In the Old Testament there are many beautiful lives, but in the choosing of only a few I cannot pass by the life of David. Visualize him if you will in the king's house in Jerusalem, wearing the royal robes, and yet tender enough of heart to write, "Who can discern his errors? Clear thou me from hidden faults. Keep back thy servant from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be clear from great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Jehovah, my rock, and my redeemer." (Ps. 19:12-14). Hear him again as he wrote on another occasion, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul; he guideth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake...Surely goodness and loving-kindness shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Ps. 23:1-3, 6).

Into this good life there came sin of the grossest nature. There was adultery followed by lying and deception, followed by murder. It was then that David under the great pressure of guilt feelings wrote, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness; according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin...Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy Spirit from me." (Ps. 51:1-2, 10-11). The ugliness and the tragedy of David's sin cannot be covered. However, it can be said that, having fallen, David then rose again. The humble spirit of confession and petition for forgiveness characterizes his life as one of beauty.

Decisiveness

In the New Testament there are many beautiful lives, but from the long list I may choose only two. The first is that of the Ethiopian nobleman who had made a journey of more than a thousand miles from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship God in strict obedience to the Law of Moses. Upon his return he was sitting in his chariot reading the prophet Isaiah, when Philip the evangelist approached. After a brief conversation Philip joined the Ethiopian and the scripture says, "And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this scripture, preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on the way they came unto a certain water; and the eunuch saith, Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still; and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him." (Acts 8:35-38).

The Ethiopian must have been a man of great spiritual strength, for no man would take approximately a month of the year to make the dangerous, expensive and toilsome journey to worship at Jerusalem, if this were not the case. We further admire him because when he learned of the Messiah, he immediately was ready to change the direction of his life to follow the Lord. One wonders why he did not say, "This is more interesting, I will think it over and next year when I return I will give you my decision." We can only be thankful to God for the decisiveness that led him in that hour to determine that he would be a follower of Christ. This also is a beautiful life.

Generosity

In the following chapter of the book of Acts we read, "Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple names Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and alms deeds which she did. And it came to pass in those days, that she fell sick, and died: and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper chamber. And as Lydda was nigh unto Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men unto him, entreating him, Delay not to come on unto us. And Peter arose and went with them. And when he was come, they brought him unto the upper chamber: and all the widows stood by him weeping, and showing the coats and garments, which Dorcas made while she was with them." (Acts 9:36-39).

Here is a woman whose name was hardly known outside her own community, yet hers was also a life of beauty. We are not so concerned at this distance about the marvellous miracle that Peter performed in raising her from the dead. We are concerned about the beauty of her life as manifested in the fact that when she died she was described as "full of good works and almsdeeds which she did," and that the neighbors showed "the coats and garments which Dorcas made." Her life had been one in which she was concerned with the needs of those about her. We can almost see them as they hold up the various garments and admire her work. Her life, too, in a simple but wonderful way, was beautiful.

Conclusion

These lives were all different, yet they had in common the essentials of greatness: "What doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God." There is a beauty about a life that loves its fellowman and deals with him justly and in kindness. There is a beauty about a life that walks with God in humble obedience.

In John Temple Graves' famous "Eulogy on Henry W. Grady," there are these impressive lines, "I have seen the gleam from the headlight of some giant engine rushing onward through the darkness, heedless of opposition, fearless of danger; and I thought it was grand. I have seen the light come over the eastern hills in glory, driving the lazy darkness before it, till leaf and tree and blade of grass glittered in the myriad diamonds of the morning ray; and I thought that was grand. I have seen the light that leaped at midnight athwart the storm-swept sky, shivering over chaotic clouds, 'mid howling winds, till cloud and darkness and shadow-haunted earth flashed into mid-day splendor; and I knew that was grand...But the grandest thing, next to the radiance that flows from the Almighty Throne, is the light of a noble and beautiful life, wrapping itself in benediction around the destinies of men, and finding its home in the bosom of the everlasting God."

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