

A Study in Isaiah 3:16–26

The Daughters of Zion — Haughtiness, Ornament, and What God Puts in Their Place

We are reading Isaiah chapter 3, beginning at verse 16.

"Moreover the LORD saith, Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet: therefore the LORD will smite with a scab the crown of the head of the daughters of Zion, and the LORD will discover their secret parts."

"In that day the Lord will take away the bravery of their tinkling ornaments about their feet, and their cauls, and their round tires like the moon, the chains, and the bracelets, and the mufflers, the bonnets, and the ornaments of the legs, and the headbands, and the tablets, and the earrings, the rings, and nose jewels, the changeable suits of apparel, and the mantles, and the wimples, and the crisping pins, the glasses, and the fine linen, and the hoods, and the vails. And it shall come to pass, that instead of sweet smell there shall be stink; and instead of a girdle a rent; and instead of well set hair baldness; and instead of a stomacher a girding of sackcloth; and burning instead of beauty."

"Thy men shall fall by the sword, and thy mighty in the war. And her gates shall lament and mourn; and she being desolate shall sit upon the ground."

Why These Directions Are Addressed to Women — and the Parallel with 1 Timothy 2

A response once made to a complaint about remarks concerning women's dress noted two things: first, that no man of sound sense adorned himself the way the complaint described; and second, that all the injunctions of the Holy Spirit on the subject of dress in the New Testament are addressed to or about women. Both points are correct. The deeper point behind the second is that women in a household dress with their husband's knowledge and consent. Where there is something wrong in how a woman presents herself in the world, the root of the problem will not always stop with her alone.

There is a striking parallel between this section of Isaiah 3 and 1 Timothy 2. The first half of 1 Timothy 2 addresses men — kings and those in authority, the duty to pray for them, the character of the men who are to pray (holy hands, without wrath or doubting). The second half turns to women — adorn yourselves in modest apparel with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with broidered hair or gold or pearls or costly array, but with good works. Exactly the same order appears here in Isaiah 3: the first part of the chapter deals with the leaders of the nation, the mighty men, the judge, the prophet, the prudent, the ancient (verses 1–8); and then, after dealing with the oppression of the princes and elders (verses 12–15), the prophet turns to the daughters of Zion. The same God who is concerned with the deliberations of heads of state is equally concerned with the dress of an individual person. Both in one Old Testament chapter, and both in one New Testament chapter.

A reading meeting once reached 1 Timothy 2:9–10 and a senior brother announced, We all know what these verses mean — and jumped to verse 11, bypassing them entirely. That kind of thing indicates a state of soul, not a state of knowledge. The Levites at the water gate gave the sense of what they read. The water gate represents the word of God, and one does not skip portions of it

because they are inconvenient. All sixty-six books are like love letters from God, and love letters are read and re-read, with not a word escaped.

Haughtiness, Stretched Necks, Wanton Eyes, Mincing Steps

Jehovah said, Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched out neck, and wanton eyes, and go along mincing and making a tinkling with their feet. Not one of these descriptions suggests submission. A stretched neck is the opposite of what Scripture pictures in a modest and retiring disposition — it thrusts the face into affairs where it does not belong. Wanton eyes are eyes ungoverned by the truth of God, following their own will. The contrast is Boaz's word to Ruth: Let thine eyes be on the field that they are reaping. Eyes directed to where the word of God is being ministered, learning from it, gleaning from it.

And go along mincing — taking such small steps that no real progress is made. Mincing steps are the little baby steps of a child's game, steps so small they are hardly steps at all. It is possible to be on the path of walking with the Lord but to take such mincing steps that no progress is made in divine things. The Scripture speaks of walking with the Lord in light of his word. The smaller the steps, the less ground is covered. Ruth was the opposite of this — her progress in divine things in a single short book is remarkable.

What is the alternative? The Song of Solomon 7 gives it. The beloved describes his bride's footsteps in beautiful sandals — sandals being a separation to keep her feet from the filth of the ground. Her neck is like a tower of ivory, not stretched forward but carried with dignity. Her eyes are like pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim — and Heshbon was a Levitical city, a city of those who knew the Lord. Eyes of discernment, looking toward what is of the Lord. And her nose is like the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus — a great nose, meaning great discernment, the ability to sense when something has gone bad.

The nose that sniffs out whether something is still good or has begun to rot in the spiritual sense. The quiet sister who, after some conversation, says, There was no fear of God in that — she is behaving like a nose. She is discerning.

The Long List — and What Each Item Fails to Do

The list of adornments that will be taken away is extensive. It is worth observing that many of these items do not help with the proper use of the body — they actively interfere with it. Ornaments around the feet do not help the feet to walk. Bracelets do not help the hands to work — they get in the way. Nose rings do not help the nose to smell. Rings on every finger do not help the fingers to sew or embroider. A mirror, if used rightly, is for checking that one's life is regulated by the word of God — but used wrongly, it is a distraction, feeding the flesh with vanity and shutting down the proper occupation of time. In Exodus 38:8, the laver in the tabernacle was made from the mirrors of the women who served at the door. Those mirrors were donated and transformed into the vessel that cleansed the priests before they entered the sanctuary. That is what a mirror is for.

The story was told of men arguing about why Jews in the Bible were forbidden to eat pork. One said it was the bacon; another said it was the pork chops; a third said it was the pork roast. And each one ate the other parts and avoided only the one he named. They roasted the whole pig and ate every bit of it, because each one said, Oh, that part — I don't eat that. The list in Isaiah 3 calls for the same kind of honest confrontation. One cannot run down the list and say, Well, anklets I don't wear, but the headdress is different, and the mirror is fine. The whole list has a single theme. The prophet Isaiah already proved in chapters 1 and 2 that the inside was not good. This long external list is the symptom of that internal condition.

There is also within the list a connection with idolatry. The little suns and the crescents of verse 18 are connected with the worship of the heavenly bodies that was practiced in pagan religion in Israel's surroundings. Some of these ornaments were not merely vain but were directly tied to idolatrous religion. They were being worn as emblems of a competing allegiance. The list is not merely a catalogue of fashion but a catalogue of misdirected hearts.

The Opposites — What God Puts in Their Place

The judgment of God replaces each thing with its opposite. Instead of sweet perfume — rottenness. Instead of a girdle — a rope. Instead of well-set hair — baldness. Instead of a robe of display — sackcloth. And burning instead of beauty. These are not arbitrary reversals — they are the exposure of what was always there underneath. The display of wealth and beauty was covering the reality of spiritual poverty and filth. When the cover is removed, what is underneath is revealed.

Verse 25 then brings in the great crisis: Thy men shall fall by the sword, and thy mighty in the fight. These are the men belonging to these women. The men of Zion. And her gates shall lament and mourn, and she being desolate shall sit upon the ground. The city that was the city of solemnities, the city where the Lord had set his name, sits stripped on the ground. And all of this because of the departure that was spoken of in earlier chapters — they provoked the eyes of his glory.

The Scripture's Standard — and Its Application

There is a common notion that as long as the inside is right, the outside does not matter. The answer to that is: if the inside is right, the outside will be regulated by the word of God. That is not a difficult conclusion. If the word of God shapes us from within, then shamefacedness and sobriety and modest apparel will

follow. If those things are absent on the outside, the inside has not been shaped as it should. The prophet had already demonstrated in chapters 1 and 2 that Israel's inside was not good. The display of chapter 3 verses 16 through 24 is the symptom.

Proverbs 31 gives the true alternative. Its closing verse is the key: Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised. That is what Isaiah was writing for: not a list of prohibited items, but a heart toward the Lord that would regulate the outward expression of life. Beauty in the scriptural sense is found in the beauty of holiness, the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, the arms of faith and the wings of prayer — things that go together in a harmony with no discordant note among them.

Favour is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised.