



WHEN GOD REWRITES YOUR STORY!

ISAIAH 61:3

IT'S OKAY NOT TO BE OKAY!

Dr. Darryl T. Canady

FMBC | 11.16.25

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Title: When God Rewrites Your Story: From Ashes to Beauty

Sermon Summary: Dr. Canady shares his personal testimony of being called to ministry at age 26 at Friendship Missionary Baptist Church and returning at age 60 as a witness to God's faithfulness. This powerful homecoming sermon explores the transformative work of God in rewriting our life stories, even when we're not okay. Drawing from Isaiah 61:3, the message emphasizes that God specializes in divine exchanges—trading our ashes for beauty, mourning for joy, and heaviness for praise.

He emphasizes that it's acceptable to come before God with our brokenness, failures, and authentic selves rather than pretending to have it all together. God isn't looking for Superman; He's looking for Clark Kent—the real us, complete with flaws, failures, and fragility. The sermon celebrates God's restorative power, highlighting that He doesn't discard broken people but gives them another chance through grace.

The central truth here is profoundly liberating: it's okay not to be okay. The Hebrew concept explored here reveals that God wants to 'place on' us new garments, essentially giving us a complete wardrobe change for our souls. This isn't about surface-level happiness but deep restoration that moves us from destruction to beauty, from devastation to jubilation, and from depression to exaltation.

The message challenges us to bring our ashes, our mourning, our deadness—into God's presence, trusting that He does His best work with what we think is ruined. When we stop gazing in the rearview mirror of our past and start looking through the windshield of our future, we realize that our breakthrough is closer than it appears. This is the God who doesn't avoid dead things but specializes in resurrection, breathing new life into dreams, relationships, and purposes we thought were finished. The message culminates in the truth that when we praise God in our heaviness, He fights our battles and lifts us above what tried to destroy us.

Chapters

Chapter 1: From Destruction to Restoration

We explore how God exchanges our ashes for beauty, taking our broken past and restoring what destruction tried to ruin through genuine repentance and God's grace.

Chapter 2: From Devastation to Jubilation

We discover how God replaces our mourning with the oil of joy, breathing new life into dead places and reviving what seemed beyond hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 3: From Depression to Exaltation

We understand how God gives us a garment of praise for our spirit of heaviness, teaching us that praise is not emotionalism but theology in motion and our weapon in spiritual warfare.

Key Points:

- It's okay not to be okay—God wants the real you, not your pretense or performance
- God does His best work with our ashes when we come to Him with true repentance
- From Destruction to Restoration: God exchanges our ashes for beauty and crowns of honor
- From Devastation to Jubilation: God gives the oil of joy for mourning and breathes life into dead situations
- From Depression to Exaltation: God provides a garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness
- Praise is not emotionalism but theology in motion—it's our weapon and protection
- God specializes in resurrection and restoration, not throwing people away
- The Holy Spirit is essential, not optional—you can't do spiritual work without being spiritual
- Your rearview mirror is smaller than your windshield—focus forward, not backward
- When Jesus says yes, nobody can say no—God's approval supersedes human rejection

Scripture Reference:

- Isaiah 61:3 (Primary): "And provide for those who grieve in Zion to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and the garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair"

- Isaiah 61:1: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me"
- Romans 8:28: "All things work together for good for those who love God and who are called according to his purpose"

Stories:

- Personal testimony of being called to ministry on January 27, 1991, at Friendship Church after coming straight from the club scene
- Pastor Jones flying to Jacksonville, Florida to marry the preacher and his wife, then returning the same day to preach
- The founding of LIFE School (Living Intelligently Fulfilling Expectations) in Pittsburgh for Black boys, starting with sixth and seventh grade and now expanding to tenth grade
- The story of receiving divine confirmation through the song "When Jesus Says Yes, Nobody Can Say No" while seeking property for the school, hearing it twice at pivotal moments
- Walking around the school property 500+ laps (seven times like Jericho), taking six and a half minutes per lap
- The bus boy illustration—how God clears away the old mess and sets a fresh table with new settings
- Deacon Melvin Caldwell Sr. calling for prayer when the preacher accepted his call to ministry
- Miss Seeley's testimony: "I may be ugly, I might be this, and I might be that, but I'm still here"
- The wife's wisdom in distinguishing between Superman (false self) and Clark Kent (authentic self)

- A skeptical preacher who told him "You ain't down in Charlotte no more, they don't do that up here" regarding the school, but later honored him for listening to God instead

Scripture References from the Sermon

Explicitly Mentioned Scripture References:

1. **Isaiah 61:3** - "And provide for those who grieve in Zion to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes. The oil of gladness instead of mourning and the garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."
2. **Isaiah 61:1** - Referenced regarding the Spirit of the Lord being upon the speaker (anointing and appointment)
3. **Romans 8:28** - Alluded to: "All things work together for good for those who love God and who are called according to his purpose."
4. **Romans 8:31** - "If God be for you, who can be against you?"

Scripture Allusions and Song References:

5. **Psalm 150:6** - "Everything that have breath ought to go on and praise the Lord"
6. **Psalm 124:1** - "If it had not been for the Lord on my side"
7. **Amazing Grace hymn** - References the concept of being "once lost, but now found; was blind, but now I see"
8. **Romans 10:14-15** - Referenced in the sermon title Pastor Jones preached: "How can the people hear without a preacher? How can they preach without being sent?"

Relevant Verses Aligned with Main Themes:

Theme: God's Restoration

- **Joel 2:25** - "I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten"
- **Psalm 51:12** - "Restore to me the joy of your salvation"

Theme: Beauty for Ashes

- **Isaiah 61:1-3** (entire passage) - The foundation text for the sermon

Theme: God's Presence and Anointing

- **Psalm 23:5** - "You anoint my head with oil"
- **Acts 10:38** - God anointing Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power

Theme: New Life/Resurrection Power

- **2 Corinthians 5:17** - "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation"
- **Ezekiel 37:1-14** - The valley of dry bones (resurrection theme)

Theme: Praise as Warfare

- **2 Chronicles 20:22** - Praise defeating enemies
- **Psalm 22:3** - God inhabits the praises of His people

Theme: God's Unconditional Love

- **Romans 8:38-39** - Nothing can separate us from God's love
- **1 John 4:8** - "God is love"

Theme: Repentance and Turning

- **Acts 3:19** - "Repent and turn to God"
- **Luke 15:11-32** - The Prodigal Son

QUOTES:

It's okay not to be okay. I couldn't heal because I kept pretending I was not hurt.

It's not where you came from, it's where you're going. Too many of us are spending too much time gazing in your rearview mirror and not glancing through your windshield.

God does His best work with our ashes. God does His best work when you and I come to Him with the real us.

God is so sophisticated that He can separate what I do from who I am. There's nothing I can do to start God to love me and nothing I can do to stop God from loving me because God is love.

Praise is not something that you do when you feel strong. Praise is something you do so God can make you strong.

When Jesus says yes, nobody can say no. You cannot allow anybody to take away your dream and your vision.

God will exchange your ashes for beauty, your mourning for joy, and your heaviness for a garment of praise. He restores what destruction tried to ruin.

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5-Day Devotional: When God Rewrites Your Story

Day 1: Beauty for Ashes

Reading: Isaiah 61:1-3

Devotional: God specializes in divine exchanges. When you bring Him your broken pieces, your failures, and your ashes of regret, He doesn't turn you away. Instead, He performs the ultimate exchange—beauty for ashes. The Hebrew word for "give" in this passage means to place upon or dress someone in a garment. God wants to dress you in restoration, not in your past mistakes. He sees beyond your failures to the person He created you to be. Today, bring your real self to God—not your image, performance, or pretense. God is in love with the authentic you, flaws and all. His grace doesn't just clean you up; it restores you completely. Whatever destruction has touched your life, God can rebuild.

Reflection Question: What "ashes" do you need to bring to God today for Him to exchange with beauty?

Day 2: Joy for Mourning

Reading: Psalm 30:1-12

Devotional: Mourning represents the deadness in our lives—dead dreams, dead relationships, dead hope. You may look good on the outside while feeling dead on the inside. But God doesn't avoid dead things; He specializes in resurrection. The "oil of joy" God promises isn't mere happiness dependent on circumstances. It's supernatural peace that looks beyond your situation. Joy is internal; happiness is external. The world didn't give you this joy, and the world cannot take it away. When God's Spirit shows up in the dead places of your life, He breathes new life into what looked finished. Your midnight can turn into morning. God can

revive what was dying and breathe on dead dreams, giving you back the passion and purpose you thought were lost forever.

Reflection Question: What area of your life needs God's resurrection power today?

Day 3: Praise for Heaviness

Reading: Psalm 42:1-11

Devotional: The "spirit of heaviness" Isaiah describes means a flickering lamp, a dimming light, a soul on the edge of giving up. Perhaps your light has grown dim, and your flame is flickering. But God offers you a garment of praise—not a decorative scarf but a wraparound blessing, a covering, a shield of glory. Praise is not something you do when you feel strong; praise is what you do so God can make you strong. Praise is warfare, not noise. It's theology in motion, understanding who God despite what is you're going through. When you praise God down here, He fights for you up there. Praise is your protection and worship is your weapon. Even in depression, even when life tries to bury you, put on that garment of praise and watch God lift you above what tried to destroy you.

Reflection Question: How can you choose praise today, even in the midst of your heaviness?

Day 4: It's Okay Not to Be Okay

Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Devotional: The Christian journey isn't about pretending everything is perfect. You cannot heal if you keep pretending you're not hurt. God wants Clark Kent, not Superman. He wants the real you—the one with flaws,

struggles, and vulnerabilities. Peace doesn't mean you won't have problems; it means your problems won't have you. Being positive doesn't require pretending everything is good; it's seeing the good in everything. God is so sophisticated that He can separate what you do from who you are. There's nothing you can do to make God love you more, and nothing you can do to make Him love you less, because God IS love. When you come to Him with genuine repentance, with your true self, He meets you there and begins rewriting your story.

Reflection Question: Are you presenting your authentic self to God, or are you hiding behind a mask?

Day 5: When Jesus Says Yes

Reading: Romans 8:31-39

Devotional: When God says yes to your life, no person, circumstance, or devil can say no. Your story is not over. Your current chapter is not your final conclusion. The valley is not permanent, the pain is not your last paragraph, and grief is not your ending. God is still writing, still renewing, still restoring, still resurrecting, still reviving, and still making you over right now. If God is for you, who can be against you? Don't spend your time gazing in the rearview mirror of your past; glance through the windshield of your future. Remember, your rearview mirror is always smaller than your windshield. Your breakthrough is closer than what you're going through. It's not where you came from; it's where you're going. God has your back, and He's rewriting your story with beauty, joy, and praise.

Reflection Question: What vision has God given you that requires you to trust His "yes" over others' "no"?

Closing Prayer: Father God, thank You for rewriting our stories. Thank You for exchanging our ashes for beauty, our mourning for joy, and our heaviness for praise. Help us to bring our authentic selves before You, knowing that You love us completely. Strengthen us to praise You even when we don't feel strong, trusting that You are fighting for us. Remind us daily that our stories are not finished and that You are still working all things together for our good. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Small Group Guide: "When God Rewrites Your Story"

Opening Prayer

Begin by thanking God for His faithfulness and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your discussion and reveal truth to each person present.

Ice Breaker (5-10 minutes)

Share one thing from your past that you're grateful God has transformed or redeemed in your life.

Sermon Overview

Pastor Canady shared his testimony of returning to Friendship Baptist Church 34 years after being called to ministry there. He preached from Isaiah 61:3 about how God exchanges our ashes for beauty, mourning for joy, and despair for praise. The central message: It's okay not to be okay because God specializes in rewriting our stories.

Key Scripture

Isaiah 61:3 - "To bestow on them 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."

Discussion Questions

Section 1: From Destruction to Restoration

"God does his best work with our ashes."

1. What "ashes" have you brought to God? What areas of your life feel broken, wasted, or destroyed?
2. Why is it so difficult to bring our real selves to God instead of our "image" or "performance"? What keeps us from being authentic before Him?
3. Pastor Canady said, "God is in love with the real you." How does this truth challenge or comfort you? What would change if you truly believed this?
4. Discuss the difference between Clark Kent and Superman. Why does God want Clark Kent and not Superman? What does this mean practically for your spiritual life?

Section 2: From Devastation to Jubilation

"The oil of joy comes when the Spirit of God shows up in the dead places in your life."

5. What "dead places" exist in your life right now? (Dead dreams, dead relationships, dead passion, dead hope?) Be honest with your group.
6. What's the difference between happiness and joy? Can you share a time when you experienced joy despite difficult circumstances?
7. Pastor Canady emphasized we cannot do spiritual work without being spiritual. How dependent are you on the Holy Spirit in your daily life? What would increase dependence look like?
8. The sermon mentioned that mourning isn't just tears from a funeral—it's heaviness over something that has lost its spark. What in your life has lost its spark that needs God's oil of joy?

Section 3: From Depression to Exaltation

"Praise is not something you do when you feel strong. Praise is something you do so God can make you strong."

9. How does this definition of praise challenge your understanding of worship? When is it hardest for you to praise God?
10. The "spirit of heaviness" is described as a "flickering lamp" or "dimming light." Have you ever felt like your light was flickering? What helped reignite it?

11. "Praise is warfare, not noise. Praise is theology." What does it mean to praise God as an act of spiritual warfare? Share an example.
 12. Pastor Canady said, "When you praise God down here, God fights for you up there." How have you seen this principle work in your life or someone else's?
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Personal Reflection

13. Which of the three exchanges resonates most with you right now?
 - Beauty for ashes (restoration)
 - Joy for mourning (revival)
 - Praise for heaviness (lifting)
 14. What does "it's okay not to be okay" mean to you? How does this give you permission to be honest with God and others?
 15. Pastor Canady repeatedly said, "It's not where you came from, but where you're going." What past are you still looking at in your rearview mirror that God wants you to stop gazing at?
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Key Takeaways

- ✓ God specializes in resurrection and restoration - Nothing is too broken for Him to restore
- ✓ Authenticity over performance - God wants the real you, not your image or mask

- ✓ The Holy Spirit is essential, not optional - We cannot do spiritual work without being spiritual
 - ✓ Praise is warfare and protection - It's a weapon that breaks heaviness and invites God's presence
 - ✓ Your story isn't over - God is still writing, still restoring, still making you over
 - ✓ Grace doesn't just clean you up; grace restores you - God gives broken people another chance
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Practical Applications

This Week's Challenge:

Choose ONE of the following to practice this week:

Option 1: Bring Your Ashes to God

- Schedule 30 minutes alone with God
- Write down the "ashes" in your life (failures, guilt, brokenness)
- Pray through each one, asking God to exchange them for beauty
- Burn or tear up the paper as a symbolic act of release

Option 2: Cultivate the Oil of Joy

- Identify one "dead place" in your life
- Each morning this week, pray specifically for the Holy Spirit to breathe life into that area
- Journal what you notice changing in your perspective or circumstances

Option 3: Put on the Garment of Praise

- When you feel heaviness or depression coming, immediately begin praising God (out loud if possible)
- Create a "praise playlist" of songs that lift your spirit
- Commit to praising God for 5 minutes before complaining about any situation

Option 4: Be Authentic

- Identify one person you trust and share your real struggles (not just your highlight reel)
- Practice removing your "mask" in prayer—tell God exactly how you feel
- Stop pretending everything is okay when it's not

Prayer Focus

Pray for each person in your group:

- That God would exchange their ashes for beauty
- That the Holy Spirit would revive dead places in their lives
- That they would receive the garment of praise for any spirit of heaviness
- That they would have courage to be authentic before God and others
- That they would believe God is rewriting their story right now

Closing Scripture & Declaration

Romans 8:28 - "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Group Declaration: *"My story is not over. My chapter is not final. The valley is not permanent. The pain is not my last paragraph. God is rewriting my story right now. When Jesus says yes, nobody can say no!"*

Before Next Week

- Share your testimony with someone about how God has exchanged something in your life
 - Memorize Isaiah 61:3
 - Practice one of the weekly challenges above
 - Come prepared to share what God revealed to you
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Leader Notes

- Create a safe space for vulnerability—what's shared in the group stays in the group
 - Be prepared to share your own struggles and victories
 - Have tissues available—this is an emotional topic
 - Consider having communion together if appropriate for your setting
 - Follow up with anyone who seems particularly heavy or struggling
 - Celebrate testimonies of breakthrough from previous weeks
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Remember: It's okay not to be okay. God does His best work with our ashes.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Pastor Canady shares that 'it's okay not to be okay' - how does acknowledging our brokenness before God differ from pretending everything is fine, and why is authenticity so important in our spiritual journey?
2. The sermon emphasizes that God wants 'Clark Kent, not Superman' - what does it mean to come before God with our real selves rather than our polished image, and how might this vulnerability transform our relationship with Him?
3. Isaiah 61:3 promises beauty for ashes, joy for mourning, and praise for heaviness - which of these exchanges do you most need in your life right now, and what would it look like to bring that need honestly to God?
4. Pastor Canady testifies that God does His best work with our ashes - how have you seen God work powerfully through your failures, mistakes, or broken places rather than your strengths?
5. The message distinguishes between happiness (external) and joy (internal supernatural peace) - how can we cultivate this deeper joy that circumstances cannot steal, especially during difficult seasons?
6. The sermon states that 'praise is not something you do when you feel strong, but something you do so God can make you strong' - how does worship function as both warfare and weapon in our spiritual battles?
7. Pastor Canady emphasizes that 'it's not where you came from, it's where you're going' - how can we stop gazing in our

rearview mirror at past mistakes and focus through the windshield toward God's future for us?

8. The preacher shares that God can separate what we do from who we are - how does understanding this distinction help us receive God's unconditional love even when we've failed?
9. When Jesus says yes, nobody can say no - how have you experienced God opening doors that people said were impossible, and what vision might God be calling you to pursue despite opposition?
10. The sermon teaches that we cannot do spiritual work without being spiritual and that the Holy Spirit is essential, not optional - in what areas of your life are you trying to operate in your own strength rather than God's power?

A MIRACLE is when
everything around you
says it's too late or too
broken but God
steps in and says
"Watch me do what
only I can do."