

Acts 12

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[0 : 00] We're all drawn to beauty. That which is beautiful attracts us. God has created us with that capacity to delight in the beautiful. God has created a universe that is spectacularly beautiful and has created us, you and me, as men and women who are able to share in God's pleasure in the contemplation of His beautiful creation. The universe, creation, reflects its maker, and so we can deduce that God, the creator of all, is unimaginably beautiful.

If that which He has created is spectacularly beautiful, then it seems entirely reasonable. Indeed, it seems to be a necessary conclusion that the One who created it is beyond beautiful, beyond certainly the beauty that we can observe in His creation. What about us? What about you and me? Are we beautiful? I don't know if you consider yourself beautiful or not. Well, we are all created in the image and likeness of God, and so, again, it seems reasonable to conclude that we all reflect in some measure something of God's beauty. But how do we measure beauty? Can you measure beauty?

Is beauty measurable? Is it not the case, as is often said, and with some substance, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder? And measuring beauty becomes especially delicate and even complex in the case of men and women, the likes of us. How do we measure if somebody is beautiful or not? Beauty is multifaceted.

With respect to physical beauty, to physical appearance, I think we probably can agree that there are certain objective measures. Objective measures that I'm sure are in some, to some extent, culturally conditioned, but nonetheless measures that can determine who the beautiful people are.

But what about God? What does He find beautiful in us? The Apostle Paul uses language that paints a picture of Christ engaged in the work of beautifying His people, the church. In the fullness of time, we will be, and we quote the words of Paul, we will be a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. Holy and blameless. We will be beautiful. But what about today? That is Paul looking into the future. What about today? And what about each of us, not only together as God's people, but individually as sons and daughters of God, can we today be beautiful in God's sight? Now, in one very real sense, we are in union with Christ, all beautiful to the Father, because when He sees us, He sees Jesus.

[3 : 46] For we are in Jesus. We are in Christ. We are in the One who is the fairest of ten thousand. And so, at that level, in that very real way, when God looks down on us, He sees a thing of beauty. But it is also true that we are all to be involved in God's work of making us more like Jesus. And so, in that sense, increasingly beautiful in God's sight. Now, this evening, I want us to learn from a beautiful girl.

Beautiful, I have no doubt in the sight of God. And the name of this beautiful girl that we want to think about and learn from is Rhoda, a beautiful name for a beautiful girl. Now, on what grounds can I describe Rhoda as beautiful? We've met her, of course, in our reading just a few moments ago in Acts chapter 12, the servant girl who opened the door for Peter as he had been miraculously released from prison. We have this picture of her painted for us by her participation in Peter's coming amongst the disciples who were gathered there in prayer. But back to the question that I posed, how can we describe Rhoda as beautiful? Do we know what she looked like? Do we know the color of her eyes or the softness of her skin? Do we know how pleasing her proportions or how captivating her smile?

We know none of this. And yet I say she was beautiful, beautiful certainly in the sight of God. And why do I say she was beautiful? Well, let me suggest that Rhoda had beautiful hands, a beautiful heart, and beautiful feet. And let's think of each of these in turn. First of all, she had beautiful hands. And why can we call her hands beautiful? Because her hands were hands that served. What was Rhoda? Well, we're told what she was there in verse 13. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. She was a servant girl. Serving was her thing.

Serving was her life. And she had hands that served. Her beautiful hands had, I'm sure, opened and closed the door of that outer entrance on numerous occasions that evening. It wasn't the first time that she'd had to go and usher in the guests as they arrived, when Peter arrived in the middle of the night. Her beautiful hands had, I imagine, prepared and served food for the brethren as they gathered, worried, concerned, distraught at what was happening and at Peter's imprisonment, and they feared imminent death. And as they gathered to pray, her beautiful hands served them. Her beautiful hands had, I imagine, quieted, tired toddlers, allowing others to pray undisturbed.

I wonder, and of course, we don't know in what way she served that evening other than what we're explicitly told, but I wonder if her beautiful hands had even washed the disciples' feet as they gathered, that evening to pray for Peter. Rhoda served God's people. Her service was very practical and sacrificial. She did those jobs most of us just assume somebody else is going to do. There are so many of those tasks, so many of those jobs that need to be done, and many of us, well, we just assume somebody else will do them. There's a knock at the door. Well, who's going to answer the door? It happens in our homes, doesn't it? The telephone rings. Who's going to answer the telephone? The door, a knock on the door. Who's going to go? Well, Rhoda, she did those kind of jobs. I wonder if on that evening, I wonder if Rhoda ever thought as the sound of the door knocking yet again ringed through the courtyard,

[8 : 23] I wonder if she ever thought, I'd love to just rest and pray with the others. Wouldn't it be nice if somebody else went to get the door? I wonder if she thought that. But if she did, well, she quickly put it to one side, and she scuttled out through the courtyard and opened the door yet again and allowed the believers to come and gather to pray that evening. Her service was unassuming and largely unnoticed, I imagine. We have some indication of how she was viewed by most who were there, even though this was a group of believers in her or in their attitude to her, as it's described for us when she, in a moment, we'll be seeing this when she came with the news that Peter was at the door, she was dismissed.

It's just Rhoda. It's just the servant girl. What does she know? And no doubt her service also was met by many in that same spirit. Not really very important. But though her service was unnoticed by many, unnoticed even by the believers that she was a part of, it was not unnoticed by God. God could see and take pleasure in Rhoda's beautiful serving hands. And not only did God notice, but He ensured in the recording of these incidents that her name was recorded for us that she would be remembered, even by name. We know that personalities or characters such as Rhoda sometimes are presented to us in the Bible and we don't have a name. We're just told no name is given, but God has ensured that

Rhoda's name is recorded for us, that we can learn from her and maybe just be drawn to her that bit more as we have her name given to us. And evidence too of how God noticed her unassuming service.

So Rhoda had beautiful hands, hands that served. And of course, as we think about Rhoda, we do so as an encouragement and as a challenge to ourselves. And so the question that we pose is, well, what about your hands? Do you have beautiful hands? Hands that serve, hands that serve in practical and sacrificial and unassuming ways? Maybe you're conscious of how that is the case, and so often your service is unnoticed and unrewarded and uncelebrated. Beautiful hands, hands we could say like Jesus, who came not to be served, but to serve. So that's the first thing we can say about Rhoda, to justify our description of her as a beautiful girl, beautiful in the eyes of God. But the second thing we can say is that she had a beautiful heart, not only beautiful hands, but a beautiful heart. And again, the question could arise, well, can we see her hidden heart? How can we know? Well, her beautiful heart becomes visible in the early hours of that fateful night in the service that she renders to God's people.

We can say of her beautiful heart that it was a courageous heart. The believers are gathered there in this home in Jerusalem. They're still mourning the death of James that we have recorded for us at the beginning of the chapter, and in the light of his death, they quite reasonably fear for Peter's plight. If indeed they had any informers or any on the inside who would be able to explain to them what was about to happen, they would have known that even on the following day, the trial would begin, and the outcome was one that they had every reason to fear. And if Peter were to die, what would become of them if Peter were no longer to be with them? I wonder if they feared also for their own lives.

[12 : 53] It begins with James and now Peter, and when would it stop? Were their own lives also in danger? No doubt. They reasonably concluded that they were. Who would be next on the list? And as the believers pray into the wee small hours, suddenly there is this foreboding knock on the gate at the outer entrance.

Who could it be? Try and imagine yourself there in that home on this occasion. James has died. Peter is in danger. It's the middle of the night. Everybody who they could reasonably have expected to be there was there already. No doubt the last in arriving had arrived sometime before, we can imagine.

This is not the time of the evening when people come round and knock at the door. So imagine you're there. What would you think? Who might you imagine it could be? Might it not be that many of them, as they heard that knock, were wondering, could it be the temple guards? Could it be Herod's henchmen about to drag them all to prison? Who would go and see? They don't know, of course, but who would go and answer the door? Well, surely one of the leaders. That would be appropriate. Somebody to take the lead courageously. But who goes? It's Rhoda. Rhoda goes. Rhoda, the servant girl. Rhoda with the beautiful, courageous heart.

Well, before we think a little more of her beautiful heart, the question arises for us, what about you? Is yours a courageous heart in the service of your Lord? In this week that has begun and as it spreads out before you, will you courageously serve Him? Will you courageously speak of Jesus to those who know nothing of Him? Rhoda had a beautiful heart, a courageous heart, but not only a courageous heart, but a joyful heart. We know the story. We've read it, and of course it's familiar to us. She approaches the gate, and she hears the voice of Peter, and what does she do? We're told what she does there in verse 14. She was so overjoyed, she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, Peter is at the door.

She's overjoyed. Her heart is overjoyed at this turn of events. And this joy is the joy of seeing the evidence of answered prayer. She had been part of this gathering as God's people prayed for Peter's protection. And here, evidence, clear, dramatic, joyful evidence that their prayers have been answered, and she rejoices. Her heart rejoices at answered prayer. Her joy at the evidence of God's saving power. What a God who can rescue Peter from Herod's clutches. And so she rejoices in evidence of God's saving power. Her joy at hearing the voice of God's servant, of hearing the voice of Peter. That alone would have been a source of joy for Rhoda, I'm sure. So many reasons, connected reasons, that together explain what is described for us, that she was so overjoyed, so overjoyed. This is beautiful joy that springs from a beautiful heart. Well, again, I ask myself and I ask you the question, what about your heart? What brings you this kind of exultant joy? I think in significant measure, we can say that the measure of a man or of a woman is what brings us joy. What do we really celebrate? What brings us happiness and joy? And it's a helpful exercise, and perhaps a sobering exercise for all of us to ask ourselves that question, well, what are those things that really make me happy? And the answer to that question will give you a good indication of where you are and what is important to you. Well, for Rhoda, we're told what brought her overwhelming joy. Answered prayer, evidence of God's saving power, the voice of Peter. So, again, we can say that this girl, Rhoda, though we have no pictures of her, we know nothing of what she looked like, yet we can say confidently that she was a beautiful girl, with a beautiful heart, beautiful in the sight of God. So, beautiful hands, a beautiful heart, but one other thing that I want to mention, and that is that Rhoda had beautiful feet. Now, this may sound a little bit silly.

[18 : 06] Beautiful hands, well, you can see where I'm coming from, a beautiful heart, well, fair enough, but beautiful feet. Well, let's read what we find in the prophet Isaiah, and in chapter 52, in verse 7, a verse that I'm sure many of us are very familiar with. How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, your God reigns. How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, and not just on the mountains, but in the quiet of a Jerusalem dawn, the feet of those who bring good news are also beautiful. And Rhoda's beautiful feet carried her and her good news to the expectant disciples. She had gone to the door, and on this occasion, her going to the door, I'm sure, was not unnoticed. The very hour of the night, there would have been a hush and an expectancy. Who will she come back with? Who could it be? And so, in the midst of this expectation, Rhoda comes rushing back, her beautiful feet come rushing back with good news for all those gathered there. Peter is at the door.

Peter is alive. The Lord has heard and answered our prayers. Good news carried by Rhoda's beautiful feet. Well, you can almost hear the whoops of delight, the shouts of amen, and praise be to God at the hearing of this news. Or not. Sadly, not. You might have expected that would be the response, but that wasn't the response. What was the response of those who heard this good news brought by Rhoda?

Well, we're told, you're out of your mind. You're out of your mind. And you read that, and you think, well, that just is so harsh that that would be the way they would respond to Rhoda. She brings good news evidently, overjoyed at what she has heard, and yet dismissed in this very harsh way. You're out of your mind. And it's so harsh that you kind of imagine and hope that, well, maybe these were the harsh words of a maverick disciple. But that's not what the Bible suggests. That's not what the account records for us. For we read there in verse 15, you're out of your mind, they told her. The suggestion seems to be this was the considered opinion of all those who were there. Not, of course, necessarily all without exception, but that was the general view. She's out of her mind. It's just Rhoda. She's just a servant girl. What does she know?

And there is, of course, and it's very evident, it's not a great discovery, but there is a poignant irony in the scene that is painted for us here by Luke. Here we have the disciples gathered in earnest and persevering prayer for Peter's protection, for his rescue, for his deliverance. And yet they regard as out of her mind the servant girl who announces that their prayers have been answered.

And a lesson there certainly for us is that believing prayer is always to be recommended. And while we don't celebrate the unbelief of the disciples, for this is what it is, but while we don't celebrate the unbelief of the disciples, it is certainly true that Rhoda's beautiful and simple joy shines all the more brightly against the rather dark background of the disciples' unbelief. So, beautiful feet, and we can say also persevering feet, intent on declaring this good news.

[22 : 18] For how does Rhoda respond in the face of being dismissed? Well, we read there in verse 15, you're out of your mind, they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said it must be his angel. But particularly there what it tells us of Rhoda, when she kept insisting that it was so, despite being dismissed and mocked in effect, despite being her opinion and her news being rejected, she kept on insisting that it was so, that it really was Peter, that he really was alive, that he really had been rescued from his captivity. And there is, of course, and we don't need to spend much time drawing the obvious challenge for ourselves. What about our own feet? Do we have beautiful feet that bring good news to this city? Do we have those beautiful feet that vibrantly carry those who can declare our God reigns? And also, how quickly do we sometimes give up in the face of apathy or rejection or even mockery? Not so Rhoda, Rhoda with the beautiful feet. Well, our God is a beautiful God, and we are His sons and daughters and are privileged to share in our Father's likeness. We are called to and being molded by God into a thing of beauty. But in this work of God, we are called to cooperate.

And one of the tasks that we are given is to examine ourselves, that we would periodically examine ourselves in the light of God's Word. And this evening provides such an opportunity to examine ourselves in the light of God's Word, in the light of Rhoda's example that is recorded for us to encourage us and to challenge us. And so, I would invite you to do just that, to ask yourself these questions that we've been posing as we've been going through the sermon this evening. Do you have beautiful serving hands?

Do you have a beautiful, courageous, and joyous heart? Do you have beautiful feet that bring good news to an often incredulous and dismissive audience? Rhoda, a beautiful name for a beautiful girl, beautiful in the eyes of God. Let's pray.