



A Crown of Thorns:

Why I'm Exchanging
Princess-ship for
Discipleship



by *Laura Robinson*

I first started getting crowns at prayer retreats when I was far too old for them—that is, my freshman year of college. All of a sudden, it seemed that paper crowns were everywhere in the Christian community, distributed to women with a discussion about how we are all princesses. It was a candy-coated, conviction-free reminder I got every time I walked into a women's discipleship group, youth ministry, or Christian bookstore—you are a princess because your Father is a king.

I hadn't heard of *Captivating* yet or John and Stasi Eldredge's *Ransomed Heart Ministries*, the undisputed flagship of what I call the "Christian princess movement." So when I asked a friend about where all these crowns were coming from, she

directed me to that book. I borrowed a copy and read it in a crowded coffee shop in the middle of an Indiana winter. In it, I learned that, as a woman, I was designed by God to be a princess who longed to be romanced, reveal her beauty, and play a part in a grand adventure.

I'll be honest with you—it was a pleasant daydream. I think that an overwhelmed, tired college student would take any diversion from her coursework, and if the diversion showed up on a white horse with a sword, so much the better. It was, apparently, God's will. I packed my bag, a little encouraged and a little deluded, and stood up. Then I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror.

It was, I think, God's firm but kind reminder of the reality I was living in. In that mirror I saw who I really was—a fallen image-bearer of God in a room full of other fallen image-bearers, no better or worse or more worthy of love than any of them. The world did not need my beauty—in that moment, it needed me to throw away my coffee cup so someone else could relax with a book and hot chocolate at my table for awhile. And in order to be a good steward of a college education, I was not going on any fantastic adventures but would have to complete the long, icy walk back to my dorm room, heat something up for dinner, and work hard. My life isn't a fairy tale, but God never promised me one. He promised me a hope and a future. I'll take it.

I'm not a princess (though I suspect my dad will fight me on this point when he reads this). And I don't think it's cynical of me to say it. It's not bad news. It's great news, actually. God has called me—has called all of us—not to a life of childlike sentimentality, but to concrete hope and service in him through discipleship. In this way I encourage women, when they're tempted to think of themselves as royal, to think of themselves as royal priests (1 Pet. 2:9). Here are the present pitfalls of being a princess—and God's alternative, which is so much better.

A Princess is Proud

There's a reason why so many leaders of women's retreats hand out plastic crowns and tell women they are princesses. It is exactly what everyone wants to hear. In our fallen state, we like to be flattered and coddled, to be let off the hook of responsibility, to feel entitled, and so forth. A princess is the heroine of the story—the perfect, untouchable character. We *want* to hear that “the whole, vast world is incomplete without me. Creation reached its zenith in me” (*Captivating*, p. 25). A daughter of God, on the other hand, is a beloved, hard-working, and self-sacrificing servant of her Father. She imitates Christ by loving and serving others without self-entitlement.

You will never receive a plastic crown accompanied with a sermon about washing peoples' feet (John 13:14), selling all your possessions (Mark 10:21), and taking up your cross to follow Jesus (14:27). We are urged as Christians not to revel in human titles but to “value others above [our]selves” (Phil. 2:3). Christian discipleship is a hard and humble position. Princesshood is not—and God calls us directly away from its narcissism. The “princess” satisfaction that comes from having a title of value, without substance to back it up, is pride. The “servant” satisfaction that comes from working alongside God and doing his will is confidence, thanksgiving, and courage. As Christians, we should remind one another to “take the very nature of a servant” in following the example of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:7).

A Princess is Pretty

Now, before I write anything else, I want to be up front about this one thing: I don't think physical beauty is bad. I don't go

around glaring at women who wear makeup and cut their hair, and I don't think women need to start wearing tentlike dresses that fit like potato sacks. But I'm also convinced—and there's ample biblical evidence to support this—that beauty is not the defining or most important quality of a woman. Yet, if you get your cues about Christianity through princess culture, you'd never know it.

I have seen, heard, and read more Cinderella renditions than I can possibly count, and every Cinderella character seems to have one trait in common: she's pretty. Cinderellas can also be active or passive, bold or shy, rebellious or submissive, outspoken and strong or worn out and broken down. None of these qualities really matter because the only attribute she actually needs to get the prince is beauty. Christian princess culture has handily absorbed the “pretty princess” cultural phenomenon to the point that it's the underlying thesis for the Eldredges' *Captivating*. The Eldredges assert over and over again that the world longs to enjoy the beauty of a woman, and that every woman has it to offer.

I don't want to repeat the modern media's message that only a tiny handful of women are beautiful and that we must work like crazy to be beautiful ourselves. But, as a very wise friend of mine once said, you can't have a right answer to a wrong question. The answer to “Am I beautiful?” is not, “Yes, you are—all girls are beautiful.” The *question* is, “Should physical beauty matter so much?” and the answer is, “No.” It is unwise to get too interested in—or too enamored with—our own appearance. Satan, whose “heart became proud on account of [his] beauty” (Ezek. 28:17), is going to learn that the hard way in the end. On the other hand, Jesus wasn't actually attractive on earth, except for the Transfiguration and his resurrected body: “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isa. 53:2). If Jesus was an ordinary-looking man despite the fact that he was carrying in his body the unbelievable power of his incarnation, why do we think that our outward appearance is so important?

Beauty is a cultural idol that has slipped into the church under the guise of “princess Christianity,” when it, in fact, was a tripping point for Satan and was of no use to Jesus. It's a tremendous relief that Jesus has again lifted one more cultural pressure off us.

A Princess is Passive

Remember how Sleeping Beauty wins her prince? Hint: it's right there in her name. She's beautiful. And she sleeps. For years. Good fortune just comes to her after she's been lying there for awhile. Snow White sleeps too, waiting for someone to show up and remove her curse. Cinderella actually goes to a ball to get her man, but only with the princess paraphernalia provided by her fairy godmother. Rapunzel waits in a tower and functions as her own ladder for someone to rescue her. And so on.

Noticing a pattern here? Being a princess comes with the guarantee that you don't have to venture out and take risks—that someone else will rescue you from servitude, or a tower, or



well—the gift of work. The first couple was put in the Garden of Eden to “work it and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15). Solomon calls finding satisfaction in one’s work “the gift of God” (Ecc. 3:13). And Paul commands new Christians to “work, doing something useful with their hands, that they may have something to give to the poor” (Eph. 4:28).

By no means is this to be seen as an urging for self-conscious girls to work themselves into a panic in search of worldly approval—a problem that I think the “princess culture” has well-meaningly attempted to reverse. But let’s have no more nonsense about women revealing their beauty by sitting still and being passive. Our Father has blessed us with a future far better than that. I am sure that when I worked as a camp counselor I was, at times, unpopular with the girls. Whenever there were unglamorous chores to be done—carrying water, setting up tents, and so forth—I insisted that they do the same work that their male peers were doing. I was not doing this to punish them or because I loved them any less than the boys. I wanted them to know that not only should they undertake difficult tasks, but that they *could* undertake difficult tasks. God has called all of us—men and women—to be co-laborers of Christ on the earth, and he wouldn’t call us to this if he didn’t equip us with the gifts we need. A girl’s confidence should not come from a label that denotes value in title only. She has value because she has been “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). Works prepared in advance for us to do—what an indescribable gift!

a coma. Christian princesshood mirrors this pattern of passivity, as well. When explaining why you rarely see paintings of naked men in art museums, John Eldridge writes:

Men look ridiculous lying in a bed buck-naked, half-covered with a sheet. It doesn’t fit the essence of masculinity. Something in you wants to say, “Get up and get a job. Cut the grass. Get to work.” On the other hand...when artists have tried to capture the essence of Eve, they have painted her at rest (*Captivating*, p. 36–37).

I would venture that there is not much a woman can do lying in a bed buck-naked half-covered with a sheet either—besides “be sexually available,” of course, but that’s another issue. Stuck in the bed, she can’t get up and go out unless someone brings her some clothes. She can’t bring herself something to eat or drink; she needs someone to provide for her. She can’t travel, study, mother her kids, get a job, contribute to society, or serve the church. She’s stuck, because her beauty is best revealed if she just doesn’t move. She appears perfectly beautiful when perfectly passive.

Stationary princesses are rampant in the world of fairy tales. They are in a position of waiting to be rescued. That’s it. Thank God that he has a much higher calling for us! Certainly there is an element of rescue in the Christian story—God has saved us by the gift of his wonderful grace, with no assistance on our part (Eph. 2:5). But God has given us another gift as

A Royal Priesthood

Now, if this doesn’t sit well, remember that if our Father is still king, then we are still royal—all of us, men and women alike. Women are not princesses but “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” in order that they “may declare the praises of him who called [them] out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet. 2:9). Being a priest is a hard, high-responsibility calling that has been extended to every member of the church regardless of his or her gender. God has given us a new identity, and the hard work that comes with it is incompatible with the self-absorbed Christian culture of fairy tales, crowns, and princesshood.

When Paul speaks of love, he reminds us that when he grew up, he put childish ways behind him (1 Cor. 13:11). And when the elders worship at the throne of God, they take off their crowns and lay them before him (Rev. 4:10). Playing pretend is all right for little girls, but when we get to the throne of God, we too have to set aside our playthings and worship God, not ourselves. This is why I am choosing to be a priest and not a princess.



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