

Beauty and the Beast

The Book of Esther

By Dr. Liam Goligher

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Tenth Presbyterian Church
1701 Delancey Street
Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

Website: www.tenth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tenth

Keep your Bibles open at this chapter. It's a pretty straightforward chapter, really, in the book of Esther. It's a story, isn't it, of rags to riches. It's the story of somebody who wins a beauty pageant or something, Miss Persia 530. But actually, there is nothing romantic about this story. There is actually nothing positive about this story, well, there is, but it's kept under wraps for the time being because what we have in this chapter is a whole lot of moral ambiguity, a whole lot of the reality of life in the raw, a life in which women are often objectified, in which women are treated only on the basis of what they look like, in which girls are made victims and where men are predatory. That's really what this chapter is all about. It is an uncomfortable, dark story of abduction and abuse and this girl, Esther, is caught up in this story. What I want you to think about as you read this chapter is the sex trafficking, the sexual exploitation of young girls taken away from their homes and their families, taken away to some other part of the world and sold to become the toy of some man somewhere in some remote place. That's what this chapter is really about. Those are the emotions this chapter should really stir up within us. Those are the issues that unfold as this chapter progresses. And as we read it this morning, I want to say to you, God has a word for those who have been used, those who have been abused, those who have been misused. God has put this story in the Bible because he wants you to know that he knows what you have experienced; that he knows what's going on behind closed doors; that he knows the story you dare not tell for fear of the implications and repercussions for you. Your heavenly Father knows.

So that's really what the chapter is about but we're going to walk our way through it this morning and try and get our heads around the story as it unfolds. It begins with the King Ahasuerus. We are introduced to him in chapter 1. There in chapter 1 we saw him in a drunken stupor and here in chapter 2, we find him in the doldrums. So right at the very beginning of this chapter, we know some things about this man. He has been off on an unsuccessful military campaign against Greece. Greece is actually going to be the undoing of the Persian Empire, he doesn't know that at this point but he has gone westward. He has had this conflict with Greece that hasn't worked out very well. He has come back licking his wounds and he has come back to the palace. And as he's sitting in the palace, I wonder whether he goes into the banqueting hall, the banqueting hall that is so prominent in chapter 1; the banqueting hall where so many years before, perhaps four or five years before, he had been with all his men gathered and there in a drunken stupor

had made the worst decision of his life. And as he's sitting there alone in the banquet hall and as the weight of his own foolishness is resting upon him, somewhere in the background there is a radio playing Charlie Rich, "Hey, did you happen to see the most beautiful girl in the world? And if you saw her, was she crying? Say, if you happen to see the most beautiful girl in the world that walked out on me, tell her I'm sorry. Tell her I'm really sorry." That was the song. Anyway. I promised myself I wouldn't sing it for you and there you are, I broke my own promise to myself.

Well, that's the kind of image, isn't it, that here he is, here's a guy and he realizes the mistake he's made. Now, let's not get too romantic about this. One of the things we discovered in chapter 1 was this man actually was thinking about how absolutely spectacularly beautiful Vashti was. We discovered in chapter 1, here was a man who could not see beyond her appearance or her looks. Like everybody else around the court of King Ahasuerus here, he had objectified women. Women were there to look good and to be available when it was necessary. He expected the women in his life to do precisely what he expected the women in his life to do whenever he wanted them to do it. It came as the most massive shock to this man when one woman, the one woman who shared his throne with him, that woman stood up and said a word that King Ahasuerus was not used to hearing, she said no to him. (Why do you say that? You say to him later on when you get home. You pick your moment.) She said no to him and in this saying of no, Ahasuerus was faced with this, the character of a woman who he thought was amazingly beautiful but he didn't know her at all. He did not know what her character was like. He did not know she had it in her to stand up and risk everything to say no to the humiliation, the abject humiliation that he was proposing there in chapter 1. Vashti is, in fact, the first heroine of the story and her removal from office leaves the way open for the emergence of the second heroine in this story.

So here he is, he's sitting and he's down and depressed and his young men who are very sensitive, they know their king, they know exactly how to approach him, they come and they come with this proposal. They say to the king, "This is what you need to do. We know exactly the cure for your ailments. What you need to do is you need to appoint officials in all of the provinces of this kingdom and gather together girls that are qualified at three levels: they're beautiful, they're young and they're virgins." That's repeated in verse 3 and again in verse 4, the end of verse 2 rather and then again in verse 3. They are beautiful, they are young and they are virgins. Beautiful kind of speaks for itself. Young, they were probably in their teens; somewhere between the age of 13 or 14 up to about 18 years of age, that kind of spread. They were young and they were virgins. That's what they have in mind. That is their plan, their big plan that they give to the king, and the outcome of that plan is that the one that pleases the king should become queen instead of Vashti. So no wonder this dirty old man at the end of verse 4 is pleased. The king is pleased and he decrees that this should happen and he sends out his men into his provinces in order to round up all these girls.

Now, this is an amazing action that takes place here. What you need to understand is that none of these girls is applying for a contest. None of them have sent in their resume to Miss Persia or...I'm forgetting the show that I was going to refer to there. But anyway

nobody has applied for this job. Persia's got talent, that's what I'm thinking of. And nobody has applied for this and these girls don't have an option. Soldiers march into town. They order all the young girls out. They pick out the ones that look good. They herd them all together and they take the best 400 in all of the provinces of the Persian Empire and they march them back to Susa to the capital city under armed guard.

These children are abducted. These children are taken by force. The first thing we see in this chapter is here is an abuse of power in order to serve ungodly ends. That's what's going on in the story. There is nothing good that you can say about what's going on in this chapter. Here is a king driven by his own desires agreeing to a policy by which husbands and wives, parents who have got dreams for their daughters, great dreams of their daughters going off to university or getting a great job somewhere, or getting married and having a family and so on, are taken out of their lives; they are abducted before their very eyes and are taken to the king's palace to be sequestered. That's what they would be, sequestered for the rest of their lives, to live in the harem away from any other watchful eyes, away from normal life and friends and family, kept there under guard for the rest of their earthly life only to serve as toys when wanted of the emperor king. It's an atrocious, it is a demoralizing story. It's a degrading story. It is human beings being degraded by power and by authority. Let there be no doubt about what's going on here. These girls are taken.

Then no sooner are we told that this is the plan and that this is what they go on to do, then in verse 5, there is immediately a disruption in this story. It comes suddenly. In the Hebrew, it comes very suddenly in verse 5. Without any expectation, there was a man, a Jew. The nouns come before the verb. A Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, and he came from the tribe of Benjamin just like King Saul did; he came from that tribe and here he is, this Jewish man. We're not expecting this. Here is a book that doesn't mention God but suddenly there's a mention of God's people, the Jews. The very mention of that word brings to the mind of any biblical reader the memory that God had promised way back in the book of Genesis that it would be through Judah, the father of the Jews, it would be through the tribe of Judah that the Messiah would come. It was through the tribe of Judah that God was going to send the king who would reign forever, to whom all the nations of the world would be drawn and through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. A Jew in Susa.

Now, let me tell you a bit of the history here. Well over 100 years before, the Babylonians had attacked and leveled Jerusalem and Judah and had transported the people there. You can see that actually in the language that is used in verses 5 and 6. Let me tell you what it says literally in the original, "A man, a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai who had been exiled from Jerusalem, among the exiles who were exiled with Jeconiah, the king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had exiled." There you have I think four references to what? To exile. This man wasn't even born when it happened. He was simply a seed in his grandfather and mother's life and a thought, a twinkle in their eye at the time they were taken, but he was born in exile. He may have been in his 40s by this time. Esther is only in her early or mid teens. He had been born there. The very reference to this man and to his exile reminds us that here were

people who had found themselves away from the land of God, away from the temple of God, away from the people of God and here they are living, living in a foreign land and yet they are called Jews because these people had maintained their integrity as followers of the Lord God.

So not only do you have Mordecai introduced as an exile, but you have this girl, Esther, introduced by her Hebrew name, Hadassah, which means the myrtle tree. And when you take her name Esther and you bring that into the Hebrew it means "I have hidden myself." That may very well be a hidden hint that the hand of God is going to be at work in the life of this Hebrew girl. So here's a covenant family of believing people in the midst of the ungodliness of Susa and the Persian Empire of that time. Here are people who like us are living an exiled life. Here are people who had never been cut off from the covenant of promise or from the Commonwealth of Israel no matter how far away they were from the land and their fellow people, and what the text is saying to you is this, "Keep your eyes on these people. Keep your eyes on Esther. God has got something in store for us and for the world through Esther." Esther is going to be key and Mordecai as her support is going to be key to the unfolding story. Esther's two names, her Persian name and her Hebrew name, remind us of the challenge that faces the people of God always as we live in two kingdoms, living in the kingdom of God and living in the kingdom of this world. Here is this Esther and she is swept up into the maelstrom of sorrow and responsibility that she could never have imagined or dreamed.

So with 400 of them, she is taken away. She is taken out of her own life. Here she was, she had been orphaned, she had been adopted by Mordecai, and we are told something about her. We're told something that she has something that the other girls didn't have. You know, they came looking for girls that were "lovely to look at." Well, Esther, she qualified. She was lovely to look at but she qualified in another way as well, she also had a beautiful figure. She had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at so she had an extra thing going for her. Now, do you notice the objectification of women in this text? It's all over the place in this book. This is what's happening in our society today. This is even what's happening in the church today. What's happening today is that women are simply regarded by how they look. There's nothing wrong with looking good. That's okay. It just makes it more pleasant for everybody else but that...I'm kidding. But that is not how you define people. This is repeated so often in this book that you are meant to see how shallow superficial and empty that assessment of a human being is. That's all these guys were interested in. That's the only take home they got when they saw this girl: she has a great figure and she's good to look at. Period. That was all that got their attention. That is all that is recorded of what they thought when they saw her. She was going along with these other girls, "We will take them and we will get them ready for a night with the king." There was the story in a nutshell. That's what she was taken for.

So she's taken with the others. She is taken back to the temple and put through this regimen of being prepared for the night with the king. Now, you can see the moral ambiguities there going on in this story here. Where is this going to end up? It's going to end up in the king's bedchamber and so for a whole year, these girls are given the beauty treatment. They are literally bathing in the cosmetic oils and so on that are described

here. Every day they have to take baths in this smelly perfumed stuff. Can you imagine how they stunk? It would smell like the perfume area in Macy's all the time, really intensely. They were bathing in this stuff. They were given the beauty treatment but that was not all they were being given, they were being brainwashed. The fear of death was being put into them. By the time that big night came, those girls had no option. There was no choice.

I read somebody this morning. I got up early this morning and as I always do and I thought I'll read somebody else, a new book that was out on Esther that I hadn't looked at. I looked at it, I read the chapter this morning. If I could have got the guy who wrote this book, I would have got him against the wall and I would have hurt him, seriously hurt him, because what he was saying was this: Esther is a seriously compromised young woman. She did not have the courage to take a stand against the king. This girl was a victim. She had no option. The abuse of power in that context was so great, the forces against her were so many, by the time that year of being prepared or cultivated, coached was over, there was absolutely no way out for that girl. No way out. You read these people and they say the heroes in the story are of questionable morality. She had no choice with what happened to her. No choice. It is always the response of small minded people that they want to find a way to blame the victim rather than the victimizer, the abused rather than the abuser. Here is this girl and she is put into this position and I'm so angry with this guy this morning that I read. He's saying there is no way we can exonerate her. He says, you know, because she could have stood like Daniel and said no. No she couldn't. Daniel had worked his way through the system and by the time he said no he had a very high royal position in the palace and he was a man and he had men friends around him to give him moral strength and all the rest of it. Here's a girl on her own in her teens. She is taken away from her home and her family. She is cultivated and prepared for this one night stand with the king that will determine her future. She is thrown into the lions. This is a story of beauty and of beast, a real beast, not the Disneyesque one, and in this story, we see people in power abusing their power to get their sexual thrills through a sheer act of abuse.

Do you think that doesn't happen? In one church I was in, there was a lady when I got to know her she was in her early 40s. She was married, she had children. She was in a profession, a very prominent profession in her own right. When she was 13, an elder in her church would come round, started coming around every Friday to do a "Bible study" with her. Her parents were elsewhere in the house and she was in the front room. Starting at the age of 13 she was raped every Friday afternoon until she left home at 18 to go to university. Now she was in her 40s. Her daughter had turned 13 and the horrific reality of what had happened to her that had been suppressed over the years began to pour out. She tried to ease the pain. When I found out, I went to see her parents. I confronted them with the reality of their daughter going through this. They denied it. They denied everything. They tried to exonerate the man who had done this. They wouldn't believe her. They may even actually have known what was going on. This happens. This happens. This abuse of power happens to real people in churches and if it has happened to you, sister, if it has happened to you, we will believe you. We will believe you. We will not try to exonerate your abuser. We will believe you.

Well, you know the amazing thing is that in spite of this happening to this girl, God gave to her the wisdom that she needed to survive. I think it's amazing that going through all of this there is Mordecai who tries to be a kind of one thing that hasn't changed in her life. He goes by every day, we're told. At great risk, he runs the risk of going anywhere near the harem. You can imagine that that was a place that was a no-go area for any men in the royal palace. He gets as near as he can so that he can find out how she's doing every day. There was nothing else he could do. The king had all the power. The king had all the authority but here's somebody who does what he could to encourage her. And because he didn't want things to go even worse for her, he encouraged her not to say anything about being Jewish. Well, this guy I read this morning, he had something to say about that too. She wasn't prepared to confess her faith. Oh, my goodness me. This guy really needed to be knee-capped or something.

She's on her own, for goodness sake. She's a teenager. She is surrounded in an armed camp by soldiers. She didn't stand a chance and the wisdom that she had not to say anything was a wisdom come from God because God does give us wisdom and sometimes the way of wisdom is not to say anything until it's the appropriate time. You know, there is advice given by the Apostle Peter to women, wives, who have unbelieving husbands. It's good advice. You should read it sometime because it says this, "Win them without words. Win them without words." Why? Because if you are in close proximity to somebody, if you are in a close personal friendship with people or in a marriage or at home with parents or siblings who are not Christians, you rabbiting on all the time about Jesus is really going to get up their nose and make them even more hostile to Jesus. In close relationships like that, you're better to wait and Peter goes on to say this actually further down in that chapter, he goes on to say this, "Wait until you're asked and then be ready to say something. Wait until you're asked." And Esther was given the wisdom to wait.

Now, we ask ourselves a question: what is going on in this story? Isn't it remarkable that there were Jews in Susa? You see, 50 years before the story that we are reading about, 50 years before, a Persian king called Cyrus had issued a decree saying that all the Jews who had been taken into exile could go back to Jerusalem and Judah and most of them went back. This guy I read this morning, of course, he had something to say about the ones who didn't go back, about how disobedient they were and all the rest of it, but hey, in the providence of God, there were some Jews left in Susa and we're going to find out as the story unfolds, that is key that there should be someone who knows about the Jews, who cares about the Jews, who has the interest of the Jews in their heart there in the palace at a crucial moment when they were needed to be there. In other words, this little family who had stayed on are there because of the providence of God, the good government of God. They were there because God was going to use them. Isn't that interesting, that in this heart of the Empire there was somebody who had on their mind and heart the interest of the Jews in that remote province of the Empire way to the west and would be there when God needed them to be there.

Well, what do we learn? We learn that God can use even his enemies to serve his own ends. Nothing is going to happen to this girl, this whole process and then going into the king and all the rest of it, it seems to be unmitigated disaster except there are two little highlights I think in the story that suggest that God was with her. On the one hand, she gains the favor of the man in whose custody she was held and that was a good thing. I don't think the guy was anymore impressed by anything other than the fact that she was good to look at and had a good figure and was nice, but nonetheless God gave her favor in his eyes. Then when the night came and she has to go into the king, the king delighted in her. Now, I don't know how far that went either but nonetheless it made an impression and she becomes the queen in the providence of God.

God can even make the wrath of men to praise him. Caiaphas can make his pronouncement, "One man must die for the people." It's a political decision but actually he was going to die for the people, all the people, people all over the world, and bring them salvation. Joseph, the one with the multicolored coat, that one. Joseph who was taken down to Egypt, you remember through all the trials and tribulations he went through, is raised up to become the Prime Minister of Egypt so that he is there at the right time. That's what's going to happen to this girl. She's going to be there at the right time. Was she distressed? Of course she was. Was she oppressed? Of course she was. Was she abused? Yes she was. Was she taken and physically used by this man? Yes she was but God was going to overrule all of that pain, all of that shame, all of that disgrace. God was going to overrule it to serve a bigger purpose.

As we read our story, we realize that God can use the weakest of his servants for the greatest of his works. The author wants our eyes to be riveted on now Esther. She now takes center stage. She is going to be the one now that is going to absorb our attention as this book unfolds. She starts out as an orphan. She's an orphan, a woman and a Jew. That's a combination which in that day and that location was calculated to put you on the margins and yet God was going to bring her into the center of stage. She had been taken, abducted, forced into a life of sex slavery. She has no power or influence but God is going to overrule that and make her the queen.

How does the kingdom of God get built? Well, it's not through the mighty and the strong. It's not through the people who are the celebrities in our Christian culture. It's not through those who have access to the speakers and the megaphones, who have access to the public notice. They're not the ones who really build the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is really built up by the small, by the people that don't seem to matter as far as the big people are concerned. God has taken the weak things and the despised things and the things that are nothing to bring to nothing the things that are. That's what's working in this story because the hearts of kings are in the Lord's hands.

As we look at this story this morning, we regret the unmerited fate of Vashti being pushed aside after her courageous stand. We regret, we lament the carnal desires of a king. We deplore the treatment of these young women as they are cultivated to feed a king's vanity and lust. But we're also amazed that in the mess, God gave this girl wisdom,

grace, in an impossible situation, in an abusive situation, to gain the favor of the beast and from that place of favor to serve when the opportunity came.

Now, why is it important that Esther is introduced to us as a Jew? I've already given you a hint. It was through the Jews that the Messiah was to come. It was through Esther that the Jews in the Empire were going to be spared annihilation. If they had been annihilated, guess who would not have come? The one who was born of a Jewess. The one who in the fullness of time came as the Jew, the perfect Jew who said, "Salvation is of the Jews." Esther has a place in the salvation history of the world. This girl, abducted, abused, has a place in God's great catalog of faith because even though she could not help herself, even though she could not get herself out of her circumstances, God could use them, God could use her for his great purposes.

Now, that does not mean, of course, that from a human point of view it would not have been better had she been rescued. Of course it would and I hope nobody thinks from this, that nobody takes from this seriously any idea that you should stay in an abusive relationship because God might use you there. That is not the lesson I want you to learn from this. If you are being abused in any way in your relationship, you tell us, we will believe you. We will believe you and we'll tell the police. That's what we should do. You don't take it. Don't take it from him because you're made in the image of God and you're beautiful to God and he cares about you. He cares about you and the big lesson here is that as we look out for one another and as we pray for one another and as we preach the Gospel to one another and as we learn from the Gospel how it is that God takes us and he uses us for his glory, so the kingdom of God can work even in terrible places.

Let's pray together.

Father, we pray this morning as we did earlier for all those little girls who are being taken away from families and homes and are being kept and prepared for the kind of abusive relationship that these girls had with the king. Lord, we pray for their deliverance. We pray for those who are living in abusive marriages, for those who are being used and abused by boyfriends. We pray that you would give them the courage to cry for help and we pray that the right people would hear that cry and help them. We pray above all that when we find ourselves in difficult circumstances, we might believe that God in his mercy is always there even when we can't see him. And we pray that above all you would bring us to Jesus who alone can comfort our hearts and lift us up and make us strong. Lord, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.