

The Blessing and Curse of Beauty

If you had or have a loving mother, it doesn't matter what she looks like, to you she's incredibly beautiful, right? So, what is beauty? We come on this Mother's Day Weekend to chapter 2 of this ancient book where we are introduced to the main character, a young woman named Esther. She is described in verse 7 as being:

...lovely in form and features... (Esther 2:7)

An old Jewish commentary on this book says that Esther was so beautiful, "...she made the other girls look like monkeys!" So, what is beauty? How should it be used? For what purpose did God create it? These are the questions before us on this Mother's Day weekend. First, in Esther 2 we need to see...

I. The Power of Beauty

William Shakespeare wrote:

Beauty itself doth of itself persuade, The eyes of men without an orator. i

Nearly 400 years later, the old rock group, The Eagles, sang:

City girls just seem to find out early, how to open doors with just a smile... ii

Beauty, in any form, has power. You climb up a ridge and get to an overlook and go, "Whoa!!!! Look at that!! That's incredible!!" Or have you ever been snorkeling or scuba diving in the tropics? Liz and I had the chance to do that once on an anniversary trip. We nearly drowned because these fish would swim by with these fluorescent colors and we'd go, "Whoa!!! That's amazing!!" We were always the last ones back to the boat because we just couldn't get enough.

Beauty in any form motivates us. It moves us. That's because beauty has a built-in power. But human beings are the only ones affected by this power. Have you noticed that? Liz and I like to hike with our dog, Mason. But when we get to a beautiful overlook, Mason is not impressed. Seriously! He never wants to just sit and watch the sun set. I don't know what's wrong with him! Is your dog like that? And cats are even worse!! Have you ever tried to get a cat to appreciate a flower arrangement? No, it's only people to whom God has given the ability to be moved by beauty.

Now, in our story, we're introduced to this young woman, possibly even a teenager, named Esther. She is physically very beautiful. This fact is very important to the outcome of the story because it is her beauty that gives her power. There's nothing else in her life at that time that could do that. She wasn't wealthy; in fact, she was poor. She was an orphan. She didn't have any royal blood in her; she was the daughter of immigrant parents. She wasn't even Persian! But because of her beauty, she had the power to open the door of the palace.

This means that Esther shared a characteristic that several other Jewish women of influence had. Eve, Sarah, Abigail – all were described as beautiful women. Some used their beauty-power for good and others used their beauty-power for selfish and even evil ends. Do you know the story of Abigail in I Samuel? She is described as "...an intelligent and beautiful woman." (I Sam. 25:3) She used the

power of both her intelligence and her beauty to prevent King David from striking down her husband in a revenge killing.

Eve was so beautiful that when Adam first saw her, one commentator says that his first words were spoken to her, "...in ecstasy!!" But how did Eve use the power of her beauty? She used it to convince Adam to join her in disrespecting and disobeying God. Adam should have and could have saved her from using her beauty-power for evil, but he didn't and we all have suffered because of it. (Gen. 3:1-19)

Did Esther know she was beautiful? Beautiful women KNOW they're beautiful! They know by the way they're treated. First, for Esther, an edict had gone out to bring "beautiful girls" into Susa. Esther was taken. When she got to Susa, she was separated from the other "beautiful girls" and given special treatment because it says, "***The girl pleased him*** (the head of the harem) ***and won his favor.***" (Esther 2:9) This all happened because of the power of her beauty.

Yes, beauty has power attached to it. Is that still true today? In a recent Harris poll, guess what percent of American women said they would change something about their looks if they could? 99%. Why? They want more power.

International photographer, Zed Nelson, in his book "Love Me," writes: "Beauty is a \$160 billion-a-year global industry. Body improvement has become a new religion... Banks offer loans for plastic surgery. American families with annual incomes under \$25,000 account for 30% of all cosmetic surgery patients." ⁱⁱⁱ

We can shake our heads at these statistics, but why do they do it? Is it just vanity? Perhaps for some, but for most it's because they know that beauty has power to open doors and they want that power.

But power isn't the only attribute of beauty. There's also a darker side. That side is:

II. The Pain of Beauty

The actress Halle Berry is considered by many to be one of the most beautiful women in the world today. Listen to what she has to say about beauty:

"Let me tell you something – being thought of as a beautiful woman has spared me nothing in life. No heartache, no trouble. Love has been difficult. Beauty is essentially meaningless and it is always transitory." ^{iv}

While I don't agree with Ms. Berry that 'beauty is essentially meaningless,' I do agree that it is often accompanied by pain. Esther's going to Susa was not voluntary. Verse 8 says she was "...taken to the king's palace." This is an abduction not an audition. Which introduces us to how vastly different life was in a dictatorship in the fifth century BC from our democratically free society today. These young women like Esther had no rights and no court to hear their grievances. They were the property of the king. Many commentators believe that all of these virgin girls (possibly as many as 1,000) were not taken to participate in a "beauty contest" like "Miss America," where they would be paraded before the king and then asked a few silly questions. No, they were taken, every one of them, to satisfy this evil king's sexual desires. Verse 14 describes the basic plan:

In the evening she (one of the girls) **would go there** (to the king's palace) **and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She**

would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name. (Esther 2:14)

This was not “Cinderella meets Prince Charming!” Yes, the girls who weren’t chosen as queen still lived in the luxury of the palace, but as another commentator has said, this was “more like widowhood than marriage.” No more contact with family, no long walks with childhood friends, possibly not even any children to raise. It was a “plush but pointless imprisonment.”^v How did Esther end up here? It was her beauty, her gift, that had dragged her there. The gift of beauty can become for some an unbearable weight.

In his book, *Wild at Heart*, John Eldredge says that there is a question that every boy and every girl must answer before they will see themselves as a man or a woman. But the questions are very different. Boys do not see themselves as men until they can answer the question, “Do I have what it takes? Am I powerful enough to face the challenges this world offers?” And for most of us men, if our fathers didn’t answer that question for us in the affirmative, or worse, if they continually said we DIDN’T have what it takes, we’ll spend the rest of our lives trying to prove that we do by taking greater and greater risks or by slithering away to live in a cave because we’re convinced we aren’t a real man.

But the deep cry of a young girl’s heart is different. Her question is, “Am I lovely? Does anyone delight in me? Am I worth fighting for?” If you don’t believe me, go to Fantasyland at Disney World and look at the costumes the little girls are wearing. Are they dressed like Wonder Woman? Maybe a few, but by the hundreds they’re dressed like little princesses. And if a girl is not convinced by someone before she is in her mid-teens that she IS lovely and delightful, that she IS worth fighting for, she will spend the rest of her life looking for love in all the wrong places until someone answers her central question.^{vi}

Esther in this book is not desperately searching for love. She’s nonchalant about even pleasing King Xerxes. (Esther 2:15)

When the turn came for Esther (the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king’s eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her.

Please note the word “favor.” It’s the Hebrew word *chen* (pronounced ‘khane’). We are told in this story that Esther “won the favor” of people on three different occasions. The Hebrew word picture is that of a fence or a wall surrounding and protecting one’s life. It’s to be seen as being “precious” to someone. In verse 9 it says that the first time Esther met Hegai, she “...won his favor.” In verse 15, when everyone saw her just before going to meet the king, she “...won the favor of everyone who saw her.” And the first time the king saw her: (Esther 2:17)

...she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins.

How was it possible that she won everyone’s “favor” at their first meeting? Was it her incredible physical beauty? No, I don’t think so. I think they saw something else, something deeper.

There’s an old Jewish tradition that says that in the beginning, in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve sinned, goodness and beauty were unified. In other words, if something was beautiful, it was always also good. And if something was

evil, it was always ugly. This meant that nowhere was there any deception in all creation. You could tell what was good and evil just by looking at it.

The reason that God told Adam and Eve to stay away from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was because that is where Satan hung out, the Great Deceiver. He was able to take things that were bad and make them look good and take things that were good and make them look bad. When you think of it, that's exactly what he did with Eve. First, he tempted her to think of God's one single rule not as something good, but as something bad; something God was withholding from them. Secondly, he showed her forbidden fruit and what did it look like to her?

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was GOOD for food and PLEASING to the eye, and also DESIRABLE for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. (Gen. 3:6)

According to this Jewish tradition, it was at this point that beauty and goodness were separated. Everything beautiful was no longer always good, and everything good was no longer always beautiful. That curse of deception is still with us today, is it not? ^{vii}

Because of that separation, today, being beautiful is no longer always a good thing, always a blessing. And also, things that are homely or even ugly are not always bad or evil. In other words, in this world, we can't trust our eyes. This is illustrated perfectly in the episode recorded in verses 21-23. Two of the king's officers conspire to assassinate the king! Mordecai discovers the plot, informs Queen Esther and the plot is foiled. The ones dressed in uniforms of loyalty (the soldiers) were really the enemy.

This then is why pain is sometimes associated with beauty. When sin entered the world, it separated beauty and goodness. Now, all we can see is the outward beauty of a person but what they are on the inside is hidden from us. All this means then that we must consider this final question...

III. What Is the Purpose of Beauty?

Beauty of any kind is by nature attractive. We don't even have to agree on a definition of what beauty is. By our own experience, when we see something that we call "beautiful," what do we do? We move towards it! We're attracted by it. The *Song of Solomon* is a tribute to beauty! A man and woman who see each other as beautiful spend the whole book chasing after each other! Why? That's the effect beauty has on us! God created beauty to do that! Why? Ultimately, so that one day, when our eyes are opened, when the Spirit of God removes the deception from before us, on that day we will be ATTRACTED TO HIS BEAUTY!! The Psalmist describes it:

**One thing I ask of the LORD,
this is what I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life, (Why? Why does he want to be there?)
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD... (Ps. 27:4)**

But don't stop there! No, this is good. This is very, very good to have eyes to see the beauty of the LORD. But watch this! He's not finished when we get to that place of truth. No, look at Zechariah 9. Here the prophet is talking about the coming Messiah. First, coming into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, the Palm Sunday

prediction. But then, later in the same chapter, he's talking about a second coming, THE second coming! He writes:

**Then the LORD will appear over them;
His arrow will flash like lightning.
The Sovereign LORD will sound the trumpet...
The LORD their God will save them on that day
As the flock of his people.
They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown.
How attractive and beautiful they will be! (Zech. 9:14, 16, 17a)**

God created beauty first to attract us to Him and secondly, to make us attractive, to make us beautiful to others. What was it that made Esther so attractive that when people met her for the first time, she "won their favor"? Do you see it? It wasn't her physical beauty!! No, it was something on the inside of her. It was something shining through, something that sparkled "like jewels in a crown." It wasn't a beauty from the physical beauty treatments because it was working BEFORE she even got the beauty treatments. The apostle Peter describes what it was when he instructs us about two kinds of beauty – inward and outward:

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. (1 Peter 3:3, 4)

All women here today, do you see here the answer to your life questions? Does someone consider you lovely? Yes, your Father in heaven who sees beneath your outer shell. How attractive and beautiful you are in His eyes! Does someone take delight in you? Yes, the God who created you shouts to you in Isaiah 43:

**Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name;
you are mine. (Is. 43:1)**

Does anyone consider you worth fighting for? Yes, His name is Jesus. He fought Satan for your beautiful soul! Dear daughter, you can stop your desperate search for love now because LOVE has now found you.

And C. S. Lewis says, our deepest longing for beauty will one day be fulfilled: *We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it... At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.* ^{viii}

This is God's promise to all who are His – one day, we will become part of His beauty. Amen.

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- ⁱ William Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece*, 1594
- ⁱⁱ Don Henley and Glenn Frey, *Lyin' Eyes*, 1975
- ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from Joseph Stromberg's, "The Distressing Worldwide Boom in Cosmetic Surgery," *Smithsonian Magazine*, Oct. 2012
- ^{iv} Brainyquote.com, halleberry
- ^v Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), p. 35
- ^{vi} John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), p. 182-183
- ^{vii} "Vision of Beauty," Chana Kalsmith, www.Torah.org
- ^{viii} C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 16-17