



True Beauty
Reflections on Esther

BY CAROL REID

I love the true story of Esther. I remember when my mother read it from the Bible to my brother, sister, and me, and we demanded chapter after chapter, eager to see what happened next. There is history, romance, humor, risk, and justice, all wrapped up with a satisfying conclusion. Jewish congregations still read the book aloud every year as part of their Purim celebration, hissing when Haman's name is read and cheering for Esther.

My first impression of Esther was all about how beautiful she was—the Cinderella story of the Jewish orphan who became queen because of her great beauty. As a child, I didn't understand the forced compliance to the king's decree and what it meant for a virgin teenager with no say-so in the matter.

I loved Esther's courage and ingenuity in finding a way to rescue her people. Her bravery won the day. But in my context, the prettiest woman in the land who asked to talk to her husband never seemed to be taking a huge risk. Again, I missed some of the cultural overtones.

Later, I loved the story for the poetic justice—as Mordecai was honored by the king in the way Haman planned for himself, while Haman eventually hung on the high gallows he built to punish Mordecai. Scripture tells the whole story, and often those twists reveal God's justice—and His sense of humor! The ethnic and political implications were hard for me to understand. Considering the turmoil in the Middle East today, they are still hard to comprehend!

Let's look again at the beauty of Esther—of the queen and the scriptural account of her role in history—and reflect on some dimensions of that beauty we may have overlooked.

The Set Up

The Bible could have left out the first chapter of the book of Esther. Beautiful Esther would still enter the scene with the royal search for the loveliest lady in the land. But Queen Vashti sets up the story. She serves as a contrast to Esther that we don't want to overlook.

We don't fault Vashti for not doing what the king asked.

Ahasuerus (or Xerxes) was a powerful ruler. He gave a six-month party (Esther 1:4) to show off. He was on a seven-day drunk (verse 10), surrounded by his men friends, when he sent for Vashti. Some commentaries believe that when the king asked her to come in her crown (verse 11), he meant only her crown—nothing else. The king was not happy about her refusal. Enraged, burning with anger—her husband's bad temper provided another reason Vashti felt it was better to continue as hostess of her own party (verse 12).

But the king wouldn't let it go. He called his cabinet together and made a big deal out of the queen's refusal. Those wise men worried that Queen Vashti's behavior would give permission to women all over the realm to show contempt to their husbands as well (verse 17).

Let's press the pause button for a moment.

Is that what your husband thinks too? When you refuse, second-guess, overrule, or reject his opinions, does he feel your contempt instead of your respect? Beware of the unintended consequence of your attitudes. Learn the lesson from Vashti—who lost her husband and home and perhaps her head. Her refusal was worse because of the public situation. Should she have done what Ahasuerus demanded? I don't know. But maybe she should have called on her own wise counselors for advice.

Maybe there was a compromise she could have offered. Maybe a creative alternative would have defused the situation. Just be aware of your own attitudes—even when your solutions seem much better than your husband's ideas. Find a way to show respect as you work together.

Vashti's refusal to obey the king focuses not only on the threat that would come to Esther but portrays her as the foil—the opposite of the heroine in the story. She serves as a contrast to the next queen, showing in relief “what not to wear.”

All of this sets the stage for Esther's “beauty pageant”—except this pageant was not voluntary.

The Contest

By royal decree, all the beautiful young virgins were taken to the king's harem (Esther 2:3). Imagine that your

daughter or cousin were selected. Imagine that she was betrothed to a wonderful young man whose parents you had known for years. Imagine that she struggled with anxiety because of the traumatic exile from her homeland. Imagine that she had already suffered horrendous losses of her loved ones. We don't know Esther's whole story. We know she was being brought up by a cousin, Mordecai (verse 7), but we don't know what their family looked like. Was he married? Were there other children in the home? What were the circumstances of their exile?

Like Daniel and his Hebrew friends, Esther was taken to the king's palace. No objections, no questions, no arguments were tolerated. The brightest and best and most beautiful became captives. She was renamed and indoctrinated with a foreign culture.

Perhaps worse, her fate was sealed one way or the other. If she did not win the title of "Miss Persia," she didn't return home with her Miss Congeniality sash and a college scholarship. She was stuck in the harem of the heathen king—from then on. All the losers stayed in the harem as the king's sex slaves. What were the chances that she would win? Let's just say, even if she was the prettiest girl in the world, the panel of judges was narrowminded. Only King Ahasuerus decided—and remember Vashti. Even the contest winner was not assured a long life and happiness.

Added to all of this, Esther was a Jewish exile. Her people had been conquered and her homeland was devastated. What were her chances of becoming queen? No wonder Mordecai, her guardian, advised her to keep quiet about being Jewish (verses 10 and 20).

Esther's Survival Strategy

How would Esther survive such a difficult position? How could she protect her honor and her commitment to God? How could she meet the devastating circumstances piled on her, not of her own doing?

Here are four strategies she practiced that can work for you in your devastating circumstances too.

1. She kept in touch with her roots and the people who

loved her. Her guardian Mordecai visited the palace every day to check on her (Esther 2:11). You see him at the gate to communicate with Esther often in the book of Esther (2:19; 3:2; 4:3). Though she did not disclose her heritage, she communicated regularly with her cousin. She found strength in her people. She probably made many friends, but she did not forget her roots and was anchored in the truth and traditions of the Jewish people. She claimed her Jewish family and kept in touch with them. A year of palace living and preparation was not enough to change her values or her faith.

2. She cooperated and found favor. Esther was obedient to Mordecai's instructions (Esther 2:10). She heeded the advice of Hegai, the person in charge of the harem (verse 9). She wisely chose to do what those who were in authority asked her to do (verses 10, 15). This brought favor from everyone around her (verses 9, 15)—even the king (verse 17). Remember, this had been a year-long preparation (verse 12), and we don't know how long Esther had to wait for her turn among the other beautiful young women. We only know that the wedding feast was four years after Vashti had been dethroned (compare Esther 1:2 with Esther 2:16).

You may think that six months of oil of myrrh treatments and six months of spice massages sound wonderful, but if you've lived in a girls' dormitory you know the drama that can develop. Confined to one space, away from family, under pressure, facing competition, cat fights inevitably would crop up. But the inerrant Scripture pronounced that somehow Esther found favor with everyone who saw her (verse 15). This speaks volumes about her sweet nature and cooperation with others.

3. She made the best of a bad situation. What were Esther's options? She could have wallowed in despair. She could have complained and cried all day, every day. She could have been bitter and difficult. But instead, Esther learned to please the king. Even without realizing the future of her nation would be at stake, she participated in the preparations with purpose. And she must have delighted Ahasuerus (see verses 14 and 17).

4. She accepted her opportunities. Mordecai's first

summons was about two men who were planning treason. He became an informant and sent word of the plot through Esther (2:21–22). This was the warm-up, though it played a major role in setting afire the anger of wicked Haman. When later the threats were against all the Jews, the stakes were higher. Again, Esther courageously intervened. She stepped up, even at personal risk, to do what God had put her in place to do (Esther 4:14–17). She used the resources within her capabilities. She set strategy and prepared the way to her husband’s heart. God did the rest.

5. She kept praying. When threats came that could destroy her life and the lives of her people—and yes, the lineage of the Messiah—she first had a prayer meeting. Mordecai had already been praying and fasting, making quite a spectacle at the city gate (Esther 4:1). Her people had been mourning and weeping and dressing in sackcloth and ashes (verse 3). This was far from palace life, though, and Esther could have tuned out the needs of others. Instead, she asked them to fast and pray. She and her maidservants also began a three-day fast (verse 16). She would not bring up the subject to her husband without bathing it (maybe soaking it?) in prayer. This is an excellent strategy for all of us when we face a difficult situation or a hard conversation. Let’s talk to God about the trouble before we talk to others. Let’s ask Him

to prepare the way for us to effectively present our case and get the glory from the results. Whether your issue is with an employer, a friend, your husband, your children, your parents, or your neighbor, spend time on your knees before you bring it up. Let God do His part. You might be surprised at the results.

Esther’s Beauty Secret

What is your best beauty secret? My friend Tillie once told me about some Estee Lauder cream she had discovered. “How much does it cost?” I asked. “Who cares!” she exclaimed. “It works!”

Do you sleep on a silk pillowcase? Use a special cream or make-up brand? Do you drink 64 ounces of water every day? Esther’s beauty secret was not so secret. This beauty is imperishable—it will never fade. It keeps getting better as you get older. You don’t need to pay any money for it, though sometimes it may seem quite costly. The good news is that it can be your beauty secret too.

This is the beauty secret of 1 Peter 3. Somehow Esther knew it even centuries before Peter wrote of it. (Who would have thought he was an expert on beauty? Remember, though, he was inspired!) It was the beauty secret of Sarah too. She was so beautiful at age 89 that a king took her to be his wife, and God had to get Abraham out of a sticky situation (Genesis 20).

The Bible’s best beauty secret is submission.



However, our culture has turned up its nose at this secret. Women have listened to the advertisers and influencers of our day. They are more willing to try cucumber and apple cider vinegar than to listen to the Scripture and learn from the women there.

Yes. The Bible's best beauty secret is submission. (Some of you might have laughed out loud.)

This is not easy. This is not convenient. This is certainly not popular, but it is truth. It is God's truth, plainly stated and reinforced by examples of women in the Bible. It is definitely countercultural, another upside-down truth of Christ's kingdom that flies in the face of this world's culture.

So, look first at 1 Peter 3:1–6. A detailed study is for another time but notice that submission is the key to winning our husbands to Christ (verses 1–2). Our internal qualities are more important than our hair, jewelry, or wardrobe (verse 3). A gentle, quiet spirit not only gives us enduring beauty but also pleases God (verse 4).

Take a look at the way Esther modeled this scriptural principle. She submitted to Mordecai (Esther 2:20) when he took the role of her parent. She submitted to Hegai, the keeper of the harem, when she was sent to the palace (2:15). She treated her husband, the king, with utmost respect and honor (Esther 5:4, 7; 7:3; 8:3–6). She submitted to God (Esther 4:16) and the position He placed her in. Instead of responding with bitterness and despair at her situation, Esther displayed inner beauty that only enhanced her outer beauty.

We may all wish we could turn back the clock on those wrinkles, age spots, and extra pounds. But here's a guarantee for ageless beauty. No matter your income bracket, swimsuit size, or genetic blueprint, it works. It has some stiff requirements—like biting your tongue, preferring others, and dying to self—but a gentle, quiet spirit will make you beautiful from the inside out. Even more, it will please our Heavenly Father.

How do you get from here to there? You have a good mind and good ideas. You are not stupid or in any way “less than.” So how can you protect yourself and speak up for your ideas without turning into Vashti?

Here are four ideas to cultivate.

1. Spend time in God's Word and prayer. Allow Him to shape your thinking and change your heart. You might need to stop receiving some of the culture's messaging in order to listen more closely to Him. I'm guessing all of us need to spend more time on our knees and less time on social media.

2. Talk with a role model. Find someone beautiful and ask her to speak into your life. I hope you have someone flesh and blood nearby, but don't forget the possibility of books too. You might find an author you connect with. You might read biographies about a woman from history. Seeing how she translated the gentle, quiet spirit into her routines will encourage you to do the same.

3. Truly value others. Help your husband know how much you respect him. Show your employer honor by your words and your work ethic. In every relationship, esteem others above yourself. Forget the self-help gurus. This is scriptural (Philippians 2:3).

4. Give yourself time for the process to work. Probably, if you are opinionated and expressive, others are not going to recognize your gentle, quiet spirit by next weekend. Sorry. There's no magic pill or instant fix. But over time, when we allow the Lord to work to make us more like Jesus, we can follow His example of humble submission to the Heavenly Father and His will. And we can let the beauty of Jesus be seen in us.

God used Esther's legendary beauty to save the nation of Israel and prepare the way for the Messiah. Even if you never win a beauty contest, He can use your gentle, quiet spirit in spectacular ways for His glory. *W*

About the Writer: Carol Reid has always been involved in Christian education. She served thirty years at Welch Library and continued her ministry as an editor at D6 Family Ministries. Though she is officially retired, she continues to work part-time at D6, teach the toddler nursery at church, and help care for grandchild #5, Samuel. Carol's husband, Dr. Garnett Reid, went to Heaven last September, so she is sorting through his books and papers to try to find good homes for them.