

## **Our Gift is Greater Than We Thought**

**Esther 4:1-17**

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Part of the task of growing up is the discovery of our gifts. At some point, we all begin to wonder, "What is my special ability, my knack, aptitude, niche in life?" Toward the end of high school, we are offered various tests to help us identify our abilities and choose an appropriate vocation.

I still remember the results of my test. My vocational counselor said that all indications were that I would make an excellent truck driver. He'd obviously never seen me try to back a U-Haul trailer into a garage.

There are only a handful of categories used to label our giftedness. They are not all formal designations, but they are common ways of framing our gifts. Athletic prowess is one category. People who are able to run, jump, throw, hit, block, shoot in superior fashion are told this is their gift. Artistic ability is another. When people can paint, sing, dance, sculpt, design better than most of their peers, they are said to be talented artists. Personality provides a third classification. Some folks are so charming, outgoing, witty, they naturally win friends and influence people to a degree unmatched by their associates. Intelligence sets others apart. One million students take the SAT every year, and on average, only 20 of them achieve the perfect score of 2400. If you get anywhere close, lots of people will tell you that your gift is a sharp mind. Mechanical know-how is yet another group of gifts. Some individuals can listen to a clanking engine, identify the defective parts, take the motor apart, replace the damaged components and reassemble the entire machine. Others of us listen to the same noise, take our car to a repair shop, say "my car is broken" and that is the full extent of our knowledge.

Physical beauty is a type of endowment as well. Although the sense of entitlement that the impossibly handsome and incredibly beautiful often assume irritates those of us who don't turn every head in the room, we can understand why they carry themselves so imperiously. For most of their lives, nearly everyone they have interacted with has told them, in one way or another, that beauty was their gift.

Esther fell into this category. She might have been highly intelligent, artistically brilliant, athletically superior or even the possessor of an exceptional personality. Maybe she could take apart a chariot and put it back together faster and better than any other person in town, but if so, those gifts were unnoticed in comparison with her dazzling beauty.

We know she must have been knockdown gorgeous, because she was declared the most beautiful woman in the Persian Kingdom. A kingdom, so the Bible says, that stretched from India to Ethiopia.

This expansive dominion was ruled by King Ahasuerus, a man who had an eye for breathtaking women. As was the custom of his time, Ahasuerus had a harem of lovely ladies who served him in whatever way he desired. The woman he deemed prettier than the rest was elevated to the status of his Queen. As our story opens, that position is held by a very desirable woman by the name of Vashti.

The King and Queen run into a little trouble, however, when the King throws a party for his friends that lasts an entire week. The book of Esther says the King and his cronies drank wine by the flagons (which must be a boatload of wine) and did whatever they desired. On day seven, the drunken King decided that he wanted to show off

the beauty of Queen Vashti and so he sent his servants to dress her up and bring her to the party.

The servants complied with his royal request, but Vashti did not. She wanted no part of parading around in front of the King and his inebriated guests. She sent her RSVP marked, "I regret to inform you that I won't be showing up."

Her defiance threw the King into a major hissy fit. His anger grew hotter when all the nobles in the kingdom pointed out that once their wives heard of the actions of the Queen, they would stop responding to their orders as well. A women's liberation movement threatened to discombobulate the entire Persian social order.

A solution to the crisis was quickly found. The King, said his advisors, should simply fire the Queen and hold an empire-wide beauty pageant to select her successor, a woman with equal beauty, who would know her place.

Ahasuerus liked the plan and sent a decree throughout the land that announced the dethroning of the Queen and ordered all uppity women to resume obedience to their husbands. As the Bible put it, the King decreed that "every man should be the master of his own house."

With Vashti removed from office, the beauty pageant began and Esther, because of her unsurpassed good looks, was chosen as a contestant and brought to the palace. Esther's father and mother were deceased. She had been raised by her older cousin Mordecai who eventually adopted her as his own daughter. Mordecai accompanied Esther to the citadel and placed Esther under the authority of the manager of the King's harem. Mordecai advised his daughter to do as the manager instructed, but to avoid telling the King or his staff that she was Jewish. Esther took the advice to heart.

This, of course, was a mistake on both Mordecai and Esther's part. Never let anyone force you to deny your heritage. Wherever your roots are found, they are important, nurturing and stabilizing. Whether you come from a royal tribe in Nigeria or a pauper's household in Arkansas, your heritage is a gift of God. Stay connected even when all the forces around you - family, academics, religion, occupation and country - try to sever you from that heritage and force you to become like the dominant culture.

For the next six months Esther lived in a spa where her skin was treated with the oil of myrrh every day. When her skin was as perfect a woman's could be, she was moved to another part of the palace where she spent the next six months luxuriating in fragrant perfumes and cosmetic applications.

After a year of being pampered, Esther was brought before the King who immediately declared her to be the winner of the contest and crowned her as Queen. Notice there was no talent portion of this pageant. Nor was there a question posed to Esther so she could demonstrate her keen intellect. The Queen's selection was based on one and only one criteria, her physical beauty. In that realm, Esther had no equal.

For the next few months, Esther meets the three expectations of a Queen in the Persian Empire; she dresses up, shows up and shuts up. By all indications she takes to her new life as the stunner of the kingdom, looks pretty everywhere she goes and does whatever she is told. She had reached the pinnacle of her career as a woman of jaw-dropping beauty. Her gift had taken her all the way to the top.

As in most stories, however, trouble brews when life seems too cheery. The King promotes a man by the name of Haman to Chief of Staff. Haman held so much power in the land, that when he walked by his underlings, they all bowed to the ground in deference to his magnitude. Mordecai, however, because he was a devout Jew, refused to bow to any human being. When Haman walked by, Mordecai remained standing.

His posture infuriated Haman and the arrogant politician yearned to have Mordecai killed. Nevertheless, a man of his position, he thought, should not be so petty as to kill one man for insolence, so Haman devised a vastly more diabolical plan. He went to the King and reported that there was a race of people distributed throughout the kingdom who lived by a different set of laws than the king's decrees. Haman declared these people to be so dangerous to the security of the nation that they should be executed. To sweeten the pot, Haman swore that if the King would issue a death warrant for this race of people, he would make a contribution to the King's treasury in the amount of 10,000 pieces of silver. The King agreed, not even knowing which race of people Haman had in mind, and issued a decree that they should be killed.

News of the King's edict reached Mordecai who immediately began a public protest. He tore his garments and covered himself in sackcloth and ashes. The Scripture says that as Jews throughout the provinces heard of the official genocide, they too fasted, dressed in sackcloth and ashes and wailed in lamentation.

Esther, being insulated from her people by the fortress of the palace, didn't get the news. She continued to put on her pretty things and ply her energy into being glamorous until her servants told her they had seen Mordecai lying in sackcloth and ashes. What Esther does next, reveals the extent to which she had bought into the idea that beauty was her gift. Hearing that her father is covered in rags and soot, she sends him some new clothes. We can almost hear her tell her servants, well do for him what you do for me when I'm in a bad mood. Pick out something dashing that will perk up his spirits and send it to him.

Mordecai, of course, rejects the clothing and when Esther hears of his refusal, she is stunned. This is one of the consequences of being cut off from her heritage. Esther doesn't even recognize the rituals of public protest and grief followed by her people for centuries. Instead she wonders, "why would anyone turn down a new suit of clothing? What's the point of life if it is not to look marvelous?" Her dismay prompts her to send a servant to find out why her father was so publicly disheveled.

When the servant inquires as to Mordecai's behavior, Esther's father explains the crisis faced by the Jewish people. Then he sends a message back to his daughter: "You must go before the King and beg for the salvation of your people."

Esther is not happy to receive her father's request. In essence, she responds that Mordecai obviously doesn't understand the role of a pretty woman in the palace: she is to dress up, show up and shut up. She is to visit the King only upon request. If she presumes to enter the King's chambers without invitation, she will be executed. By implication Esther is saying, find someone whose gift is personality or intelligence. Someone who can wield their authority or come up with a strategy that will protect our people. Don't look to me. I bring beauty to a room, not influence.

Mordecai, however, knows something that Esther is about to discover. Her gift is greater than she thinks. Her father knows she's been placed near the throne by God for just such a time. Her true gift is the spirit of God which will grant her courage to save her people. When he communicates as much to Esther, a whole new aspect of her character emerges. She tells Mordecai to call the whole Jewish community to fast and pray for three days. Esther then promises that following the days of consecration, she will enter the King's presence unbidden and, famously says, "If I perish, I perish."

I am praying for some Esthers to arise in our government. We are overrun with Hamans, people whose ambition, greed, pride and self-absorption have brought them to the top of their vocation. I am alarmed by the number of elected and appointed officials who are so beholden to lobbyists, big business, the extreme right and left of their party and their own political ambitions that they are unable to get any work accomplished which serves the broad spectrum

of people in this country.

I am praying for some men and women who thought their gift was intellect, political savvy, charm, or personality to realize that their true gift is greater than they thought. I am praying that someone will understand that he or she has been placed in the halls of power for such a time as this and rely on the Spirit of God to work out help for the people in this nation who need it the most.

Audrey Hepburn was one of the world's most beautiful women as well as among the most talented actresses of her generation. She was only the third actor in history to earn a million dollars for one film. Yet as astonishing as these gifts were, she learned late in life that her true gift was greater than she thought. Acting on the compassion placed in her heart by God, she devoted the last four years of her life to helping poor and malnourished children through UNICEF and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her efforts.

Similarly, Mia Farrow began her adult years as one of the most desirable actresses in Hollywood. No lesser light than Frank Sinatra fell in love with her beauty and talent. Soon, however, Farrow recognized that her gift was greater than she thought. Exceeding the value of her ephemeral loveliness was her thirst for justice for oppressed children throughout Africa. Last year, her tireless efforts for children in Darfur, the Sudan and Rwanda led Time magazine to name her as one of the most influential people in the world.

Roberto Clemente was one of major leagues most honored players from 1955 to 1972. He was an All-Star and Gold Glove winner twelve years in a row and once elected the most valuable player in the national league. Many sportscasters to this day say he was the greatest right fielder to ever play the game, but Clemente learned that his true gift was greater than he thought. For the last ten years of his life, Clemente dedicated himself to delivering food, medicine and other essentials to people devastated by natural disasters throughout Latin America. He died while trying to deliver emergency supplies to Nicaragua in the aftermath of a major earthquake. The star outfielder was awarded both the Congressional Gold Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his humanitarian work. Today, Major League Baseball, awards the Roberto Clemente award each year to a ballplayer who exemplifies Clemente's concern for others.

Esther learned her gift was greater than she thought as well. With courage inspired by God, she entered the King's courtroom and found the prayed-for welcome. The King listened to her articulate the problem and plead for her people and responded by protecting the Jewish people and sending the heartless Haman to his death.

Each of us has been raised with an idea as to the nature of our gift. Maybe you are one of the strikingly attractive people of this world, or maybe you can outrun a freight train, sing a song that brings chills to an audience, score 2400 on your SAT, charm the grumpiest of souls or fix any machine on the planet. Hopefully, your incredible skill will one day take you to the top of your vocation. Regardless of how great your gift is, however, your true gift is even greater than you think. We are all given the gift of God's spirit to use us in God's great work of compassion, liberation, healing, salvation and redemption. By God's grace, we can use that gift to change a person's life and even change this world. All we have to do is believe that our gift is greater than we thought. Amen.