

### Putting off the Clothes of Captivity

Today we'll get a chance to think again about the new status we have as Christians before God. We'll think about how that should affect our thinking and how we see ourselves. We'll get a chance to reflect again on the transformative work of Christ in our lives. But we will do that from this passage.

Many people when they get to a passage like this from the Old Testament find it hard. Now we have to acknowledge silence where silence is, and there are certain things that we might want to read into this passage that are not there. For example, when you read a passage like this, it is often asked if this is allowing for a man to divorce his wife for any reason? Well, when you have a less clear passage, you have to go to more clear passages for the answer. The one that most similarly addresses this question is Mark 10:2-9. There the Pharisees ask Jesus about another command in Deuteronomy, where in Deuteronomy 24 it talks about a man sending his wife away with a certificate of divorce. Many of the Pharisees thought that this was Moses approving of divorce for almost any reason. Yet Jesus clarified this for them. Jesus said that Moses allowed for a certificate of divorce only because of the hardness of men's hearts. Jesus said the law didn't advocate divorce; instead this law legislated what the people were to do when, out of their hard hearts, they wanted to get rid of their wife. The law then for the certificate of divorce actually was a way to offer some protection to the woman in midst of her husband who might be divorcing her for bad reasons. And so, that law in Deuteronomy is one example of several that are a bit concessionary. In light of man's hardness of heart, certain laws are given to protect others in the midst of man's sinfulness.

Matthew Henry in his commentary sees that at work in this passage. He sees some of these provisions given in light of man's hardness of heart. Certainly in verse 14 that would be the case. The passage doesn't advocate divorce for any reason, but if for some reason the man does divorce the wife, there are certain protections for this woman who used to be a captive. And so this passage doesn't advocate divorce for any reason. Instead we use more clear passages on divorce, to know about what is a biblical reason for a divorce or not. And we use Jesus' words to understand that Moses has certain laws like this that presume the hardness of men's hearts.

A similar question that comes up when you read this passage is whether this is advocating forced marriage. Is the Israelite man allowed to go and just take any captive woman as his wife, whether she wants to be married or not? Well, again, the passage is actually silent on those details. It may be that some men at that time, again in their hardness of hearts, might do something like that. That doesn't make it right. And this passage would serve to provide some protection for the woman in that situation. For example, the month long waiting period would keep someone from just taking a captive and immediately having his way with her. Yet, it is also possible that the provisions in this chapter could promote true love and biblical marriage in the event that an Israelite man and a captive gentile woman fall in love and want to be married. Such things are not unheard of; just think of the love story between Boaz and Ruth; that's a different set of circumstances, but

shows that an Israelite man and a gentile woman could indeed fall in love and want to be united together in marriage.

And so to say it plainly, this passage doesn't advocate forced marriage or divorce for any reason. Yes, some out of their hardness of hearts might operate under this passage, but that's not the Bible advocating those things. And so what I'd like to do now as we look at this passage is first think about the context for this passage, of what's actually going on here. Then second, I'd like to look at how this passage actually elevates the status for the woman in this situation. Thirdly, I'd like to then turn to think about how this all looks to Christ and our relationship with him.

First, let's think about the context here. Deuteronomy chapters 20 and 7 set the background for this short passage. Deuteronomy 7 tells us that this captured woman wouldn't have been from one of the specific gentile nations living in the Promised Land. Those nations were under a ban, devoted to destruction. Deuteronomy 7:3 specifically says that Israel must not marry any of these people. Instead God had sent Israel to utterly destroy those specific nations, including every man, woman, and child.

So instead we should be thinking about Deuteronomy 20 that we studied just a few weeks ago. That passage made a distinction between wars fought against these nations under the ban, and those that were far off. If they found themselves in a conflict with another nation that was far off, they should try to make peace with them. If they did, then those people would be spared, and they'd become servants of Israel. If they were not willing to make peace, Israel was allowed to conquer them, but they weren't to utterly destroy them. God explicitly told them at that point to spare the women, though obviously they'd be captives at that point. So either scenario could result in gentile women becoming captives or servants of Israel, and in either case might become the scenario under which an Israelite man might want to marry a Gentile woman. This would probably especially be the case when in the second scenario the battle has occurred killing off the male soldiers and there were a lot of women captives taken.

So in this case this passage provides protection for the women captives in this situation. They could not just be taken and abused and treated like property. But if they wanted to marry one of them, they could, according to the provisions in this passage. The month timeframe listed in verse 13 would have kept a wicked man just taking and abusing a captive woman. The provisions in verse 14 would have kept the man from treating the captive woman like property or like a slave, as if he thought he could just have his way with her and just discard her afterwards. Marriage would be acceptable. Treating the woman like property would not be.

Instead, this passage actually elevates the status of this woman. That's the next thing I'd like us to reflect on. When the man first saw the woman, she was a captive. She was basically a sort of slave at that point. She didn't have freedom to just do what she wanted or go where she wanted. In some societies at that time captives could have a lot of freedoms, though some didn't; but nonetheless they were always still captives.

And yet when this Israelite man wants to marry this gentile captive woman, there is a great change of status that takes place. That's what this month long ritual signifies. Look at what happens in this thirty day timeframe. Right away she is given a new home. She gets new clothes. Of course the significance is not just in getting new clothes or a new home. It's in the

transition. She leaves her old place of residences which was a place of captivity. She instead moves into the home of her engaged husband-to-be. She takes off her old clothes of captivity; the clothes she was captured in, to put on something new. The point is the immediate transition that happens. Immediately her status has been changed, even before she is married. Even when only engaged, she is now no longer a captive. She's is no longer in some sort of enslaved status.

Then she enters into a time of mourning. She cuts her hair. She cuts her nails. She mourns for her mother and father. Now this might be because her parents were presumably killed in the battle that had taken place. Though more likely this is just acknowledging her leaving her parents. In marriage you leave your parents to be joined with your spouse. That's how it was described back in Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Because she is getting married, she is leaving her parents to become united to her husband. For that matter, her parents will still be in the state of captivity, whatever that might look like. But she would find new freedom in her new life with her husband.

Commentators usually note that part of what's behind this mourning and the whole month long ritual is that this woman is finding a new identity. She was a captive gentile. She was outside the covenant community in that sense. But now in joining with this Israelite in marriage, she was being brought into the covenant community. She was aligning herself with God's people. She was outwardly becoming a part of the church of God's people through this marriage.

Now on a side note of course, this marriage doesn't guarantee her personal salvation. She outwardly was becoming a member of God's covenant community in Israel. Ultimately she needed to have this change inwardly as well. But again you can think of someone like Ruth. Ruth as a Gentile rejected the home of her parents to instead go to Israel and come and take refuge under the wings of the LORD God. Ruth said to her Israelite mother-in-law, "Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." Ruth is a picture of a Gentile woman coming into God's covenant community, even through marriage; but for Ruth the benefit was not just through some external coming into the covenant. For Ruth, it was a real expression of her heart to identify herself as one of God's people and to come and live and be a part of the community of God's elect. In the same way, the captive woman in this passage would be outwardly set free from captivity and identified with God's people along with her husband. There was a great outward transformation in her status. The real value for her, however, would come if she also inwardly made this transformation as well; that the LORD God would in fact be her God.

And so this woman in this marriage would have her status changed. She'd go from slave to free. She'd be identified along with God's covenant people. You see this new status by what would happen if she was later divorced by her husband. Again, this passage doesn't advocate the divorce. But let's just assume that the husband wickedly divorces this wife. Look at verse 14. If he sadly stopped delighting in her and wants to send her away, he has to follow certain rules. He can't sell her. He can't treat her like a slave. She's instead free to go; she can go anywhere she wants.

Realize how this shows her new status. Before the marriage, she wasn't free to go anywhere. She was a captive. She would have been treated like a

slave. But no longer could she be treated that way. By the marriage, she had been transformed. She had been set free. She had been redeemed from captivity. Just because the husband doesn't want to be married to her can't undo that transformation. She can't lose that new status just because of the hardness of this man's heart. He must not treat her brutally as if her status hadn't changed. By coming into the community of God's people, she had a new identity and a newfound protection. That's what the thirty day period had shown, even before they got married. It continued even if the husband no longer delighted in her. She was now a free woman living among God's people.

I hope as we've studied this passage you can begin to get a sense of how this looks forward to Christ. I hope you can begin to think of how this causes us to think of the transforming love of Christ. We see in this passage a small snapshot of God's heart. We get a glimpse of God's heart to protect the captured woman and even advance her cause. Yes, it's just a glimpse. But I can't help when I think through these provisions but remember what Christ has done for me.

The book of Ephesians helps walk us through what Christ has done for us, especially in relationship to this passage. Ephesians 2 tells us that we were once enemies of God. It says that our allegiance used to be to Satan. We used to walk in ungodliness apart from Christ ultimately in service to Satan, whether we realized it or not. But Ephesians goes on to talk about Christ's transforming work in our life. Christ essentially is described as conquering us. He conquers the rebellion in our lives. So by the time you get to chapter 4 of Ephesians Paul can describe Christians as captives of Christ. Paul himself in Ephesians 4:1 includes himself in that list as a prisoner for the Lord. So far, our own story is very similar to what we read about here for this captive woman. She belonged to a people hostile to God and his people. She was captured by God's people who were given victory by God. She was then a captive Gentile. As Christians, we have become captive Gentiles; captives of Christ according to Ephesians 4.

And yet Ephesians doesn't end there. Ephesians 5 goes on to talk about a new relationship that we have in Christ. Christ didn't capture us only to make us slaves. He captured us to transform our status. Ephesians 5 talks about the great love Christ had for his church and so he gave himself up for the church. Christ conquered our unbelief and rebellion against God, not to keep us as captives, but to exalt us as his bride. Ephesians 5:23 describes what Christ is now doing in our lives. It says he is sanctifying us, cleansing us, that he might present us the church to himself as a bride full of splendor, without spot or wrinkle, but holy and without blemish. In other words, we are undergoing a transformation right now, before the final marriage takes place, before the final consummation of the church with Christ.

You see, we the church have not remained as mere captives of Christ, but we have been betrothed to Christ. The time we live in now is akin to this month long period of the captive woman in our passage. For her, on the first day of the betrothal, her status was changed. Already she had a new home. Already she had put on new clothes. And she would yet spend some time mourning the leaving of her parents and essentially preparing for her new life with her husband-to-be. Already her status had been changed, yet not in the fullest consummated sense yet. This is the case with us as Christians. Having become a Christian, our status has changed. The day we received by faith the gift of eternal life is the day our status changed. That day we were redeemed and justified. That day we became part of the bride of Christ

that is awaiting his return. We now live in that 30 day window. We wait for Christ. We prepare for the consummation. We shed our old life and prepare for eternity with Christ. It's a period of both immediate transformation and continual transformation.

And the good news is that when Christ comes back and takes us to be his bride, we don't have to worry about the concern of verse 14. That's where we remember that this passage is specifically addressing sinful humans that do bad things at times. Such a woman at that time might sadly find that her husband no longer delights in her. There was some measure of protection for her under the old covenant. But in the new covenant we realize so clearly that we have a husband that not only has brought us out of captivity, but one that will never send us away. This is because our Husband-Lord will never stop delighting in us. He has loved us so much, and he does love us so much. He will always love us. We are the beloved of the Lord, and he is ours. He will always delight in us, and we will always delight in him. This is how great our Husband-Lord, Jesus Christ is. And so as Christians we do not fear that he will take away his love for us. We instead rest in the sureness of his love. We rest in the greatest of peace as the beloved of the Lord who has lifted us out of both our rebellion and our captivity.

If you are sitting there today and have not experienced the things I am talking about, let me invite you to experience them today. You see the Bible says that we receive these things by faith. The bible calls us to repent of our sins and turn in faith to Jesus Christ. We trust our lives to him as our Lord and Savior. We mourn over the ways we've lived in rebellion to him, and instead acknowledge that we need his forgiveness and grace. If you turn to him in faith today, if you call on him today to be your Savior and Lord, then indeed you will be forgiven. Today you will be united together with God's people and become part of the bride of Jesus Christ.

We started out our sermon today acknowledging how easy it would be to see this passage acted out in the most negative light. We could easily imagine some cruel soldier dragging a woman off the battle field to be his wife whether she wanted to or not. We could see that cruel soldier sending her away after a short time. It'd be easy to think of the most awful ways someone could use the provisions of a passage like this. We could realize how this provides some measure of protection to the woman in this situation, but we might feel only slightly comforted in that thought.

We could easily imagine this bad scenario. But now stop for a moment and imagine a more idealized situation that could also come out of the provisions of this passage. It could be something of the greatest of love stories. Imagine if you were some young Gentile woman captured at that time as part of some war. You might not understand the politics of why your nation was fighting Israel. You may have just been starting out in life, your whole life ahead of you, when all of sudden you find yourself ripped away from your home and maybe even your family. Loved ones are killed in the process. You then find yourself living in a foreign land as a captive, essentially living as a sort of slave. You are probably scared and your whole life feels like it has just come crashing down.

But then one day you meet a man. He's an Israelite man who the moment he sees you from afar is struck by your beauty. As he gets to know you that love is just fueled and increased. You too realize his own beauty and kindness of heart. Then one day he proposes to you. You decide to get married, and so then you go through the process described here. You come

into his home. You are given new clothes. You are given this time to prepare for the marriage while he in turn continues to treat you with all purity and love. You know he cares so much about you. Suddenly your whole life seems turned around. One moment you felt as if your entire future had been robbed from you, and now you have new hope. Of course in all this you also learn about the one true God and together you start out your life together with your husband who delights in you so very much, together living your life for the LORD. If we can imagine the evil soldier using this passage to take a captive as a wife, we can also imagine this more idealized love story.

If you were this wife of this loving husband, of this husband who delights in you so much, think about what your thoughts might be of him. You'd probably think of him as your knight in shining armor. You'd think of him who came in and rescued you at the darkest moment in your life when everything seemed to be falling down around you. This sort of love is what love stories are made of. If you were this woman, would you ever wish to return to your old life of captivity? Would you ever loathe your new life when you have found such joy and love in your new life with your husband?

If we can imagine this idealized love story, then we can certainly see how this passage points us forward to what Christ has done for us. And so let me close then with this last point of application. If we can think of this idealized love story, think of that as an analogy for us as Christians. We said that the captive woman who has found freedom and new life shouldn't want to return to life as a captive. Why should she ever want to take off her new clothes and put on again the clothes of captivity? In fact, there's no way to go back there. She's a free woman now!

And yet, as Christians how often we can long to return to our old ways of captivity. We shouldn't want to put on again those clothes of captivity. And yet that's so often what we do with our sin. We've repented of it, we've mourned of it, we've been lifted out of it, and yet we sometimes forget what we have in Christ. We sometimes find ourselves delighting in our old rags, instead of the robe of Christ's righteousness. We flirt again with sin and rebellion. It's not Christ who loses delight in us; it us beginning to delight again with the ways of the world.

The Bible tells us what to do when we find ourselves in that situation. Return to your first love! Revelation 2:4-5. Christ has seen you from afar and has loved you. He gave up himself for you. He is the lover of your souls. Remember where you have come from. Remember how you have been transformed. Be reminded again of the joy of being in the Lord. Delight yourself in the Lord, for he has delighted in you. Be refreshed again today with how much Jesus loves you. May that wake each of us from any ways that we have started to flirt again with the ways of the world. There is no greater joy than to be the bride of Jesus Christ; and that is what the church is; and so that is what you are a part of if you are a Christian. He loves us so. May we never tire of his great love. Let us return again today to this great love. Amen.

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