

# Esther

Seeing Our Invisible God in an Uncertain World



COWELL & AMY CARROLL

Christians and non-Christians alike are coming to terms with the uncertainty of this life. But as we balance ongoing uncertainty with our unwavering call as Christians, here comes Amy and Lynn, trusted friends, to help with a fresh look at the ancient text of Esther.

From the narrative of a girl who is often reviled, Amy and Lynn skillfully yet gracefully show how much like you and me she is.

With humor and transparent authenticity, Amy and Lynn share their pitfalls as well as biblical principles which helped them grow spiritually through trying seasons of life.

As you read the scripture and allow them to read you, like Amy, Lynn and Esther, God will encourage, convict, and empower you to stand firm, regardless of the outcome. Wherever you are in your life, this must-do bible study is for such a time as this.

**Karen McNary**, Bible Study Fellowship: Director of Global Cultural Engagement

Have you had struggles where God felt invisible, uncaring, and uninvolved? Me, too. Amy and Lynn tenderly reveal how God is always in control and show us ourselves in Esther's story. This Bible study will guide you from Persia straight to the place you call home, and help you hope in God's unwavering hand when he leads you out of your comfort zone into your calling.

Amy Lively, author of How to Love Your Neighbor Without Being Weird

As a Bible teacher and lover of Esther's miraculous story, I thought that I knew everything about the book of the Esther. Wrong! Amy and Lynn's new study provides fresh spiritual insights as well as humbly and lovingly raising the bar on Spirit-led personal application and spiritual challenge. Personally, I loved experiencing fascinating new "a-ha" moments every day of this study!

Barb Roose, Speaker and author of Surrendered: Letting Go and Living Like Jesus; Joshua: Winning the Worry Battle; and other studies

This study is a mix of fun, insight, and a deep dive into scripture. What I love most is that it has the power to teach me today how to live as a woman of faith right now, and to make a difference in a world that God loves like crazy.

Suzanne (Suzie) Eller, author, Bible teacher, co-host of *More Than Small Talk podcast* 

Although the book of Esther doesn't directly mention God, Amy and Lynn help you see His guiding hand throughout this young queen's journey. You'll find helpful insights, engaging questions, and new perspectives realizing the Lord at work in your own story as you turn the pages of this excellent Bible study.

Melissa Spoelstra, speaker and author of *Isaiah*:

Striving Less and Trusting God More

If you're looking for the standard "Here's how to get through hard times, just look to God" answers, you've come to the wrong Bible study. *Esther: Seeing Our Invisible God in an Uncertain World* goes beyond the platitudes and dives into the messy, deep end of the pool. If you've been swimming in the deep end for the past couple of years, asking the tough questions, this book is for you.

**Kathi Lipp,** Bestselling author and founder of Writing at the Red House



#### Seeing Our Invisible God in an Uncertain World

Study Guide | Six Lessons



LYNN COWELL & AMY CARROLL



Esther

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To our wise Umbrella friend, thank you for your continual love, support, and cheerleading. You are the best!

Love, Amy and Lynn

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Message from Amy and Lynn

DEAR NEW FRIEND (or maybe you're an old friend if we've studied together before!),

Thank you so much for your commitment to join Amy and me as together we go below the surface in the book of Esther.

Recently as my husband, Greg, and I watched another newscast of trouble in our world, overwhelm gripped me. I have to do something! But what can I do? I'm just one person.

I wrote that paragraph as if it was a one-time occurrence. It wasn't and it's not. That happened last night, but the reality is that this reaction to all of the uncertainty around us wells up in my heart often. One thing I am certain of, it will happen again.

So what do I do?

What do you do when the reality of the world's pain grips you? Shut off your heart? Move on? There is only so much heartache we can take.

One thing that helps me is a line I heard from Pastor Andy Stanley many years ago, "Do for one what you wish you could do for everyone."

This simple, but not easy, wisdom helps me, even today, as I ask the

Holy Spirit to direct me. I'll look for the way I can listen, feel, do, and speak and be an advocate for *one* today.

This pattern of listen, feel, do, and speak I've learned from Amy, and then even deeper from Esther as I began to study the book in the Bible with her name. It is a pattern that is serving me today and can guide me for a lifetime. I hope that as you study this book and the life of this woman, you'll find a way to move past "But what can I do?" to "Let's do this, Lord" with the encouragement you'll gain from Esther.

His, Lynn

#### DEAR READER,

When Esther comes up in a group of women, inevitably I hear cries of, "Oh! Esther is my favorite book in the Bible."

I have to confess that I had never felt that way.

I mean, I never *hated* the book of Esther. I just didn't *love* it. Esther was never in my top ten favorite books of the Bible . . . or even top twenty.

While I adore all things feminine, I prefer a funky pair of sneakers over gowns and tiaras. Esther's story seemed too impossible to live up to. Too Disney princess to feel connected to. And conversely, the ending seemed too brutal to understand in my modern way of thinking.

But when an opportunity to write a study with Lynn Cowell, my dear friend and ministry teammate, on the book of Esther opened, I jumped at the chance! Between all my hesitancy about Esther and a finished manuscript, something amazing happened. I fell madly in love with both Esther and the book named after her.

The transformation started when Lynn saw that Esther walked through a process that God has been taking me through for several years. I've been going through these steps on repeat: Listen  $\longrightarrow$  Feel  $\longrightarrow$ 

Do → Speak. When God opened my eyes to what Lynn saw (more about that in the study), suddenly I didn't see Esther as an unattainable model anymore. I saw her as a sister in the struggle to live as God's daughter in a really tough world. As a woman who cares about people and wants to do the right thing, the godly thing, as much as I do. As a woman who flounders a little in uncertainty but ultimately triumphs, bringing God great glory. I want that. Don't you?

Once I dove into studying Esther—a process that lasted for months—I found that I was converted. I now deeply love Esther and her true, gritty story. Whether this is your first time studying her story or it's always been one of your favorites, I hope you see Esther in the fresh light that God has shone on her for Lynn and me. And it's my deepest desire that God uses this study to ease your uncertainty and increase your confidence that you, too, have a significant place in His story.

In His Love,

# Introduction

WHAT DO YOU DO when uncertainty strikes and God seems to have vanished? Our minds may tell us we serve an all-powerful God, yet our uncertain circumstances give rise to doubt when we can't *see* our invisible God.

Hi! My name is Lynn Cowell and more than once this has been the scenario in my life. My friend, Amy Carroll, has also experienced the same—times when our mind heads in a doubting direction:

Are You there, God?

Do You care about me and what I'm experiencing?

With all that seems out of control, are You really in control?

In uncertainty, wrestling with unbelief is a natural thing to do. As women who have spent years studying the word of God, Amy and I have come to the place where we now turn to God's Word when our minds wants to question what we cannot see.

This is why we've partnered together to write this Bible study. The book of Esther is perfect for us when we face uncertain times. Esther was a woman with little control of her own life, which feels very familiar to me. Esther carved a pathway for all women who find themselves walking through uncertainty. She shows us that we can do so, not only with faith but with influence.

#### Esther

As I read through the book of Esther, I saw a process emerging. A process Amy had shared with me months before in her own season of uncertainty:

Listen 
$$\rightarrow$$
 Feel  $\rightarrow$  Do  $\rightarrow$  Speak

Within this time frame of Esther's story recorded here, God molded her into a woman who, though she may have been afraid of the uncertainty surrounding her, fulfilled God's assignment for her.

#### About the Study

As co-authors, Amy and I will both be contributing to the study content. As alternating authors, at the beginning of each week we'll share our names so you know who is teaching.

Each week includes five days of reading and reflection questions as we focus on this process of listen, feel, do, and speak. Before we dig into that process, we'll start week 1 with looking at our motives. We'll wrap up our time together in week 6, studying what our outcomes can look like when we follow through with the assignments God gives to each of us.

Each of the five days of study within the week will include portions of scripture from the book of Esther, supporting scriptures throughout the Bible, historical context gathered from study, plus reflection and application. We will study Esther's life and processes, while asking the Lord to take us on our own journeys through uncertainty so we can fulfill the assignments He gives to each of us.

We'll include a Pathway Principle at the end of each day to help you deepen and apply your study of Esther. At the end of the week, we'll give an overarching principle and a review of each day.

#### Memorizing God's Word

In addition to the Pathway Principles, there will be a memory verse that encapsulates the week's theme. Since many of us struggle with memorizing, Amy had the idea of giving unique and specific steps to help all types of learners to memorize. Give it a try! I did—and it works!

#### **Options for Study**

While we have designed this study to be used in your personal time with the Lord, we have also provided elements to make this study a resource for group study. At the end of each week, you will find group discussion questions providing a starting point for conversation and reflection. Some groups will find the setup of six weeks just right for the amount of time they have. Other groups may choose to divide the six weeks into twelve, providing more time for those who need it.

#### **Additional Tools**

In the back of this study, you will find an additional resource we have created to help you develop your own tool box for studying God's Word. I know you will find it helpful as you not only study Esther, but other books in God's Word as well.

#### Before We Begin

Studying God's Word is a very important practice for us as His daughters. It has the power to change the direction of each and every day of our lives. Before you begin, take some time to invite the Holy Spirit to be your teacher. In John 14:16, Jesus said He was sending the Holy Spirit to help us, and He has. If you have given your life to Christ, the Holy Spirit lives within you now. Ask Him to come and meet you each day, to teach you. Approach each day of study with a heart open to receive what He wants to show you and a willingness and intention to walk out His directives as well.

#### Lynn and Amy





## Day One: Tracing the Hand and Heart of the Invisible One

I stretched out on my single bed in my more-shabby-than-chic college apartment and stared up at the ceiling. Worry about final papers, end-of-semester exams, and where I'd head after graduation left me fuming and fussy. Finally, I exploded aloud, "I wish that God would just write me a note with all His directions, tie it to a rock, and then throw it through the window. I really want to know what *He* wants me to do!"

There was a pregnant silence across the room, and then my roommate, who had heard my rock-wish one too many times, answered with an eye-roll, "Oh, Amy . . . you know that if a rock came flying through the window with a note attached that you'd just run outside to see who threw it."

Sigh. She spoke the truth.

It's difficult to follow an invisible God in an uncertain life. We're just humans, surrounded by a physical world. The birds sing, and we hear their joy. The sun shines, so we see the glow and feel the warmth. The ice cream drips, and we take one long, delightful lick of strawberry. Our senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting—are the way we experience the world. Their input helps us to map out our next move, know whom to trust, stay out of harm's way, decide what to swallow or spit out, and discern when to run. Our senses are almost everything to us.

Almost.

If you're holding this book in your hand, I count you as a sister. There's a sacred place wired inside us to know there's more. There's something bigger than us that we can't see with our eyes, hear with our ears, sniff with our noses, touch with our hands, or taste with our tongues. It's not actually a "something" at all. It's a Someone. He's more magnificent than our senses—in fact He created them—and He's real. He's God.

Before we dive into the book of Esther, we have to wrap our hearts and minds around a very uncomfortable fact. Not only is God invisible in this book of Scripture, He's not even mentioned. Not named. Not once. Not. At. All. It's one of only two books in the Bible that never names God directly.

This gap has led to a lot of controversy swirling around the book of Esther. There are many interpretations of her story, but some thought it shouldn't be included in our Bibles at all. The absence of God's name was so disconcerting that many early Christian giants either ignored the book or spoke out against it. "For the first seven centuries of the Christian church, not one commentary was produced on this book. In fact, two of the biggest names in church history seemed to have major issues with Esther. As far as we know, John Calvin never preached from Esther. Martin Luther denounced this book together with the apocryphal 2 Maccabees, saying of them, 'I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities.'"

That may be shocking to those of us who love Esther's story, but it's true. Luther wasn't wrong, was he?

- 1. No God-mentions
- 2. Lots of very flawed people
- 3. Set in a culture that didn't worship the one true God

The book with Esther's name on it doesn't sound like the ideal sermon series or a model of godliness for children. Even so, the book of Esther is perfect for us today. As you'll soon see, she's a woman up to her neck in uncertain circumstances beyond her control and living in a culture that doesn't worship the way she does. Yet, she's part of a community who loves their invisible God. Feel familiar?

WI	What do you find difficult in loving and following a	an invisible God?

This unique book is one of the rare books in the Bible without a known author. Most Bible scholars believe that the unknown author of Esther left God's name out on purpose as a literary device that forces us to search for God's hand. It's a genius move, but the writer wouldn't have expected us to see God in a vacuum with no context.

Throughout this study, Lynn and I will include tips that will equip you to dig deeper and understand Scripture more fully in your individualized study time. They are also compiled in an appendix at the back of the book.

I've given a name to one essential Bible study method that many scholars have used for centuries. I call it The Clarity Principle, and here's how it works. When we run across a difficult-to-understand passage of Scripture, we don't rush to interpret it through our human lens or build a wonky theology, a belief system about God, around it. Instead, we dig into the whole of Scripture, interpreting the unclear passages with the clear ones, thus The Clarity Principle. As we think about our invisible God, we know that He isn't *always* concealed as He is in the book of Esther. Let's use The Clarity Principle here for a moment.

Look up and read the following passages. Draw a line from the Scripture to the way that God has revealed Himself and/or His message to humans.

1 Kings 19:11–13	Fire
2 Chronicles 34:22-24	A prophet
Genesis 16:6-8	A donkey
Exodus 3:1–2	A whisper
Numbers 22:27–31	Angels of the Lord

God has made Himself seen and heard in varied ways, some quite surprising. These are only a handful of examples from the Old Testament!

$\Rightarrow$	Can you think of some additional ways Scripture tells us God makes Himself known? If so, list them here.

You may have listed visions (Genesis 15:1), dreams (Genesis 37:5), a voice from heaven (Matthew 3:13-17), or tongues of fire (Acts 2:3). Our God is so creative that we could list all day. Because of His goodness, He reveals Himself to us in many ways so that we will see Him.

Although God seems to have vanished in the book of Esther, He has never played a game of hide-and-seek with us. Jesus Himself, fully God and fully man, came to reveal God in a way that all our senses could experience. Those who walked with Him on earth could absorb His reality with their whole beings. Jesus is the pinnacle of how God has revealed Himself to man. In fact, Colossians 1:15 says, "The Son is the

image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." God has made His message and His character visible through His Son, Jesus.



Read these passages and list what each tells you about the character of God.

Exodus 34:6-7

Psalm 25:6

Psalm 147:5

Malachi 3:6

Job 19:25 (Don't miss this one! It's central to the book of Esther.)

<u>.</u>	This is only a partial list of the innumerable attributes of God. If some
4	others come to mind, list them here.

Lynn recently sent me a picture of a cute sign in a shop that she frequents. It says, "Let our work speak louder than our talking points." This is a fervent prayer for me as a wordy girl at heart. But God already functions this way: His work reveals His glory. This is what we have to look forward to in this study.

There may be a silence as it relates to God's name, but His Presence shouts all the way through the book of Esther. Just like in the Song of Solomon, the other book that doesn't mention God's name, God is made visible through His fingerprints of love. There is a string of "coincidences" we'll trace too significant to be anything but a display of God's Providence, His protective care.

In this first week, we're taking a magnifying glass to the motivations of all the characters in this fascinating story, so let's start with God.

What *could* His motivations be in this book? They're not spelled out for us, and we should never presume to know exactly what God is thinking unless Scripture explicitly says it. Yet, His core motivations become very clear as we consider this book as one puzzle piece with the other sixty-five. Let's use The Clarity Principle again. God's motivation since the fall of man in Genesis 3 is to redeem, to rescue, and to restore all that is broken between Himself and those He creates and loves. What is His name that reveals His motivation in each of these stories?

For Noah's family in the flood (Genesis 5–8) . . . Redeemer. For the Israelites coming out of slavery in Egypt (Exodus 2–13) . . . Redeemer.

For the weary exiles returning to Jerusalem (Ezra)... Redeemer. Through Jesus on the cross (John 19)... Redeemer.

Throughout all of Scripture, God is consistently rescuing and redeeming. Let's watch closely as His undercover work reveals His pursuit of redemption all through the story of Esther.

There are two seemingly conflicting truths that are equally accurate:

- 1. God sometimes seems to have vanished.
- 2. He's always present even when we feel like He's left us.



Our invisible God never leaves us. But sometimes
He's standing in our blind spot, beckoning
us to watch for the effects of His hand.



That's what I want you to take away from our first day together, because (*spoiler alert!*) the focus and superhero of this book isn't the one with her name at the top. As in the rest of Scripture, the primary hero was and always will be God. He may not be named, but watching His

every move in this story will teach us more about Him and how He is always, *always* with us even when we can't see Him.

Knowing whom He is helps us to more accurately interpret the actions of His unseen hand in this story. God is good. He is loving and trustworthy. Then and now, He always keeps His promises. He is the Redeemer who rescues those He loves.

Dathway Principle

God is faithful and ever-present, even when it seems He's vanished.

Memorize

"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse" (Romans 1:20).

Read the memory verse aloud four times. Read it very slowly the first time and faster each subsequent time.

Application

Your one application this week is to read or listen to the whole book of Esther in one sitting. Depending on the rate at which you read, it will take you around forty-five minutes. Lynn and I want you to have an overview of the whole story from the very beginning. If this is the first time you are reading Esther, you'll see what an exciting part of God's story it is. If you've read it before, I guarantee you'll be challenged and inspired anew!

# Esther Day Two: For the Love of a Story

In my home state of North Carolina, tucked into the southern, coastal region of the U.S., natives are known for a list of cultural delights. Our food is second-to-none (we think!) with barbeque and sweet tea topping the menu. Accents here are as slow and warm as a summer's day. Our turns-of-phrase sprinkle conversations with colorful word pictures. And when we're in a house overflowing with people, you can count on my husband to shake his head and say, "Too many fleas on one dog!"

There's one love that trumps all the others in the south, though. We're a people with a full-blown obsession with a well-told story. One of my favorite field trips as a third-grader was our class trip to the storytelling festival on the lawn of Raleigh's State Capitol. My brain has a storeroom filled with vivid memories of small groups of kids sitting on blankets, legs splayed in all directions, as professional storytellers spun their yarns. We were rapt in the rare silence of children. Our imaginations were racing while our bodies were still. I attended that festival over forty-five years ago, but the girl inside is still transfixed by a great story.

I don't think it's just southerners who love a story. Humans have handed down stories, both fictional and historical, since the beginning of time. There's something in our souls that responds to a story written in a book, told by a friend, or recounted on the flickering screen of a movie theater. We love to watch heroes triumph, villains be vanquished, and happy endings emerge.

Stories can be enjoyed just for pleasure, but they also inspire and teach.

Į.	Make a short list of two to three stories of any genre that have captured
1.	your heart and mind. Put one favorite lesson beside the name of each
	story you've listed.

The great news about our study is that Esther is not just a captivating story. It's epic. And better yet, it's true. To understand the story of Esther, we need to understand all the elements: genre, time, setting, and characters. Without knowledge of these pieces, we'll lose the richness and nuances of this book.

Just like a human writer puts together a story, God is the author of this story. He chose and developed the characters, human free will and all. He divinely picked the setting. God's hand scripted each scene, and He determined the timing of each move. Our Redeemer didn't just craft a story in a fictional world like a human author. He created the story in our real world and brought about His ultimate good. Let's take a look.

*	How does picturing God as the author of this true story help you see His part in it?
,	part in it?

#### The Genre

The Bible itself contains multiple genres, or types, of writing. There are narratives/histories like Kings and Chronicles. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are wisdom literature. There are books of poetry, including Psalms, and prophecy like Jeremiah and Isaiah. In the New Testament, there are Gospels that tell the life of Jesus and epistles, which are letters that teach. When you're studying, it's important to know the genre of each book and take it into consideration. Knowing the genre helps us to understand and interpret Scripture. For example, similes in poetry aren't interpreted literally, they're word pictures designed to illustrate a concept or principle.

#### Esther

There is a lot of debate about the genre of Esther, but since I'm not a Bible scholar, I'm not going to go deep into all the arguments here. If you're interested, please use that spark of curiosity to dig into some of the resources we list in the endnotes.

In a nutshell, Esther seems to be a blended genre. It is history but told with the "artistry of great literature." That's a contrast to the kind of reporting we'd find in a newspaper article. Instead of containing "just the facts, ma'am," Esther includes elements and details that heighten the unfolding drama. This is consistent with Hebrew narrative and how historians at the time wrote. It also conforms to the way we tell a story across the table to a friend. The retelling is true even though some details are left out and others are emphasized.

Narrative, or storytelling, has always been a powerful genre that can both inform and teach. The emotions evoked in a story can reform the listener. In this story, God, the author, establishes His love for His chosen people, the Jews, and His providential care over them.

In addition to genre, here's another Scriptural distinction that's important to understand. There are two main types of Scripture: *descriptive* and *prescriptive*. It's important to know the difference, because prescriptive Scripture contains directives from God.

**Prescriptive passages** tell us what to do and how to please God. **Descriptive Scripture** simply relates a story without commentary on the morality of the actions.

If we confuse descriptive and prescriptive Scripture, it can lead to interpretive trouble. I found this great question to help us tell the difference between the two types. "Is the passage *describing* something (it should happen)?"<sup>5</sup>

The narrative in Esther isn't prescriptive. Instead, it's descriptive. One of Esther's unique traits is that the narrative is completely devoid of

any discussion of motives, thoughts, or how God judges human actions. Much is described with no commentary as to whether God sees it as right or wrong.

4	How can it aid in your individual Bible study to know the difference		
4.	between prescriptive and descriptive Scripture?		
*	Read 2 Timothy 3:16–17. List the source and functions of Scripture that are revealed in these verses.		
رند	Think about the possible goals of the unknown human author of Esther.		
7.	Circle words from the list you made in the previous question that could have been the author's possible goals for writing the book of Esther.		

#### The Time and Setting

Hang with me through a lot of details here. I promise that some fascinating connections are coming.

Although we can't nail down the exact dates, they vary slightly according to the source, Esther became queen around 478 BC in the Persian Empire. If you look at the timeline, you'll see where this book falls in God's big story.

722 BC: Samaria falls, and the Assyrian exile of Israel begins

**586 BC:** Jerusalem falls and the Babylonian exile of Judah begins

539 BC: Babylon falls to Cyrus, king of Persia

**537 BC:** Cyrus makes his first decree (Ezra 1:1) and the first group of Jews return to Israel and begin to rebuild, the Postexilic period begins

486-465 BC: Xerxes' reign

**478 BC:** Esther becomes queen

Here's a summary of Israel's history during this time from a tenthousand-foot perspective. The book of Judges documents the continuing cycle of sin and idolatry, which is the worship of other gods. God punishes the kingdoms, both Israel and Judah, that were once united as Israel by removing them from the land He had given them. Just like a loving parent, God's discipline was designed to bring His people back to Himself and into chosen obedience. Israel goes into exile first, taken by Assyria. Then Judah is conquered by Babylon and taken into captivity, a painful exile away from their God-given land.

Around forty-seven years into the Jewish exile in Babylon, Babylon is conquered by another power, Persia. The king of Persia, King Cyrus, seizes control. The biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah are records of the Jews, the people from Judah, who began to return to Israel after Cyrus released and equipped them to go. For all of you who are word nerds like me, this timeframe is called the **Postexilic period** because it was *after* the *exile* was officially over. (Yes, friends, I *have* been practicing how to say Postexilic. It doesn't exactly trip off the tongue, but I desperately want to use it in a sentence.)

I know that's a lot, and you might be wondering where the fascinating epic-ness of Esther starts. With all the details, it's hard to synthesize them, but let's put it all together. The book of Esther covers about ten years during the rule of Xerxes, a king who reigned about forty-five years after Cyrus.



It can be confusing that different translations use different names. Xerxes is his Greek name, while Ahasuerus is the Hebrew variant. They're different names for the same king, so don't be confused if you have a translation that uses Ahasuerus or if you see it when we quote from the English Standard Version. Lynn and I decided to use Xerxes in this study because it's the version that we can pronounce.

Esther and Mordecai, the main characters whom we're about to get to in a moment, were Jews residing in the Persian city of Susa during a time when they didn't technically have to be there. Instead of going back to the Jewish homeland of Israel, they stayed in a pagan land where they were foreigners. Why?

Just like the name of God, the book of Esther is silent about their motivations in staying, but we can make some educated guesses based on a little history and a big understanding of our own human nature. Jerusalem was a pile of rubble at this point in history, but Susa was the winter home and playground of the royal family. Cushy much? Esther would have been born in Persia, so all the strangers weren't strange to her. They were familiar, and humans are always drawn to familiarity. Persia wasn't their historical home, but it had become home in every other way. There were families, houses, and livelihoods. No matter the exact human reason, God, our divine Author, had placed Esther and Mordecai in this time and setting.

€	Describe the time you live in:



*	Describe your setting (country, town, neighborhood):
	Acts 17:26 says, "From one man he made all the nations, that they uld inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times istory and the boundaries of their lands."
*	What thoughts come to mind knowing that God chose the time and place for Esther, and He's also chosen the time and place for you?
The	e Characters

There are five main characters in Esther, and we'll give each of them the space they deserve in upcoming days.

K'a a Vanas	0	Harran	
King Xerxes	Queen #2 Esther	Haman	
Queen #1 Vashti	Mordecai		

Just like us, each one of them has many layers. They're all very human with a full range of emotions and the choice to follow God or reject Him.

It's interesting to note that there's a turning point, a place of decision, for each character. This beautiful book shows both the Sovereignty, or rule and reign, of God as well as human choice as elements in God's bigger story.

,, and are some of the
characters that God has put in my story.
Our Motives Revealed
The story of Esther has been reviled at times, but it's beloved, too
Her story has been told over, and over again. Fictionalized accounts
have been written, movies like One Night with the King have been made
and there are even cartoon versions. As the book of Esther has been
Hollywood-ized, it's also been sanitized. Just like our Christmas nativi
ties don't portray an accurate, Scriptural view of Jesus' birth, these ren-
ditions start to smudge our view of the whole of Scripture. Cleaned-up
versions end up leaving us with what we wish but without what we need
Why do we always want to clean up God's story?
I've come to the uncomfortable conclusion that the motive for dunk
ing God's Word into spiritual Clorox is that we don't want to face our
own flaws. We'd rather skew Scripture than look at ourselves in the mir-
ror displaying the weaknesses of the people He uses. Let's make a pact
Right here. Right now. Let's commit to reading and studying Esther
minus our rose-colored glasses. Without our spiritual Clorox. Let's lool
at the hard stuff so that we can truly celebrate the beautiful work of Goo
in the lives of messy humanity.
List two or three reasons that you think make humans want to "clean up God's story.

ther
What are the dangers involved when we do so?
One of the many beautiful characteristics of Scripture is that it's d's big story, populated with sinful humanity, told honestly. When we ognize God as both author and hero of His story, we can also begin to His authorship in our personal story. Despite our flaws and failures are a part of God's big story. We can trust that our faithful Author is ting us into His amazing tale!

Pathway Principle —

God is the author of our story.

Memorize

Today, write out the memory verse four times and then read all four times aloud. Circle words that are meaningful to you.

"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse" (Romans 1:20).

### Application

Have you read the book of Esther from beginning to end yet? If not, it's okay! It's your only application this week. Your assignment today is to schedule a time on your calendar to do it before the end of the week. It will take about forty-five minutes.

## Day Three: When My "Why" Is Me, Myself, and I

During a polarizing election cycle, I opened my email and found a copyand-pasted message from an acquaintance containing her beliefs about the times in which we lived. The message was long, full of error, and punctuated with undertones of hate.

To say that I didn't appreciate this email would be a grave understatement. I was furious. How dare she send me such a thing! The words assaulted my values and were a gross misrepresentation of the faith we share. So . . . (insert sarcasm here) I did what any good Christian woman would do. I composed a scathing social media post in my head:

If you're someone who sends unsolicited political emails expressing your "concerns" to people that you haven't spoken to in years, I have a little advice.

Stop it. Now.

You're not changing minds OR winning hearts.

I. Was. Hot.

Thankfully, I paused before I posted, and God intervened through Scripture. Esther 1 is where God directed me, and as I read, I remembered



an application that shone a spotlight on my anger and challenged my motives.

3	Read chapter 1 of Esther and jot down here what jumped out at you. Often $$				
7.	Read chapter 1 of Esther and jot down here what jumped out at you. Often the Holy Spirit will make verses jump off the page, or "come alive," when				
	we need to apply God's Word to our own lives.				

When I was a little girl, there was nothing that I loved more than dressing up. My mother lovingly created a dress-up box for me filled with her old dresses, discarded shoes, outdated jewelry, and a few costumes. I'd clunk around our house in oversized shoes all day long, adorned in sparkling "jewels" and dragging the "train" of her too-big dresses behind me.

At some point in every childhood, there's a dream to be a princess or Wonder Woman. We want to be part of a story in which the good guys win every time. There's a longing in the human heart to be a hero.

Just like you, I'd choose to twin with Esther in this story, but the day I received the email and read chapter 1, God used the opportunity to show me my likeness to King Xerxes instead. He used the Scripture to shine a light on my motives, and I didn't like what I saw.

#### The Root of Rotten Motives

In chapter 1, verses 1–8, the author describes the first character that we meet in the book of Esther, King Xerxes. A little of his personal history

helps us make sense of this chapter. Xerxes was the son of Darius, a Persian king who perpetuated the ongoing conflict between Persia and Greece. Toward the end of Darius' life, he led a losing campaign against Athens, the capital of Greece, and died before he finished planning a second attack.

Herodotus, a pagan Greek author of the day who is often referred to as "The Father of History," recorded accounts of the Greco-Persian wars. In an account that verifies Scripture, he wrote that Xerxes held an enormous banquet to garner the favor and resources of his kingdom. The banquet was held to raise troops and funds for yet another war against the Greeks. Xerxes' aim was to avenge his father and restore glory to his present kingdom. This banquet Herodotus described is the same one detailed in the opening chapter of Esther.

The banquet included an extravagant timeline, lavish decorations, priceless table settings, sumptuous food, and an endless flow of booze. When we break down the king's motivation, digging deep into his "why," we can see two self-centered motivations.

King Xerxes had:

Something to prove—The king's banquet and the war he was planning were a show to prove that he was wealthy, strong, and worthy to anyone in doubt.

Something to earn—The banquet was also a means of earning support and finances from those attending or watching.

In both cases, Xerxes was not serving his people. All of Xerxes' actions were self-motivated.

When I thought about my root-motives for the social media post that I was considering, I realized that sadly, I was just like King Xerxes (with a significantly lower budget!). I wanted to *prove* that I was a little more righteous, or virtuous, than the person who sent the email to me. I wanted to *earn* the approval of all my social media friends along with their condemnation of the sender. Even if I wrapped words of righteous anger around my actions, my motives were impure.



2	Have you ever had something to prove or something to earn that resulted
1.	in self-centered or self-serving actions? Describe the situation and what
	happened.

Many times, tainted motives spring from gaps in our lives. These are places that I've come to call holes in our souls. The author of Esther doesn't do any psychoanalysis on the king, but knowing humanity like we do, we can dig out two possible sources for his motives. Sin and flaws are holes in our souls that manifest in a myriad of negative ways.

Sin	<u>Flaws</u>
Pride	Insecurity
Arrogance	People-pleasing
Thinking more highly of ourselves than others	Insecurity
Desire to control	Craving others' approval

Almost certainly, the king had at least one of these holes in his soul and probably many more. So do we. That's why it's essential that we pause before we act to parse our motives. We need to ask ourselves these questions:

Am I doing \_\_\_\_\_\_ to try to prove something?
 Am I doing \_\_\_\_\_ to try to earn something?

If the answer is "yes" to either question, it doesn't mean that we should hide in shame. The need for approval is natural, but the only kind of approval that truly satisfies comes from God.

Not only does He provide satisfaction, He fills the holes in our souls! It's when we don't turn to God, we end up like King Xerxes, willing

to sacrifice anything or anyone to meet his need for affirmation and prowess. When our motives are mixed, we look to others to meet our expectations in inappropriate ways.

-	Review Esther 1:12. Who was the ultimate recipient of King	Xerxes'
7.	expectations?	
<u>.</u>	How did she respond, and what were the consequences?	
1.	now did she respond, and what were the consequences:	

This is a section of Scripture where I'd love to have more detail! Because I wanted to understand better, I turned to commentaries, books written by biblical scholars that explain the Scripture. Lots of brainy folks have made educated guesses about the motives behind King Xerxes' request and Vashti's response, but none of us know for certain why and how this scene unfolded. I've summarized the scholarly viewpoints below, and you'll see how even their opinions contradict each other.

Conflicting beliefs about King Xerxes' motivations:

- → His expectations were appropriate or virtuous because:
  - He was proud of Vashti and wanted to show her off.

    He sent seven eunuchs because he planned for her to enter,
    carried on a royal platform like the queen she was.
- → His expectations were wildly inappropriate or evil because:
  - **He was drunk.** Matthew Henry said, "If he had not been put out of the possession of himself by drinking to excess,

- he would not have done such a thing, but would have been angry at anyone that should have mentioned it."<sup>4</sup>
- He wanted to humiliate Vashti to show his power. He sent seven eunuchs as the muscle to make her do what he *knew* she wouldn't want to do.

Conflicting beliefs about Vashti's motivations:

- → Her response was appropriate or virtuous because:
  - She was defending her rightful status. Queens were traditionally introduced at the beginning of banquets and the prostitutes at the end.
  - **She was protecting her dignity.** She refused to display herself for a crowd of drunk men.
  - She was maintaining her modesty. The traditional interpretation found in Jewish teaching was that the King's request for her to appear in her crown was actually a command for her to appear in *only* her crown, naked except for that one sparkly accessory.
- → Her response was wildly inappropriate or evil because:
  - She was a rebellious wife. Vashti simply didn't submit to her husband.
  - She was a prideful and entitled royal. As the granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar, she was too vain to go to her husband when summoned.

Confusing, right? I presented these points of view so that you can seek God and draw your own conclusions about Xerxes' and Vashti's motivations. Personally, I believe that all these conflicting points of view about these two characters say more about the commentators' biases than about the actual interaction (another book for another time). Biases, not facts, often come to the forefront when we try to interpret others' motives.

The King's response tells us most of what we need to know about

the root of the King's motivations. The only things we know for *certain* is that Vashti didn't come to him, and the king was furious. "But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him" (Esther 1:12 ESV).

When the king became angry, whom did he turn to for advice?
What advice did they give?
What's your response to this action?
How would you describe the advice that King Xerxes received?



One of the means that I've begun to use when examining my motives is the tool I like to call "red-flag feelings." Listed below are red-flag feelings that signal us to slow down, let our emotions settle, examine our motives, and ask for wisdom before we act.

#### Red-flag Feeling #1:

**Burning Anger.** Instead of stuffing anger, we can use its appearance as an indicator to look at our feelings. It's an opportunity to slow down, pause our reaction, and evaluate. In the case of my email, I was furious because of the content, but I was also offended that it was sent to me. My anger was an indicator that I needed to take a hard look at my motives.

#### Red-flag Feeling #2:

**Self-righteousness.** In Esther 1:15, King Xerxes asked his counselors for advice, and they reacted with over-the-top self-righteousness. In our world, there are people who will always agree with us, fanning the flames of our anger. What we need in moments of anger is someone who will point us straight back to God, away from ourselves. When I had to decide what to do with my post, I turned to my husband, who is loving but not a "yes man." As one who knows the unchanging wisdom of God, not just one who understands the shifting times, he advised me to spend my time praying instead of posting, a pause that allowed my heated emotions to cool.

4	$How \ could \ using \ anger \ and \ self-right eousness \ as \ red \ flags-signaling \ you \ anger \ and \ self-right eousness \ as \ red \ flags-signaling \ you \ anger \ and \ self-right eousness \ as \ red \ flags-signaling \ you \ anger \ anger \ and \ self-right eousness \ as \ red \ flags-signaling \ you \ anger \ an$		
1.	to pause and examine your motives—help in your relationships?		

Whom do you consult when y clearly? What qualifications do	o you have for those you consult?
Thankfully, the social media	a post that I composed in my head never
rain to my fingers! He humble	Holy Spirit interrupted the flow from my ed me by revealing the holes in my soul ag feelings, good counsel, and Esther 1 me cold.
vell and often harm those arour	red motives, the kind that never serve us nd us. Let's use his negative example as a rown motives and making sure that the away from God, also.
Pathway Principle -	
God can refine our mot	tives when we remain humble.
Nemorize ———	
oday, fill in the blanks. If you l	nave access to a recording device (maybe the verse aloud into it. Listen to it four
mes wille you're reading it.	
	of the world God's
For since the	of the world God'shave

Esther Application

If you haven't read the whole book of Esther yet, complete that assignment first.

Optional: If you've read it, write one sentence per chapter to give a summary of the main idea of that chapter.

Day Four: Superheroes and Other Myths: Why People Never Deserve a Pedestal

Trigger Alert: Today's lesson deals with the topic of sexual violence. If you have experienced sexual abuse or violence of any kind, know that I'm praying that this lesson brings comfort. God has a plan for each of His daughters that is never destroyed by what we might have suffered at the hands of others.

I scrolled the news article with growing grief and disbelief. No, Lord. Please, not another one. A Christian communicator that I highly esteemed had fallen. His reputation was posthumously exposed, and it was ugly. The rumors of adultery that had floated around for years before his death were proving to be true despite all the protests from within his ministry while he lived.

I was crushed. I had listened to his sermons. I had wondered at his ability to both intellectually and biblically defend the faith. His gifts were aspirational. He was a kind of superhero in my mind. That made the reality of his brokenness so much harder to hear.

My hero's fall points to a truth that is painful to bear. Every single human who has ever lived is a strange and sometimes tragic mix of good and bad. There are no "good guys" who are fully pure in heart. And there are no "bad guys" who are evil through and through. There are only humans, made exquisite in the image of God and terrible in our

fallenness. Each one of us is capable of great good when we're walking with God and part of His story. We're also capable of far worse than our most horrifying nightmare. We have the ability to be heroes but never Messiahs; however, in our humanity we often burden our heroes with savior status.

When Lynn and I planned out this study, we decided we couldn't leave week 1 without including the first part of chapter 2 where the "good guys" of this book are introduced. But today, and the rest of this study, comes with a warning label. Esther might not be who you think she is. She is a gorgeous woman whom God used, but she has some not-so-pretty layers, too. Let's take a compassionate but honest look at a woman who's more like us than we might have thought.

$\Rightarrow$	Read Esther 2:1–12. Who are the characters that are still here from chapter 1?
*	Who are the new characters?

Four years passed between Esther 1 and Esther 2. Vashti was exiled in the third year of the King's reign, and Esther was made queen in the seventh year. In the middle, Xerxes went to war as planned against the Greeks, but he suffered a crushing defeat instead of the legacy-building victory for which he had schemed and banqueted.<sup>5</sup>



$\Rightarrow$	Although there's no mention of his <i>current</i> feelings, consider human reactions after defeat and list some of the emotions that the king may have
•	been dealing with at the beginning of chapter 2.
*	How do humans often behave when they're dealing with these kinds of emotions?
*	What advice did his personal assistants propose? How might their advice have appealed to him because of his emotional state?
	mave appealed to film because of fils emotional state?

Although I'm an unabashed believer that Scripture holds all that we need, I also realize that I've too-often brushed by the humanity of the people in God's Word. Although we should use the tool of evaluating emotions very carefully, we shouldn't skip it. We never want to misinterpret the truths of Scripture by making them fit human actions, but we *should* aim to interpret human actions with human emotion in mind. Since the author doesn't give us any indication of the thoughts or motives of the people in the story, we'll use this tool today, thinking through the natural feelings that might have been a factor in the actions of each person.

Perhaps with mixed motives of their own, the advisors helped the king put their counsel into action. Commissioners went to every province to collect young, beautiful virgins to be tested by the king and ultimately to become part of his harem. Esther 2:4 tells us that only one would be chosen as queen.

Let's pause here a moment to look more closely and consider the possible emotions of the women who were part of this exercise. As you continue to process these passages, keep these cultural and historical facts in mind:

- → The young women who were chosen had to leave home.
- → Though the verb "brought" is used in some places, Esther 2:8 says that "Esther also was *taken* to the king's palace." (my emphasis added)
- → Each of these virgins would spend a night with the king which delicately implies a not-so-delicate reality—the loss of their virginity.
- After their night with the king, they would either be chosen as Queen or relegated forever to the harem of concubines that the king kept for his pleasure. The concubines were isolated, forbidden to marry, and some historians estimate that Xerxes may have had upward of three hundred women in his harem.
- → Polygamy was a cultural way of life, arranged marriage was the accepted system, and teenaged brides were the norm during this time and for many centuries after.

	Make a list of the range of emotions that the women who were collected
1.	might have felt. Keep in mind that the culture of this time was far different
	from our modern understanding of human rights and accepted practices.
	However, that fact doesn't erase human emotional reactions. This might
	have been considered an honor by some, a prison sentence by others, and
	traumatic by many.

Now that we've thoroughly introduced the people in the story so far, we're finally ready to meet the main characters whom we love: Mordecai and Esther! Mordecai is a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, one of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. He took guardianship of Esther when her parents died. Verse 7 tells us that Mordecai "had taken her as his own daughter," an expression that is far deeper and more loving than simply giving her the basics of food and shelter.

Bible Nerd Box

If Mordecai was actually taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar, he would have been over one hundred years old by this time. Most commentators think that this reference is used to point out that Mordecai was one of the chosen people. His people were taken into exile, thus he was taken into exile. It also establishes him as a recipient of the Covenant promises. The reference to "son of Kish" may be used by the author to show Mordecai's family ties to Saul. The genealogy also indicates that Mordecai wasn't over one hundred.<sup>6</sup>

Some other things we know about Mordecai in 2:1–12 are that he:

- → allowed Esther to be part of the King's contest, or at the very least he didn't prevent it.
- forbade Esther from revealing her Jewish identity.
- → paced in front of the harem's housing every day to check on Esther.

*	What do Mordecai's short biography, adoption, and consequent actions potentially tell you about the motivations that drove him? Do you see a list of both positive and negative motives emerging?

As we continue to acquaint ourselves with each person in the book of Esther, we'll see that Mordecai has an admirable strength of character. The facts above, however, reinforce that there's no such thing as a perfect parent, not even Mordecai.

Now let's take a look at our sweet Esther. There are very few details shared about Esther in the introductory verses.

-	What does Scripture say about Esther in 2:1–12? What doesn't Scrip-
7.	ture say?

My heart goes out to Esther at this point. As I've studied, read, and prayed, I've come to see her as an astonishingly-beautiful, young woman

Esther

who not only endured the tragic loss of her parents but also persevered under the stress of a life-altering contest. Now she carries the heavy responsibility of the crown. She may have come from humble beginnings, but she has become extraordinary.

Historical Note

Esther, the name by which we generally know her, is a Persian version of her name. Her Jewish name was Hadassah, and you might find this in some Bible translations, too.

That's what we know, but let's take a searching look at what's not included. There's no mention of the law, the divine commands that God had given Israel generations before. There's no description of godly resistance to the culture either. The king calls. Mordecai sends. Esther obeys. There is no record of any attempt by Mordecai or Esther to avoid being part of the king's plan.

Also, Esther didn't reveal her racial identity, but maybe she didn't have much to hide. She and Mordecai blended into the pagan culture well at the beginning of this story. If they had been living according to the law of God, eating kosher, praying regularly, and celebrating the festivals, people would have known them as Jews without a word being spoken. There's seemingly no evidence of their faith in God to give them away.

When we read Scripture in its stripped-down, unvarnished glory, we have a much less glamorous girl in front of us than those presented on screens. She's exceptional but definitely not perfect.

Esther is a young woman who is like us in many ways.

She's a girl who's lived through some hard knocks. She blends in with her culture enough that some might consider her lukewarm. But she's still chosen by God. She's still created to be part of His story.

Just. Like. You.

Just. Like. Me.

There *are* heroes in this world beyond the little ones that emerge in costume from a dress-up box or those in Saturday morning cartoons. There are people, like Esther, who do wonderful things.

But even those folks are simply flawed humans who have likely accomplished great good and perpetrated terrible cruelty in the stretch of their life's stories. It's true of my fallen preacher man, and we'll see that it's true of Esther, too, as the story goes on. Being honest about the contradictions can make us despair, but it's a place for hope, too. We each have the call to be an imperfect hero, so we need to extend that grace to all around us. When we keep our heroes flat on the ground instead of up on a pedestal, Superhero status rests with God alone.

$\Rightarrow$	How does today's study of Esther make you sad?
*	How does today's study of Esther give you hope?

God knows that we are each capable of both great good and terrible cruelty.



		of the world God'shave
		from what has been made, so that
	excuse	
Read the section Application	·	ou had trouble with several more times.
1 1:1:		
	read the whole l	book of Esther yet, complete that assign-
If you haven't ment first.  Optional: If you		a list of the characters in Esther and give
If you haven't ment first.  Optional: If you	u've read it, make	a list of the characters in Esther and give
If you haven't ment first.  Optional: If you	u've read it, make	a list of the characters in Esther and give
If you haven't ment first.  Optional: If you	u've read it, make	a list of the characters in Esther and give

## Day Five: The Mystery of Mixed Motives

Our human temptation is to wriggle off the hook. I've wanted to give myself a pass for:

- stupid things I've said.
- → the ways I've hurt people.
- considering myself better than others.
- confidences I've broken.
- > promises that I haven't kept.

I'm not just being hard on myself. I can also be loving, humble, and a great friend. Being human means that we're all a blend of good, bad, and very ugly.

Being fully honest, think about what you've learned this week about each of these people, and write what you have in common with each of them.

Xerxes			
Vashti			
Mordecai			
Esther			

### Esther

Most of us can swing between the motives of all four of these folks in a day, but before you get too disheartened, I want to say something revolutionary.

Your motives don't matter as much as you think.

In the case of each of the people we've encountered this week, God worked despite and sometimes through their motives. It puts our presence in His story into proper perspective. Do we matter? Absolutely. Are our good behaviors and pure motives essential to His story? Nope. We can look at this small bite of Esther and see the truth.

God works despite Xerxes' self-centeredness and anger.

God positions His people through Vashti's refusal to comply to her king.

God uses Mordecai even though he's a less-than-perfect parent.

God places Esther in the palace despite her lukewarm faith.



#### God's providence is immovable despite His people's wavering faithfulness.



In the Old Testament book of Esther, we see God's providence at work as His people wait for the coming Messiah. As commentator Karen Jobes says, "Regardless of whether they always knew what the right choice was or whether they had the best of motives, God was working through even their imperfect decisions and actions to fulfill his perfect purposes."<sup>7</sup>

We dearly love the comfort in quoting Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." While we hope for those shining outcomes, we often think that God's good work is blocked by our imperfections. We see in Esther that's simply not true. We've given ourselves too much credit. That's good, good news for us who can get tripped up by our own perfectionism . . . but it's not an excuse.

Do our motives matter at all? Yes! Although pure motives aren't essential to God's work, He desires to make us spotless in every way. God kept His ancient promises to Esther and Mordecai in spite of their short-comings while they waited for the promised Messiah. In the same way, God works His good in our lives while we wait for the promise of Jesus' second coming. He's always about His redeeming and rescuing work.

*	Write Romans 8:29 below.
*}]	What transformational new promise is being made for those who follow Jesus?
**)	In what way do you rely on God's promises in the same way that Esther and Mordecai did?

The role our motives play in God's story are a bit mysterious in Esther, but we can apply The Clarity Principle by looking at some other passages in the Bible.

Read each of these passages in the New International Version translation of the Bible (if you don't own one, you can find it online). Then draw a line from the Scripture reference to the truth it reveals about motives.



Proverbs 16:2

The Lord will reveal motives at His second coming.

I Corinthians 4:5

Wrong motives can block prayers being answered.

Philippians 1:18

Motives can only be weighed by the Lord.

James 4:3

God can use both false and true

motives in preaching.

From these passages, we can see that our motives don't limit God, but they are still relevant. There are three big takeaways that we can apply to our own lives and to our further study of Esther.

#### Only the Lord Truly Knows People's Motives

This is an important truth to hold as we deal with both ourselves and others. We can guess at people's motives by looking at their actions, just like we've been doing in our study, but we can never be sure of their motives. It's a dangerous judgement to make.

Making assumptions about people's motives has certainly come back to bite me. As most people do, I tend toward attributing bad motives to actions that I don't like. The problem with that is that it damages relationships by creating defensiveness, discounting wounds, or condemning unfairly. Go back to Vashti and think about all the conflicting viewpoints that pastors and theologians have leveled at her, and then answer these questions.

*	Have you ever had conflicting reports circulating about you? If so, describe
1	the situation.

Why is it da	ingerous to	o ascribe r	notives to	others?	

Even our own motives can be murky. It's all-too-easy to deceive ourselves, and we'll almost always judge our own motives more gently than the harsh ones we deliver to others. Unless someone comes out and tells us their motives, it's better to leave the judging to God. He's the only One who knows the true weight of every motive, so He's the sole, qualified Judge.

#### God Can Use Both Good and False Motives for His Purposes

The person doesn't have to be good, and their actions don't have to be godly in order for God to redeem and rescue.



#### God moves despite mixed motives.



As we've seen in Esther, the New Testament reinforces God's ability to use all things for good. That doesn't mean that all people and all circumstances are good. It simply means that our all-powerful God can redeem them.

Volumes have been written about this mysterious co-mingling of the worlds' evil with God's redemption. It's a hard concept to grapple with, and I almost went under with confusion after my dear friend Linda, the mother of two small sons, died from breast cancer when we were in our early thirties. In the midst of my darkest days after Linda's death, a friend gave me *A Grace Disguised* by Jerry Sittser. It helped me with the complex matter of God using all manners of evil—sickness, abuse, death, etc.—for good.

In *A Grace Disguised*, Sittser recounts the year after a terrible car accident in which a drunk driver killed his mother, wife, and one of their four children. Sittser suffered immeasurable agony over this evil incident, but he also saw God do amazing good in the year that followed. At the end of the book as he processes the seeming contradictions of tragedy and joy, Sittser says, "The badness of the event and the goodness of the results are related, to be sure, but they are not the same. That the latter is a consequence of the former, but the latter does not make the former legitimate or right or good."

Did God's use of King Xerxes make the king's brutal actions good? No. But could God bring good from those terrible actions? Yes. In God's grace and mercy, He is able to redeem our worst sins and our darkest motives. This ability is part of His loving character.

#### Wrong Motives Do Have Consequences

Although the weight of perfecting our own motives is lifted, that doesn't mean that bad motives don't have consequences. James 4:3 says, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." It's very clear that some prayers are not given a "yes" if we're praying with wrong or self-centered motives. I see the mercy of God even in this! There have been many times that I've prayed for things that in retrospect would have been damaging to me or others. God's always consistent, and His "no" was a rescuing work.

I've seen this truth play out in Lynn's life in real-time. I remember our early conversations about her involvement at Changed Choices, the organization she mentioned in the introduction. It's true that her original motives were mixed. My huge-hearted friend wasn't just thinking about serving others. She was also weighing how to get her book into more hands.

But over time, I've watched our good God use those originally-mixed motives and purify them until they shine like gold. In His wondrous mixture of Providence and Sovereignty, the way He reigns over everything, He's leveraged flawed motives to do a great work in and through Lynn.

She has become a gift to the previously-incarcerated women whom she loves, and they're a treasure to her, too. It's a beautiful thing to see. I've watched God transform motives in my own life, and I'll bet you've seen it in yours, too.



## Motives matter, but God moves despite mixed motives.



Pathway Principle

God uses us despite our mixed motives.

(Memorize

Today, cover our memory verse with your hand and repeat it four times. Peek without shame if you need to!

"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse" (Romans 1:20).

Application

Today's the last call! If you haven't read the whole book of Esther yet, set a reminder on your phone for a time to read it before the next meeting. You'll be glad you did! Even though I've issued lots of warnings this week not to Hollywood-ize the book of Esther, it's got more plot twists than the best movie I've ever seen.

## Motives Pathway Principles

God's motives are always pure, so we ask Him to refine ours.

God is faithful and ever-present, even when it seems He's vanished.

God is the author of our story.

God can refine our motives when we remain humble.

God knows that we are each capable of both great good *and* terrible cruelty.

God uses us despite our mixed motives.

1 Prayer

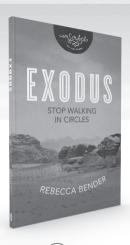
God, You are faithful and true. Your motives toward Your world and me are good. When I'm in uncertain circumstances beyond my control, I will trust that You are writing my story even when I can't see You. I'm thankful that my mixed motives don't disqualify me from being part of Your story. Please show me where you want to refine me and make me more like You, pure in all my ways. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Personal Fournaling

Describe how you generally react to uncertainty (i.e., with fear, shut-
ting down, jumping into action, etc.).

After completing the study this week, how have your beliefs about
the main characters changed? Why have they changed? What is one
way that our invisible God has shown Himself to you?
What is one new thing you learned directly from the Scripture reading this week?
What resonated with you the most this week? How will you apply
this idea in your life moving forward?

# inscribedo

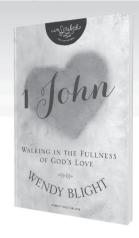




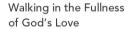
Stop Walking in Circles and Reach God's Destination for Your Life

Rebecca Bender

In this study, Rebecca takes you straight into the book of Exodus where the Israelites are wandering after their own tracks immediately after escaping from bondage and oppression at the hands of Pharaoh. God is trying to get them to the land of his promise, but they, like many of us, are frustrated by doubts, fears, and self-destructive habits.



#### 1 JOHN



Wendy Blight

In this in-depth study of the book of 1 John, Wendy shares the unique insights and wisdom of the last disciple to walk with Jesus. Wendy wrote this book for every woman longing to live out God's unconditional love.



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- Online Bible studies
- Podcast.
- COMPEL writer training
- She Speaks Conference
- Books and resources.

Our desire is to help you to know the Truth and live the Truth. Because when you do, it changes everything.

For more information about Proverbs 31 Ministries, visit: www.Proverbs31.org.



#### What do you do when God seems to have vanished?

When you have a decision to make, when your stability is shaken, when your sure-fire plan fails—when everything is spinning out of control...

Esther is the perfect partner for seeing our invisible God in uncertainty. Though she lived centuries ago, Esther speaks to us when we run into limited control and resources. We find in her a strength and fortitude you and I need today. A strength we discover as we follow her process of listen, feel, do, and speak. We'll see that Esther carved a pathway, not only with faith but with influence, for all women who find themselves walking through uncertainty.

This six-week, in-depth study of the book of Esther is a gritty dive into a woman's story that teaches us to:

- Listen to wise people who fill our gaps of understanding.
- Embrace your feelings as a catalyst for God-directed action.
- Do the work God assigns you even when in doubt.
- Speak up with confidence, knowing that God has a place for your voice in His story.

This book includes biblical and historical background insights, Bible study, practical application, and questions for reflection.

InScribed is a collection of studies that lead women to not just survive but thrive by encouraging them to immerse themselves in the Word of God.



**AMY CARROLL** delights in gathering a community of women with tender hearts and strong voices. She's a speaker and writer for Proverbs 31 Ministries, a speaker coach, and the author of *Breaking Up with Perfect* and *Exhale*.



**LYNN COWELL** is a national conference speaker who passionately empowers women of all ages to understand the importance of Christ confidence. She is the author of several books including *Make Your Move: Finding Unshakable Confidence Despite Your Fears and Failures* for women, and *Brave Beauty* just for girls ages 8–12. She also serves on the speaking and writing team for Proverbs 31 Ministries.

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