

| Drawn in |
BIBLE STUDY

Esther

Finding Yourself in Times of Trouble

EUGENE H. PETERSON



FEATURING
THE MESSAGE

Ester

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BIBLE STUDY

Eugene H. Peterson

THE MESSAGE®

NAV PRESS 

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Esther: Finding Yourself in Times of Trouble

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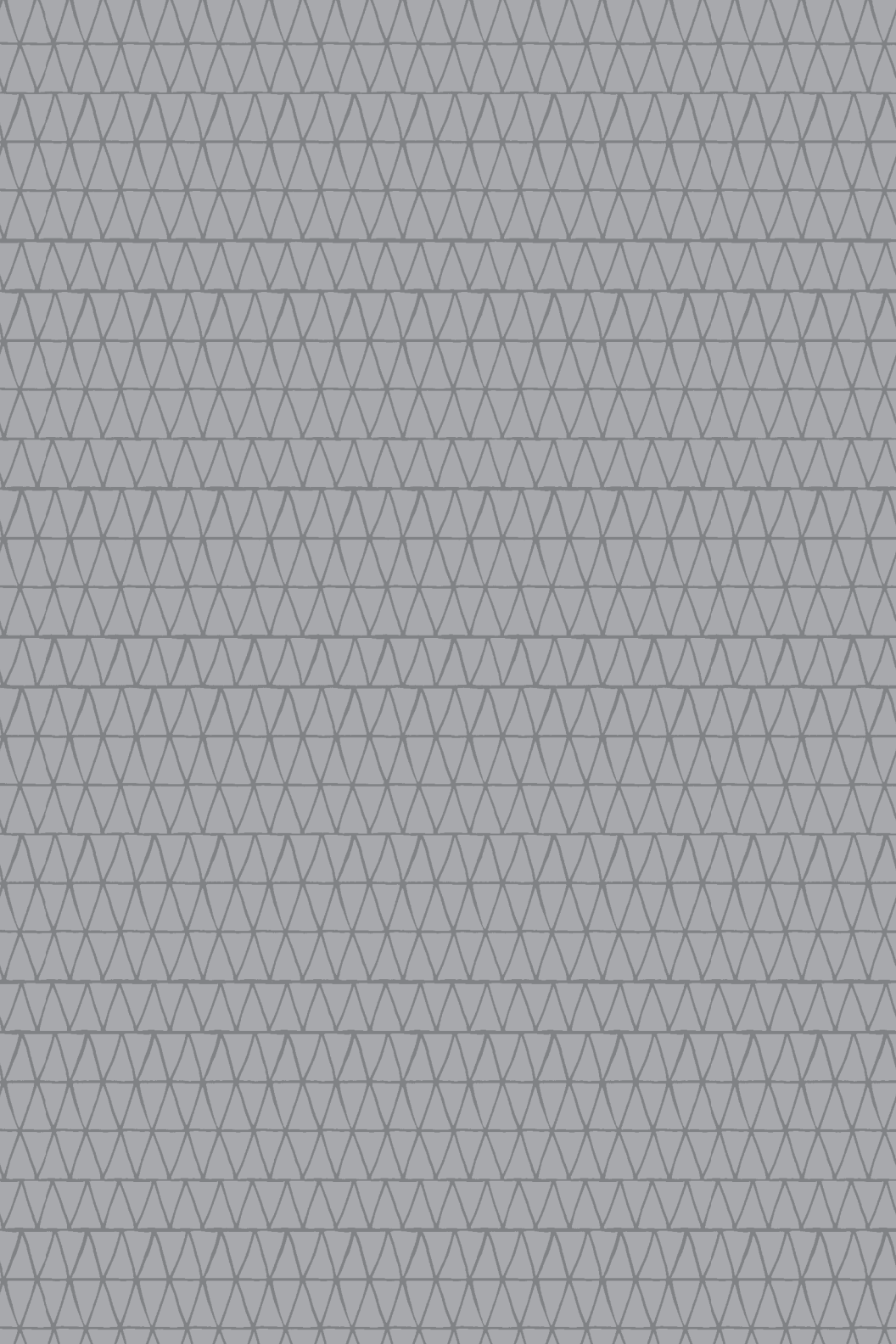
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introduction

Eugene H. Peterson



READING IS THE FIRST thing, just reading the Bible. As we read, we enter a new world of words and find ourselves in on a conversation in which God has the first and last words. God uses words to form and bless us, to teach and guide us, to forgive and save us.

I didn't start out as a pastor. I began my vocational life as a teacher and for several years taught the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek in a theological seminary. I expected to live the rest of my life as a professor and scholar, teaching and writing and studying. But then my life took a sudden vocational turn to pastoring a congregation.

I was now plunged into quite a different world. The first noticeable difference was that nobody seemed to care much about the Bible, which so recently people had been paying me to teach them. Many of the people I worked with now knew virtually nothing about it, had

never read it, and weren't interested in learning. Many others had spent years reading it, but for them it had gone flat through familiarity, reduced to clichés. Bored, they dropped it. And there weren't many people in between. Very few were interested in what I considered my primary work, getting the words of the Bible into their heads and hearts, getting the message lived. They found newspapers and magazines, videos and pulp fiction more to their taste.

Meanwhile I had taken on as my life work the responsibility for getting these very people to listen—really listen—to the message in this book. I knew I had my work cut out for me.

I lived in two language worlds, the world of the Bible and the world of today. I had always assumed they were the same world. But these people didn't see it that way. So out of necessity I became a “translator” (although I wouldn't have called it that then), daily standing on the border between two worlds, getting the language of the Bible that God uses to create and save us, heal and bless us, judge and rule over us, into the language of today that we use to gossip and tell stories, give directions and do business, sing songs and talk to our children.

My intent is simply to get people reading the Bible who don't know that the Bible is readable at all, at least by them, and to get people who long ago lost interest in the

Bible to read it again. Read in order to live, praying as you read, “God, let it be with me just as you say.”

INTRODUCTION TO ESTHER

The unknown Persian Jewish author of Esther probably lived sometime within 150 years of the events described in this story, while Persia was still in charge of the Middle East, before Alexander the Great took over. Jews under Persian rule refused to say that their God was only one among many options, and for that they endured social put-downs, job discrimination, and sometimes violence.

It seems odd that the awareness of God, or even of the people of God, brings out the worst in some people. God, the source of all goodness and blessing and joy, at times becomes the occasion for nearly unimaginable acts of cruelty, atrocity, and evil. There is a long history of killing men and women simply because they are perceived as reminders or representatives of the living God, as if killing people who worship God gets rid of God himself. To no one’s surprise, God is still alive and present.

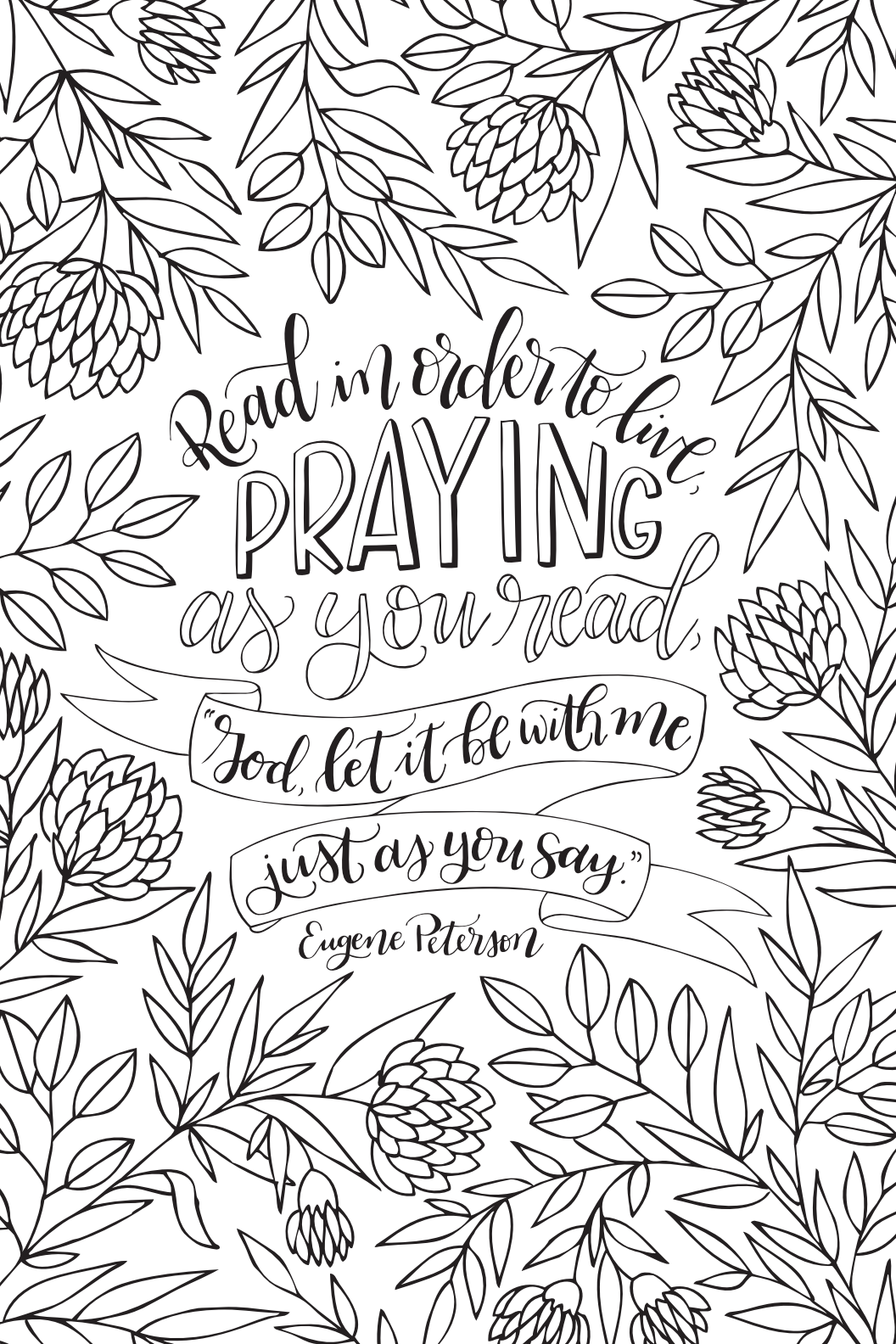
The book of Esther opens a window on this world of violence directed, whether openly or covertly, against God and God’s people. The perspective it provides transcends the occasion that provoked it, a nasty scheme to massacre all the exiled Jews who lived in the vast expanse of fifth-century BC Persia.

Three characters shape the plot. Mordecai, identified simply as “the Jew,” anchors the story. He is solid, faithful, sane, godly. His goodness is more than matched by the evil and arrogant vanity of Haman, who masterminds the planned massacre. Mordecai’s young, orphaned, and ravishing cousin, Esther, whom he has raised, emerges from the shadows of the royal harem to take on the title role.

It turns out that no God-representing men and women get killed in this story—in a dramatic turnaround, the plot fails. But millions before and after Esther have been and, no doubt, will continue to be killed. There is hardly a culture or century that doesn’t eventually find a Haman determined to rid the world of evidence and reminders of God. Meanwhile, Esther continues to speak the final and definitive word: *You can’t eliminate God’s people*. No matter how many of them you kill, you can’t get rid of the communities of God-honoring, God-serving, God-worshiping people scattered all over the earth. This is still the final and definitive word.







Read in order to *live*
PRAYING
as you read,

"God, let it be with me

just as you say."

Eugene Peterson



HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF

Esther

*It takes more than bread to stay alive.
It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth.*

MATTHEW 4:4

MANY PEOPLE APPROACH reading the Bible as a religious duty or a way to get in good with God. Worse still, some believe God will send a horrible punishment if they don't dedicate at least a half hour each day to dutiful study of his Word. Coming to the Bible with so much religious baggage takes all the fun out of reading it.

Reading the Bible isn't simply a fact-finding mission. You don't come just to collect bits of trivia about God. From the moment you read the first line of the Bible, you will discover that this book isn't about you. It's about God. God gave his Word as the place where you meet him face-to-face.

In order to read the Scriptures adequately and

accurately, it's necessary at the same time to live them—to live them *as* we read them. This kind of reading has been named by our ancestors as *lectio divina*, often translated “spiritual reading.” It means not only reading the text but also meditating on the text, praying the text, and living the text. It is reading that enters our souls the way food enters our stomachs, spreads through our blood, and transforms us. Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture; we feed on it. Words spoken and listened to, written and read are intended to do something in us, to give us health and wholeness, vitality and holiness, wisdom and hope.

The Scriptures not only reveal everything of who God is but also everything of who we are. And this revelation is done in such a way as to invite participation on both sides, of author and reader.

This may be the single most important thing to know as we come to read and study and believe these Holy Scriptures: this rich, alive, personally revealing God as experienced in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, personally addressing us in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, at whatever age we are, in whatever state we are. Christian reading is participatory reading, receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love. We submit our lives to this text so that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.

One of the characteristic marks of the biblical storytellers is a certain reticence. They don't tell us too much. They leave a lot of blanks in the narration, an implicit invitation to enter the story ourselves, just as we are, and to discover for ourselves how to fit in. There are, of course, always moral, theological, and historical elements in these stories that need to be studied, but never in dismissal of the story that is being told.

When we submit our lives to what we read in Scripture, we find that we're being led not to see God in our stories but to see our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.

The Bible is God's Word. He spoke it into existence and he continues to speak through it as you read. He doesn't just share words on a page. He shares himself. As you meet God in this conversation, you won't just learn *about* him; you will *experience* him more deeply and more personally than you ever thought possible.

DRAWN IN BIBLE STUDIES

We all lead busy lives, and even when we step away from our activities for spiritual rest and renewal, our activities don't necessarily step away from us. *Drawn in* Bible Studies are designed to temporarily relieve you of distractions so you can enjoy the story of God more fully. This happens in a variety of ways:

The Coloring

For people of all ages, coloring offers a structured activity that fosters creative thinking. Tricia McCary Rhodes, author of *The Wired Soul*, is not surprised by the appeal of coloring among adults today:

Brain scans of people involved in activities like coloring reveal that as we focus, our heart rate slows and our brain waves enter a more relaxed state. Over time, by engaging in Scripture or prayer art-journaling, it may become easier for us to focus and pay attention in other areas of our lives as well. It is no wonder we are so drawn to this activity.

As you work through a study, read the appropriate Bible passage and question, and mull over your response as you color. Some art has been provided for you, but feel free to draw in the open space as well. The act of coloring will help your “orienting response,” the brain function that allows you to filter out background distractions and attend to the matter at hand. That’s one reason so many people doodle as they read or study. Ironically, by coloring as you engage in this Bible study, you’ll be more attentive to what the Scriptures have to teach you.

The Message

For many people, the Bible has become so familiar that it loses some of its resonance. They've memorized so many Scriptures, or heard so many sermons, that they think they've figured a passage out. For others, the Bible has never not been intimidating—its names and contexts separated from us by millennia, its story shrouded by memories of bad church experiences or negative impressions of people who claim it as their authority. While you can read any Bible translation you like alongside the *Drawn in* Bible Studies, included in the studies themselves are passages from *The Message*, a rendering of the Bible in contemporary language that matches the tone and informality of the original, ancient language. You will often be surprised by the way *The Message* translates something you may have read or heard many times before. And in that surprise, you'll be more receptive for what God might have for you today.

The Questions

When we sit down just to read the Bible, we can feel a bit disoriented. The questions in the *Drawn in* Bible Studies are designed to help you stay connected to your own lived experience even as you enter into the lived experience of the people and places the Scriptures introduce us to. You'll grow in your understanding of the Bible, but

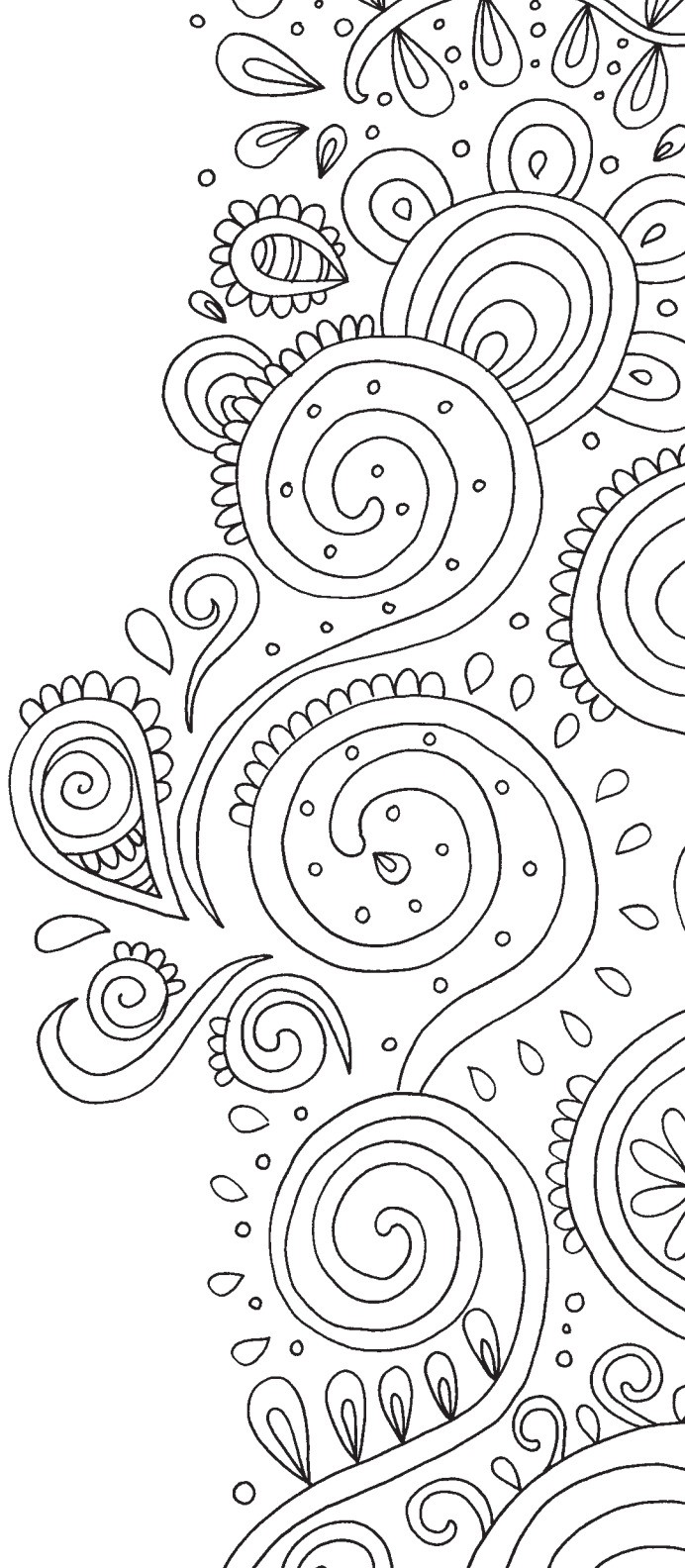
you'll also grow in your understanding of yourself. These questions are also good for discussion—get together with a group of friends, and enjoy coloring and talking together.

The Commentary

Included in this *Drawn in* Bible Study are occasional comments from renowned Bible teacher Eugene Peterson. You'll see his name following his comments. He helps clarify more confusing passages and offers insight into what's behind what you are reading. He'll help keep you from getting stuck.

Leader's Notes

In the section “How to Lead a *Drawn in* Bible Study” you'll find general guidelines for leading people through this study, along with notes specific to each session. These can inform and enhance your experience, so even if you are going through this study on your own, or if you are not the leader of a group discussion of this study, read through the notes as preparation for each session. Nevertheless, don't feel pressure to be an expert; the main purpose of this study is to provide an opportunity for fun and fellowship as people encounter God's Word and consider how it touches their lives.





Esther

— SESSION ONE —

This Is the Story of Something That Happened

ESTHER 1 – 2



SERVANTS GO ABOUT their work quietly and deferentially. They walk down the street and speak in soft conversational tones. They go about their work in gentleness. They don't stand over someone and bully. They stand under and serve.

To be a servant is to be like God, for God is in his creation serving it.

— EUGENE

1. *Recall a time you worked as a “servant”—a job in a service industry, a voluntary role as a care provider, or some other “quiet” and “deferential” role. What was your experience like? What was good about it? What was hard about it?*

2. *Who are some of the people in your life who are “like God” in their servant attitude? What do you appreciate about them?*

3. *Even though “to be a servant is to be like God,” very few people aspire to servanthood. Why is that?*

THIS IS THE story of something that happened in the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled from India to Ethiopia—127 provinces in all. King Xerxes ruled from his royal throne in the palace complex of Susa. In the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers. The military brass of Persia and Media were also there, along with the princes and governors of the provinces.

For six months he put on exhibit the huge wealth of his empire and its stunningly beautiful royal splendors. At the conclusion of the exhibit, the king threw a weeklong party for everyone living in Susa, the capital—important and unimportant alike. The party was in the garden courtyard of the king's summer house. The courtyard was elaborately decorated with white and blue cotton curtains tied with linen and purple cords to silver rings on marble columns. Silver and gold couches were arranged on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and colored stones. Drinks were served in gold chalices, each chalice one-of-a-kind. The royal wine flowed freely—a generous king!

The guests could drink as much as they liked—king's orders!—with waiters at their elbows to refill the drinks. Meanwhile, Queen Vashti was throwing a separate party for women inside King Xerxes' royal palace.





4. *The Bible is mainly filled with stories about the Jews, God's chosen people, and their interactions with God. Yet the book of Esther begins with a story about a pagan king and an extravagant celebration. What expectations do you have for the rest of this book, given this unusual opening story?*

5. *Xerxes, described as "a generous king," throws "a weeklong party for everyone living in Susa, the capital—important and unimportant alike." What might be an equivalent event in contemporary society? Who might be an equivalent person to throw such an event?*



ON THE SEVENTH day of the party, the king, high on the wine, ordered the seven eunuchs who were his personal servants (Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas) to bring him Queen Vashti resplendent in her royal crown. He wanted to show off her beauty to the guests and officials. She was extremely good-looking.

But Queen Vashti refused to come, refused the summons delivered by the eunuchs. The king lost his temper. Seething with anger over her insolence, the king called in his counselors, all experts in legal matters. It was the king's practice to consult his expert advisors. Those closest to him were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven highest-ranking princes of Persia and Media, the inner circle with access to the king's ear. He asked them what legal recourse they had against Queen Vashti for not obeying King Xerxes' summons delivered by the eunuchs.

Memucan spoke up in the council of the king and princes: "It's not only the king Queen Vashti has insulted, it's all of us, leaders and people alike in every last one of King Xerxes' provinces. The word's going to get out: 'Did you hear the latest about Queen Vashti?"





"DID YOU HEAR THE LATEST
—— about ——
Queen Vashti?
KING XERXES
ordered her to be
BROUGHT BEFORE HIM
—— and ——
she wouldn't do it!"

from Esther 1, The Message

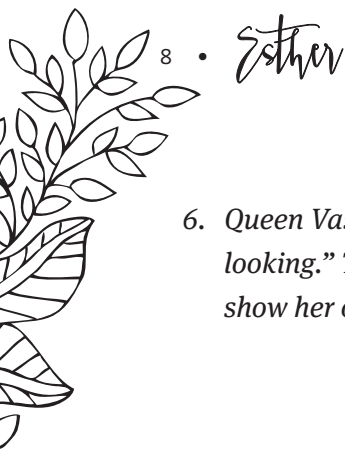
King Xerxes ordered her to be brought before him and she wouldn't do it! When the women hear it, they'll start treating their husbands with contempt. The day the wives of the Persian and Mede officials get wind of the queen's insolence, they'll be out of control. Is that what we want, a country of angry women who don't know their place?

“So, if the king agrees, let him pronounce a royal ruling and have it recorded in the laws of the Persians and Medes so that it cannot be revoked, that Vashti is permanently banned from King Xerxes' presence. And then let the king give her royal position to a woman who knows her place. When the king's ruling becomes public knowledge throughout the kingdom, extensive as it is, every woman, regardless of her social position, will show proper respect to her husband.”

The king and the princes liked this. The king did what Memucan proposed. He sent bulletins to every part of the kingdom, to each province in its own script, to each people in their own language: “Every man is master of his own house; whatever he says, goes.”

ESTHER 1:10-22





6. *Queen Vashti is described as “extremely good-looking.” The king seems to think so and wants to show her off. But she refuses. Why do you think this is?*

7. *Vashti’s snub causes a kingdom-wide uproar. What do we learn about Susa from the reaction to Vashti’s defiance?*

8. *How would you have liked to be a woman in Xerxes’ kingdom? What difficulties might you have faced?*



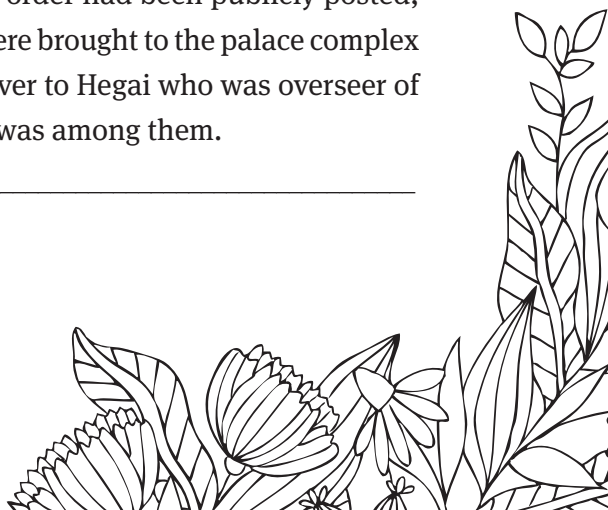
LATER, WHEN KING Xerxes' anger had cooled and he was having second thoughts about what Vashti had done and what he had ordered against her, the king's young attendants stepped in and got the ball rolling: "Let's begin a search for beautiful young virgins for the king." . . .

The king liked this advice and took it.

Now there was a Jew who lived in the palace complex in Susa. His name was Mordecai the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish—a Benjaminite. His ancestors had been taken from Jerusalem with the exiles and carried off with King Jehoiachin of Judah by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon into exile. Mordecai had reared his cousin Hadassah, otherwise known as Esther, since she had no father or mother. The girl had a good figure and a beautiful face. After her parents died, Mordecai had adopted her.

When the king's order had been publicly posted, many young girls were brought to the palace complex of Susa and given over to Hegai who was overseer of the women. Esther was among them.

ESTHER 2:1-8








HEGAI LIKED ESTHER and took a special interest in her. Right off he started her beauty treatments, ordered special food, assigned her seven personal maids from the palace, and put her and her maids in the best rooms in the harem. Esther didn't say anything about her family and racial background because Mordecai had told her not to.

Every day Mordecai strolled beside the court of the harem to find out how Esther was and get news of what she was doing. . . .

When it was Esther's turn to go to the king (Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his daughter), she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch in charge of the harem, had recommended. Esther, just as she was, won the admiration of everyone who saw her.

She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal palace in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of the king's reign.

The king fell in love with Esther far more than with any of his other women or any of the other virgins—he was totally smitten by her. He placed a royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti. Then the king gave a great banquet for all his nobles and officials—"Esther's Banquet." He proclaimed a holiday for all the provinces and handed out gifts with royal generosity.



Esther,
just as she was,
won the
Admiration
of Everyone
who saw her.

from Esther 2,
The Message

11. *Esther does what Hegai tells her to (verse 15) and obeys Mordecai's instructions of what not to do (verses 9-10). Why do you think she acts this way? What would you have done in her situation?*

12. *Why would Mordecai advise Esther not to share her ethnicity or family?*

*Have you ever kept secrets about your background?
If so, what was the reason?*



A NOTE
FROM
EUGENE

THE SUSAN JEWS are known only from the biblical story of Esther. The elimination of detail and background leaves a kind of stark black-and-white picture of what is basic: a surviving community of faith. The community survived simply because of God's grace.



13. *Esther, “just as she was, won the admiration of everyone who saw her” (verse 15) and became queen, which brings an end to the story that began in chapter 1. Why do you think people admired her?*

14. *Where do you feel pressure to please people by not being just as you are?*

What would help you to resist that pressure to change yourself to please people?

15. *In what ways is Esther demonstrating servanthood?*



If “to be a servant is to be like God,” how can you practice servanthood more consistently in your life—without giving up who you are as a person?



ON ONE OF the occasions when the virgins were being gathered together, Mordecai was sitting at the King’s Gate. All this time, Esther had kept her family background and race a secret as Mordecai had ordered; Esther still did what Mordecai told her, just as when she was being raised by him.

On this day, with Mordecai sitting at the King’s Gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs who guarded the entrance, had it in for the king and were making plans to kill King Xerxes. But Mordecai learned of the plot and told Queen Esther, who then told King Xerxes, giving credit to Mordecai. When the thing was investigated and confirmed as true, the two men were hanged on a gallows. This was all written down in a logbook kept for the king’s use.

16. *Chapter 2 ends with Mordecai exposing a plot to kill the king. What is your impression of Mordecai based on what we've seen of him so far?*

In what way is Mordecai demonstrating servanthood here?

17. *God has not been mentioned in these two chapters, and yet we know he's involved—the Bible is his book! What do you think God is doing here?*



Until we meet again

REFLECT on times you have behaved like Xerxes. Have you ever reacted badly to someone not giving you what you want, or let other people talk you out of feeling remorse for something you did? What was motivating you in your Xerxes moment?

REFLECT on some things you and Esther might have in common. What do you admire about her? What do you hope for her as this story continues to unfold?

REFLECT on some ways you can play the Godlike role of a servant this week in the lives of your friends and families, even strangers. Consider how to do so as your authentic self—not trying to be like Esther or Mordecai or anyone else.



Prayer

*Thank you, God, that though you
may not seem center stage in the drama
that surrounds me,*

*you are always behind the scenes,
like a good servant,*

*watching over me and working
all things for good.*



