

Pathways

LESSONS FROM ESTHER

From Providence
to Purpose

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LifeWay Press®
Nashville, Tennessee

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ISBN 978-1-4627-9679-3 • Item 005802343

Dewey decimal classification: 248.84

Subject headings: ESTHER, QUEEN / PROVIDENCE AND GOVERNMENT OF GOD / CHRISTIAN LIFE

My deepest thanks go to Mrs. Heather Hair for her skills and insights in collaboration on this manuscript.

Passage summaries in the “Start” sections of all group sessions are adapted from David S. Dockery, gen. ed., *Concise Bible Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010).

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Printed in the United States of America

Groups Ministry Publishing • LifeWay Resources • One LifeWay Plaza • Nashville, TN 37234

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About the Author

DR. TONY EVANS is one of America's most respected leaders in evangelical circles. He's a pastor, a best-selling author, and a frequent speaker at Bible conferences and seminars throughout the nation. He has served as the senior pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship for more than forty years, witnessing its growth from ten people in 1976 to more than ten thousand congregants with more than one hundred ministries.

Dr. Evans also serves as the president of The Urban Alternative, a national ministry that seeks to restore hope and transform lives through the proclamation and application of God's Word. His daily radio broadcast, *The Alternative with Dr. Tony Evans*, can be heard on more than 1,300 radio outlets throughout the United States and in more than 130 countries.

Dr. Evans holds the honor of writing and publishing the first full-Bible commentary and study Bible by an African-American. A former chaplain for the Dallas Cowboys, he's currently the chaplain for the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, a team he has served for more than thirty years.

Through his local church and national ministry, Dr. Evans has set in motion a kingdom-agenda philosophy of ministry that teaches God's comprehensive rule over every area of life, as demonstrated through the individual, family, church, and society.

Dr. Evans is married to Lois, his wife and ministry partner of more than forty years. They are the proud parents of four—Chrystal, Priscilla, Anthony Jr., and Jonathan—and have a number of grandchildren.

Introduction and Background

THE MESSAGE OF ESTHER

Esther is unique because it's the only book in Scripture that doesn't directly mention the name of God. God ordained this omission because He wanted to use the book to show the way His providence (that is, His invisible hand) works behind the scenes to bring about His purposes in history. So even though God isn't on the pages of Esther, His fingerprints appear throughout the book.

At times the book seems rather secular; historically, this fact has contributed to questions about its place in the canon of the synagogue and the church. Esther is tightly connected with specific historical events, yet it's also a piece of literature, a narrative with all of the literary features needed to make it a great story. Its purposes aren't always explicitly stated but are derived from the story as a whole.

Esther's dramatic story unfolds with the people of God, the Jews, living in Persia, where God had exiled them because of their sin. Through a series of circumstances, the young Jewish woman for whom the book is named was selected as the new queen because of her natural beauty. Her people were then threatened with annihilation by the hand of an evil man named Haman. But God, working behind the scenes, brought about His people's deliverance when Esther decided to risk her life by speaking to the king for them. She sealed her resolve with the words "If I perish, I perish" (4:16).

The Book of Esther demonstrates that although His methods vary, God is in control. His kingdom promises and purposes can't be thwarted.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF WRITING

AUTHOR. As with many Old Testament books, the author of the Book of Esther is unknown. The book itself names no writer, and no reliable tradition exists that identifies one.

The Jewish Talmud suggests that the members of the Great Synagogue wrote the book. However, it's hard to imagine that this prestigious group of religious scholars write a book that mentions the Persian king 190 times but never mentions God. Many early writers, Jewish as well as Christian, suggested Mordecai as the author.

BACKGROUND. In 587 BC Jerusalem fell to King Nebuchadnezzar, who carried many of the people of Judah into exile in Babylon (see 2 Chron. 36:15-21). In 539 BC Cyrus the Great, the ruler of the Medo-Persian Empire, conquered Babylon and issued a decree permitting exiled people, including the Jews, to return to their homelands (see 2 Chron. 36:22-23). Although many Jews returned, others continued to live throughout the Medo-Persian Empire. The events in the Book of Esther took place during the reign of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I), who ruled the empire from 486 to 465 BC. His son, Artaxerxes I, would later send both Ezra and Nehemiah to Jerusalem (see Ezra 7:11-28; Neh 2:1-8).

KEY THEMES

HOPE. For the Jewish people scattered around the Persian Empire, the Book of Esther gave encouragement and hope. It provided a model for how the Jewish people could not only survive but also thrive in a Gentile environment. It showed how Jewish people could effectively serve in positions of high responsibility while maintaining their Jewish identity and their commitment to the God of Israel. It showed how Jewish leaders could be used to bring blessing to their Gentile rulers and neighbors. And for a people far from the land of their forefathers, it demonstrated that the God of Israel was still able to redeem His people in their oppression, whether they were in Egypt, Israel, or Persia.

The Background of Esther

DIVINE PROVIDENCE. It's unlikely that the lack of any mention of God in the Book of Esther is accidental. It leaves the reader to ponder the work of God, evident but unseen, in the unfolding story of deliverance and redemption. This approach is fitting because Jews in exile would be tempted to find a lack of evidence for God's overt presence to be evidence for His actual absence. The Book of Esther counters this notion, depicting God's providence as ruling even the events of foreign lands during the Jews' exile.

GOD'S UNLIKELY INSTRUMENTS. Part of the mystery of God's providence in the book is how God can use unlikely people to help accomplish His plans. Who would ever guess that a young Jewish woman named Esther, an orphan, would end up being the queen of the greatest empire the world had ever known? Who but God could bring about such a powerful reversal through a young woman?

CONTRIBUTION TO THE BIBLE

Without ever mentioning God directly, the Book of Esther underscores the providence of God. God's promise to give the Jews an eternal ruler remained in place, even in the face of threatened annihilation. Esther shows us that many Jews remained faithful to their God even in exile. They kept their identity as God's people through the synagogues that developed as the centers of the Jewish community wherever Jews settled. The synagogues would later play a significant role as the gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire, for these served as natural starting places for the deliverance of the gospel in the towns visited by the apostles (for example, see Acts 9:20; 17:1-2; 18:19; 19:8).¹

1. Adapted from CSB Study Bible (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017) and from Tony Evans Study Bible (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2019).

How to Get the Most from This Study

This Bible study book includes six weeks of content for group and personal study.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Helpful background information about the Book of Esther can be found on pages 5–7.

GROUP SESSIONS

Regardless of what day of the week your group meets, each week of content begins with the group session. Each group session uses the following format to facilitate simple yet meaningful interaction among group members, with God's Word, and with the teaching of Dr. Evans.

START. This page includes questions to get the conversation started and to introduce the video teaching.

WATCH. This page includes key points from Dr. Evans's teaching, along with blanks for taking notes as participants watch the video.

RESPOND. This page includes questions and statements that guide the group to respond to Dr. Evans's video teaching and to relevant Bible passages.

PERSONAL STUDY

Each week provides five days of Bible study and learning activities for individual engagement between group sessions. The personal study revisits stories, Scriptures, and themes Dr. Evans introduced in the videos so that participants can understand and apply them on a personal level. The days are numbered 1–5 to provide personal reading and activities for each day of the week, leaving two days off to worship with your church family and to meet as a small group. If your group meets on the same day as your worship gathering, use the extra day to reflect on what God is teaching you and to practice putting the biblical principles into action.

Tips for Leading a Small Group

Follow these guidelines to prepare for each group session.

PRAYERFULLY PREPARE

REVIEW. Review the weekly material and group questions ahead of time.

PRAY. Be intentional about praying for each person in the group.

Ask the Holy Spirit to work through you and the group discussion as you point to Jesus each week through God's Word.

MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

Create a comfortable environment. If group members are uncomfortable, they'll be distracted and therefore not engaged in the group experience. Plan ahead by considering these details:

SEATING

TEMPERATURE

LIGHTING

FOOD OR DRINK

SURROUNDING NOISE

GENERAL CLEANLINESS

At best, thoughtfulness and hospitality show guests and group members they're welcome and valued in whatever environment you choose to gather. At worst, people may never notice your effort, but they're also not distracted. Do everything in your ability to help people focus on what's most important: connecting with God, with the Bible, and with one another.

INCLUDE OTHERS

Your goal is to foster a community in which people are welcome just as they are but encouraged to grow spiritually. Always be aware of opportunities to include any people who visit the group and to invite new people to join your group.

An inexpensive way to make first-time guests feel welcome or to invite someone to get involved is to give them their own copies of this Bible-study book.

ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION

A good small-group experience has the following characteristics.

EVERYONE PARTICIPATES. Encourage everyone to ask questions, share responses, or read aloud.

NO ONE DOMINATES—NOT EVEN THE LEADER. Be sure that your time speaking as a leader takes up less than half of your time together as a group. Politely guide discussion if anyone dominates.

NOBODY IS RUSHED THROUGH QUESTIONS. Don't feel that a moment of silence is a bad thing. People often need time to think about their responses to questions they've just heard or to gain courage to share what God is stirring in their hearts.

INPUT IS AFFIRMED AND FOLLOWED UP. Make sure you point out something true or helpful in a response. Don't just move on. Build community with follow-up questions, asking how other people have experienced similar things or how a truth has shaped their understanding of God and the scripture you're studying. People are less likely to speak up if they fear that you don't actually want to hear their answers or that you're looking for only a certain answer.

GOD AND HIS WORD ARE CENTRAL. Opinions and experiences can be helpful, but God has given us the truth. Trust God's Word to be the authority and God's Spirit to work in people's lives. You can't change anyone, but God can. Continually point people to the Word and to active steps of faith.

KEEP CONNECTING

Think of ways to connect with group members during the week. Participation during the group session is always improved when members spend time connecting with one another outside the group sessions. The more people are comfortable with and involved in one another's lives, the more they'll look forward to being together. When people move beyond being friendly to truly being friends who form a community, they come to each session eager to engage instead of merely attending.

Encourage group members with thoughts, commitments, or questions from the session by connecting through these communication channels:

EMAILS

TEXTS

SOCIAL MEDIA

When possible, build deeper friendships by planning or spontaneously inviting group members to join you outside your regularly scheduled group time for activities like these:

MEALS

FUN ACTIVITIES

PROJECTS AROUND YOUR HOME, CHURCH, OR COMMUNITY



Week 1

THE SECURITY
OF SOVEREIGNTY

Start

Welcome to group session 1 of Pathways.

For the next six weeks we're going to study the Book of Esther. Have you ever studied this book personally or with a group? What do you know about the Book of Esther? What are looking forward to during this study?

Esther is a kind of Cinderella story. Why do these stories resonate with us?

Before we begin, read aloud Esther 1:1–2:18 together as a group. The passage is summarized below.

King Ahasuerus convened a royal reception in his third year on the throne (483 BC). The assembly he called lasted 180 days, and it culminated in a 7-day feast of luxurious dining and drunkenness. Esther 1:1-7 describes the opulence of the Persian court to indicate the vast resources and power of the king.

In a drunken stupor the king called for Queen Vashti “to display her beauty” (v. 11) before his guests. Her refusal, probably out of decency, threatened the king’s reputation, and Ahasuerus banished her.

After four years the king became lonely and sought a new wife. Esther was among the young women brought to the king’s palace because of her exceptional beauty. Esther won his approval and became queen. Mordecai, Esther’s elder cousin who had raised her, advised her to conceal her nationality.

Watch

Complete this viewer guide as you watch video session 1.

The Bible has sixty-six books. Sixty-five of them mention the name of God.

Esther was placed in the Bible because God wanted to show all of us something about His character and methodology when He is not overtly being seen.

The Book of Esther is set between chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Ezra.

According to the laws of the Medes and the Persians, when a law was set, it could not be changed.

God takes natural things that He has given us and, through the streams of meandering, positions them for opportunity in order to fulfill His sovereign purpose.

You're part of something much bigger. It's not just about what's happening today. It's about what God has promised, in His sovereign plan, to do, His will that He is determined to accomplish.

God can hit a bull's-eye with a crooked stick.

Providence ought to give you hope that even if things aren't perfect, it doesn't have to be the end of the story.

Discuss

Discuss the video with your group, using the following questions.

As you read Esther 1:1–2:18 and heard Dr. Evans’s teaching, what stood out to you?

One reason Esther is such a beloved, enduring book is that it’s an excellent story. What elements of a good story do we see in these opening chapters?

Dr. Evans said God often “zigzags us to our purpose.” When has God taken you on an indirect path to accomplish His will in your life? How did you respond to the twists and turns?

What did you learn on the indirect path that you might not have learned on a more direct one?

According to Dr. Evans, why doesn’t the Book of Esther mention the name of God? Why should the seeming absence of God’s name in this story actually encourage us when it seems as if God isn’t with us?

God used Esther’s physical beauty to draw the attention of the king. How does God use our natural talents and ability to further His providence? What’s an example from your own life?

Dr. Evans mentioned that a few sins were involved in the process by which Esther became a queen. Although Esther’s becoming the queen was part of God’s plan, the sin wasn’t. How does God providentially accomplish His will despite human sin?

Esther was unaware that she was part of God’s divine plan. In what ways is God’s providence a reason for hope?

Read week 1 and complete the activities before the next group session.

The Security of Sovereignty

Have you ever wondered why you're where you are and when things are going to change? That's a question we all face at some point in our lives. If you haven't asked it yet, just wait. I have a feeling you might.

God rarely takes us directly from point A to point B on this pathway called life. Rather, He typically has us travel a winding road made up of twists and turns, detours and traffic jams. Why? Because unlike human beings, who can see the present and only guess at the future, God is an infinite being who isn't bound by time. He knows the end from the beginning (see Isa. 46:10). He connects the future with the past. The bottom line is that God knows the right path to take you exactly where He wants you to be. He does this with His providential hand.

My hope for this Bible study is that as you and your small group, family, or friends complete the daily readings and activities, you'll learn to discover the power of God's providence in the midst of your personal pain, fear, gain, loss, and love. In addition, I want you to discover the very personal nature of God as He maneuvers each of us along multiple pathways, intersecting what and whom He wishes according to His intended aim.

Over the next six weeks you'll learn to recognize God's providential hand through the biblical Book of Esther. It's the story of how God took a young Jewish exile named Esther, made her queen of Persia, and used her to deliver His people from the threat of destruction.

This short book, tucked in the middle of the Old Testament, never mentions the covenant name of Yahweh. Yet behind the scenes, in the minutiae and details, in every choice and decision, God sovereignly guided the events of Esther to His chosen outcome. As we read Esther, we'll see two foundational ideas that illuminate God's character: His sovereignty and His providence.

God is the greatest storyteller. He's the puppet master behind the scenes. When you learn how to locate Him in what appears to be His absence, you'll learn to trust Him along the dark pathways life often presents. Then you'll be perfectly positioned on your own unique pathway to purpose. On this path you'll discover in what ways you too have been created for God's purpose and have been placed in your own spectacular story, like the royal Esther, for such a time as this.

**This week's teaching draws out themes found in Esther 1:1–2:18.
Review this passage of Scripture before beginning your personal study.**

◉ DAY 1 ◉

WORRIED YOU'RE NOT ON THE RIGHT PATH?

Have you ever felt that you were on the wrong path? Have you ever surveyed the circumstances of your life and been unable to find God in them? This may seem like an odd way to begin a Bible study, but taking a moment to consider these questions will help you begin your study of *Pathways*.

As we consider the Book of Esther in depth during the coming weeks, you'll undoubtedly notice that God seems conspicuously absent. While the king of Persia is mentioned 190 times, the name of God never appears. The further we venture in the book, the more the circumstances will seem to be stacked against Esther. Yet when it seems as though Esther is on the wrong path, the invisible hand of God is always at work. The story of Esther urges us to trust God even when we're worried that we're not on the right path. Here at the beginning of our time together, let's take a moment to address that concern.

How do you respond when you feel that your life isn't going the way you hoped or planned?

Even though this is a common struggle, why is it such a difficult struggle?

If we were honest, we'd admit that we've all struggled with questions and doubts, wondering why God has taken us where He has or allowed us to face what we were facing. It's human to feel these emotions. It's human to lose hope. You don't need to pretend that you're superspiritual. God has seen discouragement and doubt before. He knows our frame. He knows we're modified dust (Ps. 103:14).

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In those times we just want God to show up to let us know He's still there. We reach for Him, but like the wind, He escapes our grasp. His invisible hand eludes us, while His words urge us to keep walking the path He has called us to take.

But do we take the next step? Do we walk in faith? Are we able to believe the words spoken through the prophet Isaiah?

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

ISAIAH 43:1-3, NIV

A prophet may not show up at our door with a message from the Lord, but God has left us a witness in His Word. So how does God's Word address our emotions and questions when we face loss and doubt? God is able to secure the promises delivered to Isaiah and to us because of who He is. To better understand what God does, we first need to consider who God is. At this point we need to introduce a theological idea that will be considered over and over again throughout this study—providence.

Like God's name in the Book of Esther, the word *providence* never appears in Scripture. However, this doctrine defines the way God works in the world. *Providence* refers to His invisible work in our lives—His unceasing involvement in the world. It's the belief that God stewards His creation in such a way that all creation ultimately fulfills His intended purpose.

Read Ephesians 1:11. What does this verse teach about God's intentionality and control of the world?

The Security of Sovereignty

Read Romans 11:36. What attributes do we learn about God from this verse? How do these attributes relate to our lives?

One of God's chief attributes is His sovereignty. *Sovereignty* refers to His rule over all His creation. Absolutely nothing escapes His power and influence. God is in charge of all things because He has created and sustains all things. He's radically, utterly in control.

Often people struggle with the truth of God's sovereignty because it means we must relinquish ultimate control to Him. However, God's sovereignty should comfort us.

If you're being honest, what aspects of God's sovereignty make you uncomfortable?

Read Isaiah 46:9-10. List three comforts you can take as a believer in knowing that God is sovereign.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Comfort comes in knowing that God is in control. Because God is sovereign, we can have peace when life's situations become confusing or chaotic. Another comfort lies in our increased ability to rest when worry or anxiety seeks to dominate our hearts and minds. Trusting in God's sovereignty removes fear from the equation, opening the door to greater joy and contentment. John Calvin wrote:

*Ignorance of Providence is the greatest of all miseries,
and the knowledge of it the highest happiness.¹*

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How could increasing your trust in God's ultimate control affect your emotions and outlook?

Read the following verse.

*The LORD has established His throne in the heavens,
And His sovereignty rules over all.*

PSALM 103:19

How did the psalmist describe God's rule?

In what ways do you need to trust God's control and release your own?

You can rest in this one simple, repeated truth of Scripture: God rules over all. If you've spent large portions of your life worrying about details, anxious about every twist, turn, detour, or roadblock on your path, consider ways a greater understanding of and trust in God's sovereignty can change your life. Would you like to reduce your ongoing concerns and negative emotions? Applying yourself to the diligent study and application of God's sovereignty will do just that.

★ PRAYER ★

Ask God to give you insight into ways you can trust Him more and rest in His sovereign care. Ask Him to open your eyes to recognize His invisible hand along the pathway of your days.

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, ed. Anthony Uyl (Ontario: Devoted, 2016), 1.17.11.

◉ DAY 2 ◉

LETTING GO OF THE WHEEL

Sometimes it seems as if our culture is obsessed with control. We control the temperatures in our home, and now we can do that from our smartphones. We control our schedules through daily planners or apps. We even control our time with God, giving Him five minutes in the morning or fifteen minutes at lunch. We seek to control our health; environment; and even, at times, the people around us.

Our desire to keep things under control helps improve our lives and surroundings. But it can also hinder us from living in a spirit of surrender that a life under God's overarching control requires.

In recent months how have you sought to control circumstances in your life?

Do you follow a fixed schedule? How do you react if that schedule is interrupted?

Admittedly, not everyone feels the need to control all things at all times. Some people are more flexible than others. But within most of us is a desire to control at least the important areas of our lives, such as health, safety, and provision. This impulse stems from our need for security as human beings.

Read Luke 12:22-26. Summarize Jesus' words.

Do you think it's possible to follow Jesus' instructions in these verses at all times? Why or why not?

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What does our worry about our circumstances communicate about our faith in God?

Worry is the greatest revealer of doubt. The ravens in Jesus' example own a simple faith that often eludes us. Consider when you purchase something online and you receive an email alerting you that your item will arrive the next day. Do you then spend time the remainder of that day worrying about whether your item will arrive? No. Why not? Because you've been assured that your order was received and filled. If you chose to worry about an order you placed, despite being told the exact delivery date of that item, you would reveal doubt not only in the company's ability to stay true to its word but also in its ability to provide the item you ordered.

More than we trust an online store to deliver a package in two days, we should trust God to sustain our lives. Not only does God rule over all, but He's also the owner of all. As He said through Jeremiah:

*Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh;
is anything too difficult for Me?*

JEREMIAH 32:27

Nothing is too difficult for God. When we choose to worry or inadvertently allow worry to enter our thoughts and actions, we're questioning His sovereign control. We're questioning His ability to stay true to His Word. We're questioning His ability to provide what He says He will provide.

Recall a time when you felt worried or anxious about a certain direction your life had taken, yet in hindsight you saw that God's hand had directed your circumstances all along. What did you learn through that experience?

Maybe you're saying, "But Tony, I never worry or doubt God." However, God declared through Jeremiah:

*The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.*

JEREMIAH 17:9, NIV

The Security of Sovereignty

If you feel that you never worry or doubt, take a moment to ask God to enlighten your heart to recognize hidden areas of doubt and anxiety in which you may need to trust His sovereignty.

Whether our worry levels are high or low, we can grow in our level of faith in God. We start growing when we understand God's providence and sovereignty. Yesterday we defined *sovereignty* as God's rule over all His creation. *Providence* refers to God's control of the spinning wheel of history behind the scenes.

Providence is actually a subcategory of sovereignty. In other words, one way God exercises His sovereignty is by His providence. The providence of God is the miraculous, mysterious way He intersects and interconnects events in order to bring about His sovereign rule of the universe. God's sovereignty is what He wants to happen. God's providence is the way He orders and connects events to bring about His will.

As humans, we often misunderstand God's providence. To achieve His ultimate sovereign purposes, God at times providentially allows things to take place that are outside His preferences. In His sovereignty God allows things He doesn't prefer in order to accomplish His ultimate plan.

Think about all that's involved in baking a cake. What would it taste like if you chose to eat the ingredients separately rather than as a completed, baked cake?

How is a fully baked caked different from the separate ingredients?

When we see our circumstances outside God's providence and sovereignty, we aren't seeing our lives the way God intended. It would be like taking a recipe for cake and eating the separate ingredients before baking them together. However, when we see our circumstance through God's providence and sovereignty, we see the ingredients coming together to produce something beautiful.

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Read Esther 2:1-17. Then answer the following questions.

Based on what we've learned about God's providence and sovereignty, how should we understand Esther's ascent to royalty?

Why would God tell this story without using His name? In what ways do you see Him at work?

We don't read God's name in Esther 2, but He's there. Esther became the queen through the providential work of God. Without an understanding of providence and sovereignty, these events may seem like luck or fate. This seeming twist of fate would have far-reaching consequences for God's people. Only when we understand the link between providence and sovereignty can we recognize God's fingerprints in the midst of His apparent absence. We don't always get to see how God weaves the details of our lives to take us to our intended destination and purpose. He operates behind the scenes, pulling the strings and setting the stage. His ways are always designed to produce the greatest outcome for His purposes and for our spiritual development.

When seeking to trace God's sovereign purpose, we're usually shortsighted. Neglecting to look beyond our immediate situation, relationship, job, or challenge, we easily become confused. Things may not (and probably don't) make sense when viewed individually rather than as part of an entire tapestry of scenarios God weaves together to accomplish His overarching plan.

★ PRAYER ★

Pray that the Holy Spirit will enable you to view your life through spiritual eyes that allow you not only to trust what you can't see but also to identify patterns in God's sovereign plan as His invisible hand weaves the pieces together.

◉ DAY 3 ◉

HOW GOD DRIVES

Take a moment to think about your car. Consider all of the different parts and pieces that fit together to form your car. Some cars have small trunks, while others have large trunks. Some cars sit close to the ground, while others can nearly triple that height. Some cars go fast. Others seem built to glide along at a leisurely pace.

Cars are different in many ways. But they're also alike in many ways. Does your car have a steering wheel? Tires? How about a seat for you to sit in? I've seen a lot of cars over the course of my life, and they come in all shapes and sizes, but these features remain consistent in all of them: they all have steering wheels, tires, and seats.

The pathways we travel along to reach God's destiny for our lives won't be identical. Some of us will get there faster than others. Some may have to carry a lot of baggage with them. Some may arrive there comfortably, while some may have a bumpy ride. Yet despite the many differences we'll encounter on the various pathways of our spiritual journeys, we'll all share certain similarities.

For example, followers of Jesus Christ all share the reality that God works all things together for good to those who love Him and are called for His purpose (see Rom. 8:28). No matter how difficult the journey, no matter how challenging the trip, and no matter how precarious the pathway, providence means God caused it for a greater purpose. This truth applies to each of us, even though our journeys to our destinies may come in all shapes and sizes.

Read Romans 8:28-29. Why does God cause all things to work together for good?

Now read Ephesians 1:12-14. What's another reason God causes all things to work together for good?

Pathways

All things work together according to God's agency—His determined providential involvement. Not only does God cause all things to work together for good so that we'll be “conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29), but He also does it with the intended outcome being “to the praise of His glory” (Eph. 1:12,14). Work works all things for good to conform us to the likeness of Jesus and to exalt His name. His providence guarantees that all He has created fulfills and satisfies its created purpose, which is to bring glory to Himself.

God exists for God. So does everything He made. He made it all for Himself. That's the reason it's here. That's the reason we're here. We're made for God. Our lives aren't about us; they're about Him and His glory. If you don't care for that idea, go and make your own universe. God made this one, so He gets to set the rules.

Anything that competes with, negates, or minimizes God's glory exists in a perpetual state of misalignment (see Rom. 1:18-32). It's out of order. God made all things to display His attributes, character, and power (see Col. 1:15-17; Rev. 4:11).

Read Colossians 1:17. What does it mean for God to hold “all things” together?

In what ways does God receive glory through the events and circumstances in our lives? How might we get in the way of God's work in our lives?

Everything you and I possess has been given to us as a direct result of God's choice to do so. Everything you've received was created either by God or from materials He created. God produces every single thing. Because He does, He claims sovereignty over it all as well. He controls it. He's intricately, intimately involved in every single detail of life. If He stepped back for a moment and didn't hold the universe in place, everything would descend into chaos. We'd all be obliterated in an instant.

From God's vantage point, it all makes perfect sense. Yet from ours, time can seem marked by an endless array or series of contingencies we may call bad luck, chance, or random events. That may be the way it seems, but it's not how it is. Nothing is random with God. Consider God's foresight and knowledge in contrast to your own:

The Security of Sovereignty

*I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no one like Me,
Declaring the end from the beginning,
And from ancient times things which have not been done,
Saying, "My purpose will be established,
And I will accomplish all My good pleasure";
Calling a bird of prey from the east,
The man of My purpose from a far country.
Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass.
I have planned it, surely I will do it.*

ISAIAH 46:9-11

One problem in remaining on the right path as we head toward our purpose is that we don't see the end as God does. And when we can't see where we're headed, we get frustrated and feel lost. Have you ever felt frustrated when you were driving and got lost? Yet when you found a map or a GPS or got directions from a stranger, your frustration dissipated. Why? Because reaching your destination came into sight.

While we may be directionally challenged, God isn't. He has perfect knowledge of our destination. Unlike us, He can see the end from the beginning. However, along the pathways of His providential leading, He doesn't always give us the directions to the very end. He doesn't provide us with the full map view so that we can see every turn we'll eventually take. He gives us a glimpse here, a direction there, or the next step but rarely the entire picture. Thus, people often live in a perpetual state of frustration, not knowing how each step, each day, each set of circumstances, or each conversation is leading to the right place. Without a full view of providence and a surrender to sovereignty, these frustrations can overflow in an overwhelming cascade of emotions.

Describe how you feel when you're lost. How do your emotions change after you locate the right directions or get on the right road to where you're going?

Pathways

What might God be teaching us by not taking us on a direct route but instead on one with twists, turns, and detours?

What reasons has God given you to trust Him even when the path isn't clear? Spend a few moments meditating on God's faithfulness to you.

Nothing comes to you that doesn't first pass through God's providential fingers. You have to believe that. You have to trust that. You have to rest in that. That mindset will position you to respond to life's challenges, setbacks, and seemingly random occurrences with a spirit of intentionality and persevering faith.

Believing that God is working all things for our good and His glory means we continually choose to place our trust in Him, recognizing that all the twists and turns along the path are producing His image in us (see Rom. 8:29). Not only that, but every hardship is preparing for you "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

★ PRAYER ★

As you pray throughout the day, engage God in a conversation about His direction for your life. Ask for a deep, abiding trust in Jesus. Ask for greater grace to trust God along the pathway of your life so that you can be set free from worry and so that your faith in God can be built up.

◉ DAY 4 ◉

PULL OVER AND TAKE A BREAK

Every January at the church I pastor we hold a solemn assembly, a dedicated week when we come together as a congregation to fast, pray, and commit our lives and our year to the Lord. We don't dictate rules for fasting. We simply ask that with God's guidance, members choose something from which to fast for one week.

Some members fast from food, a meal, or even chocolate. Other members give up watching television, while some give up social media. Fasting is letting go of something in the physical realm in order to focus on something in the spiritual realm. I've heard countless testimonies of how fasting during the solemn assembly at church ushered in life transformations, rescued marriages, and resurrected hope.

It recently struck me that it might be beneficial if each of us chose to fast from something intangible as well. That could be fasting from worry, letting go of control, rejecting critical thoughts, or giving up doubt. Each time this desire or impulse sought to spark its light in our minds, we simply reminded ourselves, *I'm fasting from worry right now, so I can't indulge that thought.*

Essentially, that's what discovering how to trust in God's providential care can do for us. The more we trust His providence, the more we learn to let go of preoccupations like worry, critical thoughts, doubt, and a need for control.

List three events or circumstances that can prompt you to worry, fear, or doubt.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Pathways

Read John 15:5. Jesus clearly said apart from Him we can do nothing. In what ways should this truth affect you and your emotions?

How can a spiritual discipline like fasting teach us that we're not in control?

People rarely like providence. People like to be in control. It's true. Only when providence is ushering us toward a seen result with visible rewards do we embrace providence. Why? Because people prefer autonomy, and autonomy precludes God's rule. We don't like to let go. Fasting is good for our souls because fasting leads us to feel our helplessness in a way that points us toward God. It allows us to rest in God's control and release our grip on the circumstances of our lives.

When we understand and accept God's providence, we lay down our own paths, our own pursuits, and our own maneuverings to try getting to where we feel we need to go. Trusting in God's providence requires letting go. Providence lifts our hand. Providence acknowledges that ultimately God is in control and that His method of being in control often involves twists, turns, and meanderings that make us uncomfortable.

Yet the sovereign providence of God can only mean that He's the absolute ruler, controller, and sustainer of all aspects of His creation. He's the sovereign King. He's running the universe. His prowess and wisdom set up details; turn circumstances; reverse situations; and usher people, positions, and places into His intended purpose. Often all this occurs without our awareness or acceptance because God doesn't need us as much as we may think He does.

Though God doesn't ultimately need us, He uses us to accomplish His purposes. What joy should we find in being used by God?

The Security of Sovereignty

When has God used you despite your limitations or perhaps even your unwillingness to be used by Him?

In hindsight how did these occurrences affirm God's providence in your life?

God's Word features accounts of His will and purpose succeeding despite human weakness. In His providence God spoke through a donkey (see Num. 22:21-31). He also woke up a king in order to position Esther to save His people from annihilation (see Esth. 6:1). In His providence He used tired, hungry foot soldiers and priests to march around a wall and produce one of the most amazing military feats of all time (see Josh. 6:1-20). God's providence and sovereign control exist, whether or not we acknowledge them. Thus, to discover the importance of working, living, and moving within them is one of the most critical life skills we could ever develop.

Unfortunately, this wisdom is often lost on our egos. Why? Because most people want to do what they want to do. Most people want to feel as if they're calling the shots. Most people want to be the center attraction in the three-ring circus known as their lives. So they deny or rebel against the truth of sovereignty in their hearts and their minds. Yet denying or rebelling against God's providence doesn't make it less true. It just makes us feel that we have more control than we actually do. In fact, rebellion against God is typically rooted in a desire to usurp His sovereignty. Furthermore, God can even use people's rebellion to accomplish His plan.

Read Exodus 9:34-35 and Romans 9:14-18. What do these verses say about God's ability to use a human being's rebellion for His ultimate goal?

Pathways

How can God use something meant for evil to ultimately accomplish good? What are some biblical examples when God used an evil intention to bring about good?

How does knowing that God can bring good from evil circumstances make you feel about a challenge you're facing?

If you've spent time wandering the pathway of life, wondering why bad things happen to good people or how God can allow certain circumstances in your life, these truths are for you right now. As you discover the security of sovereignty, you'll experience the peace that's rightfully yours as a child of the King.

The greatest truth you can ever know about God, other than hearing and receiving the message of salvation, is His sovereignty. When you know God is in control—even of things that appear to be out of control—you're able to move through life benefiting from the blessings of assurance, peace, and contentment. When you truly understand that He's in your corner as your greatest defender and vindicator, you'll no longer seek to rescue yourself. Only in drawing close to Him so that you can hear Him and, as a result, follow Him can you experience His deliverance in every area of your life.

★ PRAYER ★

Prioritize time to think about God's control and ultimate power over all. Consider ways He has worked in other people's lives or in your own life to bring good results or positive growth from a negative situation. Thank Him for His ability and care to do that in His gracious sovereign purpose.

◉ DAY 5 ◉

LOST IN LOGIC

When we face a trial or an adverse situation in life, we often try to figure it out, fix it, or logically argue our way through it.

When has God done anything in your life that seemed illogical at the time but turned out to be something great? If this hasn't happened to you, when have you seen this happen to someone else?

What do you notice about the various paths by which God led His people when delivering them throughout the Bible?

What do you notice about God as He delivered His people?

When we rely too much on our logic and reasoning, we leave ourselves vulnerable to the outcome of that reasoning instead of preparing ourselves for God's intervention. God is in control. I don't care how things appear to you right now. I don't care what authority your boss has over you right now. I don't care what your addiction, your mate, or your messy situation is telling you to do. None of those people or circumstances are in ultimate control.

Yes, they may look as though they are. After all, during the exodus Pharaoh had every appearance of control over the Israelites as his army chased them across the wilderness and backed them up against an enormous body of water (see Ex. 14:5-31). But what we see is never all there is to be seen. Sovereignty can reshape water and set souls free. Providence can pave a way where there seems to be no way at all. God is in control.

Pathways

In what ways can human logic get in the way of identifying and following God's direction?

What might we miss if God worked only in ways that made sense to us?

Consider the example Paul gave the Corinthians:

Since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:21-25

Why would Jesus' crucifixion seem like foolishness from a human perspective?

How did Paul address the argument that the cross was foolish?

The Security of Sovereignty

We look back at the cross with the benefit of time, but for the first-century audience, the cross didn't make sense. For the Jews, being crucified meant being cursed and forsaken by God. To them, Jesus' death was a sign that He wasn't who He claimed to be. To the Greeks, crucifixion was a mark of shame. It would have been unbelievable to them. Worshiping a crucified criminal would have been nonsense.

However, the cross is foolish only from a human perspective. Despite its folly the cross demonstrated the wisdom and power of God. As Peter pointed out, Jesus was "delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). In other words, what might seem illogical to the world was the perfect plan of God. The Father allowed human evil against His Son to fulfill His purpose.

God has a myriad of reasons for what He does and for what He allows:

*"My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD.
"For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts."*

ISAIAH 55:8-9

God's vantage point is so far above our own that when we seek to interject our logic or rationale into the equation, it's like trying to put together a puzzle with only a fraction of the pieces. Logically figuring out God's ways will never happen, simply because we don't have all the information.

Sometimes God delays us on our pathway because He's seeking to develop our character or our passion for something He wants us to do. Sometimes He delays because He's seeking to develop a quality within someone else with whom we'll come in contact later. Or at times He's ordering events so that their timing intersects with the plan He wants to carry out. Always keep in mind that He's the great, unfiguroutable God. He doesn't always disclose His purposes until we're much further along our pathway.

Pathways

Read the following verses.

We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

ROMANS 5:3-5

The testing of your faith produces endurance.

JAMES 1:3

What are some reasons God allows difficulties, challenges, and roadblocks along the pathways of our lives?

Whenever God sovereignly allows something that's unpleasant, always remember that it's also not random. He allowed it for a reason. God always has a reason for what He does and for what He allows. The Book of Lamentations tells us:

*If He causes grief,
Then He will have compassion
According to His abundant lovingkindness.*

LAMENTATIONS 3:32

Do you find it easy or difficult to trust God when circumstances don't make logical sense? Explain.

If you're facing a difficult situation or a roadblock, what would it look like to let go of your need to devise an outcome and surrender to God instead?

The Security of Sovereignty

Of the Scriptures we've considered this week, which ones have stuck with you? Which are most helpful to you in confronting the roadblocks you're currently facing?

It's difficult to trust God if you don't believe He's sovereign. When things happen in your life that are painful or confusing and you don't fully grasp God's sovereignty, it's easy to lose trust in God's control and goodness. But once you grab and hold on to the truth that He's the ruler, controller, sustainer, and authority over all, the seemingly disconnected happenings of life are woven together into a tapestry of His perfect timing. The meanderings that seem to take you from place to place on the pathway of your days now lead somewhere. And although you may not see the destination or be instantly relieved of the difficulties, your trust in God's providential care and sovereign rule will give you the ability to rest rather than fret, be still rather than be anxious, and praise rather than complain.

I hope this week's study has helped you realize more about God's sovereign and providential character. These two essentially beliefs about God are the backbone of the Book of Esther and this Bible study. When you understand the sovereignty of God even though you don't understand what He's doing, you'll learn how to see God in a way you've never seen Him before. You'll find joy in His providence. You'll discover the power of His presence and the purpose of His plans.

★ PRAYER ★

Read Romans 8:28-29 and focus on this passage today as often as you can. Seek to align your mind with God's sovereignty by letting go of your logic and trusting in His divine direction. Ask God to increase your faith so that you can rest more fully in His providential care.