

“Liz Carter offers a fresh and needed voice. To the one who feels useless, the pages of this book will remind you of where your true worth is found. To the one who’s exhausted from striving, these pages will free you from the tyranny of ‘being enough,’ all while growing in you a greater awareness and compassion for the least of these. A book I definitely needed to read!”

SARAH WALTON, Author, *Hope When It Hurts*

“I’ve used the phrase ‘used by God’ many times, never stopping to interrogate the meaning or connotations. But *Valuable* has changed that. It exposes Christian culture’s misplaced obsession with usefulness. Utterly convincing in its arguments, it presents an infinitely more wholesome vision of what God has created us to be. As Carter puts it: ‘We are recipients of God’s love, and that love comes through receiving, not through what we do’. What liberating truth!”

SAM HAILES, Editor, *Premier Christianity* magazine

“For those of us who grew up believing we must be better, bigger and the best, *Valuable* is a reminder of the truth of the value we all have as God’s beloved. A gorgeous, heart-breaking, hope-bringing, astounding book. Read it and exhale.”

RACHAEL NEWHAM, Author, *Learning to Breathe and And Yet*

“Words can impact us deeply—which is why it’s so important we speak wisely and well. In this engaging book, there is encouragement to think about our language, run back to Scripture and reassess the vocabulary of God ‘using’ us. It is thought-provoking, heart-searching and conversation-starting—and a beautiful opportunity to see more of the God who gives us value, not just use.”

HELEN THORNE, Biblical Counselling UK

“The belief that we are validated through what we do is endemic in our culture and also in the church. Many people fall off the end of that theological cliff, exhausted, burned out or feeling like they have failed. Liz speaks a better, godly story—of value through being, strength in weakness, extra-ordinary found in ordinary, and a God who accepts and loves us as we are, not as we do. This subversive, saving, Spirit-filled message is as radical as it is one of relief.”

KATE MIDDLETON, Director, *Mind and Soul* Foundation

“If, like me, you’ve wanted to be useful to God, prayed that he might use your pain, or told others they can be used by God, then read this important book. With its clarity, beauty and fresh biblical reflection, *Valuable* is a potent remedy to a malady we may not even realise we have—of believing ourselves to be anything other than loved. What an important book this is.”

SHERIDAN VOYSEY, Author, *The Making of Us*;

Presenter, *Pause for Thought*, BBC Radio 2

“Carefully applying Scripture and peppering her writing with personal illustration, Liz Carter challenges the church to reconsider its preoccupation with ‘usefulness’ and helps us grasp our value in the light of God’s transforming love in Christ. *Valuable* is paradigm-shifting—a challenging and freeing approach to our relationship with God.”

ERIC SCHUMACHER, Pastor; Author, *Worthy and Ours*

“Having benefitted hugely from Liz’s writing previously, I eagerly anticipated this latest book. She writes authentically, beautifully and with great depth—as well as a thorough knowledge of Scripture. I commend this book to you—let its rich treasures of hope, truth and freedom reach deep into your soul.”

CLAIRE MUSTERS, Host, *Woman Alive Book Club*

“A timely challenge and a profound rallying soul cry to pursue fruitfulness over usefulness. Biblical throughout, with poetic flourishes and raw, honest storytelling, Liz has done a majestic job of balancing poignant personal pain with deep teaching from the Bible. I’m so grateful to her for this message.”

PHIL KNOX, *Evangelical Alliance*

“A brave and important book. Liz Carter invites us to explore fresh ways to approach brokenness, and to see that God’s love comes through receiving, not through what we do. With its powerful and eloquent illustrations, *Valuable* is both beautiful and helpful.”

WENDY VIRGO, Author, *Influential Women*

“Stripping back the notion that ‘we are what we do’, Liz Carter takes us on a journey of discovery, guiding us to find—or re-find—our true identity. Affirming, empathetic, encouraging and real, *Valuable* will gently reveal to you just how much you mean to God.”

EMILY OWEN, Author and Speaker

“A gentle and fierce call to eschew the falsehood that our worth depends on our usefulness. Liz writes with clarity, compassion and authenticity in words that will empower everyone, from those seen as ‘useful’ to those who feel broken, and anywhere in between. A wonderful book.”

AMY BOUCHER PYE, Author, *7 Ways to Pray and Transforming Love*

“Liz Carter beautifully challenges our values and language, which in turn challenges our culture. We all have a choice around what culture we want to build in churches, families and communities. This book, with its personal stories and theological reflections, is a gem and will be so helpful for everyone. I thoroughly recommend it.”

PATRICK REGAN OBE, Co-Founder, *Kintsugi Hope*

LIZ CARTER

Valuable

Why your worth is
not defined by how
useful you feel

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Foreword



Our youngest daughter, Emmaus, recently celebrated her 30th birthday. This is always a significant moment for parents, but for us it has a particular poignancy. My wife, Edrie, became seriously ill while she was carrying Emmaus and was later diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. So Emmaus' birthday was also the 30th anniversary of Edrie being in a wheelchair.

MS brings excruciating pain, difficulty sleeping, and a sense of helplessness—but it also brings the anguish of feeling useless. What could Edrie have achieved without this unwelcome infirmity? Couldn't we have been better parents or more productive Christians or greater prayer warriors without MS? If value is measured by productivity and success, then the things we have experienced during the last 30 years have been a massive divine mistake. We could have been so much more useful without MS.

People try to be positive. “You must be very precious to God for him to entrust you with this illness! You must be learning so many lessons!” Perhaps that is true, but did we really need to stay in the classroom that long? People want to find positive and measurable benefits of chronic illness,

but sometimes there seem to be none. The same could be said of depression or broken relationships or the grief of bereavement. They leave us feeling inadequate and pathetic. We feel useless.

All of us struggle with pain of some sort or another. The only condition for suffering is to live long enough! What makes it worse is that most of us have succumbed to the lie that our value is measured by our usefulness. We start to believe that God's love is dependent on our performance. When suffering appears to limit how much God can use us, we have a problem.

In response, we might fit in place a dishonest mask—pretending that all is well, our faith is strong and the trials of this world don't touch us. Perhaps we think that if we confessed our inner struggles we would be letting the side down. Or we worry about what our brothers and sisters in church would think of us—their lives seem so together and sorted (if only we knew the truth!). So we fit our masks in place. The alternative response is to simply spiral down into despair, fearing that God has forgotten us. Edrie and I have experienced both reactions.

But in this book, with insight and sensitivity, Liz Carter maps a better route. Our value does not lie in our usefulness but in our identity as beloved children of a gracious heavenly Father.

The Puritan John Owen reminds us that God's love is “an eternal love that has no beginning and that shall have no ending; that cannot be heightened by any act of ours, that cannot be lessened by anything in us” (*Works*, 2.30). We are flawed and broken. But we are loved more than we can imagine, and God wants us to know it.

Liz reminds us that Jesus delights in small and weak things. He turns our value systems on their heads, choosing the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. Like vessels of honour in Jesus' hand, we are precious and valued. And our compassionate Saviour calls us into the fellowship of his church—the fellowship of the broken but beloved. Here we can remove our masks and find loving acceptance and transforming grace. We can experience real and liberating joy even when we cannot understand God's purpose or see the positive results of our pain.

Over the last 30 years Edrie and I have come to cherish the hope which is held out to us in the gospel. This book culminates in a celebration of the glory of that hope:

We've been finding ourselves in a new story of living hope, which draws us into freedom within our struggles. This hope gives us assurance that one day we will be most fully ourselves, we will be who we were created to be, we will be who we are at our very utmost.
(p 117)

Liz explores these themes and so many more in this wonderfully perceptive book.

Paul Mallard, January 2023

Introduction



“I am Nothing.”

That’s the despairing wail of a battered little stuffed toy in the much-loved children’s book *Nothing* by Mick Inkpen. Left behind when the people in his house move away, he lies abandoned in a dusty corner of the attic. He has a feeling that once upon a time he was something, that he meant something to somebody. But now he is Nothing.

His search for who he is sends him on a painful journey where many of the voices around him only confirm his sense of insignificance. The family leaving says someone else will get rid of him. The mouse tells him the new people won’t want him either. The fox says he’s not even worth eating. As the little toy stares at his reflection in a pond, he sees ugliness, worthlessness and somebody who doesn’t belong. He doesn’t seem to have any use to anyone. “I don’t know who I am,” he wails.

Of course, in the end Nothing finds out that he is not Nothing at all. He was once a beloved cloth cat named Toby, and he is lovingly restored to his former glory for a new generation. He discovers that his value lies in how he is loved, no matter how he looks.

We live in a world where value and usefulness are all tangled up together. All the time, we see and hear judgments of others based on their use: “What a useless mother.” “She’s useless at that job.” “He’s a useless cook.” *Shouldn’t we do better? Couldn’t we be better? We’d have more value if only we could be more useful.*

All of us feel a bit useless sometimes. Every day, in a thousand tiny ways, we can easily feel we are just not quite enough. Somewhere deep inside, like Nothing, we may feel like we too are on show to the critical crowds in our own lives, and we too are left staring at our reflections and found wanting.

But that is not how God sees us.

THAT LITTLE GIRL

I was the sick kid at school. The one who was always absent, always too pale and blotched with illness. As a baby I caught a serious pneumonia which started the process of scarring in my lungs that led to degenerative disease.

“You’ll never amount to anything,” my maths teacher told me when I was 13 years old, and I believed her. Other children only reinforced this belief in me, with their barbed words flying at me over and over again: *Useless. Hopeless. Not one of us.*

“Father, please heal Liz so she can be useful again,” someone praying for me back in those days said with deep sincerity. The words reverberated in my mind and soul, casting shadows in already dark corners. It was true, after all. I *wasn’t* useful. I’d never be useful; at least, not until I got healed, until I got whole.

I wondered if that was how God saw me, too. Did he see

me as no use to the kingdom, as a cast-aside, as someone who once had potential but no longer?

I can still see that little girl standing on her own in the playground if I search closely through the murk of time. She's still there somewhere, suspended and frozen, staring at her feet as the others skip away, oblivious to the power of their words. She stood still in my mind and my body for a long, long time, before I found a different script; a script which wasn't about uselessness anymore. Instead, I found a new identity as a child of God—an identity not based on what I could offer to God, but on his love for me. I finally began to fathom the depths of verses like 1 John 3 v 1:

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

And that's when I knew that I didn't have to stand on my own in the playground anymore.

A DIFFERENT SCRIPT

We form our identities around all manner of things. We grow up with people who influence us for good or bad, we go to school and hear stories about ourselves which we believe, we begin to tell ourselves our own stories, and they become part of us. Our narratives are affirmed by the world around us, by images of perfection, by others who are doing everything well. All around us we see the successful, the beautiful, the healthy, the lives which are undamaged and flawless.

The useful people.

Perhaps you feel like you could always be doing more, being more, achieving more. Maybe, like me, you live with a long-term struggle—whether in mind or body—and you can't see any way in which you can be useful to God or to others. Maybe you live with crippling grief and feel you have no way of expressing any kind of usefulness within your agony. Maybe you are neuro-diverse and feel the world often casts you aside. Maybe you feel you've messed up too many times and there's no hope for change. Maybe you've lived with a sense of uselessness for so long that it simply self-perpetuates; it loops around in your inner script and you cannot escape it.

I want to invite you on a journey beyond use and into value. It's a journey into a new framework, a better script, a freedom story. We will begin in a place of uselessness, and then go on to explore the spacious place of God's kingdom narrative, where the borders are smashed down and the script gets flipped. We'll consider the problematic language of God's use of us, and how we can apply a new language in our lives, in our weakness, in our identity and in our deepest places.

It is my prayer that as you read, you will glimpse the joyous liberation of journeying with a topsy-turvy God, who loves without conditions and slices through the lies you tell yourself. I pray that you will leave behind notions of uselessness and worthlessness as you reflect on Scripture and stories of transformation.

I pray that you will find the space beyond use, and then embrace your value in the light of a new kind of wholeness and holiness you find there.

FOR PRAYER & REFLECTION

*I'm useless, I say,
I am Nothing.
My soul churns the words and
They spatter through my mind,
Daubed by a hundred ruinous brushes
Painting society's whispers and my own failures
Across the landscape of my life.
But I take a step forward,
Dare to trust a new journey
Where hope writes the lyrics and
Peace plays the melody.
Where I run into a new story
Of freedom and triumph.
Where use gets blotted out by perfect love
And I dance through golden avenues
Of upside-down glory.*