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Who God Says You Are



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STEPHEN KENDRICK
& ALEX KENDRICK
WITH LAWRENCE KIMBROUGH

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Introduction

STEPHEN KENDRICK



One of the most powerful and life-changing books in existence is the New Testament book of Ephesians. Filled with hope, it is deep, mind-blowing, and very rich. Its six short chapters express God's amazing heart of compassion, how He can meet us where we are, powerfully change us from within, and beautifully redeem our lives for good and for His glory.

For many years when I tried to read Ephesians, my eyes would seemingly glaze over. I would get lost in some of the concepts and skip over sections I didn't understand, not grasping the bigger picture or how to incorporate it into my life. Then a few years ago, something unexpected happened to my family that completely turned the light on for me and unlocked the book in living color.

We adopted a little girl.

Throughout the process of adoption, our new daughter's journey began to surprisingly parallel the concepts in Ephesians. The entire book began to make sense to me for the first time at a deep level. All the truths became more powerful in light of it, and it's now one of my favorite books of all time.

This experience was so profound, in fact, that I've been walking others through Ephesians and showing them how God can use it in their lives. I'm grateful I can now share our adoption story with you and take time to dive into so many incredible truths from Scripture. I'll begin by going back to the defining day when our adoption began.

Early one morning, my wife, Jill, and I were flying to New York to approve the final master of a movie called *Courageous* that my brother and I had produced, before it was released in theaters. While on the plane, I was praying and reading in the Gospel of John, specifically Jesus' words in chapter 10 about how a shepherd will love, protect, and lay down his life for his sheep. I was thinking about my role as a father that morning and how I could better shepherd our four little children at home. In the course of my reading, God suddenly caught me off guard and spoke to my heart very clearly. I turned to Jill, feeling a bit surprised, and said, "I think God wants us to be open to adoption."

My wife smiled and was already ahead of me. I didn't realize she had been quietly praying for years that God would turn my heart toward adoption, but she had not told me because she wanted it to be of God, not of her. I picked up my pen and wrote the word *adoption* next to the key verse God brought to my attention that day, then dated it.

Fast-forward two years. After we'd completed mountains of adoption paperwork, an email popped into my phone with our first referral. I was elated. Staring back at me was the picture of an adorable, eight-month-old girl, along with the question, "Do you want to adopt this child?"

She logically lined up with everything we were asking for, but there was a problem. I don't know how better to explain it than to say a dark, uneasy heaviness came over me. I felt a strong lack of peace that I wrestled with for hours, wondering what was wrong with me. *Am I afraid? What will happen to this girl if I say no?*

I called a friend who is an adoption consultant, asking for help. "This is too big of a decision, Stephen. If it's not a clear *yes*, then it's a *no*." So with a measure of guilt, I sent the agency an awkward email and closed the door. Jill cried.

Over the next few weeks, two more referrals came. Each was a beautiful, precious child. Each was followed by an emotional battle of research, prayer, and indecision. The willingness was there, but no peace. No “yes.”

More awkward emails followed.

Our adoption agent said it wasn't uncommon for parents to turn down a referral, maybe even two. I had already struck out three times. The “fear of man” started to kick in. *What will others think if I keep turning away these precious orphans knocking on my door? Didn't we say God wanted us to adopt?*

A fourth referral arrived. But again, no peace.

I turned it down. Jill cried.

It was heart-wrenching. An experience that was supposed to be a joyful journey for us had become a traumatic roller coaster, and I sincerely wanted off. The next month, the agency didn't send us any referrals and, to be quite honest, I was relieved.

Then came March 2013. A fifth referral landed in my in-box.

When I saw it, I dreaded opening it.

She was a two-year-old girl who'd been abandoned in a large city in China, diagnosed with a deadly heart condition. Her physical situation was more severe than any of the other children we'd considered. And yet when we saw her picture, an unexpected peace came over both of us, like Colossians 3:15 talks about. It was as if God was saying, “This is the one you've been waiting for.”

After research, we discovered that her birth mother likely couldn't afford her daughter's surgeries and had to face the brutal decision of either keeping her and letting her die or giving her up to save her life. She left her on a street corner wrapped in a red blanket (which in China means “good luck” and “I love you”), along with the papers describing her needed surgeries.

Despite all the potential complications, something seemed very right about making this specific little girl a part of our family. Her file stated her date of birth as February 14, 2011. Jill responded with, “She was born

on Valentine’s Day with a broken heart.” So with peaceful hearts and joyful tears, we sent a welcoming email and locked her in. All was well.

A few weeks later, Jill asked me about that flight where God had spoken to us about adoption. “What day was that?” she wondered. “Do you remember?” I hadn’t thought about it and had no idea. I thumbed through my Bible, looking for John 10:16. Opening the page, I found the word *adoption* next to that verse, and the date next to it.

February 14, 2011.

The day this little girl had been born in China was the same day when God had said so clearly to me on the airplane that He wanted us to adopt.

I was overwhelmed and in awe of God. I felt this incredible sense that we were about to be part of something much bigger than we realized. He was undoubtedly in control of this, and we needed to trust Him and move forward.

Things happened quickly after that, with God continuing to affirm His blessing and guidance in everything we were doing. We felt inspired to name her *Mia*, which means “one” in Greek (Eph. 4:5). After we arrived in China, we discovered that the name her birth mother had given to her was the Chinese word for “one” as well.

Finally, after processing Mia’s adoption and paying all the fees, the time came for us to bring her home, which led to another interesting plane ride. Our friends had warned us it might be highly difficult. They were correct. During the extremely long flight to New York, our new daughter cried, whined, and screamed loudly for a large portion of the twelve hours. (I have videos.)

Mia, our new China rose, was understandably distraught and very confused about what was going on and who we were. She had no idea that this uncomfortable experience was a necessary and important part of a big, wonderful plan—that we were actually rescuing her from a desperate and hopeless situation.

She didn’t know that her future trajectory had been dark. Orphans there get minimal care and often grow up struggling with their identity, sense of value, and purpose. Not knowing the love of a family, not having

much help or hope for the future, they frequently end up on the street where they may be trafficked.

But now Mia would have a safe, happy home and a healthy family. She would have two loving parents, four siblings, four grandparents, and more than a dozen cousins ready to welcome her with open arms. At the orphanage, she owned almost nothing. Now she would have a warm bed, clean clothes, and new toys to enjoy. She would also have all the education and medical care she needed. And she would freely receive the same privileges and future inheritance as all her Kendrick siblings. Now she would have hope. Not just wishful thinking, but a bright pathway into the future.

But none of these wonderful changes were happening because of anything she had done or earned or could provide us. They were all set into motion because of one key thing: there had been a change in her identity because of WHO SHE NOW WAS. She was not a hopeless orphan anymore. She was Mia Kendrick: our chosen, wanted, and beloved daughter. And because of this, in rippling effect, everything else in her life would also completely and tangibly change for the better.

If Mia had understood this reality on the plane—who she was, how deeply she was loved by her new family, and how good her life would become—she could have been smiling and cheering instead of weeping in fear. She could have enjoyed the journey and more easily endured the long flight delays. Had she been able to grasp the bigger picture, she could have been celebrating the entire way home.

And so can you . . . because as beautiful as Mia's change of identity sounds, this story directly applies to each of us.

None of us is born knowing who we are or why we're here, any more than Mia did in China. All of us arrive with our own set of issues and genuine needs—not just physical, but emotional and spiritual as well.

We also have heart problems. We battle with selfishness, pride, lust, greed, insecurity, anger, and many more things. Over time we will struggle with fearing the future, as well as wrestling with the pain and dysfunction within our own lives and families. We'll hurt, and *be* hurt, by

others. We'll tend to grapple with confusion and question our place in this world.

But the Bible says that God, who is the most loving Father of all, openly expressed His compassionate love for each of us by sending His Son on a rescue mission. Jesus demonstrated a love we did not deserve by laying down His life to save us from a hopeless future. He paid the spiritual fees needed for our redemption, and He offers new life to anyone willing to trust Him by faith.

Think about this. When we place our lives in His hands, God the Father literally adopts us into His family and completely changes our identity. Our spiritual condition, value, and purpose change as well, along with our entire future. God takes ownership over us as His children. He blesses us with new resources, helps us discover how to be more like Him, and explains to us in His Word how to live victoriously as His beloved sons and daughters.

But most people do not understand this—including most followers of Christ, I would argue. When the apostle Paul wrote the book of Ephesians, he was writing to people who knew God but didn't understand their spiritual identity. Paul prayed that God would open their eyes to grasp the depth of *who they were* and *what they had* in Christ because of how it would radically change their entire lives.

That is the purpose of this book.

We have written *Defined* to help you learn who you are. Not at a surface level, but at a much deeper level. We want you to discover more of the amazing truths of Ephesians regarding what God's Word says He's already been doing in your life. We invite you and even dare you to join us, along with countless others, on a journey of discovery through some of the most important passages of the Bible regarding the identity and inheritance God provides for His children.

We'll begin with how God designed us, handles our brokenness, and willingly forgives us. We will study what it means to let go of the past and live out our identity in Him so that it positively affects how we think, speak, and relate in love to those around us. Then we will conclude with how God's Spirit empowers us to handle temptation, criticism, and

life's hardest battles more successfully, so that we can walk in victory and still honor God despite our circumstances.

With this purpose in mind, right here at the outset, we would like to challenge you to make a commitment to do three things as you read:

*First, **READ** this book a chapter a day.*

We suggest at least five days a week for the next seven weeks, but whatever works for your schedule.

*Second, **READ** the Bible each day.*

Let the Word of God teach you who God is and who you are. Consider starting in either Matthew or Ephesians, but we'll also give you specific verses at the end of each chapter that you can look up and study. They should deepen your perspective on what God says about your identity and help you gain the most from this journey.

*Third, **PRAY** every day.*

Scripture indicates that prayer is a key component to helping us comprehend and believe truth. Choose a place and time when you can pray alone each day, preferably in the morning (Ps. 5:3). Try to end each chapter by asking God to help you believe and apply whatever He is teaching you. Then take time to pray specifically about any need or difficulty in your life.

We'll end each chapter with a prayer, just as we're doing here in this opening section, extending to you an invitation to approach God with a specific request:

Heavenly Father, I come in Jesus' name, asking that You would open the eyes of my heart to know You and who You created me to be. Help me daily receive Your love for me, walk in sincere love toward You and others, and live out who I am in You. Bless me and strengthen me to do Your will. Fill me and lead me by Your Holy Spirit, and use my life as a light in this world for Your glory. Amen.

May we each experience the depth of the love and mercy of God, and may our lives become living examples of His grace and transforming power to bring light and hope to future generations!

CHAPTER 1

Identity Matters

*I call to God Most High,
to God who fulfills his purpose for me. (Ps. 57:2)*

Jesus Christ inhabited time and space in the first century and is recognized around the world as the most loving, powerful, and influential person ever to have walked the earth. But also this: His entire life is a vivid illustration of the priority of identity.

At thirty years of age, Jesus arrived in Judea to be baptized by the prophet John, who was assigned to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report that at His baptism, Jesus came up out of the Jordan River, and eyewitnesses heard a voice thunder out of the heavens, saying:

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.” (Matt. 3:17)

Now consider the significance of this affirmation at the genesis of Christ’s public ministry. God could have said, “Go evangelize the world,” or “Do the right thing,” or “Fulfill My law,” or “When You die, fear not; I will bring You back.” But instead of endless other possibilities, Jesus’

heavenly Father went straight to the heart and spoke specifically about His Son's identity. This was the priority of heaven.

Identity took precedence over instruction.

Interestingly, God declared this audible blessing of love and acceptance *before* Jesus had preached one sermon, called even one disciple, performed His first miracle, or completed His Father's will. God wanted everyone present—including His Son—to hear exactly who Jesus was and how deeply He was already loved in the eyes of His heavenly Father.

Immediately, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tested by Satan for forty days. Both Matthew 4 and Luke 4 state that two of the three recorded temptations that Christ encountered were specific attacks aimed at, of all things, His identity. The tempter kept repeating, "If you are the Son of God . . ." (Matt. 4:3); "If you are the Son of God . . ." (v. 6). That was his allurement, inciting Jesus to compromise in order to *prove* who He was.

Satan knew that Jesus' integrity and desire to live out His identity was a powerful motivator that would strongly influence His decisions. But Jesus consistently responded with the truth of Scripture rather than His own feelings. Despite intense pressure, He trusted what His heavenly Father had already lovingly affirmed.

After this experience, Jesus traveled back to His hometown in Nazareth, walked into the synagogue, and publicly read what the book of Isaiah had prophesied as the job description for the Messiah. Jesus was publicly declaring who He was, acknowledging His calling to "preach good news to the poor" and to "proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed" (Luke 4:18–19).

The local citizens did not realize He was their Messiah, so they immediately questioned it. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:22). Rather than embrace their long-awaited Savior, they were filled with rage and tried to kill Him instead. Jesus' first day of ministry ended in attempted murder. But He knew this was only the beginning, so He walked through the midst of the angry crowd, left Nazareth, and went out to fulfill His mission.

Over the next three years, Jesus founded His entire ministry not on His education, or on the people He knew, or on the miracles He could do, but only on who He was and is. Everything He said and did flowed out of His identity. His teaching was not just brilliant instruction but was modeled by His life.

Regularly, He personified His messages to meet the need of the audience in front of Him. He wanted to specify what some of the various elements of His identity meant. For instance:

His identity guided His *actions*. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

His identity explained His *access*. “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

His identity clarified His *authority*. “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die” (John 11:25–26 NASB).

Jesus did not merely declare bold things, but He backed them up with actions and power. After proclaiming, “I am the resurrection and the life,” for example, He immediately confirmed it by raising a dead man (Lazarus) from the grave.

His life and ministry demonstrated that (1) knowing our God-given identity is a key priority for each of us, and (2) allowing God to be the One to help us discover it and live it out is foundational to fulfilling our purpose in life.

WHAT IS AN IDENTITY?

The word *identity* describes who you are in totality. It’s the real truth about the real you. Since you are not an abstract cloud of nothingness,

but rather a definitive, living human being, you already have a specific God-given identity whether you know it, want it, or understand it. It is a cornerstone concept in the comprehension and functionality of human existence.

In *language*, we use the word *when* to reference time, *where* to qualify space, and *who* to refer to a person's identity. The word *identity* is not used in the Bible, but the word *who* is referenced thousands of times . . . to indicate identity.

In *relationships*, it's the interaction of our identities that enables us to know and understand one another. From shaking hands and exchanging basic personal information to eventually sharing and knowing someone's thoughts, feelings, and heart, the health and depth of relationships is greatest when who you are, and who *they* are, can freely open up, understand, and speak the truth in love.

In *Scripture*, anytime God created something, He always marked its identity by *naming* it. The first thing Adam did in the garden was to identify and name the animals under his care (Gen. 2:19). And throughout the generations of history, people all over the world still attach a name to someone when they are born, marking their identity.

In God's Word, a person's name is not only connected to their physical existence but ripples outward to encompass their distinctive character and attributes, their individual significance and value, their relational roles and responsibilities, and can also include their authority, actions, accomplishments, reputation, and personal influence. All of these things that are tied to a name can also be part of your identity as a person.

Welcome to the complicated mystery of you. Hopefully it's clear, as we scratch the surface of it, that your existence, identity, value, and influence are of monumental importance and can be epic in reach. Hopefully you will discover in this book that who you really are matters to God, and discovering what He knows about who you are should matter to you.

Every one of us is on an identity journey. We are born knowing nothing about ourselves before we launch into *real life academy*, where new lessons are to be learned in every season. The full spectrum of what you hear, feel, and assume throughout life can include both good and bad

teachers, both weird and wonderful lessons, and will come at you from a wide variety of sources—some trustworthy; some totally unreliable.

Some of your identity lessons are simple and surface: “I have a freckle on my right elbow.” Others are major and monumental: “I’ve never felt loved and understood by my biological father.” Over time you discover strengths you never knew you had, as well as weaknesses you long to overcome. Successes you’d like to relive. Shame that you’d like to hide and bury in the past. You accept and adapt to some of these changes; you deny and doubt others. You experience both deep and superficial relationships, and you learn epic lessons of joy and sorrow in the midst of them.

Through it all, the conclusions you make become a lens through which you view yourself, your life, your circumstances, and your relationships.

So, what has real life taught you about yourself? How deeply have you contemplated this issue of your own identity? Do you really know who you are? You may assume you do, which is why you may say you don’t think about it that much anymore. But the truth is, your identity is actually a deep, underlying part of your thinking all the time, every day.

Beneath your daily words and ambitions, behind your regular thoughts and emotions, is a pool of hidden beliefs about your own identity and worth that either clarifies or confuses the choices you make in life. It affects almost every area, including how you think and feel at any given time, the way you approach daily opportunities and react to problems, and how you tend to view God and your present circumstances.

Consider the following illustrations inspired by true stories:

Shawn is a sharp, intelligent employee, excellent at solving problems. He loves to share his faith, and he keeps a great attitude—that is, unless he fails or someone criticizes him. Then he panics, explodes in anger, lashes out at others, and withdraws into self-pity for days.

Luann is an amazing mother to her three children. But when her youngest son left for college, she suddenly felt like her life

as a mom was over, and she quickly sank into an unexpected depression, including suicidal thoughts.

Colby grew up in church and decided to follow God at a young age. But in his teen years, he developed a dark addiction to pornography that has enslaved him for more than a decade. He desperately wants to be used by God, but he is haunted by shame, and he struggles with ongoing doubts about his own salvation.

Chelsea is a beautiful Christian girl with a bright future. After being sexually assaulted on a date in college, she's been deeply broken emotionally and feels like worthless, damaged goods. Carrying loads of misplaced shame, Chelsea began to drink to medicate her pain and has battled alcoholism for years.

Jerome retired after twenty-five years as a beloved pastor in his community and gladly passed the baton to a young buck, fresh out of seminary. Less than a year later, however, he's frustrated with his empty calendar and has a hard time not being angry at how well the congregation has moved on without him. He fumes with jealousy over the new pastor's success and has grown bitter toward God for taking *his* [Jerome's] church away from him.

If you were to sit down for a meal with each of these people and listen to their heartfelt stories, you might assume that Shawn just has anger issues, Luann's problem is her empty nest, Colby needs an internet filter, Chelsea needs to control her liquor, and Jerome is merely a grumpy old retiree.

But the truth is, in each case, their external behavior is actually flowing out of internal issues deeply rooted in their hearts. Difficult circumstances did not *create* their identity but deeply *tested* it, twisted their understanding of it, and revealed that their identity wasn't anchored where it needed to be. If you dive below the surface, you might find . . .

Shawn doesn't understand how to separate the opinions of others from his worth as a man.

Luann is struggling to believe that her value and purpose are much bigger than even her important role as a mom.

Colby doesn't grasp who he is in Christ or how discovering his identity could help him walk in freedom.

Chelsea doesn't know how to fully accept and walk in the love and acceptance of her heavenly Father.

Jerome doesn't realize, even as a spiritual leader, that he's walking around with identity issues.

Surely, every one of them needs love. They each deserve a listening ear, compassionate understanding, accountable relationships, and encouraging prayer support. But they also need to discover some key truths about their identity and value that could set them free.

The "truth," Jesus said, "will set you free" (John 8:32).

These stories represent only a few of the countless battles people face all around us on a daily basis. Life is extremely complicated, and people clearly struggle with various issues for a wide variety of reasons. It would be overly simplistic to say that an identity adjustment is all anyone needs to solve their problems. We're not saying that. We don't believe that. But we do know identity is a core, foundational issue that greatly affects almost every aspect of our lives. It is deeply misunderstood and often overlooked. And God has so much to say about it that we need to know and understand.

DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE?

What about you? If someone placed a giant mirror in front of you today and offered you a million dollars to accurately and honestly define,

clarify, and share everything you possibly could about the person looking back at you, what would you say?

After feeling awkward for a minute, you might freely state your name and your driver's license stats of race, gender, height, maybe your home address. Before you shared your weight, financial numbers, or any sensitive personal information, you might ask if this conversation is being recorded. Then you'd likely talk about your family and your relational roles. You'd tell things about your parents and siblings, maybe even some of your extended family. You would state any job titles or positions you hold, as well as some of your day-to-day responsibilities.

You might talk about your nationality, your political and religious affiliations, your educational background. You might smile with modest transparency about your skills and talents, highlighting some of your unique abilities and accomplishments. You would likely open up about what you personally love and hate in life—food and music preferences, sports teams, favorite movies, and personal pet peeves.

At some point, if you felt emotionally safe enough, you'd likely take a deep breath and start sharing personal stories about your greatest memories or even your hardest life experiences, including your deepest regrets that you long to be erased from your past. You might get a little choked up when talking about the people who have loved you the deepest over the years, as well as those who have brought you the greatest pain.

Even still, there might be some areas you'd be hesitant to share. Questions you struggle with. Fears. The deeper layers of your innermost thoughts and secrets. Some of your core beliefs and things you still wonder about. And then, if prompted, you might even share your best guesses at the WHY behind it all, what you think the real purpose and meaning of your life might be.

But after all was said and done, whether it took hours or days to pour out your heart in such unhindered fashion, imagine being asked to look back into that mirror, fix your eyes on your own eyes, and answer as honestly as possible the following challenging questions:

- Do you genuinely like, respect, and care about the person you see?
- What do you truly think about this person?
- Are you grateful to be you, or do you honestly wish you were someone else?
- Are you angry or grateful with what God has done in your life?
- Who do you think influences your view of your own identity the most?
- How loved and affirmed did you feel by your parents growing up?
- Did they make you feel valued and understood?
- How loved do you feel today in your heart and current relationships?
- What do you think God thinks about you?
- Do you believe He really sees, cares, and knows you intimately?
- Do you feel like He accepts you, just tolerates you, or rejects you?
- Do you genuinely believe He loves you?
- How deeply have you been hurt by others?
- Are you still tender and hurting, or have you healed completely?
- When was the last time you were genuinely happy and at peace inside?
- What do you believe is the purpose of your life? Do you have any idea?
- Do you feel empty and hopeless inside, or do you have a hopeful future?
- Do you believe you will go to heaven one day when you die?
- Are you sure? If not, would you like to be sure?
- What is your greatest hope from learning about your identity?

The purpose of this book is not to become self-absorbed or self-centered. Our genuine hope for this experience is that you'll discover so much more about the heart of God as you open up your own heart to the mystery of what He's done and wants to do in and through you.

To know and be known is a powerful thing.

To love and be loved is a beautiful thing.
To know your purpose and fulfill it is a priceless thing.
But to know God and be known and loved by Him is better than
life itself.
It is life—“eternal life” (John 17:3).

Heavenly Father, as I begin this journey of discovery, I pray that You will open the eyes of my heart to discover and know the truth about who You are, about who I truly am, and who You created me to be. Give me the grace and strength to trust You with whatever I find. Help me to know Your love and to find and fulfill Your greater purpose for my life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

TAKE IT DEEPER BY STUDYING

Matthew 16:13–17 • Mark 9:7–8 • John 5:31–32

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! (Ps. 139:23–24 ESV)

CHAPTER 2

The Confusion of Your Identity

Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God. (Rom. 12:2)

Identity confusion is ongoing and everywhere. We live in a digital generation that is being constantly bombarded with random and opposing messages about who we are and what we are. A cloud of ongoing debate swirls around racial and national identity, gender and sexual identity, political identity in government, and even denominational identity in the church. Some of these identifiers are inbred and God-given, while some are matters of belief, values, and choice.

But either way, people we love and care about in our families, friendship circles, and work environments fall on both sides of almost every one of these issues. And we're not talking about marginal, petty disagreements here. We're seeing lives devastated and families torn apart, and nationally we're watching substance abuse and suicide rates on the rise.

Identity is a core issue. What you and I believe about God and about ourselves are two of the most central and foundational beliefs in our hearts. And the further these internal beliefs skew away from truth, the more havoc our distorted interpretations of identity will wreak on our behavior.

To use a sports analogy, a person who doesn't understand his or her true identity is like a football player who doesn't know his position or what team he's on. He can run around on the field chasing the ball and randomly tackling people, but he will function in a fog and frustrate everyone else with his confusing behavior. He might rant, "Quit judging me! I'm trying my best here. This is what I want to do and feel like doing." But his behavior is not the core problem. He doesn't really understand who he is.

Or to use a farming illustration, if a cow begins to think he's a chicken, he will unnecessarily live a life of frustration, depression, and disillusionment, especially when he tries to lay an egg or jump up on a fence post and crow.

People who begin embracing a lie about their identity will constantly struggle with confusion and inconsistencies between their thoughts and emotions on the one hand and the reality of God's Word and everyday life on the other. Jesus warned His listeners that they could easily frame their lives around false assumptions and self-deception (Matt. 7:21–23), and that they needed to be careful and on guard about the people whose teaching they allow to influence their opinions (vv. 15–20).

The apostle Paul warned:

We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ. (Eph. 4:14–15 NASB)

Regardless of where we've come from and what kinds of identity issues we're dealing with, we need to take these words to heart. Let's not be like gullible children, easily duped by whoever's making the loudest, most impassioned noise at any given moment. And let's not artificially separate walking in love from walking in truth. Both are valuable and necessary, or else we and the people we love will find ourselves building

our lives on shifting sands, to tragic results (Matt. 7:24–27)—the following shifting sands of *feelings, desires, and other people's opinions*.

FEELINGS ARE FAULTY

Feelings are powerful communicators but not reliable sources of truth. Your feelings are one of the most shallow and unstable parts of your life. Emotions can swing all over the map, bypassing logic, ignoring reality, and reacting to speculation. Just because something *feels* true does not at all *make* it true. Feelings are basically fickle followers, not dependable leaders. They should be seen as the caboose following the train, not the locomotive that pulls it. The day we quit letting our feelings run our lives and start walking in truth will be a great day of liberation. While feelings can actually help us discover what we *already* believe in our hearts, they're not often a good gauge of what is true—what we *should* believe.

So where do our feelings come from? Different sources. But the Bible gives us a clue about how we can parse out our feelings and trace them back to their point of origin. Each of us is comprised of a body, soul, and spirit, interconnected with one another (1 Thess. 5:23), and all three of them can affect and influence our feelings in distinct ways.

1. *Your body* is a temple, the Bible says (1 Cor. 6:19)—a mobile tabernacle—that needs to stay well fueled and well tuned. Because if not kept under control, it will drive you off a cliff. We're all aware that a lack of sleep, a stomach bug, or the wrong medication can negatively affect how we physically feel. On other days your body may feel great; you almost feel like you could fly or run through a wall. At other times, however, it might feel despondent or demanding and make you think you should overeat, oversleep, or even sleep around.

So it should be led and stewarded well, but not trusted and followed as a moral guide. Your body doesn't care what's right or wrong, and it will betray and enslave you quickly if you let it take the wheel and have its way. That's why the apostle Paul wrote, "I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest . . . I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27 ESV).

2. *Your soul* is commonly believed to be comprised of your mind, will, and emotions, and it can also impact your feelings. Jesus said, the night before His crucifixion, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death” (Matt. 26:38 NASB). His feelings were being informed by His knowledge of what was to come. The thoughts in your head and core beliefs in your heart will directly affect your feelings and emotions. You may be physically and spiritually healthy, but if you mentally allow your thoughts to dwell on evil or believe a lie, you will feel the darkness and bondage of it. Lot, in the Old Testament, “felt his righteous soul tormented” by all the sin he saw in his city of Sodom (2 Pet. 2:8 NASB).

3. *Your spirit* also affects your feelings. Love, joy, and peace are spiritual fruit and can be tangibly felt in our hearts when we walk with God. In contrast, King David felt an agonizing *loss* of joy when he lived in spiritual sin (Ps. 51). God will often guide us with feelings of peace or conviction in our spirits (Col. 3:15), which can be useful in directing our next steps toward obedience. But the filter of His Word must still remain our plumb line of truth (v. 16). Where feelings and His Word do not align, we must trust His Word, which doesn’t change, not our feelings, which are always subject to change. First John 3:20 says, “Even if we feel guilty, God is greater than our feelings, and he knows everything” (NLT).

So lock into this. Many people foolishly let their feelings (regardless of the source) determine what they believe to be true about who they are or what is morally right for them. They think: *If I don’t feel loved, then I must not be loved. If something feels good, then it must be good. If I feel like I’m right, then I must be right. If I have feelings of attraction for someone, then it must mean God made me this way and it’s my destiny to pursue that. If I feel like God hates me, then He must hate me. If I feel like I’m worthless and should hurt myself or someone else, then maybe I should.*

This line of thinking is backward, unreliable, and tragic. A lie will feel true if you choose to believe it. A hypochondriac who mentally assumes he’s sick can physically make himself *feel* sick. Worry stirs up fearful feelings as if evil has already happened when nothing real has occurred.

Consequently, painful experiences are powerful teachers. To go through pain so deep that you can hardly breathe or honestly want to

die—this is a potent pill to swallow. Emotional experiences are deeply memorable and can leave a scar of poisonous lessons in our hearts. If that message is a lie about our value or identity, and if it is reinforced by so much deep emotion, it's hard for us not to believe it and be deceived by it.

Whether it was verbal, physical, or sexual abuse, if someone rejects you and crushes you, and you start to *believe* that you are worthless or unloved, then you will also start to *feel* that way, even when it's the opposite of the truth. Your feelings will follow your heart's beliefs. Whether it's through the cutting words of a critic or being openly rejected by a former friend, feelings can water the seed of a lie you're considering and help it take root in your heart. Then the lie, when planted, will reinforce itself with more feelings. Angry thoughts lead to angry feelings that lead to more angry thoughts. Depressing thoughts are handcuffed to depressing feelings.

If you are a man who begins to genuinely question, consider, and ultimately start to believe that you are a woman, then be aware that your feelings could naturally follow the thoughts and reinforce those assumptions. We should not believe everything we feel or think. We might say, "I've believed and felt this way for a long time." But God's Word would remind us that believing a lie for a long time doesn't make it true.

We might claim, "Well, I'm just following my heart." But the prophet Jeremiah would warn us that the human heart can be selfish, wicked, deceitful, and deceived (Jer. 17:9). Solomon, after years of learning painful lessons the hard way, warned, "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but he who walks wisely will be delivered" (Prov. 28:26 NASB).

So wise discernment of our feelings is vital to maintaining healthy thinking, and thereby maintaining an accurate viewpoint on our identity. Regardless of the source—body, soul, or spirit—we must filter it all through wisdom and truth from God's Word. The Bible instructs us to "destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5 esv).

DESIRES ARE DECEITFUL

Contrary to what many people believe, your desires do not determine your identity or your destiny. Scripture warns us to follow God-honoring desires but to turn away from sinful ones.

So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.

When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! (Gal. 5:16–23 NLT)

Regardless of how we feel, Scripture says God never tempts us to sin. Our own sinful desires, not God, are what lure us toward doing something wrong (James 1:13). God is actually the source of every good thing (v. 17). He has our best interest in mind and wants us to enjoy His best desires freely without the heartbreak or the hangover afterward. So the biblical response to wrong desires is to willingly turn from the stumbling blocks in our lives and apply the Word of God instead, to “put

away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls” (v. 21 ESV).

Remember, God can renew your mind (Rom. 12:1–2), save your soul (James 1:21), restore your soul (Ps. 23:3), fill you with His love (Rom. 5:5), and give you the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). His best for us is within reach if we are willing to trust Him.

OTHER PEOPLE’S OPINIONS WILL OSCILLATE

The words and opinions of people are varied, contradictory, and can easily change or swing to extremes.

Your mom may glance at your third-grade report card and tell you how smart you are, but later your older brother catches you dripping ketchup on your shirt and informs you that you’re a complete idiot. Your football coach gives you a high five and calls you a winner. Your ex-girlfriend posts online that you’re the world’s biggest loser.

Try releasing a movie and reading the wildly differing reviews.

“Greatest movie ever made! I’ve seen it six times!”

“Absolute most embarrassing piece of life-sapping garbage ever put on a screen!”

When it comes to your identity, even if you line up ten people who know you well to tell you who they think you are, they still only know a small fraction of your words, actions, and only a few of your inner thoughts. Who has total omniscience, perfect understanding, and could articulate everything about you flawlessly? Only God, not them.

Jesus did not base or alter His own sense of identity on what other people thought or said about Him. Some people listened and followed Him, while others questioned and angrily opposed everything He did. The night Peter was vowing to die for Christ, Judas was simultaneously betraying Him behind the scenes. Even when people were believing in Him, Jesus “would not entrust himself to them, since he knew them all and because he did not need anyone to testify about man; for he himself knew what was in man” (John 2:24–25). He understood “it is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man” (Ps. 118:8 NASB).

Throughout our lives, we will each hear a wide variety of helpful and hurtful things said about us. Some loving; some hateful. Some completely true; some totally wrong.

Words can be so powerful. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 18:21). Sometimes what people say about us can feel like a curse. Their words cut deep, go to the heart, and feel true. Then we can replay them hundreds of times in our minds. We may reject them, believe them, or wonder if they *might* be true. Then when anything happens that reinforces them, we can overreact out of fear and struggle to prove them wrong. Whether it’s the fear of looking stupid; fear of failure; fear of being overlooked or replaced; or the fear of being rejected, unloved, or abandoned, all of these can be horrible tormentors to someone’s thinking if that person is not grounded in the solid truth of what God says about them. We must remember:

The fear of mankind is a snare, but the one who trusts in the LORD is protected. (Prov. 29:25)

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. (2 Tim. 1:7 NKJV)

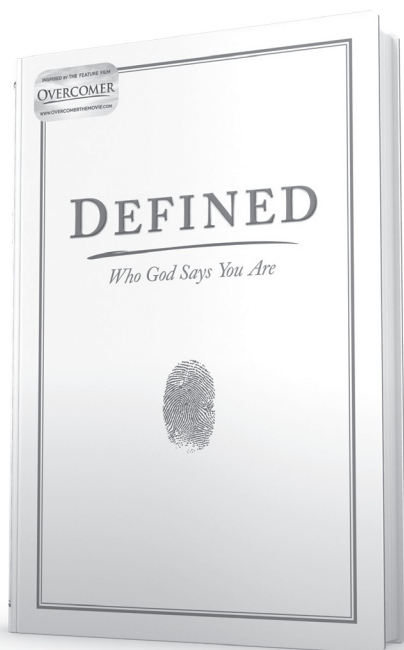
In conclusion, be careful about grounding your identity in fluctuating things that will set you up for failure and disappointment. You should be defined by God, not by your changing feelings, fickle desires, Facebook likes and reviews, or others’ assessments of you. We all have issues and should continue to walk in humility and love, being willing to learn and grow. But as we will discover in future chapters, to discover who you really are, as told by the One who truly knows you, can be a life-changing breakthrough that unlocks how best to live. The best is yet to come.

Heavenly Father, give me wisdom and discernment to filter all the messages that are coming at me, and help me build my life and thinking on truth. Change my heart, O God, and cleanse me of any sinful or hurtful way that is in me. Renew my mind and habits by Your grace. Help me speak the truth in love and not be swayed by my feelings or desires that are leading me away from loving You and obeying Your will. In Jesus' name, amen.

TAKE IT DEEPER BY STUDYING

John 8:30–36 • 2 Corinthians 10:4–5 • James 1:19–25

O send out Your light and Your truth, let them lead me. (Ps. 43:3 NASB)



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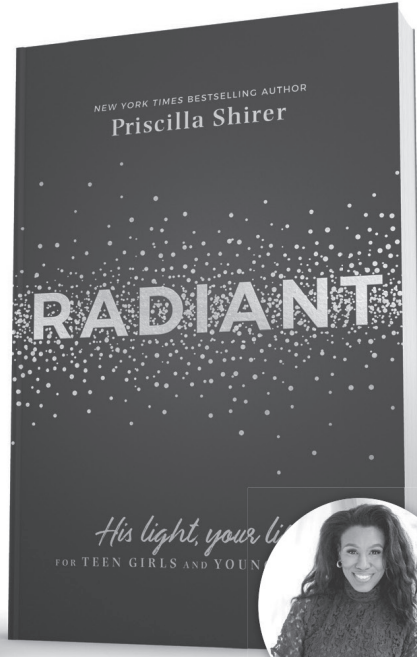
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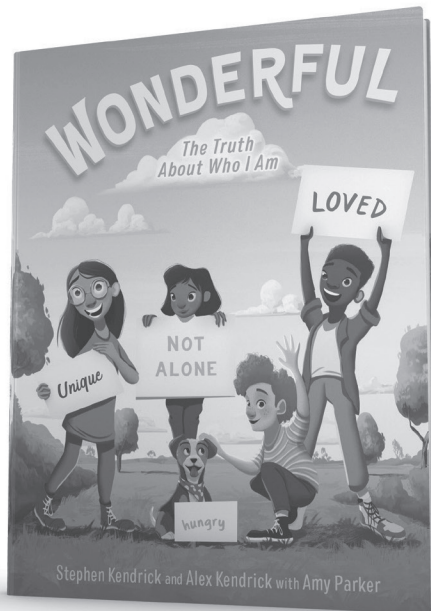
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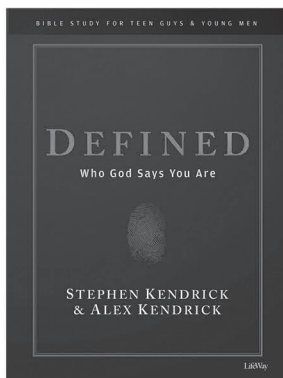
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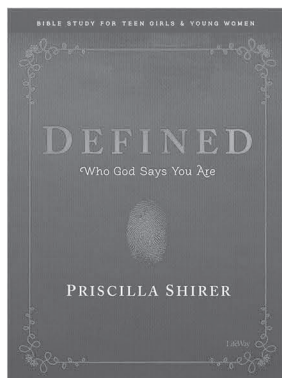
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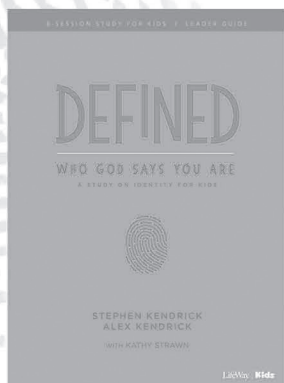
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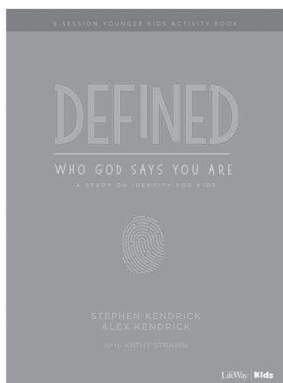
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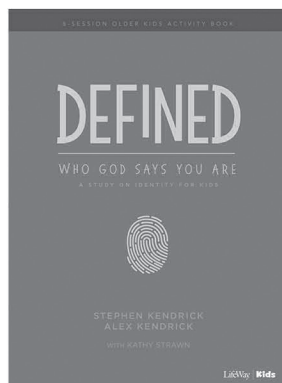
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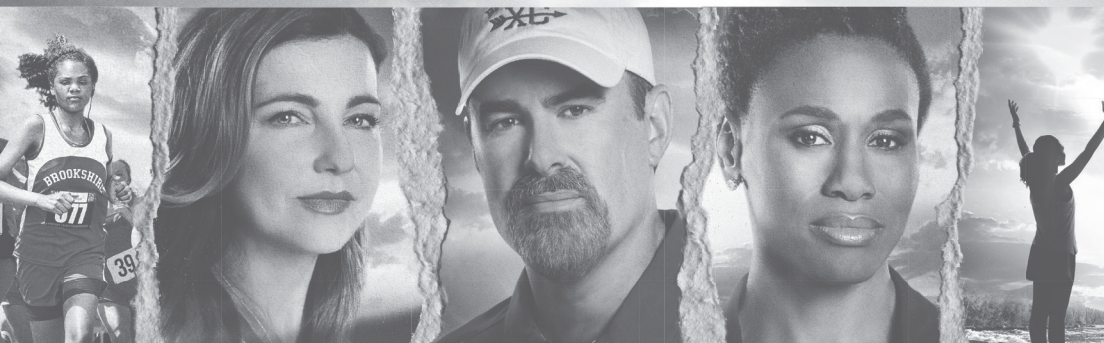
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