

The Elusive Search

When I discover who I am, I'll be free.

—Ralph Ellison

*One of the tragedies of our life is that we
keep forgetting who we are.*

—Henri Nouwen

JOHN

DANIEL DAY-LEWIS IS KNOWN AS one of the most committed method actors of our time. When he took on a role, he embodied the character not only on camera but off camera, and he only responded to his character's name. For the movie *In the Name of the Father*, Day-Lewis lost fifty pounds and spent three days in solitary confinement without water. For his role as a man with cerebral palsy who could only use his left foot, Day-Lewis lived like the character off-set, getting carried or wheelchaired, and was hand-fed all his meals. During the filming of *Gangs of New York*, which was set in nineteenth-century New York, Day-Lewis caught pneumonia because he insisted on wearing period-specific clothing. He then refused to take modern medicine and almost died as a result.¹

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“That is crazy!” we exclaim. And yet, many of us have spent our lives embodying roles that are not our true identities. We have lost track of what ultimate reality is.

Humans have been wearing emotional masks since we exited the garden of Eden. We try on identities, attempting to discover one where we find affirmation, peace, and security. We put on masks of vocation, role, and achievement, hoping to find the contentment we desperately long for.

No matter how many masks we put on, happiness eludes us. Rates of depression and suicide have never been higher. Marriages fail at alarming rates. More individuals in the United States have substance addictions than those who have cancer.² The happiness our masks promise remains out of reach for most.

How then can we find happiness? How can we be at peace? We believe the answer is found in two words: true identity.

Who Are You?

Wait a minute. Haven't we already tried to find happiness through identity?

In 1992, Robin Williams, voicing Genie, coaxed Aladdin, “Remember, be yourself.” Nearly thirty years later, amid a culture steeped in a “be yourself” philosophy, we are more lost than ever. We've tried to be ourselves through our relationships, our careers, our parenting, our sexuality, and our patriotism. Genie's advice has failed. This isn't because we have neglected to live out the admonition but because we have never understood *who we are*. We have substituted false identities for our true identities.

As a counselor (Angel) and pastor (John), we've had hundreds of conversations with those who struggle to understand their purpose and find happiness. It's not surprising that few of those who are struggling can satisfactorily answer the most basic question: Who are you?

We invite you to stop right now. Don't read another word. Answer

that question: Who are you? When you take off the masks, what is there? Write it in the margin or at the back of the book. We'll return to your answer later.

How We Talk to Ourselves

Modern science has confirmed the power of replacing negative self-talk with positive affirmations. Studies have shown that the practice of making daily affirmations decreases stress, increases the amount of time exercising, and may even lower the risk for cardiovascular disease.³

When Angel and I read these studies, we were surprised by the verifiable impact of positive self-affirmations. But we also question the way positive affirmations are taught and used. Our culture tells us to replace negative self-talk with affirmations based not in our identities in Christ but in our aspirations.

Secular therapists and coaches help clients recognize negative self-talk. You might identify with some of these thoughts:

- “I’m so ugly.”
- “I’ll always be fat.”
- “I’ll never get a promotion.”
- “I hate myself.”
- “I’m such a loser.”
- “This is going to fail.”
- “Everyone leaves me out.”
- “No one thinks I can do this.”
- “I am the problem.”
- “I am dirty.”

According to these therapists and coaches, the next step is to replace this harmful self-talk with positive statements. Those statements might look like the following:

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- “I am beautiful.”
- “I enjoy exercising.”
- “I will create opportunities for myself.”
- “I love who I am.”
- “I am successful.”
- “I love defying the odds.”
- “I am valued.”
- “I believe in myself.”

Cruise down the self-help aisle in Barnes & Noble and you’ll be sure to find a title promising you that your life will be changed by actualizing your effervescent, perfectly capable self.

Does that make anyone else uncomfortable? Angel and I are allergic to this model of positive self-talk. Why? Because it is not grounded in our identity in Christ but rather in the shifting sand of our own thoughts and beliefs. We can say “I love who I am” a million times in a mirror, but if it’s rooted in our self-belief, the first time we see something about ourselves we want to change, we’ll topple. And what happens when real gusts of hardship come? What happens when life inevitably proves we are not the masters of our lives, in control of all circumstances?

And yet, while the secular therapists who have researched and promoted self-affirmation have built their practice on too weak a foundation, their methods are worth considering. Not only does science support positive thinking, but Scripture also asks us to affirm our identities. It is no accident that the New Testament writers make direct statements of truth about themselves and their readers. It is not enough for the truths of our identities in Christ to be passively received, like a child might memorize a list of United States presidents or states to simply say they know who they are or where they are located. Is naming them enough? It isn’t what we know; it is what we do with what we know. Therein lies the power. Affirmations

have purpose. If God's voice of truth in Scripture speaks a word about us, then we are invited to speak it over ourselves.

In fact, God encourages us to speak his truths over ourselves. Paul likens this to putting on a new article of clothing: Christ himself (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27). When we put on our "new self" (Col. 3:10), we put on the likeness of Christ and his virtues, and we take off the "old self" (Col. 3:9). But we don't just put on Christ; we are also to put away the falsehoods (Eph. 4:25) that the Enemy has taught us to repeat.

Far too many Christians have let the Enemy have a foothold in their lives under the deception that negative self-talk is somehow godlier. When we speak poorly about ourselves, we can feel like we're being humble. It is true that we are sinners in desperate need of a Savior. It is true that secular positive affirmations are vacuous if they are built on our personal ability to make them come to pass. But when we open the Bible, we see that it is full of affirmations far better than our culture provides.

Consider how replete the Bible is with statements of profound worth. Echoing God's Word, we can say with confidence:

- "I am wonderfully made."
- "I am adopted by the perfect Father."
- "I am beloved."
- "I am a conqueror."
- "I am God's friend."
- "I am protected."
- "I am pure."
- "I am a saint."
- "I am God's treasure."
- "I am gifted."
- "We are God's beautiful bride."
- "We are the light of the world."

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- “We are unified.”
- “We are his temple.”
- “He will complete his good work through me.”

It is a good thing to start and finish our day with these statements of biblical affirmation. If we trust in the words of Scripture, then believing these statements and letting them form our hearts and shape our self-talk will grow us into the likeness of Christ in a powerful way. If the King of Kings and Lord of Lords calls us valuable, then we can absolutely believe and say we are valuable. Biblical affirmations make much of God’s voice over us. As we navigate forward, we pray that you hear more of your Master’s voice and less of the false voices we all naturally tend to amplify.

Substitute Identities

I am not much of a baker (Angel, on the other hand, is fantastic). Some years ago, I tried to surprise my family with a Saturday morning breakfast. Picture the scene: Angel and the kids are asleep, the weekend rain pitter-patters on the roof, and a family breakfast seems to be the perfect way to start the lazy day.

Homemade biscuits sound like the ideal complement to my standard eggs and bacon. I thumb through our recipe book and pull out Angel’s family biscuit recipe. “Two cups flour. Got it. Three-quarters teaspoon salt. Check.” I pour the Morton’s into the teaspoon and flip it over into the bowl. “Two and a half teaspoons baking powder. Hmm . . . where did that baking powder go? Where did it go?” Cupboards open and close. Nope. “Ahhh . . . well, here’s baking soda. Almost, but not quite. Baking powder, where are you?”

I stand back and consider my options. Do I wake Angel up? No. Any hope of brownie points would evaporate. Do I run to the store? No, sir. What if the kids wake up while I’m away? Lazy Saturday morning ruined. How similar are baking soda and baking pow-

der? They've got to be pretty similar, right? And in the baking soda goes.

The fork scrapes the bowl as the biscuits are mixed. The coffee is ground and percolated. The bacon sizzles in the pan, and the eggs are salted, peppered, and scrambled. I dollop the biscuit dough out onto the pan and put them into the oven.

The smell of breakfast fills our home, and Camille, Soren, and Angel file into the kitchen, give me a thank-you hug, and pile breakfast onto their plates. We sit. We give thanks.

Then from the kitchen table, the first bite of biscuit is taken. "Gross! What did you do to the biscuits, Daddy?"

Uh-oh. I take a bite. It tastes metallic and soapy. Yuck! It turns out baking soda is not a perfect substitute for baking powder.

Many of us put substitute ingredients in place of the true ingredients of our identity. Seems like they should work, but those substitute identities will leave us as disappointed as baking soda in biscuits.

Labels, Roles, and Identity

So, who are you? Many respond to that question by sharing their roles: "I am a mom." "I am a dad." "I am a sister." "I am a wife." "I am a husband." "I am a lawyer." "I am a teacher." "I am an athlete."

It's not surprising that we answer the question this way. One of the first questions we ask children is "What do you want to be when you grow up?" It's a fine question, but by asking it over and over again, we teach kids that they are what they do. We coach our children to substitute roles for true identities.

Angel grew up with a mission to be a wife. She planned her wedding in fourth grade. She started praying for her future husband in sixth grade. In hindsight, she admits she was setting herself up for failure. Everything she did was to craft her identity around being a wife. She had a false understanding of her true north. It led

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to a season of fighting for her own happiness and escape. When her identity as a wife imploded, she tried out her identity as a health nut, a yogi, and a photographer. None of those identities satisfied her. Eventually she went after other men. She thought that perhaps they would make her feel beautiful and worth something. Adultery and death were at her doorstep. Her world turned upside down, and every childhood holy pursuit was now a reflection of self-hatred and condemnation. She came face-to-face with her own internal desperation before a living God. She had failed in her identity as a wife and mom. Little did she know, Jesus had way more to say about her. Jesus took her brokenness and then put her back together. Only when she found her identity in Jesus could she experience his wholeness.

As youngsters grow into teenagers and teenagers into young adults, it is more likely that roles become substitute identities. The amorphous blob of elementary children separates into distinct groups—the geeks, jocks, thespians, musicians, punks, emo kids, mean girls, preps, and church kids. What teenage movie doesn't riff on the interplay among these groups? Despite what they say, every teen longs to embody a label. We want to be able to make sense of who we are and where we fit in this world.

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I remember one summer when my parents took our family to a one-week camp in New Mexico. During the day, we divided into our respective age groups. I went off with the eleven- and twelve-year-olds. We gathered in a gazebo and introduced ourselves. As introductions began, a light bulb went off in my head. "No one knows me here! I can be whoever I want to be." My turn came and I introduced myself as "Johnny." None of my friends back home called me Johnny.

But maybe this was the moment to break through to a new, cooler me. I didn't just go by a different name; I tried on a new personality. I acted tougher and more aloof. Tough-guy "Johnny" was a fraud, so at night I had to keep my family away from my new friends. I feared my parents would discover my duplicity. I was Johnny by day, John by night, slipping on the personalities like sweatshirts. I was relieved when we pulled away from the camp and I bid farewell to "Johnny." The charade was over, and I was grateful.

The hunt for our identity doesn't stop as adults. We latch onto identifiers. We join Facebook pages, read books and blogs, join clubs, and make friends with those who are like-minded. We hunt for those like us. When we learn someone else has the same quirky tastes, we light up. The two of us appreciate undiscovered music and strategy board games. When we find someone similar, we think, "You're one of us!"

And so we identify ourselves by family, marriage, vocation, political party, style, where we grew up or where we live, even by the grocery store we frequent. (Can we get an "Amen," fellow Trader Joe's loyalists?)

Sexual preferences are another means of creating identity. It's not surprising that our culture has become obsessed with gender. Because some group identities are formed based on sexual preferences, there is a push to label those preferences earlier and earlier. It makes sense (from the world's perspective) that if our identity is found in our sexual preferences, then we would want children to identify their sexual preferences as early as possible. Similarly, we are dissatisfied with binary genders, desiring subsets ad infinitum because we think they can express our identity. Yet such answers are found wanting, just like all the rest.

Substitutes, all.

Our preferences do not define who we are. They are not ultimate.

Our roles do not define who we are. In fact, every one of our roles

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can change. For us, if one of us dies, we will shift from spouse to widow or widower. If we change careers or retire, we will no longer be a pastor or a counselor.

We assert that making our vocations, our families, our independence, our personalities, or our righteousness into our identities will not sustain us. We will deal with each of these issues in the chapters that follow.

God has given you valuable roles. But don't confuse them with your identity. They make poor substitutes that will not satisfy.

Who you are in Christ is unchangeable and nonnegotiable. If and when you experience the transforming work of Christ in your life, you are given new identities that cannot change. Christ offers us multifaceted identities in him. In him we are saints, sons, servants, and much more. Coming to grips with these true identities brings about holistic peace and radical freedom.

To answer the question "Who am I?" is to set the true north of your life. Understanding that your true identities are in Christ allows you to step into being who you were made to be and living how you were designed to live.

An Identity Built on Sand

To begin grappling with the depth of who you truly are, you will need to allow some aspects of how you view yourself to shift from being things that define you to things that express you. Roles, achievements, pursuits, and so on can be good, but they should not be foundational.

As God's image bearers, we need to let the old pass away; we were made for more. When Paul writes to the church at Corinth, he invites them into a new freedom, which comes as we behold who God is and allow him to transform our identities. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are

being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:17–18). When we encounter God, he changes us into who he has made us to be. We trade our earthbound faces for his ultimate identities for us. A door is important, but it cannot substitute for a foundation.

Our circumstances are not our fundamental flaw or problem. Our anxiety and depression do not define us; nor do our marital, financial, relational, sexual, or vocational issues. Our circumstances are not who we are.

When we define ourselves by our roles, our preferences, or our situations, we have built our identity on a foundation of sand.

Not long ago, Angel and I took a work vacation to Tijuana, Mexico, in order to be intentional with our writing projects. On the beach was a stretch of homes built on the cliffs—idyllic, but not reinforced with steel and concrete. Year after year, the tide has drawn the sand from the cliffs into the sea. Grain by grain, the cliffs have inched back. Some homes have already slid down the sea-worn banks. Others hang precariously over the edge with foundations exposed. It is only a matter of time until they join the fate of the other poorly anchored homes. So it is with our lives: when we’ve built our identity on what the world whispers to us about who we are rather than on the solid truths of who God declares us to be, we soon find that our exposed foundations prove unsupportive.

Our Battles

It took both of us a long time to fully understand who we are in Christ and then to root our lives in that identity. We will share some of those battles in the pages that follow.

As a counselor and a pastor, Angel and I walk with those who are engaged in these battles every day. We witness the struggles to understand identities. They are real. Every person reading this book has a unique story with unique trials. Scars tell the stories of

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battles won and lost. They speak of trauma and abuse; they speak of broken homes; they speak of doubt; they speak of addiction.

But hear this: there is hope for you. You might not see even a flicker of hope today, but your Creator does. Your Savior does. Can you trust the One who knit you together in the beginning of time—trust him enough to believe that what he sees in you is more trustworthy than what you see in yourself?

Is it hard to fully live into the identity Christ has purposed for us? Yes, it does not come naturally. Have you ever noticed how dogs swim? Most dogs look unnatural in the water. Their heads point awkwardly out of the water; their legs, perfectly designed for running and jumping on land, look silly paddling along. Now consider the dolphin: a flick of its tail propels it through the water effortlessly, and it changes course at angles that don't seem possible. When it comes to living in the reality of our true identity, many of us are more like dogs in water than dolphins. Even though we've been told we belong in the water, we struggle to put our heads under and really live as God has called us.

Pastor Eugene Peterson reminds us, "Identity does not begin when I begin to understand myself. There is something previous to what I think about myself, and it is what God thinks of me. That means that everything I think and feel is by nature a response, and the one to whom I respond is God. I never speak the first word. I never make the first move."⁴ Let's let God speak the first word to us; let's let God make the first move. When we trust his promises more than what our hearts tell us, and when we trust his true north over our culture's, then we will begin to feel and live differently.

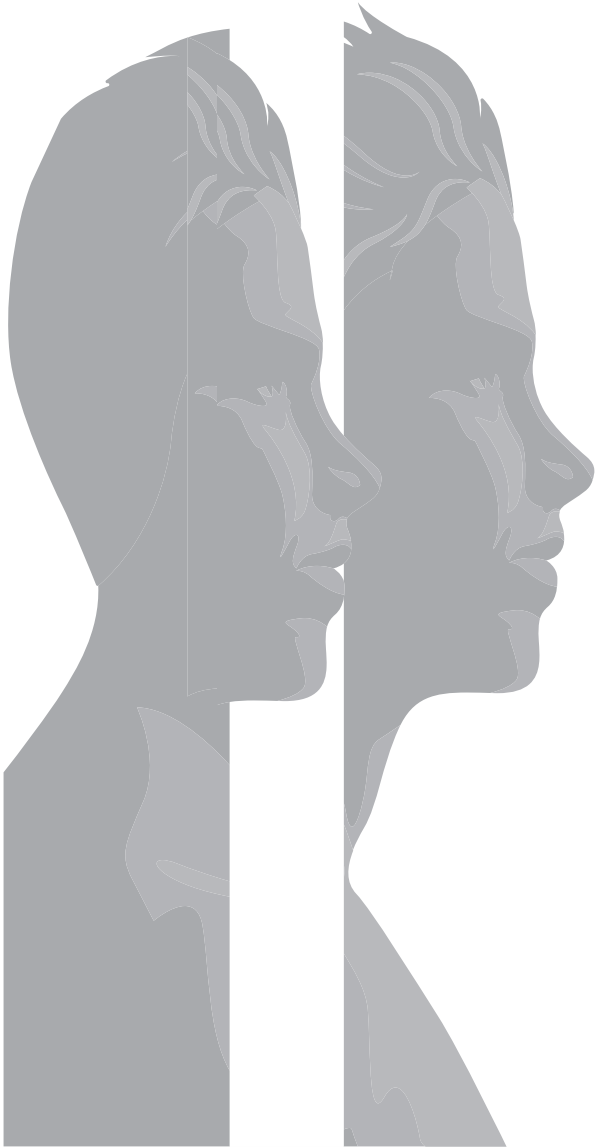
We believe that most struggles are fundamentally struggles with identity. The only way to experience the peace, contentment, and joy for which God has made us is to understand who we truly are.

Let's journey together. Angel and I hope to help you navigate both the breadth and depth of your true identity in Christ. To do so, we

will examine ten substitute identities that masquerade as true identities. As we consider each of these identities together, we will challenge you to take off the mask of that false identity and exchange it for a true identity that Christ gives to those who trust him.

The only way to experience the peace, contentment, and joy for which God has made us is to understand who we truly are.

We pray that God uses these words to accomplish his transformative purpose in your heart. We invite you to move forward with us. May you taste and see that the Lord is good, and may you believe his Word about who you are.



MASK 1

Shame

Finding Worth as an Image Bearer



The shame that tormented me was all the more corrosive for having no very clear origin: I didn't know why I felt so tainted, and worthless, and wrong—only that I did, and whenever I looked up from my books I was swamped by slimy waters rushing in from all sides.

—Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch*

Humanity is a plague. We're a disgusting, narcissistic, selfish parasite, and the world would be a better place without us.

—Tony, as played by Ricky Gervais in *After Life*

You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.

—the twenty-four elders in the book of Revelation

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ANGEL

I SIT WITH A YOUNG woman. She exhales and looks at her shoes. “My grandfather molested me when I was six. My father first raped me when I was eleven. Abusive boyfriends took his place by the time I was thirteen. Alcohol, drugs, men. It’s been the story of my life.” She looks up at me flatly. “Nothing works. I hate myself. I am worthless.”



John got the call from Brian’s mother this morning. “He committed suicide last night.” John’s heart drops and he remembers their last session. “My kids would be better off without me,” he said. “My wife has moved on. She already has a boyfriend. She won’t even look me in the eye.” Brian made assurances that he would not commit suicide. But as he sat in his truck pulled off to the side of the road, looking at the home he had been forced to sell when he and his wife separated, his emotions probably churned inside of him. He might have remembered the first day they moved in, with all their hopes and aspirations. His thoughts may have drifted to teaching his kids how to ride their bikes, to a fight he and his wife had, to a piñata hung up on a mesquite tree for a birthday party. And in the end, he believed the world was a better place without him.



The American Psychological Association reports that suicide rates have increased 30 percent in the past two decades.¹ In the age group of fifteen- to twenty-four-year-olds, the rate of increase is a staggering 56 percent.²

How can self-hatred be so pervasive in this age of self-positivity?

The rise of suicide rates has directly correlated with the rise of social media.³ John and I don't think that is a coincidence. Never in the history of the world has there been a time when we all are more susceptible to the dangerous trap of comparison.

When we grew up, we compared ourselves with classmates and neighbors. Today, via social media, we compare ourselves to virtually any acquaintance we've ever had. And that comparison is poisonous. No matter how great our lives might be, one glance on social media is sure to remind us that someone out there has a better life than we do. A discouraging day is compounded by social media, where we are sure to see friends in some exotic location.

The Voice of Shame

Many of us live with a voice that speaks words of despair into our ears: "I am a fraud." "I am so messed up." "I am stupid." "I am pathetic." "I am worthless." And the you messages: "You suck." "Everyone knows you're an idiot." "Who do you think you are?" "Everyone thinks you are such a loser." "No one will ever want you."

This shame attendant has been present since the relationship between humans and God ruptured. One of the reasons we feel shame is because God has an enemy (and therefore we do too!). His name is Satan, and he's the accuser and tempter of human beings. Shame is Satan's most powerful tool to estrange us from God and to multiply the power of sin in our lives. When Adam and Eve rejected God's authority in their lives and chose to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, what was their immediate response? Shame. Suddenly aware of their nakedness, they hid their bodies. Guilty of what they had done and ashamed of who they were, they hid from their Maker.

This is what shame does: it alienates us from one another and from God. While guilt is our response to what we have done, shame tells us that we *are* what we have done. Gripped with the fear of

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what we will see if we encounter ourselves, we hide from ourselves, others, and God.

The voice of shame records fragments of conversations with others that echo our worst fears about ourselves and plays them on a loop. John has told me horror stories of the many times he's heard, in the chambers of his heart, the echo of an elder's words at a church he pastored: "You are unfit for ministry." The context of that statement is wiped out; John's heart ignores how he's changed since then. Instead, he feels the words aimed like a bony finger at his chest, accusing him, defeating him.

**The voice of shame records fragments of conversations
that echo our worst fears about ourselves and
plays them on a loop.**

The voice of shame also takes even small events and attaches messages to them. We write a text message to a friend that is reciprocated with silence. "You aren't worth his time," the voice tells us. Yesterday John spoke to a group of pastors, and no one followed up with a text or email. "You should have declined the invitation to speak. Now they know you are an imposter."

It happens in anticipation as well. Invited to speak to a group of pastors, I have heard the voice of shame speak to me: "You're stupid. What do you have to offer these older, wiser men?" The voice speaks to us both as we write this book: "Who do you think you are? You're not authors. No one will read this."

Once Satan instigates shame, he hands us fraudulent tools to escape its imprisonment: comparison, comfort, and numbing.

"If you just compare yourselves to others who are worse, you will feel better," he lies. "Console yourself with this bowl of ice cream," he coos. "Ease your pain with this porn," he entices. "Shut down so you don't have to feel these bad feelings," he whispers.

Shame

The shame attendant rubs his hands together when we cave to comparison, comfort, and numbing. Scrolling social media creates more fodder for shame, as does the bowl of ice cream, masturbation, and numbing. Shame wants us to stop, to freeze, to shrink.

Our flesh goes to great lengths to avoid pain and seek comfort. The danger and irony of shame language is that it arrogantly dismisses God. Shame plugs our ears from hearing the voice of God and refuses his truth about who we are.

Amplifying the voice of shame can feel as though we are acting in humility. But it is not humble to believe lies. It is not humble to reject what God says about us. It is sinful to deny God's words over us; when we do, we position ourselves on the enemy's battlefield in allegiance with him.

How do we break the cycle of shame? How do we fight the voice that tells us we are worthless?

The First Word

To shut down the lies of shame, we must open our ears to the truth God speaks to us. The first word on who we are in the Bible is a word that speaks to our incredible value. In the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, Genesis 1, the story of creation is laid out before us. As God creates the cosmos, he revels in its beauty and perfection. Punctuating each of God's creations is God's delight in his creation: "God saw that it was good." Stars and planets, saguaros and palm trees, centipedes and elephants . . . God smiles and laughs. "Good, good, good!"

But God is not finished. The stage is set, but the lead actors are not in place.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock

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and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them. (vv. 26–27)

As a human being, you hold the unique distinction of bearing the image of the Almighty, the Creator. You were created in God’s image. You have permission to declare with confidence, “Hi, my name is [fill in the blank], and I am an image bearer of God Almighty!” This is true. “I am worthless” is a lie. Receiving our identity as an image bearer of God gives us permission to be freed from the prison of shame.

We are invited to look into the mirror of God himself—not the mirror of our expectations, not the mirror of society or media, not the mirror of family, friends, and acquaintances—and see that God says we are “very good” (v. 31). God’s first word about all of us is that we are good.

When you look in the mirror with disdain, when you hate how you look or that you’re not smart enough, you are not speaking of who you are—you are speaking of who God is. Self-hatred is God-hatred.

The story of the creation of Adam and Eve concludes with these words: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (2:25). God made you to be naked and unashamed. Author Curt Thompson writes that shame “wants to destroy everything about the world that God intended for goodness and beauty.”⁴ One day, free of sin and with the shame attendant’s voice banished to hell, you will experience the glory of a life free of shame.

A Masterpiece?

Who is your favorite artist? Da Vinci? Van Gogh? Picasso? Imagine that a benefactor gave you one of their masterpieces. In your living

room hangs Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, or Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, or Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. You invite a friend over for dinner. You welcome him at the door, and he steps into your living room. His eyes squint and his nose turns up. "What's that ugly piece of trash?" he says.

What is your response? Do you take your friend seriously? Have you misjudged the work of art? Or do you recognize that while you have a masterpiece, you also have a friend with poor judgment?

You were created by *the* Master Artist. Better than Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, better than Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, better than Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, are *you*, the masterpiece of the Master Artist. So when you look in the mirror and think awful things about who you are, your inner voice is acting like that imaginary friend who criticized the masterpiece in your living room.

Our self-hatred speaks of our misjudgment, not of the flawed artistry of the Master Artist. God looks at you, his masterpiece, and says, "You are very good!" He's not a liar.

Not only are you God's masterpiece, but Genesis 1:27 says you are made in his image. What does it mean for you to image God? There are three primary ways you do so. First, you image God's *attributes*. Second, you image God's *relationality*. Third, you image God's *reign*.

You Image God's Attributes

You image the attributes of the one true God. The Bible tells us those attributes include God's

- holiness (Isa. 6:1–8)
- goodness (Ps. 34:8)
- justice (Jer. 23:5)
- love (1 John 4:7–19)
- grace (John 1:17)
- mercy (Ps. 103)

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- faithfulness (2 Tim. 2:13)
- wisdom (James 1:5–6)
- freedom (Exod. 3:14)
- beauty (Ps. 27:4)

Each of these attributes is reflected in you. Go through each characteristic and ask whether you can see it in yourself. (If you're not sure what a word means, or even if you think you know, look it up in a dictionary or Google it.) Can you see God's mercy in you? His goodness? His justice? Wherever you see these attributes, you see the reflection of the Master Artist in you.

In *The Help*, the maid Aibileen Clark speaks a blessing over the child she is caring for: "You is kind. You is smart. You is important."⁵ That's what God says about *you*. When he sees you, he sees his own attributes and image reflected in you.

When you resist the temptation to finish the Ben and Jerry's pint to numb your pain, God sees his holiness in you.

When you do what is right and claim tips on your taxes, God sees his goodness in you.

When you use your voice for someone mistreated, God sees his justice in you.

When you cradle your colicky newborn, God sees his love in you.

When you offer forgiveness to your friend who gossiped about you, God sees his grace in you.

When you release someone from a debt, God sees his mercy in you.

When you choose to go to counseling to preserve your marriage, God sees his faithfulness in you.

When you say no to entertainment because of a looming test, God sees his wisdom in you.

Shame

When you refuse to engage in crude joking, God sees his freedom in you.

When your joyful laugh fills a room, God sees his beauty in you.

You were made to reflect the attributes of God to a world desperately in need of them. In a world that aches for justice, truth, love, mercy, and beauty, God has placed you to magnify his perfect attributes.

You Image God's Relationality

Christianity claims that God is triune. The word *triune* means that the one true God has existed eternally in perfect relational unity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As human beings created in God's image, we display all the three persons of the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We also reflect their triune relationship.

The Father says you were fashioned perfectly from the beginning. You were formed in secret. Woven in the depths of the earth. The Father says he saw your unformed substance and wrote in the book of life every one of your days (Ps. 139:15–16).

The Son died so his blood could make you right before him. The Son, who knew no sin, became sin, so you could be made righteous (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus looks upon you as the “joy that was set before him” (Heb. 12:2) on his road to Golgotha.

The Holy Spirit dwells intimately in you so that not only do you have a helper 24-7, but you can also be made alive and go forth in the power of his name (Rom. 8:11).

As image bearers, we reflect the relationality of our triune God. From eternity, God is in community. And he makes us for community. In Ephesians 2, Paul explains that those who have trusted Christ have been saved by grace through faith and then brought into community through the peace of Christ. He concludes that we

TRADING FACES

“are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (v. 22). We display who God is when we are together. He made us for one another, and as we love one another and are united in heart and mind, we reflect his triune character.

You Image God's Reign

Dominion.

If you take a look at the verses we quoted on pages 29–30 about the creation of mankind, you'll see that *dominion* is the first word about how you reflect God's image. You are the image bearer of the high King of Kings, intended to “have dominion over” (we will return to this theme in greater depth in chapter 9). Having dominion means God gives us authority to oversee, nurture, and steward that which he has given us responsibility for. You are set apart from creation and intended for a higher purpose. You are the unique and beautiful actor God created for his stage to reflect himself.

The first way we reflect God's image is by reflecting his benevolent rule on earth: we reign, but we do so in a way that's best for everyone.

We live out dominion in our workplaces, in parenting, over finances, in the kitchen, and in our neighborhoods. When we are employees who work hard, are filled with integrity, and treat people in front of us as fellow image bearers of God, we practice dominion as God intended. As we discipline our children in unity, mercy, and grace, we display God's dominion. Dominion can be shared. In marriage, when we jointly make purchasing, banking, and budgeting decisions, we demonstrate dominion. When we collaboratively cook a delicious meal, we steward God's gift of cuisine. As we open our home in hospitality to our neighbors, we exercise dominion in the place we live.

One of John's and my favorite shared things to do is to practice

dominion in the space God has given us. We love stepping outside to cultivate our yard into a place of beauty. We dig the soil, pot a plant, pick weeds, and prune trees. As we work, we inhale gratitude and exhale prayers of surrender. “It is good,” we tell our King as we care for his garden.

Humans were made for dominion. We are servants who have been given talents (giftings, finances, and opportunities) from our Master with a call to steward them for his glory (Matt. 25:14–30). It is life giving when we understand who we are and give ourselves permission to see ourselves from God’s point of view.

You are made to reign and reflect his kind rule. You are his king. You are his queen.

The Last Word

God undoes shame not just with his first word about us from creation but also with his last word on the cross.

“It is finished,” Jesus declares in his final moments. On the cross Jesus speaks the last word to shame as he identifies with our shame and removes its power. The Enemy’s whispers of shame are silenced as Jesus purchases us with his blood. Our sin—rejecting God in thought, word, or action—doesn’t define us; his acceptance of us does. The sinless man becomes sin that we might be freed from sin. The unshameable man becomes shame that we might be freed from shame. Like the sponge he’s given to drink from, Jesus is saturated in sin and shame. The shaming of the perfect man undoes shame.

Satan went into his bag of tricks and pulled out the most powerful one he had: shame. It was a ploy that had proved effective time and time again. He must have howled in delight to use it on the very Son of God.

God undoes shame on Good Friday. The story of the cross is not merely the story of guilt being removed but of shame being undone.

TRADING FACES

The Romans devised crucifixion not just to torture those they killed but also to inflict shame in the process. The victim hung completely naked on the torture device, arms outstretched and unable to cover himself.⁶

The story of the cross is not merely the story of guilt being removed but of shame being undone.

On the cross, Christ makes atonement for our sin. The penalty is paid by the blood of the God-man poured out on the cross. But the work of Christ does not end there; Jesus takes the full sting of shame on the cross and removes its poison.

Christ's arrest begins with a kiss by one of his closest friends, an act of respect and intimacy used to bring the shame of betrayal. He is abandoned by all but two of his friends: more shame. One of his closest friends then denies him: additional shame. The spiritual authorities place him on a bogus trial: shameful. The political authorities put him on trial: shame. The crowds turn against Christ, mocking him, begging for an insurrectionist to be released instead of him and demanding his crucifixion: shame multiplies. He is stripped naked, mocked as king, and spat upon: shame deepens. Through a crowd, he drags a cross to Golgotha and is hung between two enemies of the state who also mock him: shame mounts. He hangs naked as the soldiers gamble for his clothing: shame. He cries out to God, publicly expressing his hurt, fear, and forsakenness: shame culminates.

On the road to the cross, Jesus walks into the heart of shame. He has plunged deeper into shame than we could ever imagine and has destroyed the Enemy's weapon of shame. Just as Christ absorbed our sin on the cross, he also absorbs our shame. Satan will seek to destroy us through shame, but because of the cross, that shame is

Shame

a lie and has no ultimate power. Satan will attack, but “no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed” (Isa. 54:17). We can walk the path as image bearers without shame because Jesus, the perfect image bearer, has already walked the path of shame for us on the cross.

Jesus knows the shame you have experienced. Because he has walked its path, you are no longer bound by its lies. Dane Ortlund frames this explosive truth this way: “That God is rich in mercy means that your regions of deepest shame and regret are not hotels through which divine mercy passes but homes in which divine mercy abides. It means the things about you that make you cringe most, make him hug hardest.”⁷ The cross reveals the heart of God. God is not repulsed by our shame. The Merciful One knows you and loves you.

You are not worthless. You bear the image of the almighty God, the creator of the universe. The cross of Christ speaks of your worth. You are worth the life of the very Son of God, Jesus.

When we open our ears to hear the voice of God, the voice of shame is silenced. When we hear God speak his truth over our lives, we step out of patterns of comparison, self-comfort, and numbing, and we move forward in his love. Psychologist Curt Thompson says, “Where shame attempts to push us into static inertia, love bids us to *move*.”⁸

Shame tries to steal the pen from the great Author and rewrite his stories in our lives. Let God take back the pen of your story. God authors a story “of hope and creativity, one that scorns shame in order to imagine new minds, new possibilities and new narratives.”⁹ Step into God’s kingdom story as his image bearer, and live in the power and truth of his words over you, words he has spoken from creation and from the cross. Will you receive them? Make a choice today to trust him. Make a choice today to die to a false self.

TRADING FACES

Make a choice to take off any jersey that would name you with self-condemnation and put on a jersey that speaks God's truth: you are worthy, redeemed, holy, beautiful, valuable, loved, and established.

PRAYER

Father, forgive me for so easily dismissing you and who you say I am. I bear your image. Forgive me for listening to the lies of shame. I receive the gift of Jesus on the cross, who took my shame and set me free from its burden. Jesus, your blood purifies me. Forgive me for the lies I speak over myself. Forgive me for the ways in which I condemn myself. Lord, I repent of the specific lies shame has convinced me are true. I am not stupid. I am not ugly. I am not a loser. I am not worthless. You say I am worthy, I am redeemed, I am holy, I am beautiful, I am valuable, I am loved, and I am established. I receive your truth for myself. Teach me to hear your voice. Teach me to be satisfied in you, holy God. Teach me to trust whatever you call me into today. You anoint, equip, and empower me to be who I am. I am yours. Thank you that I can walk in the blessing of being made in your image and say, with you, that it is very good. Amen.