

introduction

I don't want you to go

The only whisper from God that kept rushing through my heart was that I had to learn to fully trust Him and Him alone. Without full trust in Him, it is impossible to be fully satisfied by Him. And apart from Him, there is no fullness. Apart from Him there is no true satisfaction.

—LYSA TERKEURST

Twenty-six days, nine hours, and twelve minutes before I sat down to type these words, I said a heart-shattering goodbye to my precious mom as she stepped into heaven. As I write this, the most beautiful person I've ever known is gazing into the eyes of the King of heaven. If I listen deeply, if I listen through the sorrow in my heart, I can hear her singing "How Great Thou Art" as she dances around the throne.

Hours before she passed, I crawled into her hospital bed, tucked myself up beside her, and looked into her beautiful brown eyes for the last time. "I don't want you to go," I whispered, aching with this message on a soul level, right at my very core. *Please, Mom, please don't go.*

Losing my mom wasn't my first experience with loss or with a goodbye that broke my heart. Several years ago, gasping and folded in half on my kitchen floor, I watched in horror as my then-husband packed up nearly two decades of marriage and stepped into another life. "I don't want you to go . . ." The words screamed out of my soul like they were on fire and then slid with despair from my mouth. My

This Isn't the Story I Wanted

heart was completely torn in two with the confusion and nightmare of a goodbye laced with betrayal and rejection that echoed in every room, every song, every smell, every place—every day. For years.

Grief crashed in with such force that it threw me face down into the deepest valley of my life. But even with all my years counseling others through their hard stories, I did not at first declare this terrible pain *grief*.

But it was. Because loss is the door through which grief barges. It's the sharp and breathtaking pivot point launching us into a new normal, a new identity, a new season we didn't ask for.

We're holding stories of loss, you and I. Stories we didn't plan for, dream of, or want. And that loss—whatever form it's taken—has invited grief into our lives.

When we survey the landscape of our lives and research the hills and valleys of our history, we find a complex mosaic of grief-laden goodbyes dotting the terrain. Some goodbyes enter softly and leave us with grief that bubbles quietly in the background of our hearts, while others burst through the door, grab hold of us on a soul level, and change us—change everything—forever.

The truth is that none of us gets a grief-free life. In fact, every person who has ever walked through my counseling door is grieving someone or something. As a clinical therapist in private practice, I've spent most of my adult life in the helping profession. I've run workshops on grief, spoken at conferences on healing from the unthinkable, developed curriculum on living well after tragedy, and taught in university classrooms for years. Years! So I thought I understood grief. Before it burrowed deep into my life, I thought I had a handle on what grieving looked like, how it felt, and how it showed up.

But head knowledge and soul knowledge are different beasts, aren't they?

If no one has said this to you, I want to say it now: If you have said an unwanted goodbye, you know grief. If you're living through a story you don't want, one that feels impossible, you're grieving. If there are deep scrapes and unsightly scratches on your heart, you're grieving. If

life does not look at all like you'd dreamed, or you're trying to catch your breath in a life that hurts, you, my sweet friend, are grieving.

And I am so sorry this has happened. I am so sorry for this loss you face, the goodbye that has left you heartbroken, and the new normal you didn't ask for. I'm sorry for the dreams that have been stolen. For the times you tried your best, gave everything you had, prayed for healing or change but still were left holding ashes.

Every unwanted goodbye you've said counts. Every tear you've shed matters. And every prayer you've prayed has rushed its way to the ears of our attentive and heavily invested heavenly Father (Psalm 55:16–17).

Every single one.

Maybe you've lived through countless losses. Maybe you've changed communities and said goodbye to the familiar life you loved. Perhaps your child is hurting or has stepped into a new identity, a life you don't understand, or a relationship you see changing them. Maybe friends or family have distanced themselves from you, or a job change has you feeling disoriented and unsure. Perhaps you've watched helplessly as your hoped-for adoption and the child you love slipped away. Or perhaps you yourself are adopted and battling a sense of abandonment and rejection.



Every unwanted goodbye you've said counts. Every tear you've shed matters.

Maybe you've watched a parent leave or have lived in the aftermath of divorce. Maybe addiction, mental illness, or disordered eating has stolen away the person you once knew so well and left someone you hardly recognize.

I know I've said it already, but I think it bears repeating: Head knowledge is different from soul knowledge. And that's what we have now, isn't it? You and I have a deep soul-knowing. An understanding at our core that cannot be taught in the classroom or at a conference. No, the

This Isn't the Story I Wanted

only way to truly understand this level of grief is to carry a story we never wanted. And while our stories are different, we've both faced life changes we didn't want. We have insider knowledge that we can't unlearn.

This journey is not for the faint of heart. It takes courage and hope to move forward when grief has rewritten the story. And it takes gentleness and patience to move through the goodbyes, carry our hard stories, and learn to stand in this new normal we didn't anticipate and certainly don't want.

So can I invite you to join me?

Can I invite you to step into the courageous job of facing the loss, the ending, or the story you don't want? Navigating loss and learning to find our footing in a new, unwelcome normal is brave and important work. I can't promise this will be an easy read. But God will meet you here. The Bible tells us he is near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18), that when we call to him, he hears us (Psalm 18:6), and that he wants to do immeasurably more than we can imagine (Ephesians 3:20 NIV). We can trust him with this.

On these pages you will find gentle reminders that grieving is a natural part of loving.

You'll find a unique perspective on loss and grief—one that liberates us from the tyranny of the shame-based messages we might have been believing about what grief should look like and who gets permission to grieve. *This Isn't the Story I Wanted* seeks to be part of your journey forward through your grief and to equip you to hold on—to cling tight to the fundamental truth of Jesus and what he says. And to stand in the knowledge that nothing happens to us that has not first been filtered through the attentive, sovereign hands of our heavenly Father.

There is purpose in our pain. Every page you turn here is a bold partnership in faith and determination to grow through this painful season of loss. And it's my heart's deepest desire that, in some way, my hard story and I can link arms with you and your hard story in a healing journey that brings hope to others.

Here's to our next steps of courage together—and to a new chapter in your story that breathes redemption into the nooks and crannies of every layer.

one

SORRY

On this journey of grief, I am reminded that my very existence is woven with a need for God, hope, purpose, and human connection.

—DR. MEGAN FATE MARSHMAN

Marilyn greeted me at her front door as though she had known me forever. That morning her warm and gracious smile reached through all the fears I held of this first meeting and told me I was in the right place. Vanilla, maybe the smell of fresh baking, wafted its way through the house, and as I slid my shoes off and followed her down the hall, I took a deep breath. The deepest one I'd drawn in weeks.

This beautiful woman was offering to pray with me. That's why I was there. To have a complete stranger pray with me. To pray *for* me. To sit with me in my sorrow and lift me up to Jesus—broken heart and all.

Marilyn invited me to sit, and just like that, without any warning, months of confusion and sorrow poured out with such urgency that I wondered if it would ever end.

Has this ever happened to you? Have you wondered if the tears would ever stop? Or worried, as I have, that if they started, there would be no end to them?

Without hesitation Marilyn fell to her knees at my feet, wrapped her arms around me, and prayed.

This Isn't the Story I Wanted

It's a blur. All of it. But at one point in her prayer, Marilyn took my face in her hands, and with tears of compassion on her face, she said words I'll never forget. "I am *so* sorry."

It wasn't pity. It didn't feel placating or distant. Her *sorry* was deep. Does that make sense? It came from deep inside her. And it dripped with the most beautiful empathy and genuine care I had ever felt.

We let it linger. We were both so sorry. And right there in a stranger's living room, my heart felt understood. My pain felt truly seen.

She meant it. Marilyn met me right there in my sorrow and meant every word of it. And while I didn't know it at the time, that moment was an important pivot point in my healing journey.

The counselor in me knows that healing begins with being seen. And though our stories are different and we haven't yet met, I want you to know that I see you. I want you to know that I am *so* sorry. I'm sorry for the unwanted turn of events that brought you to a book like this. I know this is not a book you thought you'd be reading. I'm sorry the world wants to measure grief by holding one loss up against another to determine its validity.

There is no need to compare grief. Whatever you're facing, whatever goodbye you've said, whatever heartbreaking disappointment, loss, or anticipation of loss keeps you up at night, it's worthy of grieving.

I'm sorry if, along the way, you haven't felt free to grieve. Or if your grief and the series of events leading up to it have been met with judgment or dismissal. I am sorry if that is how your pain has been received.

Your grief is valid.

Marilyn's words of kindness were a salve for my soul. She didn't try to solve anything. She simply saw my sorrow and met me there. As best as she could, without knowing the details, while the unspoken things hung in the room, she stepped in and showed me I was seen. She showed me that my sorrow mattered.

And if you had been there with us that day, she would have shown you the same, beautiful thing. Because you are seen, and your sorrow matters.

something you should know

We learn a lot in a crisis, don't we? And maybe you've found, as I have, that in the valley of grief, having trite Christian terms and pat answers thrown around is ineffective and unhelpful.

Yes, God is in control. At the same time, this season feels chaotic and overwhelming. And uncontrolled.

You and I know that the God who calmed the storm in Matthew 8, Mark 4, and Luke 8 is still at work in our lives right now. But as you hold this book, the unrelenting waves are crashing into your life. And with everything in you, you just need your Savior to stretch his hands out over all of it and do what we know he does best.

Heal. Redeem. Raise up. Calm.

Oh, how I understand this. The desperate prayers to the God of the storm.

With everything in me, I believe the God of the storm is listening to your prayers. With everything in me, I believe he's listening to your heart's cry. So while I cannot take away your pain, I can pray for you. I can lift you up to Jesus. And I can sit with you in a shared understanding of loss. Because we have that in common, don't we? You and I understand painful endings that steal dreams, and losses that take our breath away.



The God of the storm is listening to your prayers.

After Marilyn rose and dried her eyes, she grabbed the NLT version of the Bible and flipped it open to Psalm 56:8. Slowly, so my heart could hear, she read David's words to his God:

You keep track of all my sorrows.

You have collected all my tears in your bottle.

You have recorded each one in your book.

This Isn't the Story I Wanted

Leafing back to Psalm 18:6, she read,

But in my distress I cried out to the LORD;
yes, I prayed to my God for help.
He heard me from his sanctuary;
my cry to him reached his ears.

More page turning, then Marilyn stopped at Psalm 103, and quoting verse 13, she looked me in my tear-soaked eyes and said, “The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him” (NLT).

Her face was gentle as she spoke. And in the quiet of her living room, Marilyn reminded me of a powerful truth. Something you might need to be reminded of too.

While everything feels like chaos around you, your God, the King of heaven, is counting your tears. He's hearing your prayers—even the ones you can't say out loud. And with compassion greater than you can imagine, he is listening to the cry of your heart right now.

Maybe you've wondered if you're seen. If the sorrow you feel is noticed. If the ending matters to anyone else but you.

Maybe you're spinning in the aftermath of betrayal and deception. Perhaps you're sitting on the front end of a season of uncertainty, and normal isn't a thing you enjoy anymore.

Let me remind you that your tears are counted. Your cries are heard. And our God—the one who drops everything to pursue us—has not lost sight of you. Not for a second has he stepped away from his throne, and as you read these words, his eyes are on you.

He is *for* you.

And while you look into the future with uncertainty, *he* is certain. You can count on him to travel this road with you.

what we share

It's in our shared understanding of loss that we find comfort. And it's in our shared experience of goodbyes, endings, and disappointments

those around us don't seem to fully understand that we can find some respite from the loneliness of loss.

We get, in a whole new way, the quiet knowing of those who have been through loss that doesn't quite fit into the stereotypical grief-worthy boxes.

During my early days in the valley, God reminded me that the presence of heartbreaking reality does not mean he is off his throne. He reminded me that both can be true—that God is good and in control while, at the same time, things are painful and hard. And definitely grief-worthy.

We can trust God and believe he's good and also be brokenhearted.

We can still wish for things to be different. Even when we trust God to work things out for good (Romans 8:28), we can admit this is so much more than we think we can carry. Even when we believe he will do more than we imagine or hope for (Ephesians 3:20), it's okay to sit in the confusion and sorrow of a story that's hard to hold.



We can trust God and believe he's good and also be brokenhearted.

It's good and right to grieve. We are created with the capacity to grieve. Jesus did. God does. And my Bible reminds me that countless ancestors did. You are allowed to grieve.

Though your loss might not be related to the death of a loved one, you can grieve.

Though many won't understand the depth of your loss or the weight of your grief, it's important to do the heavy lifting of sorrow. We can't heal what we don't acknowledge, and your courageous work here will be rewarded with a healing journey that will encourage others in their journeys through loss.

And today, as we move forward in this season of sorrow in your life, I want you to know I'm standing with you in trusting the one who weeps

This Isn't the Story I Wanted

with us. The one who understands better than anyone the weight of sorrow and the pain of loss. It might not make sense to us right now. And on this side of heaven, we may never fully understand, but we can trust his heart. And he is ready and willing to carry us through this storm.

Jesus wept, and here's why it matters

If you have your Bible, open it to John 11:35 and highlight that powerful little verse.

It still grabs my heart when I think about it. The shortest verse in our English Bible, and perhaps one of the deepest and most profound verses in the Word.

“Jesus wept.”

This is more than tears. It's more than a quiet display of superficial emotion.

Jesus wept. This is divine tenderness—the tender heart of a loving God on full display.

Whatever you have faced or are facing today, let yourself follow the lead of Jesus. Weep. And know that he is weeping with you.

Can you picture this moment? The one where Jesus is weeping. All eyes are on this man who is pouring out emotion at the tomb of Lazarus. Jesus, feeling his friends' pain, saw their sorrow and wept.

Jesus weeps with the ones he loves. He weeps with us.

I don't know exactly what it is that you're grieving today. What diagnosis, disaster, or disappointment you're carrying. But I know that Jesus is weeping with you.

Not just a tear or two. But weeping. *For* you and *with* you. He is *so* sorry too. Not because any of this is his fault, but because his child is hurting and that grieves him deeply.

He weeps because he loves.

your story (and mine too)

We have a shared history of knowing sorrow. Our stories look different—they're unique in their details—but similar in their heartache. And today, if no one in your life has said it, I want you to know that I am *so* sorry.

I'm sorry not only for what has happened but for all it means in your life. The changes and uncertainty. The new normal and all it requires of you. The weight of it. I'm just so sorry.

And more than that, much more than that, your sorrow has gripped the heart of our perfect Father. He is grieving with you.

I'm asking you to dig deep right now. Imagine, if you can, how it would feel to look up right now and see the tear-filled eyes of Jesus. His perfect eyes, full of love, gazing back at you.

Can you picture this moment?

He knows your story. He knows what you've been through and the pain of loss you're carrying. Before you ever say a word, Jesus knows.

And if you're feeling brave, picture all that has happened. The loss you're living with. The words said that can't be unsaid. The things done. The harmful. The terrifying. The unthinkable. The desperately unwanted.

All of it.

Now in your heart, collect it all up and picture yourself putting it into a box. Go ahead and fold it inside. If you need a bigger box, I understand. I did too.

And now, because you can, hold up that box and all that's inside it to Jesus.

It's one of your bravest moves. It's the most important thing you can do today. Even though it's hard. Even though it feels unfamiliar. Hold it up to him.

What do you see in his eyes as he takes that box and opens it?

What do you notice about him?

Because I know his heart, and I know his unrelenting, compassionate love is greater than we can imagine, in his eyes is sorrow.

Sorrow mingled with love.

Just as he wept with his friends in John 11, so too does he weep with us. The Bible tells us in Isaiah 53:3 that Jesus is "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

Jesus is weeping with you. He hurts with you. God's grand design never included pain or loss. And because he loves us, while his heart breaks with yours, he is also working out his good plan. And one day

This Isn't the Story I Wanted

soon you and I will sit shoulder to shoulder at the throne, our hands lifted high, knowing that every tear we've ever cried was seen, every sorrow was held, and the very things that tried to break us have been redeemed into a story beyond anything we could have imagined.

Or perhaps it won't even matter at that point. Perhaps by then we will be so overcome with the presence of Jesus that all this will hold no interest to us. Can you imagine that day? The day we see Jesus face-to-face? It's coming, my friend. Let yourself dream of it.

And in the meantime, keep your eyes on him and let him lead you through this season. It won't always hurt like this. I know it's hard to imagine, but the pain you're carrying will not always feel this heavy. You have a comforter and a friend. One who weeps with you and who will never leave your side. You can count on him.

my prayer for you (and for me too)

Dear Jesus, you know all about our pain. You weep with us as we face the unthinkable and the terrible experiences never intended for your children. Thank you for your nearness and empathy. Thank you for never leaving us alone in the pain. Lord, infuse us with your presence and your hope. Give us faith to lean on you through these hard days. My friend is needing an extra reminder from you today, Father. You know her story and all she is facing. You know it's heavy and painful. Please wrap her in your arms and help her experience your comfort in new ways today. We are excited to see what you're going to do and trusting you with all of it. In your name. Amen.

therapeutic questions

1. What private sorrow are you carrying that you can hold up to the Lord today?
2. If grief could have its way, what would it take from you?

sorry

3. Knowing the truth that God loves you and sees your sorrow, what areas of your life do you believe will most benefit from that knowledge?

reflection

My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
(Psalm 73:26)

You have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16:22)

journal prompt

Reflect on a time you experienced Jesus's compassion and how his empathy impacted your journey through pain. Consider the empathy and compassion shown to you by others and how it helped you in that season.

two

identity

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

—1 PETER 2:9

My first meeting with Wendy was through the meal slot of her isolation cell. It's a long story about why she was in the segregation unit, but when I met with her that first day, Wendy had been in that tiny cubicle for three weeks. She was refusing to shower or speak to staff, and that morning, Wendy announced that she had a plan to end her life.

If you had told me ten years earlier—as I ventured into my career as a social worker—that I'd be sitting in a segregation unit, peering through a meal slot at a violent federal offender, I would have shaken my head in disbelief. Correctional psychiatric social worker was never a title I saw for myself. But there I was, perched on a black roller chair in front of a locked metal door, waiting to chat with an inmate I'd never met, her enormous correctional file on my lap.

Wendy's last name and inmate identification number were in bold black print across the top. A bright-green sticker on the side tab indicated her level of security and risk of violence. Wendy was considered high on both. Inside the file were countless reports, assessments, and designations covering every piece of Wendy's criminal and psychiatric journey.

The correctional staff instructed Wendy to sit on the floor, back from the tiny opening in the door. Shuffling to the far wall of her cell, she tucked herself up in the corner and clutched her knees tightly to her chest. In slow motion Wendy tipped her face down and rested her forehead on her knees.

Time is strange in segregation. I sat staring at her for what seemed like countless long minutes. This tiny woman with a terrible past, her black hair matted and wild as it covered what little part of her face wasn't buried in her knees.

Please look at me, Wendy, my mind pleaded with her, willing her to lift her head and make eye contact with me, even for a moment.

I wanted to see her.

Not through the eyes of the assessments on my lap. Not based on the labels and tags all over that manila file. Not based on the ID number or the reputation she'd established while in general population.

I wanted to see *Wendy*. I wanted to know her. Like, really know her. Who she was before this happened to her, before she'd committed crimes that landed her here.

And I desperately wanted her to see on my face that I would not view her through the identity outlined in her chart.

But Wendy didn't want to be seen. She didn't know how to be anything other than what was in that file. She had absorbed the labels and the numbers. She had accepted hand-me-down messages from countless people and experiences. And that day, as she sat there with each label and tag demanding the front of the line, Wendy was living out her identity as a federal offender.

Time passed. Many months went by.

And surprisingly Wendy eventually agreed to talk with me. And her story broke my heart.

Wendy's earliest memory was working the trapline with her dad, a rite of passage in her Northern Canadian Indigenous culture. When the children turn six, they take part in their first weeklong trapline expedition, learning the traditions of their ancestors. Wendy would light up as she shared lessons from her father about moss in the undergrowth, berries and roots, and the growth patterns of foliage. Evenings

This Isn't the Story I Wanted

were extra special for her. And she shared how she would always sit as close as possible to her dad and listen to his soft, gentle voice as he shared memories and lessons of her culture.

One day, not long after she and her father returned home from the trapline, men in black vans arrived in her small community. And in just a few hours, they collected all the children between the ages of four and sixteen and took them away.

Wendy spent the next eight years in a residential school. I don't need to tell you about the horrors of life in the residential schools. I'm sure you already know that these "schools" were designed to strip away any sign of Indigenous culture and, through violence and abuse, force children to take on new identities and become people they were never meant to be.

It's a bit of a blur for her from there, but Wendy had to adopt the identity forced on her as a residential school survivor.

To soothe her pain and numb the trauma ringing in her soul, Wendy lived on the streets and did whatever she needed to do to maintain her drug habit. These choices led her to a life of crime, and for more than fifteen years, Wendy cycled through the revolving door of the criminal justice system.

That's how we met. And there I sat—across from this woman who carried a terrible story of loss, injustice, and pain. Her grief was thick in the room. Grief over the loss of childhood dreams. Grief over broken relationships and disconnection from people she loved. Grief over choices—wrong choices, hard choices that left her more broken and lonely than before.

And over the years, Wendy had fully accepted an identity forced on her through the trauma. Through the grief and loss.

Not surprisingly, our personal history informs our identity. The labels shoved at us and those we pick up along the way radically impact how we view ourselves.

Whether we've made poor choices, taken wrong turns, or had the free will of another person land hard on us, our history builds our identity. Our value. When our stories all pile up, we run the very real risk of accepting the handed-over identity and losing sight of what is true.

untrue

I'll come back to Wendy soon, but I want you to think about your own history of lived experiences—the ones that linger long for you as you wrestle out what is true and what is not. If you can, recall the identity-informing pieces that have added up over the years.

Consider the timeline of events, the pivot points, and the messages you've accepted as truth. Think about the things said and done. The hurt and the harm you've endured and the identity-shifting stories still lurking in the background.

Or the foreground, for that matter.

The world works constantly against God's truth. It's fixated on shaping our identity by handing us man-made labels based on our achievements, failures, or appearances, or on the approval or disapproval of others. It has us hustling to prove our worth, insisting that success defines our value or that love is earned through perfection.

These human narratives creep in subtly, disguising themselves as the truth.

But they are anything but true.

Over time, they spin a web of insecurity, whispering messages of inadequacy.

You're not enough.

You're a failure.

If you had done it differently, this would never have happened. You're never going to be worthy.

But these are not the words of our Creator. They're not the words of the one who knows us best and knit us together in his image.

grief and identity

Grief has the power to fog up the lens through which we view ourselves and our lives. When we lose something or someone we value, whether it's a relationship, a job, or our health, it can feel as though our identity is taken too.

I remember the overwhelming ache of loss when I was kicked out of my favorite club—the Wife Club. No longer fitting the identity I had enjoyed for so long. Without that label, I felt untethered—unsure

This Isn't the Story I Wanted

of who I was and devastated by the unwanted ending of something I found my identity in. What had been a defining role for me was now abruptly gone.

It's not uncommon to feel this way when we face loss. When what we believe defines us is ripped away. Whether our partner walks out or a child battles mental health issues. Whether we're facing a diagnosis we can't fathom or a deep sorrow from an earlier trauma that lingers in the background of everything we do. Each of these invites life-altering grief. And grief shapes our identity. It can't not.

In fact, it often feels as though these losses carve out painful new spaces in our hearts and minds that were once whole, leaving us feeling incomplete, less than, irreparably broken.

true

Here's the truth. Those losses, while life-changing and significant, do not have to define us. They can inform pieces of our story, but they do not have to become the whole book. At the root of who we are, at our very core, at the center of our identity, is Jesus.

Christ in me. Christ in you.

The one who remains when everything else is stripped away. When the world slaps labels on us and highlights the things we'd rather not show, his words about us are final. Our identity is not found in the titles or roles the world gives us, or in what has been taken from us, or in what we've done. It's found in the one who created us and loved us enough to give his life for us.



At the root of who we are, at our very core, at the center of our identity, is Jesus.

Our identity, thank goodness, is solid and defined by the one who made us. It is never, not for a second, in the shifting standards of the world or of those around us.

Psalms 139 is one of my favorite passages. David reminds us that we are “knitted” together and “fearfully and wonderfully made” (verses 13–14).

In Genesis 1 we are told we were created in God’s image. A reflection of his unconditional, perfect love. Made on purpose for a purpose. This foundational truth is a radical contrast to the world’s false identification standards. Nothing outside of Jesus can provide us with true identity.

The tension stems from how we so easily accept what isn’t true. We let the lies handed to us through our experiences shape how we see ourselves and our place in the world. Somewhere along the way, we accept these false narratives as truth. But in every case, these lies lead us to a distorted understanding of who we are.

They pull us away from the freedom and peace that come from resting in the identity God gives us.

We must actively and intentionally return time and again to the truth. Our identity is not in something we create—it’s in *someone* we receive.

The truth is, our identity is anchored in Jesus. He calls us chosen, adopted, redeemed, and loved. When we let go of the false narratives grasping at the heels of what we’ve been through, we can fully accept the truth of how God defines us.

Here, we can experience the freedom Paul talks about in Galatians 5:1: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (NIV).

The world is loud. And our personal history is powerful. But God’s truth and his voice are steady, constant, and powerfully transformative. When we sink deep into his Word and lean into his promises, we can silence the lies and rest in the knowledge that our identity is rooted in him alone.

I’ve learned, on the heels of betrayal and in the chaos and confusion of a life undone, it’s important to acknowledge and identify the loss. It’s necessary to grieve the changes. And it’s healthy to weep over the broken dreams.

But within that, we also know that in Jesus, we are still whole.

We are not defined by what was lost or taken. We are defined by

This Isn't the Story I Wanted

what is gained in him. We are defined by the all-encompassing truth of Christ in us.

Our identity cannot be taken. It's not up for grabs or free for the taking. Our identity is in him, and it's in him that we are made complete.

your story (and mine too)

Through my work with Wendy, I was reminded of the profound impact grief and loss have on our identity. And how that identity impacts how we show up in our lives.

Wendy had been buried under the weight of countless labels over the years. She had internalized the inmate identity so deeply that, when it was time for her release, she was paralyzed with fear. The idea of stepping into a new identity—one not defined by the walls of the prison or the labels handed to her—was terrifying. *Impossible*, she would have said. Wendy was so bound by the labels that she didn't know who she was without them.

Part of the work with Wendy was to help her embrace the truth that her identity wasn't tied to her past mistakes or her current circumstances. Freedom wasn't a place outside the prison walls. It wasn't an external change.



**God's truth and his voice are steady,
constant, and powerfully transformative.**

Freedom is an internal shift. It is a mind, heart, and soul shift. Away from accepting untruth and toward fully internalizing the true narrative about your worth. This internal shift, however, requires courage.

Wendy's new identity as a free woman was waiting for her. The parole board said she was free, no longer an inmate. It wasn't something she had to earn or prove. It was a matter of choice.

To accept freedom or not.

This really is the heart of the journey we all face when it comes to identity. Just like Wendy, many of us find ourselves bound to labels or

circumstances that don't reflect the fullness of who we are in Christ. The world tries to force-feed us reminders of our past mistakes. Of the things done and said to us. About us. It insists we locate our value and worth in something other than Jesus. Attaching too much weight and importance to temporal rather than eternal truth.

The truth is that we are children of God. Woven together. Wonderfully made. Handcrafted. The truth is, we are the object of the greatest pursuit of all time—the history-altering, time-stopping, God-ordained rescue with our name on it.

Claiming our true identity requires courage—just like it did for Wendy. True freedom is in accepting who we are in Christ and then stepping into that identity with bold faith to live out who we truly are.

Wendy's journey to freedom reminds us that while the process may be difficult and the fear real, we are invited to walk in the new, true identity we've been given. It's a gift. It's already been paid for. It's ready for us. May we step into it with the confident assurance that we are fully and completely defined by God himself. All other labels fade away.

my prayer for you (and for me too)

Dear Jesus, thank you for the truth of who you are and who you've made us to be in you. Father, we invite you to full inform our identity so that we might rest in your peace and truth, knowing we are loved and complete in your eyes. Remove any lies or false labels that try to define us. And help us embrace the fullness of our worth in you, Jesus, secure and unshaken by the world around us. In your name. Amen.

therapeutic questions

1. What story have you been believing about who you are, and how does that story reflect the truth of your identity in Christ?
2. What evidence do you have in your life that confirms your worth and value, especially in light of your identity in Christ?

This Isn't the Story I Wanted

3. How have your challenging experiences shaped your identity? How might understanding your identity in Christ offer a new perspective or sense of freedom in how you view your past self and who you are today?

reflection

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

journal prompt

Write about a time when you felt your identity was shaken or in question. How did you find reassurance in who God says you are, and what truths helped you reclaim your sense of self in him?