

Praise for
The Dream of You

“My friend Jo has a pastor’s heart, and that heart shines through every page of this beautiful book. Reading these pages is like learning from a wise friend.”

—SHAUNA NIEQUIST, *New York Times* best-selling author
of *Present Over Perfect*

“In these pages, Jo’s trademark wisdom is on display and accessible to everyone who settles in for the ride. Through her gift of delivering essential messaging with wit and wonder, Jo rekindles the desires of your heart and reintroduces you to the life you were meant to live. If you and this book have found your way to each other, I have just two words to share: lucky you!”

—DEIDRA RIGGS, national speaker and author of *One: Unity in a Divided World*

“We live in a noisy culture. It feels as if nearly everyone is screaming about who we ought to be, creating a heightened sense of anxiety and confusion. Jo Saxton, in *The Dream of You*, speaks prophetically, pastorally, and practically to this crisis of identity, because if our identity is not in Christ, we’ll struggle with deep insecurity. We’ll pursue everything, trying to fill our lives with meaning. With her own personal vulnerability, Jo invites us to relinquish our broken identities and return once more to the One who created us.”

—REV. EUGENE CHO, senior pastor, Quest Church, and author
of *Overrated: Are We More in Love with the Idea
of Changing the World Than Actually Changing the World?*

“The thing I admire most about the words Jo writes is the way in which she lives them. She carries this message like a jug and passes out cups of cool water to those who have been running faster, harder, and longer. If you have lost sight of where you are going, *The Dream of You* is a guidebook to help you get back on track.”

—BIANCA JUAREZ OLTHOFF, speaker, advocate, and best-selling
author of *Play with Fire*

“Jo is a friend of ours. She’s a lot of fun, but she’s also filled to the brim with guts and grit and Jesus. This isn’t a book about Jo; it’s about leaving behind who you thought you were and becoming who God made you to be. You’ll be captivated by her stories and swept away by God’s love.”

—MARIA AND BOB GOFF, authors and Jo’s friends

“Who do you see when you look in the mirror or take a selfie? Maybe you see blemishes, pudgy cheeks, imperfection, emptiness, and a lost identity of yourself. *The Dream of You* is a reality check for many who have gotten lost in what society requires and what others desire of you. These false identities have created a sunken silo, sometimes unrecognizable to us. Jo brilliantly calls us to remember our true identities, discovering the people God created us to be. Jo takes us on a personal discovery of ourselves, interwoven through personal and biblical stories of broken identity that keep us from living the lives we were created to live. She invites you to be brave, bold, and courageous, whether you were told you had to work harder than everyone else or that you’re not good enough and will never be enough. God wants to redeem our stories and capture our hearts. God wants to restore your name and purpose. He wants you to embrace His redeeming love.”

—LATASHA MORRISON, founder and president of Be the Bridge

“Absolutely hands down, Jo is one of my most trusted voices in Christian leadership. When she teaches us about our identity in Christ, being deeply known and loved and purposed by God in *The Dream of You*, the greatest testament I can offer toward her credibility is that she texts me some version of that message every single week. She leads auditoriums full of people, and she leads me one-on-one. She is the real deal, and every word of this book is the gospel truth.”

—JEN HATMAKER, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Of Mess and Moxie*

“In *The Dream of You*, Jo Saxton takes her readers by the hand as she walks us through the many broken identities she once claimed and has now relinquished in order to retain the only One who is necessary. She does so by inviting us into the most painful touchpoints in her life while

describing what it has meant for her to navigate her intersectional identities as a black woman who is the daughter of Nigerian immigrants. External voices scream incessantly, telling us who we ought to be. Even heroines like Wonder Woman become cruel taskmasters whose images reminds us that we will never measure up. Jo Saxton calls us to give up the ever-elusive chase to be everything but what God has called us to be and we are all the better for it.”

—EKEMINI UWAN, public theologian

“Henri Nouwen wrote, ‘One of the great tragedies of our life is that we keep forgetting who we are.’ Jo Saxton’s *The Dream of You* carries the antidote to this universal problem—a book that calls us to remember who we really are. It is a primal, human book, crackling with life and wind and Spirit. *The Dream of You* doesn’t just speak *about* our shared human condition, but *into* it with revelatory clarity, like the prophet Ezekiel speaking to the valley of dry bones. To truly hear these words is for your soul to come to life. The dream Jo Saxton writes about will actually be your awakening.”

—JONATHAN MARTIN, author of *How to Survive a Shipwreck* and *Prototype*

“Jo writes like she teaches. With a deeply rooted foundation in Scripture, Jo fills the pages of *The Dream of You* with biblical meat along with challenging, grace-filled application. Most of this beautiful balance of truth and grace unfolds in her personal, and sometimes painful, journey. Authentic, funny, relatable, poignant, and tender, this book is packed with practical direction for each of us to discover and embrace our true identity in the unchanging character of God. I am excited for how lives will be impacted as a result of reading the truths found in the pages of this wonderful book.”

—VIVIAN MABUNI, speaker and author of *Warrior in Pink: A Story of Cancer, Community, and the God Who Comforts*

“Jo writes with the same gusto with which she speaks, from a life lived fiercely and faithfully. Without an understanding of our core identity, we will squander the short time we have here on earth and miss out on

the story the God of the universe has written for each of us, one of meaning and intimacy. Jo challenges us to live as we were meant to, with power and purpose.”

—JENNIE ALLEN, author of *Nothing to Prove*; founder and visionary of the IF:Gathering

“In reading Jo’s book, I wondered if she had been reading my journals or eavesdropping on my conversations. Her writing finds us where we are, whether we are broken, surviving, healing, or desperate for a change. This book is not only Jo’s letter to her readers, but it is a great reminder of the letter God is writing to all of us. Let this book serve as your loving wake-up call to God’s dream of you.”

—AMENA BROWN, spoken word poet and author of *How to Fix a Broken Record*

“Jo Saxton didn’t just give us a book. She gave us an invitation to dig into Scripture, to listen to her journey, and to be honest with ourselves and with God. She walks us through her story as a Nigerian Brit now in the US. You can almost hear her laugh and sip her tea as she tells us about her childhood hurts and dreams, and she weaves it all together with a reminder that God sees us and knows our dreams. What a needed reminder!”

—KATHY KHANG, author of the forthcoming book *Raise Your Voice* and coauthor of *More Than Serving Tea*

“Careful. You’re about to have an encounter with Jo Saxton here in this book, and life may never be the same! Every time I am with Jo, I am challenged, refocused, inspired, and a bit more free to rise to my full capacity as a woman of God. With her trademark boldness and authenticity, Jo will empower you, embolden you, and send you out with purpose and hope to become who God always intended for you to be all along.”

—SARAH BESSEY, author of *Jesus Feminist* and *Out of Sorts*

THE
DREAM
OF

YOU

LET GO OF BROKEN IDENTITIES
AND LIVE THE LIFE YOU WERE MADE FOR

JO SAXTON



WATERBROOK

THE DREAM OF YOU

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Details and names in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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*To all the wonderful women I meet
at conferences, churches, over coaching calls and coffee.
You're amazing.
Yes, you!
with love, Jo*





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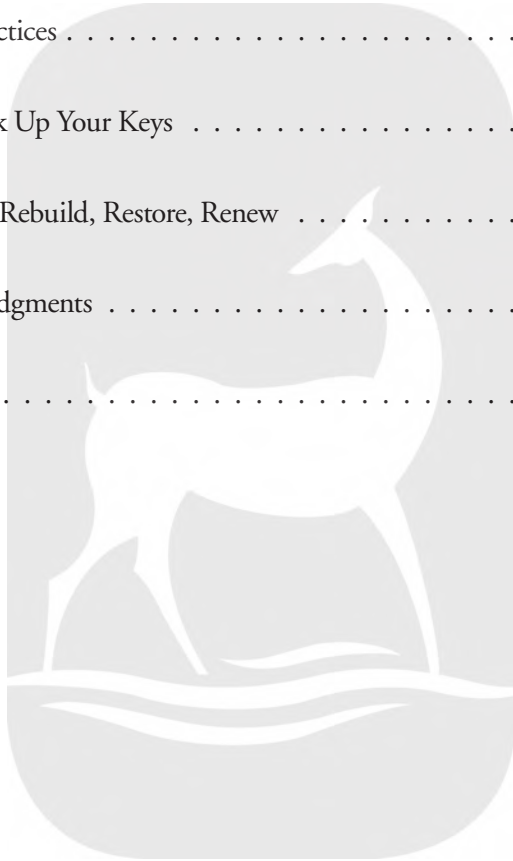
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foreword

There's a brilliant family of people in Africa, called the Himba. When a Himba woman is expecting a child, she goes out into the wilderness with a few of her sisters, and together they wait till they hear in their hearts the song of the coming child.

Himba women wait as long as they need to; they wait under stars; they wait until the dream of the child begins to beat like a singular rhythm under their hearts. Because these sisters know that every heart has its own unique beat—its own wild and blazing purpose. And when the Himba women attune to the song of the coming child, they circle around and together they sing the miraculous refrain of the expected child.

Then they return to the gathering of their people and teach this child's unique song to the waiting community.

When the anticipated child is finally born and taken into arms, the Himba family enfolds her with their presence, and their voices rise, singing the child's own song to her breathing in first air of this earth.

Later, when the child begins her schooling, the villagers gather and boldly chant the child's song. And then when the child passes through the initiation to adulthood, the Himba again circle round and sing hopefully and bravely. At the time of marriage, the young woman again hears the assuring notes of her very own song, carrying her forward to meet her hopes.

But there is one more occasion upon which the Himba sing.

If at any time during her life the sister loses her way, falls short, forgets who she really is, or lets anything steal the dream of who she is meant to be, she is gently beckoned to the center of the village. And there she stands, her people forming a safe, ringing circle around her, like her own galaxy of stars.

Then the villagers sing, letting the beat of her drum, the rhythm of her own being rouse her to wake to the dream of her soul again. They sing her own soul song to her because Himba sisters believe that change happens most when we remember who we are and whose we are.

This is what every woman must know: the first tactic of the Enemy is always to distort your identity. Genuine serenity is found only when you know your genuine identity. And you can find your true destiny only when you find your true identity.

Do you know who you really are under the false facades and the piles of work and the relentless exhaustion and the suffocating masks?

Maybe for too long you can't seem to wake from the nightmare of feeling like "not enough"—not good enough, smart enough, pretty enough, trendy enough, accomplished enough—and this is what keeps you from waking to the abundantly more than enough God has for you.

Maybe your heart has thickened into this long, scarred callus, and you've numbed yourself to getting wounded ever again. You smile, you laugh, you nod—but when you look in the mirror, you can't even remember who you really are or who you were bravely meant to be. But these pages you hold in your hand are your song sheets to wake you to "the dream of you."

These pages will sing your beauty when you see yourself ugly.

This symphony will sing your worth when you see yourself worn out.

These lyrics will sing hope when you feel deeply hurt.

This song will sing of you as His Beloved when you struggle to believe.

Your uncommonly wise sister, Jo Saxton, intimately knows the song of you because she listens in rare and luminous ways to the heartbeat of your Father. She has written a symphony for your soul, a movement of song that will find you and remind you, because you are not defined by the blind or the unkind or mankind, but only by the Conductor of the Cosmos who sang the dream of you into glorious light.

Your Father knows the beat of your heart when you have forgotten how to be. He knows the rhythm of your return when you don't know the road back. He knows the lyrics of why you are loved, when you can't remember quite how to live. He won't let you lose your way.

And when you have forgotten the words to His Word—to yourself—Jo will sing your Father's song for you, and you will be forever changed, undone, and remade. Jo takes your broken heart longing to break free, and she cups the dream of you close, and she whispers the words to you, so you can remember the refrain of you again and sing the song that was always meant to be yours before the beginning of time:

You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit,
how I was sculpted from nothing into something.

(Psalm 139)

I am completely God's masterpiece. (Ephesians 2:10)

I am completely forgiven. (Ephesians 1:7)

I am completely a new creature. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

I am completely strong in the Lord. (Ephesians 6:10)

I am completely accepted in Christ. (Ephesians 1:6)

I am completely loved with an everlasting love. (Jeremiah 31:3)

I am completely overtaken with blessings. (Deuteronomy 28:2)

And your Father and your sisters will sing it soft and strong and certain, of the dream of who you are, until you find your way again. Until you remember the notes of your song—one that awakens all of you to everything you ever dreamed of.

Find your realest identity—and you find how to be really free.

Lean into these soul-stirring pages that will just keep singing your song.

Tuning you to what grace is, awaking you to your soul's Lover who rejoices over you with gladness, who never stops singing the Belovedness of you, until every single one of your fears is quieted with His love, and the dream of you comes true.

—Ann Voskamp,

New York Times best-selling author of
The Broken Way and *One Thousand Gifts*

Introduction

Red Boots

In your wildest, most exciting dreams, who were you? Did any of those dreams ever come close to your reality?

When I was a little girl, about four years old, I wanted to be Wonder Woman. I didn't need to look like her, I wanted to *be* like her and live like she did. By day, she covered up her mysterious, powerful origins. To those around her, she was the understated and underestimated Diana Prince, a hardworking navy officer. Later she became an agent working for Inter-Agency Defense Command (a CIA/FBI-type agency). Yet in times of crisis, Diana's full identity was revealed. She would spin around and be transformed into Wonder Woman.

As Wonder Woman, Diana could leap a wall, communicate telepathically, and fly an invisible aircraft. Even her outfit (on occasion including a cape, a clear indicator of her superhero status) and her accessories possessed special crime-fighting powers. It never once occurred to me that perhaps she could have worn a few more clothes whilst fighting for justice. She was Wonder Woman; she could wear whatever she pleased!

My favorite part of her outfit was her red, knee-high boots. But what she wore didn't matter as much as the fact that Wonder Woman had passionate ideals and fought for justice and equality. She was beautiful, kind, thoughtful, and wise. Wonder Woman

was changing the world, dealing with the bad guys, looking out for the good guys, and simply being amazing every single day.

I was in awe. Wonder Woman's adventurous life was my happily ever after. In my four-year-old mind, someday I would follow in her footsteps.

And then my Aunty May returned from a rummage sale with a pair of red leather Wonder Woman boots. They were for me! I don't think I could have loved May any more than I did on that day. The moment those boots touched my feet, I was no longer a little girl with big ideas and dreams and hopes. I was the Wonder Woman of my own world. I was mysterious, possessing secret insights and skills. I was strong, kind, and powerful, and I was going to change the world.

I wore my red boots as often as I was allowed, with any and every kind of outfit. Of course, the boots looked great with sweatpants. And yes, they matched my party dress perfectly. When I had my Wonder Woman boots on, I held my head high and walked taller. I was fearless. Wonder Woman expressed everything I wanted to be. And now with my boots on, Wonder Woman looked like me.

So it was quite possibly the saddest day of my childhood when, at age five, I realized how much my feet had grown. My Wonder Woman boots were two sizes too tight, and I finally had to let them go. My brief life as a superhero was over. My powers were gone, my mystery lost, my mission compromised.

I wasn't Wonder Woman anymore; I was just ordinary little me.

WHAT WAS YOUR DREAM OF YOU?

Let's return to the question I asked at the beginning of this introduction: What was the dream you had of yourself from the very beginning? Before life interrupted, before anyone told you who you were allowed to be?

Take a moment now to recall the dreams you had, the dreams of who you could be.

There is something special and important about our unfiltered, innocent dreams. Even though they're also imperfect and naive in places, they can be signposts to our aspirations and hopes, our longings and ideals. They express something of who we are, they speak of our identity, maybe even hint at the kind of life we were made for.

You and I had an identity before anyone came along to tell us we couldn't be that person. We had a purpose long before experience told us we weren't worthy of one. We even had a voice, tiny though it might have been, before it was muted.

Yet as life unfolds, you hear voices telling you that you can't be the person you dreamed you'd become. Some are simply part of growing up. No, you are not Wonder Woman. No, your cape won't help you fly. No, you are not a princess, life is not a fairy tale, and you won't live in a beautiful castle. The more problematic voices are the ones that speak to your real identity and invalidate you. They sound authoritative: "You're a bit too assertive. Girls aren't supposed to be like that." They question your passion and vision, delegitimizing you with every sentence.

“Your dreams aren’t in line with reality.”

“Women are not meant to be strong.”

“Those goals are way beyond your abilities.”

“It’s futile to try to fight injustice. There will *always* be injustice.”

These voices limit us as they tell us what we can expect, and for some reason we believe them. So let me ask you: What happened to the dream of who you are—and why?

I can’t stress enough how important it is to establish a secure and healthy understanding of your identity. You need to know who you are. This is not self-serving or the epitome of self-interest; it is essential to your well-being. Why? Because as Carol Dweck, Stanford psychology professor, has written, “[T]he view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be and whether you accomplish the things you value.”¹

The way you view yourself will define how you rest, work, and play; how you fight and make peace. It will shape the way you love. It influences how you approach your relationship with God. Your sense of identity flows into your relationships with others. For example, if you believe the lie that you’re worthless, it will shape and distort your outlook on life. It will influence how you treat your body and how you allow other people to treat you.

Your understanding (or misunderstanding) of your identity will define your sense of purpose and your contribution to the world. It will tell you whether to value your talents or believe you have nothing of value to offer. What you believe about your identity will tell you whether you share your dreams and live as a

woman directed by vision and mission, or whether to hide your dreams away believing they are pointless. It's impossible for you, me, or anyone else to live beyond what we believe to be true about ourselves.

When you are uncertain about who you are, you will believe—wrongly—that your value has to be earned. You will try to prove your worth through achievement. Your identity will be held in place by a fragile truce that comes with burdensome conditions, instead of a lasting peace and contentment that grounds your life. You will rely on the recognition and applause of others to center you and provide affirmation.

And what does all this do to you? You will exhaust yourself mentally, physically, and emotionally trying to earn the approval of people or institutions. Then you'll take yourself beyond exhaustion as you try to hold on to the approval you feel you have earned. You'll be trying so hard to keep it all together that you'll have no energy left to find your way back to who you truly are. You will have lost sight of the fullness of your true identity. You'll no longer see or believe the reality of your God-given potential and purpose.

It's time to stop the downward spiral and start living a different way.

It's time to recover the Dream of You.

THE DREAM OF YOU

The Dream of You is not merely an expression of your wildest dreams and greatest aspirations; the Dream of You soars above

your childhood dreams and icons—even though at times they can act as signposts to your deepest longings. The Dream of You is not just about who you think you are on a good day.

The Dream of You is God's vision of you—your real, true identity and your God-given purpose.



It is not a dream that you have to earn, and it does not require that a vote be taken by others. It is bigger than the weighty burdens of obligations and expectations that you have encountered up to now.

The Dream of You is about being who you truly are and living the life you were made for. The Dream of You is God's vision of you—your real, true identity and your God-given purpose.

While life experiences, your environment, your cultural heritage, and your relationships all help shape you, the Dream of You takes into full account God's promise of redemption and transformation. It empowers you to let go of old, broken, and limited definitions of who you are so you are free to discover and learn how to live fully into who you really are.

Are you ready to recover and reclaim the Dream of You? Then let's start with where you are right now—with your identity and purpose today. As we do that, we'll consider how life brought you here.

Don't Call Me "Pleasant"

HEY, FRIEND,

You are fully known and deeply loved by the living God.

You are seen, every single part of you.

You have a voice, you have ideas, you have a purpose.

You are valuable. You are worthy.

Just let all this sink in for a minute.

But somewhere along the way, you lost sight of the truth of who you are. You became who you thought you had to be. You became what was expected of you, what pleased the world around you, what people required of you. That was fine for a while; perhaps it was even necessary. That is, until you reached a place where you don't know who you are anymore. And you haven't been able to find your way back.

Most of the time, life is too full and moving too fast for you to even pay attention to the gradual loss of identity. But you can't escape the moments in life that reveal the situation. It's in the way you automatically second-guess your opinions. Or in the guilt you feel about your pride in your dreams and ideas of doing something

big. It's revealed in the way you burn yourself out catering to the needs and wants of others. It's in the hope that by being and doing you will earn more love and acceptance. And when you have worn yourself out and still haven't received the recognition, you try even harder.

It's in the way you can't get beyond your past, and the stain of shame that you can't seem to escape. After all this time, you still wonder if God really could love someone like you.

I wrote this book for you.

It's the story of how identities get broken, but how they can be redeemed.

It's the story of how voices are muted, but how one day they sing a new song.

It's the story of how God transforms us so we can be free.

It's my story, and I believe it's yours too. It's a story that unfolds every day.

It is possible to find your way back to who you are and recover the life you were made for. It's not always easy, but the path is paved with God's grace and mercy. If you're ready for the journey, I'd love to walk alongside you and keep you company. We'll share our stories along the way. And maybe some snacks.

With love,

Jo



Who do you think you are? It's a life-defining and an identity-defining question. When I consider who I think I am, what my identity is, I sometimes think I'm a woman simply trying to keep up with the expectations of the world around me.

Standing at an airport newsstand looking for some light reading, I noticed the glossy images on magazine covers. The cover models' features and dimensions defied gravity. There was not one photo of a person on any magazine cover that looked anything like me.

Then there were the claims made by magazine-cover headlines. I needed to buy one magazine to get a perfect body while another offered a must-read article that would teach me how to be the perfect parent and not ruin my children's lives. Forever.

Yet another magazine promised to make me amazing in bed, while the one just below it assured me I could make nutritious, locally sourced meals in only fifteen minutes. An entire section of magazines pointed out all the accessories I needed to own for the perfectly appointed home. How would I afford all this? Thankfully, another magazine contained the skills I needed to become a multimillionaire entrepreneur.

To ward off any doubts that all this was possible and could be accomplished *now*, the magazines featured beautiful people who had achieved these goals by the time they were twenty-five. I should simply have walked away from this madness, but I couldn't help myself.

I said rather loudly, "All I want is a bloody magazine!" and walked away with nothing but angst.

It's not just me, and it's not just you. It has to do with being a

woman in a society that refuses to accept and celebrate women on their own merits. Our society seems far more interested in limiting us to role definitions that usually have little to do with the qualities, intelligence, and talent we each uniquely bring to the world.

Marketing analyst Clotilde Rapaille has written, “Being a woman in America is difficult. . . . So many rules, so many tensions.”¹ I agree, except I’d add that my sisters around the world know this is not an issue only in America. Globally, in different cultures and different ways, we’re all feeling the pressure to conform to imposed standards designed to limit us. We all wrestle with a range of rules and expectations and have to work against the voices that keep telling us who we’re supposed to be and what we’re supposed to live for.

As we have seen, our sense of identity is shaped by far more than childhood dreams. Some of us were given inaccurate identities when life interrupted and distracted us. The people around us have left their mark. And personal experiences don’t remain in the past. They leave a deep imprint, forever changing us.

WHEN LIFE CHANGES YOUR NAME

In ancient times, a woman named Naomi left her homeland along with her husband and sons. They moved to Moab to escape famine, and they hoped it would be an opportunity to make a new beginning. Sadly, life didn’t turn out the way Naomi had hoped. In Moab, she lost her husband and both her sons. She returned home years later with a daughter-in-law, Ruth. When they reached Nao-

mi's hometown, the community welcomed her back. But devastated by grief, Naomi was no longer the woman they had known years before.

"Don't call me Naomi," she told the people. [Naomi means "pleasant."] "Instead, call me Mara [meaning "bitter"], for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me home empty" (Ruth 1:20–21).

Naomi's sorrow changed her life and renamed her identity. Yet it's not only the life-shattering events that shape our identities.

Another story from ancient times shows that allowing others to define one's identity can sideline even a person marked for royalty. Saul, about to be appointed king of Israel, failed to show up for his own coronation. His unexpected disappearance was so concerning that the people sought God to find the king. The response: "He is hiding among the baggage" (1 Samuel 10:22). Saul eventually came out from his hiding place to assume leadership of the nation, but he never escaped the baggage of his own insecurities.

If you read his story in the Bible, you'll see that insecurity and other issues buried Saul's potential. He lived for the approval of others, even at the expense of obeying God. For instance, the king felt so threatened by a young newcomer named David that he tried to kill him. The attempts on David's life continued for years. Saul's insecurity was a toxin that overwhelmed his identity and poisoned his life.

It's human to experience insecurity. We don't feel confident all the time, and it's tempting to compare ourselves with other people. Yet the insecurities, if left unaddressed, can grow from

momentary emotions to a definitive worldview that determines how we feel, think, and act. Insecurity becomes our identity.

If personal experiences, the interruptions of life, and the voices of those around us have poisoned who we really are, how can you find out your true identity? You know the “right” answer as well as I do. Knowing Jesus forms the basis of your identity, and having a personal knowledge of Him changes everything. Doesn't it?

Doesn't it?

WHY THE BIG DISCONNECT?

For many of us, knowing Jesus has not pointed the way to finding out who we truly are. How can that be possible? Perhaps it's because humans find it hard to receive love, gifts, and kindness. We have trouble accepting grace. Maybe after all of our achievements in culture, arts, technology, and science, we assume we now have to overachieve in the realms of spirituality and faith. As a result, our identity in Christ becomes yet another task to add to an overcrowded list of jobs to get done.

Wash the car.

Fold the laundry.

Pick up prescriptions.

Be like Jesus.

Before we know it, a life-changing, heart-transforming, identity-defining relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ is reduced to a formulaic “to achieve” list. The list often includes attending church regularly, participating in mid-week groups, giving money and time, maintaining personal

piety and devotion, and helping others—especially those who are less well off. Of course, it involves being a generally “nice” and vaguely “moral” person. These activities are good, even great things. It’s just that these are things to do. They are not who you *are*.

When our identity in Christ is reduced to a checklist, it’s no wonder the connection between our faith and our identity is, instead, a big disconnect for many of us. Surely seeking to be defined as a follower of Jesus is not just more empty hype.

We know that Jesus is the answer, so we feel vague guilt about challenging the assertion that he is *the* answer. But if Jesus answers the question, “Who are you?” then why are we still struggling to find our deepest, truest identities? Where are the freedom, peace, and security that were promised? We’ve sung it, we’ve read it, we’ve stood on the promise of it, and even though we know on some level these things must be true, they don’t seem to be true for us.

We still don’t know who we are. Some of us, not having found a way to get past the experiences that defined us, identify with Naomi. Some of us align with Saul: We haven’t been able to break out from the baggage of our insecurities. We have been trapped in comparing and competing, neither of which can end well. We have listened to other definitions of who we are, and paying attention to the voices has limited our potential and our future. Maybe, as the voices tell us, the problem is *us*. Once again, we’re not good enough.

Thankfully, God sees us from a completely different vantage point.

GOD'S DESIGN FOR GLORIOUS LIVING

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone. (Ephesians 1:11–12, MSG)

The Scripture passage is not a slogan; it's the truth. This is the answer to the heartache behind our deepest longings, the answer to the stories behind our wildest dreams. This truth is the answer to our hopes for who we really are and can become. There is so much more to discover than rules and tensions. Before we even knew Jesus, He had designs on us for glorious living.

The words of truth regarding your identity were written by a man named Paul, a zealous persecutor of Christians until he met Jesus in a life-transforming, literally blinding, encounter. The passage forms part of a letter written to church communities in the ancient city of Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) and the surrounding region. Paul's letter communicated deep truths that still apply to all believers.

The cosmopolitan city of Ephesus experienced something of an awakening to the good news of the gospel when Paul and his team preached there (see Acts 19). People from all backgrounds and walks of life came to faith. Incredible miracles took place. People who had been involved in witchcraft burned their books and tools and became Christians. Others publicly confessed their

wrongdoing. This kind of public confession bore particular significance in this city. Ephesus was home to many religious temples, but its preeminent shrine was the Temple of Diana, still considered to be one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Temple of Diana also was known to be a place of sanctuary and asylum. People could find immunity there, escaping the consequences of their crimes.²

The Temple of Diana played a huge role in the city's cultural life, housing its arts scene. The worship of Diana, which fueled the local economy, included rituals and practices that exploited women as temple prostitutes. As pagan worshippers of Diana responded to the gospel and started following Jesus, a decline in commerce derived from former temple-goers affected local businesses. Business owners who were losing profits eventually incited a riot against Paul.

Paul and his team decided to leave, eventually moving on to Macedonia (see Acts 20) and Greece. Meanwhile, new converts living in a pagan land were figuring out what their faith meant to their everyday lives. They were dealing with opposition and conflict due to their faith in Jesus Christ. These men and women were Christians who had left behind a life that bore little similarity to a life in Christ. They needed guidance.

That's why Paul pointed out in the first chapter of his letter to the Ephesians that a new life with Jesus is exactly that: a completely new life. This is huge in orienting believers in the way to live in a hostile culture (see Acts 19). It also was freeing for the Ephesians. It meant that people who had lived in spiritual darkness, putting their trust in a religion that was powerless to help

them, no longer had to be defined by the past. God was making them new, from the inside out.

Can you imagine what it is like to let go of everything that is familiar in order to fully embrace a new life? This means laying down the old way of living, including friends, family, community, the way you used to think, your worldview—all the things that had made you *you*. The old life can't continue to exist alongside the new life. But forsaking the old life means having all your comforts and reference points stripped away. With all that left behind, who are you now and what are you living for?

Try to put yourself in the place of converts to the Christian faith who had spent their lives practicing a pagan religion. They sought a change, and now they were experiencing a complete turnaround. Think of the challenges they faced in changing their lives—and staying changed.

We've all tried to reboot our lives at some point: a juice cleanse to reboot our health, a decluttering session to clear out our homes. Or maybe a commitment to stick to a New Year's resolution with the promise of a "New Year, New You." A word to live by each year to help you remember the person you've always wanted to be and the life you've hoped to live.

I'm a huge fan of New Year's resolutions, the chance to start again, the chance to transform my life. My attempts have met with varying degrees of success. The weight I lost one year found its way home again. Career paths sometimes took me in a direction I hadn't planned to take. The determination to be a better woman (whatever that meant) brought me—exhausted—face to face with who I am. My resolve to change my life never has

been enough. I've needed something lasting and someone bigger than me.

IN CHRIST = IN COVENANT RELATIONSHIP

Throughout the Bible we read of people who discovered that a relationship with God transformed all of life—including their identities—from the inside out. This transformative relationship is possible because of God's covenant promise, a consistent theme that conveys the freedom in our new identity. Covenants were common in the culture of Old Testament times.

Agreements between two people or between tribes, when one party was stronger than the other, often were marked by a ceremony in which an animal was sacrificed. The stronger party took the initiative to cancel the other party's debt, freeing the weaker party from the burdens and consequences they faced. The stronger party gave the new covenant partner a new identity. Their past was over. They were given a new name that reflected who and whose they now were.

As a result of the covenant, the weaker party assumes the attributes of the stronger partner. The weaker party never would be alone and vulnerable again, because the covenant bestowed a new life and a new place of belonging. As a tangible reminder of all that the covenant meant, the agreement was marked by a scar, often formed by a cut on the wrist. The scar also served to warn potential adversaries that the person carrying the scar was in covenant relationship. If weaker covenant partners were attacked, they had a stronger partner who would come to their defense.³

In the Bible we see God enter into covenant relationship with His people, including Abram and Sarai, Noah, Moses, and David. All of these covenants pointed to a greater One. The ancient covenants eventually were fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

As the stronger covenant partner, God took the initiative by entering into a relationship with a broken humanity. He sent His Son, Jesus, whose life illustrates what a relationship with God and what an identity in God is like. The covenant that transforms our lives is not enacted in the sacrifice of an animal, as was done in Old Testament times. Instead, Jesus Himself (described by John the Baptist as “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” [John 1:29]) is the sacrifice, laying down His life for us. His body—not the bodies of the weaker covenant partners—carries the scars in His side and in His hands. His death breaks the power of the debt we owed by canceling the penalty for our sin. Now humanity, the weaker covenant partner, has new life and a new place of belonging.

We are no longer defined or named by our past. Instead, we have been given a new identity. We’re in Christ now. We have access to the attributes of our stronger covenant Partner. This covenant means God’s redemption is at work in every part of life. In biblical terms, *redemption* means “the buying back of something that has been lost.” People who have been lost through helplessness, poverty, violence, and foolishness are bought back. It also means “deliverance from bondage, freed from everything that enslaves and controls us.” Redemption was good news for God’s covenant people in the Old Testament. Redemption was good

news for the people of Ephesus who never had heard of Christ until they met Paul. Redemption is good news for us and our identity and purpose because it changes everything.

Jesus not only rescued us from the debt we never could repay. He also paid the price for all that we had lost due to the reality of a broken world. In His death and resurrection, He broke every chain that held us captive. You may know already that He has rescued you. You may know that He has forgiven you. But you also need to know that His redemption of your life has transformative implications for your identity. You no longer have to accept lies about who you are. You have a new identity. In Christ you find out who you are and what you are living for.

He doesn't shame or condemn you for your past. He breaks the chains of all that controlled you and limited your identity. He redeems your true identity, which was interrupted by your life experiences and crushed by the mixed messages of the world. He even redeems the dreams you had of the person you hoped to become. He redeems your Dream of You.

That said, He has way more in mind for you than a pair of red boots; He has designs on you for glorious living. Redemption means He makes all things new.

REDEEMED TO RECLAIM YOUR TRUE IDENTITY

Christ invites us to discover who we are. And because we have a relationship with God, this discovery is an ongoing process. We can learn to let go of the broken identities that have wrongly defined us. But we also can revisit areas of our identities that bear

further exploration. God has led me to revisit the same areas of my identity in different seasons of my life. How my body image affected my identity as a lithe metabolic wonder at age nineteen is not the same for me now. Today my body image has to do with being a woman in her forties, after having two children, with decades of love for fried chicken, and with a metabolism that decided to go on a *long*, slow vacation. It's a different deal.

God has needed to redeem my long-held identification with Wonder Woman in every decade of my life. The Wonder Woman of my childhood was a little adventurer. In my teens she was the girl who became obsessed with academic excellence and was determined to have the chance to create her own dreams in the face of discrimination. The Wonder Woman of my twenties sought to be accomplished, hot (attractive, not sweaty), and married. The Wonder Woman of my thirties aimed to be the perfect wife and mother with a perfect home and career.

And today? I'm doing great, thanks very much. I could use a long nap, and I wouldn't mind a new pair of fantastic red leather boots. That's all the Wonder I've got energy for.

Long before we first heard of Christ,
He had His eye on us. He had
designs on us for glorious living.



One final thing to remember: while the work of redemption is incredibly liberating, it's also incredibly costly. Our redemption was wrought on a cross, a humiliating, agonizing form of execution. As we journey with Jesus, sometimes we'll feel relief and

freedom, a weight lifted off our shoulders, gladly resting in the hands of our stronger covenant Partner. At other times, as redemption works on the deepest parts of who we are, we'll journey to painful places, the kinds of places that disciples are tempted to run away from. We'll be tempted to avoid the vulnerability and nakedness. We'll be tempted to hide to keep anyone from seeing us bleed. We'll be tempted to avoid bringing the broken pieces of our identities to the Cross. There will be times where we'll be tempted to rationalize, minimize, or ignore our culpability, or our own sin. We'll be tempted to comfort and appease ourselves, rather than deny ourselves and choose to stop going our own way (see Matthew 16:24). At those times, going back to living by the *oughts* and *shoulds* of our culture and giving in to our insecurities will feel a lot easier, even more appealing!

It will be important to remember that the Cross is not the end, but rather what happens before resurrection, before new life. Remind yourself that when the grit and the guts of your broken identity meet the grace and goodness of God, it will reveal you, but He will transform you. You're in Him now, with all His resources available to you. You have access to His power, mercy, and grace.

Sometimes you'll feel impatient with the process, wondering why it demands so much. You'll be frustrated that transformation and growth are such slow, hard work. Surely, you will conclude, if Jesus has secured your freedom, it shouldn't feel so difficult and take so long.

Yet this new covenant is more than a spiritual transaction, a contract that was signed when we first heard about Jesus. It's a

relationship with the living God that grows, stretches, and deepens over time. When Paul wrote to another church community, describing the difference this new covenant makes, he stated that it “makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image” (2 Corinthians 3:18). We have the opportunity to continually respond to the covenant love that God offers us through Jesus.

Discover the depth of your identity in Christ as you let go of the old life of trying to prove yourself worthy, of striving to measure up to an imposed standard. Embrace your covenant relationship in all its fullness. Invite God into your past life experiences and ask Him to break you free from the debts, the brokenness, and the wasted years. It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ, He had His eye on us. He had designs on us for glorious living. Discover His Dream of You and His dreams for you.

As we wrap up this chapter, take a few moments to pause and reflect on what a covenant relationship with God could mean for your identity and purpose.

What's in a Name?

HEY, SISTER,

When I was pregnant, I would pore over pages of books searching for the perfect names for my soon-to-arrive children. As a child I had attended celebratory naming ceremonies for the newborns in our Nigerian community. So when it came to naming my own children, I had specific goals. A name needed to be timeless and perhaps capture a yet-unseen personality as indicated by a baby's in utero behaviors. (One of my children would kick at the same times, three times a day. The other somersaulted on no established schedule.)

Above all, a name should help tell a person's story. My husband and I formed a multiethnic family, so our children's names needed to reflect our wide, rich story.

Still, those who know me well would tell you that my name-centered goals go well beyond naming children. They'll tell you that I'm a little obsessed with naming. Every friend I have is given a new nickname. I happily name everything I have: events, parties, cars, guitars . . . iPods. I admit this *might* be a problem.

Everything needs a title, a definition. On long walks and in late-night conversations, I have told close friends

about the names I was called, things that were said to me and about me. Sticks and stones didn't break my bones, but names could always hurt me. These names would leave their mark. They would wrongly define me.

Being wrongly named can cause you to walk a little bent over. It's as though the words, the labels, the definitions press on you so heavily they drag you down. The false labels have caused you not to live by your given name, which merely introduces you. Words and experiences limit who you try to be and who you are trying not to be, to the extent that you don't know who you really are.

It doesn't have to stay this way. Walk through these next few pages with me, read these words into the night if you need to. They will remind you of One who is truth, overcoming all the powerful lies you've lived under. He knows your true name, and He will lift your head and straighten your back.

xo,

JO

It's dusk, yet another hot and dusty evening. From where he stands in his room near the palace, he looks out over the city. He sees torches flicker in the distance, and he inhales the smell of this land that is far from his original home.

He wears the clothes of the powerful, the trappings of an official whose authority is second only to that of Pharaoh. He smiles,

bemused to think that the lavish coat his father gave him when he was young was nothing compared to this. Yet the coat that had been given to him in love had sent him into so much trouble.

Voices come to him, the sounds of his children squealing as they play. His smile broadens and thoughts of his sons crowd out any further thoughts about his past. Joseph turns and goes inside to find his boys. There is no need to dwell on the troubles and pain of his youth.

JOSEPH, A MAN WITH A SHIFTING IDENTITY

Thanks to Sunday school storybooks and Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical about an amazing Technicolor dreamcoat, Joseph, son of Jacob, is one of the most familiar biblical figures in popular culture. His story is told through thirteen chapters in the book of Genesis. Joseph was his father's favorite, much to the annoyance of his brothers. His father so indulged his eleventh son that he gave Joseph an ornate coat—the kind reserved for supervisors. Meanwhile, Joseph's older brothers were sent to tend the flocks.¹

Not only was Joseph favored; he was gifted. He had supernatural dreams that revealed his future leadership role, but as a young man he lacked the emotional intelligence to realize that boasting about his dreams offended his family. His jealous and vindictive brothers tossed him into a pit and sold him to slavers. To cover up their violence, the brothers put blood on Joseph's coat and led their father to conclude that Joseph had been killed by wild animals (see Genesis 37:31–33).

The slave traders later sold Joseph, and he ended up in Egypt,

which at that time was the world's superpower. Joseph served in the household of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. It's hard to imagine more jarring circumstances for Joseph to be in, but the narrative tells us, "The LORD was with Joseph, so he succeeded in everything he did as he served in the home of his Egyptian master" (Genesis 39:2).

Potiphar realized that he was being blessed by God's presence in Joseph's life. As Joseph continued to succeed, the captain's home and business flourished. So Potiphar gave Joseph successive promotions until finally, the captain of the guard gave Joseph administrative oversight over everything he owned (see Genesis 39:3–6). After the horrors of being sold into slavery, Joseph's life was finally getting somewhere.

Then Potiphar's wife tried to seduce the young man. When he refused her advances and ran away, she falsely accused him of rape. Joseph lost everything to yet another injustice. This time he was thrown in jail.

While in prison he interpreted dreams for members of the palace staff. This gift eventually put him in the presence of Pharaoh, who had been troubled by his own dreams. Joseph's gift of interpreting dreams led to a position of prominence in Egypt—a post second in power only to Pharaoh himself. Ultimately, the God-given dreams of leadership and influence that Joseph had as a young man were fulfilled.

The story gets even better when a famine drives Jacob's sons to visit Joseph without realizing who the "Egyptian" official really is. The brothers who had sold Joseph and then lied to their father now depended on him to keep their family from starvation.

WHY NAMES MATTER

We are given few glimpses into Joseph's interior life during his journey. But when he named his children, it revealed the depth of his growth.

Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering." (Genesis 41:50–52, NIV)

In biblical times, a name carried profound significance. It spoke of a person's family and heritage, but also the person's character, potential, and purpose.

A good name is more desirable than great riches;
to be esteemed is better than silver or gold. (Proverbs
22:1, NIV)

Sometimes a name reflected the parents' circumstances. Joseph's name emerged through his mother, Rachel, and stepmother (and aunt), Leah. The two women competed for the affections of their husband, Jacob. Leah was Jacob's first wife, but he gave preferential treatment to her younger sister Rachel. Leah named her firstborn Reuben, which sounds like the Hebrew for "the LORD

has seen my misery” (NIV). Leah said of Reuben’s name, “The LORD has noticed my misery, and now my husband will love me” (Genesis 29:32).

One of Rachel’s sons conceived through a surrogate was named Naphtali, meaning “my struggle.” She said, “I have struggled hard with my sister, and I’m winning!” (Genesis 30:8). When Rachel finally gave birth to a son, she named him Joseph, meaning “may he add.” Of Joseph, Rachel said, “May the LORD add yet another son to my family” (Genesis 30:24).

A name also could speak of a person’s character. Jacob, Joseph’s father, came out of the womb grasping his older twin’s heel. So he was named Jacob, meaning “he grasps the heel.” The phrase was a Hebrew idiom for “he deceives” or “he takes advantage of.” Both idioms were true of Jacob’s character.

A child’s name was a declaration of his or her identity. For many leading characters of the Old Testament, their names defined their lives. When Joseph named his sons, he declared in advance a God-given identity over them that spoke of Joseph’s redemption. Joseph named his older son Manasseh, a word that sounds like a Hebrew term meaning “causing to forget” (see Genesis 41:51). He named his second son Ephraim, a name that sounds like a Hebrew term that means “fruitful” (see Genesis 41:52). The names of these sons later became the names of two of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The God who had kept covenant with Joseph as he endured abuse, enslavement, and betrayal helped Joseph forget (*Manasseh*) his struggles and sorrows. The foreign land that had become his home was no longer a place of despair, loss, and horror. It had

become fruitful (*Ephraim*). Not just for Joseph, but also for his extended family and his adopted nation.

What is most remarkable about the naming of Joseph's sons is where it's placed in the bigger story. Joseph's wise leadership rescued Egypt during seven years of famine. His administration of the country's resources had strengthened Egypt's economic position in the region as travelers from famine-ravaged nations visited Egypt to purchase food and supplies. Furthermore, Joseph eventually was reunited with his father and reconciled with his brothers.

Yet Joseph named his sons before any of those events took place. His sons' names declare that Joseph already was free, whole, and living the God-given life he was made for. He did not allow the past to name him, as had happened with Naomi, who returned home telling her former neighbors to call her Mara (bitterness). Events that stole so much from Joseph did not have the last word in his life. The fruits of restoration overflowed from his life, blessing everyone around him.

His mother, Rachel, had given Joseph a name meaning "may he add" (see Genesis 30:24). God answered her prayer yet again by giving her one more son, Benjamin (see Genesis 35:18). But God also added to Joseph's life by way of sons, prestige, influence, and power, as well as through redemption and restoration.

WHAT NAME DO YOU LIVE BY?

When we're getting to know a person, we often ask about the person's name. Are you named for a relative? What would your name have been if you had been born a different gender? We are

naturally curious about the circumstances surrounding the person's name.

However, as you explore and reclaim your own identity, perhaps the more telling questions to ask are “Who named you?” and “What named you?” What experience, situation, or relationship has defined your understanding of your identity and potential?

The names given to me at birth tell you only so much of who I am. Through a set of circumstances beyond my control, I later found that my soul, my heart, and my thoughts—my whole life—had been named in a more definitive way.

My earliest memories are recalled visually in a summer haze. I'm sitting in a garden surrounded by huge, pretty rosebushes. I'm making things—a fort, a mud pie, a magic wand—as I enact my adventurous dreams. Or I'm talking to my chickens in the backyard, asking about their day. Or I'm climbing on my very patient dog, trying to will her into assuming her true destiny as a magnificent Pegasus for my Wonder Woman.

As you explore and reclaim your own identity,
perhaps the more telling questions to ask are
“Who named you?” and “What named you?”



In my earliest memories, the sun is shining and I feel warm and safe. Secure. It plays like an old home-recorded film clip. I can see the colors of the setting and the movements of the people.

Reality tends to paint a starker picture than the one given to us by our memories. For instance, my memories often fail to articulate that my warm, summer-haze memory-picture takes place

in foster care. This detail gets left out largely because it was a normal living arrangement for me. It was the only life I could recall, since years earlier my parents' marriage and our family had fragmented across two continents.

A nice yet random lady used to come to our foster home to visit me and ask questions. She was my social worker. The fuller picture showed a diverse foster family. There was my brother. Then my foster mother, Aunt May, an elderly, unmarried, white woman. My foster brothers also were white. The picture included lively and enjoyable visits from my mom and my Aunt Bassey. Aunt May always made a special trifle on those days. Still, the overriding visual that stands out is that my foster home was home, that Aunt May was home, and it was summer. Warm. Safe. Secure.

That is, until December 11, 1979, when the warm, summery, hazy days of memory were replaced. (In truth, I don't know if that was the exact December day, but in my mind that is the date stamp.)

It was snowing. Normally that didn't matter since I loved playing in the snow. I loved it when the snow was so deep it reached my thighs. I loved snowflakes and snowmen and snowballs and snow angels. I'd open my arms and lift my face to the sky, daring the snow to come and get me. I loved the chill feel of flakes falling on my eyelids, providing frosty white eyelashes on my dark brown skin. I loved the gentle teasing of melting flakes on my tongue. I'd jump and squeal and fall into its fun.

But the day that appears in my memory was different. The scene is set in slow motion.

It was snowing hard, flakes so full and thick they overpowered everything, silencing the street with their weight. It was bitterly cold. The wind stung my face and held me back. Winter didn't want to play with me that day.

I don't remember a goodbye. I don't remember looking back and waving through the rear window. I don't remember if my brother spoke, or if anyone did. I just remember that it was bitterly cold and there was a lot of snow. Soon I was in a taxi, then on a train. There were no tears. Why would there be? It was a familiar trip. I was headed back to London where I was born, but not home, I mean the home identified with Aunt May. I was headed somewhere different for the Christmas holidays.

There I was standing amid towering grown-ups with familial, yet unfamiliar, faces as the adults welcomed me home. At first I was confused. Why did they think I was home? Then I realized they were serious about celebrating my homecoming.

Home?

The raw elements of winter had tried to warn me. The cold stood still and mourned. The snow slowed me down and then sorrowfully buried me, snowflake by snowflake. My story and my life as I knew them were being buried. I hadn't been told that I was leaving Aunt May's house for good, that I would never again live with her. Somehow the big goodbye had happened without me, even though I was right there.

I didn't cry. I was both happy and sad. I was happy to be with my family. I was home, and yet I wanted to go home. All I could think of were the gifts left underneath our Christmas tree at Aunt May's house. I knew, I just knew that one of them was the

doll I had been promised, the doll I'd always wanted. Next to my doll were toys I'd play with, games I'd play with my friends. They were my presents. My name was written on them. They never came to my new home in London.

I was five years old, but the experience of leaving Aunty May's and arriving to what my family called "home" reshaped my identity. The grief and confusion I felt were way too big for my five-year-old heart to understand. This sudden shift was too complex for my five-year-old mind to interpret. All that was left was to react to it, and it defined me in a way that renamed me. It changed who I was. Starting at that moment, I saw the world differently.

I didn't like winter anymore. It was cold and dangerous. The wind stung me; snowflakes were annoying, frightening little things that became a big thing that could steal your world away. I resolved that when I grew up I would live in a place where the sun shone and it was always summer. I think I wanted summer because summer felt safe. I even became suspicious of Christmas holidays. What was the point of the gifts and the excitement? Why feel, again and again, the sadness of gifts that never came?

The changed, renamed me understood that life was . . . temporary. Homes were temporary. Relationships, even the very closest ones, were temporary. Life could change at any time without warning, leaving me sad, confused, and hurting. Better to be prepared. I trained my heart to keep people at a distance, because no matter how secure I felt, I didn't belong to anyone, not really. In the end, the people I loved could let me go. So I believed they always would.

WHEN A NAME DEFINES YOUR LIFE

Who named you? Was it your family, your friends, your boss, your spouse? Maybe, like my experience, the renaming happened when you were very young. Children have little control over such powerful experiences, and yet the impact can resonate for the rest of one's life. Abuse, loss, loneliness. Some renaming events may seem minor but carry a heavy weight with them.

Years ago, I asked women at a Bible study how they were named and how the naming impacted their lives. Their answers were revealing.

"I'm the youngest in my family," said Joan, "so growing up I was immature and silly, somewhat frivolous. However, the label stuck, and no matter what I did, the attitude [toward me] remained." Her face flushed and her voice cracked with frustration. "Years later my siblings, and in fact no one in my family, takes what I say seriously. I'm still seen as silly. And I'm a grandmother."

Perhaps we've been named by an opinion about us that was expressed by someone who didn't really know us. The assessment of who we are—good or bad—shaped us and limited us.

Marie said, "When I was younger I was known in my group of friends as 'the skinny one.'" She paused, smirked, and looked around the room. "Then I had children. No one calls me the skinny one anymore!" The room erupted into laughter.

"I'm the strong one," said Clare. I noted that several women in the group murmured in agreement. It seems "the strong one" is a common name assigned to women. "I don't always feel strong, but I feel that that is what is expected of me. I know it's meant as

a compliment, because I am capable and I support people. Sometimes I just wish someone would be the strong one for me.”

I heard the group exhale, almost sighing in agreement.

Which “one” were you? The rebellious one, the happy one, the reliable one, the strong one, the sensible one, the cynical one? How has your name shaped your identity? How has it limited you?

LETTING GO OF OLD NAMES

I had been defined by my early experience. For me, people and places were temporary. I would fall back on my personal history whenever I checked out of close friendships. “Sorry, I’m just really independent, always have been, going back to my foster days. It’s nothing personal, it’s just who I am.”

On one level that was true. There was no point in pretending that the things that had named me didn’t exist. I needed to face that reality. Yet I couldn’t ignore that throughout biblical history, God transformed people. In many instances, even the circumstances that named them gave them a fresh identity and purpose. Abram and Sarai were transformed into Abraham and Sarah (see Genesis 17:5, 15), their new names reflecting their relationship with the living God and the promise of a son and a future lineage. Simon was renamed Peter after acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah (see John 1:42). His new name meant “little rock,” speaking of his relationship with God (the Rock) but also of his future role in the church. God changed the names of people and in doing so changed their stories.

He could do the same for me.

The story of Jacob, Joseph's father, illustrates the raw reality of shedding an old name and receiving a new one. Jacob was forced to face his difficult and deceptive past when he encountered God on the bank of a river, and the encounter renamed Jacob forever. He was henceforth known as Israel, a name that later identified a nation (see Genesis 32:28).

On the bank of a river, a stranger confronted Jacob and fought with him. Muscle for muscle, strength for strength, it seemed the men were evenly matched. Neither man relented, so they fought through the night, bloodied and bruised. Suddenly this strange man, seeing that Jacob refused to let go, touched Jacob's hip and dislocated it.

They were not so evenly matched after all. Understand that this fight could have been over with a single touch at the very beginning. The man had decided to leave, but Jacob kept him there. "I will not let you go unless you bless me," Jacob told the strange man (Genesis 32:26). Jacob knew this mystery stranger was more than a man. He had encountered the Divine.

Jacob did receive his requested blessing, but he would walk with a limp for the rest of his life. Yet hadn't there always been something broken about Jacob? The events that brought him to this moment told his story and reflected his original name: Jacob, meaning "he who deceives, he who takes advantage" (see Genesis 25:26). He had deceived and taken advantage of his brother Esau, stealing the older brother's birthright and taking Esau's rightful blessing from their father, Isaac. Then he had to run for his life.

Jacob had been deceived and taken advantage of by his Uncle

Laban, given in marriage to one of Laban's daughters, a woman he didn't love. Then Jacob was forced to serve double the time to secure his marriage to Rachel, the woman he'd asked to marry all along. This was his life and there was nowhere left to run.

On the bank of a river, the stranger spoke to Jacob.

"What is your name?" (Genesis 32:27).

Who are you apart from the wealth you have earned, your flocks, and your possessions?

What is your name?

Jacob was set to meet up with his estranged brother the following day. But in this moment at the river, God brought a different kind of reckoning.

"Jacob," he said to the stranger (Genesis 32:27). "I'm Jacob."

I am Jacob. I'm a liar. I'm a cheat. I'm "he who deceives." Face to face with the powerful stranger, Jacob finally owned his name.

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome" (Genesis 32:28, NIV).

Jacob was renamed Israel, meaning "God fights, struggles, prevails" or in other translations, "God's prince." The old name is gone. Jacob needed to be blessed with a new name. Yes, he was broken and he needed the blessing of a new identity.

He would walk differently from now on.

DISCOVER GOD'S NEW NAME FOR YOU

God is still changing names and changing stories.

It took time for me to walk away from the experiences that

named me. It's almost instinctive to walk in the groove of habits that began in childhood. It has been a long, hard session of wrestling with God to come to the end of myself and yet not let go until God blesses me. Moving forward has meant walking with a limp, aware of my weakness and vulnerability. Still, the limp has created a dependence on God's Word and His Spirit's power to transform me. He is redeeming my story.

Having looked at the power of names and the importance of naming and being named, stop and give careful thought to the impact your name has on you now and has had on you in the past.

- Whoever or whatever has named you does not have to define you forever. Are you ready to discover your identity and purpose, your name? As a first step, carve out time to be alone with God.
- Tell God who and what has named you, and who you have become as a result. Feel free to wrestle in prayer for as long as it takes.
- Invite God to reveal the identity He has given you. This is the name that will give you new life.
- Don't be afraid if you feel vulnerable when you begin to embrace your new name. It's an opportunity to lean on God and to rely on His Word and power. He is redeeming your story.