

THE JEFESUS

EDITED BY CAMERON COLE & CHARLOTTE GETZ

I WISH I KNEW IN

HIGH SCHOOL

“*The Jesus I Wish I Knew in High School* exemplifies a multigenerational vision in which older saints impart gospel-centered, biblical wisdom to adolescent youth. The authors will encourage, equip, and challenge you to live a humble, faithful, and dependent life upon Christ by providing relevant and scriptural teaching on a wide variety of issues faced by today’s teenagers.”

Brian Cosby, Senior Pastor of Wayside Presbyterian Church (PCA), Signal Mountain, Tennessee; author of over a dozen books, including *Giving Up Gimmicks: Reclaiming Youth Ministry from an Entertainment Culture*

“These are honest, sacred pages. The authors courageously unveil true and painful stories from their own high school days, and then they share how those experiences intersect with the gospel, the truest story of all. This book is a gift to its readers. Read it and be tenderly reminded of God’s unrelenting love for you.”

Drew Hill, Pastor; award-winning author of *Alongside: Loving Teenagers with the Gospel*

“There is great freedom and joy to be found in following the Jesus of the Bible instead of limping after a counterfeit Jesus that the world has constructed. *The Jesus I Wish I Knew in High School* is a road map to the authentic Jesus and will serve as an encouragement for many teens to know that they are not alone and that they are loved beyond measure by their Creator!”

Barrett Jones, Former NFL player; Outland Trophy winner; college football analyst for ESPN Radio

“Students love relatable stories because not only do they help truth come to life, but they help teenagers realize they aren’t alone. Most storytellers either seek to entertain or impress, but this book shines the spotlight on Jesus. I believe that these short chapters can help students make sense of the world around them and give them courage to share their own story with others.”

Chris Li, High School Ministry Director, Mariners Church

“I wish I could have read *The Jesus I Wish I Knew in High School* when I was a teenager. This is an ideal handbook for parents, students, and teachers, with practical conversation starters and discussion questions on everything

from cultural identity to ableism, gender, faith, and more. Through gospel-centered teaching and relatable storytelling, this book will both inspire and equip the next generation to love Jesus more and better understand Jesus's love for them."

Michelle Ami Reyes, Vice President, Asian American Christian Collaborative; author of *Becoming All Things: How Small Changes Lead to Lasting Connections Across Cultures*

"The first time I grasped the truth and power of the gospel was when I saw unexpected joy in my teenage peers. I wanted to know this Jesus who seemed so different, so alive compared to the stained-glass version I saw from the back of my church. I'm so grateful that another generation of youth will come to know this risen Christ through the testimonies of this creative and welcome book."

Collin Hansen, Vice President of content and editor in chief of *The Gospel Coalition*; host of the *Gospelbound* podcast

"It's been said that 'wisdom comes from experience.' I know that to be true, as over the course of my life I've learned to listen and learn from those who have gone before me who desired to faithfully follow Jesus. *The Jesus I Wish I Knew in High School* is packed with words of wisdom that have been born out of the experience of those who, like you and me, have desired to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Read and treasure these words from my friends. They understand what you're going through. Even more, they offer biblically faithful advice on how to get through it."

Walt Mueller, Center for Parent/Youth Understanding

"I want all young people to understand who Jesus is and how Jesus can change their life. This book strips away some of the (often well-intentioned) myths young people have absorbed about Jesus and keeps them ruthlessly focused on the true Jesus. The true Jesus is always compelling."

Kara Powell, Executive Director of the Fuller Youth Institute; Chief of Leadership Formation at Fuller; coauthor of *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager*

THE JESUS I WISH I KNEW IN HIGH SCHOOL

Edited by
Cameron Cole and Charlotte Getz



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Cameron Cole:

To Dad, who taught me that what truly mattered in life is trusting Jesus for salvation and being a humble Christian man.

Charlotte Getz:

To my parents, who always aimed me toward Jesus, in high school and beyond.

Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Temptation and Goodness by Jen Pollock Michel.....	4
Chapter 2: Performance and Acceptance by Cameron Cole.....	9
Chapter 3: Grief and Empathy by Mac Harris.....	15
Chapter 4: Misfits and the Arrival of God by Michelle Ami Reyes.....	21
Chapter 5: Reputation and Righteousness by Kristen Hatton	27
Chapter 6: Doubt and Love by Mark Howard.....	32
Chapter 7: Dreams and the Real Story by Charlotte Getz.....	38
Chapter 8: Approval and God’s Voice by Sandra McCracken	44
Chapter 9: Pride and Grace by Watson Jones.....	50
Chapter 10: Sin and Rest by Dawson Cooper.....	55
Chapter 11: Failure and a Sure Promise by Sam Bush.....	60
Chapter 12: Heartbreak and God’s Presence by Catherine Allen.....	66
Chapter 13: Morality and God’s Gift by Jessica Thompson	72
Chapter 14: Rejection and the Good News by David Zahl.....	78
Chapter 15: Conformity and Freedom by Melina Smith.....	84
Chapter 16: Flaws and Faithfulness by Lauren Hansen.....	90
Chapter 17: Fear and Courage by Scott Sauls	96
Chapter 18: Shame and Holiness by Kevin Yi.....	102

Chapter 19: Disability and Suffering by Rachel Kang	108
Chapter 20: Faith and God's Seal by Emily Heide	114
Chapter 21: Idolatry and God's Pleasure by Rebecca Lankford.....	120
Chapter 22: Wounds and Restoration by Peter Ong	126
Chapter 23: Weariness and the Kingdom by Liz Edrington.....	132
Chapter 24: Secrets and Mercy by Davis Lacey.....	139
Chapter 25: Rebellion and God's Pursuit by Chelsea Kingston Erickson	145
Chapter 26: Imperfect Parents and God's Family by Anna Meade Harris.....	151
Chapter 27: Blame and the Great Exchange by Kenneth E. Ortiz	157
Chapter 28: Tragedy and Healing by Scotty Smith	164
Chapter 29: Regret and Rescue by Lucy Kate Green	169
Chapter 30: Isolation and Liberation by Clark Fobes IV.....	174
Glossary	180

Introduction

Have you ever heard an adult say, “Just wait until you get into the real world” or “You think this is bad? Just wait until you’re an adult”? Even if they don’t say it out loud, you have probably noticed that it’s easy for some adults to minimize the struggles of teenagers, and act as if “real problems” only begin when you hit the “real world.” Too often we adults can be guilty of looking back at our lives through rose-colored glasses—only remembering the happy times from the past and forgetting the hard times.

Let us tell you the truth. If any adult sits down and does a sensible analysis of their entire life, they will agree that adolescence is universally the most difficult phase. When we ask other adults to really think about their teenage years, we often hear: “Man, being a teenager is brutal. That was the hardest time of my life. I can’t imagine how hard it must be now.”

As a teenager, you are starting to carry many of the expectations of adulthood, but without many of the benefits. You are expected to take responsibility for your grades, schedules, jobs, and applications like an adult, but you only receive limited freedoms in return.

Meanwhile, you are experiencing dozens of new and complicated challenges all at once. Your body is changing rapidly in ways that make you feel uncomfortable and insecure. You inch closer and closer to leaving home and are expected to make yourself marketable and attractive to potential employers or colleges. You gain the right to drive. You have more access to

technology. Social groups and friendships change and evolve. You might have new financial responsibilities and obligations.

Adolescence is a hurricane, a tornado, an earthquake, and a forest fire coming at you all at once. As a result, many teenagers experience anxiety, stress, despair, and loneliness.

We get it. We remember.

Now, don't get us wrong. Being a teenager isn't all bad. There are games, parties, proms, pep rallies, and concerts. There can be great friendships, cool adventures, new learning experiences, and gratifying accomplishments. Being a teenager can be a thrill and a blast as well. The challenges, though, can be overwhelming.

WE WANT YOU TO KNOW TWO THINGS

The thirty volunteer authors of this book know two things, and we want you to take these two things to heart. First, we know that being a teenager is hard. Perhaps the hardest thing about it is that amidst the struggle, you feel as if other people in your life do not understand the gravity of the challenges and intensity of the difficulties you face. Part of the loneliness of adolescence is feeling constantly misunderstood and sensing that nobody takes your problems seriously.

One of the purposes of this book is for a group of Christians to affirm, "We hear you. We understand. We get the difficulty of what you are facing." That is why much of this book focuses on the authors sharing their own fears, failures, and struggles during their teenage years. We expect that as you read, you'll laugh, relate, and grow.

The authors range in age from twenty-three to seventy, but the fears, desperation, self-loathing, insecurity, embarrassment, conflict, and heartbreak are still very fresh to all of us. We hope that as you read, you will feel valued and understood. We want you to know that we take your struggles seriously.

The second and most important thing is that we want this book to point you to Jesus. When you know Jesus, you know

what it's like to be perfectly loved, because Jesus loves you so much that he died for you. You know what it's like to have hope for the future, because you're confident that God has a plan for your life. You know what it's like to feel grace and mercy when you mess up big time, because forgiveness flows out of Jesus. And you know what it's like to have joy, because relationship with Christ is the source of all joy.

You cannot avoid pain and challenges in life. Those come with the territory. With Christ, however, you can walk through those challenges with greater hope and freedom.

WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK

The chapters are short and can be read within ten minutes. Each chapter has three sections. In the first section, the author shares a difficult experience they encountered in high school. The second section, *The Jesus I Wish I Knew*, contains a reflection from Scripture. The author considers how knowing Jesus and the gospel could have impacted his or her experience. In the final section, *The Jesus I Want You to Know*, the author speaks directly to you. Imagine they are sitting right beside you, sharing their heart. At the end of each chapter you will find optional questions for further reflection.

We want you to be filled with hope, peace, joy, and freedom. We want you to have Christ at the very center of your life, because he is the only place where we find true, abundant life.

From the Editors,
Cameron and Charlotte

Chapter 1

Temptation and Goodness

by Jen Pollock Michel

He is sixteen and I am fifteen. We're in the bedroom of a stranger's apartment with the lights off. The couple we've come with has paired off in the other bedroom. At some point, my boyfriend reaches over me, fumbling to open the drawer of the nightstand beside us. He closes it, holds a small foil-wrapped package in the palm of his hand. There is a single suspended moment of indecision.

And then there is not.

I was raised in church, knelt beside my mother at the age of six to ask Jesus to live in my heart. There was little I didn't *know* about Jesus, at least as I thought then, and there was nothing I openly rejected. I'd believed in Jesus my whole life: believed that he was God in the flesh, believed that he died on the cross for my sins, believed that he was raised from the dead—I even believed that he was coming again.

At fifteen, I didn't mind believing in Jesus, didn't even mind most of the Sunday mornings my parents drug me out of bed early for church. I just didn't want Jesus ruining my fun or restricting my freedoms. I was like the prodigal son in Luke 15—simply looking for a good time. I planned, of course, to come “home” at some point. I knew I'd need to make sincere

apologies and promises to God when I did. But I was postponing that repentance for a later date: after thirty maybe, when life would find me behind the wheel of a minivan. Following Jesus was like paying the mortgage—and having a lawn to mow.

For a year, my boyfriend and I played married. Ironically, we also used to entertain long theological conversations about the state of our souls. He, too, had been raised in the church, and neither of us had any hesitation about the sinfulness of our behavior. Still, we lingered over this question: Were we—or were we not—Christians? My favorite verse as a child was Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God.” I counted on pardon and felt sure that however much I tested God’s steadfast and abounding love, it would never break under me.

It might have continued on like that except that I discovered this to be true of God: he is a loving shepherd seeking the stray.

For one, I was surrounded by people who loved Jesus in very real ways. Their sincerity was a foil to my hypocrisy. Aside from my parents, there was my Sunday school teacher: a single woman whose lessons were her life. She radiated a joy deeper than anything I recognized from my Saturday nights. There was a friend from church, a girl one year older than me, who attended a different high school. She read her Bible during the week as if the words of God really mattered, and she pursued a holiness—an *otherness*—that I found myself admiring. These examples of faith stirred longing in me—for something more solid, more stable than the sand beneath my feet.

If you know the story of Saul on the road to Damascus in the book of Acts—this fire-breathing man with arrest warrants for Christians in his hand, this man who met the blazing spectacle of the risen Jesus one ordinary afternoon—then you might not be surprised when I tell you that I also met Jesus when I least expected to. I was sixteen when I heard his voice at summer camp, asking me three questions: *What do you want? Where are you headed? Will you follow?*

I don’t remember indecision then, only the urgency of *yes*.

THE JESUS I WISH I KNEW IN HIGH SCHOOL

This story of mine is now thirty years old, and there's a lot I've left out: the breakup, the rebuilding, how my new friendship with Jesus filled all the lonely places. In truth, it's not a story about sex as much as it is about surrender. It's a story about temptation, and it's a story about trust. It's a story about coming home to a Father—and finding him good.

I think of one of the oldest stories in the Bible, found in Genesis. It's the story of our human parents, Adam and Eve, and recounts the day they mistrusted God. God had, of course, lavished all of his best gifts on these children of his, and there was nothing they lacked, even if there was one thing he had forbidden them. "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:16–17). We can't be exactly sure why God would cordon off this one tree, but it does confront Adam and Eve with two very important questions, especially as the serpent cast suspicion on God's motives. *Is God good? Can God be trusted?*

In the midst of their temptation, they had to decide what they believed about God's nature and where they would find life's purpose.

At fifteen, I wish I'd had better answers to these questions. At fifteen, I thought of God as stingy, as always standing in the way of a good time. I knew that he was *God*—and that being God, he expected to be obeyed. But I thought surrendering myself to him meant signing up for a life I didn't really want, a life that would always look like the cheap knockoff version of the better life everyone else would be living. It's not hard to see why Adam and Eve—and every human since—has been grabbing for the things God forbids. We just aren't convinced that he's good. We think of his commands as prohibitions and punishments instead of invitations to *life*.

I had all the wrong ideas about following Christ at fifteen, but when I finally decided to follow him, I began believing in his goodness. I risked that I'd find my best life in him. Let me tell you, friends: it's the surest bet I've ever placed.

It seems crazy that we'd find it so hard to believe in God's goodness, given that the one Bible verse we are all supposed to have memorized—the one Bible verse most widely known—is a verse about God's generous giving. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16a). I wish I'd grasped what this meant for the apostle Paul, who saw the cross of Christ as a display of God's goodness and generosity, his grace toward his people. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). Paul wanted his readers to stare long and hard at the self-sacrifice of God. He wanted us to see the innocent God-Man, who allowed himself to be beaten, tortured, and executed for the sake of love. He wanted us to doubt our doubts about God and then ask, *Does that look like stinginess to you?*

If God is stingy, then life will always require the stealing that took place in the garden. If God is stingy, we can't count on him to give us what we need, to lead us into the good life. We'll have to take it for ourselves. But if God is good, if God is generous, if God is so lavish in love that he'd suffer torture for our sakes, we can lean into trusting his direction for our lives, lean into knowing that every "no" has a purpose and leads us toward life in Christ.

In the words of a song I sang as a child, we can "trust and obey."¹

THE JESUS I WANT YOU TO KNOW

The word *gospel* means good news, and that's what I want to leave with you. You might think you *lose* your life in order to follow Jesus, but let me assure you: in the end, you ultimately *find* it. At fifteen, I started to understand what Paul meant in Philippians 3, when he said that everything was loss compared to knowing Christ.

I wonder if you, if I, can't start trying to trust that God's Word is good, that God's plans are good, that God's providence

1. John H. Sammis and Daniel B. Towner, "Trust and Obey" (Public Domain, 1887), https://hymnary.org/text/when_we_walk_with_the_lord.

is good. In the words of the psalmist who speaks to God, “You are good and do good; teach me your statutes” (Psalm 119:68). I think faith—obedient faith—hangs on this promise, and that’s what I want to see formed in you.

Can I give you just one (lifelong) assignment? It’s extraordinarily easy and difficult at the very same time. It’s simply this: to try learning the height, the depth, the width, and the length of God’s love “that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19b). If he truly is perfectly, generously good, why would we not follow?

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS

Read Romans 8:31–32.

1. This passage contains three characteristics about God. What are they?
2. The author of chapter 1 describes how she came to understand God’s goodness. Consider a time when you were tempted to question his goodness.
3. What are some obvious and not-so-obvious ways in which God has been good and generous to you?

SURRENDER (verb): To release control completely. To give in to the power of another.

What this means for you: Christ calls you to *surrender*—to give him complete control of your life. You can let go of the reins. You can rest. You can trust God is good.

Chapter 2

Performance and Acceptance

by Cameron Cole

“T*his grade is going to be on your permanent record. Colleges will see this.”*

I remember that oft-repeated phrase that teachers reiterated, starting in the ninth grade. It created a sense of dread and anxiety deep in my gut with each pronouncement. I perceived that teachers were holding it over our heads, as if they held the key to the door of our futures.

Prior to high school, we played after school with foam sabers, but now the stakes were raised: now it seemed like we were playing with real swords. What this meant to me was that every assignment—every test, every quiz, every paper, every homework grade—had bearing and determination over my future. One slip-up, one off day, one unit of math that I didn’t understand, one week of missed school, one week of slacking off and—*Boom!*—my college dreams would explode into a million pieces of shattered glass. A single mediocre mark on my résumé would destroy all of my hopes for the future.

This pressure resulted in a persistent undercurrent of anxiety that was so ever-present it became as normal as breathing. Fear pervaded my life. School felt like the grounds where my entire future depended on my performance on every single test

and every single assignment. I carried the weight that only God could carry.

The ugliness of this pressure manifested itself my sophomore year, when I got my first “F” on a chemistry test. The 44 written in bright red ink revealed my profound inadequacy.

When a vessel contains so much heat and energy and pressure and it builds, and builds, and builds, what happens? It explodes.

I exploded.

I took the test paper, crushed it inside my intensely clenched fist, then unraveled the small wad and tore it into a hundred pieces. With the teacher watching. My stunned classmates—eyes wide open—watched their nice, well-mannered peer transform into a total enraged psycho.

To whom was my fury directed? Not the teacher. Not God. Not my classmates. *I* was the object of my own wrath. I poured down judgment on myself as I screamed under my breath.

You stupid idiot. You moron. You are such a stupid piece of trash. How could you be so dumb. I hate to admit it, but the words I used to describe myself were far more profane than that.

I wasn’t even embarrassed at my toddler-style tantrum and my profanity-laced self-shaming. To me, my inadequacy was so flagrantly obvious that I couldn’t understand why my outrageous reaction surprised my peers.

The pressure and performance all pointed in one direction: my college résumé. In the fourth grade, after placing in the top five in the southeastern United States in the 100-yard backstroke, I asked my mother if I could put this accolade on my college résumé. Even in elementary school, the culture had ingrained this formula in my head: life is for building your college résumé, your college résumé is for getting into the highest ranked school possible, the highest ranked school possible is for ensuring a life of happiness. We all knew the inversion of this formula: failure to build a satisfactory résumé means failure to attend top-ranked school, which means failure in life itself. To attend a mediocre college or (God forbid) to not attend college at all certainly meant you would spend most of your adult life sleeping in a gutter.

Résumé-building consumed my life. Every activity had to be added to this growing document. Every waking minute involved studying or extracurriculars. I even invested time between events at swim meets studying vocabulary for the SAT. High school life was a four-year, all-consuming strategy, with a goal of optimizing maximal acceptances to as many *U.S. News and World Report Top 25* colleges as possible.

As a result, every single endeavor took on life-and-death stakes because, in my mind, my future happiness and well-being hinged on my performance in high school and on the quality of my résumé. Even though I did have a spectacular résumé and I did get into the highly-ranked college of my choice, I look back on my adolescent self as an unhappy person. I felt as if I lived in a locked closet, chained to a treadmill that never stopped running.

I. Was. Miserable.

THE JESUS I WISH I KNEW IN HIGH SCHOOL

Résumés are not a modern invention, and they don't only relate to colleges and jobs. The apostle Paul listed his religious résumé in Philippians 3 when he wrote, "If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (vv. 4b–6).

Before Paul came into a saving relationship with Jesus, he was a spiritual rock star in the Jewish faith. He had religious status through birth. As one circumcised on the eighth day, and of the people of Israel, he was a pure-blooded Jew, which meant something in those days. As a person born of the tribe of Benjamin, he was from the most prestigious of the Israelite clans. As a "Hebrew of Hebrews," this meant that his family spoke Hebrew, which was a status merit badge among Jews.

From a Jewish standpoint, people would have envied Paul's status. He was the kid from the "right" family. He reeked of impressiveness.

While the first half of the apostle's résumé contained attributes that he was born with, the second half had everything to do with his achievements. Paul practiced Judaism as a Pharisee, the strictest, most respected sect of Jews. As a persecutor of Christians, he demonstrated the highest passion and intensity. With regard to observing the law, his observance of the Jewish rituals and regulations neared perfection.

Paul earned the perfect religious résumé. If he were an athlete, he would have been All-American with dozens of scholarship offers and a chance to play in the pros. If he were a student, he would have had a 36 on the ACT, 5's on all of his AP test, and acceptances from Ivy League schools. If his thing had been social media popularity, he would've had 20,000 friends on Instagram and a YouTube channel with a million subscribers. He had reached the top.

But here's the problem: Paul was miserable.

However, like me, Paul never realized this until he tasted the freedom of the gospel and the joy of a relationship with Christ. When he turned his life over to Christ, he found a peace, hope, and love that he had never tasted before. He experienced such satisfaction that he deemed his past deeds as "rubbish" (or "dung," as some translators interpret it—see Philippians 3:8 CSB).

In Paul's former life, he had to earn his righteousness every day. He had to win God's approval with each religious challenge. Each new day constituted a proving ground. Each moment a risk of falling from perfection into failure and shame.

I don't know about you, but I can relate to Paul. Every day as a teenager, I felt so much pressure to be impressive and I experienced so much fear of imperfection. Paul and I had two misunderstandings.

First: you may not realize this, but, because of our sinful nature, we all live with an impulse to create our own righteousness through performance. We all have this sense that we are not quite good enough. This sense is actually true. As sinners, *all people* "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23b). In order to enter into relationship with a holy God, we must have all of

our sins washed away. We need his righteousness to cleanse us—so we can be completely loved and accepted by God.

All sinners have the same initial misunderstanding about righteousness. We try to earn it through performance, which we might pursue in sports, popularity, school, morality, or appearance. Where performance pressure exists, we try our best to succeed.

Second: my obsessive pursuit of the perfect college résumé was really just a manifestation of me trying to make myself “enough” in God’s eyes and my own. It was me trying to manufacture my own righteousness. This striving exhausted me. Why? Because only God can make us righteous through grace.

I was a Christian. I had asked Jesus to be my Savior as a third grader. I attended church weekly, read my Bible, and shared the gospel with others. I primarily understood the gospel as my ticket into heaven. I *did not* realize that the gospel gave me peace, freedom, and comfort in this life.

This changed when my life of performance finally ran me into a spell of deep depression and anxiety. My pastor told me, “The gospel is rest. The gospel means Jesus carries the burden of your life. The gospel means you will never have to prove yourself again.” For the first time in my life, I realized that I was enough. Jesus had given me his righteousness as a free gift. God had made me enough by grace through faith. And, like Paul, all my successes seemed like garbage compared to the peace and comfort of knowing the gospel of grace.

As I continued to grow in this truth, I no longer felt pressure to perform or to earn my own righteousness. I was able to remember, even in the midst of temptation, “I don’t have to be impressive. Christ has made me enough.”

THE JESUS I WANT YOU TO KNOW

What I wish I had known—and what I want for you—is to know that you are enough through Christ. You don’t have to prove yourself. You don’t have to impress anyone. If you trust in

God's grace through Jesus Christ, rather than your own spiritual performance, you will know the Lord has made you perfectly acceptable in his eyes. There is nothing more to prove.

Rest in comfort: through Christ, you are enough.

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS

Read Philippians 3:1–11.

1. What do you think Paul meant when he said, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (v. 8a)?
2. The author of chapter 2 describes how true worth is rooted in the gospel. Describe the gospel. What does it mean to you?
3. In what ways do you feel like you are not enough? What things do you do to try to make yourself feel better? How can resting in the perfection and love of Jesus make a difference?

THE GOSPEL (noun): The good news of God's grace and redemption for sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the primary message of the Bible and of Christianity.

What this means for you: When you trust the gospel, you can live freely before a God who delights in you. Because of Jesus, there is nothing you can or can't do that will make him love you any less.