

IDENTITY THEFT

A decorative flourish consisting of two curved lines with small oval shapes along them, resembling a laurel wreath or a stylized leaf design, positioned below the title.

RECLAIMING THE TRUTH OF WHO WE ARE IN CHRIST

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Identity Theft: Reclaiming the Truth of Who We Are in Christ

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“I hear all the time that women want to study their identity in Christ. Now there is a book that provides a winsome, biblical, relatable guide for that study! Every chapter in this book is a winner. I can’t wait to recommend it!”

NANCY GUTHRIE, author of *Even Better Than Eden: Nine Ways the Bible’s Story Changes Everything About Your Story*

“Questions about identity swirl around and in us these days, in the public square, in our churches, and in our homes. The women who have written this book have applied theological truth to the longings and lies in our current cultural moment. A combination of truth and beauty that will make your heart soar.”

TREVIN WAX, Director for Bibles and Reference at Lifeway Christian Resources, author of *This Is Our Time* and *Eschatological Discipleship*.

“To know and to live into our identity is essential for both our own well-being and the well-being of the church. With compelling insights and biblical teaching, the essays collected here, written by some of the wisest women I know, point out the subtle and significant ways true identity can be lost—and found.”

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, author of *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books* and *Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More—Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist*

“In a secular world that boasts 50 sexual identities—or 500 by the printing of this commendation—we see that there is no more vital topic for Christians to understand than what identity in Christ means and does. We must ask ourselves:

what is the relationship between my deepest feelings and my sovereign God? Do my compelling desires tell me who I am or how I am? The essays in *Identity Theft* are witty, engaging, accessible, and insightful, with helpful memory verses and study questions, encouraging readers to resist the identity theft of secular modernism and instead to grow in union with Christ.”

ROSARIA BUTTERFIELD, author of *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* and *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*

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CHAPTER 1

FREE

RESCUED BY GRACE
JEN WILKIN

*To serve God, to love God, to enjoy God,
is the sweetest freedom in the world.¹*

—Thomas Watson

When you think of freedom, what's the first thing that comes to mind? For me, it's La Jolla Cove and a snorkeling adventure that quickly went from fun to frantic. The story involves no shark attacks or near-drownings; no, instead, my dark moment of captivity happened when I tried to remove my wetsuit in a public bathroom. To be precise, it was a borrowed wetsuit, and its owner was about six inches shorter than I am. The thing with wetsuits is that they slip on fairly easily when they are dry. Getting out of them once they're

1 Thomas Watson, *The Christian Soldier* (New York: Robert Moore, 1816), 115, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=XJx-HAAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA115>.

wet takes strength and technique, neither of which I possessed. And the too-small size didn't help.

Having extracted my head from the neck opening with enormous difficulty, I began pulling my arms out of the sleeves, turning them inside out as I tugged. Instead of coming free, my arms got stuck, pulled close into my chest, with my hands trapped inside the sleeves. My adrenaline surged, and I could feel a shriek welling up inside my chest as I began flailing and gasping for breath. Some combination of unconsciousness and public humiliation seemed imminent. Just as I was about to run screaming into the daylight, my daughters appeared in the doorway and performed a laborious extraction. Free! I will never forget the exuberant relief as that dripping pile of nefarious neoprene was peeled away.

Perhaps no idea is more foundational to the Christian's identity than freedom. The good news of the gospel is that we are no longer slaves to unrighteousness but are free—free from the bondage brought about by the fall, free to be who God created us to be. But the exact nature of that freedom can evade us, even causing us to doubt if we have truly received it. Our initial moment of the euphoric relief of conversion fades, and we once again struggle in the straight-jacket of sins we thought we'd stripped off for good. This has certainly been my story.

WHERE'S THE FREEDOM?

I grew up in the Bible Belt where, by mid-elementary, most of my peers could point proudly to a note written in the front of their Bibles announcing the exact date they Got Saved. At junior-high youth rallies the rededications began, along with a smattering of I-thought-I-was-saved-but-I-really-wasn'ts (scribble over that first date and write in the new one). Through all seven verses of "Just as I Am," and all four

years of high school, we children of the Bible Belt battled our doubts and hustled our backslidden selves down aisles to altar rails.

Maybe, we thought, this time just maybe The Saving will stick.

Our problem was this: our sinning had not ceased with our professions of faith. The salvation that had promised us new life in Christ had by all appearances failed to deliver. We still made all the same mistakes, and along the thorny path of adolescence we added fresh failures to the list. Damning evidence, or so we thought, that when we Prayed The Prayer we had somehow not done it right. Where was the freedom from sin we had been promised?

Looking back, I wonder if for many of us, our problem was not with salvation itself, but with our understanding of how salvation brings freedom. Not until my early 20s did I gain any clarity on this issue. I knew I served a God who *was and is and is to come*, but I had yet to learn that I possessed from him a salvation of which the same could be said. Salvation from sin can be broken down into three categories: justification, sanctification, and glorification. For the believer, our justification *was*, our sanctification *is*, and our glorification *is to come*. We were saved, we are being saved, we will be saved. I've found the easiest way to understand these three forms of freedom is to remember the three Ps: penalty, power, and presence.

Without a firm grasp of these concepts, we can remain trapped in an old identity. Understanding God's work in us and through us is foundational to our understanding of who he created us to be. Every other aspect of identity that we'll study in this book flows from God's redemptive work in our lives. Just as I found myself trapped inside a wet suit that wouldn't let me go, we need someone to free us to become

who we were intended to be. God's rescue begins with our justification.

JUSTIFICATION: FREEDOM FROM SIN'S PENALTY

When we came to saving faith in Christ, confessing our great need of him and asking for forgiveness from the punishment we deserved, we were met with God's unequivocal "yes." Since Christ bore the penalty for our sins, we received freedom from that penalty for all sins past, present, and future. We were justified before God our judge because our penalty had been paid. Those who have been justified never need re-justifying. We can look back to the time of our justification (perhaps written in the front of our Bible?) and know that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1–2).

Our justification is behind us. We *were saved* from sin's penalty, miraculously freed from its death sentence.

SANCTIFICATION: FREEDOM FROM SIN'S POWER

Now that the grace of God has been set upon us as a permanent seal (2 Cor. 1:20–22), we are being made new. We are being set free from the power of sin by the power of the Spirit. God's grace is restoring to us a will that wants what he wants. Before we were justified, our broken wills were utterly subject to the power of sin. We chose sin at every turn. Even when we made choices that appeared good from an external standpoint, because we had no higher internal purpose than to glorify self, these choices were ultimately sinful as well.

Now, the power of sin is broken. We've been given the deposit of the Holy Spirit. Though we once chose only to sin, now we have the power (and the growing desire) to choose righteousness. We who were once slaves to sin's power are

now free to serve God. We don't always use our freedom. We still sin, but over time we learn increasingly to choose holiness. Our entire lives from that handwritten date in our Bibles onward are devoted to "working out our salvation" (Phil. 2:12–13) as we learn to choose righteousness instead of sin, to walk in obedience to God's commands.

Our sanctification is ongoing. It's a slow-moving growth in holiness. We *are being saved* from sin's power, increasingly free from its pull.

GLORIFICATION: FREEDOM FROM SIN'S PRESENCE

We will fight to grow in holiness our entire earthly lives. But when we have run the race and fought the good fight, we will enter into the presence of the Lord forever. We will be glorified. In his presence, our soul rest will at last be complete, as sin and its devastation will cease to assail us. There can be no evil in his presence. Though now we are surrounded on all sides by sinfulness, though now sin continues to cling to our hearts, on a day not too distant we will go to a place where sin is no more. In our glorification we will at last be granted freedom from the very presence of sin. At that moment, for the first time, we will rightly reflect our true identity in every fiber of our being.

Our glorification is coming. It's the day we trade the persistent presence of sin for the perfect presence of the Lord. We *will be saved* from sin's presence, completely free at last.

FALSE FREEDOM

It's possible not just to doubt our freedom, but to presume upon it in sinful ways. This, too, is an identity crisis of sorts. If we misunderstand our past *freedom from sin's penalty* as a

“get out of jail free” card, we may lapse into the false freedom of *license*, relaxing God’s commands instead of resting in Christ’s perfect obedience to them. We may be tempted to “sin all the more that grace may abound.” Those of us who wear our past failures openly and often succumb to shame may be particularly tempted by the false freedom of license.

If we misunderstand our progressive *freedom from sin’s power* as something achieved by our own efforts, we may lapse into the bondage of *legalism* instead of godly obedience. We may confuse Spirit-enabled change with the false freedom of self-improvement and moralism. Those of us whose besetting sin is pride, those who are good at keeping up appearances and following the rules, may be particularly tempted by the false freedom of legalism.

If we misunderstand our future *freedom from sin’s presence* as a means of escaping suffering, we may lapse into the bondage of *escapism* instead of eager anticipation. There is a difference between being prepared for the Lord’s return and being anxious for it. Every hardship, health concern, or heartache causes us to long for the day when these things are no more. But if a fixation on future freedom causes us to trade patience and steadfastness for a fretful “Are we there yet?” we trade trusting the Lord for questioning his timing. God is not slow in keeping his promises. Those enduring trial are particularly (and understandably) tempted by the false freedom of escapism.

Instead of embracing false freedoms, we are called to “Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God” (1 Pet. 2:16).

REST, LABOR, HOPE

If my childhood peers and I had better understood the past, present, and future aspects of salvation’s freedom, we might

have saved ourselves a great deal of anxiety and a few trips down the aisle. The knowledge that sin is gradually overcome across a lifetime would have been good news to the teenager who thought her ongoing sin invalidated her profession. The knowledge that sanctification is hard work would have helped her topple the myth of the effortless stock-photo Christian life. The knowledge that total freedom from sin is a future certainty would have helped her ask in faith for grace for her current failures and wait patiently in trials.

Maybe you, too, have found salvation mystifying. Maybe you've wondered, *If I'm really saved, why don't I feel fully free?* Well, you're not yet fully free, but you will be. Our complete freedom from sin is certain, but it's not sudden. So we rest confidently in our justification, we labor diligently in our sanctification, and we hope expectantly in our glorification.

Be assured of your justification. It *was*. One day, you were freed fully from the penalty of sin.

Be patient with your sanctification. It *is*. Each day, you are being freed increasingly from the power of sin.

Be eager for your glorification. It *is to come*. One day, you will be freed finally from the presence of sin.

For today, remember: Christ is in you and you are in him. Your identity is securely anchored even as you are increasingly being transformed. Sister in Christ, live each day in the joyful certainty that "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

VERSE TO MEMORIZE

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:1

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

OPENING QUESTION: You've probably heard a statement like this: "I'm free to be me, and you're free to be you." What do people mean when they say that? Is it true? Why or why not?

1. When you think of freedom, what's the first thing that comes to mind?
2. READ ROMANS 6.
 - a. How does this passage describe our justification? What has already been done for us?
 - b. How does this passage describe our sanctification? How is God working in us now?
 - c. How does this passage describe our glorification? What are we promised will happen?
3. How is the Christian understanding of freedom different from the world's understanding of freedom?
4. Why is it sometimes difficult to believe we're freed from sin's penalty and power? In what ways do you battle to believe you're free from sin's penalty? From sin's power?
5. Are you more tempted to license, legalism, or escapism in the Christian life? Why?
6. READ 1 PETER 2:16. In what ways can we use the concept of freedom as cover-up for evil?

7. READ GALATIANS 5:1 AND 5:13–24.
 - a. What do you learn about true freedom from this chapter?
 - b. What does it look like to live by the flesh (as a slave)?
 - c. What does it look like to live freely (by the Spirit)?
8. How is living in the freedom of the gospel the foundation for our identity? How does the gospel offer truth about our identity and hope for our identity?
9. As you think back over the chapter, what particular truth struck you? How will you live differently in light of that new understanding?