

You Who?

WHY YOU MATTER AND
HOW TO DEAL WITH IT

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*From the end of the earth I will cry to You,
When my heart is overwhelmed;
Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.
-Psalm 61:2*

*To Morgan,
a faithful lighthouse on that higher rock.*

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1

TROUBLE, TRUTH, AND GLORY

PERHAPS I SHOULD OPEN THIS BOOK with a warning. If you are looking for a book that will gently pet your bangs and soothe your worried brow, telling you how beautiful you are, this is not it. I will not stick only to the feel-good themes and ways to boost your confidence, telling you that you (no matter what you are doing at the moment) are *enough*. I will not give you a big pep talk about how to fight for you, and there is no chapter on morning affirmations.

This book is not here to help you in your quest for self-love. I want something much, much better for you, because I want something *true* for you.

The goal of this book is to encourage and equip believing women to see their identity in Christ as the most essential part of them, and to see all the ways that will work its way out in their lives, manifesting itself as strength, dignity, and clarity of purpose.

My goal here is not mere hard words for the sake of hard words, but rather hard words so we can embrace the glorious Good News. We cannot have the one without the other. There is no need for good news if we will not see the problem of sin. When we want to celebrate what God has done for us, we need to look honestly at why we needed it in the first place and what we are without it. If you won't face the fact that we have sin, there will be no joy in looking to a Savior.

My grandpa has always said that soft teaching makes hard hearts and hard teaching makes soft hearts. When we encourage each other with platitudes about our self-worth and our beauty, we are simply lying for the sake of *feelings*. When we accustom ourselves to soft

lies so we won't feel affronted, we become a hard-hearted people.

Ironically, the harder we try to make ourselves feel better, the further we remove ourselves from the one true comfort in this life. Our pain will only grow. We need comfort more and more, but we are taking away all hope of comfort by looking to ourselves for salvation. We are turning ourselves into a bunch of brittle, crackling liars who do nothing but affirm each other. There is no actual joy or peace here—just an endless quest to feel better, and maybe some throw pillows telling us we are beautiful.

On the other hand, when we are willing to face the hard truths about who we are and what our purpose is, we will not become a bunch of hard-hearted robots without feelings. Rather, our hearts will be soft, and our feelings will be rightly ordered, not defending us from God but making us run to Him. We will become much more real, much more tender Christian women. We can encourage each other without lying. We can receive encouragement that is true and actually life giving. Without our self-protecting goggles on, we are free to rightly see our Savior, the source of all true encouragement.

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FOOLISHNESS

THE HUMAN STRUGGLE WITH IDENTITY is so pervasive that it is commonplace to hear people say things like, “I don’t even know who I am anymore.” This is not exclusive to unbelievers: it is also common among Christians. We have novels, stories, movies, and advertising campaigns about people who go on quests to find themselves—sometimes literal journeys, sometimes only spiritual or philosophical ones. That lost-self cry of “Who am I?” is the cry of a person who suddenly realizes that the

philosophy he has been following around in the grocery store isn't his mother after all.

Our modern society has been following wrong philosophies around for generations. We have wandered so far that we need a map to find our way home. Many of us would not recognize a Christian philosophy of identity if we ran into it in the street. We are so muddled about the self and the purpose of humanity that we no longer even know where to begin. We can wander hopelessly through life like so many people do, trying out one new technique after another to try to make ourselves feel better, or we can deal with our confusion (whatever it takes) and be living and acting in the confidence of our salvation and the joy of our Lord.

Paul says in Colossians, "Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words" (2:4). And then a minute later "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit" (2:8).

Worldly philosophies have fundamentally and tragically affected our modern culture. While we will be looking at some of that godless philosophical influence, I want to make clear that philosophy is not bad in itself. This book is in many ways an exercise in philosophy. The

thing that Paul warns us about is not philosophy but deception. We can lose track of our fundamental beliefs through persuasive words. Empty, vain philosophies can and will cheat us of real understanding. The problem is not that we discuss ultimate things (obviously), but that we lie about them, or listen to lies. There is no gentle way of saying that the Christian world today has largely been deceived. We have listened to lies. We are entangled (though we are believers) in the consequences of unbelief. In some cases, we believe that a simple, “I believe in God” or even a vague God reference will erase all the ill effects of a deceitful philosophy. Christians must learn to look beyond the surface and evaluate the belief at its core.

The worldly philosophers and thinkers have always been something like the high-fashion designers who live in a sort of alternative reality. They make unbelievably stupid outfits for unbelievably tall and harsh looking people with show-poodle hair, wearing cinder-block shoes and pants made out of an inner tube. They do all this while praising each other as stunning and innovative and talented and surprising, taking pictures of everything and putting enormous price tags on it all. Meanwhile, most of

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A PHILOSOPHY STARTER

THE FIRST TIME I EVER REALLY NOTICED the philosophical problem of the self was in college. I was writing a paper on it and spent some time I will never get back reading philosophers so I could respond to them with a biblical perspective. I have not stopped seeing the problem of the self out on the streets in all of its shiny confusion since that time. It is the thing that won't stop showing up once you have become aware of it. Where I often see it is all tangled up in the regular lives of Christians, keeping them

in a state of muddled confusion for no good reason.

These next few chapters may feel a little bizarre or a little heavy, a little irrelevant in your regular life, or a little impractical. But I hope you will trust me with your time long enough to hear the point. I keep thinking of Ignaz Semmelweis, that Hungarian doctor in the 1840s, who first proposed that doctors washing their hands between dealing with cadavers and delivering babies would cut down on maternal deaths. At the time, everyone laughed at his theories.

If you are not interested in philosophy naturally, you may want to laugh at my theories here. You might think philosophy is not a part of your life because you don't call it by its name. But many thousands of Christian women today are sick from the consequences of this discussion. We don't know who we are. We don't know why we matter. We don't know how to walk through our lives with purpose and meaning. We don't know how to *be*. We are sick because we won't consider these first things.

The problem of the self is a very old philosophical question. Who am I? What am I for? What makes me who I am in essence? Am I able to change that? Can another person

change that? Am I the same person I have always been? What is the essential me? Where is the essential me? How do I find out? How do I come into being?

Change is a reality in our world. When dealing with the self, how do we know we have one essence, one self through time, per person? Are you the same person (in essence) as you were as a child? What if you go through some major change? Can your identity be taken away from you? Can your self be lost? What is the nature of the continuity of the self? Am I who I have always been?

A simple example of this problem of continuity is the ancient puzzle of the ship of Theseus. The ship sails out from port on a long journey. Throughout the journey it needs to stop in various places for repairs. Because the journey is so long, by the time the ship comes back home, every single part of it has been replaced. Is it the same ship that left port?

Now, assuming that you answered yes because it has some kind of continuity of identity going for it, imagine that someone was sailing along behind it the whole time, collecting every discarded piece of the old ship and rebuilding it. So in the end one ship is the original ship and

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SORTING OUT SARTRE

“BEWARE LEST ANYONE CHEAT YOU through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8).

Nihilism (the belief that all of existence is devoid of meaning and that nothing really matters anyway) should be easy for a Christian to recognize. This is the really bad counterfeit money that very few people who are looking for real meaning will fall for. Friedrich Nietzsche

(pronounced *NEE-chuh*) is the best-known philosopher who is associated with nihilism, but many different philosophers have dabbled to different sorrowful depths in this particular mud pit. There is a profound hopelessness to it. As Christians, we ought to know well that we have hope. When nihilism creeps into the view of self, what we will see is usually drug addiction, crime, hopeless despair, self-hatred and loathing, self-mutilation, and just dead sorrow.

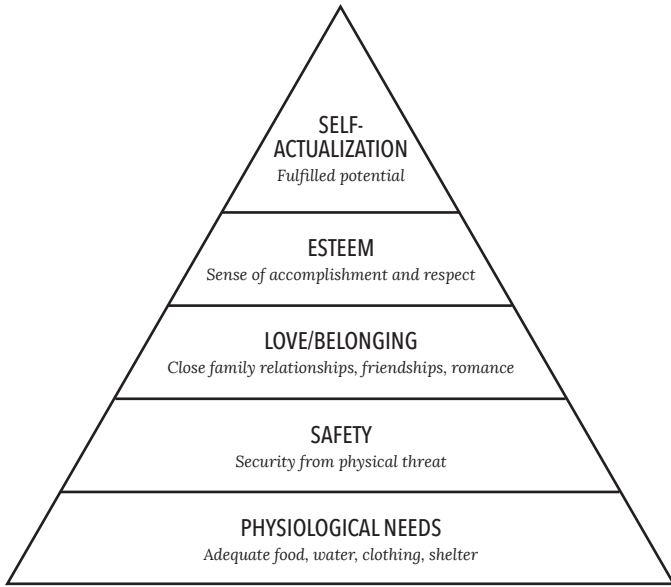
Nihilism is still a heavy influence in our world today, but this is a class of philosophical struggle that Christians recognize usually as the big E on the eye chart of spiritual hunger. We know that someone in this case needs Christ. They need to know that they have value. They need to know that Jesus loves them. They need to know there is help and hope, and a future with meaning. This is something that Christians are traditionally quite well equipped for. You don't have hope, you say? *I have that!* No one cares about you? *Yes! Jesus does!* You feel a great gnawing void in your life? *I know the answer!* Nihilistic expressions are to Christianity like a great lobbing softball to a well-positioned batter. It is hard to miss.

I do not think that nihilism has deceived many true Christians. In order to get us off our

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THE PINNACLE THAT ISN'T

ANOTHER IMPORTANT MAN IN THE history of how we view the self is Abraham Maslow. He was an atheist psychologist who built his very famous theory of the hierarchy of needs on the premises of humanism and existentialism. That famous triangle is all about our drive toward the great pinnacle of life as a human—what is commonly called self-actualization.



MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

The idea behind this was that as humans are able to secure each level of need, they are then equipped to pursue the next one.

The baseline need is just physiological: sleep, food, shelter, oxygen, etc. This is the level of need that simply keeps us alive. Once a man has established this level of need fulfillment, then he can go on to the next tier of needs—safety.

Safety needs would be reflected in physical security, protection, and stability. A person at this level of need fulfillment would want a safe place to live, a secure job, might be planning for

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THE NARRATIVE OF YOU

IT ISN'T LIKELY THAT YOU WILL FIND yourself having a philosophical or psychological discussion in line at the grocery store, but that doesn't mean that the assumptions of our confused philosophies will not be present there. Existentialism and humanistic psychology have worked their way into our cultural thought processes without most of us even knowing its name. Existentialist damage is everywhere, and more floorboards are rotted out than we want to believe. If we think that we are responsible

to make ourselves through our own action, we are certainly going to try to do so. So how will we attempt to craft ourselves, and what are the results of us trying?

Common today is what we can call the narrative view of the self. It is something of a mash-up of existential thought and popular psychology. It is the Sartre-Maslow hybrid: how you become what you are—and what makes you *you*. This sort of “philosophy” is at the root of self-help. It is the nitty-gritty, how-to section that comes after the theory.

We want to know what really matters in our quest for becoming us. The narrative view of self seems like the most realistic of all explanations because it views the self as a story, and we all know that we are in one. We have a beginning, a middle, and an end. We start out somewhere, and we keep adding plot points through time. We assemble those things that matter to us, and we imagine we can assemble a self that we will admire. This fits in with the concept of progression in the hierarchy of needs.

But the truth is, the reason this approach appeals to everyone is because it flatters us. We are the makers of our own essences! If we want to be outdoorsy, we shall be so! It is only a trip

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A CHAPTER OF HATE

ALL THIS CONFUSION AROUND THE self has affected society in the broad category of “identity issues.” When individuals are making choices and writing their own narrative (creating themselves from nothing, as it were) they may make choices that push the boundaries of our culture.

A large percentage of them certainly will try. They want to believe they are creating themselves, not just going along with old cultural norms. The more important “self-creation” is to

people, the more they will need to make specifically counter-cultural decisions just to prove themselves to themselves.

Men might decide to have green hair, tattoos of monkeys on their faces, implant horns or huge breasts, or even castrate themselves and take hormones because they have decided that they are no longer men and will now be women. They believe they are free to say whatever they want about themselves, to do whatever accords with their own will, and to be whoever it was that they wanted to be. This has been established as a right to personal expression and is essentially a right to person-making.

Today, this is a far more protected right than the right to life. What we Christians need to see is that this is completely consistent with the existential viewpoint. We are having this trouble because we believed that lie.

Christians believe that the value of life begins at conception because that is when God creates a unique human life. A unique human life has unique human value. It does not need to *do* anything to have value. The value is found in what God did by creating it. Sartre believed that you were nothing until you did something; we believe you are nothing until God does something.

For those in the grip of an existential worldview, they believe the thing that deserves protection is the true essence of a self, and that begins when a person starts making decisions for himself. They believe that a life of value begins when an individual begins to tell his own story by acting on his own desires. This is why a very liberal culture does not mind the idea of even young children going through gender changes, having abortions, or experimenting sexually. To them this is the fundamental right to life, and that is something they want protected no matter what.

Just as Christians honor pregnancy in its earliest stages because God gives value to life, modern day “human rights” advocates honor even the beginnings of self-expression because they believe that gives value to life. They honor the concept of an independent self-expression that rebels against God and/or society because they believe that is the genesis of a true human. It doesn’t matter if such an effort is weak, lame, or in no way original, because to them it has the value of life. It represents everything they care about.

We value personhood similarly, but our valuations are built on a completely different



HALFSIES

WE HAVE NOW DISCUSSED HOW THE existential approach to life has created many of our current public clashes. But very few people who read a book on Christian identity are denying Christianity at the outset. You probably believe in Jesus. You probably love Jesus. But you may still struggle with identity because it all seems to get so complicated sometimes.

I believe this is because many Christians simply don't know how much they have learned from the world. If you try to live your life just

like the world is telling you to, but do it while loving Jesus and serving Him, you will most likely be living a very difficult life, or perhaps just a radically inattentive one.

The story that you write for yourself and the story that God writes for you are not dance partners. The self-created you and the God-created you do not go together like ham and eggs, peanut butter and jam, or wine and cheese. They go together more like a living body with a dead limb. Or a living head with a dead body. Or a dead body with a living hand. It is not healthy, and there is no good trajectory. And if this is what you are trying to do, it will in fact feel like wrestling and struggling and fighting and never really being at peace and in joy.

If we try to write our stories like the world does, composing our little plot points and shaping ourselves into what we think it would be neat to be, but we love Jesus, this is just making Him one more interesting plot point about us. We put our bumper sticker that says “Jesus-lover” on our little lifestyle car. Depending on how seriously we take our faith, we may have a number of more theologically rich bumper stickers, too. Like “In His service” or “Depraved Wretch.” But Christ will not be managed or contained

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THE WORSHIPER

IF ALL OUR FOUNDATIONAL IDEAS ARE so wrong, what are the correct answers to the questions that have been afflicting us? Who am I? What am I for? What am I really all about? Mankind is fascinated by these questions, and always has been. From the smallest child having his first philosophical thoughts, to a man or woman in the storm of a midlife crisis, to the confused regrets of the deathbed, the questions of “Who am I?” and “What am I for?” are characteristic of humanity.

In a way, it makes sense that we overwhelmingly struggle with the self because at the end of the day, everyone has one. We are eternal beings who are bound in finitude. We feel the weight of eternity without the capacity to truly understand it. We contend with a lot of unbelieving input, and we generate our own unbelieving input. We struggle with the self because the self is everywhere we go, getting its grubby little hands into everything that we do.

So while this question “Who am I?” is common, an actual answer to it is uncommon. We major on the big-philosophical-struggle side and try to minor on the reality side. This is because no one wants to hear (or give) the one-sentence summary: “Yeah. Okay. So you are a middle-aged, overweight housewife who lives in Cleveland and has trouble staying on task.” Or “You are a Texas girl living in Maine who is addicted to social media. You always think you do more than you do, and have trouble with being selfish.” This kind of answer is insufficient in many ways—the main reason being that *we ourselves* are insufficient.

A description of our persons isn’t untrue, but it is certainly not enough to satisfy what we are looking for. If what we are at face value

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PLANTING FLAGS

ONE OF THE MOST GLORIOUS THINGS about seeing ourselves as worshipers is that it puts all the events of our own lives in perspective. This happens in two ways.

First, it gives us a realistic sense of how *little* all our troubles are. We are the worshipers, and we are not the worshiped. We are characters, and He is the Author. God is great, and we are not. It puts our little concerns next to all the great things of life, and we can see them more clearly in the light of what really matters.

However, second, it gives us a realistic sense of how *big* our lives are, because it ties our little details into the great, good story. We are only worshipers, but we are worshipers of the Living God. We have our hands full of little troubles, but they are little troubles that *matter* to the Maker of the universe. With this perspective, we can both see that this is a small offering and also that it is a great God we serve. His care over our lives makes our lives reflect His greatness. In other words, knowing yourself to be a worshiper both keeps you humble and makes you glorious.

To a worshiper of God there is always this kind of comfort from 2 Corinthians: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (4:17).

Whatever troubles us in our lives is only a fragment compared to the weight of the glory—and that glory will not be momentary, but rather eternal. Everything is little here, everything is momentary—but it means great glory later. It is small and glorious at the same time. Passing and petty, eternal and profound.

There is one great story in the whole history of the world. A story that starts with the