

"Angie Smith does it again... We are changed by her teaching and wisdom and challenged by her bravery and encouragement."

ANNIE F. DOWNS

ANGIE SMITH, PhD

into the deep

*Finding Relief from Pressure, Exhaustion,
and the Need to Perform in a Shallow World*

Angie Smith does it again with *Into the Deep*—we are drawn in by her humor and honesty, changed by her teaching and wisdom, and challenged by her bravery and encouragement.

ANNIE F. DOWNS

New York Times bestselling author of *That Sounds Fun*

Into the Deep is a warm and insightful call to come out of hiding. With vulnerability and hope, my friend Angie reminds us that while the world rewards shallow striving, true freedom and authenticity are found in trusting the Savior who meets us in the deep places of our lives. It's a must-read!

LYSA TERKEURST

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author and president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

Honest, holy, and hilarious, Angie Smith, with blazingly fresh insights, a PhD in psychology, and a hard-won doctorate in the school of hard knocks and real life, writes lines that are lifelines for the really exhausted among us—the ones who keep trying to live a deep life with surface-level tools and then wonder why we feel like we're drowning—but in a really shallow world. *Into the Deep* exposes all kinds of anxiety-producing, performance scripts—perfectionism, impostor syndrome, comparison—and then hands you the relief of something real and durable: a fresh way to deeply live, freely trusting that Jesus is in the depths with you.

ANN VOSKAMP

New York Times bestselling author of *One Thousand Gifts* and *WayMaker*

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INTRODUCTION

The Deep Is Calling

Most of our days are spent being everything to everyone, managing obligations, and facing the pressures of a world that's moving faster than our minds and hearts. It's relentless, and somewhere along the way, we've settled for living a shallow life because it keeps our heads above water.

We are exhausted.

We've learned to survive, and in the process, we've given up on being transformed. We can't name it, but we feel it. I say *we* because I walk beside you in this struggle. I feel it every day, and despite praying, reading my Bible, and doing all the other things "good Christians" do, I long for an answer to the nagging question: Why is life this hard?

Here's the thing: We know we're too busy. We know it's hard to be vulnerable sometimes and social media is not always our cheerleader. We know we hate feeling left out and we feel like we have to be constantly vigilant or life will fall apart.

We've used shallow tactics. We schedule fewer activities. We remember that what we see of other people's lives isn't

the whole story. I could go on and on, but you get the drift: These things aren't working.

The reason you stay busy may be different from why I stay busy. The way you feel when you're ignored may sting in ways it doesn't for me. Being reprimanded for missing a deadline or being late may bring up memories for you that I will never know. The thing is, there's no one-size-fits-all solution, even though most of what we hear tells us there's a simple formula that works for everyone.

This book is different. It is just for you—for your unique experience of the world around you, your heart, and your relationship with Jesus.

If you feel like you're just trying to survive, it's because you are. You've been doing it since the day you were born, and it has served you well in many ways. As you grew older and wiser, you figured out coping mechanisms and responses that helped you fit in and earn love—you found out that being funny or smart got you what you needed from others. Those ruts are deep, and they don't disappear because you've blown out a few more birthday candles.

I think most of us can answer the question of why life is hard. Dang it all, Eve, it was fruit.

Fruit.

We live in a fallen world, where sin invades like the snake did so many years ago. He is ruthless, that guy. But take heart, dear one. God has overcome, and we can live deeply in that truth.

That said, it isn't easy. But I think it can be easier.

The reality is that if we don't understand the deep currents of our own lives and fail to acknowledge the relentless tides that seek to disorient us, we can't truly heal. This isn't about trying harder—I think we can agree that it isn't a lack of trying that has put us in this position. This isn't a self-help, touchy-feely, bullet-point approach, because you've tried that, and you know as well as I do that it doesn't work.

Knowing that you feel a certain way isn't the same as knowing *why* you feel that way. That kind of healing only comes in the deep.

Now listen, I see how this analogy could make you nervous. I mean, I'm aware of the fact that the idea of drowning is less than appealing. What you don't know from the shore is that what you thought was most dangerous is where the Lord meets you in the most significant way. It's where you stop relying on the world to satisfy you and meet the God who rules the depths you can't survive on your own.

Don't worry—we're going to get there gradually. I'm going to ease you in, and along the way, you'll get to know a little more about the journey I went on to get here, and you'll meet some people you may have heard of but maybe never heard *from*. Trust me, the shallow life didn't show up at the turn of a century or the advent of a certain invention. It has been alive and well as long as humanity itself, and God, in His kindness, has given us examples of those who came before us but swam the same seas.

I want to ease your mind from the very beginning, because I know the intense concern that's nagging at you, and no, I

won't keep using cheesy water language until you want to pull your hair out. Bear with me for a little bit, and I'll give you a rest once you've gotten a lay of the land (or water, as the case may be).

We'll start on the shoreline, where we identify the issue. We'll move to the shallows, where we consider how and why we approach the world the way we do, and finally, we'll get to the deep, where true, lasting peace and healing come.

For the record, you couldn't pay me to scuba dive. I snorkeled on my honeymoon because that's what a carefree newlywed does in the bathing suit that will never fit her again. I enjoyed it long enough to get the obligatory "cute peace sign" photo and then realized the enormous, tire-like apparatus making me look deranged was not, in fact, on my bucket list.

You wouldn't know it from the pictures, though, and I guess that's kind of the point. What looked to everyone else like a happy adventure was me pretending to enjoy the experience I was not actually enjoying.

If you've been there, friend, you've come to the right place.

I pray that by the time you close this book you will have an encounter with the God who created you to be like no one else and that you'll learn more about yourself and Him in the process.

May I pray for you before we start? That was rhetorical. I'm the boss of the words here.

Lord Jesus, only You know the aches and deep joys of the person holding this book, and I pray they

learn that You are holding them. Please give them insight into their lives so they might become better friends, sisters, daughters, and warriors for Your Kingdom. Cover them with inexplicable peace as their pens touch paper and as they explore places in their souls they may have never touched before. Create in them a new heart that finds purpose, identity, and hope in You in ways that are fresh and remarkable. Only You, Father. This is only for You. May the meditations of our hearts and the words of our mouths honor You, and may our lives reflect Your great mercy. We commit these days ahead to You, and we thank You even before we see the fruit that will come from this time together. Guide us, Lord, and help us follow. I pray in the mighty, holy, and incomparable name of Jesus. Amen.

God's love
doesn't
require us
to be anyone
other than
who we
actually are.

Taking Off the Mask

You are loved.

The exaggerated esteem in which my lifework is held makes me very ill at ease. I feel compelled to think of myself as an involuntary swindler.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

I've spent a good bit of my life performing in front of large audiences, and I always assumed the pressure to perform came because there were so many people watching. It turns out I was wrong.

I teach middle school English at a tiny Christian school, and this is the first year I haven't felt like I'm going to throw up when the bell rings and I head to class. It probably sounds ridiculous, but the reality is that I still feel like I'm trying to prove I know what I'm doing.

If this is how I am in front of children, I'm sure you can imagine what it feels like when I'm with other adults. I live in a constant state of *Am I proving that I can be what you need me to be?* The image I project changes based on who I'm with and the context of our interaction. Please don't laugh when

I tell you that my daughters and I argue over who has to get the pizza from the delivery guy.

It doesn't matter how small the scenario is; I feel like I'm constantly working to ensure that my interactions are smooth and I can walk away feeling like I did what was required of me to make that happen. Social events are hard for me because they mean I have to be a chameleon, and there are only so many times you can change your colors before you forget who you really are. The truth is, pretending is driven by something we might not associate it with: fear.

Here's my underlying fear in all these situations: *If they knew the real me—with all my insecurities, mistakes, and imperfections—they wouldn't love me anymore.* Every time we succeed while wearing a mask, it reinforces the lie that we're only lovable when we're performing.

That cycle is brutal, and I have a feeling you know what I'm talking about. The more we convince people we are who we don't believe we are, the higher the stakes are next time. We pretend to be someone we aren't and then shoulder the burden that comes with keeping up the scam.

What nobody talks about is how exhausting this performance becomes. When you're constantly monitoring your words, your facial expressions, and your reactions to make sure they align with the persona you've created, your nervous system never gets to rest. You're always on, always calculating how to respond in character rather than simply responding as yourself.

We're swindlers, every one of us. It's just that sometimes we

don't know the cause of the pressure and insecurity that hover over us in our daily lives. The way we internally monitor how our faces are responding to others or the way we speak a curated version of what we want to say when it might paint us in a better light. And the irony of all ironies is that we walk around assuming that no one else we're talking to is doing the same.

Just out of curiosity . . . have you ever felt like you weren't smart enough? Like you had to pretend to be more intelligent than you are? I ask because I kick-started this chapter with an amazing quote about someone feeling like an "involuntary swindler." He felt like he wasn't actually that brilliant and he was confused about why there was so much hubbub about him.

In case you didn't catch it, these words were said by none other than Albert Einstein. I mean, it's a name that's synonymous with genius (well, that and #hairgoalz), and he felt like he was better at tricking people than he was with scientific formulas.

What Would Happen If They Knew?

While not officially a diagnosis, *impostor syndrome* is considered a true diagnostic issue. It isn't just a cute thing to say—it has serious implications for our mental and physical health. Where did that term come from? Glad you asked.

There were two high-achieving graduate school students who coined the term in 1978 and have studied the phenomenon for decades.¹ They aren't the only ones, and as you might imagine, the field has exploded with the advent of social media

and all the other fun ways we feel pressure to keep up whatever version of ourselves we've persuaded people to believe is real.

I have to tell you this wacky story I heard about years ago because it definitely wins the superlative for "least likely to give up the scam." His name was Chung Ling Soo, and he was an Asian magician who gained notoriety for his quirkiness. First of all, he didn't speak onstage. Ever. Which was mostly because he was really an American born as William Robinson. Turns out he had been unsuccessful until his manager told him that Asian magicians were in demand. At this point, he shaved his head, bought some makeup, and took his kind-of wife (that's a story for another day) on a freaky road show. And he pulled it off until one night when he didn't.

On March 23, 1918, he took his place onstage the way he had for years and held a bullet under his tongue. His assistant fired a rigged gun, and before he could move the bullet to the front of his mouth to make it appear he had caught it with his teeth, tragedy struck. There was too much gunpowder in the rigged gun, causing a real bullet to shoot out and pierce him through the lung. As he realized what had happened, he gasped and said the only words he would ever utter onstage: "Oh my God—something's happened. Lower the curtain."

I'm going on record as saying the curtain would not even be part of my first few hundred thoughts. Also, I feel like the whole "Something has happened" thing was kind of a given at that point, but kudos to him for clarifying. I don't know how many budding magicians were in the audience, but I'm guessing they took a follow-up StrengthsFinder quiz immediately.

I mean, y'all. The guy knows he's about to die, and in that moment, what he is most concerned with is maintaining the act.

Close the curtain.

The first words he ever spoke onstage and the last breaths he took in this life were directed toward an audience of strangers he didn't want to know the truth. *I am not who you think I am, and I would rather die than have you realize it.* Extreme, yes. But it's not that hard to draw comparisons to our own lives.

What would happen if they knew?

When Your False Self Lets You Down

Here's the spiritual wound at the core of all pretending: We believe the lie that love is conditional and based on our performance. We think we have to earn love—from God and from others—by being perfect, successful, funny, helpful, or whatever role we learned would keep us safe. But this belief cuts us off from the very love we're desperately seeking.

We all have false selves, and they have served us well in the past.

The problem is that they don't serve us well for the long haul, but because we have hidden behind them for so long, it's hard to stop the charade.

Eventually we don't even know where the line is between who we are and who we are pretending to be.

I love the way author David Benner says it: "We do not find our true self by seeking it. Rather, we find it by seeking

God.”² I don’t know David Benner, but I plan to find him in heaven and tell him how much his work has meant to me. In fact, I considered just stapling his pages here instead of mine (that just autocorrected to *stalking*, which might be a red flag). Publishers frown on plagiarism because they’re dramatic.

Anyway, I just wanted to put that little caveat here because this isn’t a self-help book; it’s a self-reflective book that will prayerfully lead to God-help.

Let’s start with something light (you know, the way politics at Thanksgiving dinner is light or the way chocolate cheesecake is light):

In childhood, who did you have to be in order to be loved?

I’m going to put a handy chart here so you can see which one of these you most identify with, and then we’ll break it down a bit.

CHILDHOOD ROLE	CHILD TRAITS	ADULT PATTERNS
The Hero (the Responsible One)	High-achieving, perfectionistic, obedient, takes care of others	Overfunctioning, people-pleasing, struggles to rest or delegate, defines worth by productivity
The Mascot (the Entertainer)	Funny, distracts from tension, avoids conflict using humor	Uses humor or lightheartedness to deflect pain, avoids emotional depth, struggles with vulnerability
The Invisible One (the Lost Child)	Quiet, withdrawn, stays out of the way, avoids conflict	Emotionally disconnected, low self-advocacy, has a hard time identifying needs, may feel invisible

TAKING OFF THE MASK

CHILDHOOD ROLE	CHILD TRAITS	ADULT PATTERNS
The Scapegoat (the Rebel)	Acts out, distracts from family pain, labeled “the problem”	Self-sabotaging behaviors, chronic guilt or shame, mistrusts authority, may resist healthy intimacy
The Caretaker (the Pleaser)	Emotionally attuned to others, takes care of caregivers, suppresses own needs	Codependent tendencies, has a hard time setting boundaries, defines identity through others’ well-being

Well, look at that—you found one, didn’t you? You can thank Virginia Satir for that.³

These roles don’t develop in a vacuum—they’re survival strategies that children develop in response to their family environment. When a family system is under stress (addiction, mental illness, financial pressure, marital conflict, or even just the normal challenges of life), children unconsciously take on roles that help maintain stability and ensure they stay connected to their caregivers.

The Hero child learns that being perfect and responsible brings praise and reduces family stress. They become little adults, often parenting their own parents, because they discover that achievement and helpfulness make them valuable. The Mascot realizes that making people laugh diffuses tension and helps them avoid painful realities. The Invisible One figures out that being invisible and undemanding prevents them from adding to the family’s burdens. The Scapegoat acts out, often unconsciously, to distract everyone from deeper problems—their “bad” behavior gives the family something

to focus on other than the real issues. The Caretaker becomes hypervigilant to others' emotions, learning to manage everyone's feelings to keep the peace.

These roles serve a crucial purpose in childhood—they help children feel safe and connected in environments that feel unpredictable or overwhelming. The problem is that what works for a seven-year-old trying to navigate family dysfunction doesn't work for a thirty-seven-year-old trying to build healthy relationships.

As adults, we keep playing these roles even when they no longer serve us because they're deeply ingrained. They feel like our identity rather than just a strategy we learned.

The Hero fears: "If I'm not perfect, I'm worthless."

The Mascot fears: "If I'm not entertaining, I'll be abandoned."

The Invisible One fears: "If I speak up, I'll be rejected."

The Scapegoat fears: "I'm fundamentally bad and unlovable."

The Caretaker fears: "If I don't take care of everyone, I'll be alone."

The beautiful and difficult truth is that these roles are evidence of your strength and adaptability as a child, not your brokenness. You figured out how to survive and stay loved in challenging circumstances.

But now? It's exhausting. Never ending. Painful.
Now it's time to let your authentic self emerge.

Taking Off the Mask

At any moment, we could be calling the curtain down because we've been caught. That's because having to *be* something is different from *being* something. You might have felt like you had to be the straight-A student, but your identity isn't "achiever." Maybe you felt like you had to mediate family relationships, but your identity isn't "peacekeeper." You feel like an impostor because you haven't quite come to understand that yet. I think people are really feeling this disconnect these days, because there was a 75 percent increase in online searches for the term *impostor syndrome* in 2024.

So where is the line? How do we know when we've slipped into the act?

Pay attention to whether you are presenting yourself or being present.

Depending on which category you fit into, there are patterns you will start to pick up on when you slip back into roles that may not serve you well anymore.

Say you're the rebel. I like to pretend on that one, because I am a firstborn so I didn't have this luxury. My sister, however, went through a goth phase that involved a boyfriend who smelled like patchouli and had a very confusing nose-to-ear chain situation going on. He turned out to be delightful

but did have a love for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* that I could not reconcile.

So in the event that you're the rebel, start to notice when you feel like you're doing things just to be contrary or to push back on authority. Acknowledge what you're doing and ask yourself why. Maybe you're pushing back because you felt like everyone always talked over you and you had to be aggressive to be heard. It might be that you felt like you were only noticed when you were acting out.

When you catch yourself performing, ask, "What am I afraid will happen if I don't?"

This gets to the deeper fear quickly. If you're being extra funny, maybe you're afraid people will be bored by the real you. If you're overachieving, maybe you're afraid of being seen as lazy or worthless.

Practice one "authentic moment" per day.

It could be admitting you don't know something, sharing a real struggle instead of saying "I'm fine," or letting someone see you without makeup. Start small and build your tolerance for being seen as imperfect.

These authentic moments don't have to be dramatic confessions or major vulnerability dumps. They're small acts of honesty that gradually expand your comfort with being seen as human rather than perfect. Maybe it's admitting to a coworker that you're nervous about a presentation instead of

acting confident. Maybe it's telling your spouse you're feeling overwhelmed instead of pretending you have everything under control. Maybe it's posting a photo on social media where you look like a real person having a real day instead of a carefully curated lifestyle brand.

The goal is to practice showing up as yourself in low-risk situations so that when higher-stakes moments come, authenticity feels more natural than performance. Each time you choose honesty over image management and nothing terrible happens, you're rewiring your brain to believe that you're lovable as you are.

Start by paying attention to when you feel the urge to edit yourself or present a more polished version of reality. Notice the impulse to say, "I'm great!" when you're actually struggling. Catch yourself before you pretend to understand something you don't or before you downplay an accomplishment because you're afraid of seeming boastful.

The beautiful thing about authentic moments is that they often create connection rather than rejection. When you admit you're nervous, other people often admit they're nervous too. When you show your imperfections, others feel permission to show theirs. Authenticity is contagious in the best possible way—it gives everyone permission to be human together instead of performing separately.

Notice when you feel exhausted after social interactions.

That's often a sign you've been performing instead of being present. Real connection energizes you; pretending drains

you. Of course, there's some room for discernment here since introverts and extroverts experience social interactions differently. But in general, there's a sense of soul-level fatigue that comes on the heels of prolonged pretending.

Stop apologizing for being human.

When you make an honest mistake, instead of saying, "I'm so sorry, I'm such an idiot," try "Oops, let me fix that." You don't have to apologize for not being perfect.

By the way, there's nothing wrong with the traits we discussed earlier. It's not bad to have opinions or to be funny. It's amazing to be a peacekeeper or a talented athlete; in and of themselves, they are just aspects of who God made you to be. Those things are important, but they aren't the reasons you are loved.

We feel like impostors because we know the bullet is fake and we don't want the jig to be up.

Here's a radical thought: Maybe the jig is supposed to be up before it kills us; maybe we aren't unscathed at the end, but we live out the truest version of ourselves. Maybe walking with a limp is better than running away.

Who Are You . . . Really?

And now it's time to head to the deep, where we've got a fella who's wildly qualified to speak into this topic. Oh, Jacob. You and your mom must have been the originators of the term

enmeshed. Sweet Jakey boy lived much of his life in a performance that was driven by some odd family dynamics and the desire to meet expectations.

Identity was the central theme of Jacob's life. He had an illustrious bio that included giving soup to his brother in exchange for his brother's birthright and accidentally marrying the ugly sister of the girl he actually wanted to marry (it was a setup, and apparently he didn't realize it until the next day, so I think it's safe to say it was a rager of a party). Have no fear, he did eventually marry the pretty one as well.

Before the wifey adventure, Jacob's mom convinced him to glue goat hair on his arms so his ailing and blind dad would think he was his hairy twin brother. Why? Because she wanted herrrrr precioussssss to receive the blessing Esau was supposed to get. I mean, she literally made him pretend to be someone else—talk about impostor syndrome. I feel the need to mention something here that is never illustrated in children's Bibles, and it's a fact I just recently learned. Y'all. Jacob was SEVENTY-SEVEN ACTUAL YEARS OLD AT THIS POINT. This really puts a whole new spin on things. Not only was he obeying his mother, he was doing so as a geriatric man. Ew.

God bless the man (don't worry, He will), his name actually means "swindler." In fact, the twins struggled in the womb, and Jacob grabbed hold of his brother's ankle as they

Jacob's Story

For more about the story of Jacob and his journey from pretender to beloved of God, see Genesis 25–35.

were coming into the world. Did I mention his name also means “heel grabber?” What do we in the psychology biz like to call him? Job security.

I’m really grateful God included folks like Jacob in Scripture. At face value, he was a kid who came into the world with some uphill battles and a family that had, at best, some trust and codependency issues. Thousands of years separate us, but we all come into this life the same way he did. Into broken homes and self-doubt and sibling rivalries.

The folks we read about in the Bible lived three-dimensional lives that expand far beyond the pages. They had petty arguments and played favorites and lied and struggled with commitment.

Anyway, after tricking dad and ripping off his brother, Jacob ran for his life. He worked for his uncle, married his cousins, and ended up with lots of kids and plenty of servants and animals. Years later he ditched his uncle and headed into the wilderness with his large and complicated family. After a little traveling, he found out that Esau was hot on his trail, and all signs pointed to a rocky reunion. It looked like his past had found him, and given the fact that his brother had four hundred men with him, it wasn’t looking great for Jacob and crew. So he sent his two wives and eleven children ahead and hung out alone for a little bit.

It seemed that everything had caught up with him. Years of scheming and lying and manipulating had come to a head, and

the miles were closing between him and his day of reckoning. He couldn't keep up the act anymore.

Sometimes God allows us to reach the end of our ability to maintain the facade. The very thing we've been running from—being found out, being seen as we really are—becomes the doorway to freedom. Jacob's moment of reckoning wasn't his punishment; it was his invitation to stop performing and start receiving.

Wrestling the Right Opponent

There was a slight interruption to Jacob's quiet time when a wrestling match broke out between him and a stranger. Haaaattee it when that happens.

This didn't just happen for a minute—it went on for hours.

Somewhere in the process, the man put Jacob's hip out of its socket—but the match didn't end there. At daybreak, the stranger told Jacob to let him go, but Jacob refused and uttered a sentence that leads to one of my favorite interactions in all of Scripture: “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

Whoa, what? Bless him? Who wants to get a blessing from some random guy who attacked him and then popped his hip out of the socket? Well, I guess anyone would if they knew what Jacob did: He had been wrestling with God Himself, and he was not going to surrender until he was blessed by Him.

Let's rewind for a moment, shall we? I don't want you to miss the details here, because they tell parts of the story that

give it depth and color. Context, context, context—that’s of utmost importance when reading the Bible.

Since the moment he was born, Jacob had been a trickster. No, seriously—from the actual moment. As I said, his name means “swindler.” I’m not saying we are defined by our given names, but in this case, Jacob certainly lived up to the, umm, baby shower theme? He’d done his fair share of swindling during his life and left a wake of repercussions based on bad decisions, and now they’d finally caught up to him. I’ve been there, that’s for sure.

What’s beautiful about this wrestling match is that it represents the difference between wrestling with God and wrestling with the world. Jacob had spent his entire life wrestling with people—manipulating circumstances, trying to control outcomes, fighting for position and blessing through his own schemes. But that night, he was finally wrestling with the right opponent.

When we’re living from our false self, we’re constantly wrestling with the world—trying to prove our worth, manage other people’s opinions, control how we’re perceived. We exhaust ourselves fighting battles that can never give us what we’re truly looking for. You can’t manipulate your way into authentic love. You can’t perform your way into genuine acceptance. You can’t scheme your way into true belonging.

But wrestling with God is different. It’s not about trying to get something from Him through trickery or performance—it’s about refusing to let go until He shows you who you really

are. It's about holding on through the pain and darkness until He speaks your true name over you. It's about being willing to be wounded in the process because you know that His blessing is worth more than your ability to walk away unscathed.

Jacob's limp became proof of his authentic encounter with God. It was evidence that he'd stopped running from the truth and started running toward it. The swindler who had always tried to get blessings through deception finally received a genuine blessing through honest desperation. His weakness became the mark of his transformation—not something to hide, but something to carry with honor.

This is what authentic spiritual transformation looks like. Not the clean, pretty version we hear about in testimonies, but the messy, painful, beautiful process of being seen fully by God and discovering that His love doesn't require us to be anyone other than who we actually are.

Basically, Jacob had nothing to lose.

Including the wrestling match. Even though he was wounded, he was also determined. Besides, what's the worst that could happen at that point? Then God asked him a question that could have sounded a little depressing: "What's your name?"

I mean, of all people to forget.

I'm guessing you've figured out that God didn't really wonder what Jacob's name was—He wasn't making polite conversation. He wanted Jacob to come as face-to-face with himself

as he was to God. No more running. No more hiding. *You and I both know who you are, but I know something you don't: It won't always be this way.*

Jacob answered with one word: his name. And with that, God told him he would no longer be called Jacob but instead would be called Israel. He told him that he would take this name because he had fought with God and man and had won. With that, Jacob walked away with a limp—a reminder of both his confession and his redemption.

But wait! Did my editors fail to correct what I just wrote? Nope. I said *Jacob* walked away, not Israel. Turns out, God hadn't changed his name yet despite the version of the story you may be familiar with.

When Esau saw Jacob on the horizon, he ran and embraced him. Esau showed no signs of animosity, and he even thanked Jacob for sending some animals and other gifts to him in anticipation of their reunion. Even though Jacob told Esau he would be following behind him with his family so they could settle in the same town, he actually took a different route and set up the home front in a place called Succoth. I don't blame him—it's hard to resist the allure of a place with a name like that. An all-inclusive seaside town with sweeping views and the world-famous Succoth Spa.

Please take note of the fact that while Jacob reconciled with his brother, he did not follow him. Sometimes we have to take stock of who we are healthier without—can I get an *amen* on that?

Eventually God told Jacob it was time to head back toward Canaan, which was probably a relief to the wives, because no one wants their kids to go to Succoth High.

Before he hit the road, Jacob told his wives there was one little thing they needed to take care of: get rid of all the idols they'd been carrying. They did as they were asked, and Jacob buried the idols deep in the ground before heading out. We don't know exactly what those idols were, but it's likely they were small charms that people believed brought them good luck or prosperity.

They may have had value, but they were worth absolutely nothing. They had no power. They were false shields, and they were heavy.

Masks can be idols. They're valuable because you think they have protected you, but they actually have no power and they're heavy.

Lay them down, friend.

God knows the truest part of you, and He loves you.

That's one of those sentences you might read quickly and skim past, but I want you to sit with it for just a moment and allow it to sink deep into your bones. He looks past the false selves you've created because He knows that underneath all of them is the fear that really matters: *Would they love me if they knew?*

And the One who really matters says He does.

You Are Loved: No Mask Required

I told you that Jacob walked away with a limp, but I haven't yet told you the rest of the story. Several chapters and events take place, culminating in the decision to lay down every idol and move forward in faith.

And it is at that moment God spoke: "Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel."

Israel. The name that means "one who struggles with God."

God wasn't ignoring the fact that Jacob had a less-than-stellar past and reputation, but He wasn't leaving it there either.

Jacob had had enough of running, and he admitted that he couldn't do it anymore. Have you?

You aren't the achiever, the scapegoat, or the rebel. You are the beloved of God.

Not that it's always easy to remember that—I get it. It's almost like you have to practice believing it and test it out for a bit; it's not an overnight process.

People will remember you as you have been, and some of them would prefer you stay that way because it suits them. Trust me, when you go home at Christmas, you'll slip back into the role you've had there.

I bet Jacob had to have a lot of awkward conversations with people in the coming days. He had to gather up his family and have the old "God changed my name, so now you have to call me something else" conversation. Then he had to do the same whenever he saw people out and about.

“Jacob! How the heck are you?”

“So, funny story, Mike . . .”

Not to mention the paperwork. The Succoth DMV is notoriously understaffed.

You can change your name to make people love you, or you can love the One who will change it for you. You can wrestle with the world over the name they’ve given you or wrestle with God to remind you who you really are.

What is the limp you’re still trying to hide—the proof of your wrestling—that might actually be the most honest part of your story?

Here’s the beautiful part of being your true self: Those who genuinely know you don’t judge you for having a limp because they know how you got it. They know your imperfections point to a perfect God.

Maybe it’s time you stop apologizing for the limp that makes you look imperfect and start living like someone who fought too hard to call it anything less than a miracle.

A Benediction for Pretenders

May you learn to take off the masks that hide who you really are and remember that God formed you—exactly you.

May you stop wrestling and remember that you already have a name.

May you stop striving to be someone you aren't for people who will never truly know you.

When you're tempted to believe you have to be someone else to be loved, hear the voice of the Lord telling you it isn't so.

As you walk through your day, I pray you come face-to-face with reminders of your value, both on earth and in heaven.