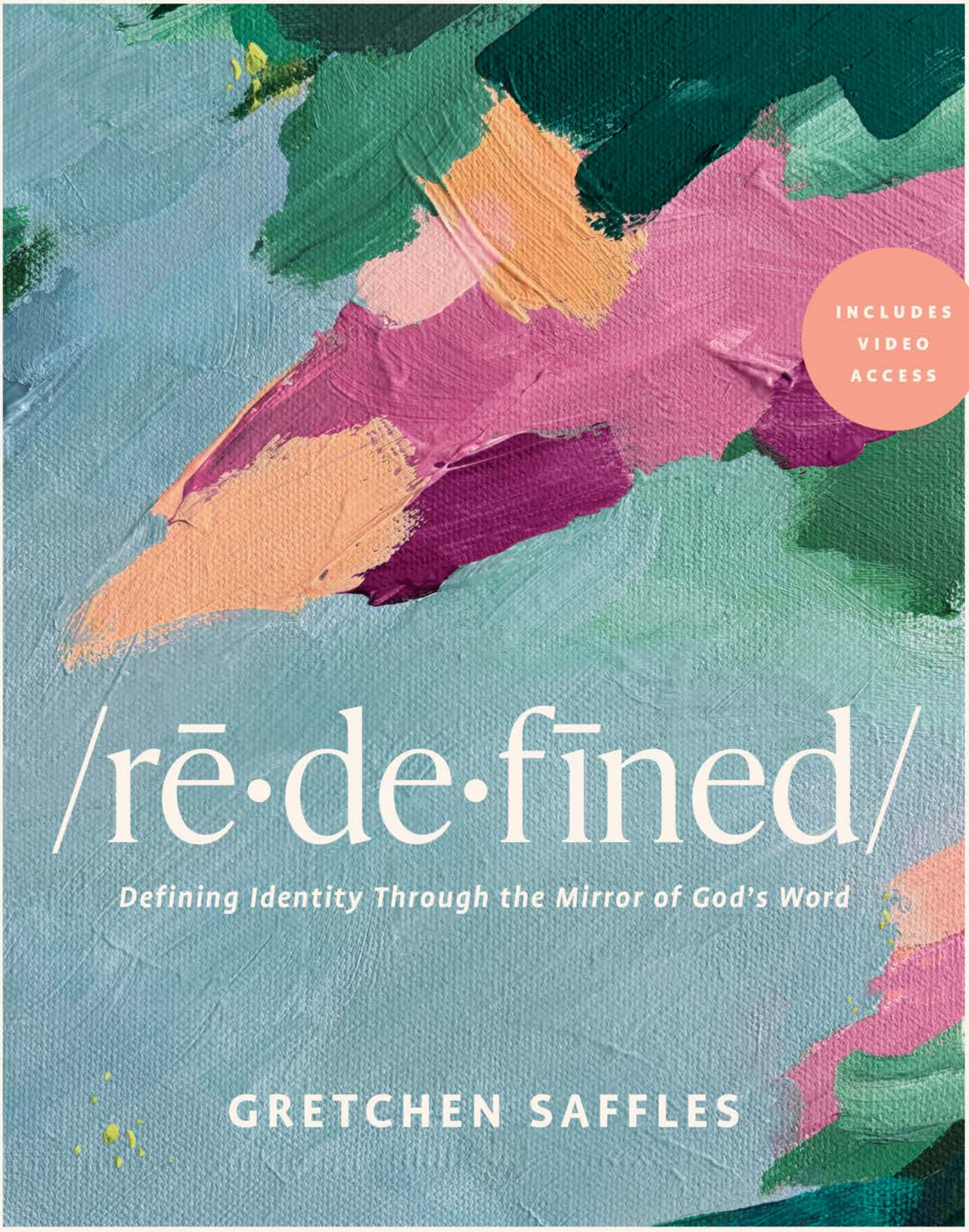

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Defining Identity Through the Mirror of God's Word

GRETCHEN SAFFLES

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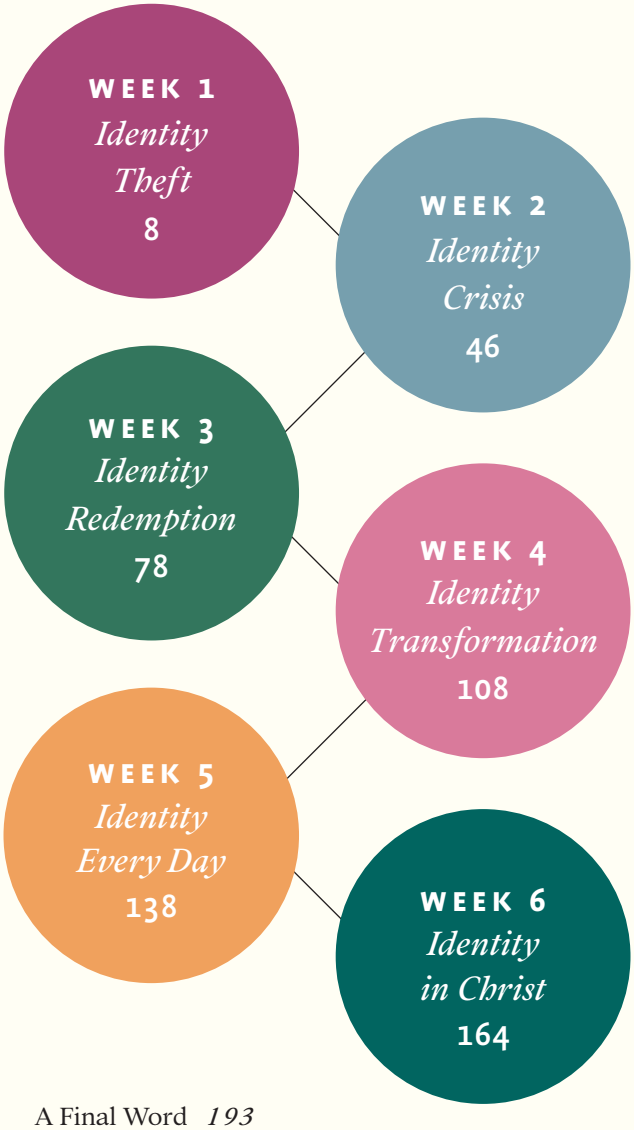
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33 32 31 30 29 28 27
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contents

INTRODUCTION Who Are You, *Really*? *1*



A Final Word *193*

Leader's Guide *194*

Just One Thing *198*

Notes *199*

About the Author *202*



INTRODUCTION

who are you, *really*?

DEAR FRIEND,

I've tried on a whole stack of identities in my life. Just like I might try on a hat or a blouse in a fitting room to decide which was most becoming, I brought some identity beliefs to the checkout counter while others were quickly tossed aside. In all my try-on sessions, the only identity I've found that fits and transforms my life in every way is one I didn't work to earn—one that was bought for me at the highest price. It's my identity in Christ.

I'd like to invite you along on a journey of putting on and embracing your true identity in Christ—an identity bought with his blood and freely given. This is not a theoretical concept for me—it's something I've wrestled with throughout my life. But there was one season when everything changed for me. The old identities I'd held on to for too long no longer fit, and it became clear that the only way forward was to exchange the lies I'd believed for the truth that sets me free (see John 8:32).

Not long after my first baby was born, I found myself walking through a dark valley. Disoriented from sleepless nights and a body that was struggling to recover, I crumpled like a used paper napkin. Though I was immensely grateful to be a mom, I was discouraged by how my body and my brain refused to recover on my (unrealistic) timeline.

That first year of motherhood, I was diagnosed with a thyroid disease, battled postpartum anxiety, and experienced debilitating panic attacks. I knew in my head that God loved me and had not abandoned me, but it seemed impossible to believe it. As I discovered, the distance from your head to your heart may only be about eighteen inches, but sometimes it feels more like eighty miles.

While my doubts about God's character swirled, the labels of my past began to play through my head like a film reel.

Broken. Worthless. Inadequate. Unwanted. Unqualified.

I wondered if God would redeem me from the pit I'd made my home in. As the enemy continued to replay the film reel of my failures and shortcomings, these labels stung, stealing my joy. Self-help books didn't ease the pain, and the words of others fell flat. So I went to the only place I'd ever found hope and peace—I opened God's Word. I read these words in Colossians that soothed and compelled my aching heart: "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (1:13-14).

Delivered. Chosen. Loved. Redeemed. Forgiven.

In that moment, I pictured myself kneeling before the cross—just as I was—where I had been redefined. I beheld my Savior, no longer hanging on the cross but standing by my side, his hand resting on my shoulder. No longer was I defined by my unworthiness and insufficiency; I was redefined by Jesus' worthiness and abundance.

When Jesus hung on the cross, he didn't just pay for our past sins; he rewrote our very identities with his nail-pierced hands.

Jesus redefines who we are, leaving no part untouched.

It has been a decade since I came to the understanding that my identity isn't primarily about my role, title, or contributions; it's about who I am in Christ. But the voices around me can be so noisy and convincing that I still need to rehearse this truth to my heart over and over. I know I'm not alone in this struggle. We all wrestle to grasp who we are in Christ. So often, we search high and low to determine who we are. We read other people's reviews of us like we're an online product and let their words and opinions define us. We use a measuring stick to compare ourselves to friends, family members, acquaintances, influencers, or people in our social media feeds. But the most important questions are these: Who does God say we are? How does the gospel redefine our past, our present, and our future?

In seeking to discover who we truly are, we must begin by looking at who Jesus Christ is and why he changes everything. It may seem backwards to find his identity before finding ours, but such is the Kingdom of God.

EVERYONE HAS A STORY TO TELL

God wants to meet us right in the middle of our stories, but first we have to stop hiding the parts of the script we wish we could erase. The past has a way of controlling the present, and if we strive to conceal our brokenness, we will struggle to carry this insurmountable burden alone. We weren't created to live this way. Our

hearts have compartments that, if left unexamined and untouched, become places of hoarded insecurities that keep us from walking in the fullness of grace. Jesus wants to empty out the junk drawers of our hearts and fill them with truth, hope, and the cleansing power of his shed blood.

A common mistake we make as we examine our identities is looking inward with self-focused affirmations to boost self-esteem. But as Tim Keller explains in *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, "Boosting our self-esteem by living up to our own standards or someone else's sounds like a great solution. But it does not deliver. It cannot deliver."[1]

Jesus wants to empty out the junk drawers of our hearts and replace the lies with the unchanging truth and hope of the gospel.

Boosting self-esteem is not the answer to healing identity wounds. We need a deeper, more lasting, more fulfilling answer. We don't need a Band-Aid to cover our wounded souls but healing ointment that treats the source of the problem. Keller offers the cure: "The more we get to understand the gospel, the more we want to change."[2]

The answer to the chronic self-esteem issues that plague us and result in infected, broken identities is found in something—or someone—bigger than ourselves.

In my years as a Bible teacher as well as a friend, I've sat down with countless girls and women spanning generations, and I've listened as they've shared their identity crises. They are grasping for authentic hope and a loving reminder that their lives matter and their brokenness has not been wasted. I've seen women walk through life cloaked with insecurity rather than the covering of the blood of Jesus. I've cried a waterfall of my own tears of desperation, confusion, and self-pity, wondering if I would ever truly comprehend and embody the freedom and fullness of life Jesus promised in John 10:10. I'm tired of watching the enemy win small battles that wipe our memories of the infinite riches that are ours in Christ!

Would you believe me if I told you that Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross two thousand years ago changes *everything* about who you are today?

Belief in his finished work is where true life change begins. If you find yourself lacking faith or feeling disqualified, broken, or far from God, join a fellow doubtful sojourner who, even when standing in Jesus' physical presence, prayed to him, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). Even when we struggle to believe, Jesus speaks the gospel over our broken hearts, bringing new life to our bruised and battered identities.

The reality of who we are in Christ—because of his life, death, resurrection, and current reign—is inconceivable to our finite minds. It's hard for us to grasp that we are loved by the God who spoke a word, and stars glittered across the galaxies. In

a world of tribes and friend groups, we struggle to find contentment in knowing that we belong to him and that he has a purpose for us. But although his greatness and his love for us are hard to comprehend this side of heaven, God has given us his Word so we can discover these treasures every day as we come to him. Even in our brokenness, he is at work to make us a new creation in his image.

WHEN A BAND-AID ISN'T ENOUGH

We often begin in the wrong place when trying to mend the damage sin has done to our identities. We bandage our wounded souls with cliché words, phrases, and fixes to soothe the ache. We want to know that we are more than the reflections we see in the mirror. I've heard the statements "You are loved," "You are chosen," "You are beautiful" countless times, but when they're offered apart from our identity in Christ, these phrases simply numb the soul. They can't bring lasting relief from our struggles to know who we really are. The focus of these statements is that they're all about us. The startling reality is, we are not the answer; Jesus is.

But if we're completely honest, this isn't what we want to hear. We're hardwired to think of ourselves first. It's not our first response to look outside ourselves for truth. It isn't appealing to hear about our brokenness; we'd rather hear that we're enough, we're beautiful, and we're brave on our own merit. But there's a difference between what we want to hear and what we need to hear. We *need* the gospel. The gospel is good news, but it's also hard news.

Right living begins with right thinking, and right thinking begins with having our minds saturated in the Word of God.

In my own struggles with identity and self-image, everything changed when I shifted my gaze from the mirror on the wall to the mirror of the Word. The mirror on the wall reveals only part of the picture—our untouched outer selves (blemishes and all), not our inner beings. The mirror of the Word reflects both our hearts and our bodies as reflected in the image of Christ. What we believe about Jesus is expressed in how we view ourselves. Right living begins with right thinking, and right thinking begins with having our minds saturated in the Word of God.

THE HEALING OINTMENT OF THE GOSPEL

Peeling back the layers of our temporary identity fixes can be painful and anxiety inducing. No one wants to be exposed. The apostle Paul identifies the need for exposure in Ephesians 5:8, writing, "At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light." The light of the gospel exposes what has been tucked away in the junk drawers of our hearts and exchanges our trash for the treasure of the gospel. This is the healing ointment that is applied to our wounds by Jesus himself, bringing comfort, conviction, and confidence to our souls.

Jesus is the ointment we need to experience true healing and to uncover who we really are. The gospel is not a temporary fix; it's an eternal solution. Being exposed in the light of God's Word isn't something to run from; it's something we can embrace, because it's only when we bring our true selves to Jesus that restoration can begin. Paul turns on the light to this truth in 2 Corinthians 4:5-7: "What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."

This is the journey we'll take through this six-week study. We will look to the cross and to Christ, the Redeemer and Rewriter of our stories. We'll trade our cloaks of insecurity for his robes of righteousness (see Isaiah 61:10). We'll hand Jesus the scripts of our lives—our past, present, and future—and allow him to illuminate them according to the gospel of grace.

This means no more shackles. No more shame. No more scarlet letter. As we open the Word, whether with a group or individually, we will walk together in Jesus' footsteps, which have gone before us in victory. We'll trade our past pain for his present promises and live the redefined life Jesus came to offer us—for our good and his glory (see Romans 8:28).

Walking this journey of freedom alongside you,



INTRODUCTION—SESSION 1 VIDEO NOTES

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

After you watch the session 1 video, you can discuss these questions as a group.

1. Get to know one another by briefly sharing your story.
2. What are some common sources people look to in an attempt to define themselves?
3. How is the good news of the gospel better than a Band-Aid for our souls?
4. What are you hoping to learn from this study about identity in Christ?

To access the video session, use the instructions in the front of your Bible study book.

WEEK 1

/ī·den·ti·ty/ theft

Your identity is not in what you do but in who made you. God wants to trade your fig leaves for freedom. You are never too broken to be mended by the Lord.

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

ISAIAH 53:5

WEEK 1

introduction

The journey to discovering our identity in Christ is a lifelong endeavor. This study will be only the beginning, but my hope is that it will spark a desire in your heart to know Jesus more deeply and intimately. In the weeks ahead, we will look into the mirror of God's Word so we can trade the lies we believe for his truth that sets us free. His Word has a pulse; it is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). Yet since the dawn of time, Satan has been twisting God's Word, planting doubts and untruths in the hearts of humankind, turning us away from God's good plans and promises. Satan's words are a death sentence; they infect us with the disease of sin. God's Word is life; it imparts wisdom and heals us.

Our study will start at the very beginning, in Genesis, where the war for right thinking began. Identity struggles are nothing new to humankind; they originated in the garden of Eden.

This week, we will highlight God's original design for his creation, see the impact sin has had on us, and reveal the hope we have in the Messiah, God's Son, who rescues us from darkness and brings us into the light of the gospel of grace.

DAY 1

the original design

God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

GENESIS 1:26

God is at the center of the universe, not us.

Before you study God's Word, pray for humility and insight.

FOR YEARS, WHENEVER I ENTERED my frequently used password on a website, my computer would alert me that my information had been part of a data breach. Even though I knew my security had been compromised, I stubbornly continued to use that same password. After years of receiving warnings about my beloved password being jeopardized, my husband and I noticed a false charge on our bank account. I'd been hacked. The realization that my data was not safe finally prompted me to take the security breach seriously and use a password protection system.

Even if you've never had your wallet stolen or experienced a security breach that compromised your data, we've all faced the angst of identity theft. To some degree, we've all handed over who we are and who we are meant to be to a ruthless world that etches lies, doubts, and insecurities on our hearts.

We allow the words and actions of others to define who we are. One discouraging word on social media can derail our day. One misunderstanding from a friend can confuse, distort, or disorient us.

When we allow the words and opinions of others to define us, we walk around confused, attempting to find who we really are, but we often end up merely chasing after the wind. We suffer from a devastating case of identity theft, but we don't know where to go for help or who to report the robbery to!

1. What are the first words that come to mind when you think about your identity?

Take a look at your answers. Do these words describe what you do? Your relationships? How you spend your time?

What have you allowed to steal pieces of your identity? These aren't necessarily bad things; they may be good or neutral things, but we often ask them to fill a need that's bigger than they're made to fill. When we meet someone new, the most common question people ask is "What do you do?" In other words, it is easy to define who we are only by what we do for a living. Or we might describe ourselves in terms of our relationships—who we're married to or how many children we have or what group we're part of. We may allow food—a necessary part of life—to define who we are, either by restricting what we eat or by eating too much. We may define ourselves by our living spaces—proving our worth by how beautiful or clean or big our homes are.

To begin at the right place, we need to start at the very beginning, when God created everything.

2. Turn to Genesis 1 and read verses 1-2. What does this passage reveal about God and creation?

Right from the get-go, the entire story of creation and life centers around God. The Hebrew word for "create" is *bara*, meaning "to fashion out of nothing."[1] While we create with materials we have on hand, God caused something magnificent to come into existence from absolutely nothing. He is the source of all life—the designer of everything we know, see, and have yet to discover. He's the ingenious inventor of the world we live in.

3. Read Genesis 1:3-31. Fill in the chart with what God created each day. In the second column, mark if anything created that day was made in his image.

	WHAT GOD CREATED	MADE IN HIS IMAGE
Day 1 (verses 3-5)		
Day 2 (verses 6-8)		
Day 3 (verses 9-13)		
Day 4 (verses 14-19)		
Day 5 (verses 20-23)		
Day 6 (verses 24-31)		

God designed the sun with a core that reaches 27 million degrees.[2] He fashioned microscopic dust particles that float unseen, plump blackberries that cling to earthy stems, and white, squawking seagulls. Not only did he make the enormous whale that swims through the depths of the ocean, but he also created the tiny ant that crawls beneath our feet. The atom was his idea, and by his infinite power, he holds all created things together (see Colossians 1:16-17).

Take a moment to glance around you. What do you see? What are you sitting on? What are you wearing? What light is illuminating your surroundings? Think about this: God created the molecules that form every single thing we touch.

He didn't need help creating the universe. He simply spoke, and it was. Not only that, but it was good. God completed his majestic work with the pinnacle of creation, making man and woman in his image.

4. Read Genesis 1:26-31. Write verse 26 in the space below. Circle the word us *and draw an arrow to* our image. *Underline the role of human beings.*

5. Read Genesis 1:1-2 and John 1:1-3. Based on these passages, who is "us" referring to in Genesis 1:26?

6. How does God describe his completed work in verse 31?

Without God, nothing and no one would exist. He created the world from nothing, fashioned humankind in his image, and declared it all "very good." Let this humbling perspective be your lens as you reclaim your identity in Christ.

The world does not revolve around you; it revolves around God. You don't hold all things together; God does. You did not create the fibers in the clothes you wear or the food you eat or the elements that make up the home you live in; God did. In order to reclaim who we are and who we're created to be, we need to fully grasp one of the most foundational truths of existence: God is at the center of the universe, not us.

7. Who are human beings created to reflect (see verses 26-27)?

God's original design was for humankind to be his image-reflectors. The word *image* in Hebrew refers to "likeness."[3] We were created to be God's image-bearers and image-reflectors.

8. Write the definition of image. *(Use a dictionary, if needed.) What does it mean to be made in God's image?*

9. How does being made in God's image impact the way we view ourselves and others? Are any other created things or beings made in the image of God?

God's design has always been for human beings to be his image-bearers and his reflectors. Set apart from all the rest of creation, human beings were designed to bear fruit, to multiply, and to take care of all that has been made, just like God does (see Genesis 1:28). We learn that from the very beginning, we were created with a purpose and with a mission: to reflect God's glory.

Your identity is not in what you do but in who made you. Pastor and author John Piper described the image of God this way: "God didn't create you as an end in yourself. He's the end, you're the means. And the reason that's such good news is because the best way to show that God is infinitely valuable is to be supremely happy in him. If God's people are bored with God, they are really bad images. God is not unhappy about himself. He is infinitely excited about his own glory."[4]

Being created as God's image-bearers is not a trivial fact to quickly skim over; it's a foundational, life-altering, purpose-giving truth we hold tightly in a world that threatens to commandeer our identity.

It is no accident that God created man and woman uniquely and distinctly to bear his image and to reflect his wondrous glory. It is no accident that God created you and gave you not only breath in your lungs but also your unique gifts and passions. He has placed you exactly where you are today for a reason. Your life is not a fluke. You are not here by chance. You have been created by God on purpose and with a mission: to reflect his image and declare his glory. This was God's original design.



PURPOSE: /rē•de•fīned/

What God-given roles are you responsible for in your own life? Get very practical here. Are you a wife? A mom? A caregiver? A student? A friend? A daughter? What do you do at your job? What activities make up your days? The roles God has given you are opportunities to reflect him to others and to be faithful to his mandate to be fruitful and multiply for his glory.

In Genesis 1:28, the command to "be fruitful and multiply" correlates with bearing children (remember, this was God's word to the first man and woman, through whom he would populate the earth!). It is also a commission to humans to live fruitful lives by following God's ways. Before ascending to heaven, Jesus gave his disciples the great commission, commanding them to be fruitful and multiply in spiritual terms.

Read Matthew 28:18-20. How are we to be fruitful and multiply?

How do we reflect God's image when we obey his commands?

When you look in the mirror each day, what thoughts immediately come to mind? Do you focus on every flaw? Complain about every blemish? Reminisce on youthful days when you didn't think twice about your outer appearance?

Do these thoughts honor God as your Creator? How would you see yourself differently if you truly believed you're made in the image of God?

How does being made in the image of God affect the way you think about the roles God has given you? How would your actions and your perspectives shift if you saw yourself as God's representative in your everyday life?

Practice this week's memory verse by writing Isaiah 53:5 here.