

Jessie Cruickshank + Julia Schmaltz

BECOMING GOOD NEWS

Reimagining Discipleship Through
Identity, Story, and Science

Discipleship was never meant to be outsourced. Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In *Becoming Good News*, Jessie and Julia not only name the lies we believe but offer a pathway forward, showing that every believer is equipped to be a disciplemaker. We need to rediscover this powerful principle of spiritual formation in our generation if we are to fulfill the mission of God.

CHRISTINE CAINE, founder of A21 and Propel Women

Healthy leaders reproduce who they are, and *Becoming Good News* is a powerful guide to becoming someone worth multiplying. Jessie and Julia remind us that discipleship isn't about striving harder but about living from our identity in Christ, where story, soul, and even science align. This book will help you stop drifting into “human doing” and start leading from the Spirit's transforming work already alive in you. It's a timely resource for anyone serious about raising up healthy, multiplying disciplemakers.

DAVE FERGUSON, CEO of Exponential and author of *Multiplier*

For Jesus to make us into the person we want to be forever, it will take several identity rebuilds. Don't fight them! *Becoming Good News* reveals the identity rebuilds that most of us still need.

JIM WILDER, PhD, author of *Renovated*

Becoming Good News is a compelling invitation to rediscover discipleship as transformation of identity, not merely behavior. With theological depth and pastoral warmth, this book reminds us that God is not asking us to perform for Him but to trust Him as the Author of our story. If you long for a faith that reshapes not just what you do but who you are becoming, this book will guide you there.

TARA BETH LEACH, pastor and author of *The Great Morning Revolution* and *Emboldened*

As a mission and church leader, I've often had to unlearn things—usually false or incomplete narratives about myself or the world—as part of my journey toward greater alignment with God's Kingdom. Jessie and Julia help us see that this re-storying is at the heart of discipleship. *Becoming Good News* is a tremendous resource for your own journey with Jesus and a powerful framework that understands disciplemaking as embodied life and story.

DANIEL YANG, senior director of global mission and church movements at World Relief

The Good News of Jesus was never meant to be merely proclaimed—it was meant to be embodied. In *Becoming Good News*, Jessie Cruickshank and Julia Schmaltz offer a compelling vision of formation rooted in beloved identity and lived out in honest community. With pastoral wisdom and prophetic clarity, they invite us to release performance and rediscover presence. We do not become good news by striving harder but by surrendering more deeply to the love that has already claimed us.

This book is both conviction and hope—a timely call to become a people whose lives bear a more faithful witness to the love of Christ.

LISA RODRIGUEZ-WATSON, national director of Missio Alliance

Becoming Good News offers a compelling reimagination of discipleship that begins where all authentic transformation begins—with identity rooted in God and shaped through the story we inhabit.

ALAN HIRSCH, author of numerous books on missional spirituality, leadership, and organization and founder of Movement Leaders Collective and Forge Mission Training Network

Jessie and Julia have given us a gift—a framework that finally connects the dots between how God made us and how God transforms us. For years, as a pastor and church planter, I've watched people hunger for deeper discipleship but struggle to find pathways that honor both the beauty of their God-given identity and the mess of their actual lives. *Becoming Good News* offers that pathway.

AUBREY SAMPSON, copastor of Renewal Church and author of *What We Find in the Dark* and *The Louder Song*

Combining narrative theory with hard science, Cruickshank and Schmaltz show us how we discover who we really are by growing deeper in who God is. In the end, we all become stories, so the central question is which stories do we want our lives to tell? *Becoming Good News* is all about how to shape our life story using the template of the magnificent narrative of God's love in Christ. I really enjoyed this super helpful book. Read it with a highlighter; it's full of wisdom.

MICHAEL FROST, author of *Surprise the World*

Books on discipleship are legion, but few are needed. This is one of the exceptions. Jessie Cruickshank and Julia Schmaltz draw on faith development, identity formation, attachment theory, neuroscience, and the power of narrative to show what happens when we allow the Author of life to write our stories, the Spirit to narrate them, and Jesus to show us reality as it truly is.

JR WOODWARD, national director of the V3 Movement, author of *Creating a Missional Culture* and *The Scandal of Leadership*, and coauthor of *The Church as Movement*

I love to learn, and Jessie Cruickshank never fails to give me fresh information and fresh perspectives on which to chew. Just as importantly, she does it with style and readability. Whether she is telling her own story, explaining Scripture, presenting new models, or diving into neuroscience, this book is a joy to read and filled with compelling insights. It will soon be a must-read for all who want to experience a deeper walk with God.

MARCUS WARNER, DMin, president of Deeper Walk International

Jessie and Julia understand something that many of us have missed: People don't change because they memorize better theology; they change when Jesus reinterprets their story. This book masterfully lays out the renewing work of the Spirit in a way that is both biblically grounded and practical. It feels ancient and fresh at the same time. I'm grateful for a resource that helps the church move back toward becoming good news.

PEYTON JONES, author of *Discipology*

Becoming Good News dares to ask who you already are—and whether you actually believe it. There's a science behind our stories and a heart behind the science, and Jessie and Julia weave both into something rarer: a path toward uncovering who we are in light of who God is in a way that roots identity and reorders desire. This book is a gift to the church!

DAVID SUNDE, DMin, pastor, teacher, and author of *Small-Batch Disciplemaking* and *Homegrown Disciples*

The contemporary phrase “to make disciples that make disciples that make disciples” is nauseating and unhelpful and sounds like we are trying to mass-produce widgets. Finally, a book on discipleship emerges through the mud and gives us a clear fountain of honest, proven practices that change people to their unique core. *Becoming Good News* is the single book I'll recommend from this point on.

HUGH HALTER, author of *Flesh* and coauthor of *The Tangible Kingdom* and *Brave Cities*

Becoming Good News moves from identity formation to loving our enemies, creatively integrating truths from Scripture and insights from neuroscience to give us a clear pathway amid the twists and turns of discipleship.

GEOFF HOLSCRAW, cofounder of the Center for Embodied Faith and coauthor of *Landscapes of the Soul*

I loved *Becoming Good News* by Jessie Cruickshank and Julia Schmalz. In the midst of today's mental health crisis, the church desperately needs resources like this. With pastoral wisdom and scientific insight, Cruickshank and Schmalz help us understand the power of neuroplasticity for learning, development, and healing. This book invites the church to participate more faithfully in God's restorative work in people's lives. It is both timely and deeply needed.

DERWIN L. GRAY, cofounder and lead pastor of Transformation Church and author of *It's Time to Heal*



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FOREWORD

Most of us didn't wake up one day and decide to lead divided lives. We didn't choose confusion over clarity, striving over rest, or performance over presence. It just happened slowly, quietly, while we were trying to be faithful, useful, and good.

That's why this book matters.

For years I, like many of my friends and colleagues, have exhausted myself trying to follow Jesus while never quite becoming . . . well . . . myself. I learned the language of faith, adopted the prescribed behaviors, and even produced results, but underneath it all was a lingering question I was afraid to ask out loud: *Why doesn't this feel more like freedom?*

Jessie Cruickshank and Julia Schmaltz have written a book addressing that very question.

Becoming Good News doesn't begin with what you or I should do. It begins with who you and I are. And that alone sets it apart. Because discipleship was never meant to be about fixing behavior. It was always about restoring identity. Jesus didn't come to make bad people behave better; He came to tell the truth about who we are and invite us to live from that truth.

What I appreciate most about this book is its insistence that transformation doesn't happen through willpower. Lord knows I've tried! It

happens through *revelation*. When someone encounters the truth of who God is and who we are in Him, behavior changes naturally, not because it's demanded but because it makes sense.

That's how the Kingdom works.

This book understands something essential: Every human being is already living out of a story. The question isn't *whether* you have a story but whether the story you're living in is true. Many of us are running with narratives that were handed to us by fear, trauma, culture, religion, or family systems. We call them "reality," but they're often just agreements we made early on to survive.

And those agreements shape everything.

Jessie and Julia gently but firmly invite the reader to examine those stories, not with shame but with curiosity. They help you notice where your view of God might have become distorted, where your view of yourself has been diminished, and where your discipleship has quietly drifted into striving. They don't rush this process because real freedom is never rushed; it's discovered. And true discipleship is an invitation into freedom.

What's also compelling about this work is its integration of science, not as a replacement for faith but as a witness to it. The brain (even my brain), it turns out, loves agreement. What you believe deep down, not just what you say, forms patterns that either reinforce truth or protect lies. That's not a threat to spirituality but an invitation to wholeness.

The five questions woven throughout this book aren't formulas; they're mirrors. *Who am I? Who do I belong to? Who am I becoming? Who do I represent? Who are we becoming together?* These are the kinds of questions that Jesus asked, not to test people but to wake them up. When answered honestly, they dismantle false identities and restore authority. And, importantly, not the kind of authority that dominates but the kind that comes from knowing where you stand and whose you are.

FOREWORD

And *that's* where discipleship becomes good news again.

Because when you know who you are, obedience stops being heavy. Love stops being theoretical. Mission stops being something you add to your life and becomes something you embody. You don't *try* to represent Jesus; you simply *do* because you're living in agreement with the truth.

This book is not loud. It doesn't bully the reader into change. It doesn't weaponize Scripture or rush toward solutions. Instead, it walks at the pace of trust. It assumes that the Holy Spirit is already at work and that the reader doesn't need more pressure, just more permission to tell the truth.

And that's rare.

If you're a leader, this book will challenge the way you think about formation. If you're tired, it will give you language for your exhaustion. If you're curious, it will invite you deeper. And if you're ready, it will gently confront the places where you've settled for a version of faith that looks right but doesn't feel alive.

The gospel has always been good news, but it becomes *visible* when people live from their true identity. That's what this book is really about. Not becoming impressive. Not becoming correct. But becoming aligned. Becoming whole. Becoming the kind of person whose very presence tells the truth about God.

So don't read this book quickly. Read it honestly. Let it ask you questions before you try to answer them. Let it name things you've felt but never articulated. And most of all, let it remind you that discipleship was never meant to make you someone else.

True discipleship was always meant to help you become who you already are.

Enjoy the journey.

Jamie Winship

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We stand on two thousand years of history. These ideas are not new but very, very old. We are not offering something new as much as rediscovering and rearticulating ideas that have been around for two millennium. For us, it feels like redigging the ancient wells. Moreover, we don't arrive at this moment alone. This book is the culmination of many who have taught us, both in spirit and in words. To the hundreds who have influenced our thinking and taught us much, we say THANK YOU. We stand on your shoulders, and we carry you in our hearts.

Specifically, we would like to thank Jacob Hoyer for being a colaborer and inspiration on this journey. You are so very dear to us. To Jim Wilder, for your pioneering and world-changing work. Thank you for the eyes to see this work and the courage to challenge us that we were not just reworking Fowler but had named something new. This book exists in this form because of you. Thank you to Donald Miller for your work on bringing the hero's journey to businesses and organizations. Thank you to Rowland Smith for introducing us and changing the trajectory of our lives. To those who supported Whoology with your prayers and investments. To the hundreds of

churches who have taken a chance on changing the narrative with us, and to the thousands who go on the adventure to let Jesus rewrite your story. You inspire us every day with your courage.

To Jessie's spiritual family in Laramie, who reminds us of what is possible.

To Julia's family, parents, friends, and pastors, including Scott Kilpatrick and Jason Carson, and to the teams of people who have helped shape her story, from the Everyday Youth Group to Team Awesome and the true identities who live this every day at Identity Exchange. You are communities that model this narrative.

We would also like to thank our agent, Keely Boving, and our editor, Caitlyn Carlson, for their amazing work, and all those at NavPress and Tyndale who helped craft this manuscript into a book of good news.

ONCE UPON A TIME

God is writing His story of you.

*You are like a letter written by Christ and delivered by us.
But you are not written with pen and ink or on tablets made of stone.
You are written in our hearts by the Spirit of the living God.*

2 CORINTHIANS 3:3, CEV

JESSIE

At the tender age of twenty-two, I became a codirector at a wilderness discipleship program called Solid Rock Outdoor Ministries (SROM). We designed and led forty-day-long wilderness expeditions that served as classrooms for spiritual formation and discipleship. As an experienced guide and recent college graduate with a degree in science education, I was now training guides to help people navigate high-risk outdoor activities like rock climbing and technical mountaineering. Combining my passions, I wondered how I could teach critical safety skills to somebody once and have them remember it accurately weeks later. That's how I began my deep dive into the neuroscience of memory formation.

I had been applying memory research at the wilderness ministry for almost ten years when God invited me to study at Harvard and get my master's. I did their Mind, Brain, and Education program,

which is based in cognitive psychology. It took a few miracles to get there—passing the GRE in one take, getting into the program at all, and fundraising enough money to pay for the degree.

Then, in June, as I was packing to go to Harvard, I learned I was pregnant for a fourth time.

For the past eight years, my husband and I had been trying to have a baby. The identity of *mother* had become the central theme of my life, and all things revolved around it. As month after month passed, as temperatures and treatments yielded no pregnancy, as pregnancies yielded no children, *mother* became a black hole sucking in all the light of my life.

It took several years into the journey before I realized just how much of my life I had lost to this quest. I could only see the next four weeks in front of me at any given time. It caused me to stop planning for the future. Years of pursuing a pregnancy had put significant strain on my marriage. And after four years of trying, I was so very angry at God that I stopped talking to Him. What was the point? He never seemed to answer my prayers anyway. All the women around me seemed to have no problems getting pregnant. I was alone in my struggle, and I was very alone in my loss. It took four years to slide into the black abyss, and it took four years to come back out and rebuild my life.

And now—now that I was finally planning for the future—I was pregnant for the fourth time in eight years. Both my husband and I had conflicting emotions. What was God thinking? The plan was for me to go to Boston for school by myself because he had his own job to maintain. Since the due date happened to align with spring break, we kept moving forward despite our worry and confusion. In July at an early ultrasound, we heard a baby's heartbeat for the first (and only) time.

I was two weeks out from moving across the country when I started to feel the ominous cramping. An emergency visit revealed

that the baby had passed. Left alone in the examination room, my husband and I held each other and cried in the middle of our mixed emotions. I had surgery and three days later my friend drove me across the nation, from Wyoming to Boston. As I sat silently in the car, my body in physical and emotional shock from the previous two weeks, I screamed at the Lord in my head: *What are You even doing with my life?!?* I wanted a family. Not to go to Harvard.

And in the deep chasm of brokenness in my soul, I heard God say, “Will you let Me give to you what I want to give to you and take from you what I want to take from you?”

Shattered, all I could respond was, “Okay. It’s Your life anyway. I gave it to You a long time ago. What can I do about it now?”

What I didn’t know, what I could have never imagined, was that as one dream was dying, another was about to be birthed.

REMEMBERING YOUR STORY

Our lives are not just events; they are also memories. And they are not just memories; they are also stories. The story we live in affects everything from how we understand our past to the choices we make for our future. Are we in God’s story, where He is good and kind and loves us well? Or in some other story, where God is cruel, holds out on us, and acts against our best interests? The story we are in is the narrative that guides our lives—what we notice, what we feel, and what we believe.

We are formed by stories. They allow us to connect with one another around dinner tables, during car rides, or while standing in the kitchen. Stories speak to something inside us that is fundamentally human. They help us find meaning in our lives and sense our place within the world at large.

As children, we intuitively learn the shape of story. A story is a tale of what happens that is told by an author through characters, scenes, and plot. In its most basic form, a story involves a character who encounters a problem that needs resolution. A good story captures your attention and holds it to the end. A great story satisfies your soul.

A narrative, on the other hand, thickens the plot. A narrative is a purposeful telling of a story. Think of it this way: A story is what events are told. A narrative gives meaning to how the story is told.¹ A meta-narrative goes even further, creating a universe of meaning. It weaves individual storylines into a unified whole, offering a lens through which we interpret and make meaning of our past, present, and future.

Narratives are all around us, rooted in the stories we tell each other and ourselves. It's the stories whispered around campfires; the songs we sing under the stars; the wisdom carried in proverbs, rituals, and the traditions we may not even realize we're still honoring. Our narratives are how our culture deeply and beautifully remembers who we are and how we belong to one another.

Joseph Campbell, a professor of mythology and literature, compared the narratives from cultures around the world and discovered a pattern he coined "the adventure of the hero."² It is the pattern of an ordinary person experiencing a disruption that sends them on a transformative journey. Along the way they make friends and face challenges. Though they return back home, they are forever changed. The *hero's journey* is the story arc that George Lucas emulated in the making of *Star Wars*.

Lucas's saga—told in three trilogies over nine movies— isn't just about individual characters like Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader, and

1. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Zondervan Academic, 2014), 94.

2. Joseph Campbell, "The Adventure of the Hero," part 1 in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (New World Library, 2008).

Obi-Wan Kenobi. The story is about their multigenerational narrative. It is about how one journey leads to another and the choices of one generation ripple into the next. And it is about how understanding someone else's story humanizes heroes and villains alike.

If we had experienced only the original *Star Wars* movie, Luke Skywalker would have been the hero, Obi-Wan Kenobi the guide, and Darth Vader the villain. But the story did not end there. Luke's quest to become a Jedi Knight leads him to face Darth Vader again. When that battle takes place, Luke learns a disruptive, disorienting truth: Darth Vader, the villain, is his father. In an instant, Luke's enemy becomes an integral part of his own orphaned existence. In the original trilogy, at the climax of the final showdown, Darth Vader embraces his role as father and intervenes to save Luke's life. And at that moment we realize the saga is not just about Luke Skywalker's journey to become a hero who saves the galaxy but about a son guiding his father toward redemption.

Like Luke Skywalker, we are each walking our own hero's journey while we concurrently are playing a supporting role to someone else. But not every character in every story transforms. If they embrace the journey of transformation, they are often a hero or a guide. If they resist it, they are often a villain or a victim (someone to be left behind).

But what makes some of us live a story as a hero, victim, villain, or guide? Do we get to choose which character we are going to play? And if we do, can we change roles and identities? And finally, where does God, the church, and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus fit in all this story shaping?

My time at Harvard is where the Holy Spirit revealed how discipleship sits at the intersection of identity, story, and science. For years, I had been teaching about story structure and the hero's journey as the framework for discipling. But at school I became fascinated by research on the memory system that not only stores our experiences

but is also so strong that it has the ability to interrupt our thoughts and direct our actions. What I learned is that the brain contains two distinct long-term memory systems.³ The first, semantic memory, is the memory system of data, facts, and summary points. This is the information that helps you do well on quizzes or win at trivia games. Most of what you learn in this data memory system is forgotten within twenty-four hours, and it's almost all gone after seven days. We can all recall cramming for final exams and forgetting what we memorized almost immediately (or maybe we can't!).

The second type of long-term memory in the brain is episodic. Episodic memory has two parts: procedural (or muscle) memory and autobiographical memory. Procedural memory helps you remember things like how to tie your shoes or drive your car. There is little emotion associated with it.

Autobiographical memory is the memory of our experiences and is the strongest recall system we have.⁴ It is the hub that connects all the things that matter in our lives, including our faith. It remembers our relationships with others, including our experiences with God. Highly interconnected with our sense of identity, autobiographical memory is stored throughout our entire bodies, including our internal organs.⁵ We literally hold our stories in our bones!

3. We acknowledge that neuroscience also splits long-term memory into implicit and explicit memory. This is a different way of grouping the same types of long-term memory systems—semantic, procedural, and autobiographical. The implicit/explicit method groups them based on ability to explicate or share the memory. The other method of grouping the three systems is based on how the memories are encoded and stored. Semantic memory (names, data facts) is stored primarily in your temporal and prefrontal lobes and can operate independently of the hippocampus. Episodic memory (personal experiences) is stored throughout your body and remains highly interconnected with the whole brain and body. For the purposes of learning and transformation, we use the semantic/episodic grouping not only because of how they are distinctly managed in the brain but also because we can have greater impact on how a memory is created based on how we engage holistically with the learning.

4. While we can activate our procedural memory without being fully aware of our movements, autobiographical memory is the strongest long-term memory system because it is constantly operating. It is the water we swim in. Thoughts about our experiences dictate what we notice, how we process incoming information, and how we interpret everything; they even interrupt us when we are trying to think about other things.

5. Your whole body helps you remember what you have experienced and who you are. Bessel van der Kolk, MD, explains how our past experiences, good and bad, are stored throughout our bodies in *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Viking, 2014).

Autobiographical memory is also very emotional. When we cry at a commercial, it is because it has connected to something in our story. We remember what we feel and we feel what we remember, like thinking back to our first love or our first heartbreak. The presence of autobiographical memory is why storytelling is so impactful. When we tell each other our stories, we are relating, human to human.

Our experiential autobiographical memory is our most robust memory system because humans are created to be relational and emotional beings. It is often referred to as “heart knowledge,” and it is the biological system we use to love the Lord God with all our hearts, souls, and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5). God gave autobiographical memory to humans so our stories would connect us to each other (see Psalm 139).

Finally, the autobiographical memory system can do something that semantic memory cannot: project into the future.⁶ In the brain, remembering the past is the same process as thinking about the future. Autobiographical memory is the only memory system capable of considering our future and answering the question: *How do I apply this to my life?* When you have an innovative new idea or a moment of revelation, this part of the brain creates, dreams, and imagines.

Personal Reflection

What is your favorite story? How does that story make you feel?

STORYLINES OF DISCIPLESHIP

We all have backstories and origin stories. We do not choose the time and place of our birth, our ethnicity, parents, birth order, or economic status. The storylines that we are born into predate us and will outlive

6. This is called *prospecting*.

us. When we think about the story of our lives, we think about where we came from and what legacy we want to leave when we are gone. Each of these stories is woven into the fabric of our autobiographical memory system. Therefore, they are woven into the narratives we tell ourselves about who we are. They are what shape our identity. Throughout this book, we invite you to reflect on your own story. Not as a mere series of events but as the narrative of *you*.

Hero or guide, victim or villain, in our story, we get to choose what character we are going to play.⁷ Like a victim, we can be focused on our own agenda or blame others when the story goes wrong. Like a villain, we can be stuck in past wounds that cause fear and angst, blindly fighting back and hurting the people we love. Or we can choose to walk the hero's path.

When I met Julia, we were both using the hero's journey as a story pattern for discipleship and discipling. We had each seen how the combination of our relationship with God, who we believe ourselves to be, and the stories we tell ourselves could create a new lens for discipleship and spiritual formation. We were drawn toward this new narrative for discipleship because we had seen how effectively it transformed our own lives as well as the lives of others.

We set out to launch our nonprofit, Whoology, with a mission to ignite every person to become a disciple of Jesus. We started with a question: "What hinders people from making disciples?" We began to ponder the questions that most of us ask around discipleship: "How do we follow Jesus?" and "What does it mean to be a disciple?" Most discipleship resources concentrate on answering one of these two questions. The most common solutions often focus on leadership development or spiritual disciplines.

7. Donald Miller, *Hero on a Mission: A Path to a Meaningful Life* (HarperCollins Leadership, 2022), xiii–xv.

Our experience has revealed that those discipleship methods, while helpful for a season, center on spiritual ideas and behaviors which are stored in our semantic memory system. They can be easily forgotten when life gets hard. In our darkest moments, it's not the data facts about God that lead us into transformation. God did not create us to work that way. Meeting Jesus personally, however, changes our story every time.

To change a story, you need a disruption, so Julia and I decided to ask disruptive questions. "Why" questions reveal motivation. "What" and "how" questions lead to action. But "who" questions tap into our memory systems because we are relational beings. *Who is (my) God? Who am I? Who do I belong to? Who am I becoming? Who do I represent?* These storylines in our personal lives tell us much more about what we actually believe than our theology. Theology is the study of God. But the only way to study a person is by getting to know them—by being *with them* in relationship instead of merely reading *about them* in a book.

Often, our ideas about God are data facts stored in our semantic memory. After all, if God is not a liar, then where is the truth, freedom, and joy He promised? Even when we believe intellectually that God is good, our emotions might fight back. God's goodness can be hard to believe in the face of pain, death, divorce, infertility, or when our children walk away from faith. Discipleship only changes us when we meet Jesus and He changes our autobiographical memory by interpreting our story and questions through His truth.

Encountering Jesus has healed, redeemed, and restored our past, present, and future. He has changed how we remember our stories. We are not stuck in the pain of the past, and we don't have to project or worry about a future without Him. God is always with us. It has forever altered the metanarrative of how we view discipleship.

BECOMING GOOD NEWS

We now think of a disciple of Jesus as someone whose soul is formed through the following storylines:

- The question of “Who is (my) God?” is our *fidelity*.
Discipleship is who we put our trust in.
- The question of “Who am I?” is our *identity*.
Discipleship is about who we are, not what we are doing.
- The question of “Who do I belong to?” is our *community*.
Discipleship is a group project.
- The question of “Who am I becoming?” is our *maturity*.
Discipleship is soul formation.
- The question of “Who do I represent?” is our *authority*.
Discipleship is following the Holy Spirit.



The presence of Jesus in these storylines changes our neuropathways. Transformation comes when we see ourselves the way God sees us and when we understand the story we are in. The most significant changes come as God speaks *who we are* and *who He has created us to be*. As disciples and followers of Jesus, we are formed into a new creation—our true identity. How we answer the question of “who” in our lives is foundational to who we will become. True discipleship doesn’t begin with strategy or information—it begins with identity.⁸ We are human *beings*, not human *doings*.

Imagine, for a moment, a slideshow of your life, each frame flickering on the screen. What kind of movie will unfold? A quiet indie drama? A wild adventure? What story do you want your life to tell? A story is written by the author who holds the pen. If you have the pen, you might be writing your own story. That story may serve you well for a time. But eventually, each of us gets to the end. We have no more story to write, or it becomes a story we don’t want to live in anymore. Since God wired us to live primarily from our autobiographical memories, He also created us so He could rewire a new narrative. The way God gives us a new narrative is through discipleship, where we finally hand the pen back to our Author.

Personal Reflection

What is scary about letting go of the pen and letting God author your story?
What is comforting about it?

8. Science has yet to come up with a common definition of identity, but both Scripture and biology reveal that our identity is at the core of our souls.

“I WILL MAKE YOU . . .”

As disciples, we learn from whom we follow. We don't just copy their actions; we also listen to who they say we are. We are all being disciplined all the time, but not always by Jesus. The question then is not “What does it mean to be a disciple?” The real question we need to ask is “Who are we following?” The answer: Whomever we place at the center of our lives. That is who we are learning from, who is discipling us, and who we are becoming.⁹

When we read Jesus' invitation to “follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19, ESV; also see Mark 1:17), we often simplify discipleship into two steps: (1) follow Jesus, and then (2) share that good news with others around us. This approach may appear clear and actionable. But it misses the depth of what Jesus is truly saying to the disciples (and to us). Jesus is not yet commissioning and sending the disciples out. So here, He is inviting them into a relationship with Him, one in which they will be fundamentally changed.

In Matthew 4:19, the verb translated “I will make” (*poiēsō*, from *poieō*) is in the future tense and can be used in Greek when a deity brings something into existence. Jesus is saying, “I will make your being. I will shape you into what you will become.” It's the same word, like in the Greek version of Genesis, when God makes or creates something, bringing it into existence like a work of art.¹⁰ So to Peter and Andrew, fishermen by trade, Jesus used wordplay to *make their being*—to connect the dots between who they already were and who they would become as messengers of His gospel. He was offering to be their

9. The Greek word *mathētēs* is translated “disciple.”

10. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 839–42. It is the same word (translated from Hebrew to Greek) used in the creation story in the Septuagint. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (United Bible Societies, 1996), 149–50.

guide as their rabbi. He invited them to hang out with Him, learn from Him, and be challenged by Him. Only through that relationship would they be able to become who God created them to be.

Scripture is filled with testimonies of people who discovered who they truly were when they encountered the living God. They were changed by God's presence. Think of Abraham, Moses, Lydia, Paul, Mary Magdalene, and Phoebe—all experienced a divine interruption so powerful and personal that it altered their narratives and helped them receive their true identity. Their journeys of faith, trust, and deepening relationship with God happened both in a moment and over a lifetime.

The call to follow Jesus is a call to allow Him to guide us on our journey. It is to let Him shape us into who He created us to be from the beginning, to bring into existence who we are becoming. It is an invitation into the story God tells. And when we answer the call, Jesus reinterprets our stories for us through His redemptive lens.

Not long after returning from Harvard, God asked me to leave the wilderness ministry. At that time, I had been there for my whole adult life. My relationships with my coleaders were thriving. But after seven months of processing with my spiritual brothers and tweaking my role again and again, an unyielding sense of unease remained in the pit of my stomach. The only tweak left was for me to leave out of obedience.

Following God off that cliff felt like free-falling. I was so scared. I had never let go of anything before in my life. In fact, part of my identity was being a person who hung on. I hung on to rocks when climbing. I persevered through the tough parts of an expedition. Literally, I led by never letting go. I also knew myself as someone who built and created things. But this was the first time I realized that building things doesn't always mean staying to see them grow.

God was asking me to let go. I opened my hands, and my soul screamed as I fell backward into the abyss.

During my last course at SROM, as I ugly cried in front of the new instructors, one of them gave me a word, a name: *Faithful*.

Over the next few months, as my soul calmed down out of pure exhaustion, I slowly became aware that I was not falling. Even though I had let go, God had not. Because I had always been the one hanging on so tightly, I had never known that God was the One holding everything.

Faithful was not the first name God had given me. In my late twenties, while trying to get pregnant, I had asked God what names Jesus had written on me in the spiritual realm. He said I am a momma. So I got a tattoo of the word *Ima* in Hebrew letters. *Ima* means “momma” and is the mother equivalent to *abba*. I had lost three pregnancies by then, and the tattoo reminded me that even though I was not a physical mother, I was a spiritual one. It helped me not miss the opportunities to spiritually parent those whom God had given.

Since then, God has given me a few more names.

I am a *Catalyst* who helps others change and develop. I am a *Terraformer for the Kingdom*, changing atmospheres and creating soil. And I am the *Mother of Nations*. (I don’t quite know what that one means yet, but the journey ahead will show me.)

THE NARRATIVE THAT CHANGES US

If we want to become more of who God made us to be—both individually and collectively—we don’t need another new strategy for discipleship, we need a whole new narrative. Or rather, we need to return to the Good News narrative found in Scripture. It is a narrative that can hold the entirety of God’s story while also representing the complexity and beauty of us as created, relational beings. A narrative focused on who we are and who we are becoming. A narrative that

binds us to one another, where we are receiving from Jesus and living out of a sense of belonging.

Living in Jesus' Kingdom narrative means living according to the story as Jesus tells it, through His eyes and His voice. That means our lives are not just our stories to tell—they are God's stories. God is inviting us into something bigger than the scripts we would write for our lives.

The Bible is more than a book. It is God's grand saga, almost two millennia in the making. Over fifteen hundred years, across sixty-six books and at least forty different human authors, the Bible exquisitely demonstrates God's story. The narrative is so intricately written that no human could have created such a cohesive storyline leading to the central figure in all of human history: Jesus, God's beloved Son, the Christ.

But what is the great story God wants to tell? Jesus meets with His disciples after His resurrection and reveals the overall story, the meta-narrative, to them. His disciples are gathered in a room, afraid, when Jesus appears. In that sacred encounter, Jesus opens His disciples' minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:44-47). That mind opening—the ability to comprehend what was once hidden—was not a result of human intellect. It was an illuminated work of the Spirit.

As Jesus tells the disciples that everything written in the law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings—what we now call the Old Testament—was ultimately about Him, He reveals a truth that is central to understanding what it means to live in God's narrative:

“This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and *repentance for the forgiveness of sins* will be preached in his name.”¹¹

LUKE 24:46-47, EMPHASIS ADDED

11. See also Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:48-49.

We believe this is the key to life in Christ. As our Creator, God wired our narratives into our autobiographical memory system and gave us the mechanisms of confession, forgiveness, and repentance to rewire them. As the One responsible for leading us into all truth (John 16:13), the Holy Spirit acts as our Narrator. As the author and protector of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), Jesus guides and directs our steps. God is always present with us, inviting our souls, hearts, and minds into transformation.

Because of the way God designed us, He knew our lives and memories would need interpretation. God created our minds so that we cannot see all that is in front of us or perceive all there is to know. We are witnesses through the lens of our own perception. The Holy Spirit is the One who brings us back to Jesus, again and again, and makes clear what we could never understand on our own.

The closer we get to Jesus, the clearer God's intended narrative becomes. We no longer have to carry the burden of figuring out what to do with our lives, making them work, or fixing what is broken. We can let go and trust. This is the narrative that changes us. When God is at the center of our lives, He transforms our souls. He does it Himself. All we have to do is follow and receive. And once we do, once we know and believe that the purpose of this life is to live in God's narrative, we begin to discover our place is in His story, not our own.

This is the narrative we are made for: Jesus is the Messiah and Savior, the *good news of great joy for the whole world* (Luke 2:10).

Personal Reflection

What is one example of how God has redeemed your narrative?

STORIES THAT SHAPE US

Biology, psychology, and the other branches of science can only now explain what the Scriptures, experience, and the Holy Spirit have been telling us for generations: God built our brains to be shaped through story.

Most of us, though, are oblivious to our own stories. True perspective requires an objectivity that we don't possess on our own. Together, we're going to explore some of the narratives we have been living in so we can move from a narrative of *what we need to do for Jesus* to *what He has already done for us*.

As you read, take time to consider your own narrative. These pages are rooted in real-world experience with practical application. Throughout this book, you will find reflection questions and prayer prompts. While many tools help you reflect on your past or plan for your future, this book is not about analyzing what was or strategizing what's next. It is about becoming fully present so you can receive the narrative God is offering you today. The promise throughout Scripture is clear: *God is with us*. He was with you yesterday. He will be with you tomorrow. And He is with you now.

No matter what episode or chapter you are in, your life is no longer the story of a fractured relationship with God. That relationship has already been reconciled through the cross of Christ. God—through His Spirit, His Scripture, and His people—reminds and refreshes us with the truth that He has always been and will always be. Jesus Christ is the Truth who shows us the way into resurrected life. When you begin to understand how God uses narrative, you will come to know Him more deeply and find your place in His story. Today can be the day Jesus begins to clarify your narrative and tell you who you are. Today God can begin to show you how your life is a good news story.

Becoming good news is the best evangelistic and discipling strategy in the world. Imagine for a moment a faith community where . . .

- all stories matter equally so there are no status or power dynamics, where we stand spiritually equal before the cross and before the throne as brothers and sisters in Christ;
- people live from their God-given authority—social or organizational status doesn't matter, only their active obedience to the assignment God has given them;
- we don't need to anxiously fix one another, but we can help each other build trust in God as a good author, a good parent, and King of the universe; and
- we trust the blood of Jesus to restore all things, including our souls, and we trust the Holy Spirit with every breath and every step.

Becoming good news is about being made and remade by Jesus. It is the lifelong work of the Holy Spirit, transforming us from the inside out. As Jesus exchanges our fear, anger, and grief with joy, our autobiographical memory begins to change. The circumstances don't always shift—but the tone and narrative of our lives do. Our lives move from tragedies to stories of redemption and hope. We become aligned to God's story and learn to walk in step with Jesus. And the narrative we live in flows from who we are becoming. These are the stories that shape us:

- a child of God who finds **fidelity**
- a disciple who receives true **identity**

ONCE UPON A TIME

- a family member who belongs to others in **community**
- a witness who grows in lifelong **maturity**
- a follower of the Spirit who lives under God's **authority**

The more we receive from God, the more we can share with others our sense of peace, wholeness, and freedom in Christ. This is the story of the gospel. This is the path of discipleship. This is *becoming good news*.

CHAPTER REFLECTIONS

1. What do you think about the big story of God? Does it seem like good news to you?
2. How does this idea of living in God's narrative—becoming good news to those around you—influence your understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus?
3. Pray and ask God how He wants you to participate with Him in redeeming your story.