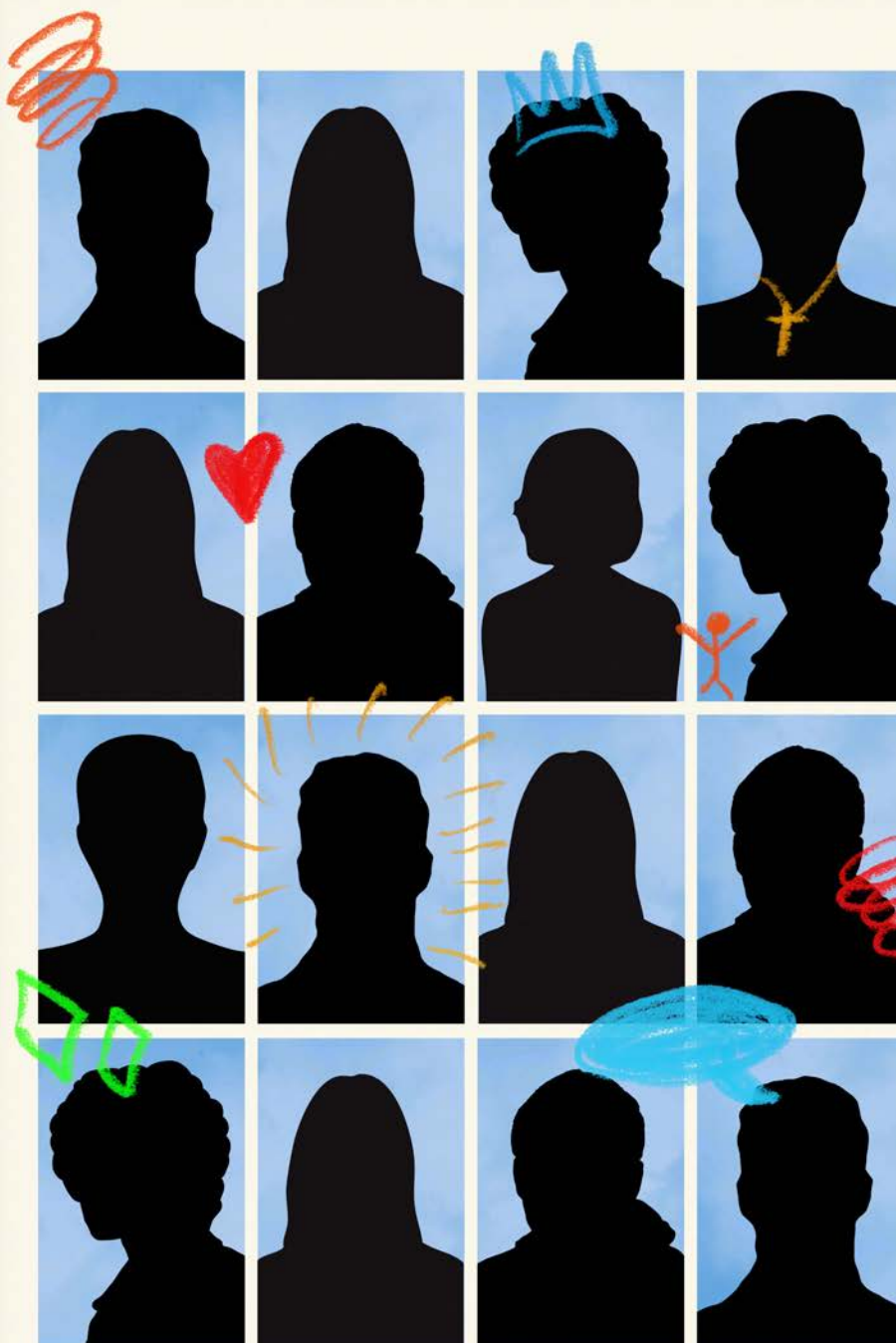




Who You
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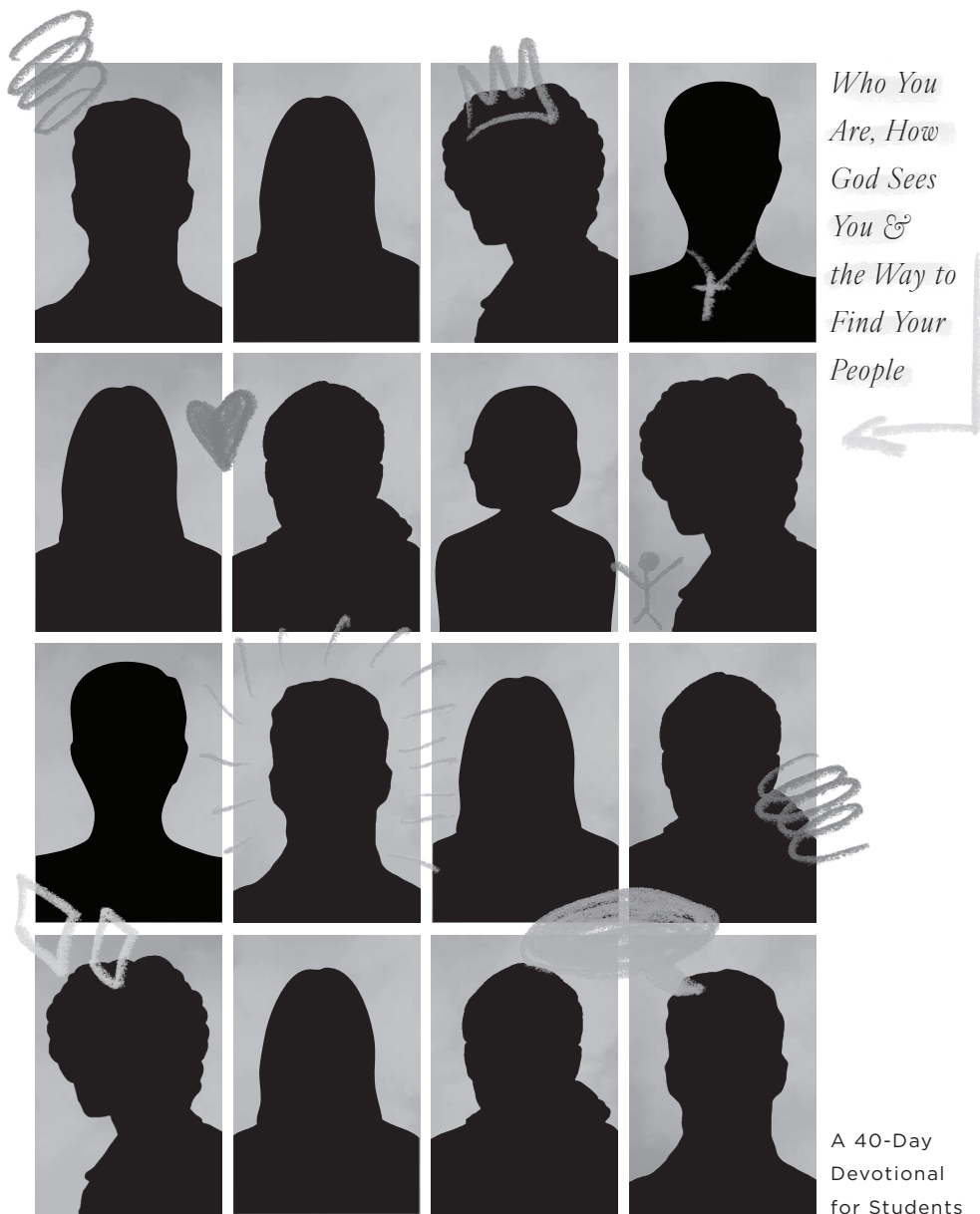
A 40-Day
Devotional
for Students

You *Already* Belong

★

★

HEATHER THOMPSON DAY



*Who You
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You Already Belong

HEATHER THOMPSON DAY



Published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

You Already Belong: Who You Are, How God Sees You, and the Way to Find Your People (A 40-Day Devotional for Students)

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INTRODUCTION

The Lie of Not Belonging

When I was in eighth grade, I was expelled from my small-town Christian school. I internalized a sense of rejection that took many years into adulthood to shake. I tried to self-soothe the pain with perfectionism. If I got good grades, got more degrees, wore the right clothes, gave the perfect answers to everyone's questions, then maybe I would be worthy of belonging.

But belonging isn't earned. Belonging *is what you already have*.

I wouldn't be living in that truth today if God hadn't pursued me. Even at thirteen years old, I knew this in my bones. I could sense the presence of God over my life. I could feel the Spirit knocking. Even then, God was inviting me to realize that I belonged to him.

Some invitations will change your life forever. But you don't know it when you get them. I wonder what emotion the disciples were feeling when this rabbi named Jesus stopped them by the Sea of Galilee. Matthew 4:18-19 reads, "They were casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 'Follow me,' he told them, 'and I will make you fish for people.'" Just like that, they moved into a story where everything about their relationships and their purpose changed forever—because Jesus told them they belonged.

Over the next forty days, we are going to take a journey of belonging. Maybe you haven't been expelled from a school but you've felt expelled

from a friend group. Maybe your family is changing or your town is changing. Or maybe everyone around you is staying the same but something inside you is changing.

I was talking to a college student who was precious and well-spoken. I was stunned when she told me, “I used to take my dad’s old cell phone to youth group and delete contacts so it looked like I was texting with someone.” She didn’t want people to know how alone she felt. Even in her own church youth group, she still didn’t feel like she belonged.

I know what that feels like. And maybe you do too.

When my own daughter was in third grade, our family moved to a new state. She was struggling to make friends, so every night I would pump her full of confidence. I’d tell her how proud I was of her and encourage her to be brave. She was nine years old when she walked up to a table in the cafeteria and asked if she could join her classmates. The entire table got up when she sat down. She barely knew how to do multiplication, but she was being taught that she didn’t belong. We learn all types of things in school.

A student once came to my office and told me he was dropping out of college.

“I just don’t think my people are here,” he said.

He had his hood up over his head and wasn’t making eye contact with me. It is hard to say things out loud that make you feel exposed. I told him that I’d had five other students share similar disappointments with me that week alone. I wanted him to hold on, to give me a chance to try to build community in my classes. We started a breakfast group that met every Tuesday in the cafeteria. It grew until there was a table of twelve of us. Eleven college students who at one point were certain they were the only ones who hadn’t found their people. Until, of course, they found their people. You can too.

Becoming a person who not only lives from belonging but creates belonging for others starts with self-compassion. *Self-compassion* is a fancy social science term for being kind to yourself when you experience hard things. Learning how to do this is a big deal. It’s changed how I navigate disappointment and suffering.

INTRODUCTION

Did you know that all human beings experience suffering? It is simply part of being alive. The good news is there are tools that can help us get through it. And one of these tools is being kind to yourself and acknowledging your own feelings. When we do that, we're better prepared to extend compassion to others. Studies have found that having self-compassion is even more important than having self-esteem.¹ Your ability to be kind to yourself is an even more important skill to learn than confidence. Because as you show compassion, your confidence will increase naturally.

We're going on a journey together to learn to be kind to ourselves, to discover we're loved, and to become places of belonging for other people. These forty days are broken up into eight parts:

- | | |
|------------|--------------------------------|
| Part One | Let Yourself Feel Big Emotions |
| Part Two | Understand Who You Are |
| Part Three | Know Who God Is |
| Part Four | Build Relationships |
| Part Five | Shape Your Character |
| Part Six | Change Your Heart |
| Part Seven | Practice Your Faith |
| Part Eight | Live with a New Heart |

As you turn the next page, I want you to know that this book is not about becoming someone else. It is about discovering more of who you already are. I will not try to “fix” or define you. But I do want to spend the next forty days gently reminding you of what is true, just in case you've forgotten.

You already belong.

PART ONE

Let Yourself Feel Big Emotions

For the next seven days, we are going to focus on accepting our own emotions without judgment and showing ourselves compassion. But before we talk about how to process big emotions, I think we should agree on something important: You are allowed to have them. Yes, even the big ones. You are allowed to be upset that no one called and told you about the movie. You are allowed to experience anger at the person who makes your life hard. You are allowed to get anxious, to struggle with doubt, to feel overwhelmed or even exhausted by difficulty. This is part of being human. In fact, naming our emotions is part of what helps us process through our hard emotions so that we can feel the good ones too.

Your emotions are not trying to make you look like a bad person. They are simply trying to tell you something. Let's learn how to listen.

The Willow Tree

Jesus wept.

JOHN 11:35

“Meet me at the willow tree so I can say goodbye.”

I poked my palm with the sharp end of my pencil just to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I'd had a crush on Dane all summer, and today was the last day of camp and probably the last day I would ever see him. Camp might as well have required a passport, because it felt like entering a different country where you meet all new people.

But sixth grade started next month. We did not live in the same town or attend the same school.

Ouch. The lead of my pencil had pressed a small red dot into my hand. I stared at it for a moment before shifting my eyes back to the crinkled piece of paper. It felt like everyone was staring at me.

“Okay,” I wrote. *I hope this doesn't sound too eager*, I thought as I folded the note back up and passed it down the line.

The willow was sacred ground. It was where all camp romance happened. There were places on the tree trunk where previous summer couples had carved their initials before making the long trek back home, never to meet again.

I stood in front of it in my Winnie-the-Pooh T-shirt and tried to pat down the humidity-induced frizz in my hair. I'd come there alone—so you can imagine my shock when I saw Dane coming toward me with at least four other boys.

Strength in numbers, I thought. But as they got closer, I realized at least four of the five were laughing.

“What's so funny?” I choked out with a half smile, thinking *If you can't beat them, join them* might be an applicable strategy for whatever was about to happen.

“You,” one of the boys, who was not Dane, responded.

Now, at this point, I probably should have booked it out of there. *All* the

red flags were waving frantically. But I was totally frozen. Your brain tends to respond to shocking experiences in one of four ways: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. It's like when you startle an animal on a walking trail and it could either bite you, run from you, or stand incredibly still as though lack of movement makes it invisible. Fawn is a little different. This is where your body tries to keep you safe by pleasing the other person. So a dog, for example, may make itself smaller, wag its tail and bend its head, sometimes even roll on its back. It is trying to communicate, "I am not a threat. Please let me be safe here." My brain, without my conscious permission, chose the third option: freeze.

"Why me?" I heard myself say before I could shut myself up.

"Because you thought he liked you. He doesn't like you. And we have forced him to be nice to you this entire summer," the same guy, the ring-leader, responded. Dane stood silent, head down, shoulders slumped, not making eye contact with me. Fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. His brain locked in on option three just like mine did.

I took a deep breath and, with all the confidence I could muster, whispered, "I don't care." Then I walked away slowly, each step feeling like an uphill climb.

But I did care. A lot.

Have you had a willow-tree experience? A time when everyone was laughing but the joke was on you? It hurts. And I want you to know that it's okay to care. It's okay to feel whatever emotion you feel.

Even Jesus, who had all the reason in the world to be joyful, cried. John 11:35 says that Jesus wept when he saw the sisters of his friend Lazarus crying because Lazarus had died. Jesus was not afraid to have emotions. Why is it so easy for us to hide from ours?

Human beings have emotions. You cannot escape them. In fact, over the course of your life, you will experience a lot of emotions. Jesus got angry (Mark 11:15-17). Jesus experienced distress (Matthew 26:37-38). Jesus felt compassion (Matthew 9:36).

Emotions are part of how God made us. They help us move through the hard things in life and into what's next. So feel whatever it is that you feel. Name that emotion out loud to help your brain process exactly what happened and how it affected you. And remember that the feeling isn't forever.

WHICH EMOTIONS ARE GROWING?



Think about the emotions on this willow tree. Circle two or three that best describe how you feel right now.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever felt like you froze in a situation where you were uncomfortable? What would you have done differently if you had known that that situation was about to happen?
2. When someone hurts or embarrasses you, how can remembering that you belong to God change what you do next?

HEART CHECK

Imagine that Jesus has just walked up to you and said, "Follow me." How do you want to respond?

A Heart of Flesh

[The word of the Lord, as spoken by Ezekiel:] “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

EZEKIEL 36:26

My willow-tree moment happened about a hundred feet away from the steps to the church. I didn't blame God for the rejection I experienced, but I wasn't positive that God was paying much attention to me either. I couldn't imagine that my life would get better than anything I was going through in that moment.

The pain of rejection caused my brain to kick on its survival switch. I learned how to pick up the mask of indifference while fighting back tears. *I don't care* became the mantra of my adolescence. I didn't care who hurt me or who I hurt. I didn't care what anyone said about me. I would make myself so numb that no pencil prick could ever crack my skin again. *Say what you want about me* was my philosophy. *I don't care*. I would enter sixth grade and survive.

To be honest, in some ways, a piece of me is still frozen right there in the summer before sixth grade, wanting to belong but not knowing how. It comes in like lightning flashes in my nervous system when I sense impending rejection even now. Recently I was interviewed by a large video devotional platform. They wanted me to start creating some video content for them, and I was so honored to be asked. And then, out of nowhere, I got an email saying they were going in another direction. It felt like a punch in my gut. Sharing the gospel is my calling. I feel most alive when trying to communicate how I've experienced God. Being rejected from a chance to lean into that calling stings. And you want to know what my temptation was? To say, “I don't care.” When the truth was I *did* care. I cared a lot. So instead, I chose to keep my heart soft. I chose to tell God out loud, “This rejection hurt my feelings.” And then I asked God to redeem it or to let me just let it go. I didn't want to pretend something didn't hurt that did. That's

not how we process hard emotions. We have to let ourselves acknowledge them and ask God to help us work through them.

Our journeys through the human experience are going to be filled with moments that stay etched in our memories and frozen in our emotions like time capsules. Some of them will be so good we'll have to pinch ourselves to make sure we're awake. Some of them will be so bad we will wish they were dreams. And yet all these steps can teach us something about who we are becoming.

You are always becoming. Every time I step into a classroom, I have to become someone with an open heart who is willing to connect. *Will my students like me? Will this Bible study group think I am worth listening to? If I sit at this table of strangers at this event, will someone talk to me, or will they just carry on with their own conversations?* Every time I choose to sit at the table, to smile at my student before they smile at me, or to offer my perspective in Bible study, I am choosing to live with a soft heart. I am choosing to show up vulnerably as I am and make an internal decision that I belong. I give myself permission to exist as I am, with a heart soft enough that I could be rejected. The way we choose to respond to the hard moments now makes us stronger and wiser for the future. It helps us make decisions from a place of *This is who I am* rather than *This is how I feel*.

In Ezekiel 36:26, God, through the prophet Ezekiel, gives us an amazing promise about how we can do more than just survive the rejections we face:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

No matter what you are facing right now, this is what God is guiding you toward: becoming softer, kinder, gentler, more self-controlled, more loving, more patient, and more able to see the people around you with the compassion you've often needed. Life tries its hardest to turn us to stone. But God is trying to give you a heart of flesh. A heart of flesh is soft enough to feel, listen, and change. Here is what this may look like in real life: You see a kid at lunch, and maybe no one is being mean, but no one is talking to them either. A heart of stone would say, *This isn't my problem*. Or maybe

not even notice. But a heart of flesh says, *Can I say hello? Can I ask how their day is going? Can I take a moment to be kind?*

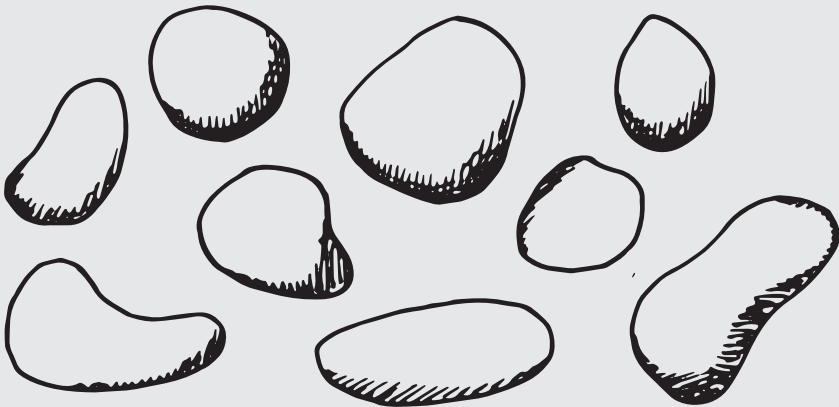
Or maybe your mom or dad or someone else you trust tells you they think you were rude in how you treated them. Do you get defensive and blame them? Or do you pause, listen, and apologize? A heart of flesh is always willing to say, *I didn't think about it that way, and I am sorry for how I reacted.*

If you're in Christ, the Spirit of God is within your very soul, remaking, reshaping, reforming your character to be more and more like God. This is the fork in the road we all face: flesh or stone, Christ or self, love or hate, hope or despair, connection or rejection.

The summer before sixth grade, I wish I would have chosen flesh. I wish I would have faced what was hard with a heart that could become soft. I didn't. I made the wrong choice. I took the wrong path. And it created a defense mechanism in me that made me want to be so tough that no one could hurt my feelings. But that isn't what it means to be human. Being human is having feelings. Good ones and hard ones. And to shut yourself down from your own feelings is a quick way to make sure you won't be sensitive to anyone else's either. It would be several more years before I would allow Christ to do in me what I pray you won't wait another minute to let Christ do in you.

Release the stones. The person you are becoming won't need them.

RELEASE THE STONES



DAY 2

Using this list to come up with ideas or words of your own, fill in the stones with the things you want to let go of.

hurt
pain
rejection
fear

isolation
abandonment
shame
anger

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When something hurtful happens, what's your first reaction? Do you tend to close your heart or keep it open? Why do you think that is?
2. What fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; Galatians 5:22-23) do you most want God to grow in you right now?

HEART CHECK

How can you practice this fruit of the Spirit today?

Failure Is Not the Story

*Though I have fallen, I will stand up;
though I sit in darkness,
the LORD will be my light.*

MICAH 7:8

Lord, if you do this one thing for me, I will never ask you to do anything else ever again.

This was the prayer that ran like a repeat soundtrack through my bedtime routine my senior year of high school. I was entering my first pageant for my small Midwestern town. It was called Miss Berrien Springs, and while winning it wouldn't bring me anything close to Miss America fame, I believed with all my seventeen-year-old heart that getting that crown would be the beginning of the rest of my life. I practiced walking in heels. I looked in the mirror and tried to rehearse my shocked face for when they called my name. There was nothing I wanted to be more than Miss Berrien Springs. And if God was listening at all, this was all going to unfold beautifully.

When pageant night came, I was ready. My friend Haley let me borrow a beautiful white gown that I could never have afforded. I crushed my interview with the judges. I didn't trip during my walk onstage. When they called five of us contestants as finalists to a back room to await the onstage interview question, I knew that I had this thing in the bag. This was the last thing separating me from my new title. I was thrilled to watch God cash the check on all those late-night prayers.

"Stars choose to shine their light brightly. How do you choose to shine in your community?" The man from the radio station had a deep voice that bellowed into the microphone and across my high school gymnasium. I took a deep breath.

"I believe that you shine brightly when you push yourself to do your absolute best. I was on the newspaper staff, and so then I pushed myself to

become the newspaper editor. I was on the yearbook staff, but then I grew into the yearbook editor. We shine when we push ourselves to be at our best in whatever it is we are doing.” The crowd erupted in applause, and I felt so grateful I didn’t stumble on my answer.

At the conclusion of the pageant, the pageant directors had all the girls line up and face the audience. The court from the previous year would come up when their turn was called and each would place her crown on the head of the girl who would now take her place. They did Miss Congeniality first, then second runner-up. I held my breath, hoping not to be selected. Then they called first runner-up. The crowd fell silent.

I heard the clicking of heels coming up behind me on the stage, and I faked a smile when the crown went on my head. First runner-up. I didn’t win. I was not Miss Berrien Springs.

I pretended to be happy for the girl who did win. I smiled in the pictures just like I had practiced in the mirror. There is a photo of me in that expensive white gown standing next to my dad in my high school cafeteria. If you look closely, you can see the sadness in my eyes just above my smile. All I wanted at seventeen was that crown. I didn’t get it. I went home that night and tried to retrace my steps. “What did I do wrong?” I whispered out loud to the Lord. He never gave me an answer. My mascara ran off onto my pillow.

I had practiced my wave. I hadn’t practiced my loss.

Sometimes we try our best, give something everything we have, and still come up short. We pray for God’s blessing and are tempted to think that if we lose, it means he didn’t give it. As if the only way God blesses is through wins and not what we learn through losses. We think that we failed and our prayers did too.

God is always much more concerned with strengthening our character than with us earning applause. He hears our prayers, and we get to become part of how they’re answered. Doing our best is never failure.

Words mean things, and the way we describe ourselves matters. The word *failure* means “lack of success” or “a state of inability to perform.”² Here’s the thing: If you put your whole heart into something, then it is impossible to have a lack of success or an inability to perform—no matter

YOU ALREADY BELONG

the outcome. Showing up to your own life, pushing yourself to achieve a goal you have set, is always a success.

Not winning something doesn't equal losing something. You don't lose character when you're trying your hardest. You don't lose resilience when you show up for yourself. The fact that you tried means that you've gained something.

Be proud of yourself for trying. You just proved that you can show up to your own life and give it everything you've got.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:25, "Everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown." At seventeen, I thought a plastic crown would jump-start my life. Today I know that my character, perseverance, and resilience are not revealed by the things I win but by the way I handle the things I lose. This is part of the imperishable crown that Paul is talking about. This is a treasure of the Kingdom of God.

You can stop telling other people—and yourself—the story of how you failed. The story you are writing is so much bigger than one singular loss. The story you are writing is about becoming a person with the character and resilience to try.

LOSSES AND GAINS

List two losses you have experienced. Then write one thing you have gained from each of those situations.

Loss	Gain
.....	
.....	
.....	
.....	
.....	
.....	
.....	

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What have you learned about yourself when you win? How about when you lose?
2. What is something you are proud of yourself for trying?

HEART CHECK

Are you more focused on getting what you want from God or on letting him shape you through what you've already been given?