

KNOW
N

How Believing
Who God Says You Are
Changes Everything

Aubrey Sampson

All of humanity carries the image and likeness of God, and God has “named” his children with dignity—so that we might flourish and empower others to flourish. In *Known*, church planter and author Aubrey Sampson invites the reader to embrace his or her true “name” in Jesus so that the Name above every other name will be honored by all. Read this book and know the name above all others.

DR. DERWIN L. GRAY, lead pastor of Transformation Church, author of *God, Do You Hear Me?*

So many of us struggle with insecurity and unworthiness because we take our cues for value from what we see around us. *Known* helps us redirect our vision to the only place that matters: the Word of God. This book is like God calling us on the phone to remind us who we are in him. I pray many discover the truth in these words.

NONA JONES, bestselling author of *Success from the Inside Out*, head of global faith-based partnerships at Facebook

There are a lot of voices shouting at us about who we are. *Known* cuts through the noise with the biblical truths about how God sees us. Experience the powerful reality of God’s personal and specific names for you. Read this book, and you’ll find yourself freed and empowered to bless a hurting world.

MARK BATTERSON, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Circle Maker*, lead pastor of National Community Church

In *Known*, Aubrey Sampson bravely shines a light on both our individual and communal pain. At the same time, she points us to a greater truth: God has specific and powerful names that counter every lie about who we are. What an invitation—to

know how God sees us and loves us and to offer a hurting world an identity that can never be shaken.

DR. ANITA PHILLIPS, LCSW-C, trauma therapist, host of *In the Light* podcast

If you ever wanted to explore your identity and family name as a child of God, this is the book to pick up. In such a personal, authentic, vulnerable (yet biblical) way, Aubrey emphatically and comprehensively declares how you are known by God. My prayer as you read *Known*: Not only will you come to know who God says you to be, but you (as the title says) will come to believe who God says you are—and that, my friends, will change everything, from how you live to how you live sent.

ED STETZER, executive director of Wheaton College Billy Graham Center

Aubrey's book could be read slowly over time, but I ended up reading it in one sitting because I just couldn't get enough. Her words are powerful but always kind and tender. I loved the way she made deep theological truths and stellar exegetical work accessible and relevant to any of us struggling to find our identity in Christ. After two decades of teaching the Bible, I know this resource should be in the hands of any Christian seeking more intimacy with Christ.

KAT ARMSTRONG, author of *No More Holding Back* and *The In-Between Place*, preacher, cofounder of The Polished Network

There is a cosmic battle being waged for the identity of every one of us. In *Known: How Believing Who God Says You Are Changes Everything*, my friend Aubrey Sampson does a masterful job exposing the lies and telling us the truth about our true identity in God. Sampson addresses one of the great contemporary questions of our time in an insightful,

challenging, and compelling fashion. Read *Known* for yourself, but then share it with a friend.

DAVE FERGUSON, lead pastor of Community Christian Church, author of *B.L.E.S.S.: 5 Everyday Ways to Love Your Neighbor and Change the World*

Identity is *the* pain point of this generation. Many are risking everything to find who they are. The reality is we can't make an identity, nor can we find one by looking within—it must be given to us by God. But this journey of knowing who we are by God is not just cerebral, it's one that we have to feel in our bones. It has to make sense to us emotionally. This is why Aubrey's book is so wonderful and needed. I was deeply moved as I read her words. She takes the truth of who God says we are and doesn't just put a bow in it. Rather, she takes the reader on a journey that makes us feel all the feels and know what it's like in our messy world to be Known by the only Voice that matters.

DAVID LOMAS, pastor at Reality SF, author of *The Truest Thing About You*

I think every heart on the planet has gotten pretty banged up the past few years, bruised and rubbed raw, buried under layer upon layer of anxieties and insecurities. Then comes the gentle, healing message of *Known*. Author and pastor Aubrey Sampson invites us to come as we are and reminds us that in our most broken places, we are known and named by God.

CATHERINE MCNIEL, author of *Fearing Bravely, All Shall Be Well, and Long Days of Small Things*

This book is beautiful. The writing is beautiful, of course, but even more beautiful is the grace Aubrey Sampson writes about. Most beautiful still is the God of grace at the center of this story. This book will encourage you to rest in Jesus and his goodness.

In a time of sorrow and fear, this book steps in to point us to hope: hope in Christ as he sees and loves us.

MICAH FRIES, director of engagement at GlocalNet, director of programs at Multi-Faith Neighbors Network, author of *Leveling the Church*

“What’s in a name?” So much more than we (or Shakespeare) might realize. With her usual wit and insight, Aubrey Sampson teaches us that our names are a way of being known and that the name God gives us is the most important one of them all. With Aubrey as a guide, you’ll find the courage and freedom to live out of your true self, the one that is known and named by God.

MITCHEL LEE, lead pastor of Grace Community Church

In an age where you can be known by many and yet truly known by none, our souls long to be seen—flaws and all—and chosen nonetheless. In this raw, honest, and brilliant work, Aubrey Sampson shows us how to shed the false names we’ve assumed for ourselves and rest in the adoption of the Name above all names. I highly recommend this book to anyone who longs to feel completely understood and loved—which is all of us.

DAVEY BLACKBURN, author, speaker, host of the *Nothing Is Wasted* podcast

Aubrey Sampson is a wise teacher, a gentle guide into the tender spaces of our stories. *Known* speaks to our most fundamental longings with transformative hope. May the truths in these pages cause your heart to soar.

ANN VOSKAMP, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Broken Way* and *One Thousand Gifts*

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How Believing
Who God Says You Are
Changes Everything

Aubrey Sampson

Foreword by CHRISTINE CAINE



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with Tyndale House Publishers



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*For Jenn (a name with two n's)—
Your courageous battle with breast cancer
has displayed the ever-increasing glory of God
in ways more powerful than this book ever could.
On Wednesdays, we wear camo.*

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FOREWORD

Unnamed

2508 OF 1966.

That's what my birth certificate says. The hospital assigned me a number. Because my mother didn't name me.

Numbers are numbing. They don't feel. They don't see. They don't taste. They don't touch. They don't smell. They don't talk. They don't hear. They don't smile. They don't cry. They don't suffer. They don't live. They don't eat. They don't breathe. They don't desire. Numbers numb.

Numbers are desensitizing. As I'm writing this, there are 40 million slaves in the world.¹ There are 8,500 children dying of hunger every day.² There are almost 26 million refugees scattered around the globe.³ There are 60,000 dead because of natural disasters in the past year.⁴ Close to 800,000 have died of suicide.⁵ More than 40 million children have been abused.⁶ More than 2.5 million have died from COVID-19, and the number is still rising.⁷ More than 600,000 have died from breast cancer.⁸ When it's a number like these, it's impersonal. Distant. Overwhelming. A statistic. Not a person. But when it's someone you love. Someone you know. Someone who is your mother, sister, wife, daughter, or friend—then it's one too many. Then it's a person, not a number.

Numbers are dehumanizing. When the Jews, Poles, Roma, and Soviet POWs, along with twenty-five thousand other ethnicities, were rounded up and sent to Auschwitz, a number was tattooed on one of their arms. They were no longer regarded as human. No longer someone. No longer anyone. They were just a number. The next number in line for a meager portion of bread. The next number in line to work unrelenting hours. The next number in line to be shot. The next number in line for the pile. They were regarded as dispensable. Usable. Until they no longer were. They were manipulated. Violated. Discarded. Disposed. Incinerated.

My parents who adopted me never called me by the number assigned to me. They called me Christine, which means “follower of Christ.” Over time I became exactly what my name meant, but it wasn’t until I was thirty-three that I learned I was adopted. I lived more than three decades before I discovered I wasn’t who I thought I was. The day I finally held my birth certificate in one hand, with the number 2508 on it, I held a Bible in the other. It was open to Isaiah 49:1 (CSB): “The LORD called me before I was born. He named me while I was in my mother’s womb.”

Names matter to God. It took me a long time to believe that God had named me in my mother’s womb because, in addition to being adopted, I grew up a survivor of sexual abuse. And I was marginalized as a young person because of my Greek ethnicity and my gender. It was painful to not feel seen, or known, or accepted, or wanted, or chosen, or loved for so many reasons. I was riddled with shame, fear, insecurity, guilt, anger, bitterness, and brokenness. I felt like that number on my birth certificate, not a person created in the image of God on purpose and for a purpose.

It was only when I truly encountered Jesus and discovered what he said about me that the trajectory of my life changed. As Aubrey so beautifully pens in this book, it took time to understand . . .

God has named you. You are fully known, exquisitely loved, and securely held in his arms. He has given you names out of who you are now and for who you are in the process of becoming. But God doesn't bring you into this knowledge for knowledge's sake alone or even for your personal transformation alone. He doesn't just give you all the information about your identity, doesn't just tell you all the truths about yourself so you can sit there quietly and stare out at the water.

We are named to *go and live out our names*. We are called to live as “sent ones” on God's mission into the world.

Throughout *Known*, Aubrey poignantly shows the vital necessity of understanding that we are not what happened to us or what we have done. We are not what was said to us or what others have said about us. We are who God says we are, which is why one of the most important journeys we will ever take on this planet is the journey to discover who we really are in Christ. If we know who we are and why we are here, we will live out of that truth and not the facts of our past history or present circumstances. It is only the truth we know that will set us free.

Aubrey has given us a gift in these pages. Prepare to discover the magnificent truth of who you really are. Prepare to discover what God really thinks about you. His love is greater than you have ever imagined. If you live from the truth that you are fully seen, fully known, and fully loved by God, then you will thrive and flourish in life.

Christine Caine

founder of A21 and Propel Women

2021

AS WE BEGIN

A Question

WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

Aubrey, the name my parents gave me, comes from a character in a book and a song by the 1970s band Bread. Each summer, I'd spend a few weeks in the blazing Texas sun at my grandparents' house, and on the first day of my arrival, my sweet Papa would announce my entrance by playing "Aubrey" on his record player. He'd turn up the volume, then sway back and forth, while serenading me as I walked through the door—"And Aubrey was her name, a not so very ordinary girl or name. But who's to blame?"¹

It still makes me smile to think about my grandpa in red suspenders and starched blue jeans, standing by his record player, filled with giddy anticipation as he waited for the perfect moment to place the needle on the record.

This always felt like a twofold miracle—that my name was actually in a song and that someone I adored knew the words. I heard that song's refrain in my grandpa's tenor and knew immediately that I was welcomed, that I belonged, that I was not only loved but also cherished. I still play it on my own record player every time I miss him.

Depending on where you do your naming research, "Aubrey"

means “elf leader.”² Or “rules with elf wisdom.”³ My mom, however, rejects the elf etymology altogether and tells me that she chose Aubrey because she read somewhere that it means, simply, “leader with wisdom.” I certainly prefer that interpretation as an adult. But as a young girl, I used to play under the weeping willow in my parent’s backyard and pretend that I was the long-lost ruler of a hidden tribe of tiny, magical elven folk. My understanding of my name expanded my imagination of myself and helped me envision my place in the world, albeit a fanciful one.

Our names can inspire us, giving us permission to be ourselves.

In the ancient world, a person’s name was synonymous with their reputation,⁴ and still today, our names in many ways dictate who we will become. Perhaps you were named by doting parents who pored over baby books, discovering the perfect one just for you. Maybe you inherited a family or ancestral name—something strong and rooted in deep meaning. Our names have the potential to help us know who we belong to and that we belong somewhere at all.

Our names can hold a certain authority, strength, and purpose.

Of course, we know that is not true of every birthname. Some of us have traumatic name stories—we feel a sense of pain about our name because our family rejected us, and we carry a real or metaphorical sense of being unwanted. Maybe you don’t really know where your name comes from. Maybe it’s the vestige of a parent you never knew, or your family never spoke about its meaning. Maybe you have been forced to change your name due to a painful or scary life circumstance.

Our names can have the power to be badges of honor or badges of heartache.

Adding to this emotional complexity, our names are not limited to the ones we’re given at birth. We name or define ourselves

in other ways, as well—by our jobs, marital statuses, roles, cultural contexts, ethnicities, Enneagram numbers, strengths, talents, spiritual gifts, religious affiliations, tribes, hobbies. Those are wonderful characteristics about us, but even those names are only part of the complex tapestry of who we are and how God made us. They are not the whole of us.

Many of us also carry painful, damaging names that often leave us feeling alone, unknown. Names that we have spoken over ourselves or that others have branded us with—harmful nicknames and false monikers we have lived under, hurtful labels about who we are, lies about our worth and our place in the world. Some of these names loom larger than we want them to, and others aren't always obvious; they exist as fading marks. Scars, stitches, and scratches, barely visible on the surface anymore but regular reminders of our old wounds, difficult stories, and arduous battles.

If you are wearing a name that's been spoken over you, or one that you've held onto for reasons you don't understand anymore—if, as podcaster and author Emily P. Freeman says, you have a name that's "loud enough to have an impact, but not so loud that you remember to turn it off"—my prayer as you read this book is that the Spirit of God will gently, yet mightily, embolden you to leave that name behind.⁵

At the end of the day, only God has the power to name every part of you. His names for you speak the definitive truth over all the other ways you name yourself or the ways you have been named.

What if, in place of the negative names in your story, God wants to speak a new name, a better name, a healing name, a loving name, a freeing name over you? And what if he already has? In God, you are named—perfectly and truly—because in him, you are known completely.

What's at stake for understanding our sacred namedness is nothing less than how we reflect God in the world, how we treat others, and how we allow others to treat us. This concept shapes the very nature of how we live, how we love, how we move and have our being, and how we bear witness to the gospel. Knowing our names, knowing how God sees us and loves us in all of the uniqueness of how he's created us, is foundational to our existence.

This Is Your Name

In these pages, we're going to take a journey into the truth of how you've been named, exploring who you are, whose you are, and how living into those identities changes everything. Each of the chapters calls out one of God's names for you: Beloved, Known, Whole, God's Child, Living Statue, and more. Inspired from various Scriptures about the image of God and the names of God, each of these names proclaims a truth over your life, grounding you in a reality that cannot be shaken:

Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground."

So God created human beings in his own image.
 In the image of God he created them;
 male and female he created them.

Then God blessed them. . . . God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!

GENESIS 1:26-28, 31, NLT

O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!
Your glory is higher than the heavens. . . .

What are mere mortals that you should think about them,
human beings that you should care for them?
Yet you made them only a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honor.

PSALM 8:1, 4-5, NLT

For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

PSALM 139:13-14

All of us who have had that veil removed can see and
reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is
the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are
changed into his glorious image.

2 CORINTHIANS 3:18, NLT

Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly
righteous and holy.

EPHESIANS 4:24, NLT

You are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy
nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can
show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of
the darkness into his wonderful light.

“Once you had no identity as a people;
now you are God's people.

Once you received no mercy;
now you have received God's mercy."

1 PETER 2:9-10, NLT

Knowing who we really are is vital to our individual flourishing and our community's flourishing as well. This topic of namedness is crucial to consider in groups, where we can create safe spaces to be vulnerable with one another, speak true names over each other, and point out where we might be living under false names. For that reason, at the end of this book, I've included a study guide and series of questions for personal reflection or small-group/missional-community/book-club discussion. I would highly recommend reading and reflecting on this book with a community of people and/or inviting others into a book study that you lead.

An Invitation

Spiritual director and CEO Ruth Haley Barton suggests that we are always being "saved from who we are not and called to be who we are."⁶ As you read, my biggest dream for you is to find freedom from any false name you are living under so that you can simultaneously experience divine transformation, becoming who you truly are in Christ.

This journey to understand who you are, whose you are, and what it all means cannot be embarked on lightly. You are about to peer into the very depths of your soul—the pain you carry, the lies you've believed, the truth that is stronger, and the fundamental worthiness of who God says you are.

So I invite you to take your birthname, its origins, and all the good ways you name yourself—all of the grace-filled and powerful memories of your name—in one hand. Then, carefully

and tenderly, take the false or negative names you have been called or have lived under in the other. Together, let's open our hands and present them all before God.

God, we are laying our names—both true and false—on a proverbial table before you without judgment. What is your invitation? What new name(s) might you want to speak over us in these pages? What names do you want us to let go of forever? We want to hear our true names from you, oh God, our Namer. Meet us here, will you? For the sake of your name and your glory.

I asked you a question as we began—*What is your name?* But as we begin, that's actually not the question we need to answer. What matters above all else is this: *Where is your name?* Scripture tells us,

- God has called you by name (Isaiah 43:1).
- Your name is engraved on God's hand (Isaiah 49:16).
- Your name is written in God's Book of Life (Luke 10:20).

That means your name exists in three astonishing places. Your name lives, permanently and perpetually, on the lips of God, in the hand of God, and has poured forth from the pen of God, onto the pages of God.

No matter how false names may have tried to own you, you belong to the One who has named you—the One who has sung the song of your name across time, space, and history. Listen to his voice and live.

Aubrey

PART I

WHO YOU ARE

The names that God calls you are the
only ones you should be answering to.

PRISCILLA SHIRER

THIS IS THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN LONGING: TO BE KNOWN.

Not famous. Not noteworthy. But to be *intimately understood*. We want to know that someone sees us, gets us, accepts us, and is *for* us, just as we are for others. We want to know that the aching and raw places in our souls, the questions we have about our existence, the secret dreams and heartaches we hold, are carefully tended to.

And what we're really longing for—in all of this—is love.

The greatest miracle to ever occur is that the God of the universe knows you and wants to be known by you and has called you by name, as deep calls to deep, into his perfect love.

But who are you in God's sight? He has bestowed on you powerful, loving, and life-changing names—so that you can begin to understand just how *known* you truly are.

BELAVED

Did God Really Say?

Then God blessed them. . . .
 God looked over all he had made,
 and he saw that it was very good!

GENESIS 1:28, 31, NLT

The power that brought the swirling stars, the dazzling snow, the summer sunrises, and the entire cosmos into existence; the power that put on flesh, bore a cross, and conquered death and evil—that same power breathed a name from the breadth of his unending love for you. It is your first name and your truest name: *Beloved*.

DO YOU BELIEVE YOURSELF WORTHY OF LOVE?

My forehead is pressed against a cool airplane window, the pressure of which is relieving my nausea and mercifully preventing me from vomiting. Getting sick in one of those small, white barf bags is an unacceptable option right now, especially because I am sitting next to a guy who, just a few seconds ago, dumped me.

We've been dating almost a year, and just before this weekend getaway with our little group of friends, he told me that he loved me . . . *wait for it* . . . for my potential.

“I love you, for your potential.”

Literally. He said this.

What, in fact, he means by this (and I know because he explains it) is that if I begin educating myself on meaningful authors and thoughtful art-house movies, if I can finally improve my taste in music and just sort of generally see the world through different lenses (*his* lenses, I'm guessing)—an education he is willing to undertake—then I will be worthy of his love. He mentions that I should consider a bit more exercise as well.

“One day, I could totally see myself falling in love with you . . . when you are ready for me.”

The pitiful thing is that I just sort of blindly accepted this dangling-carrot dynamic of affection for a time. That is, until this flight. (*Sweet Jesus, thank you for this flight!*) It is here on this airplane that I finally realize what a twisted mess the whole situation is.

And it's not like you think. It's not that I look down out of the airplane window at the world below me and come to some profound realization that if he doesn't love me for who I am, then *shame on him!* It's not some empowering moment of self-actualization. It's actually because of a burrito.

Let me explain.

The flight attendant is handing out burritos for the in-flight meal, and the guy keeps going on and on about it. I mean, he Can't. Let. It. Go. He's sitting there in his aisle seat, legs spread out, taking up way too much space as it is. He's got a highlighter stuck behind one ear, and he's reading some pretentious book, but he keeps setting the book down on the tray table in front of him to complain about the *audacity* of burritos on an airplane. “Burritos? What are they thinking! I could *never* eat a burrito on an airplane. It's *soooooo* unappealing. Can you imagine anyone ever deliberately eating that?”

Now, I certainly recognize that airplane burritos might not be the best version of a burrito or the wisest use of tight space and

human bodily functions. And the truth is, I don't really even want to eat the airplane burrito, but I also realize that this moment is a watershed for *my entire future*.

I understand that if I don't eat this burrito right this second, I will inadvertently allow myself to remain stuck in this inequitable relationship. I also recognize that this moment isn't truly about *this* guy at all. It's that I suddenly have this new sense of urgency. I don't want to stay trapped in a pattern of desperate dependence on others' approval. I mean, if your entire life's value, your *givenness*, relies on the inconsistent whims of a particular group of people, or on another sinful human being, that is not a great place to be.

So I flag the flight attendant and ask her for a burrito. "Make it a double," I'm tempted to say.

With that, the boyfriend eyeballs me with disbelief and derision, then dumps me. And so with several more uncomfortable hours of flight time to go, my forehead is pressed against the plane's window, not because I am heartbroken over him, and not because I am nauseated by the burrito (it was a good burrito!). But because I am sick to my stomach. I had voluntarily placed myself on a scale of his own making, and in many other ways, on many other occasions, on countless others' scales—frantic to achieve some tenuous measure of worth.

Around this time, I had a mentor who asked me a poignant question: "Do you believe yourself worthy of love?"

I couldn't answer.

Because like so many of us, even before that arrogant boy ever came into the picture, I had named myself falsely. Through the various movements and moments in my life's narrative, up to that point, I had picked up and held on tightly to certain destructive names, names like Rejected, Unworthy, Unlovable, Not Enough.

Ultimately, my mentor was asking a question about my notion of myself in the world. And in doing so, she was saying *that* notion—those false names—desperately needed to be healed.

All of this makes me wonder about you, friend, about your own notions of yourself. Your story may be a tender one—

- A dad who left and never returned.
- A mom whose acceptance you can never quite achieve, no matter how hard you try.
- Violence you've experienced because of your ethnicity or gender.
- A loved one who decided the relationship wasn't worth fighting for, and you're still not sure what you did wrong.
- An identity struggle.
- An inability to measure up to your own standards.
- A long wait for that one big thing to happen—and you're starting to question if it ever will.
- A partner, a friend, the one you thought you would plan with, run with, dream with, and do life with who seems to have moved on without you.
- Another person receiving the attention and acclaim and affirmation you long for, leaving you wondering why you keep getting overlooked.
- A painful sense of abandonment.
- Or a general sense that you can never do enough, be enough, or do it the right way.

“The heart’s hunger is infinite,” writes author and philosopher James K. A. Smith.¹ And the reality is, our hungry and hurting souls need constant reminders about who we really are.

Even decades after that miserable plane ride—now, when I believe myself to be a settled, empowered, and confident adult—it’s astonishing how regularly I catch myself striving, hustling, achieving, posting, earning, doing. Not from joy—from *desperation*. Due to stress or fear or discontentment, or maybe just because I didn’t sleep well the night before, I suddenly grow anxious to earn the approval of some ghost, hungry to hit some ever-elusive, ever-blurry target of enoughness.

Whenever that restlessness creeps in, I have to stop and speak grace over myself: “Breathe, little soul. Slow down, little heart. What are you striving for? What are you after? You already have God’s approval and love. You are already known and accepted. Be loved, *Beloved*.”

Or, borrowing a phrase from King David’s own self-talk, “Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you” (Psalm 116:7).

I find this to be such refreshing news. Even the forefathers and foremothers of our faith needed to remind themselves of their true names.

Beloved, Your First Name

The power that brought the swirling stars, the dazzling snow, the summer sunrises, and the entire cosmos into existence; the power that put on flesh, bore a cross, and conquered death and evil—that same power breathed a name from the breadth of his unending love for you. It is your first name and your truest name: *Beloved*.

This name has existed for a long time. Long before the Fall, long before God gave Adam and Eve a tour of their little garden paradise, long before God commissioned them to cultivate the land, or engineer their city, or govern anything—before they

did anything meaningful or noteworthy—God spoke a blessing of goodness over them, simply because they existed. “You are very good!” God cried out as both a proclamation and a heartfelt response (Genesis 1:31, author’s paraphrase).

New Testament scholar and author Scot McKnight writes that “God’s glory echoes through all creation: *tov me’od*. Very good! Very well done! Perfect! Harmony! What a masterpiece!” McKnight adds, “All these English terms, and more, are found in the word *tov*.”²

Over Adam and Eve (and over you, as well), God declares with divine delight, affection, and approval, “You are very good!” And it’s not a stretch to assume that “beloved,” *agapētos* in Greek—a term that means *special, dear, object of special affection, worthy of love*³—is also contained in the Hebrew word *tov*. In fact, in some Bible translations, both terms, *very good* and *beloved*, are similarly defined as “precious.”⁴

Which makes sense—these are, after all, statements about the innate value and pleasure that God has for you and feels for you.

It’s as if, at the emergence of the created order, God made an announcement about you, a broadcast loud for the entire solar system to hear; God named you with enough force to reach through time and space: *You are very good, my beloved! My beloved, you are very good!*

Ephesians chapter 1 echoes this theme, proclaiming that God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world, “that we should be holy and without blemish before him in love . . . according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:4-6, ASV).

In other words, even *before* that grand announcement, before the foundations of the earth were ever spoken into existence, God was *already* calling you Beloved, through his beloved son, Jesus.

So, when we hear God calling Adam and Eve “very good,” we understand that he was simultaneously calling them his dearly loved ones, his beloved children. And what we discover, remarkably, is this: In God’s economy, there is no “because” in Beloved. There is no dangling carrot in Beloved. There is no “if you reach your potential” in Beloved.

Though we know that sin will enter the Garden picture and change the narrative, we still need to begin here: with our first name, Beloved. As author and priest Henri Nouwen said, “Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the ‘Beloved.’ Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence.”⁵

God’s great love for you simply and profoundly *is*, because God is, simply and profoundly, love. God loves you and speaks goodness and delight over you not because you have earned it or achieved it. Because you exist, you are worthy of love.

Did God Really Say . . . ?

Though we are so exquisitely loved by God, this tendency to name ourselves wrongly or to actively live from a place of rejection or unworthiness is an ancient instinct—as old as the Garden of Eden where that primal serpent hissed his subtle question into the universe, into Eve and Adam’s ears, and into the echoes of our sacred namedness today: “Did God really say . . . ?”

We tend to think of Satan’s craftiness (Genesis 3:1) as shrewd and vile, which is true. But did you know there’s another translation for the word *crafty* in Genesis 3? *Crafty* is also *prudent*.⁶ As in sensible, as in acting with care and forethought.

Yes, we rightly assign chaos and destruction to the Accuser, and we know where to point the finger when the evil is obvious.

But how often do we fall prey to the enemy's ploys of logic? The serpent is a liar, but don't be fooled; he attacks in ways that are precise, careful. Otherwise we wouldn't fall for them.

Think about the prudence of the question—*Did God really say . . . ?* This is a tactically brilliant maneuver because it strikes at the heart of two names: God's name and our own name of Beloved. This question causes *us* to question—to grow suspicious, to doubt that God is really who God says he is. And if our spiritual enemy can incite a mistrust of God's nature, God's promises, and God's Word, then he can completely undermine our faith journey and destabilize our life's trajectory. Ultimately, if we don't trust God, we are unlikely to live sacrificially or passionately for God's name and God's Kingdom. We are unlikely to allow God to define much about us at all.

Consider this: *Did God really say . . . ?* can also mean:

- *Have God's boundaries for my life fallen in pleasant places?*
- *Is God withholding favor and blessing from me?*
- *Is God cruel?*
- *Is God all-powerful?*
- *Is God's Word true?*
- *Does God really have the "best" in store for me?*
- *Does God actually love me?*
- *Am I worthy of God's love?*
- *Am I enough?*
- *Does God actually see me? My dreams? My hopes?*

Like I said, *prudent*—because that one question contains countless other questions. *Did God really say . . . ?* can trigger all of the doubts and fears that lay dormant in our hearts: doubts about God's love, fears about his trustworthiness. All of it leading to a belief that we are unworthy and that God is unloving.

But there is a voice louder than the enemy's, a tactic stronger, wiser, and more farsighted than the garden serpent could ever hope to employ. Where Satan has a plot, God has a plan: Jesus.⁷

Jesus Christ, the Beloved Son of God, “f[ou]ght against and triumph[ed] over the evil powers of the world”⁸ and in Jesus, God silences the voice of our enemy, the voice of rejection. In Jesus, we have a Savior and a Victor who died and rose again to forgive us, died and rose again to overcome the powers of evil and death in this world, and died and rose again “that we might,” as author Rick Richardson suggests, “receive and believe the new name and fulfilled identity [God] calls us into.”⁹

In fact, when we look to the baptism of Jesus, we find God speaking a new name and fulfilled identity over Jesus: “This is my beloved Son,” the Father declares, “with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:16-17, ESV).

In Jesus, this is also your inheritance, your fortune, and your promise—you are not unworthy, abandoned, or rejected.

In Jesus, you are declared *Beloved Daughter*, *Beloved Son*—with whom God is well pleased.

Oil, Wine, and Bandages

God called us Beloved from the beginning, and Jesus, God in the flesh, spoke Beloved over us again and again as he walked among us. The book of Luke records one of those moments. It's a story, actually, that Jesus told: about a man battered, a man bereft, a man broken by the sins of others. A man not unlike you and me. This man was attacked and robbed, then left for dead on the side of the road.

Many religious leaders walked past this man, blatantly choosing to neglect their hurting neighbor. And then—an enemy walked by. “A despised Samaritan”—a man whom the Jewish people would

have dismissed and kept their distance from by virtue of his ethnicity and religion—saw the dying man and felt compassion for him.

Jesus describes in stunning detail what the good Samaritan's love looked like: "The Samaritan soothed [this man's] wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him" (Luke 10:34, NLT).

Jesus paints a picture of a love that bears another's pain, a love that moves toward another, a love that nurses wounds, a love that brings the hurting person home, a love that provides, a love that heals, a love that deems the unlovable *worthy of love*. Though this is a story about how we ought to love our neighbors and our enemies, it is simultaneously a picture of the depth of God's love for us, even while we were still sinners, even while we were his enemies (Romans 5:8, 10).

This is not a *you are tolerated* kind of love.

Not an *I love you for your potential* kind of love.

Not a *strive and hustle* kind of love.

Not an *earn it if you're lucky* kind of love.

Not a *leave you in your ditch of despair* kind of love.

Not a *put you on a scale and measure you* kind of love.

Beloved, God's love for you in Christ is nothing short of all-consuming. His love is a love that triumphs over every abusive tactic, prudent or otherwise, of the enemy. God's love is anointing oil. His love is warm, soothing wine. His love is a bandage that binds. His love finds you, abandoned in your trauma and rejection, lifts you out, and brings you home, where your hungry, hurting soul can at last find its fill, can at last find its rest—in him.

Did God really say you are his Beloved?

Oh yes, my friend. He did.

This is your first name, your true name.

So breathe, little soul. Slow down, little heart. What are you striving for? What are you after? You already have God's approval and love. You are already known and accepted. You already have victory in Jesus. So return to your rest, for the Lord has been good to you.

Be loved, *Beloved*.