

The background of the cover is a white grid of squares. Some squares are filled with solid colors: purple, green, orange, yellow, blue, and red. Other squares are empty or contain faint, textured brushstrokes in shades of green and purple. The overall effect is a vibrant, abstract pattern.

THE SECURE SOUL

An Identity Anchored in the Love of Christ

Tammy L. Smith, Ph.D.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The Secure Soul is an invitation to walk in God's intention for your soul's design. It is a call to align your life with the beautiful particulars of who God made you to be and find rest in this truth: You were created on purpose with a purpose.

Insecurity will fade as you develop the tools to build a life upon the reality that identity is found, cultivated, and fulfilled in Jesus. When you live from an identity anchored in the love of Christ, you will experience the peace you crave.

In *The Secure Soul*, you are invited to stop shopping horizontally for what's already been given vertically. Instead, experience radical change, peace, and joy, and be released from the grip of comparison, social media, approval-seeking, addiction, and performance-based living. Discover a foundation for building a daily identity rooted in hopeful, loving, and enlightening truths from Scripture—empowering you to live out your unique and beautiful identity.

The Secure Soul: An Identity Anchored in the Love of Christ

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Jesus, you and I both know this was about so much more than writing a book. There's no way I can dedicate this to anyone but you. You have been more faithful to me than words can contain, bringing my soul back from the brink to you time and again, and strengthening me one breath at a time, one day at a time, one step at a time.

You also gave me yourself directly through Mike, Kim, Ali, Zoe, Carol and a whole gaggle of the deepest kind of soul friends anyone could ever ask for. I literally wouldn't be here without your gift of them. Thank you for providing just like you promise.



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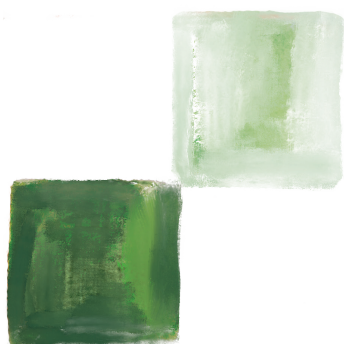
A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I long for you to live in peace and strength. I dream about relationships where unconditional love is the norm and a steady stream of grace empowers each member of your duo, trio, or tribe. I yearn for people who forgive easily, travel with empathy, and allow everyday slights to roll smoothly off their back. I pray that the central and guiding energy for daily living is the truth that we're God's masterpiece creations and that Jesus has made provision for our sinful choices.

I'm distraught by how many beautiful, breathtaking children of God look for self-worth and value in the eyes of strangers, the responses of fickle crowds, and the pressure of performing. I wrote this book out of love and a depth of compulsion from the Lord that is unexplainable. I'm asking him to make it so much more than words on a page but rather a living, dynamic, transforming conversation with him that leads you to a place you never imagined.

I pray that, on every page, you encounter a deepening sense of purpose, design, and intention that brings more joy than you ever thought possible. Thank you for allowing me to be a partner with you on this journey toward living in security and the too-many-to-list blessings that come with it. This world needs the unique expression of God that is you, and I can't wait to see it.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jammy". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "J" and a long, sweeping tail on the "y".







INTRODUCTION

You are a stunning display of the glory of God.

You—yes, *you*—are a reflection of the brilliance that is God's glory: the same remarkable beauty that artists have yearned to capture in paintings for centuries, the same breathtaking marvel that parents feel when handed their newborn baby. Each is a reflection of God's glory. And you are equally wonder-filled.

If you don't believe those words, we have a problem. If you don't believe those words, you'll never withstand the difficulties inherent in broken people in our broken world. Your relationships will struggle to be sustained in love and kindness, and your insecurity will obsessively wander like a lost ship, never finding port.

The truth is: *Your story is epic*. It is the kind of epic that, if written by a skilled author, would keep someone up all night reading. It's a series so compelling, you'd binge-watch the whole thing in one gluttonous popcorn-and-candy sitting. Seriously. And if you can't see that, it's a problem, and it's likely why you hold this book in your hands right now. You've endured broken naïveté and rejection. You've had successes and earned achievements. You've held secrets, navigated fear, been loved, known hate, walked with God, overcome injustice, been healed from sickness, lived in family dysfunction of some sort, had your heart broken, grieved your shattered dreams, and somehow you still managed

to scrape your way forward to pursue a compelling existence of love and hope. Think about how much you would enjoy that type of character in such a saga, let alone root for them.

Far more than a self-esteem issue, your concept of yourself and your existence on this earth determines whether you struggle or thrive, whether you're fulfilled or unfulfilled, and whether you're navigating life with confidence and peace or insecurity and confusion. You're meant to live from a rock-solid foundation, one that is vastly more immovable than the sum total of yours and others' opinions of you. If this sounds refreshing, read on.

First, we'll find and secure our identity (what I'll call "Soul") as intentionally designed within the larger plan and purposes of God. Then, we'll understand how brokenness damages our intended self (we might call this "Soul Crash"). After that, we'll learn specific and exciting ways to live fully within the identity that is ours alone, never to imitate another. Finally, we'll spend time becoming more solid and strong in our truest sense of self, brought by surrender and submission to the Lord (I call this process "Soul 2.0"). I'm so excited to go on this adventure with you!

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OPINIONS OF YOU.



CHAPTER ONE

Soul Specific

You are already having a reaction to this book, and you have only read the introduction. Maybe you are reading and feel captivated, or maybe you are questioning whether or not to keep reading. Maybe you feel validated, attacked, seen, offended, or curious. How is this happening, precisely? How did you come to make sense of black and white etchings on a page that cause you to behave in certain ways and have certain emotions? And why do you have the emotions you do? Why do you have the hobbies you do? How did you become the only one in your family who has a certain collection, passion, or skill set? Seriously, why are you the way you are?

If you can really drill down your answer to that question, it could change everything. You and I both know we are not instructing our own hearts to beat. We are not directing our neurons to fire in such a way as to hear the sounds around us or process the information we are taking in. Yet these things are happening within you. Your endocrine system is regulating your blood sugar level so you can function. Your metabolic system is absorbing every bit of nutrition from the food you ate earlier and working to separate out the waste from nourishment. And all these things are happening without your control. Why and how is this so?

Honestly, what is your explanation for the “you” that you are? Nature? Nurture?

Do you have an answer for who or what made and designed you?

Your perspective on every struggle in life can be transformed if you believe, in the depths of your soul, that you were created on purpose—that you are made by design. Specifically. Intentionally. Purposefully. Living in the deliberateness with which you were crafted together can result in levels of peace, security, comfort, and freedom you merely long for today. If you picked up this book because you are sad, anxious, or hopeless about the life you have, then keep reading until every word sinks in and shifts those discouraging states into encouraging strength.

In the face of the unknown, clear answers provide a sense of security. When you hear a strange noise, you generally do not feel at ease until you discover its source. When we face a difficult task, we feel fearful and uneasy until we receive directions or find solutions. Clarity settles us. As believers in Christ, we have the opportunity for this kind of settledness in our identity. As nonnegotiable as $2 + 2 = 4$, the Bible—history’s most cataloged document of all time—provides soul-settling certainty about our origin and purpose.

Isaiah 57:16 speaks unequivocally about our origins. The prophet records God saying, “I am the One who gave the breath of life to my people” (TPT). Other Bible translations give us absolute certainty that we were made by God: “the very people I have created” (NIV); “all the souls I have made” (NLT); “the breath of life that I made” (ESV). Acts 17:24–25 confirms: “He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples . . . He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need” (NLT).

Psalm 24:1 says plainly, “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” God is the owner of the earth and those who dwell therein. It’s not hard to believe such a thing when standing in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, watching

the sun set over the ocean, or peering over the edge of the Grand Canyon. But somehow, the fears and noise of daily life pull us away from this quiet confidence. If we distill this into a single thought, Psalm 24 conveys God as the reference frame for all of life. *The earth is the Lord's, along with everything and everyone in it.* Is God your reference for all of your life, or is your faith in him more an afterthought amid the demands of your calendar and busyness of your schedule? Psalm 100:3 commands us, "Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture." We can and must live our lives on this foundation. I did not make myself, he did. We are *his* people and the sheep of *his* pasture.

If you have never read the account of creation in Genesis 1, take a moment and do so. Even if you have read it before, do it again. Read it with curiosity, not glossing over it with familiarity or questioning argumentation. While the creation story is about the overarching work of God and his limitless power, for our purposes, we will hone in on three clear takeaways about your creation by God. See if you can find what they are:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the

creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.
(Genesis 1:26–31)

Here are the takeaways:

1. I was created “very good!”
2. I am made in the image of God.
3. I am made to have power and purpose.

Start with the idea that you are “very good.” This is not some pride-in-your-efforts, ginned-up confidence; it is the understanding that the fundamental idea of you is very good. This value exists apart from the choices you have made and separate from what others think or have ever said about you. Can you hold on to the idea that you are very good, period? Or do you only feel “very good” when you do something nice, help another in need, or reach a difficult goal?

Now consider: Do you feel like you are enough? Any of the enoughts: smart enough, thin enough, successful enough? Why or why not? It’s likely that if you had an ingrained sense of being very good, you would not question your “enoughness.”

Consider the times in your life when you have felt like you are enough? When and why did you feel that way? Was it after completing a successful project? Receiving applause from others? Reaching a financial goal? Gaining influence on social media?

Alternatively, consider when you have not felt like you are enough. When and why did you feel that way? Was it after a breakup? Being let go from your job? Your presentation at work flopping?

Are you relating? Have you ever had any of these thoughts?

I feel like I am enough because I work hard at my job.

I feel like I am not enough because I do not have many friends.

I feel like I am enough because I have made lots of money.

I feel like I am not enough because I do not have a committed relationship.

I feel like I am enough because others like me.

Surely, when we draw it out this way, you realize the errancy of the “because” and how it goes against the intrinsic value God has given you. You have value, period. What you do or do not do behaviorally is a separate matter. What others think or do not think is a nonissue. Our core understanding must be that we are intentionally created by God and that creation is “very good.” Across cultures, apples are universally understood as “good.” An apple literally has no awareness of its goodness. How much more valuable are you, created child of God? May our sense of intrinsic value become as unquestioned as an apple’s goodness.

Secondly, we were made in the image of God. If we slow down and ponder that fact for a moment, it makes sense. When we consider stories of heroic, superhuman efforts or the enduring spirit of someone wrecked by life yet continues to rise for the sake of others, it’s not hard to believe we were made in the image of God. But love is the greatest revelation of God contained within us. Yes, love. You can see it in the obsession with every aspect of love. From sex to romance to family relationships to friendship, love—as the ’60s song says—makes the world go ’round. Millions upon millions of songs and countless stories, movies, shows, series, novels, and sagas center around the various facets of love—its pursuit, longing, fulfillment, and unfulfillment.

If there is anything that ought to prove to us that we are made in the image of God, it’s how every human ever created has a love agenda. Love renews; love energizes; love inspires. This is because God himself is love. Love is not an attribute of his, it is his actual essence. Love is not something he does sometimes: “God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16 ESV). That’s why the supremacy of

love in the human experience is a massive signpost pointing to the validity of our being created in the image of Love himself.

The third truth about us—that we were made to have power and purpose—resonates strongly with core human drives. Power—the sense of impacting the world and others through personal agency—is at work all the time in humans. As a counselor, one of my favorite questions to ask couples in their first session is, “Who has the most power?” The ways in which they engage and answer are fascinating, but no one denies that power is an aspect of their relationship. When we are emotionally mature, we are conscious of how it drives us, how we steward it, and even how we may inappropriately garner it. But rest assured, power is always at play. The universal desire for a unique sense of power, along with purpose, is another confirmation of our creation by God himself.

SOUL, SURELY

While establishing and navigating the depth of security we have in being created by God, it is important to understand that God did not just create our bodies. We are equally and foremost a soul. The body, while fabulously complex, intricate, and powerful, is a vehicle to house the soul (2 Corinthians 5:1). St. Thomas Aquinas described well how the essence of our souls will not perish with the perishing of the body.¹ In fact, our soul will receive a body again in the resurrection of the body (1 Corinthians 15:35–40), but our soul is critical to establishing our identity.² The point is that many people give much greater attention to the body without considering the deepest parts of who they are.

Soul attention, care, and nurture include things like prayer, journaling, solitude, worship music, Scripture memorization, enjoyment of nature, meditating on truth, and listening to the Holy Spirit, to name a few. These are important as we learn to navigate living both in the incredible body we have been given and on the planet we inhabit. Jesus incarnated in a body and resurrected with a body, so we do not want to minimize our own. But if we do not start caring for our souls, we will never be able

to get out of the gates and run the race before us with security and strength.

Certainly, some people debate the soul-first presumption, especially in scientific and philosophical realms. They purport everything knowable about the soul can be learned by studying the functioning of the brain. However, the belief that humans have souls has historically been held by a majority of the general population for a reason. While the sciences have made great gains in explaining the function of the human nervous system, subjective experiences remain a mystery. We see aspects of the soul's primacy when we feel a catch in our throats looking up at the starry sky, when something inside us swells with emotion while listening to beautiful music, when we experience peace standing at the foot of a giant tree, or when we feel deep compassion watching an older person struggle. Indeed, the mysteries of birth and death, various types of consciousnesses, and processes like imagination imply the existence of a force independent of mere particles orbiting the earth.

Imagine it possible to clone your sister who passed away: an identical replica who talks, looks, acts, and smells exactly like the person with whom you grew up. Even if this clone had her memories inserted into it, do you think you would be satisfied with an exact copy? Would it end the pain of your loss? No, because something is missing. This is not your sister. While she has your sister's mannerisms and memories, she does not have her soul. It just isn't her. That's the essence of a soul. It is what makes you "you." It is the desired design of God that makes each one of us unique. Beyond your genetics and characteristics, it is the core of your being—the undefinable essence that is you.

Most of us do not need scientific proof of the soul to know it based on our own experiences. You have the choice to neglect or embrace your truest you. If you want to have any modicum of peace in your life, you must care for your soul with the same attention you give your body. This means dedicating intentional time and effort to nurturing and protecting your soul. Caring for the body as a carrier of your spirit and God's Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19) is wonderful, necessary, and certainly a priority to health

and well-being. But our bodies will inevitably deteriorate in this life, while our souls will not. Yes, our bodies are raised with us, and caring for them is important because God cares about them, but “self-care” (focused on the body) is not going to nourish us into eternal life—soul-care will (2 Corinthians 4:16). Regardless of what modern messaging suggests, self-care is not the priority. Rather, *we need soul-care first and self-care second.*

YOU: THERE WILL ONLY EVER BE ONE

To summarize what we have covered thus far: If we do not believe that we were intentionally created by a good God and made in the image of that goodness, we will never find contentment in this life. Our story will be a quest for assurance rather than an adventure driven by confidence in love and purpose. It is time to understand that if we do not take God at his word regarding our identity and purpose, it will be nothing but a fruitless pursuit of mirage after mirage of false foundations.

Instead, our story is spelled out as concretely as possible in God’s gift of Psalm 139. Across cultures and centuries, it speaks to the heart of every possible kind of soul—whether rich or poor, influential or obscure, happy-go-lucky or melancholy, analytical or emotive, extroverted or introverted, educated or uneducated, rigid or flexible, light-hearted or serious. The words of this psalm bore through the clamor straight to the human heart. It is intended to be a place of both settling and soaring for every single person. Brother or sister, will you allow this to become a landing place for every question you have ever had about yourself? Will you permit it to be the balm for every unkind word, the support from every disappointing outcome, and the resting place for every anticipated fear? Will you now, by the power of the Holy Spirit, ask the Lord to make these words your shelter in a shame storm from this day forward?

You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;

you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you, LORD, know it completely
You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

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;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained
for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.
How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!
Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you. (Psalm 139:1–18)

Will you agree that you were God's idea? You are not a mistake.
God is the one who implanted the unique genetic code that knit

you together in your mother's womb. He knew you before you were conceived just as well as he knows you now. God himself desired and designed you. The fact that, of the 7.4 billion people on this earth, you are the only you there will ever be should speak volumes. You were born with 270 bones, 100 billion nerve cells, and a heart that will pump a million barrels of blood in your lifetime. There's literally never going to be anyone else on earth like you with your one-of-a-kind bones, blood, and beauty. Nobody else has your DNA, and no soul will ever be cloneable. The bottom line is that you were handmade and handpicked by God.

Perhaps you need to write out Psalm 139 in your own words. The life-orienting conclusions are numerous and robust. In this psalm, we see God's omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence—his limitlessness—applied to the singular life. These words are meant to give us hope about our life! Just pull out the facts:

- I was created on purpose.
- There's nothing about me God doesn't know.
- God sees everything I do.
- God knows every thought I have.
- There's nothing about me that is surprising or shocking to God.
- Nobody will ever know me like God.
- I can't hide from God.
- If I try to hide, I make my life miserable (*in the depths*).

From this day forward, do not let anyone convince you there is no purpose or plan for you. God wants you to live without ever forgetting who taught your heart to beat, who wanted you just the way you are, and who inhabits every fiber of your being with his creative heart of pure love. If you have a penchant for mourning your insignificance, this psalm makes it difficult to keep doing so. It tells you to stop trying to be another face in the crowd and walk in the uniqueness that is you. Your differences from others are on purpose for God's purposes!

If you've never read Ephesians 2:10, listen to this awesomeness: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Here again, God is telling us directly through his Word that he made you on purpose. Other versions of the Bible translate the word "handiwork" as "masterpiece" or "workmanship." The clear idea is that the Master Craftsman makes everything exactly as he wants—every single detail. So when you look in the mirror with a critical spirit or bemoan aspects of yourself that culture has taught you to disparage, please remember what you are doing. Imagine being in an art gallery and making derogatory comments about an art piece only to realize the artist was standing right behind you. This is an apt picture of what happens when you disdain and reject yourself. You are the art piece! You were made by the Master Craftsman just as he wanted!

The second half of Ephesians 2:10 adds even more to the power of all of this God-specificity that is you: "We were created in Christ Jesus to do good works God prepared in advance for us to do." There it is. We were made not only on purpose but for a purpose. We were made in a way that enables us to fulfill the purposes for which God created us. If you are analytical, it's because the people you are with and situations you are in need that expression. If you are quiet, the same applies. If you are tall, it's for a reason. If you are musical, again, it's on purpose.

I (and my brother) have been amazed by my mother's caregivers in her struggle with Alzheimer's. They have done things I could never do for a stranger with dementia. However, I know people who cannot imagine doing the things God has enabled me to. I have a friend who has panic attacks at the thought of speaking in front of people and another who cannot bear up under human pain and brokenness without being depressed for days. While I am capable of these, I cannot imagine doing what they do with their particular gifts. So if you are feeling like the odd one in the room, stop right now and remember that your difference is intentional and good. What you bring to a situation when you are healthy is critical to that situation, even if you feel like the only one that thinks, processes, or behaves in a certain way.

Do you see how you can turn societal criticism—where being one way is considered better than another—on its head and instead view the various unique aspects of yourself as intentional? Right now, you can stop thinking you are not okay because you are not like anyone else. From there, it becomes easy to adopt a mindset that stops questioning the characteristics you possess. Second-guessing, self-loathing, and secular shaming are all silenced when we live in God’s perspective of us rather than our own perspective of ourselves. This is the point.

Honestly, a fear and lie I battle while writing this is that some will judge this book as superficial pop psychology meant to simply build up self-esteem. I do not write for “self” anything. Self-esteem does not hold without a foundation beyond the self. Friends, it is imperative we orient our lives around the truth of our creation by God, as expressed clearly and emphatically in the Word of God. Without this foundation, we will struggle to navigate the highs and lows, victories and losses, or happinesses and hurts that life brings.

Seriously, if you never understand the settled nature of your value, your life will be a search for that settledness of soul rather than the dispatched conduit of life and love you were created to be! You will be caught in an endless loop of seeking rather than living the adventure of walking in the good works God created in advance for you to do! This is the sole reason I write: so that you understand the importance of basing your entire worth on the Lord and can live in the freedom, joy, peace, and effectiveness that come when you do.

Can you now say this with ease? *I am created on purpose with a purpose.*

SHAME STORM

I recently engaged in a space of deep heart-sharing and reflection with the staff of a vibrant church. When I asked each of them what lie they felt the enemy was pelting them with the most, the overwhelming response was “You are not enough.” These are people who are living uprightly, serving others every day,

regularly praying for people, and giving their lives sacrificially so that the world can know Jesus. How does a person like that end up struggling with the thought that they are not enough? The same way you and I do. It's a universal phenomenon that began back in the Garden.

After God made us in his image—which means we are enveloped in love, imbued with power, given great purpose, and declared “very good”—we see the fall of humanity. Adam and Eve were enjoying unbroken fellowship with God and with each other. They were free in every way. The evidence? They were naked and unashamed (Genesis 2:25). Can you even imagine? Walking around unclothed and being perfectly, unthinkingly fine and happy with it all? Clothing didn't come into the picture until they did the one thing God told them not to do: “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves” (Genesis 3:7). Covering their nakedness was a result of disobeying God—a consequence of not being perfectly content with all that he had provided and instead reaching for that one thing they could not have.

Consider the lengths we go to in order to cover ourselves up. Under the guise of fashion, we spend too much, and for fear of aging, fillers, injections, steroids, drugs, and surgeries are commonplace. Are you struck with the reality of what is under all this? Dissatisfaction. “The way you look is not good. You need to be better. Fix it. Alter it. Correct it.” This is a reflection of a fundamental, core drive to keep covering up—to keep making the fig leaves better and better. Think of your reaction to celebrities who look nothing like their former selves because of this process. Can you see the nucleus of all of this? The impulse to clothe and hide began the very moment sin began. And there is no end to it.

We put on clothing every day. Every single day. Does that mean we are, on some level, agreeing with the fundamental assertion that “I need to cover that imperfection”? I would argue that yes, this is the process at play. Remember the state of things before Adam and Eve chose to disobey God: “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Genesis 2:25). Yet today, as

a result of the fall of humanity, we put on clothes *every single day*, reflecting the shame we struggle with.

It is a wise and discerning move for you to recognize that shame comes at you in some form every day of your life. As a practice, when you put on clothes, ask yourself: “How am I feeling? What am I struggling with? How is shame baiting me today?” Your battle with shame could very well be what is at the core of your unyielding depression or plaguing anxiety. It certainly is the fuel for rampant insecurity and, often, the number one catalyst pushing toward dark thoughts of self-harm and hatred.

This battle with shame isn’t new. The same enemy who came against Adam and Eve then is the one who comes against us now. And what was the enemy’s ploy? A form of “not enough.” The enemy suggested to Adam and Eve that something was being withheld from them, prompting them to distrust God and selfishly pursue what they thought him to be withholding. Instead of trusting that God’s withholding was for their good, they went after what they thought they were missing. Friends, no matter how much your five-year-old child screams, cries, and clamors for the car keys, you will never give them to him. God knew the knowledge of good and evil would make for a very dark experience for human beings, so he did not hand them those car keys. Wouldn’t you agree that the caustic divisions rampant in our world today have made for a very exhausting existence? It is the basis of war, political hatred, social media sparring, and tense family dinners. God knew we should not “drive that car.” We needed his sovereign, loving protection from knowing evil. But because we (humans) were not satisfied with his provision, we now live in inner and external turmoil.

A direct type of internal turmoil is this barrage of shame. Think of how you feel when you discover having mucus on your face, the zipper on your pants undone, tripping over something, saying something completely wrong, or giving a bad performance. The shame storm is undeniable. The whole body becomes hot, flushed, and nauseated. That’s an overt and obvious intense shame effect. But how about when we ask a friend to do something and we can feel the flimsiness of their turndown? When we make what we

think is a joke and it gets no traction? When someone else at work gets our desired promotion? When a friend gets acknowledged for a good deed and we don't? When we don't get included in the outing? Shame. Shame. Shame. It's pervasive. Remember, every day we put on clothes, and every day we are offered a serving of shame. What will keep us from eating it? What can possibly be the antidote for this wretched bait of condemnation?

SEEING EDEN

I'm kind of having my mind blown right now. As I've been writing this section, I've been playing instrumental music in the background. I'm not familiar with the playlist, but it's been on for a while as I've written and reflected. For some unknown reason, I just looked down at my phone and saw the name of the song currently playing. Mind you, it's the first title I've checked since I've had music playing. The name of the song? "Now I See." The name of the group? We Dream of Eden. What! I can hardly begin to process this, let alone find the words that will communicate to you the intensity of knowing God is speaking and asking him, *What do you want to say? What does this mean for this work—the work I've asked you to author and to deliver a unique, penetrating message to each person who reads it?* I'm a bit in shock! Gosh, I hope somehow you are putting this together too. Reflect on what we've been considering: the pervasiveness of shame, the perfection of the Garden, the relationship with God and others before sin, and the abject pain of knowing evil and witnessing its effects on our world—and in this very space, God gives us the message of "Now I See" and "We Dream of Eden."

I can't help but extrapolate that, as he does all throughout Scripture, he is asking, "Do you see?" Regularly, Scripture links spiritual blindness with unbelief, contrasting it to God's loving restoration to eyes that see with humbled hearts (Psalm 146:8; Isaiah 29:18; 35:5; Mark 10:51–53; John 9:15, 25; 12:39–40). So, beloved of God, do you see? Are you able to put your finger on the pulse of shame in your soul? How intense and regularly does evil try to bait you with the idea that you are not enough, not worthy, less-than, and yucky in ways you want to keep hidden

from others? Do you see how incredibly shame drives so much of human behavior and cultural pressure—pushing us to compensate for fears of unworthiness, feelings of inadequacy, or not being as beautiful, smart, wealthy, or talented as some arbitrary standard that says we “should” be?

And further, can you see how we dream of Eden? I see this all the time in myself, in my office, and in every soul that I encounter: We deeply want people to be better than they are, to not disappoint us, and to not be broken like us. Hope keeps rising—in a relationship, a job, a system, you name it—even when we swear on everything that we will never hope again. When push comes to shove and tragedy strikes, even those who vow they are done with hope and actively try to kill any thought of God, often find themselves asking for or accepting prayer. We simply cannot kill hope. Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us that God has “set eternity in the human heart.” This is exactly what it is to dream of Eden: to hope for no more hurt, no pain, no betrayal—nothing but love, goodness, beauty, pleasure, and joy. That is perfection calling to us, rising within us again. We dream of Eden, indeed. We dream of the time when the fulfillment of all our purest and best longings shall come to fruition.

The gospel reveals the absolute beauty of how God turned the whole sin problem around through the sacrifice of one perfect man, who paid the penalty for all humanity. The gospel is also the resting place from shame, fear, and striving—that is why I am writing this book. There is a restorative, redemptive solution for the shame-inflicting schemes of hell, and it was purchased by Jesus. It requires a level of trust in God, his plan, and his Word above all others. From that place, it is *actually possible* to walk out from underneath the curse of shame that has beleaguered us from the outset. By submitting to Jesus’s work, God’s truth, and trusting that life is better when we don’t have the car keys, contentment with self, joy in others, true sacrificial love, and heartfelt service are ours. Seriously, we can live in calm security. We can have contented certainty. We can sidestep the overwhelming entrapments of culture. We can live free of shame. We can. These little pieces of Eden and eternity are ours now *if we will trust*.

IMMOVABLE LOVE

The reason we can fully and completely trust is because the love of God is fully and completely trustworthy (Deuteronomy 7:9; Psalm 20:7; 111:7; 143:8; Proverbs 3:5–6; Isaiah 26:4; 50:10; Jeremiah 31:3; Lamentations 3:22–23; 1 Corinthians 1:9). Remember how we learned earlier that God not only *has* love but that he *is* love? It's massively important that we experience the love of God for ourselves because the world's view of God's love is "such a watered-down version of the truth. They view Him as a benign and insipid force. They think that His love is so unconditional that He will happily overlook all their faults."³ The brutal, heart-wrenching sacrifice Jesus willingly gave on our account to pay the penalty required for selfish sin-stained hearts is perhaps just too difficult for us to really apprehend, let alone believe.

God loves us unconditionally, which means he will love us even if we never love him in return. He loves us regardless of good or bad behavior; we are the ones who miss out when we walk outside his ways. He loves us when we feel lovable; he loves us when we feel unlovable. He loves us when we sin; he loves us when we love him in return. His love is independent of any capability on our part to earn it. It is so far beyond the kind of conditional love we give others. His love is completely unidirectional. One way (John 3:16–17; Romans 5:6–8; 1 John 4:9–10). It keeps coming and coming like ocean waves, never relenting, offering us a settled, delighted-in soul at every turn.

Are you facing troubles? *Here is my comforting love for you.* Betrayal? *Here is my forgiving love for you.* Rebellion? *Here is my undaunted love for you.* Disappointment? *Here is my hopeful love for you.* Rejection? *Here is my accepting love for you.* Injustice? *Here is my righteous love for you.* Fear? *Here is my powerful love for you.*

Romans 8:31–39 encompasses it all so beautifully:

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Here are some solid takeaways about God's love for those who receive it from this one passage alone:

- God is by your side.
- Jesus died for you.
- He graciously gives you all things.
- He justifies you.
- He keeps you from being condemned.
- You have direct access to God through Jesus.
- Jesus advocates for you.
- Nothing will separate you from his love.
- No bad thing can make him stop loving you.
- You can get through anything you face because of his love for you.
- Nothing on heaven or earth or anywhere else can make him stop loving you.

If you are just skimming these words, I hope you'll be somewhat encouraged. But if you take a moment to slow down, meditate on them, and let them sink in, you might just end up on your knees in awe of how incredible this is. At the very least, gratitude for what we have been given will likely rise up. You will never be

loved by anybody like you are loved by God. I'm praying that his love starts to be your true fuel in life and that you come to comprehend the greatness of his love toward you (1 Peter 1:3-5).

At this point in my writing, I sensed myself becoming frustrated in my ability to communicate his love in a way that would grip your heart with the life-altering, life-determining, life-changing, and life-settling opportunity it offers. So I stopped writing and prayed. In that moment, the Lord reminded me I would continue to be frustrated at the limitation of language to capture the immense, limitless, and incomprehensible nature of his love. Ephesians 3:19 refers to God's love as a "love that surpasses knowledge." In other words, our human brains cannot comprehend the infinitude, magnitude, and vastness of God's love. Try to explain that phrase in your own words and you'll see what I mean. Moreover, this love is simultaneously the most immensely intimate, accepting, knowing, seeing, compassionate, kind, and unwavering love we could ever imagine. I am praying, even now, that the irresistible nature of God's love is drawing you in as never before. It's time to live like God delights in us. Because he does (Psalm 18:19; Isaiah 62:4; Zephaniah 3:17). It's time to live like we have every affection our hearts long for. Because we do. It's time to live like someone's favorite. Because we are. It's time to live utterly loved.

We are the ones who limit God's love in our minds and hearts. We have access to the richest fare, a buffet of love, but we starve ourselves when we fail to accept how much he loves us. We treat God's love as though it were some sort of bland obligation on his part, as though he has to love us because he's God. Well, that's not even close to what God communicates about his love for you. Throughout the Old Testament, God often describes his love for Israel as that of a husband for his bride. Similarly, Jesus described his longing for Jerusalem as a hen gathering her chicks under her wings (Matthew 23:37). He certainly doesn't portray his love as a distant, arm's-length love! Sometimes when my friends are being super nice to me, I get overwhelmed by it. The same goes for when my husband, Mike, has a moment when he is completely smitten. In those times, my mind races with thoughts like, *What do they want?* or *This simply feels too good to be true.* Perhaps that's

what's going on in your mind when it comes to the love God has for you. It is too good to be true, but it is true (1 John 3:1)!

One author speaks of God's love as the captivating force that it is:

Grand and glorious, it calls us away from the sludge of life to joy unspeakable, peace beyond understanding, life beyond dreams, purpose greater than ourselves. It is a love that never fails and never ends. Who wouldn't want that? Like blind men groping in the dark, we seek to be loved. And no matter how great a relationship in our life may be, inconsistency runs through it. The skill of humanity to love well falls short, way short and we keep groping in the dark. We don't feel loved. We don't love ourselves. We can't find love. But should our eyes ever be opened to a God who would love us enough to dress Himself in human skin for the sole purpose of taking the just sentence of betrayal, abandonment, loneliness, mutilation, humiliation, and death so we don't have to. I can't even get anyone to help me on the side of the road when I run out of gas, much less suffer and die just because they love me that much. Who can resist that? . . .

If God's love were full entrenched in someone's heart, the groping in the dark would stop. They would have received more love than they would ever need. Striving to please every Tom, Dick, and Harry in their life to be approved of, appreciated, loved would be a needless endeavor in the light of God's love. So why? Why? Why do souls continue to resist what is categorically irresistible?⁴

It is indeed the goal of our work here to have God's love "full entrenched" in our hearts as the true anchor it is intended to be for our souls (Ephesians 3:16–19). We have been given a love that satiates our longings and is meant to continually fill and overflow our hearts (Psalm 62:1–2). Why does the world resist this? When the fact that every human heart can be met in its deepest longing, hope, and desire has been made known through Scriptures for thousands of years, why do we still doubt it? Tim Keller said plainly: "The only love that won't disappoint you is one—that

can't change, that can't be lost, that is not based on the ups and downs of life or of how well you live, that not even death can take away from you. God's love is the only love like that."⁵ God's love is a fathomless marvel, rooted in Christ's sacrifice on the cross, which we can never merit. It's truly yours, and it's meant to be the bedrock of your life.

There's something happening right now that is very fun, much like the earlier experience of the song playing in the background. You see, when an author writes a book, life continues around them in real time. Yet authors like me have to write outside of that particular moment because readers won't share it with us. That's why one doesn't usually refer to the current weather they're experiencing or their geographical location when writing a Christian living book. But the context of my life right now is undeniably relevant to the eternal truths we are trying to embed as the ultimate grounding point for our everyday existence.

I play competitive tennis and I just received an email about the lineup for our team's upcoming match. My co-captain asked me if I wanted to switch up the partner I had. Insecurity flared up: *Does so-and-so not want to play with me? Did she go behind my back to tell my co-captain she'd rather play with someone else?* (Isn't being a human grand?) But there it is: abject insecurity. We all face it, from the most miniscule situations, like teammate lineups, to the most massive, like marital infidelity. And in every space, from the smallest to the biggest, God wants his love to be where we get grounded, steadied, and centered again. He wants his love to be the balm, the solution, the perspective, and the reorienter. When insecurity pulls you off the Rock, get back on it as fast as you can (Hebrews 6:19–20). So in the face of fear over my lineup, I reminded myself that even if my insecurities are realized, the fleeting opinions of others have no bearing on my true value. God might have a bigger purpose in the lineup switch—maybe that I would get to bless another person with kindness and love. I also remind myself that this is satanic bait, as these friends likely wouldn't go behind my back. But even so, God loves me, and my lovability and “wantability” doesn't hang in the balance of a few women's opinions.

God's love for you is unique to you (Isaiah 49:16). God's specific authorship of you means he himself made you to receive love in the manner you do. And he's going to meet you in that. Just as you choose Christmas presents specific to different people, the love of God is wrapped with a bow and name tag that matches every human soul. Can you choose today to obediently look for and live in that love rather than incessantly wondering if it's there for you? Will you agree with the unfathomable, kind intention of God toward you?

Thank you, God, that you love me with the kind of love I really desire.

THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT
YOU WERE HANDMADE AND
HANDPICKED BY GOD.

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