

“So many voices out there are telling women to look inside themselves to find their purpose and destiny. But not Sarah Rice. I love that about her and this book. She takes women to the only reliable source for identity, purpose, and meaning—the Scriptures. With insight and wisdom drawn from the book of Ephesians, Sarah speaks to matters every woman has to work through and make sense of—empowerment, belonging, purpose, identity and conflict.”


Nancy Guthrie, Bible teacher and author of *I'm Praying for You* and *Even Better Than Eden*

“Sarah traces a beautiful theology of womanhood, one rightly anchored in union with Christ. She challenged me over and over, in her clear and readable style, particularly reminding me that self is no longer the central project of my life. Sarah is no rookie to the lies of this world, but she is a robust theologian who dissolves these lies powerfully with Christ and his gospel light.”

Natalie Brand, Bible teacher and author of *Priscilla, Where Are You?*

“If my mom, wife, daughters or friends are going to read a book on gospel identity, I want it to be by someone who has been gripped by the gospel herself, someone who knows that she (like the rest of us) is imperfect, in need of daily grace, and has learned (and is still learning) to revel in the complete forgiveness and acceptance that God grants in Jesus. Sarah Rice is that someone. Sarah writes with candor, humor and precision, and she makes profoundly important concepts clear and applicable. More importantly, as her pastor I can say that she lives every day in light of the beautiful truths she so winsomely explains. I cannot recommend this book highly enough!”

John Sloan, Senior Pastor, Capshaw Baptist Church, Alabama



Gospel- shapee! Womanhood

*How losing
yourself & finding
your identity in
Christ changes
everything*

SARAH RICE

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Introduction

Given Not Made

We live in an age where women have both the freedom and the pressure to forge a personal identity. Voices within our individualistic culture tell us it's our right and our responsibility to discover and define who we are. They teach us to look deep within to find our most authentic selves and then pursue a path that keeps us true to that self. In other words, we are living in “find yourself, live your truth, you do you” times—times in which we are (supposedly) free to be whoever we want to be.

But is identity really ours to create? Do self-discovery and self-definition actually bring true freedom and peace? We all desperately want answers to the same questions: *Am I valuable? Wanted? Secure? Truly loved? Does my life have purpose? Do I belong?* The world says we will discover the answers to these questions *within* as we learn to love ourselves while rehearsing the mantra “I am enough.” Yet, the world also bombards us with endless advice on how to be *better*. Books, blogs, and videos abound, offering tips and instructions for becoming healthier, happier, more organized, successful, and attractive versions of ourselves. If it's true that identity is self-made, we're left with

the constant and heavy burden of trying to measure and validate our “enoughness” by some unknown standard. Could what the world markets as freedom really just enslave us?

In our quest to forge a personal identity, we often define ourselves according to our roles, preferences, family history, relationships, work, physical appearance, and a host of fluctuating factors too unstable to support the weight of our womanhood. If our worth as women is based on what we *do*, what happens when we stop doing that thing, or when we fail to do it well? If our security and sense of acceptance are completely wrapped up in earthly relationships, personal achievement, or a fit and healthy body, what happens when those things are lost? When the sources of a self-made identity are stripped away, we’re left empty and hopeless.

But what if we recognized that identity is not ours to create because we didn’t self-originate, and so we don’t actually belong to ourselves? What if we simply received an identity that sealed our worth, security, belonging, and the love of another forever? What if we confidently knew this identity would grant us permanent rest from striving and enable us to face our brokenness with the sure hope of healing and wholeness? If this identity is really ours, then belonging to another is actually extremely good news!

In a world incessantly pushing us to build our identity on all the wrong things, I wrote *Gospel-Shaped Womanhood* to help women see that identity *in Christ* is the only stable and lasting foundation upon which to build a life. Through his Son, God freely grants sinners a gospel identity powered by *grace*. This is the only identity that gives us eternal rest from striving while also propelling us to live a life of good works.

In his letter to the Ephesian Church, the Apostle Paul outlines the big picture of what it means to be *in Christ* and explains how this identity works itself out practically, not only in God's grand purposes for the cosmos, but also in the details of day-to-day life. Paul's gospel identity so defined him that he forsook every other potential foundation for self, and this reality flows out in his writing. Paul wanted believers to deeply ground themselves in Christ, understanding how their identity in him transforms every aspect of their lives.

The Apostle spends the first three chapters of Ephesians surveying all God has done in Christ. He rejoices in the spiritual blessings lavished on believers, the wonders of salvation, and the stunning mystery of the gospel now revealed. In chapters four through six, Paul gets practical in how these truths impact our daily decisions, work, relationships, and family life. Reflecting the pattern of Ephesians, I've divided the following chapters into two sections to help us see how knowing *who* we are (Part 1) impacts *what* we do (Part 2). In other words, becoming grounded in our identity *in Christ*, shapes and drives our activity *for Christ* in every area of life.

In Part 1, "Gospel-Shaped Identity," we see the scope of all Christ has achieved for us in salvation, and the wonderful benefits of gospel identity. These chapters delve into how, in Christ, women are given the eternal worth, purpose, acceptance, and love, we all so desperately need. We explore how the indwelling Holy Spirit is a woman's only source of power for truly good and hopeful living, and how the gospel reverses the estrangement and alienation caused by sin. At the end of this section, we get into the often-tricky relationship between grace and works for the believer, which is the foundation for all that follows in the second half of the book.

In Part 2, “Gospel-Shaped Activity,” we get really practical in how the gospel impacts our work, our friendships, our bodies, and our marriages or singleness as women. These chapters work through what an unshakeable identity in Christ looks like in the everyday—at the work meeting or the play-date, in our interactions at church, when our favorite jeans are suddenly too tight, or when we’re wondering how to spend an evening alone. We consider together how being in Christ is good news for every area of life, both in the joys and in the struggles. The final chapter explores how we should view suffering and our role in the world. Drawing on Paul’s famous passage about the armor of God, we see how the life of a Christian woman is a life of war—and ultimately victory.

Before you dive in here, commit to read or listen to the entire book of Ephesians in one sitting. This takes about 20 minutes, and it will help prepare your heart and mind for what you will encounter in this book. In addition, to get the most out of *Gospel-Shaped Womanhood*, I recommend not rushing through but taking time to consider the impact of each topic on your heart and life. Each chapter ends with discussion questions to use in a discipleship group, book club, or individually for personal reflection. Reading and discussing the book with other sisters in Christ would be especially helpful, allowing you to encourage one another in remembering your shared identity, while spurring one another to the good works God has prepared for you (Eph. 2:10).

While many factors *shape* and *describe* us as individual women, God alone has the power and authority to *define* us. My prayer is that, as Christian women, we become grounded in the good news that Jesus Christ brings lasting *rest*. In him, we can stop attempting to build an identity and prove our worthiness. He

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releases us from the endless pressure to be enough. Gospel-shaped women learn to rest and work by the power of grace as we believe this truth: Only the love of God in Christ tells us who we really are and transforms us into who we were made to be.

Part 1:

GOSPEL-SHAPED IDENTITY

The Only Good News

What the gospel is and what it isn't

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

—Ephesians 2:8–9

“What is the gospel?” The question seemed basic enough, but she stared at me across the coffee table like a deer caught in headlights. A few moments of awkward silence ensued before she attempted to respond: “Well, I know what the gospel is... I just don’t really know how to explain it.” I was talking with a fifteen-year-old girl who had recently started seeing me for biblical counseling. The daughter of devout Christian parents, she attended a private Christian school and was at church almost every time the doors opened. But since I never want to assume church attendance means a person is a Christian, I began that session as I begin all early counseling sessions—with lots of questions.

One question I always ask is whether or not the person is a believer in Jesus Christ. If the answer is yes, I follow up by

asking her to share her testimony of coming to faith and her understanding of the Christian gospel. What I have found in multiple counseling sessions (and within the church in general) has been both shocking and discouraging: Many women who profess to be Christians are unable to clearly articulate the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even worse, a number of women have placed their trust in a false gospel without even realizing it.

False gospels are proclaimed everywhere we turn—through social media, blogs, best-selling books, and even by some churches—and the scary reality is that they can sound *so* right. They're popular and self-affirming, packaged in punchy clichés that tickle the ears and make us feel warm and fuzzy inside. Many false gospels, particularly here in the West, herald the “good news” of you and me—exhorting us to put our hope in ourselves. At first blush, these messages sound so positive and promising, but they're actually proclaiming self as Savior and Lord rather than Christ. And this is very bad news.

So, what are we to do? With false gospels bombarding us at every turn, how do we know that we're believing the truth? We must turn to the Scriptures to discern what the true gospel is and what it is not. If we are to find our identity in Christ and allow him to shape every part of our lives, we must know his gospel inside and out. We must know it not just intellectually but also experientially. We must rest in it personally, not just nod our agreement. In order to be gospel-shaped women, we must be able to distinguish the authentic gospel from its many sneaky counterfeits, and once we know it, we must root our entire lives deep within it.

No bad news, no good news

A few months ago, I read an online article announcing the

Press-Register—Alabama’s oldest newspaper—had just printed their last edition. After more than 250 years of producing newspapers, the media outlet made the transition to digital content only. I was left feeling a bit nostalgic. I remember seeing that newspaper rolled up in a plastic bag and waiting at the end of our driveway every day during my childhood years. I remember my parents reading it. The reality that my children are growing up in a world where newspapers are no longer essential is kind of sad. However, even with fewer and fewer physical newspapers there will never be a shortage of actual news (or consumers of it) in our world. Put simply, news is a report of something that has happened, and humans are endlessly drawn to it.

In order to truly grasp the gospel of Jesus Christ, the first thing we need to understand is that it is *news*. Our word “gospel” in English is a translation of the Greek word *euangelion*, which literally means “good news” or “good message.”¹ This definition immediately brings some clarity as we seek to distinguish the biblical gospel from the many false gospels we encounter. Just as a newspaper is filled with reports rather than instructions—a newspaper isn’t going to explain how to work a washing machine—the gospel is not instruction about what we must do but, rather, a declaration of what has already been done. Contrary to what some believe, the gospel is not deciding to clean up your act, pray a prayer, walk a church aisle, sign a commitment card, or be baptized. No, the gospel is the proclamation of something good that has already happened. So, what happened? Why is it good? And what in the world does it have to do with identity?

In his letter to the Ephesian Church, the Apostle Paul refers to his readers as those who “heard the word of truth, the gospel of

your salvation, and believed in him” (Eph. 1:13). This is the first time the word gospel is used in Ephesians, and here Paul defines it simply as “the word of truth.” In a different letter, the Apostle succinctly sums up the content of this word of truth:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Cor. 15: 3–5).

In summary, the gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection for sinners. The sad reality, however, is that many women (even professing Christians) have not truly believed this good news—this “word of truth”—because they have not grasped their own desperate need for it. Without the bad news, there is no good news. The gospel is only necessary and gloriously good when shining brightly against the dark and dirty backdrop of our ultimate human problem: sin.

We cannot receive God’s salvation until we understand our need. And we cannot embrace a freely given identity in Christ until we understand and admit the ways sin has marred our truest selves. In Ephesians 1, Paul outlines the many benefits of identity in Christ—we are chosen, adopted, redeemed, and forgiven, to name but a few—but in chapter 2, he circles back to remind believers why we needed this new identity in the first place.

You (don’t) have a good heart

I once asked my second grade Sunday school class how Adam and Eve sinned against God. One little boy answered, “They didn’t

follow directions.” While it is true that God’s first children failed to follow his clear directive, to sum up their sin in this way softens the blow of the offense. Failure to follow directions could sound like an honest mistake, maybe the result of absentmindedness or not listening well. In reality, Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience was much worse than a thoughtless error; it was abject treason against their Creator and King, leading to the fall of the human race and the corruption of the whole world.

Have you ever heard someone say, “I’ve made some mistakes, but that’s not really who I am—deep down I have a good heart”? Most of us will readily admit we are not perfect, but we often view our own sin as a series of honest mistakes or failure to follow directions. The “gospel(s) of self” assure us that we are basically good people—people who have the power to overcome our own flaws with enough effort. Although we naturally want to believe we are virtuous, grace debunks the prevalent myth that we are born with a fundamentally good nature (Ps. 14:1–3, Jer. 17:9, Rom. 3).

In Ephesians 2:1–3, Paul declares the bad news that made the gospel necessary in the first place:

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins, in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

Ouch!