



How the
LOVE of CHRIST
FREES US *from*
SELF-FOCUS

Flourish

LYDIA BROWNBACK

“The siren call of self sings loudly in our current cultural moment. Even as Christians, we easily fall prey to the false promises of self-focus, self-care, and self-love. With a refreshing dose of biblical truth, wisdom, and insight, Lydia Brownback invites us to consider our ways with fruitful reflection. *Flourish* is a book every woman should read. I highly recommend it!”

Melissa Kruger, author, *In All Things* and *The Envy of Eve*

“As someone who deals in words all day and every day, I’m always fascinated to see how they come and go, how they ebb and flow. Recent years have brought us countless articles, books, podcasts, and conferences based on the word *flourish*. ‘Follow this program,’ they say, or ‘switch to this diet,’ or ‘become more mindful,’ and ‘you’ll finally flourish in your life and in your relationships. Guaranteed!’ In this book, Lydia Brownback looks for and finds what I’m convinced is the true key to human flourishing. Her solution is infinitely better because it is based on an infinitely better source—the enduring, infallible Word of God.”

Tim Challies, blogger, *Challies.com*

“Lydia Brownback is an author to be trusted. She writes with lucid insight and biblical discernment. The result is a book that is truly helpful—a book that avoids contemporary fads and points the reader repeatedly to the sufficiency of Christ. She takes on common destructive states of mind that often hinder Christians from walking in the freedom that is theirs by grace. I suppose the highest recommendation I can give to this book is that it is one I will be encouraging the congregation I serve to read.”

Todd Pruitt, Lead Pastor, Covenant Presbyterian Church,
Harrisonburg, Virginia; Cohost, *Mortification of Spin*

“What if the pathway to true flourishing is not what our instincts assume? What if the siren calls of society and culture are misleading us? What if real flourishing makes foolish the wisdom of the world and turns today’s prevailing solution on its head? What if self-focus leads to losing the life that really matters, and focusing outside ourselves leads to finding it? Lydia Brownback has a beat on the answer. There is a true flourishing, and it may not be what you think—and it is better than what we dream. This is no shallow guide to ‘flourishing’ when all in life is well. Brownback wants to get us ready to truly flourish—when all around our soul gives way.”

David Mathis, Executive Editor, desiringGod.org; Pastor, Cities Church, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota; author, *Habits of Grace*

“In a world where seemingly every voice whispers, ‘Think about yourself,’ this book is an invitation to something better. With biblical clarity, Lydia Brownback exposes the pervasive lie of self-focus and points us to a more abundant life. Whether you find yourself shackled to the self-centered spirit of the age or mentoring someone else who is, *Flourish* will open the prison door and let in the warm light of Christ.”

Megan Hill, author, *Contentment* and *Praying Together*;
Editor, The Gospel Coalition

Flourish

Other Crossway Books by Lydia Brownback

Contentment: A Godly Woman's Adornment

Finding God in My Loneliness

Joy: A Godly Woman's Adornment

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Trust: A Godly Woman's Adornment

A Woman's Wisdom: How the Book of Proverbs Speaks to Everything

Flourish

*How the Love of Christ
Frees Us from Self-Focus*

Lydia Brownback

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With gratitude to God

for

Jessie Joy Bible Yang

1969–2018

You marked my life indelibly.

And, selfishly, I wish you hadn't left so soon.

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Introduction

What's trending? Tracking trends—in fashion, food, and everything else—is a hobby for some and a full-time career for others. Even those of us who care little about keeping up with trends are still curious as to what's hot and what's not. What's the fascination? Trends are a big deal because they tap into our thirst for the new and novel. In reality though, there's nothing new under the sun (Eccles. 1:9), so all trends are simply the repackaging of something old.

Cultural icons aren't the only fodder for trendsetters. It happens with ideas and beliefs as well. Even particular words rise and fall in popularity. As I write, the word *flourish* is having a moment. It's a good trend, this word *flourish*, because it conveys what life in Christ is meant to be—enjoying the Lord and living for him. It's about serving with gladness, not drudgery. It's getting beyond the ho-hum, going-through-motions sort of Christian living and knowing Christ as our greatest delight.

We want that, right? And not just the occasional flash of it, but all the time. We want a flourishing lifestyle. So why don't we have it? What's in the way? What sabotages our joy?

For most of us, it's nothing big and dramatic; it's the little daily pressures—the stresses and fears and irritations—that come along and disrupt our intentions to live and love well. But there's

often more to it. Humdrum joylessness comes also from what we take into our hearts and minds not only from the world around us but from sources that claim to be Christian. That's what we want to make sense of as we make our way through this book. We want to see how wrong teaching about God can give us wrong ideas about God and how these wrong ideas keep us from flourishing.

To ground ourselves, it's important to realize that we are living in the time the Bible calls "the last days." When Jesus returned to his Father in heaven forty days after his resurrection, this new era of history began—the last days—and we're told by God's Word that this era will be characterized by trouble. It's a sobering truth, but the apostle Paul wants us to face this reality head on: "Understand this," he wrote to Timothy, "in the last days there will come times of difficulty" (2 Tim. 3:1). And then he explains why these days will be so hard:

People will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. (vv. 2-5)

As you look at Paul's list of difficulties, do you see the repeated word? It's *love*—more specifically, misplaced love. Times of difficulty arise because people are lovers of themselves and lovers of money and lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of good and lovers of God.

So many of the scary, evil things we see happening arise from the poison of misplaced love, and as Paul says earlier in this letter, it's "spread like gangrene" by false teachers (2 Tim. 2:17).

Paul is saying that people are spiritually poisoned when they drink in wrong teaching about God's Word and God's ways, and that's why he tells us to avoid it—to keep ourselves away from wrong teaching. There's simply no escaping the fact that we're always conformed to what we focus on.

If we want to know joy and peace, if we desire to be fruitful disciples of the Lord Jesus, it's imperative that we breathe the right spiritual air. But how do we know what that is? How can we be sure that we're taking in air that's spiritually healthy?

Our challenge is to discern teaching that's pure and true from that which is toxic and false. God's Word is our standard, of course. But here's the tricky part: wrong teaching about the Bible can significantly shape the way we understand the Bible! That's why it's vital to be able to identify what's false—in other words, unbiblical—in the materials we allow into our eyes and ears. So our approach seems pretty straightforward—safeguard ourselves in biblical truth—but it's actually more challenging than we realize. We need to take a closer look. As we do, we're likely to discover that we've unwittingly bought into some of this false teaching because it's been presented to us as truth.

The whole idea of “false teaching” brings to mind images of slick televangelists or cultlike groups living on the fringe. But look again at Paul's words to Timothy and notice the very first thing he mentions about the last days: “People will be lovers of self.” Any teaching that sets self-love as the highest good is false teaching, and we are susceptible to it because it appeals to that deep yearning for affirmation we feel at our very core. That's why it hooks us. It just *feels* so right. And there is an inescapable link between self-love and self-focus. Self-love and self-focus are really just flip sides of the same coin. They always go together. That's why self-love, the sort that the apostle was writing about,

directs our energies, thoughts, plans, choices—and even our theology—inward, making ourselves the center of all things.

Are we self-lovers of this sort? We might be—if we define ourselves by what people think of us. We might be—if we believe that walking with Jesus is all about maximizing our personal potential. We might be—if we allow our feelings to govern our choices. We might be—if we think Jesus saved us primarily to make our daily life more comfortable. We might be—if we allow some sin, whether past or present, to define us. Fixating on ourselves never accomplishes what we hope it will, so we need to let go of it and fixate on someone else—the Lord Jesus Christ. God’s Word—and true biblical teaching—is all about him.

So take a moment to scan the pile of books on your nightstand, specifically those that have to do with the Christian faith. Is there a common theme among those titles? How many have more to do with successful Christian living than with Christ himself? While Christian-living books can certainly be good and helpful, they can actually warp our understanding of what it means to be a Christian if Christ isn’t at the center of them. So we want to be wise and discerning not only in our book choices but also in every form of teaching we imbibe, from preaching to podcasts.

We’ve got our work cut out for us.

But as we become biblically equipped to distinguish between self-love and Christ-love, our walk of faith will flourish, and we’ll find the abundant life Jesus promised.



Set Free from Self-Consciousness

A few years ago, selfie sticks hit the market. They were the “it” Christmas gift that year for the under-thirty set (and many over thirty, as well). In fact, the selfie stick was listed in *Time* magazine’s twenty-five best inventions of 2014. Nothing better captures the spirit of our era than this extendable metal rod that enables people to position a camera for the taking of endless self-portraits. Some have dubbed it the “Wand of Narcissus.” And for good reason.

Selfies fuel the engine of social media. Many of us change our profile pictures weekly or even daily. Some of these are candid, in-the-moment, fun shots, but many are the result of countless takes and retakes, angling for that perfect one that sets us off to best advantage. The age of the selfie (and the fact that selfies are even a *thing*) allows us to influence how others answer the question we are always asking ourselves: “What do people think of *me*?”

By means of our clothes, our weight, our gym routine, the interior of our home, the behavior of our children, and even how we birth our children, we are so easily driven by a craving for an acceptable answer to that question. But in Christ, we are called to ask a different question: What do people think of Christ? When we are driven by a concern for how people perceive him, we can live free from the bondage of what people think of us. One of the most amazing aspects of being united to Christ by faith is that he actually becomes our very identity, but not until we grasp this truth can we enjoy the freedom of self-forgetfulness.

Dig

Freedom is the best gift a democracy offers its citizens. Those of us who have lived our whole lives under a democratic system tend to take freedom for granted. We aren't typically filled with wonder that we are free to choose a career path, whom to marry, the size of our family, and where (and whom) to worship. But these freedoms we enjoy were hard-won, handed down to us through risk and bloodshed and wars. Our national history, however, is merely a short-lived shadow of the eternal freedom Jesus won for us when he shed his blood on the cross to free us from sin and God's wrath. When Jesus rose from the dead and ascended back to heaven, he actually took us with him:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:4–6)

Our life is now there, in the heavenly places with Christ. This isn't just some spiritual concept to ponder; it's a reality with

enormous practical implications. For our purposes here, it indicates that Jesus won for us freedom from ourselves. We can take our society's freedoms for granted and still enjoy those benefits, but not so much our spiritual freedom. If we take for granted Christ's work for us, or if we don't understand all he has done, we live and think like prisoners rather than free women.

I think, for example, of Sophia. Each weekday she arises at six o'clock and spends fifteen minutes sipping coffee and doing her daily Bible reading. Afterward she turns her attention to the day ahead, and she thinks about what to wear as she finishes her coffee. Thoughts of God and the Bible passage she's just read fade from her mind as she stares at the clothes rack. Sophia is focused on the image she wants to project and how her clothing choice will be viewed by the people she'll encounter in the hours ahead. Once dressed, accessorized, and made up, she heads downstairs for breakfast, and while she scrambles eggs for the family, she ponders whether she can afford the calories if she partakes. There's that dress she's got to fit into for the reunion next month, so maybe she'll just skip the toast. And on it goes throughout the day, right up through bedtime.

But even bedtime doesn't free Sophia from self-consciousness. The busyness of the day might be over, but these quieter moments allow her the mental space to scan back through the day's activities and conversations for the impressions she made. Things she said or didn't say or wish she'd said or should have said or rephrased—it's all there once her head hits the pillow.

Sophia doesn't see the bondage in which she's living, but her anxieties about her appearance and her words reveal it. Sophia is so focused on herself, curved so entirely inward, that she is locked in a self-made prison. That's what self-consciousness is—a prison.

If we center our thoughts and activities on ourselves, our world grows increasingly narrow, and over time our view of reality is warped. Without realizing it, we become the measure of all things in our own minds.

“What Will People Think of Me?”

Self-consciousness impacts the decisions we make. Our choices big and small are too often governed by *What will people think of me?* Our attempt to shape the answer to that question can become an internal undercurrent so relentless that we aren't even aware of its pull. It can be there in the home furnishings we choose. It can be there in the tables we set and the planter we place on the patio. It can be there in the car we drive and the holiday decorations we choose for the front porch. And it can be there in the books we read and the restaurants we frequent and the places we choose for vacation.

Self-consciousness can also drive the decisions we make for our children. The schools they attend and the summer camps, the clothes they wear and the friends they bring home—that relentless undercurrent might be flowing somewhere beneath our very genuine mama-bear love. Angry words, shame, and impatience so easily arise from *What will people think of me?*

It can begin even before our children are born. As the baby grows within us, we seek advice and do research on how to be the best possible mom. We note what other mothers do and how they do it, setting standards for our mothering techniques along the way. We distinguish not only good from bad, but best from better. Sometimes, though, we wind up not only wanting to be the ideal mom but yearning to be *known* as that mom.

One young mother was devastated when her plans for natural, at-home childbirth could not be realized. Complications during

the final weeks of pregnancy necessitated a hospital delivery. Two years later she continues to agonize. She views herself as a failure for not giving birth the way she'd envisioned. She can't see that she didn't fail her child, who was born healthy and continues to thrive. And she didn't fail her Lord, who nowhere in Scripture mandates a particular method of childbirth. She failed only herself in not living up to what had become standard practice among the young mothers in her circle.

When it comes to self-conscious motherhood, the method and the means of childbirth are just the beginning. There's also the pressure to make baby food from scratch and to use only cloth diapers. Love drives many moms to make these choices, but there are equally as many who make them because they seem to fit an ideal-mother identity. These moms can't see that they are driven more by self-induced standards than by love, and in time all the joy leaches out of their mothering.

If we are self-conscious mothers, that undercurrent will continue to tug at us when it comes time to make decisions about schooling our children. Certainly we set out to make informed, careful choices about where and how to educate our kids, and those choices are likely to vary from child to child. As we research schooling prospects, we wisely gather opinions from more experienced parents, but what matters here is their view on education, not their view of us. I've known more than one depressed and angry homeschooling mother whose dark emotions had less to do with a sense of inadequacy or burnout than with the initial reason for homeschooling—the perceived expectations of others. No doubt these moms chose homeschooling because they wanted the best for their kids, but other good (perhaps better) options for their particular family were pulled down in the undertow of *What will people think?*

Discern

Whatever the issue—our appearance, our family, our home, our kids—we quench the joy of our faith and mar our witness of Christ if we live self-conscious lives. It seems counterintuitive, but happiness comes not from being thought well of but by thinking less of ourselves altogether.

Body and Soul

Not all of us have children to raise or homes to furnish, but we all have bodies to present to the world on a daily basis. Living, as we do, in a society where youth and muscle tone are icons of success, the temptation to measure up can be enormous. We are well aware of the pressures put on women by society, and those of us who know God's Word seek to combat them by regularly cultivating an eternal perspective. We turn to verses such as 1 Timothy 4:8, where Paul writes, "While bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way." Even so, we may find ourselves giving too much thought and too many dollars and too much time to how we look.

I grew up on the tail end of that first skinny-obsessed generation. Twiggy came along in the 1960s, effectually abolishing the Marilyn Monroe hourglass ideal, and eventually the Twiggy trend led to full-fledged emaciated heroin chic in the 1990s. Girls in my generation got hooked by all this, and many of us have never become unhooked. Additionally, significant scientific developments during these decades opened our eyes to the health dangers of a high-fat diet, obesity, and a sedentary lifestyle. To this day we are tempted to define our well-being by our body weight. And adopting the cultural standard, we use *thin* and *toned* as synonyms for *successful* and *godly*.

Even so, worldly influence isn't our only challenge to a right understanding of biblical discipleship. Equally influential is how that

worldly influence has infiltrated our churches. Common on many a church's activities list today are exercise classes with names like "Body and Soul Fitness." These are basically the same fitness programs offered at any gym, but they are rebranded as Christian by contemporary praise music and an emphasis on good health for the glory of God. It all sounds great. Exercise is indeed valuable, as Paul said, and we do bring glory to God by taking care of our physical bodies. And how better to do so than in company with other believers all spinning and stretching to praise tunes?

But there's a bit more to consider. First is the context of Paul's words about exercise:

Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. (1 Tim. 4:7-8)

What sticks in our minds is the middle of this passage—"bodily training is of some value." We see it as biblical endorsement for regular workouts. But Paul's point here is something quite different. He was trying to clear up confusion caused by false teachers about the nature of true godliness. Believers in his day were wrestling with false teaching that equated strict self-denial—also called "asceticism"—with godliness. In other words, self-denial and suppressing bodily appetites were supposedly a mark of true godliness. So Paul here is instructing Timothy to counter that lie with the truth that strict bodily discipline and godliness don't necessarily go hand in hand. Exercise is good and godliness is good, but they aren't bound up together. In fact, only one is a necessity, spiritually speaking.

The majority of these "Body and Soul" classes have no intention of promoting the heresy of Paul's day; even so, they can

create an environment that is conducive to drifting that way. Another potential danger of such classes is how they can impact our view of God's Word. Choreographing exercise classes to Scripture passages can unwittingly trivialize God's Word, and our understanding of biblical discipleship can become warped.

In a different epistle Paul *does* set forth the merits of bodily discipline (see 1 Cor. 9:27). Even so, from the number of godly saints who suffer serious illnesses—both those who exercise and those who don't—it seems that God's concern for the shape and even the health of our bodies is radically different from ours.

Certainly it is God glorifying to take care of the body God has entrusted to us, but some of these exercise classes do little more than place a spiritual veneer over our efforts to feel good about ourselves. If we participate in this sort of exercise program, let's think about how we are being affected by it. Are we fired up at the end of class, awash in the sweaty glow of an endorphin high, to run out and evangelize or race home to read Scripture and pray? Perhaps, but more likely, we simply bask in how good we feel and get on with our day. And while that good feeling is a blessing, sometimes it's there because the workout has provided us a quick fix for the next time we're assailed by the relentless question, *What will people think of me?*

Exercise classes are the drug of choice for many a self-consciousness junkie. And the remedy for many of them isn't to stop asking the question—*What will people think of me?*—but simply to shape how it's answered.

Perception Management

Another popular attempt to remedy the anxiety of self-consciousness lies in the opposite direction. Rather than winning people's approval, we try to elevate ourselves above caring

what others think of us. But contrary to popular teaching, this is no remedy; it's simply self-consciousness hiding behind a defensive shield.

Scan some popular websites, and you'll find endless how-tos for perception management, cultivating self-love, and engaging in positive self-talk, many of them directed at teens. What are we imbibing, and what message are we instilling in our daughters? And how much of either is rooted in Scripture? We cannot assume that material labeled "Christian" is actually biblical, but discerning truth from error is a challenge, especially when truth is mixed with error. A well-meaning author, seeking to encourage girls who struggle with a low self-opinion, guides her readers to think of themselves in light of who Jesus is:

This is who I am:

I am a sinner—elaborately flawed by my own self. I screw up consistently, so much so that some days I don't even realize how much I have sinned.

But I am saved and forgiven and enough. I am worthy and valuable and significant—not because of anything I did, but because Jesus has deemed me His.¹

Good stuff there, which the author draws from Genesis 1:31: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." The mistake she makes is building her advice on this alone, leaving out the Bible's overarching storyline. As a result, her encouraging words actually lead her readers away from truth, which is clear from what she writes next:

Sometimes I like to dream about what the world would look like if we all chose to believe that how God made us is entirely good enough. And then I go one step further and start to dream about what the world would look like if we not only

believed we were enough, but believed that who we are is just plain good.²

The big picture of the Bible shows us that God's good creation was marred when sin entered the world. From that point on, every person is, from birth, just like the apostle Paul, who wrote, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Rom. 7:18). God did indeed make us "very good," but if this is all that readers are given, they won't find the help and hope they need.

I get what the author is trying to do here and that she means well, but we have to be careful of any teaching, no matter how small a portion, that runs counter to something in Scripture. The young women who read the article are left believing that salvation makes *them* good rather than that salvation is how *Christ's* goodness is given to them. Truth plus error does not equal partial truth; truth plus error equals error.

We cannot overcome self-consciousness by trying to become all we can be or by telling ourselves we are good. We overcome it by seeing the sin that underlies it, the *me* focus.

Flourish

The problem with self-consciousness isn't the emotional angst it produces or caring too much what others think of us. The problem is thinking too much about ourselves—period. Living in the freedom of self-forgetfulness begins with discernment. We begin by making a link between our self-conscious tendencies and what we are drinking in not only from our culture but also from teaching that misapplies God's Word to our day-in, day-out life. And we acknowledge that, ultimately, those influences capture us because our heart resonates with what they're pitching: personal well-being, success, and our neighbors'

admiration. Our self-consciousness is proof that we crave those things. God's Word clearly indicates that self-consciousness is bondage:

The fear of man lays a snare,
but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe. (Prov. 29:25)

This proverb is addressed to people pleasers, to those who seek their well-being in the good opinion of others. But looking for well-being in people's opinions dislodges God from his rightful place in our hearts. He is the one we've been created to please.

Overcoming the Fear of Man

Ultimately, fear of man is a craving to please ourselves; we want people to admire us so we can feel valuable and important. But God is the One whose value and importance we are called to showcase. So the proverb sheds light on the people-pleasing problem. But it also shows us the path out. It is trust in the Lord that frees us from the snare of self-consciousness. If we shift our gaze away from ourselves and up to the Lord, we find that he is trustworthy and faithful to be all he has promised to be and to do all he has promised to do.

Something amazing happens as our trust grows: our thoughts are a lot less self-oriented, and there's new joy in living. We taste the freedom that comes from living under the gaze of One. He loves us, and we have nothing to prove because Christ proved everything for us.

As we trust, our focus on people changes too. We stop viewing others as a measure of ourselves but as people to love. We stop using them and begin serving them. We *are* meant to focus on others, just not with ourselves as the reference point. These are

the blessings of self-forgetfulness. A young woman named Ava modeled this for me.

I first met Ava about a decade ago at a church retreat for high school girls. She was a bit more reserved than some of her classmates but warm and friendly nevertheless. She was also one of the most naturally beautiful sixteen-year-olds I had ever seen. And she had a heart for God. That weekend began a friendship that lasted through Ava's college years. She suffered some painful circumstances during those years, but with each challenge, she sought to know the Lord better and serve him more faithfully. Ava and I lost touch after she graduated from college, but just recently she wrote me a note, and we arranged to meet at a local café. I was a bit nervous as I drove to meet her because the picture that had accompanied her note to me clearly indicated another challenge—she was completely bald. Her note had included no explanation for the baldness. Was it some new form of millennial chic, or did she have cancer?

When I arrived at the café, Ava was already there, and as she came toward me, it wasn't her bald head I noticed nearly so much as that lovely Ava smile, still the most eye-catching aspect of her person. Turns out she doesn't have cancer. Nor was she making a fashion statement. She has alopecia, a condition that brings about hair loss—in some cases, such as Ava's, total loss. "It's only hair," she said, "and the important thing is, I'm healthy." She went on to tell me how God has used this to deepen her faith and her commitment to serve him, and she talked joyfully about all the ways that's been happening. Ava's trust is deep—and she is utterly unself-conscious.

On the way home from our meeting, I wept, but not for Ava. I wept for how an hour in her company had exposed my sinful self-consciousness. I recalled how I'd panicked during a season of

middle-aged hair thinning a few years back. I'd cried. I'd prayed. I'd rushed to the dermatologist. I'd obsessed—all because my formerly thick hair had become a bit less thick. I continued to weep as I recalled the disappointment over the years on faces of friends whose homemade goodies I'd declined out of concerns rooted in vanity. I wept for the hours (days, weeks, months) lost to fixating on myself rather than on things that really matter—love for the Lord and for people. For years I'd mentored Ava, and that day she unknowingly mentored me.

Like Ava, the apostle Paul, one of most joyful people ever to walk this earth, lived free from the snare of self-consciousness. He didn't worry what people said or thought about him. Paul's focus was what people thought of Christ:

I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:1-5)

Jesus was Paul's whole reason for living, and because that was true, he saw his personal weaknesses as opportunities to show God's strength.

Jesus Christ was also Paul's whole *identity*, which he affirms in his letter to the Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

Paul defined himself by his union with Christ, not by the opinions of others or by ministry success or by personal characteristics or achievements. His Christ identity set him free from the life-leaching bondage of sinful self-consciousness and enabled him to practice what he preached: “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8).

Christ is our identity too, if we’ve been united to him by faith. Sometimes we forget that. Some of us have never understood it. And it gets obscured by our naturally self-oriented hearts. Focusing upward and outward transforms us into women characterized by what Tim Keller calls “gospel-humility”:

The essence of gospel-humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less. Gospel-humility is not needing to think about myself. . . . True gospel-humility means I stop connecting every experience, every conversation, with myself. In fact, I stop thinking about myself.³

Christ defines us, not other people. And what he thinks is all that really matters.

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Luke 12:4-7)

WHAT KEEPS US FROM FLOURISHING?

We all long to live out our faith with daily joy, but so often that joy eludes us. Why is that? More often than we realize, it's because we've absorbed messages that curve us in on ourselves. These messages have even crept into the church, disguised as truth. It's time we learn to discern teaching that's toxic from that which is true and pure.

Flourish equips us with tools to identify the lies that come at us about where to find real life. As we dig deep into what God says in his Word, we will learn to discern the worldly influences that threaten to warp our understanding of what it really means to be a Christian, and emerge with a faith that flourishes—full of the abundant life Jesus promises.

“In a world where seemingly every voice whispers, ‘Think about yourself,’ this book is an invitation to something better. With biblical clarity, Brownback exposes the pervasive lie of self-focus and points us to a more abundant life.”

MEGAN HILL, author, *Contentment* and *Praying Together*; Editor, The Gospel Coalition

“With a refreshing dose of biblical truth, wisdom, and insight, Lydia Brownback invites us to consider our ways with fruitful reflection. *Flourish* is a book every woman should read. I highly recommend it!”

MELISSA KRUGER, author, *In All Things* and *The Envy of Eve*

“Brownback looks for and finds what I'm convinced is the true key to human flourishing. Her solution is based on the enduring, infallible Word of God.”

TIM CHALLIES, blogger, Challies.com

LYDIA BROWNBACK (MAR, Westminster Theological Seminary) is the author of several books and a speaker at women's conferences around the world. Her books include the On-the-Go Devotionals for women; *Finding God in My Loneliness*; and *Sing a New Song*.

WOMEN

