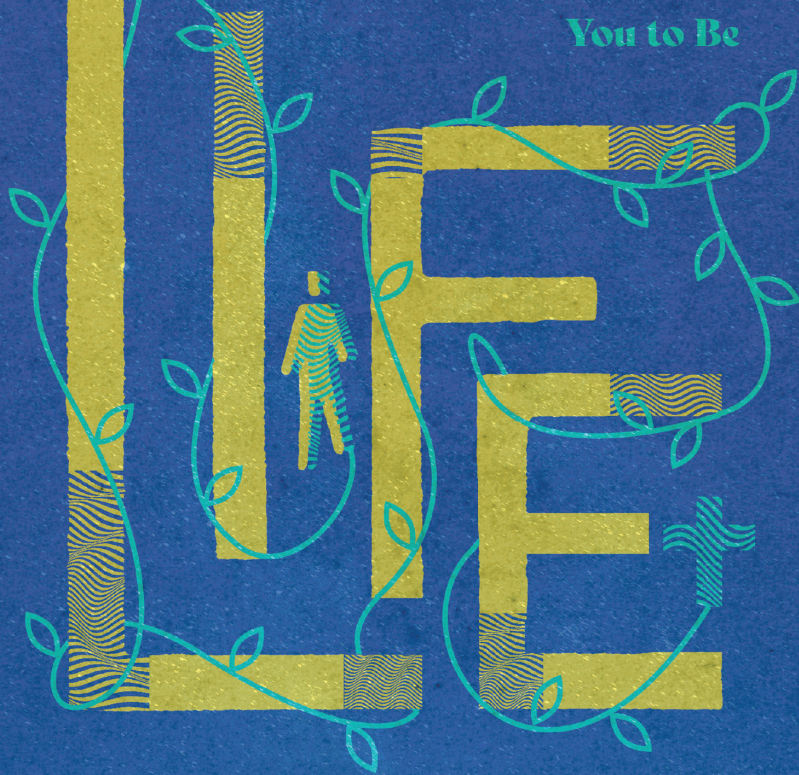


Alastair Sterne

Rhythms for

Spiritual
Practices for
Who God Made
You to Be



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A decorative vertical element on the left side of the page. It features a thin, dark grey vine with several small, simple leaves. A rectangular area in the middle of the vine is filled with a pattern of horizontal, wavy lines in a light grey color.

Part One

**Discerning
Who God
Has Made
You to Be**



1

Identity

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

GENESIS 1:27

*Quit keeping score altogether and surrender yourself with
all your sinfulness to God who sees neither the score nor the
scorekeeper but only his child redeemed by Christ.*

THOMAS MERTON

MY FIRST EXISTENTIAL CRISIS HAPPENED when I was fourteen (you can decide whether I was early or late to the game). In my bedroom I stepped in front of the full-length mirror on my closet door. My hair was dyed. I was wearing a gaudy industrial-band shirt. Nothing out of the ordinary. But as I stood and gazed at myself, something shifted. I became aware of how I was looking back at myself. I thought: *I exist*.

I wasn't about to win any philosophical awards. But I was conscious of the realness of myself in a new way. It unnerved me. Because I also wondered: *Who am I?*

I thought of my name, my family, and my short history. I ran through my interests, friends, and dreams. They all contributed to who I am. But these facts didn't answer the question. At least not in a way that settled me. I tried to go on with my day. But the thought followed me the way fruit flies gravitate to overripe oranges. I couldn't swat it away.

Who am I?

This question is often on our minds or close by. You may have only begun to search for an answer. If you recently entered a new season, you may be asking, *Who will I become?* Or, if a transition or crisis has made you feel as if part of yourself has been lost, you might be wondering, *Who am I now?* It's possible to search your soul and yet not be convinced by what you've found. And whether we have a satisfying answer or not, we never stop asking the question. It's essential.

But how we ask the question affects the quality of the answer. We can learn to ask it well. After years of searching, I discovered the best form is, *Whose am I?* Because whether our life stories are written in pen, sketched in pencil, or painted on a canvas, questions of identity are about authorship. Who writes your story?

Misguided Stories

Many stories guide our lives. But often our stories are misguided. We can find ourselves in undesirable story lines and plot twists. Before we can untangle ourselves from misguided stories, we need to name them—and identify their authors.

One dominant story of modern Western culture is that we are our own, the authors of our fate. "No one has the right to define who you are except you; you write your own story," or so the story goes. We're encouraged to claim our self-authorship. But identity isn't this simple.

We exist within the world. We determine who we are to some extent, but we are not exempt from outside influences. Countless people shape us. Friends, family, teachers, and coworkers, to name a

few. The idea of self-authorship is appealing because it keeps us at the center of the story. But it's not the whole story. There are others who wrote the script first, before we put our name on it. We are co-authors at best.

Another common story is the performance story. If you grew up in a family or culture where performance and achievements are highly regarded, you may have internalized a story that says you are only valuable if you excel and accomplish many things with your life.

Imagine a father who drives his son to school in a luxury car. As his son grabs his backpack and scoots out of the car, the father says without fail, "Be exceptional." The tone is always positive. He intends to encourage his son. As days accumulate into years, his son internalizes this message. But what is the story?

This is a performance story. The father wants more than a son who does well in life. He wants his child to be better than the rest. He wants him to stand tall above his peers. And while the story has the capacity to motivate the son to accomplish great things, it also has the strength to crush his self-worth. What happens if he isn't exceptional? Or when he realizes there is someone more exceptional than him? Or if he fails? Even if these negative effects were never the father's intent, he wrote a performance story for his son.

Unfortunately, the reality is that stories can be harmful and can even contaminate. People who have been emotionally or physically traumatized often internalize a story that says they are worthless. They can even believe that they deserved what happened. These kinds of contamination stories can motivate people to prove their worth and do many good things throughout their life. But contamination stories can also have the opposite effect. Sometimes people hold back and play it safe because failure would validate the message of their misguided story: they are worthless. Contamination stories wreak havoc in our lives because they tell us we are not enough and never will be.¹

We allow many stories to guide and direct our lives. We inherit them from our family and friends. We are taught them through education, popular culture, and entertainment. Whatever the source, many of our stories are hopelessly misguided. But all of them try to answer the question, “Who am I?”

Two dominant stories shaped my identity.

The first I call “almost but not enough.” I started living by this story after I was dumped for the first time at sixteen. I thought I had found everlasting love. But it wasn’t mutual. I felt something was wrong with me. “Almost but not enough.” Over the years I overcompensated for the “almost but not enough” narrative by motivating myself with different stories, such as, “Be the best. Do something impressive.” This is nothing short of a performance story. It’s how I learned to compensate.

The second I call “exciting but wrong.” Through experiences in my childhood I learned to push boundaries. I internalized a story that said the best sources of excitement are usually wrong. It started with “innocent” wrongs: stealing garden gnomes or sneaking out at night. But as I grew up, “exciting but wrong” translated into an unbounded sexual life, experimentation with many drugs, unfaithfulness in intimate relationships, and pushing healthy boundaries in friendships. This is a contamination story.

Both of my misguided stories created toxic shame in my life. I developed a deeply held belief that something was wrong with me. I knew I wasn’t enough. As a result, I was never sure who I was. It has taken years to disentangle from these stories. And I still tell them to myself occasionally. Sometimes they just start to play in my mind. But these misguided stories have progressively lost their influence and strength as I’ve answered the better question, “Whose am I?”

Our True Story

The apostle Paul had a countercultural message for the church in Corinth. It continues to challenge our own assumptions about

identity. He wrote, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price” (1 Cor 6:19-20).

We belong to Christ.

This is the good news of the gospel.

Jesus Christ has written a story of redemption for the world and continues to write his story within each of us. He disentangles us from our misguided stories as we accept his invitation to follow him into the true story of God.² Under God’s authorship we find our creational identity, our redemptive identity, and adoption.

Creational identity. The story of the Bible begins with the book of Genesis, which tells us something fundamental about all people: we are made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). This is our creational identity.

Imagine a mirror set at a forty-five-degree angle. If you shine light directly on it from above it will reflect horizontally out into the room. In the same way, we can imagine ourselves as mirrors. God shines on us to be reflected through us into the world. We were created to reflect the image of our triune God.

One of the greatest mysteries of faith is the Trinity.

God is one God in three persons. God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Three persons in one nature.³ The apostle John wrote in one of his letters, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). The church father Saint Augustine helped us try to wrap our minds around this mystery when he said that God is at once lover, beloved, and love itself. Neither Augustine nor John intended to reduce God to the emotion of love. Instead, their words point to how love dances back and forth between the three persons of the Trinity. This is why we can say that God is love.

This means that in eternity past, God wasn’t singing, “Can anybody find me somebody to love?”⁴ God created us out of the abundance and overflow of his love and not out of loneliness or neediness. He created us to be loved by him and to love him.

Since we are made in God's image, we are also created to love and be loved by others. You may have heard or sung worship songs with lyrics such as, "You're all I need, God." This isn't the whole picture. In the Garden, God said to Adam, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). We are only fully human when God's love flows back and forth between us and other people as well.

When we turn to God as the author of our story, we discover our creational identity: we were made in the image of God. We receive and reflect his love. We were made to do so in relationship. God has written our story not with pencil, ink, or paint but with love.

But our creational identity is only one part of the first chapter of the story.

The story written by God isn't always comfortable for us because love includes truth. God is a loving truth-speaker. As theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas writes, "The story Christians tell of God exposes the unwelcome fact that I am a sinner. For without such a narrative the fact and nature of my sin cannot help but remain hidden in self-deception."⁵ The story of God graciously brings us out of hiding and into an honest assessment of ourselves before God: our creational identity has fallen and shattered, like a mirror broken into shards of glass.

The myth of self-authorship began long before our era. Genesis 3 recalls how sin entered the world. Adam and Eve deliberately rejected God's goodness, trustworthiness, and authorship and gave in to the temptation to write their own life stories apart from God's presence and authority. They broke his simple instruction so they could "be like God, knowing good and evil" despite already being image bearers (Gen 3:5). The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans that, with this act, "sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned" (Rom 5:12).⁶

But what happened in the Garden has happened in every single one of our lives as well.

Sometimes we make sin too small by reducing it to breaking rules. But as New Testament scholar William Barclay writes, “Sin is a crime, not [only] against law, but against love.”⁷ Sin isn’t just breaking rules; it’s infidelity and unfaithfulness. When a spouse cheats in marriage, yes, they are breaking a vow in the covenant of marriage. They are breaking a rule. But more fundamentally they are sinning against the love that was supposed to unite and sustain them in marriage. In other words, the sin is expressed in the breaking of a vow, but its weightiness is due to the relationship that is broken. In a similar way, Adam and Eve broke the one commandment in the Garden. But the reason their action was so severe and weighty was because they deliberately rejected God’s loving union with them. They sinned not only against law but also against love.

The consequence of original sin was that the image of God in us was damaged, distorted, and corrupted. We were made to dwell and rejoice in God’s love and to reflect his love into all of creation. But humanity has been alienated and separated from God’s loving presence. And our spiritual condition has led to brokenness, disorder, pollution, and all kinds of evil in the world. Sin has corrupted us to the core. This truth led the Reformer John Calvin to write, “Although some obscure lineaments of that image are found remaining in us; yet [they are] so vitiated and maimed, that they may truly be said to be destroyed.”⁸ Our creational identity has been so badly damaged by our sin that it is beyond our own recovery. Our creational identity needs to be rescued and restored.

Redemptive identity. We must look at how God’s story culminates in Jesus to discover our redemptive identity. Luke reported in his Gospel that when angels appeared to the shepherds to lead them toward the newborn Christ, one angel declared, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people” (Lk 2:10). Why was this news so good and joyful? The angel continued, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you;

he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Lk 2:11). The gospel is good news, not good advice. It is the declaration about Jesus Christ and all that he has done to fulfill God’s story for the sake of the world as our Savior and Redeemer.

There are a lot of theories about who Jesus was: a good man, a teacher, a mistaken end-times prophet, an exaggeration of his disciples’ imagination, or even nonexistent. A distinctly different answer is given by the writers of Scripture. One of the simplest answers is that Jesus is Immanuel, which means “God with us” (see Mt 1:23). Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, entered the world and became one of us. The incarnation cozies up with the Trinity as another great mystery. Jesus is both God and man, perfectly divine and perfectly human.

But why did he come into the world and take on our form? I find that it’s best to take Jesus at his own word: he came to be rejected, crucified, buried, and raised from the dead.⁹ He came not for the healthy but the sick. He didn’t come for those who have their act together but for sinners (Mk 2:17). The one who made the heavens and the earth dragged a tree that he made (and that humanity fashioned into a cross) through the dirt of the earth, and there he was crucified. He died on two crooked beams in ancient Rome, not by accident, but according to plan.

What could possibly motivate Jesus to do this?

What motivated God to create us in the first place?

Love.

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions” (Eph 2:4-5). God didn’t send Jesus into the world *so that* he could love us. God sent Jesus into the world *because* he always has loved us. We must not get our wires crossed on this point. Jesus died for us as a revelation of God’s profound love for us.

Love came for us even when we least deserved it. This is a non-negotiable truth: our sins required a cross. The joy of bringing us back home motivated Jesus to endure the worst fate (Heb 12:2). Jesus took on our sins in his body and faced the consequences on our behalf. On the cross, he uttered a cry we will never comprehend nor say ourselves: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34). And he did it all out of love.

When Peter, one of Jesus’ closest friends and an apostle, tried to comprehend what took place on the cross, he concluded, “[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet 2:24). Similarly, author and pastor Tim Keller writes, “We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”¹⁰

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus forgives our sins and washes them away, overcomes death with eternal life, reconciles us into a loving relationship with God, restores the image of God within us, assures us of our future in his kingdom, and empowers new life that starts now. This is the great story of redemption written by Jesus Christ.

But what does it mean for who we are?

Adoption. When we place our faith in Jesus, we are no longer our own: we belong to Christ (Rom 8:9). We are adopted into the family of God as beloved children (Rom 8:15; Eph 1:4-6; Gal 4:4-5). The Spirit of God fills us so that the cry of our hearts becomes, “Abba! Father!” (Rom 8:12-17; Gal 4:6-7). The great theologian J. I. Packer is convinced that adoption is the highest privilege the gospel offers. He writes, “In adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship—he establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the Judge [justification] is a great

thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father [adoption] is a greater thing.”¹¹

What is the implication of our adoption?

We don’t have to be hindered by our misguided stories. We don’t need to define ourselves, or perform, or remain contaminated. This profound gift of grace led Thomas Merton to write, “Quit keeping score altogether and surrender yourself with all your sinfulness to God who sees neither the score nor the scorekeeper but only his child redeemed by Christ.”¹² We are free to enjoy God and delight in his love for endless days. We don’t merely bide our time, waiting with bated breath until the kingdom arrives in its fullness. Because our lives with Christ start now and not just later.

There’s nothing we have to do to be loved by God; we simply receive what he offers in abundance through Christ our Redeemer. We are loved because we are loved. We have always been loved and always will be loved. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:38-39). This is what makes the journey of following Christ such a great joy, even through the shadows and darkness cast by the trials and suffering we’ll face.

Although our creational identity was vandalized by sin, it is now restored and healed through our redemptive identity. The two go hand in hand. We are image bearers of God, made to be loved and to love, to live in relationship and community, as God’s beloved children. This is the identity God has for you. This is how he defines you. This is who you are in Christ.

Between Stories

I am grateful Scripture uses adoption as a metaphor for our new identity in Christ. In the ancient world, adoption powerfully conveyed the full acceptance and wonderful privilege of belonging to a new family. However, I have found that many people (myself included) struggle to fully attach to their new identity in Christ. They

know the right answers but there's a gap between their knowledge and experience.

Sometimes people have a profound experience early on in their faith that helps them know exactly who they are in Christ. God's love has gripped them and they enjoy the steady love of God uninterrupted. For many people, however, coming to trust the truth is a progressive experience. And some may doubt and wrestle and question if they really are loved, cherished, and accepted by God in Christ.

I find it helpful to keep theologian and evangelist John Wesley in mind. He had been a faithful Christian for a long time before his "heart was strangely warmed" and he rested in the assurance of God's love for him. The "who am I?" question is not easily settled even if you know whose you are. So what can we do when we struggle to rest in our identity?

First, we anchor ourselves in the truth. Profound truth can quickly become familiar. Perhaps you've heard that you've been made in the image of God more times than you can count—and so hearing it yet again doesn't do much for you. You know you've been redeemed and adopted. But as we anchor ourselves in the truth, we can ask God to grant us wonder and awe. I hope I will never be someone who scoffs at seeing a sunrise or sunset yet again. May this be true for us regarding the beautiful truth contained in Scripture as well.

Second, we engage in the identity question with others. Since God made us for community, we discover who we are in relationship with others. One of the most vulnerable questions you can ask another person is, "How do you see me?" We can be oblivious to how our misguided stories are disrupting our identity in Christ. But trusted people can point it out. We can also be blind to the beautiful things God is doing in us. Once again, trusted people can draw it out of us. In some instances, the misguided story that is robbing you of joy and peace in Christ may need to be untangled through spiritual direction or professional counseling.

Third, we pray for God to affirm his love for us again and again. God pours his love into our hearts so that we can cry out “Abba! Father!” (Rom 5:5; 8:15). Let’s ask God to keep his promise and word.

My wife, Julia, has followed Jesus since she was eleven. But a few years ago she realized she had never really asked God if he loved her specifically. Every day she started to pray, “Do you love me, Jesus?” It wasn’t a demand or an accusation. She didn’t set a time limit for Jesus to answer. She just wanted to hear from him about herself. She prayed, she pursued, she persisted.

About a month into this prayer, the Gospels came up in her daily readings, specifically the sections about the Passion of Christ. As she read these familiar passages that led up to Christ’s death, she thought to herself, *I know this. I don’t want to read it again.* But she pressed into the passages. Then she felt a very strong impression—words that were not her own: “I died so that I could be with you forever.”

These ten words now hang at the entryway of our house. Julia cherishes them in her heart. She can still lose sight of this truth in her day-to-day life. She might not always be aware of how true it is. But this experience and truth is one she returns to again and again.

While I can’t tell you how God will affirm his love for you, I can tell you that God’s love for you is unchanging and available. Pray until he answers. Sometimes God reveals his love in dramatic ways. But from my experience he tends to go with subtleties. Why does God tend to whisper instead of declaring his love *Say Anything*-style with a boom box? As I once heard the pastor Craig Groeschel say in a sermon, “God whispers because of how close he is to us.” If you want the dramatics, look to the death and resurrection of Jesus. There you will see God’s love profoundly on display. If you want to hear it for yourself, wait for the whisper.

May you know your belovedness in Christ in a meaningful and life-transforming way.

Discover Your Identity

Almighty Father, in you we live and move and have our being. You are the author of life, the perfecter of our faith, and the Father of every tribe and nation: thank you for adopting us into your family as beloved sons and daughters. Please fill us with your Holy Spirit, that we might join the church throughout the ages and the world today in crying, "Abba! Father!" May we be quieted by your love and have ears to hear your loud rejoicing over us. We pray that you would root and ground us in your love. Help us to rest in who you declare we are, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Take a moment to pray

Sit quietly with God for five to ten minutes. Ask the Spirit to guide your reflections. Write down a brief prayer in your own words for this section:

Misguided Stories

There are many kinds of misguided stories, such as self-authorship, performance, or contamination stories. Take time to identify and describe a few of the misguided stories that have shaped your identity. Start by asking: Who wrote this story for you? Who does it say you are? How does it affect you?

I summarize two of my own misguided stories as “almost but not enough” and “exciting but wrong.” How would you summarize yours?

Redemptive Identity

Below are a few ways Scripture further describes who we are in Christ. Circle words that resonate the most with you.

Accepted	EPH 1:6	Innocent	EPH 1:4
Adopted	ROM 8:15	Justified	ROM 5:1
Beloved	JER 31:3	Kept	1 PET 2:25
Blessed	EPH 1:3	Loved	JN 15:9
Child of God	1 JN 3:1	Masterpiece	EPH 2:10
Chosen	EPH 1:4	Never alone	DEUT 31:8
Coheir	ROM 8:17	New creation	2 COR 5:17
Conqueror	ROM 8:37	Not condemned	ROM 8:1
Delighted in	ZEPH 3:17	Righteous	2 COR 5:21
Delivered	COL 1:13	Sanctified	1 COR 6:11
Forgiven	EPH 1:7	Set apart	1 PET 2:9
Free	GAL 5:1	Washed clean	IS 1:18
Friend	JN 15:15	Whole	COL 2:10
Healed	1 PET 2:24	Wonderfully made	PS 139:14

How do these truths about who you are in Christ dismantle your misguided stories?

Engage your imagination: When God sees you, who does he see?

Choose one meaningful word or image that connects you to your redemptive identity:

Reflect: What did you take away from this section?
Jot down any key insights or aha moments, or topics for further study and learning:

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