

The Dream of You: Let Go of Broken Identities and Live the Life You Were Made For

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Let's be honest, the life you lead isn't what you've always dreamt. And maybe the person you've become isn't who you've always imagined. Sure, you can clean it up. You can work longer, love harder, and eat better. You can scrub the surface of your life until it gleams and still never address the fact that somehow you lost sight of who you really are and what you're living for.

Is this the life you were meant to live?

As the child of Nigerian immigrants in the UK, author and speaker Jo Saxton knows firsthand how quickly the world can cause us to doubt our dreams and question who we are. She understands how easily we can exchange our true child-of-God selves for an identity built on lies, guilt, and brokenness.

In this powerful book, Jo examines Biblical figures and shares her personal story as she invites you to turn to the One who knows you intimately and loves you deeply. He sees all you've struggled to hide. He hears the voice inside you that others have silenced. He knows the potential and purpose that no one valued. He longs to redeem the story of your life and set you on the path to reclaim The Dream of You. Are you ready?

JO SAXTON is a popular leadership trainer, international speaker, and author who is passionate about seeing Jesus transform lives across the globe. She has been featured at IF: Gathering, Catalyst, Thrive, and Propel conferences. Jo also chairs the board of an international discipleship organization, known as 3D Movements, serves on the advisory board for Today's Christian Woman, and co-hosts the LeadStories podcast. Jo and her husband, Chris, live in the Minneapolis area with their two daughters.

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Don't Call Me "Pleasant"

Hey, Friend,

You are fully known and deeply loved by the living God.

You are seen, every single part of you.

You have a voice, you have ideas, you have a purpose.

You are valuable. You are worthy.

Just let all this sink in for a minute.

But somewhere along the way, you lost sight of the truth of who you are. You became who you thought you had to be. You became what was expected of you, what pleased the world around you, what people required of you. That was fine for a while; perhaps it was even necessary. That is, until you reached a place where you don't know who you are anymore. And you haven't been able to find your way back.

Most of the time, life is too full and moving too fast for you to even pay attention to the

gradual loss of identity. But you can't escape the moments in life that reveal the situation. It's in the way you automatically second-guess your opinions. Or in the guilt you feel about your pride in your dreams and ideas of doing something big. It's revealed in the way you burn yourself out catering to the needs and wants of others. It's in the hope that by being and doing you will earn more love and acceptance. And when you have worn yourself out and still haven't received the recognition, you try even harder.

It's in the way you can't get beyond your past, and the stain of shame that you can't seem to escape. After all this time, you still wonder if God really could love someone like you.

I wrote this book for you.

It's the story of how identities get broken, but how they can be redeemed.

It's the story of how voices are muted, but how one day they sing a new song.

It's the story of how God transforms us so we can be free.

It's my story, and I believe it's yours too. It's a story that unfolds every day.

It is possible to find your way back to who you are and recover the life you were made for. It's not always easy, but the path is paved with God's grace and mercy. If you're ready for the journey, I'd love to walk alongside you and keep you company. We'll share our stories along the way. And maybe some snacks.

With love,

Jo

Who do you think you are? It's a life-defining and an identity-defining question. When I consider who I think I am, what my identity is, I sometimes think I'm a woman simply trying to keep up with the expectations of the world around me.

Standing at an airport newsstand looking for some light reading, I noticed the glossy images on magazine covers. The cover models' features and dimensions defied gravity. There was not one photo of a person on any magazine cover that looked anything like me.

Then there were the claims made by magazine-cover headlines. I needed to buy one magazine to get a perfect body while another offered a must-read article that would teach me how to be the perfect parent and not ruin my children's lives. Forever.

Yet another magazine promised to make me amazing in bed, while the one just below it

assured me I could make nutritious, locally sourced meals in only fifteen minutes. An entire section of magazines pointed out all the accessories I needed to own for the perfectly appointed home. How would I afford all this? Thankfully, another magazine contained the skills I needed to become a multimillionaire entrepreneur.

To ward off any doubts that all this was possible and could be accomplished now, the magazines featured beautiful people who had achieved these goals by the time they were twenty-five. I should simply have walked away from this madness, but I couldn't help myself.

I said rather loudly, "All I want is a bloody magazine!" and walked away with nothing but angst.

It's not just me, and it's not just you. It has to do with being a woman in a society that refuses to accept and celebrate women on their own merits. Our society seems far more interested in limiting us to role definitions that usually have little to do with the qualities, intelligence, and talent we each uniquely bring to the world.

Marketing analyst Clotilde Rapaille has written, "Being a woman in America is difficult.... So many rules, so many tensions." I agree, except I'd add that my sisters around the world know this is not an issue only in America. Globally, in different cultures and different ways, we're all feeling the pressure to conform to imposed standards designed to limit us. We all wrestle with a range of rules and expectations and have to work against the voices that keep telling us who we're supposed to be and what we're supposed to live for.

As we have seen, our sense of identity is shaped by far more than childhood dreams. Some of us were given inaccurate identities when life interrupted and distracted us. The people around us have left their mark. And personal experiences don't remain in the past. They leave a deep imprint, forever changing us.

When Life Changes Your Name

In ancient times, a woman named Naomi left her homeland along with her husband and sons. They moved to Moab to escape famine, and they hoped it would be an opportunity to make a new beginning. Sadly, life didn't turn out the way Naomi had hoped. In Moab, she lost her husband and both her sons. She returned home years later with a daughter-in-law, Ruth. When they reached Naomi's hometown, the community welcomed her back. But devastated by grief, Naomi was no longer the woman they had known years before.

"Don't call me Naomi," she told the people. [Naomi means "pleasant."] "Instead, call me Mara [meaning "bitter"], for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me home empty" (Ruth 1:20-21).

Naomi's sorrow changed her life and renamed her identity. Yet it's not only the life-shattering events that shape our identities.

Another story from ancient times shows that allowing others to define one's identity can sideline even a person marked for royalty. Saul, about to be appointed king of Israel, failed to show up for his own coronation. His unexpected disappearance was so concerning that the people sought God to find the king. The response: "He is hiding among the baggage" (1 Samuel 10:22). Saul eventually came out from his hiding place to assume leadership of the nation, but he never escaped the baggage of his own insecurities.

If you read his story in the Bible, you'll see that insecurity and other issues buried Saul's potential. He lived for the approval of others, even at the expense of obeying God. For instance, the king felt so threatened by a young newcomer named David that he tried to kill him. The attempts on David's life continued for years. Saul's insecurity was a toxin that overwhelmed his identity and poisoned his life.

It's human to experience insecurity. We don't feel confident all the time, and it's tempting to compare ourselves with other people. Yet the insecurities, if left unaddressed, can grow from momentary emotions to a definitive worldview that determines how we feel, think, and act. Insecurity becomes our identity.

If personal experiences, the interruptions of life, and the voices of those around us have poisoned who we really are, how can you find out your true identity? You know the "right" answer as well as I do. Knowing Jesus forms the basis of your identity, and having a personal knowledge of Him changes everything. Doesn't it?

Doesn't it?

Why the Big Disconnect?

For many of us, knowing Jesus has not pointed the way to finding out who we truly are. How can that be possible? Perhaps it's because humans find it hard to receive love, gifts, and kindness. We have trouble accepting grace. Maybe after all of our achievements in culture, arts, technology, and science, we assume we now have to overachieve in the realms of spirituality and faith. As a result, our identity in Christ becomes yet another task to add to an overcrowded list of jobs to get done.

Wash the car.

Fold the laundry.

Pick up prescriptions.

Be like Jesus.

Before we know it, a life-changing, heart-transforming, identity-defining relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ is reduced to a formulaic "to achieve" list. The list often

includes attending church regularly, participating in midweek groups, giving money and time, maintaining personal piety and devotion, and helping others-especially those who are less well off. Of course, it involves being a generally "nice" and vaguely "moral" person. These activities are good, even great things. It's just that these are things to do. They are not who you are.

When our identity in Christ is reduced to a checklist, it's no wonder the connection between our faith and our identity is, instead, a big disconnect for many of us. Surely seeking to be defined as a follower of Jesus is not just more empty hype.

We know that Jesus is the answer, so we feel vague guilt about challenging the assertion that he is the answer. But if Jesus answers the question, "Who are you?" then why are we still struggling to find our deepest, truest identities? Where are the freedom, peace, and security that were promised? We've sung it, we've read it, we've stood on the promise of it, and even though we know on some level these things must be true, they don't seem to be true for us.

We still don't know who we are. Some of us, not having found a way to get past the experiences that defined us, identify with Naomi. Some of us align with Saul: We haven't been able to break out from the baggage of our insecurities. We have been trapped in comparing and competing, neither of which can end well. We have listened to other definitions of who we are, and paying attention to the voices has limited our potential and our future. Maybe, as the voices tell us, the problem is us. Once again, we're not good enough.

Thankfully, God sees us from a completely different vantage point.

God's Design for Glorious Living

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone. (Ephesians 1:11-12, msg)

The Scripture passage is not a slogan; it's the truth. This is the answer to the heartache behind our deepest longings, the answer to the stories behind our wildest dreams. This truth is the answer to our hopes for who we really are and can become. There is so much more to discover than rules and tensions. Before we even knew Jesus, He had designs on us for glorious living.

The words of truth regarding your identity were written by a man named Paul, a zealous persecutor of Christians until he met Jesus in a life-transforming, literally blinding, encounter. The passage forms part of a letter written to church communities in the ancient city of Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) and the surrounding region. Paul's letter communicated deep truths that still apply to all believers.

The cosmopolitan city of Ephesus experienced something of an awakening to the good news of the gospel when Paul and his team preached there (see Acts 19). People from all backgrounds and walks of life came to faith. Incredible miracles took place. People who had been involved in witchcraft burned their books and tools and became Christians. Others publicly confessed their wrongdoing. This kind of public confession bore particular significance in this city. Ephesus was home to many religious temples, but its preeminent shrine was the Temple of Diana, still considered to be one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Temple of Diana also was known to be a place of sanctuary and asylum. People could find immunity there, escaping the consequences of their crimes.

The Temple of Diana played a huge role in the city's cultural life, housing its arts scene. The worship of Diana, which fueled the local economy, included rituals and practices that exploited women as temple prostitutes. As pagan worshippers of Diana responded to the gospel and started following Jesus, a decline in commerce derived from former temple-goers affected local businesses. Business owners who were losing profits eventually incited a riot against Paul.

Paul and his team decided to leave, eventually moving on to Macedonia (see Acts 20) and Greece. Meanwhile, new converts living in a pagan land were figuring out what their faith meant to their everyday lives. They were dealing with opposition and conflict due to their faith in Jesus Christ. These men and women were Christians who had left behind a life that bore little similarity to a life in Christ. They needed guidance.

That's why Paul pointed out in the first chapter of his letter to the Ephesians that a new life with Jesus is exactly that: a completely new life. This is huge in orienting believers in the way to live in a hostile culture (see Acts 19). It also was freeing for the Ephesians. It meant that people who had lived in spiritual darkness, putting their trust in a religion that was powerless to help them, no longer had to be defined by the past. God was making them new, from the inside out.

Can you imagine what it is like to let go of everything that is familiar in order to fully embrace a new life? This means laying down the old way of living, including friends, family, community, the way you used to think, your worldview—all the things that had made you you. The old life can't continue to exist alongside the new life. But forsaking the old life means having all your comforts and reference points stripped away. With all that left behind, who are you now and what are you living for?

Try to put yourself in the place of converts to the Christian faith who had spent their lives practicing a pagan religion. They sought a change, and now they were experiencing a complete turnaround. Think of the challenges they faced in changing their lives—and staying changed.

We've all tried to reboot our lives at some point: a juice cleanse to reboot our health, a decluttering session to clear out our homes. Or maybe a commitment to stick to a New Year's resolution with the promise of a "New Year, New You." A word to live by each year to

help you remember the person you've always wanted to be and the life you've hoped to live.

I'm a huge fan of New Year's resolutions, the chance to start again, the chance to transform my life. My attempts have met with varying degrees of success. The weight I lost one year found its way home again. Career paths sometimes took me in a direction I hadn't planned to take. The determination to be a better woman (whatever that meant) brought me-exhausted-face to face with who I am. My resolve to change my life never has been enough. I've needed something lasting and someone bigger than me.

Other Books

The Family Herald.

⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ . 66 a But far more dear to me To fan them into lite : 66 " It never was in . I believe , " muttered Gilson ; then he ... and Dr. Robinson gained something of the eclat of a " I just came to tell Mr. Whatmore that I have helped carry ..."