

WHO AM
I NOW?

GROWING THROUGH LIFE'S
CHANGING SEASONS

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CHANGING SEASONS

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The material in this book is appropriate for either personal or group study. Questions in the “Things to Think About and Discuss” sections will be particularly helpful for group study.

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PREFACE: WOMEN

SHARING THE ADVENTURE

Summer 1998

For nearly ten years I had been teaching teenagers in my local church. Our own teenagers had grown up, completed their education, married, and established homes of their own. We had four wonderful grandchildren! (We now have six.)

I enjoyed teaching teens. I loved their enthusiasm and zest for life. I watched them grow and change.

After our church hired a youth pastor, I thought it must be time for me to leave the youth group. I asked God what I should do next. I read the second chapter of the Book of Titus, where the Bible says older women should teach younger ones. Was I now an “older” woman? Would any younger woman want to listen to me?

I looked in the mirror; sure enough, an “older” woman looked back at me. (She smiled, wondering that I hadn’t noticed her before.) Amazing, isn’t it, how the term “older” takes the sting out of “old.” Where had the time gone? About

that time, my pastor approached me and asked, “Have you ever thought of teaching a women’s class?”

I was ready for a new adventure.

We called ourselves “Ladies of Grace.”

Eighteen-year-old, Lisa, a college student, often sat next to Nellie, age ninety-three, as we shared truth, prayer requests, sorrows, encouragement, laughter, and stories from our separate journeys.

Together we viewed life’s various stages, listened, and considered differing points of view while we learned from the past and the present. We discovered biblical patterns and principles that are timeless and relevant, and we found joy in our mutual search.

This book is a result of the discussions we held and the truths we discovered.



INTRODUCTION: WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE ANYWAY?

W*ho am I now?* I frequently ask myself.
I seem always to be changing.

I have been a child, a daughter, a sister, a teenager, a bride, a wife, a mother, a seeker of truth, a believer in Christ, a Bible teacher, a secretary, a bank officer, a musician (of sorts), a grandmother, a Welcome Wagon representative, a home-decorating consultant, a writer, a newspaper columnist, a public speaker, and a friend.

Women live their lives sequentially—we are first one thing and then another, with many overlapping roles.

I've played many of these roles simultaneously. So have you.

Have you ever asked yourself who you really are?

What are your thoughts, your dreams, your worries, your disappointments?

How do you see yourself?

And a bigger question: how does God see you?

Right now—where you are.

And tomorrow?

Who will you be then?

Just who do you think you are anyway?

Identity: It's who we think we are. It's how we see ourselves and how we see God.

As children, we get our self-image from our parents, teachers, coaches, relatives, and friends—those who comment about us, laugh at us, approve of us, or disapprove of us, judge us, favorably or not, those who love us, and those who withhold their love.

Later on we make our own judgments. We dream what we'll be, what we'll do. And then the disappointments come. Life doesn't turn out the way we thought it would. We fail because failing is part of life too.

We seem always to be waiting for someone to tell us who we are.

And then there is God. Where is He? Can we find Him? Or will He find us? Are we already searching for Him in our own quirky kind of way? Is He searching for us?

Only the God who created us knows who we were meant to be. Our lives reflect how we see God, and our relationship to Him defines everything else in our lives.

CHAPTER ONE



I'M A BELIEVER

The Race

As the early morning sun beat down on what promised to be another hot June day, Marcy waited to sign up for the race. Anticipating the adrenaline rush she'd felt in a number of other local community-sponsored races, she couldn't wait to begin. She had run the staked-out course, clocked her speed, and limbered her muscles for many mornings in preparation for this event. Now her heart pounded with readiness as she looked forward to the sound of the starting gun.

Since it was a charity race, the registration fees would help handicapped children. The fifteen-dollar entry fee also covered a t-shirt, which she would add to her growing collection.

As she reached the registration table, a pleasant woman greeted her, handing her the required entry form. "Are you entering the race, or did you just want the t-shirt?" she asked. Surprised, Marcy asked her to explain. She learned

that the committee had decided to give a t-shirt to anyone contributing fifteen dollars, even if they had no intention of running the race.

Her comment led Marcy think about her Christian faith: “Am I in the race, or did I only sign up for the t-shirt?” she asked herself.



Observing the manner in which the Christian gospel is often presented, one would assume that the beginning of our faith is the end. We encourage seekers to confess that they are sinners and receive Christ into their lives by praying a simple prayer. We encourage them to read their Bibles, pray, go to church as often as possible, tell others about their new faith, and adopt the lifestyle of the Christians around them (hoping they will copy the ones who meet with our approval).

But many remain at the starting gate. They have heard that Jesus “paid it all,” but they believe they are now expected to “shape up” by their own effort. When they try and fail day after day, they become convinced that God is disappointed with them, and their guilt goes unresolved. It’s uncomfortable to be around God. They can’t meet His standards. So they drift away, thinking that, for them at least, it just doesn’t work.

They don’t realize that Christ’s righteousness has been credited to them and they now stand before God forgiven and clean and that the Holy Spirit wants to begin producing His fruit in their lives.

When we enter the family of God through an initial step of belief, our salvation is complete, but it is not “all over.” We begin a race, a relationship, and a journey that lasts a lifetime and beyond. (See Hebrews 12:1–2.)

We must discard whatever hinders us (habits, relationships, wrong ideas, etc.).

We must persevere (don't grow weary) in the race *marked out for us*.

We must look in faith to Jesus, who will perfect our faith (bring us to maturity).

Our salvation began in eternity past, says Romans 8:29–30, and God will continue that work until we are glorified in His presence.

It's *more than* a prayer; it's a life.

He is *more than* the author of our faith; He is the finisher.

He has done *more than* take away our sins; He justified us and gave us His righteousness.

It's *more than* Heaven when we die; it's abundant life now.

It's *more than* John 3:16; it's claiming all the promises of God's Word.

It's *more than* another witnessing formula; it's creating a craving for Christ in others.

The Relationship

If you are married, think back to your wedding day. Picture yourself and your new husband driving away from the church, tin cans clinking from the rear bumper and Just Married signs plastered on your car. You are entering a joyous new phase in your life. As a result of the vows you have taken, you are assuming new loyalties, privileges, and responsibilities.

Becoming a believer in Christ similarly creates new relationships, with accompanying loyalties, privileges, and responsibilities. Becoming a Christian can, in some ways, be compared to getting married. Things do not remain the same.

The apostle Paul, in the seventh chapter of Romans, declares that the Christian died to the law and now belongs to Christ (Romans 7:4–6).

Believers become a part of Christ's bride, the church.

In Romans 3:21–26, we learn righteousness has been provided for us by God and that it is acquired through faith in Jesus Christ. We don't achieve this righteousness by our own effort. We have sinned, but we are made right with God through Christ's sacrifice of Himself on the cross. God's justice has been satisfied, and those who believe in Jesus are now acceptable to God. The goal was not only to take away our sin—He had to do that first—but that we could experience new life in Christ.

We begin by believing in Jesus, placing our faith in Him, trusting Him; and that faith is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8–10). (See also John 6:28–29, 35–37, and 44.) Only God can cause someone to be born again by His Spirit. We cannot make it happen by persuasion or saying “magic” words.

Believers are baptized into Christ's death (Romans 6:1–7). In other words, when Jesus died, we died *with* Him, even though we were not yet born. What a mysterious and wonderful truth! Our old life is gone. When we believe in Christ, we exchange our lives for His, and we begin anew! As we begin to *see* (consider) ourselves in this way, both our thinking and our behavior change.

We become new people, born again into a relationship with Christ and His church. Our initial surrender is followed by an unfolding of our new lives in Him. One big

yes is followed by many small ones. It is long obedience in the same direction.

The Journey

When Jesus called His disciples to follow Him, it involved a major life change. Fishermen left their nets and tax collectors changed their occupations. Their lives were never the same after they responded to Jesus' call.

The verb, "follow," indicates one is going somewhere. Old habits and ways of thinking are left behind. New adventures lie ahead.

We are called to be changed by the changeless God.

We are called to be His followers.

Followers are learners, another word for *disciple*.

We are called to become like Jesus Christ.

Our journey can begin with a simple prayer of faith, but a journey is composed of many steps, not just one. Romans 1:17 declares, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

Living by faith requires *seeing* ourselves as new people, daily *yielding* to the one we are following, and *obeying* biblical principles.

The spirituals captured the idea in their titles, "My Lord, I'm On My Journey" and "Get on Board, Li'l Children." There is a journey, and *the beginning is for the purpose of getting started*. A free ticket doesn't necessarily mean we have boarded the train.

Jesus calls us to come, believe, learn, trust, follow, and adventure in His will.

Jesus is described as "the author and *perfecter* of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). In Philippians 1:6, we are promised He will carry it on to completion.

People sometimes speak of “making a decision,” referring to a time when they prayed a prayer of commitment to Christ. But there may be little or no evidence of being in the race, in relationship to Christ or His church, or being on the journey. Perhaps they do not understand what it is they have decided. Faith is ongoing and active, leading to life in the truth. Saving faith will change the way we think and live. It is *a birth to a life* of growth and freedom—a grand adventure, perhaps more a discovery than a decision. The word *belief* comes from “by-lief” or “by-life.” Your beliefs are the things you believe in sufficiently to act upon, to live by.¹ There is no entry fee. The fare has been paid. God provides everything you need along the way. But if you remain at the starting gate, you will miss the *race*, the *relationship*, the *journey*, and the desired destination.

Suppose I invite you to my party and you say, “Yes, I’d love to come. I accept the invitation.” But you do not come. You never taste the culinary delights I have prepared for you. You never share in fellowship with other guests. You never experience the joy of the party.

Did you really accept my invitation?

Scripture Passages to Consider

- Matthew 13:1–30
- Ephesians 1:1–14; 2:4–10
- Romans 3, 6–8
- 1 Corinthians 9:24–27
- John 3:1–21; 6:26–50
- Hebrews 12:1–2
- James 1:18
- 2 Corinthians 5:17

Things to Think About or Discuss

- Describe how your relationship with Christ began.
- What first drew you to Him? Why did you come?
- What happened next?
- How did your thinking change?
- What life changes took place?
- How important is obedience in a continuing walk of faith?
- What part do the Scriptures play in your continuing growth?
- What promises did you learn to depend on?
- As you look back, what are some of the highlights of your journey?
 1. Where were the hard places?
 2. Where did you grow the most?
 3. What do you think a person coming to Christ in an initial act of faith needs to know?

SEEING OURSELVES IN CHRIST

Those who believe in Christ no longer stand before God as guilty sinners. We died *with* Christ and were *raised with Him* to new life. Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God and believers are united with Him. This may be beyond our understanding, but it is not beyond our believing, because it is true.

The Bible says God sees believers as being “in Christ.” To be in Christ is to be accepted by God, not on our own merit but on the merit of Christ. Our sin has been credited to Christ and His righteousness credited to us—even though we did nothing to deserve it. It is the most wonderful fact in the new believer’s life. God now sees us justified by Christ’s death, possessing His righteousness, and indwelt by His Holy Spirit.

The more we learn to see ourselves as God sees us, the more joyous and fulfilling our lives will be.

While we still have sinful desires, we can now choose to follow Jesus in our daily pursuits and live above the temptations that bring us frustration and sin.

The “rats” of our sinful nature will continue to live in the basements of our beings, tempting us to stray from Christ, but we can learn to live on the first floor, yielding to God, rising above the sins that would defeat us. God works in us both to *will and to do* what pleases Him. As we continue to trust God’s wisdom and sovereignty, we will desire to live in a manner that pleases Him. Why wouldn’t we?

To Those Who Are not Yet in Christ

If you have never placed your personal faith in Jesus, trusting His death as payment for your sin, you are not “in Christ.” You are lost and not in a right relationship to God, because your sins stand in the way. Jesus said that all who come to God must come through Him, a shocking truth to people who feel they can choose the manner in which they approach a holy God.

If God has put within you a desire to believe and follow Jesus, you can open your mind, heart, and life to Him at this moment. You can welcome Him into your life in simple childlike faith. Yes, it’s scary to allow someone else to be in control of your life, but this is what God wants from us, to believe and follow—keep learning, keep following—for a lifetime! His Holy Spirit will illumine your mind and enable you to believe and give you understanding as you study the Bible.

Jesus, the Creator God, made you, loves you, and wants to live His life in you. When you launch on life’s greatest adventure, that of knowing God, you will begin to become the *real you*, the person God intended you to be.

Will you invite Him into your life today, before continuing in this book? Simply—in your own words—ask Christ to forgive your sin, come into your life, and make you a new person—right now.

If you have invited Christ into your life, you will want to begin studying the Bible. As the Holy Spirit speaks to you through the Bible, you will begin to understand your new identity as a believer in

Jesus Christ. Finding a church where the Word of God is believed and taught will also help you grow spiritually.

The verses following will help you see yourself in Christ.

How God Sees Believers

- John 15:14–16: We are Jesus' friends. He chose us; we didn't choose Him. He appointed us to bear fruit.
- Galatians 3:7–9: We are children of Abraham, Abraham's "seed."
- Galatians 3:25–29: We are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, no longer under supervision of the law.
- Galatians 4:7–9: We are not slaves but sons and heirs. We are known by God.
- Galatians 5:4: We are free from trying to be justified by law.
- Galatians 5:22–23: We are free to produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.
- Ephesians 1:3–14: We were chosen in Him to be holy and blameless, predestined to be adopted in accordance with *His* pleasure and according to His plan. We were included in Christ. We were marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit, guaranteed an inheritance, to be redeemed as God's possession.
- Ephesians 2:1: We were (past tense) dead in transgressions and sins, but are now made alive in Christ (verse 5).

- Ephesians 2:6: We were raised up with Christ, seated with Him in heavenly realms.
- Ephesians 2:10: We are His workmanship (not workmen), created to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
- Ephesians 2:19: We are fellow citizens with God's people, members of God's household.
- Ephesians 2:22: We are built together to become a dwelling in which God lives.
- Colossians 1:22: We are reconciled by Christ's body, holy in his sight.
- Colossians 2:12: We have been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him.
- Colossians 3:2–4: We died and our life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ appears, we will appear with Him in glory.