

A 60-Day Exploration of Who You Were Made To Be

3 BIG

QUESTIONS

THAT

SHAPE

YOUR

FUTURE

KARA POWELL, KRISTEL ACEVEDO,
AND BRAD M. GRIFFIN

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INTRODUCTION

Asking the Right Questions

Life is all about questions.

And wow, there are *so many questions*.

Questions about the world.

Questions about the past.

Questions about the present.

Questions about the future—and more pointedly, about *your future*.

Maybe you feel the pressure to have everything figured out. Maybe you've thought the point of life is actually to find all the answers. Maybe you have adults around you who make it seem like that's *your* job, which feels stressful.

We want to let you in on something up front: this is not that kind of book.

Embracing the Questions

We may not know you personally, but we've spent a lot of time with young people like you. We are youth leaders who serve in churches and researchers who listen to teenagers talk about life and faith. We hear a lot of questions, and we ask a lot of questions.

This book is about embracing the questions.

Because the answers aren't the whole point. Questions take us on a journey, and the act of exploring, wondering, seeking, even wrestling

our way toward answers changes us—sometimes as much as the answers themselves.

Over the course of this book, we'll each share a few of our own stories of wrestling with big questions. Since there are three of us, we'll clarify whose story is whose by adding our names in parentheses the first time we say "I" in a post. One thing you should know though: asking a lot of questions is what landed each of us where we are today.

Brad used to get in trouble for asking too many questions in school. He couldn't help asking questions that started with "But what about . . . ?" Yes, he drove his teachers crazy.

Kristel is naturally curious and would always ask her parents "Why . . . ?" She wanted to know how and why the world functioned as it did and what it all meant. She's still looking for answers.

And Kara especially used to love asking questions in church. All the better if she could stump her youth pastor and small group leader.

So if you're a question asker already, we're here to say *you're not alone*. If, on the other hand, you tend to shy away from questions, or if asking questions stresses you out, you're also not alone. We've written this as a guide you can use wherever you are in your journey.

Here's more good news: questions aren't new to God. By one count of the four Gospels, Jesus was asked 183 questions.¹

That's remarkable, but what's even more remarkable is that Jesus himself asked 307 questions. If he was comfortable with questions *then*, he's comfortable with questions *now*.

So maybe we shouldn't worry whether God can handle our questions. Easier said than done, right?

All the same, we know what it's like to not feel safe enough to ask what we really want—or to not have the tools and guides we need to explore our questions and even wrestle down some answers.

The 3 Big Questions underneath the Rest

Based on our research with over two thousand teenagers, we've learned a lot about your generation. We heard from young people like you that among the dozens of questions tumbling through any teenager's mind at any time, the following often float to the top.

Who am I? The question of *identity*.

Where do I fit? The question of *belonging*.

What difference can I make? The question of *purpose*.

These aren't questions just for young people; they're questions for everyone. Adults still wonder about these things too. The three of us sure do! It's just that the period of life you're in right now is one that tends to push the big questions to the surface more often.

We've put this book together as a guide for you to explore these questions for yourself. You won't be alone. We'll be here, and we'll tell the stories of other teenagers and some stories from the Bible and stories from historical figures along the way. Whenever we directly quote a young person from our research, we use a pseudonym we've given them to protect their privacy. So anyone we reference by just a first name (like Lilly, Daniel, or Armando) is a real teenager like you who participated in up to six hours of interviews over the course of three visits.

While we based our work on research, we haven't weighed this book down with lots of citations. All the background and notes can be found in *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager*, which was written for adults but might be interesting to you if you're into research (like us).

How to Use This Book

Notice we didn't say "How to *read* this book." It is, of course, a book, and we do want you to read it. But we hope it is more like a guide—something useful, offering directions and insights along your journey.

Each post includes a story or some thoughts that introduce the idea, followed by these sections:

- *Reading God's Word*

Sometimes the Bible passage will be the main focus of the day; other times it will offer a way to reflect on the ideas we've shared. The verses are written out for you here, but we encourage you to look them up in your own Bible or your favorite Bible app—that way you can mark them for yourself,

see where the passage fits into a chapter and book, and read more if you're curious. Sometimes we'll share only part of a passage, so having your Bible open alongside the book will help you see what else is there.²

- *Reflect and Respond*

We've written a few prompts and journaling questions to get you thinking. You can either write your reflections here in the book or use a separate journal for more writing, drawing, or whatever helps you process.

There's also a starter prayer you can pray. Sometimes it's helpful to have words to use, but if that's not your style, you can just pray your own prayer!

- *Something to Try*

Each post offers something you can do to turn your questions into action. All of the suggestions may not work for you, but we encourage you to try as many as you can. You might find a few practices you want to repeat or make a regular part of your rhythms.

- *The Takeaway*

One last thought for the road—short and sweet.

There are sixty posts in all, divided between the big questions of identity, belonging, and purpose. Here are a few ideas for how you might tackle the content:

- Read one entry every day or a few days a week or whatever pace works for you. If you already have a regular pattern of reading Scripture or using a devotional guide, this is meant to be used in that way.
- Whatever your pace of reading these posts, you can either read them straight through, or start with the section you're most interested in exploring, then circle back to the others.
- Read with a group. Big questions love company! Maybe you're already part of a small group and you can work through this together. Or maybe you want to ask a few

friends to join you and form your own group. If you go this route, we recommend setting a regular day and time to meet and deciding together which posts you'll read ahead of each session.

- Use it with a mentor or family member. Sometimes it's helpful to get outside perspective on our big questions. Maybe an adult you trust could be a sounding board while you process what comes up while you read, write, and try new things throughout this guide.
- Mark it up! Underline words and phrases that stand out to you. Write notes, questions, or comments in the margins. Fold down the corners of pages you want to circle back to or find again quickly.

However you choose to use this book, we want it to be shame-free. We didn't list dates or days of the week or anything like that on the posts because we wanted you to have a guide that can flex with what fits you best.

If some of the language we use is new to you, or if Christianity altogether is new to you or something you're checking out, we hope this guide can be a sort of "way in," a start down a new road.

As you go, you might find even more questions bubbling up in you. That's a good thing. Remember that finding answers isn't necessarily the point. Both life and faith are, at their core, kind of a mystery.

If questions lead you to more questions, that's no sign of *failure*. It's a sign of *growth*.

So let's get started right now. What do you wonder about? What questions bug you about your life now or what your life will be like someday? What do you wonder about your future? Go ahead and write down a few of your own big questions. Don't hold back!

| *Who am I?*

■ *Where do I fit?*

■ *What difference can I make?*

■ *My other questions . . .*

PART 1

WHO AM I?

The Big Question of IDENTITY

Every day, I don't ever forget who I am. And I don't ever let anyone tell me who I am.

Jason

Wow, Jason is more confident than I (Kara) was at his age.

As a teenager, I often let myself be defined by who I was around. I was “smart Kara” at school, “Christian Kara” at church, “fun Kara” around my friends, and “work-hard Kara” on my swim team.

Most teenagers we interviewed are more like me than Jason.

Most teenagers also struggle with feeling inadequate. With feeling like they don't measure up.

As a teenager, I never felt like I was enough. Thirty years later, I still struggle with knowing that who I am is sufficient.

That's why the message of this section on identity is that you and I are ENOUGH because of Jesus.

We don't have to try so hard to win everyone's approval or become their preferred version of us. God says we are ENOUGH because we are created in God's image as beloved children. We are whole regardless of others' expectations and disappointments.

Every post in part 1 helps you live with more confidence that Jesus makes you more than ENOUGH. That's one of my daily prayers for myself, and I want it to be your daily reality.

With so many voices telling us who we are, it's important that we remember our identity is ultimately found in Christ. And Jesus says we are *ENOUGH*.

POST 1

Who People Expect You to Be vs. Who God Expects You to Be

“I just really, really, really cared about what other people thought about me. And I really wanted to have the right friends and do the right things.” She pointed her finger at a handful of imaginary people: “I was whatever I wanted to be for you, and for you, and for you. I didn’t have any stability. I kept looking for satisfaction, but none of it was working.”

Rebekah

I (Brad) love theater. In middle school, acting saved me from isolation and even depression.

A lot of that love came from my drama teacher, Mrs. Dwyer. Starting in sixth grade, she saw something in me that others didn’t: the potential to take my over-the-top personality and extra-loud voice and channel both toward public speaking and performance. At her invitation, I joined the speech and drama team and never looked back. (It’s possible she regretted this invitation; at times, I was a bit much.)

Acting opened up an entire world of possibilities for me—and one of the most exciting parts was getting to pretend I was someone else for a while.

When Pretending Gets Complicated

Acting is great when it's on an actual stage for fun. But not when it's your real life.

Maybe you find that each day feels like a live performance in front of a packed audience. On the far right of the theater sits your family. The center of the audience is full of friends from school, work, sports, and your neighborhood.

Just to the left are members of your church. Next to church members sit rows of teachers, coaches, and mentors.

In the front row are the people who follow you on social media, while perched in the balcony sit influencers telling you how to measure your beauty and achievement.

Your task: to try to please every audience member. At every moment. You can't just be yourself; you have to be your *best self*—whatever that means.

It's exhausting.

More than that, it's *impossible*. No one can do it.

The best of us can please only one audience at a time. But as we bounce from group to group, we're often swapping scripts. So we end up defining ourselves this way: *I am what others want or need me to be. I constantly feel pressure to live up to everyone else's expectations.*

All our lives, our identities are shaped by others. But you're in a stage of life when others' influence is massive. The thing is, while you may feel like you have to meet everyone's expectations all the time, God doesn't see you that way.

God doesn't expect you to be perfect or to meet a long list of requirements. God created you the way you are and is joyfully watching your personality, gifts, and unique quirks unfold. God's expectation is that you will be *you*—the person God created, not the person everyone else expects or pressures you to be.

We see this in the story of Jesus' own baptism. When he was dipped under the water and raised up again, the voice of God spoke a blessing over him: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11 NIV). This was before Jesus had done anything in his ministry to prove he was good enough for a blessing—no followers,

no miracles, no teaching. He was loved, and his Father was pleased with him without any performance.

When I think back to the real power of Mrs. Dwyer's influence on my life, it reached far beyond a skill set. In a season when I was experiencing intense social rejection, she never once made me feel left out, weird, or alone.

She didn't just see something *in* me—she saw *me*. That gift profoundly shaped who I am today. Because who I am is enough.

READING GOD'S WORD

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:9–11 NIV)

REFLECT AND RESPOND

Journaling Questions

How often do you feel like your identity is caught up in others' expectations? How does that make you feel about yourself?

List some of the unique qualities God's given you. How would you describe who you really are beyond the expectations or opinions of others? It's okay if you're not sure or if you write characteristics that seem opposite one another; that's part of

discovering who you are! Just write a snapshot of who you are today.

What does it mean to you to read that God is “well pleased” with you? How might knowing that impact the way you see yourself?

Pray This Prayer

God who created me and knows me, thank you for loving me for who I am. I spend a lot of energy trying to be what other people want me to be. Help me to live each day knowing that I am who you made me to be, and let that be enough. In Jesus' name, amen.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Flip the script. Pick an audience in your life with whom you're working too hard to act according to a script that doesn't feel authentically you. Where are you performing for the expectations of others? Imagine what it would look like to flip that script in some way—maybe it's saying no when you typically say yes, giving an unpopular opinion, or deciding not to post a perfectly curated picture or video. Pay attention to what it feels like to choose to be yourself.

THE TAKEAWAY

Acting is great when you're on a stage, but God didn't put you on a permanent stage. Be your offstage self today.

POST 2

How Does God View You?

I (Kristel) started actively following Jesus when I was a teenager. It was a confusing time as I ventured out to understand who I was and what role my new faith played in my journey of self-discovery.

The message I often received in churches and youth groups was that I was fundamentally flawed—sinful. I often wondered if God looked at me with disgust. Each time I stumbled, I gave myself a hard time and pictured God being irritated with me. How could God even stand the sight of me? I needed to do better and earn God’s love.

Grace may have been good enough to save me, but it wasn’t enough to keep me saved. God clearly expected me to pull myself up by my bootstraps, quit slacking off, and get myself together. Or so I thought.

Look Again

While we are all born with sin, it’s not obligation that causes God to save us; it’s love. It took me a long time, but one day I realized that God looks at me the way I look at my own children now—with awe and affection.

John 3:16 is the first verse I ever memorized: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life.” Did you catch it? God *so loved*. That’s the reason God sent Jesus to this earth. Rather than looking

down on us and our sin with anger or frustration, God looks at us with love and compassion. Verse 17 further clarifies that God didn't send Jesus to judge or condemn us but to save us. God wanted better for us and would do whatever it took to rescue us from our mess.

At my church, we say that we love God completely, love ourselves correctly, and love our neighbors compassionately. When I meet with my small group of high school girls, I often find myself reminding them about the part that says “love ourselves correctly.” They feel so much pressure to look a certain way or get good grades or be perfect. Sometimes without thinking they will say something like “Ugh, I look terrible!” or “I’m so dumb” or “Sorry, I’m not wearing any makeup today!” When I hear comments like that, I take the opportunity to gently remind them that loving yourself correctly means talking to yourself kindly and remembering that you can show up just as you are without apology.

I love having conversations with them and helping them see that we are not meant to hate ourselves or put ourselves down. We look together at where God declares faithful love for us in Scripture. God calls us good and desires to be with us.

Even when we mess up, God's love for us doesn't change. When we stumble and fall, God doesn't scoff at us and wait for us to stand and dust ourselves off. Instead, God wraps loving arms around us and holds us. God helps us to our feet and directs us forward in a new way. That's what grace is.

If you ever question how God sees you, remember this: you are God's creation, God's child. God gave everything to be with you—right now and forever. God loves you with an everlasting, unending love.

READING GOD'S WORD

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send

his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16–17)

See what kind of love the Father has given to us in that we should be called God’s children, and that is what we are! Because the world didn’t recognize him, it doesn’t recognize us.

Dear friends, now we are God’s children, and it hasn’t yet appeared what we will be. We know that when he appears we will be like him because we’ll see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves even as he is pure. (1 John 3:1–3)

REFLECT AND RESPOND

Journaling Questions

In the past, what have you been taught about the way God views you? How is that similar to or different from what you read today?

How do you know God loves you? What might make you question that love? What might help you be more confident in it?

How might knowing you are loved by God help you love yourself?

Pray This Prayer

God, loving myself correctly can seem impossible at times. When I don't love myself, help me to remember that you love me with an infinite and unconditional love. Help me to see myself the way you see me. In Jesus' name, amen.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Today, pay close attention to the way you speak to yourself. Each time you catch your negative self-talk, stop and speak truth instead. If you're not sure the best truth to focus on at the moment, remind yourself that you are loved by God.

THE TAKEAWAY

No matter how you look at yourself, God looks at you with unending love.

What to Do When Being Labeled Holds You Back

I (Kara) was known as the “smart” kid in the family. Since kindergarten, studying and getting good grades have both been pretty natural for me.

My brother was the funny one—always cracking jokes and making our family laugh.

My stepsister was the athlete. She excelled at any sport she tried (well, except basketball, but that was because she didn’t know the rules so she kept fouling out).

My stepbrother was the creative and curious one. From dismantling sprinklers across our block (which got him into trouble) to diving into computers when they first became popular (which got him into his programming career), he’s perpetually eager to figure out how stuff works.

We didn’t discuss these labels aloud, but they still came to define us—first in our family, but also in our friend groups.

How about you? In your family or in your friend group, which label fits you? Are you the smart, funny, athletic, or creative one—like me and my siblings?

Or maybe you’re the artistic one.

Or the romantic one.

Or the wild one.

Or the spiritual one.

Or the outgoing or introverted one.

Those sorts of labels—that others say aloud or we think ourselves—are hard to avoid. While labels are not entirely bad, they tend to limit us at times.

Labels Limit Us

Labels limit us when we stay stuck in certain understandings of who we are and don't allow ourselves to change. If we think that we're only creative and not also potentially introverted or funny, we can short-change ourselves and miss out on parts of who God has made us to be.

Labels limit us when we feel like we have to be what others expect—even if it's not who we are or what we feel at that moment. Sometimes it's not our view of ourselves that limits us but others' views. If we feel like we always have to be the “happy one” at home to cheer up Grandpa, or the “good youth group kid” at church so our youth pastor likes us, we miss out on the full spectrum of emotions God's given us. We end up denying some of our feelings, which can make us feel fake.

Labels limit us when we forget that more than anything else, we are defined as people who are made in God's image and loved by God. God has made each of us as unique individuals, and our unique qualities often come to define us. No one can change the fundamental truths of who God made us to be. They define us more than even our standout athletic, academic, artistic, or social skills.

Even Jesus was dogged by labels. Being from Nazareth was an insult at the time, but Jesus turned the insult around. In John 1, he gives Nathanael a compliment, catching him off guard and sharing a vision that transcended any simple label.

When we choose to follow Jesus, *this* identity surrounds all others and becomes part of all we are.

READING GOD'S WORD

The next day Jesus wanted to go into Galilee, and he found Philip. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter.

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets: Jesus, Joseph’s son, from Nazareth.”

Nathanael responded, “Can anything from Nazareth be good?”

Philip said, “Come and see.”

Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said about him, “Here is a genuine Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

Nathanael asked him, “How do you know me?” (John 1:43–48)

REFLECT AND RESPOND

Journaling Questions

What are the labels you would use to describe yourself? What are the labels others would use to describe you?

Which of these labels do you love? Which would you change if you could?

How do these qualities compare with your identity as a Jesus follower?

Pray This Prayer

God, thank you for the skills and personality you have given me. I'm sorry for the way I let other labels define me. I want to be more defined by my relationship with you than by anything else. Please help me to view myself first as a follower of yours—above anything else. In Jesus' name, amen.

SOMETHING TO TRY

On your phone or on a piece of paper, draw a fairly large circle in the center. Label that circle “Jesus follower.” Then draw a handful of other surrounding circles and write a label next to each of them—such as daughter, athlete, close friend. The bigger the circle, the more important the label is to you. If being a Jesus follower isn’t yet your biggest circle, that’s okay. Be honest with where you are now and come back to this exercise as you grow.

If there are other aspects of yourself that you’d like to explore further (such as being more of an introvert or sad or angry), then add those circles in a different color or label them with a different font. Keep this diagram somewhere you can pull it out from time to time as a reminder of the value in having Jesus define you more than anything else. Let it encourage you to keep exploring more aspects of who God has made you.

THE TAKEAWAY

The more you follow Jesus, the more your relationship with Jesus defines you.

EVERY TEENAGER WANTS TO KNOW:

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How will my life matter?
Where do I fit?

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