

Defined: Who God Says You Are

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CONTENT SAMPLER

UNEDITED MANUSCRIPT

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Contents

Introduction

1. Who You Are and Why It Matters
2. You Are Who God Says You Are

Part I—Intentionality: How Your Story Begins

3. You Are Created with a Purpose
4. You Are Uniquely Designed
5. You Are Not Perfect
6. You Are Uniquely Broken
7. You Are Invited to Know God Personally
8. You Are Able to Test Your Relationship with God
9. You Are Part of God's Epic Plan

Part II—Identity: Who You Are in Christ

10. You Are Beloved as God's Adopted Child
11. You Are Blessed as God's Spiritual Son
12. You Are Saved as God's New Creation
13. You Are Forgiven as God's Redeemed Saint
14. You Are Sealed as God's Prized Possession
15. You Are Belonging as a Member of God's Church

DEFINED

- 16. You Are Inhabited as God's Dwelling Place
- 17. You Are Gifted as God's Specialized Worker
- 18. You Are Commissioned as God's Kingdom Ambassador
- 19. You Are Shining as God's Light in the Darkness
- 20. You Are Victorious as God's Spiritual Warrior

Part III—Inheritance: What You Have in Christ

- 21. You Have Resources and a Rich Inheritance from Your Father
- 22. You Have Access and Authority through Jesus
- 23. You Have Empowerment and Enablement through the Holy Spirit
- 24. You Have Hope and a Home in Heaven
- 25. You Have Peace and Provision through Prayer
- 26. You Have Truth and Transformation through the Word

Part IV—Imperatives: Embracing Your Identity

- 27. You Must Renew Your Thinking
- 28. You Must Upgrade Your Speaking
- 29. You Must Cleanse Your Heart
- 30. You Must Walk by the Spirit
- 31. You Must Walk in Love at All Times
- 32. You Must Walk in Honor at Home
- 33. You Must Walk in Service at Work

Part V—Immovable: Standing Strong

- 34. You Can Be Strong during Spiritual Attack
- 35. You Can Be Triumphant during Temptation
- 36. You Can Be Constant during Criticism
- 37. You Can Be Faithful after Failure
- 38. You Can Be Loyal after Loss
- 39. You Can Be Glorifying to God at All Times
- 40. You Can Be Found Faithful in the End



Introduction

Stephen Kendrick

One of the most powerful and life-changing books in existence is the New Testament biblical book of Ephesians. Filled with hope, it is deep, mind-blowing, and very rich. The six short chapters express God's amazing heart of compassion, how He can meet us where we are, powerfully change us from the inside out, and beautifully redeem our lives for good and for His glory.

For many years, when I tried to read Ephesians, my eyes would kind of glaze over. I would get lost in some of the concepts and skip over sections I didn't understand, not grasping the bigger picture or how to incorporate it into my life. Then a few years ago, something unexpectedly happened to my family that completely turned the light on for me and unlocked the book in living color.

We adopted a little girl.

Throughout the process of adoption, our new daughter's journey began to surprisingly parallel the concepts in Ephesians in vivid detail. The entire book began to make sense to me for the first time at a deep level. All the truths became more powerful in light of it, and it's now one of my favorite books of all time.

This experience was so beautifully profound that I've been walking others through Ephesians ever since and showing them how God can use it in their lives. I'm so grateful that we can now share our adoption story with you here and, in the pages that follow, take time to dive into so many incredible truths from Scripture. Let me begin now by going back to the defining day when our adoption began.

Early one morning, my wife, Jill, and I were flying to New York to approve the final master of a movie called *Courageous* that I had produced, before it released in theaters. While on the plane, I was praying and reading in the Gospel of John, specifically Jesus' words in chapter 10, about how a shepherd will love, protect, and lay down his life for his sheep. I was thinking about my role as a father that morning and how I could better shepherd our four little children we had at home. In the course of my reading, God caught me off guard and spoke to my heart very clearly. I turned to Jill, feeling a bit surprised, and said, "I think God wants us to be open to adoption."

My wife smiled and was already ahead of me. I didn't realize she had been quietly praying for years that God would turn my heart toward adoption but had not told me because she wanted it to be of God, not of her. I picked up my pen and wrote the word *adoption* next to the key verse God had used that day, then dated it.

Fast-forward two years. After we'd completed mountains

of paperwork, an email popped into my phone with our first referral. I was elated. Staring back at me was the picture of an adorable, eight-month-old girl, along with the question, “Do you want to adopt this child?”

She logically lined up with everything we were asking for, but there was a problem. I don’t know how better to explain it than to say a dark, uneasy heaviness came over me. I felt a strong lack of peace that I wrestled against for hours, wondering what was wrong with me. *Am I afraid? What will happen to this girl if I say no?*

I called one of our reps for help. “It’s too big of a big decision, Stephen,” he said. “If it’s not a clear yes, then it’s a no.” So with a measure of guilt, I sent the agency an awkward email and closed the door. Jill cried.

Over the next few weeks, two more referrals came. Each was a beautiful, precious child. Each referral was followed by an emotional battle of research, prayer, and indecision. The willingness was there, but no peace. No “yes.”

More awkward emails followed.

I called our adoption agent who said it wasn’t uncommon for parents to turn down a referral, maybe even two. But I had already struck out three times. The “fear of man” started to kick in. *What will others think if I keep turning away these precious orphans knocking on my door? Didn’t we say God wanted us to adopt?*

A fourth referral arrived. But again, no peace. I turned it down. Jill cried.

It was heart-wrenching. An experience that was supposed to be a joyful journey for us had become a traumatic roller coaster, and I wanted off. The next month, the agency didn't send us any referrals, and, to be quite honest, I was relieved.

Then came March 2013. A fifth referral landed in my inbox.

When I saw it, I dreaded opening it.

She was a two-year-old girl who'd been abandoned in Nanjing, China, with a deadly heart condition. Her physical situation was more severe and potentially expensive than any of the other children we'd considered. And yet when we saw her picture, an unexpected peace came over both of us (Col. 3:15).

It was as if God was saying, "This is the one you've been waiting for."

After research, we discovered that her birth mother likely couldn't afford her daughter's surgeries and faced the brutal decision of either keeping her and letting her die or giving her up to save her life. She left her on a street corner wrapped in a red blanket (which in China means "good luck" and "I love you"), along with the papers describing her needed surgeries. Despite all the potential complications, something seemed very right in our hearts about making this specific little girl a part of our family.

Her file stated her date of birth as February 14, 2011. "She was born on Valentine's Day with a broken heart," Jill

said to me. So with peaceful hearts and joyful tears, we sent a welcoming email and locked her in. All was well.

A few weeks later, Jill came and asked me about the flight where God had spoken to us about adoption. “What day was that?” she wondered. “Do you remember?”

I hadn’t thought about it and had no idea. I went and thumbed through my Bible, looking for John 10:16. Opening the page, I found the word *adoption* next to that verse, and the date next to it.

February 14, 2011.

The day this baby was born in China was the same day that God had said to me on the airplane, “I want you to adopt.”

I was overwhelmed and in awe of my God. I felt this awesome sense that we were about to be a part of something much bigger than we realized. He was clearly in control of this, and we needed to trust Him and move forward.

Things happened quickly. We felt inspired to name her *Mia*, which means “one” in Greek, like in Ephesians 4:5. When we arrived in China, we discovered that her birth mother had originally named her the Chinese word for “one.”

After processing Mia’s adoption and paying a lot of fees, we then experienced another interesting plane ride as we were bringing her home from China. Our friends had warned us it might be highly difficult. They were correct.

During the extremely long flight to New York, our new daughter cried, whined, and screamed loudly for a large portion of the twelve hours. (I have videos.)

Mia, our new China rose, was understandably distraught and very confused about what was going on and who we were. She had no idea at the time that this was a necessary and important part of a big, wonderful plan, that we were actually rescuing her from a desperate and hopeless situation.

She didn't know that in Nanjing, her future trajectory was dark. Orphans get minimal care and often grow up struggling with their identity, sense of value, and purpose, not knowing the love of a family and not having much help or hope for the future. They often end up on the street where they may be trafficked.

But now Mia would have a safe, happy home and family. She would have two loving parents, four siblings, four grandparents, and more than a dozen cousins ready to welcome her with open arms. At the orphanage, she owned almost nothing. Now she would have a warm bed, clean clothes, and new toys to enjoy. She would now have all the education and medical care she needed. And she would freely receive the same privileges and future inheritance as all her siblings. Now she would have hope. Not just wishful thinking, but a bright path to the future.

But none of these wonderful changes were happening because of anything she had done, earned, or could provide

us. They were all set into motion because there had been a total change in her identity. Because of WHO SHE NOW WAS.

She was not a hopeless orphan. She was Mia Kendrick: our chosen, wanted, and beloved daughter. And because of this, like dominos falling, everything else in her life would also completely change for the better.

If Mia had understood this reality on the plane—who she was, how deeply she was loved by her new family, and how good her life would become—she could have been smiling and cheering instead of weeping in fear. She could have enjoyed the journey and more easily endured the flight delays. If she could have grasped the bigger picture, she could have celebrated the entire way home.

Now as beautiful as that sounds, this story directly applies to each of us.

None of us is born knowing who we are or why we're here, any more than Mia did when we first met her. All of us arrive with our own set of issues and genuine needs—not just physical, but emotional and spiritual as well.

We also have heart problems. We battle with selfishness, pride, lust, greed, insecurity, anger . . . and the list goes on. Over time, we will struggle with fearing the future, as well as wrestling with the hurt and dysfunction within our own lives and families. We can grapple with confusion and our place in this world.

But the Bible says that God, who is the most loving Father of all, openly expressed His compassionate love for the world by sending His Son on a rescue mission. Jesus demonstrated a love we did not deserve by laying down His life to save us from a hopeless future. He paid the spiritual fees needed for our redemption, and He offers new life to anyone willing to trust Him by faith. When we place our lives in His hands, God the Father literally adopts us into His family and changes our identity completely. Our spiritual condition, value, and purpose change as well, along with our whole future. God takes ownership over us as His children. He blesses us with new resources, helps us discover how to be more like Him, and explains to us in His Word how to live victoriously as His beloved sons and daughters.

But most people do not understand this. I would argue that most followers of Christ don't even truly grasp this. The apostle Paul wrote the book of Ephesians to people who knew God, but they didn't understand their identity. And Paul prayed that God would open their eyes to grasp the depth of it because of how it would positively change their entire lives.

That is the purpose of this book.

We have put *Defined* together to help you learn more about the wonderful truths of Ephesians regarding who you are and who God has created you to be. We invite you to join us, along with countless others, on a journey of

discovery through some of the most important passages of the Bible regarding the identity and inheritance that God provides to His children.

We will begin with how God designed us, handles our brokenness, and forgives us. We will study what it means to let go of the past and live out our identity in Him so that it positively affects how we think, speak, and relate in love to those around us, including our families and work associates. Then we will conclude with how God's Spirit empowers us to handle temptation, criticism, and life's hardest battles more successfully, so that our lives will bring glory to God regardless of the circumstances.

So with this in mind, right here at the outset, we would like to challenge you to make a commitment to three things:

First, READ this book a chapter a day.

We suggest at least five days a week for the next eight weeks, but whatever works for your schedule. Each chapter should only take you about ten minutes.

Second, READ the Bible each day.

Let the Word of God teach you who God is and who you are. We'll give you specific verses at the end of each chapter that you can look up and study. They should deepen your perspective on what God says about your identity and help you gain the most from this journey.

Third, PRAY every day.

The book of Ephesians models prayer as a key component to comprehending and believing truth. Choose a place and time when you can pray alone each day, preferably in the morning (Ps. 5:3). Try to end each chapter by asking God to help you apply what He is teaching you. Then take time to pray specifically about any need or difficulty in your life.

We'll end each chapter with a prayer, just as we're doing here in this opening section, extending to you an invitation to approach God with words similar to these . . .

Heavenly Father, I come in Jesus' name, asking that You would open the eyes of my heart to know You and who You created me to be. Help me daily receive Your love for me, to walk in sincere love toward You and others, and live out who I am in You. Bless me and make me a blessing. Cleanse me of my sins, renew my mind with Your Word, and make me strong to do Your will. Fill me and lead me by Your Holy Spirit, and use my life as light in this world for Your glory. Amen.

May we each experience the depth of the love and mercy of God, and may our lives become living examples of His grace and transforming power to bring light and hope to future generations!

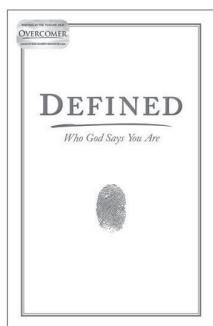
OVERCOMER

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RELEASING AUGUST 2019

unless noted

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from B&H

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