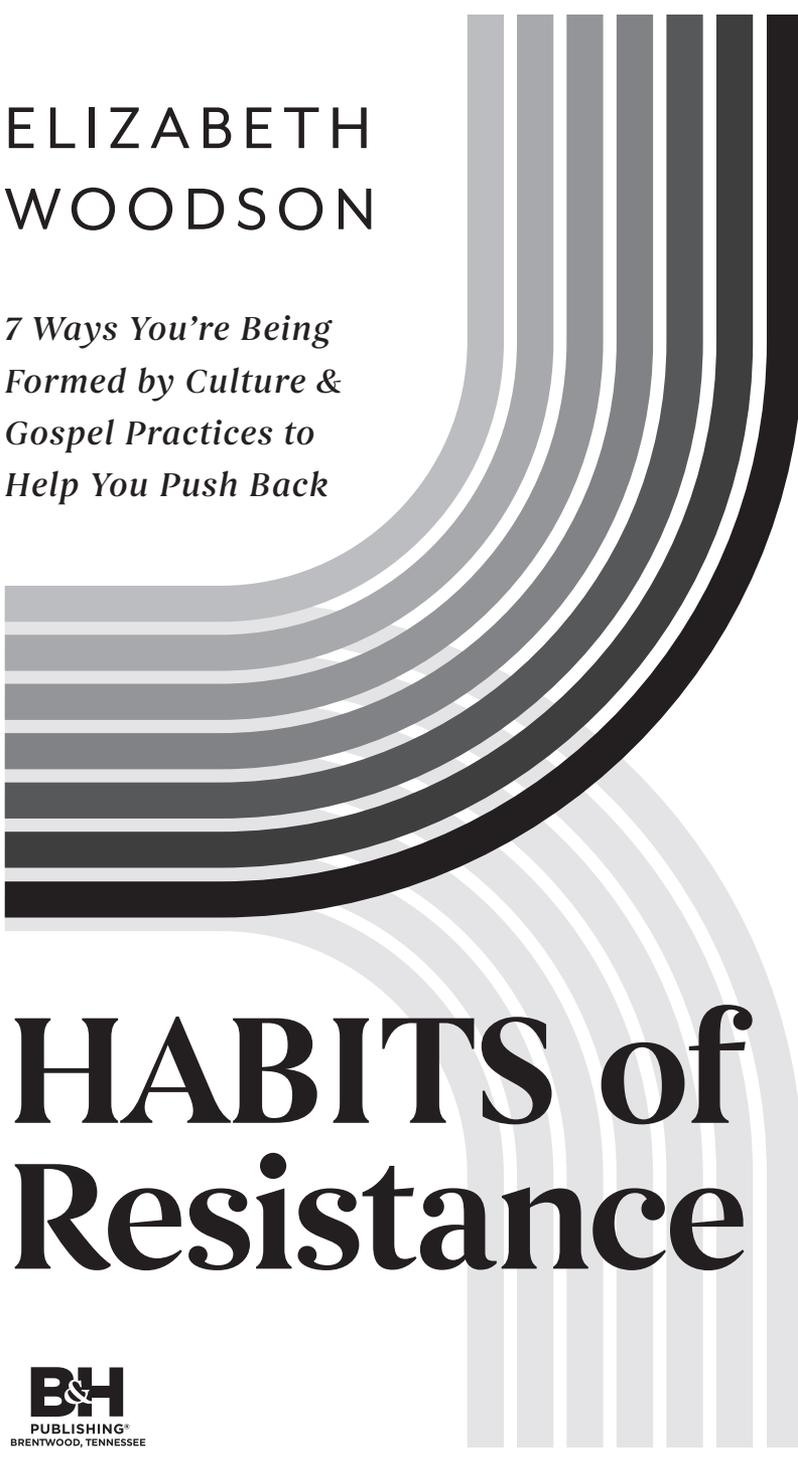


ELIZABETH
WOODSON

*7 Ways You're Being
Formed By Culture &
Gospel Practices to
Help You Push Back*

HABITS of Resistance

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A decorative graphic consisting of several thick, curved lines that sweep from the top right towards the bottom left. The lines are in various shades of gray, from light to dark, and are arranged in a way that they appear to be part of a larger, continuous shape. The lines are spaced out and curve inwards towards the center of the page.

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To those whose hearts ache for more in life and in their
walk with God but are unsure of where to find it.

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Introduction

The Wrong Door

When I was younger, I was an avid reader. One series I enjoyed reading was the Choose Your Own Adventure books, an interactive series that allows the reader to choose the outcome of the story. Each story provided some type of adventure, taking the reader to exciting destinations like the Amazon, Stonehenge, or outer space to solve a mystery. What made this book series unique was that at the end of every chapter, the reader was given two page numbers, each leading to different sections of the story. One page number might take you to a section where you uncover an important clue. Another might take you to a section where you die tragically. For this reason, I had the bad habit of turning to both pages and choosing the best outcome! (*Don't judge me, you would have done the same.*) Even though I sometimes looked ahead, I remember loving these books because they provided me with an opportunity to go on an adventure toward the pages that would give me the best experience and choose the pathway to get there.

As believers, our lives resemble these Choose Your Own Adventure books. Each morning, we wake up looking for a new “adventure.” Our actions are motivated by the goal of reaching a specific destination. The way we allocate our time, spend our money, and the activities we opt into and out of are all pointed toward one goal—the good life.

For some of us, this looks like a simple desire to live life to the fullest, experiencing all the joy that is available to us. For others, it is a desire for significance and belonging. We want to know that our life matters, while experiencing a life where we are known and loved. For others, it could be a desire for the pain in our life to stop. Whether it’s from a broken relationship, difficult job situation, or physical ailment, we want to be relieved of the pain we are experiencing. Still others of us find ourselves asking a very simple question: Is this all that there is? Life feels endlessly mundane and ordinary, with a mind-numbing consistency that has become overwhelming and suffocating.

In some sense, all these struggles point to good core desires we have as humans. All of us want love, hope, joy, peace, and a myriad of other virtuous things. However, if we were to peel back the layers and examine what we think our life is lacking, we would find that what we seek is actually a desire for wholeness or a deep state of well-being where our life has meaning and purpose. We recognize something about life is not as it should be, and even though we don’t have the words to fully describe it, we just want what feels “off” to be made right.

I believe our desire for the good life is really a desire for the biblical concept of *shalom*.

I will spend time unpacking the word *shalom* later in this book, but for now I will offer this short definition: *Shalom is a life of wholeness and delight, where everything is as it ought to be.*

Every day we are given two different options for how to achieve the good life or shalom. Picture two doors that lead to two different paths that will end at two different destinations. Each door presents a promise of salvation, a proclamation of good news that we can be rescued from our situation and delivered to our desired destination. One door presents a false gospel that will lead us down the way of the world (James 3:15). The other door presents the true gospel, that will lead us down the way of Christ (James 3:17–18).

Our problem is that we are choosing the wrong door.

Rotten Fruit

Have you ever opened your refrigerator to be met with a scent so bad that it hits you right in your face? As soon as you open the door, you immediately realize that something inside has passed its expiration date and needs to be found and discarded quickly! If you are anything like me, when this happens, you drop everything to do a mad dash search through the fridge to discover and dispose of the bad-scent culprit. However, if I wait too long to deal with it, the scent starts to seep out of the fridge into my kitchen; it's the worst!

As believers, our lives produce a spiritual scent or aroma that helps us gauge the quality or health of our relationship with God (2 Cor. 2:15). The closer we are to Christlikeness, the sweeter the aroma. But as we start to move in the other

direction, that sweet smell can quickly turn sour. In Galatians 5:22–23, the apostle Paul writes that the fruit of the Spirit is, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” So anytime we see our life producing characteristics opposite of these, we are getting that first whiff of “rotting fruit” that is coming out of our spiritual refrigerator.

Now, you might be thinking, *Elizabeth, what does this have to do with the two doors?* Well, I believe that the scent some of our lives are giving off is a little sour. It is signaling that our spiritual health might not be as fresh as it should be. The reason for this is that we are not choosing the door that leads us to the way of Christ but the one that is leading us to the way of the world. There are numerous examples of this, but this one is worth noting: the conversations we participate in. These can easily serve as indicators for our spiritual health—especially if we pay attention to how we show up online. When I consider some of what I’ve heard and seen online, I think the spiritual aroma many of us are giving off is that of anger, discontentment, and fear.

Anger

I am writing this book as America prepares for another presidential election. Politics is often seen as a topic to be avoided in conversation at all costs. Over the past few presidential election cycles, political conversations have gone from frustrating to infuriating. Regardless of what political party a person supports, disagreement with members of the opposing party is usually met with vitriolic anger, and sometimes even

violence (e.g., January 6, 2021 insurrection). Whether online or in person, our discussions about politics from the past few years have eroded our ecclesial unity and caused seemingly irreparable chasms in our close relationships. Behind these rifts is a deep sense of anger that hasn't been dealt with in our hearts. This divisiveness has also found its way into other disagreements about doctrine, public and private school, racism, justice, and other conversations related to Christian living. It seems like it is getting harder and harder for Christians to honor those they disagree with, or to put it in the Bible's terms, "to slander no one, to avoid fighting, and to be kind, always showing gentleness to all people" (Titus 3:2).

Discontentment

The internet also constantly entices us with images and videos that display the life we should aspire to have. Whether it's the latest tech gadget, a kitchen remodel, or the family that has perfect photos with matching outfits, our constant engagement with other people's lives is a breeding ground for comparison that then leads to discontentment. As we are comparing our lives to the things we see online, we are made to believe that what they have is better and that what we have is not enough. We spend more to buy the things we see to help achieve the life we want. But the effects of our materialism are short-lived, and we end up back at the door of discontentment the next time we see something we want but don't have.¹

Fear

In 2023, the Surgeon General declared loneliness as a national epidemic.² Even though the internet connects us digitally, so many of us remain disconnected relationally. Studies show that over the past few years, there has been an increase in the amount of people who are experiencing mental health struggles, specifically depression and anxiety. Our discontentment has served as a catalyst for this growth, but so has stress from major life events from the past few years like the COVID pandemic and ongoing economic instability. For some, it seems as if life has passed them by and their inability to catch up or overcome has left them overwhelmed with uncertainty about the future.³

This is likely not news to you. The topic of how social media and our use of technology is changing us is well-documented. Many books have been written that show a correlation between our social media usage and our lived experience.⁴ They detail how we are being formed in the image that our phones reflect to us, which shows up in our increased love or acceptance of: immediate gratification, complacency with our sin, FOMO, and harsh communication.

But what is interesting is that our social media usage is outpacing our time in discipleship environments. The average person spends about 2.5 hours a day or 17.5 hours a week on social media. Now, think about how much time the average Christian spends in discipleship environments, including church services, small groups, Bible studies, and daily quiet

times. Even if it is an hour a day, which is likely above average, that person is spending more than twice this amount of time on social media.⁵

Furthermore, since the end of the pandemic in 2021, there has been a sizable decrease in the number of adults who are engaging the Scriptures, whether daily, weekly, or just a few times a year.⁶ We are spending less time in the book that helps form the foundation of our faith. Additionally, even when we read Scripture, we're not always equipped to understand and apply biblical teaching.⁷ Research shows that many Christians hold unbiblical views on key doctrinal issues like Jesus, humanity, sin, and salvation.⁸

We are spending more time and mental energy in our social media formational environments than the environments that form us in our Christian faith. Even if we are attending church weekly, participating in a small group and doing a daily quiet time—all of this is not necessarily correlating to a deep abiding knowledge of God's Word if our time with God is overshadowed by our time spent online.

Simply put, we are continually choosing the wrong door because we are growing to be more familiar and more enticed by the stories of our culture than the story of the Bible. The stories we believe matter, our habits reveal that we are consuming the wrong ones, and it is shaping us deeply.

We Love Stories

For the longest time, I always wondered why people loved Hallmark movies. After all, they all seem to have the same

predictable plot. With each movie, the same thing happens—boy meets girl, they fall in love, break up, and then, after overcoming a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, they get back together forever. I couldn't understand the allure until a few years ago when I watched a handful of Hallmark movies back-to-back with my sister.

As we watched the second or third movie, it suddenly clicked for me. Over and over again, I saw what people love—the thrill of a budding relationship, the exhilaration of overcoming obstacles, and the deep satisfaction of two people ending up “happily ever after.” With each new movie, these scenes evoked an emotional response from me that never got old. At that moment, I realized these movies were so popular because they painted a picture of what we all long to have—“the good life,” or the place where we think true happiness is found.⁹

For generations, humanity has communicated the truth about their existence from the perspective of a character in a narrative whose story continues to unfold. As humans, we have a built-in narrative instinct, as if we have been designed to use stories to remember our past, make sense of our present, and shape our future.¹⁰ We interpret our life experiences through stories, a collection of facts seen through the lens of our mind, body, and heart. Stories help us make sense of the world and find our place within it, answering the three core life questions all of us ask: *Who am I? Why am I here? Where do I belong?*

However, we aren't born with these stories. Over the years, they are shaped by various influences. The TV shows we

watch, the people we follow on social media, and our community all teach us how to view our lives and the world we live in. They tell us what to value, how to view the people around us, and how we should steward the resources we have been given.

Moreover, every story has its own version of heaven, hell, and a Savior figure. We can see this in the Hallmark movies I struggle to watch. In these stories, heaven is romantic bliss, hell is remaining alone, and the Savior figure who gets you over the bridge from hell to heaven is a prince in a made-up country who happens to meet you at your small-town apple stand. By telling us how the Savior figure will help us escape hell and make it to heaven, every story ultimately shows us where “the good life” can be found.

You and I are like sponges, absorbing the information we expose ourselves to the most. So if our minds and hearts are primarily fixated on our surrounding culture, we will use its various stories to answer the questions we have about our human longings. We will look to them to figure out where to find love, our identity, and even hope in the midst of suffering. While we should continue to ask, *Who am I? Why am I here? Where do I belong?*, our habits are leading us to look for answers in the wrong place.

Remember when I said that our questions about flourishing are really a search for shalom? When we use the map provided by our culture, we are setting out toward a destination we will never reach. What culture doesn't tell you is that their solution is really a trojan horse, a door that does not lead to shalom, but that instead leads us to reject the One through whom shalom is found.

The False Gospel of Our Age | Radical Expressive Individualism

I am rarely running early; usually I am running late. But last year, I left my house a little earlier than usual. I was on my way to church to teach in our women's Bible study. As I walked down my steps to the place my car was parked, I did what I always do—hit the little button on my key remote to open my car door. When I press the button, my car makes a beep sound that lets me know the doors are unlocked. However, this time, when I hit the button, I didn't hear the beep sound. I immediately stopped in my tracks because this meant one thing—my car battery was dead.

After confirming that my suspicions were in fact true, I opened my phone to order an Uber. I needed to get to church, and my car battery issues would have to wait until I was done. In about five minutes my ride pulled up and I quickly got inside. My driver's name was Rickey, and let's just say he was real chatty!

We started making small talk, commenting on the weather and how his day was going. He had a strikingly positive disposition, so I pressed in to learn why. Rickey began to share about how he believed we can control what happens in our lives. Through the power of positive thinking, we can overcome what is going on in the world. He wasn't a Christian, but rather a "spiritual person" who was trying to live his best life. As Rickey talked and I listened, it became apparent that he believed his good feelings were the guide that he needed

to get to his desired destination. As long as he listened to the voice inside of him, he would be okay.

Maybe you've talked to someone who sounds a little bit like Rickey—they are “spiritual but not religious,” driven by a guide that is hidden inside of them. They believe the pursuit of authenticity will lead them to the good life they are looking for.

This mindset is the calling card of our culture's narrative, which we could call the (false) Gospel of Radical Individualism. It is the belief that the pathway to the flourishing we seek comes through us centering ourselves and it has three key elements:¹¹

1. We “Decenter” God So We Can Be God:

As we move away from the things of God, we slowly begin to prioritize the voices of others over the voice of God. These voices tell us that the pathway to our best life is inside of us—that we must turn inward to cultivate and discover our true self.¹²

2. Do What Feels Good: When we decenter God and center ourselves, we begin to be motivated or driven by what feels good to us, pleases us, and doesn't make us uncomfortable. Since we are our greatest authority, we are hesitant to allow external influences that might seek to limit us and hold us back.

3. **Live Like This World Is All There Is:**

With our time and our money, we pursue what feels good to us here and now because that's all there is. Our driving motivations lead us to find our identity in things like success, our careers, comfort, and the acquisition of material things.

Every story has an ending, and while this one makes us believe we can find our best life simply by staying true to ourselves, it sadly leads us to a place that is more sinister than we could imagine. This is because it's a place where we are serving the storylines of this world rather than the God who created us.

Don't Get Hustled

When I think about our culture's narrative of radical individualism, there is always one detail that is left out of the story—the cost. Through all the information that is pushed our way, we are given a seemingly beautiful vision about the potential of autonomy. The opportunity to be free to choose our own way as the captain of our own lives is an enticing offer. People seem so empowered, embracing who they are as they courageously chart their own course.

But, with all the effort that is used to spread this false gospel, there is an even greater effort exerted to ensure we never consider what it will cost us and others. We are never encouraged to wrestle with the truth that by following this way we

will eventually reject God and mistreat others.¹³ Instead of finding shalom, we will live a life without it.

Sadly, because of where you (and I) are located and the time period you live in, this story is your (and my) default setting. It is where you will naturally lean in the pursuit of your human longings of identity, love, peace, hope, and more. It's the story you think will get you the good life, as long as you walk according to its script. Here's a secret though: You don't learn this story all at once, as if you were watching a movie. You receive it slowly in pieces, downloaded to your heart and mind with each click, swipe, and download. You are shaped by it over time and through a cumulative and compounding experience, over years and years. To combat this false story—and many others—it's high time you (and I) start not only engaging with our culture's content actively, but comparing it to a better story and a better way. The Jesus story, and the Jesus way.

Moreover, unless you are intentional about not only *knowing* the false stories swirling around you, but *resisting* them so that you might be formed by a better one, you *will* be formed according to the way of the world. There is no middle ground or gray area. Either passively choose lesser ways and lesser stories that will fail you and malform you, or actively resist those false options and persistently form your life according to the way and story of Jesus.

This is why I wrote this book: to help you learn how to resist. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the best option for our flourishing. In the midst of the false stories we are faced with every day, we must learn how to interrogate and deconstruct

the stories of our culture through the lens of the gospel. As we do this, we won't just identify our culture's false stories and ways—we'll also start building habits of resistance that weaken the grip those stories have on our lives.

Our journey will be twofold:

First, we will *learn to deconstruct the stories of our culture*. We will do this by first taking a contemplative look at the Genesis creation narrative. By examining this story with fresh eyes, we'll learn how everything we desire was created by God for us to enjoy with him. We will then learn to examine our culture's stories in light of the gospel by asking critical questions. We will see how these stories form us, what they tell us is true about God, and where they tell us the good life can be found. Through our questions we'll come to learn why what our culture promises us pales in comparison to what the gospel provides.

Second, we will *learn to live in the story of the Bible*. Our plan of resistance isn't just about information accumulation but about transformation. Alongside training our minds and hearts to believe that our culture's stories are untrue and inferior, we must train our minds and hearts to believe that God's story is better. We will do this by spending time in a few key moments in the life of Israel, seeing the fruit of God's constant presence in their lives. We'll see that it is by remaining in relationship with him, we can access the overflow of shalom we long for.

How?, you may wonder. Once we identify the false stories of our culture and remember to walk in Christ's story and Christ's way, how do we *stay* in his story? What's the secret to

resisting the false gospels and walking according to the true one? Habits. Remember, we are slowly formed into our culture's false narratives through our habits—which means we can slowly de-form ourselves *out* of them, breaking free from their hold over our imagination, so that we might reenter the story of God and enjoy relationship with him.

Since Jesus shows us how to be in relationship with God, expect to learn from him in the coming pages, seeing how following his way helps learn how these habits transform us and lead us to shalom. And at the end of each chapter, I will help you apply those teachings by sharing one of the spiritual habits the church has practiced for centuries. After all, this plan of resistance wasn't created by me; rather, it's something the church has historically practiced since its inception.

A Few Final Words . . .

1. **This is a book for you to read in community:** Your first response after reading it shouldn't be to tell other people how they need to get it together. It's designed for you to consider how you are being shaped and formed. But that process of consideration or contemplation is best done in a group of people because we learn more when we do it in community. So read this book with some friends. Talk about the cultural narratives I present, wrestle with the observations I pull

out of the biblical text, and commit to live out the spiritual disciplines I share with you together.

2. My audience is my spiritual little brothers and sisters: While I think everyone can benefit from this book, I do have an audience in mind. I am writing to my little brothers and sisters, Christians who are millennial, Gen Z, or younger. You engage faith and religion differently than previous generations. You ask thoughtful questions that are making the church a better place. But, with all love, you are also getting bamboozled by seemingly good things. I want you to experience the biblical vision of shalom and am worried about the ways the world is pulling you away from it (or selling you a false version of it that will only leave you exhausted and miserable).

To end this chapter, let's consider the powerful words of Josh Chatraw:

Contrasting the Christian story with these rival narratives sobers us to the way we are actually living despite what we confess. To counter these stories, we must embed our lives in the true story. Through the reading of the Scriptures, the fellowship of the saints, the partaking of the sacraments, daily prayers,

and the preaching of the Word, God reorients the way we see the world. Constantly comparing the rival stories to God's story is essential to not being lulled to sleep in a secular age.¹⁴

Friend, too many of us are being lulled to sleep. It's time to wake up!

Are you ready to walk through the right and true door? To land on the only path that delivers on its promise to give you the good life? To learn the habits that can break you free from the lies of the false stories whispered in your ear all day long, ushering you into the truest story and greatest adventure you've ever known? To arrive at true shalom instead of being constantly disappointed by counterfeits?

I know I am! Let's go!

EVERY CHRISTIAN WANTS ABUNDANCE AND WHOLENESS, AND WE KNOW WE'RE ABLE TO EXPERIENCE THESE THINGS WHEN WE ARE FORMED BY THE STORY AND THE WAY OF JESUS.

So what's the problem? Why do we find ourselves empty, divided in heart, and unfulfilled? Oftentimes, the problem is we are being formed by some other story or way, allowing culture to disciple us more than Jesus does. If we listen closely, these false narratives are everywhere. And it's time to break free from their spell.

In this game-changing book, Bible teacher Elizabeth Woodson shows you how to get unstuck from culture's discipleship pathway. Through biblical teaching, personal stories, and practical tools, Elizabeth helps you not only deconstruct 7 false gospels that invite you into the wrong story and wrong way, but resist them through powerful, time-tested spiritual habits that bring you back into God's story. In these pages, discover:

- *How to identify the false stories you're living in, as told to you by the world*
- *How to step into the right, true, and better gospel story as told to you by God*
- *How to not only recognize when you're being spiritually malformed by culture, but push back against its influence*
- *How to replace cultural practices with 7 powerful gospel practices in your daily life*

You will not accidentally experience wholeness and abundance; you must be intentional about it. Habits of Resistance will help you fight to stay in the only true Story, true Way, and true Path to abundant life—all of which only come through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Elizabeth Woodson is a Bible teacher and author who is passionate about equipping believers to understand the rich theological truths of Scripture. She loves helping people internalize their faith and connect it practically to everyday life. She is a contributing author for *World on Fire*, and the author of *Live Free*, and *Embrace Your Life*. Elizabeth is also a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary with a Masters in Christian Education, the host of the *Starting Place* podcast, and regularly serves as a teacher for *Lifeway Women Academy*.



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