

JEN OSHMAN

CULTURAL COUNTERFEITS



**CONFRONTING 5 EMPTY
PROMISES OF OUR AGE
AND HOW WE WERE MADE
FOR SO MUCH MORE**

Foreword by
CHRISTINE HOOVER

“In *Cultural Counterfeits*, Jen Oshman addresses some of the most significant and sensitive issues of our day with a combination of informed integrity, biblical insight, and godly compassion. In these pages you will find a winsome call away from the world’s false promises and toward what is real, true, and beautiful.”

Nancy Guthrie, Bible teacher; author, *Even Better than Eden*

“Jen Oshman is a clear and trusted voice of wisdom in our current age. She thinks deeply and biblically about the issues that bombard us—and helps us to do the same. In *Cultural Counterfeits*, Jen pulls back the curtain to reveal the empty promises offered by five idols of our day. Jen’s words are full of insight, compassion, and truth. Whether you are combating these lies in your own soul or coming alongside those you love, this book will expose how the idols not only fail us, but actually betray and harm us. She then reminds us that there is ultimately only one who can truly satisfy the longing in our souls—Jesus, the one in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found.”

Courtney Doctor, Coordinator of Women’s Initiatives, The Gospel Coalition; author, *From Garden to Glory* and *Steadfast: A Devotional Bible Study on the Book of James*

“This book is provocative in all the right ways. Jen Oshman wants to ensure that women don’t settle for less than God’s good and glorious intention for their life. Jen takes on some of the most pressing issues of our day, boldly proclaiming biblical truth while overflowing with gospel grace that soothes the sinner’s heart and breaks the Pharisee’s pride.”

Trevin Wax, Vice President of Research and Resource Development, North American Mission Board; author, *This Is Our Time*

“This is an important and much-needed book. With boldness and wisdom, Jen thoughtfully unpacks the prevailing cultural lies about what it means to be a woman and beautifully points to the truth of whom God created us to be. *Cultural Counterfeits* strikes the rare balance of grace and truth, and I recommend it to anyone who is tired of the empty promises of this age and is looking for something lasting.”

Vaneetha Rendall Risner, author, *Walking Through Fire: A Memoir of Loss and Redemption*

“Jen’s voice is a herald for believers, equipping us with biblical truth to confront the unsatisfying messages of the world and the damaging lies of our enemy. She proclaims a better message, one full of abundant life in Jesus Christ. *Cultural Counterfeits* is a valuable read for everyone in our churches, whether men and women, young or old.”

Tony Merida, Lead Pastor, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, North Carolina; author, *Ordinary*

“Women are confronted with all sorts of ideas in today’s culture. It’s hard to know what is true and what truth is to be believed. Jen Oshman unpacks the most common ideas women face with care, research, and a more beautiful vision of God’s plan for us. Jen has years of experience as a ministry worker of the gospel, as a student of the word, and as a mom of daughters. As a mom of sons and as someone who ministers to women, I’m thankful for her work! This is a book I plan to give to the women I minister to, and I hope you will do the same.”

Courtney Reissig, author, *Teach Me to Feel* and *The Accidental Feminist*

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How We Were Made for So Much More*

Jen Oshman

Foreword by Christine Hoover

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
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Cultural Counterfeits: Confronting 5 Empty Promises of Our Age and How We Were Made for So Much More

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For Rebekah, Zoe, Abby Grace, and Hannah

*I love you more than words can say. May you know with deep
down joy and hope the “so much more” that you were made for.*

There will always, always be a place for you at my table.

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Foreword

RECENTLY A YOUNG WOMAN in my church came to me after a Sunday morning service with consternation on her face. She'd recently met a Christian man who lived in a different city, and they'd been getting to know one another primarily by text. She was excited about him, his involvement in his local church, and the possibilities of where dating him might lead.

Somehow, however, the subject of sexual ethics had come up in one of their text conversations. He'd explained to her why he intended to have sex before marriage and why he considered this a God-honored practice.

While I appreciated his candor at such an early stage in their relationship—long before my friend's heart attached to his—I fumed at how he was taking God's name and attaching it to his own selfish agenda. My counsel came swiftly: “Do not question whether your standards are too high. If he's willing to compromise on this and twist God's word in such a way, what else might he be willing to compromise on within marriage? He's told you who he is, and we can thank God for that. Run.”

Moments later, several other young, single women joined our conversation. Already aware of the situation their friend faced, they

seemed to me both frustrated and unfazed. Curious, I asked them if this—a “trying on” of sexual compatibility before committing to marriage—was a common theme they were hearing among their peers. They nodded and described their disappointment regarding just how much God’s perfect and beautiful intentions in creating sex, marriage, and women themselves have been distorted and confused even among God’s people.

For the rest of the week, I roiled with righteous anger. I wanted to do or say something to convey the beautiful truth to as many as might listen: God’s ways are the best ways! His ways are not only good, they are glorious beyond our comprehension and for our joy. To live by counterfeits is to live an unprofitable, colorless life. To live by counterfeits is not to live at all but rather to die.

Soon after, Jen Oshman put this book in my hands. With counterfeits already on my mind, I devoured her words, thanking God not only for her courage but for her biblical wisdom. We have certainly, as Jen says, found ourselves in a far country. Almost every arena of our lives has been impacted, and it’s difficult at times to discern what is true from what is not. However, we must not forget that competing ideas are not equal competitors. There is truth and then there are many iterations of counterfeits to that truth.

Jen, in this book, has spoken the beautiful truth. Let us listen.

Christine Hoover
Author, Podcaster, and Bible Teacher
christinehoover.net

Acknowledgments

THERE'S NOTHING IN MY LIFE—no sphere, no endeavor, no project—that is not a group effort. I am a woman rich with support that I do not deserve. Whether it's in missions overseas, church planting here at home, ministering to women, writing, raising my kids, or loving my husband, I can point to a team of people who pray for me, cheer for me, and hold my arms up high when I am too tired to do so myself. And that's true for this book too. It has been a group effort from the very beginning. These words of thanks feel far from sufficient to communicate the gratitude I feel for each team player.

To our supporters with Pioneers International: thank you for your financial and prayer support for over twenty years. In a very practical way you made this book possible. It is no overstatement to say that we could not serve at home or overseas without your sacrificial partnership.

To my local church, Redemption Parker: it is one of my greatest joys to call you family. Thank you for your enthusiasm, for praying, checking in, bearing my doubts and fears, and valuing my role in our local body as well as in the broader church community. Your support is wind in my sails. I'm especially thankful to the Lord for

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To my excellent publishing team: Andrew Wolgemuth, thank you for tirelessly engaging my almost never-ending questions and concerns. I am grateful to call you friend and brother. Dave DeWit, I don't think there's a better champion of women writers out there. I am so grateful for your words of support, practical feedback, and genuine desire to see my efforts succeed. Todd Augustine, thank you for your patience when I wanted to make big changes, your confidence in this final work, and seeing this whole project through. Tara Davis, thank you for your heart for editing. You made this book better with both your skills and your sensitivity.

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To my family: Mom, there is much of you here. Thank you for instilling in me a desire to read, think, and write deeply. Mark, you are my partner in every way. You have given this project so much. How can I ever thank you for weathering all of the highs and lows of this work? And you weathered them with joy, steadiness, and nothing but confidence in me and God's call and equipping in me. I love you. Rebekah, Zoe, Abby Grace, and Hannah, you girls were a constant source of imagination and gravity to me as I wrote. Thank you for humoring countless conversations about these topics with me. You teach me so much. I love you.

Finally, to my Father in heaven. I have sinned against heaven and against you. And yet, you watched for me while I was still a long way off. You ran to me, embraced me with compassion, and lavished me with your love. Thank you for inviting me to your feast.

Introduction

I, LIKE YOU, want to be accepted. I want the approval and applause of others. I hate to cause conflict or to offend. I like it when other people like me.

But these are polarizing days, and complete acceptance is hard to come by. Most of us—whether we're in a classroom, a boardroom, a coffee shop, or online—keep a low profile and keep as quiet as we can, so as to not be seen as arrogant or rude. We want to *be* genuinely humble and kind, and we want to be *perceived* so too.

That's what's hard about this book. I am well aware that some parts will offend both the secular and the spiritual, both the deconstructed and the Christian, both the younger brother and the older one. And I don't like that. I don't want to offend.

So why take time to call out our cultural counterfeits anyway? Why critique the empty promises of our age rather than lie low? Why potentially offend both those who are in the world and those who are in the church?

Because Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. No one can be saved, and no one can thrive, apart from him. He is our one and only hope. And so many of us have misplaced our hope in the counterfeits of our age.

Jesus's acceptance of us, on his terms, is infinitely and eternally more valuable than our acceptance of one another.

The gospel is not *only* that we are sinners in need of a Savior. The gospel starts with a good Creator who's been pursuing us since even before we gave in to sin. If you and I are going to be well, we have to *know him*. We have to know and abide by the character and design and purposes of our Creator and Savior. Without him we have nothing—nothing of substance, nothing eternal, nothing to hold on to in the chaos and in our pain.

The counterfeits of our age are a deviation from what our good God intends, a marring of the good gifts he offers us. As God asks us to love him and to love others, we do that by pointing ourselves and our loved ones back to him. He is the hope for our hurting world.

Embracing a Jesus-is-the-only-way perspective is costly for sure. It might cost us friendships, professional opportunities, and finances. But, to use the apostle Peter's words, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68–69).

Jesus alone is the Holy One of God, and he alone has the words of eternal life. What else would we believe? Who else would we trust? Who else would we offer up to others?

The warm, true, and hard words of Jesus have been wooing people to himself for millennia, and that's not going to stop now. Our God is not freaking out. He is not anxious. He is not worried about offending, because for those who have ears to hear, his word speaks life. As values and what's normal and permissible and celebrated in the twenty-first century change, Jesus's words do not.

He is an anchor in the storm. A constant in a sea of change. An enduring refuge when it's hard to know up from down. And as you

and I who follow Jesus hold out the word of truth, we will be like stars shining in a dark universe (Phil. 2:15).

Our homes and our hearts will hold out hope when our neighbors and loved ones are exhausted from trying to keep up with the idols of our age. The warm steadiness of Christ-followers will be a porch light in the dark night. Our lives—as countercultural and embarrassing and awkward as they may be—will point to Jesus, who says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).

So read on and cling to Christ because it’s his acceptance that matters most. Read on because you, like me, believe he came that we might be saved through him alone. Jesus is the way. He is the truth. He is the life. Christian, as you follow Jesus, *you offer life*.

PART 1

YOU ARE HERE

We live in a unique moment that was delivered to us by a specific timeline in history. Part 1 explores how we got here, focusing especially on the ideas that led up to and came out of the Sexual Revolution. As we seek to understand where we are on the map of history, we'll also be reminded of God's word, which is a timeless lens through which we can view changing trends.

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. (Acts 17:24–27)

Waking Up in a Far Country

WHEN I WAS FOUR YEARS OLD, I ran away from home. I packed my mom's twenty-year-old 1960s American Tourister cosmetic suitcase with all the essentials and announced, "I don't like it here," to my parents, who were preparing dinner in the kitchen. To my surprise they didn't come after me. So I marched down the street and into the sunset.

When I had made it about four houses down, probably to my friend Colin's house, which was the extent of my comfort zone, I began to shiver. It was a chilly Colorado evening. I hadn't packed a sweater, so I did what every four-year-old in this situation does: I went back home. My mom greeted me with a smile. Dinner was ready, and I sat down with my family to eat.

I know I'm not alone in this memory. I suspect you did this too. Is there an American child who hasn't had a rebellious moment and thought *I can do better on my own?* Autonomy is in our DNA. From birth we're a pioneering people who buck up against boundaries and suspect the grass is greener on the other side of just about every fence we see.

We come by it honestly, though. Consider our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the garden of Eden. God created the first man and first woman and set them in the midst of his good creation. There were fish in the sea, birds in the heavens, and livestock over all the earth. There were plants and trees and seedlings and all kinds of vegetation. The sun and the moon and the stars shone. It was all very good. God blessed Adam and Eve, told them to be fruitful and multiply, and instructed them to cultivate all the living things he had made (Gen. 1:28).

They had much freedom and just one boundary: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16–17). The crafty serpent came along and questioned this one-and-only limitation. “Did God really say that? You will not surely die,” he assured Adam and Eve (see Gen. 3:2, 4).

Convinced that God’s plan was not, in fact, best, that they knew at least a little bit better, Adam and Eve went ahead and took that fateful bite. You know the rest of the story. God sent them out of the garden, and we’ve been east of Eden ever since (Gen. 3:23–24).

This is our way. It has been our condition since that first bite. In our fallen state we think we know best, that we can do better. And so we continuously set out to make our best lives happen right now.

The serpent isn’t very creative, but he is consistent. Millennia and generations after the garden he keeps asking you and me, *Did God really say that? You will not surely die. Go ahead and try it.* And like four-year-old me, we so often do. We set out from home, we leave safe boundaries and good gifts, and we try to create a better life with our own hands and in our own way.

Two Stories in Our Heads

Here's how this looks in the twenty-first century. In his podcast *The Living Temple*, author and pastor Mark Sayers says there are two stories running around in all of our heads.¹ The two stories are largely subconscious. They're the subtle background music moving us to make the choices we make day in and day out.

The first story is broadcast loudly across pop culture, social media, and all media. It proclaims that you and I are the center of the universe. We are unique individuals, and we can be awesome. We just need to create our identities. By making the right choices with our wardrobes and weekends, and by hanging out with the right people and doing the right things, we can be limitlessly happy. The world offers you and me an amazing life; we just have to go out and make it happen.

The second story is quiet. It's more of a whisper from the back burner in our brains, but it refuses to be silenced. It will not go away. It's there in the quiet, in the middle of the night, when the new novelty doesn't measure up or the relationship breaks rather than binds. It's the questioning and the longing when the over-promises of the first story underdeliver. The whisper tells us we were made for more. In a hushed voice it insists that we have an immovable and important identity, a sort of real home somewhere out there. We're longing for it, and we know it's not just in our imaginations. *There's got to be more to this life*, it nags.

We continuously suppress that second story, though—largely because the first story is so loud. It's hard to argue with. Everything from Instagram to movies to clothing ads to political campaigns

1 Mark Sayers, "This Is for People Who Want to Go Deep," May 8, 2019, in *The Living Temple*, podcast, <https://rebuilders.co/podcasts/the-living-temple-s1/ep1>.

to Supreme Court decisions declares that we can be whoever we want to be.

Pursuing the second story would take time and intentionality. It would require going against just about every cultural grain. It would mean rejecting the societal song that says you can have your best life right now. It would mean weaning off the dopamine hits we get from shopping for our best selves. It would mean believing there's a real truth out there that we must discover, rather than thinking we are the makers of our own truth, right here, right now.

We are a people prone to shopping for new shoes, new partners, new orientations, and new careers with each changing season. We rarely, if ever, question the first story. It's so taken for granted that we don't wonder at overworking or consumer debt or gender fluidity. These are all things we have to do—to at least try or try on—to see if they're the right fit to finally make us truly happy.

It's a tale as old as we are. It's the serpent who keeps saying *If you really want to live, take matters into your own hands. Take a bite here, or there. It surely won't hurt you. Did God really say that? Your life can be better, just keep biting, keep sampling.*

The Burnout Generation

If we're honest, though, we know our pursuit of the first story isn't going well. The cultural cacophony says keep running harder, and boy, are we trying. But this race has no end. There's no real satisfaction to be had, because there's no real finish line. Under duress we keep going and keep hoping, but we're exhausted.

The exhaustion experienced is well documented. It's called burnout. Burnout is more than stress or anxiety. It's a hopelessness that leads to isolation and disengagement from work or school, friends and family. It's a weariness that won't let up and a cynicism that settles in. Burnout

keeps people from accomplishing their normal routines, from feeling settled in their skin. Burnout doesn't give way to the usual pick-me-ups.

Sociologists and economists have been noting for years that while burnout happens to all of us, millennials are especially prone. The World Health Organization even labeled millennial burnout a medical condition. And a national psychiatric survey says 96 percent of millennials feel it on a daily basis.²

Psychoanalyst Josh Cohen provides a helpful take on the condition. He says, “The message that we can work harder and be better at everything — even rest and relaxation! — results in a strange composite of exhaustion and anxiety, a permanent state of dissatisfaction with who we are and what we have. And it leaves us feeling that we are servants rather than masters of our work — and not just of our waged employment, but of the unending work we put into achieving our so-called best selves.”³

The disconnection between the first story and the second story—the idea that we can create our best selves and the reality that we aren't arriving at the destination we had envisioned—has us exhausted and anxious. Identity crises abound, not just for millennials, but for all of us in the twenty-first century. This is burnout. Not just with work, but with play, with our identities and relationships and plans and dreams and everything.

Modern Label, Age-Old Problem

Here's why we're burned out: we're making a massive mistake about reality. That second, quiet, nagging story is *true*. But we're living

2 Jaimy Ford, “Why Do 96% of Millennials Experience Burnout?,” Bud to Boss (website), <https://www.budtoboss.com/>.

3 Josh Cohen, “Millennial Burnout Is Real, but It Touches a Serious Nerve with Critics. Here's Why,” *Think* column on *NBC News*, February 23, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/>.

like it's not. There really is more to this life, but it can't be found in our own conjuring, our own identity creation and curation.

Burnout is a new label, but it's not a new condition. It's a new take on the age-old problem of idolatry.

When you think of an idol, you probably think of some kind of statue that is believed to have power. You might think of fertility goddesses at the history museum or Hindu gods and goddesses increasingly popular here in the West. And while these are certainly idols, the definition doesn't stop there. Author and pastor Timothy Keller says, "An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, 'If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure.'"⁴

Idols are counterfeits. Idolatry is when we ascribe meaning or power to something that cannot actually bear it—when we expect created, temporary things to deliver that which only the one true God can. It's as old as Adam and Eve. It's not just millennials who are tempted by idols; it's anyone living and breathing in the twenty-first century. No one of any age is immune.

We set up these idols in our hearts and give them meaning and power that should be reserved for God alone (Ezek. 14:3). We deify them by making them central to our lives, our value, our identity, and our purpose. We can make idols out of partners, children, careers, politics, money, sex, power, clothes, homes, vacations, cars, and who-knows-what else. The sky is the limit, really, because, as John Calvin wrote, "Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols."⁵

4 Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), xviii.

5 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.11.8.

Your heart and mine are idol factories. We can make an idol out of anything.

Harmony with Reality

Theologian Dallas Willard says idolatry is “an error at the ‘world-view’ level. It arises from the crying need of human beings to gain control over their lives. That need is understandable, of course, and it must be met in some way. But idolatry tries to meet the need by assigning powers to an object of human imagination and artifice, powers that object does not actually possess.”⁶

We are suffering because we are living outside of reality, and “reality does not adjust itself to accommodate our false beliefs.”⁷ It’s just not real—it’s not realistic, it’s not real life—that anything temporary like sex or another human being or any consumer item on Amazon will fulfill our deep-down longings, dreams, and desires. This is an age-old truth: the fruit in the garden of Eden overpromised and underdelivered, and the idols in our lives do too.

Reality is stubborn like that. It won’t go well with us if we refuse to live according to what’s real. The serpent tricked Adam and Eve, and he tricks us today too. We can pretend and invent and hope against hope all day long. But we suffer when our expectations are not grounded in what’s real.

Human well-being requires harmony with reality.

Sayers says we imbue fleeting and fragile things with godlike power so that we can feel safe. We want to control our lives and outcomes, so we use the idols of our age to bring about the results we’re looking for. But they end up controlling us because we keep

6 Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 41.

7 Willard, *Knowing Christ Today*, 39.

looking to them, making offerings to them, putting our hope in them. But they never really deliver. They never fully satisfy.

When our idols don't deliver—when they disappoint, when we realize we've been used rather than us using them—what if we instead turn to where we are truly loved and treasured without condition and beyond our comprehension?

What if burnout is a gift of God, calling us home? To him. To the love of our Father.

The Prodigal Son

Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15. You might know it well. A man has two sons, and the younger son asks for his share of the inheritance while the father is still alive. The father gives it to him, the son gathers all he has, and then heads out into a far country where he “squander[s] his property in reckless living” (Luke 15:13). A famine strikes, and he finds himself penniless. So he hires himself out to a man in the foreign country, who gives him the job of feeding pigs in his fields. The younger son is so broke and destitute that he longs to eat the pigs' food, but “no one [gives] him anything” (Luke 15:16).

We are not unlike this son, are we? We've been given an inheritance—so many good things by our Father in heaven—and yet we take them and run off to a far country. We seek the kingdoms of this world and their glory. Leaving our Father and home behind, we believe the universe is all about us and we can be awesome by curating the right experiences and identities.

And like the Prodigal Son, we find ourselves hungry, unsatisfied, longing for more. This is burnout. This is what idolatry delivers.

The son's misery finally brings him to himself (Luke 15:17). He hits rock bottom. He's done chasing that first story. He reasons

that even his father's servants are better off than he is. He rises up, determines to return to his father, admits his wrong thinking and wrongdoing, and seeks to at least earn his keep as a hired servant on his father's land.

The Bible tells us while the son is still a long way off, his father sees him and feels compassion. He runs and embraces his son and kisses him (Luke 15:20). The son hardly gets through his apology before the father tells the servants to clothe him, kill the fattened calf, and prepare a celebration for the son's return (Luke 15:22–23).

The son finds that the second story really is true. He really was made for more than reckless living, more than feeding pigs in a foreign land. He was made to receive the lavish love and provision of his father. He was made for the feast at home, for the celebration of his homecoming.

Prodigal Daughters

In our day, the far country remains, and it's just as alluring to us as it was to the Prodigal Son. We too gather our things and head out, hoping to discover ourselves somewhere out there. The Western world after the Sexual Revolution parades especially winsome and convincing idols before women and girls.

These idols promise empowerment and freedom, but instead deliver exploitation and enslavement. *You can be awesome*, they say, *if you'll just give yourself over to this identity, this way of life.*

There are many far countries, many idols of course, but a handful have proven to be the most enticing and the most destructive of our age. There's the idol of outward beauty. It applauds the young, the strong, and the visually pleasing, but it despises and twists true human beauty. Then there's the idol of sex. Convinced that sex is our deepest need and highest good, we hook up over

and over but never find real soul satisfaction. The idol of abortion is in cahoots with hooking up, promising us control, choice, and self-determination. And then there's the newer but tenacious far country of LGBTQIA+, promising a home to any girl wrestling with who she is and what she feels.

These cultural counterfeits, or far countries, or idols, appear so shiny, so promising, so life-giving. They've been wildly successful at drawing us in. But they've inflicted so much harm. We're now out in the foreign fields, with the pigs, so hungry we'd eat anything.

May we come to ourselves. May we rise up and go. The Father is watching and waiting even now, eager to give us compassion, love, forgiveness, and a truly soul-satisfying feast.

Older Brother, Older Sisters

The Prodigal Son has an older brother, as you may know, and we can't leave him out. When he realizes his younger brother has returned and a celebration is underway, he is angry and refuses to go in (Luke 15:28). His father goes out to him (just as he went out to the younger son), and the older son protests, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" (Luke 15:29–30). The father replies, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (Luke 15:31).

Both sons sought the good life through idolatry. One is more obvious than the other. The younger brother's reckless living is more shocking, seemingly more egregious. But the older brother too fell into idolatry. He placed his hope and trust in his own good behavior. He depended on his right choices to deliver the good life.

This idol wreaks havoc, even now, in our Christian circles. Perhaps in an effort to counter our crude age, or perhaps because we're sinful humans and inevitably drawn to either license or legalism, we've set up an idol of purity, marriage, and motherhood. Unwittingly, we've exalted these good gifts above the giver. These good gifts, though, are no less idolatrous if we look at them and say, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure."⁸

We see ourselves in the younger brother and the older brother. The brothers in this parable are all too familiar, all too relatable.

There's Very Good News; but First, the Bad

Here's the very good news that I can hardly wait to get to after we seek understanding of our own age and idols: in both cases, the father goes out to both sons, lavishes love and forgiveness, and invites them in to feast with him. Whether you are languishing and starving in a far country or steeped in your own moralism and no less dissatisfied, the Father is watching and waiting. As we come to ourselves, God stands ready to run out and embrace us, and to invite us in to the feast he has prepared for you and me.

Let's have the faith of a child—the faith of four-year-old me, who knew she could turn around and go back home. May the mercy, peace, and goodness of our God be the backdrop to every word you read on the pages ahead.

In chapter 2 we'll look at how we got here. The Western world after the Sexual Revolution is a battlefield for women and girls. We need to know that a specific history delivered us into this moment. In chapter 3 we'll look at how the Bible is a timeless and reliable

8 Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, xviii.

road map for our age. It really is good news for women and girls, as it points us to what's true, what's real and everlasting, that we might live in harmony with reality and our God. He is for us.

Part 2 will unpack the most attractive and sinister counterfeits of our age: outward beauty and ability, cheap sex, abortion, the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, and a twisted view of marriage and motherhood. With anecdotes and plenty of sociological research you and I will see how they've overpromised and underdelivered. We'll look beyond their boastful facades and see the real destruction underneath.

Finally, after looking these idols in the face in part 2, part 3 will reorient us to how good and sovereign and kind our God is. Part 3 is meant to be a worship-inducing, joy-giving conclusion. My hope is to lift our eyes up off of what can be a discouraging cultural landscape and onto God's goodness. In chapter 9 we'll look at ten reasons the Bible shows us it's good to be a girl, and in chapter 10 we will be overwhelmed by God's love and mercy and the feast he's preparing for you and me.

By the end of this book, I pray your heart and eyes will be fixed on Jesus who—as a truer, better, ultimate older brother in our story—makes a way for you and me and every woman and girl to come home. By his blood we can be reconciled to the Father. No matter what we've done, he's not afraid to call us brothers and sisters (Heb. 2:11).

One word of caution before we go on. The content in this book will at times be especially difficult to read if you have personally endured trauma at the hands of any of these idols. There may be research or anecdotes that are triggering for you. Consider reading this book with a trusted friend or group of women whom you can rely on to help you pursue healing and wholeness as you

confront these empty promises head-on. Find friends who love Jesus, Christian counseling, support groups, and any other means of healing. You are not alone, and God's desire for you is to walk in complete freedom.

My hope is that we will be well, that we will find life. We've been so sick for so long, giving ourselves over to the empty promises of our age. We've been lied to, and we've believed. But God made us for so much more. If human well-being requires harmony with reality, then let's look at what's real, what's true, what's genuinely good and beautiful, so that we might be well, so that we might truly live.

Discussion Questions

1. Did you ever run away as a kid, like I did as a four-year-old? Share the story with the others in your group.
2. Can you relate to the two stories that are running around in our heads? The first story says you can be awesome, you just have to make it happen. The second story whispers there must be more to this life. Give an example of how you try to make your life awesome—where you seek to conjure up your own identity. And give an example of a time when you suspected that you were made for so much more.
3. Tim Keller says, "An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, 'If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure.'" What idols do you see being especially attractive in your sphere?
4. Read the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32. Which brother do you immediately identify with?

5. Does adhering to and offering the words of Jesus in our world excite you or scare you? Why?

6. Close by praying for the Lord to reveal his merciful and loving Father's heart to you in the coming chapters and weeks as you read through this book. Pray that God would help you to love his word and his truth, so that you might shine like stars in the universe, holding fast the word of life (Phil. 2:15–16).