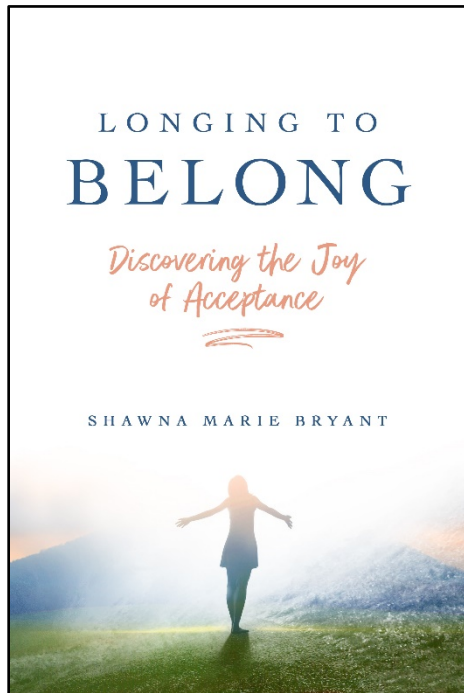


FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Longing to Belong

Discovering the Joy of Acceptance

By Shawna Marie Bryant



Become fully aware that you are unconditionally loved and accepted.

From a young age, we all learn that cruel words can wound, but *Longing to Belong* will show you how Scripture can heal your heart. Join Shawna as she explores Psalm 139 and reveals seven life-giving affirmations that everyone needs:

God knows me.
He is always with me.
I am not invisible.
I am wonderfully made.
God's countless thoughts are for me.
I have enemies, but . . .
I can walk in victory!

Writing with honesty and transparency, Shawna will show you how to handle your hurts and discover the keys to freedom when others have rejected you. Walk with her through the Bible and see anew that your Creator is not a harsh critic or a taskmaster to be feared. Instead, learn to claim your rightful place as accepted by God and live in joy.

Chapters Include: “Chapter 1: The Manifesto,” “Chapter 2: God Knows Me,” “Chapter 3: He Is Always with Me,” “Chapter 4: I Am Not Invisible,” “Chapter 5: I Am Wonderfully Made,” “Chapter 6: God’s Countless Thoughts Are for Me,” “Chapter 7: I Have Enemies, But,” “Chapter 8: I Can Walk in Victory!,” and “Chapter 9: The Key to Freedom.”

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About Shawna Marie Bryant



SHAWNA MARIE BRYANT is a professional communicator and creative. Shawna and her husband, Steve, own Bryant Digital Media, an award-winning digital media production company. They have raised two children to embrace their true identities, and now enjoy the pleasure of grandparenting. A passionate Bible teacher, Shawna is the host of the *Believe & Speak* podcast and blogs regularly at <https://shawnamariebryant.com/>.



What Others Are Saying about *Longing to Belong*

Praise for *Longing to Belong*

“As one who has longed to belong, I have looked for books that address the ever-present neediness in my heart. Thankfully, Shawna Marie Bryant’s biblical scholarship, encouragement, and empathy offers a Jesus-honoring path toward wholeness. Bryant has taken the journey before us. She loves Jesus. And she loves you, her reader. Whether you study this alone or with a group of friends, I’m convinced you’ll close the book loved, changed, and inspired.”

—**Mary DeMuth**, author of *Healing Every Day*

“*Longing to Belong* comes from such a personal place in Shawna. She is a shining example of someone who decided the pain of rejection was not going to keep her down and defeated. By embracing the truths found in Psalm 139, Shawna gives the reader a transformational guide to freedom.”

—**Joni Oquist**, Women’s Pastor at Peoples Church, Fresno, California

“Shawna is someone I have come to know as both a gifted communicator and a person who strives to hear and be led by the Holy Spirit. I think highly not only of her talents and gifts but also of her and her family.”

—**Dale Oquist**, Lead Pastor at Peoples Church, Fresno, California

“*Longing to Belong* is a beautiful, life-giving stroll through the powerful, nurturing, and life-transforming words of Psalm 139.”

—**Pam Farrel**, Codirector of *love-wise.com* and author of the bestseller *Men Are Like Waffles, Women Are Like Spaghetti*

“God has given Shawna Marie Bryant a wonderful gift in teaching, and has called her to the ministry of teaching the Word of God to women. Shawna needs to be doing this. This is what she was created to do!”

—**David Jeremiah**, Founder and President of Turning Point Ministries, and Senior Pastor of Shadow Mountain Community Church

“In *Longing to Belong*, Shawna Marie Bryant embraces readers as good friends. She captures the pain of rejection and the certainty of hope. Through relatable, personal experiences and biblical stories, Shawna takes you step-by-step to the truth of acceptance. This is a resource you will refer to time and again.”

—**Penelope Childers**, coauthor of *A Cry of the Heart*

“As pastor to a United States president, my dad, Rev. Michael Wenning, was considered a somebody. Somebodies get to endorse powerful books like this, filled with wisdom for broken hearts. As a nobody-knows-who, my opinion (and a few bucks) can buy you coffee! But maybe you need to hear from ordinary me, because after reading this book you will know beyond a shadow of a doubt how deeply, how widely, God adores you. And the best part? That makes you a pretty big somebody too!”

—**Andi Wenning Bull**, pastor, Bible teacher, and women’s mentor

“Shawna Marie Bryant guides with grace and fresh insight. Her wisdoms are breaths of fresh air. Her continual direction back to the one who sets us apart and keeps us in his belonging points readers to the source of everything they need. Shawna’s book is a timely and important work. I highly recommend *Longing to Belong*.”

—**Jami Amerine**, author of *Sacred Ground, Sticky Floors*

“With honesty and vulnerability, Shawna Marie Bryant shares her journey of discovery. You’ll join the ‘I’m Special Sisterhood’ and walk the path of acceptance, unlocking life-changing doors. A must-read, especially if you are feeling ‘less than,’ because God considers you his masterpiece.”

—**Barb Boswell**, author of *Every Time I Turn Around, God Whispers in My Ear!*

“*Longing to Belong* is a fascinating account of how deeply God loves and cares for us. As you read this book, you will see yourself the way God sees you. Shawna Marie Bryant masterfully conveys the heart of our heavenly father while walking you through one of the most powerful Psalms ever written. I personally realized that when I embrace God’s acceptance of me, self-acceptance becomes easier.”

—**Ercell B. Charles**, President of Mentor Performance Systems, and Vice President of Customer Transformation at Dale Carnegie & Associates

“Life is difficult and sometimes overwhelming, but a practical, sincere, powerful book like this one by Shawna Marie Bryant brings hope. Shawna invites you to join her in a sisterhood of learning and leaning into the Word of God together, using one of my favorite Psalms. Her guide to journaling through life’s ups and downs is something I will treasure, use in my own life, and share with others.”

—**Penny Murray**, Director of Women’s Ministry at NorthPark Community Church, Fresno, California



An Excerpt from *Longing to Belong*

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of Acceptance*



SHAWNA MARIE BRYANT



LEAFWOOD

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To the brave women who traveled this journey of discovery with me at Peoples Church Fresno, eager to walk in victory, and to my faithful prayer team who prayed for each of these women by name for weeks on end and prayed this book into your hands.

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Chapter One

THE MANIFESTO

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but I don't believe the rest of that singsong. I wouldn't have written this book if words never hurt me. The Instagram caption says, "All of us having a blast!" My stomach churns because I wasn't invited. The Facebook post links a photo album labeled, "Backyard get together with family and close friends." My throat knots with the realization that I'm not considered close. My daughter screams, "I hate you! I don't want to live with you anymore!" My heart breaks as her criticism amplifies my fear of failure.

Contrary to this misguided singsong, words do have power. I believe the words we form with our tongues have so much power, they can give life or bring about death. Emotional stabs may not break bones, but they kill hopes and happiness. Words can also revive us after we have tasted the poison of despair. Are you ready to conquer joy-robbing jabs with a small but mighty weapon?

God has given you a one-of-a-kind sword with divine power. Nothing like the weapons of this world, your heaven-sent weapon was crafted to cut through lies and take thoughts captive. You can demolish the deathly effects of every debasing thought, word, or deed leveled against you by wielding your truth-infused tongue.

The book you are holding contains a Scripture-based Manifesto—a public declaration of intentions—that empowers you to speak life-giving affirmations. The Manifesto will be your weapon against every lie that schemes to devalue you. It will tickle your tongue with the tasty truth of how special you are. Let’s call it the “Manifesto of Acceptance”; and make no mistake—it has divine power to demolish strongholds.

Declaring God’s Word arms you with the sword of the Spirit. Forged from Psalm 139, the Manifesto of Acceptance turns your tongue into a sword. The seven simple sayings in the Manifesto pack a wallop. In your hands—or rather, from your mouth—these declarations become a mighty weapon. Between here and the last page of this book, you will soak in Psalm 139, grouped into sections that support a line from the Manifesto as follows:

Verses from Psalm 139	Manifesto of Acceptance
1–4	God knows me.
5–8	He is always with me.
9–12	I am not invisible.
13–16	I am wonderfully made.
17–18	God’s countless thoughts are for me.
19–22	I have enemies, but . . .
23–24	I can walk in victory!

Declaring these seven lines will help silence the lies you’ve believed about your identity. These declarations will also help you focus on truth. Are you ready to take your thoughts captive? Captivity is a good thing when it comes to destructive thought patterns. You don’t want them roaming freely through your mind, wreaking havoc on your sense of worth.

It’s time to identify and renounce false beliefs. It’s time to acknowledge and declare truth. It’s time to claim your place of

belonging. God's Word empowers your tongue to resuscitate hope and snuff out despair. Sticks and stones and emotional stabs all cause injury. But no foe can match the mighty sword of the Spirit—even if it's as tiny as your tongue.

I used to battle rejection, but now I believe what my Creator says about how valuable I am. Rejection may have trapped me behind enemy lines in the past, but it will never defeat me again. Not ever. Just saying it makes it so. I owe that win in a big way to Psalm 139, and I'm cheering you on to a similar victory. I believe you can rout rejection or any other enemy of your true identity. I believe you can discover the joy of acceptance. I sincerely do. With everything in me, I want you to believe it too. Believing is key. So is speaking. If you've got a tongue in your mouth, you already have what it takes to win this thing. And if you can't speak, I'm confident you can think. So we will start there.

Welcome to the I'm Special Sisterhood

When I taught this material at my home church, I began by greeting each brave woman who walked through the door of that Bible study classroom with a flower. I wish I could do the same for you. Will you play along with me? Reach out your hand, and receive a single, beautiful bloom. It's your favorite, so go ahead and take it. As you hold it and breathe in its fragrance, receive this as well: Welcome to the *I'm Special Sisterhood*.¹ You are beautiful. You belong. You are loved.

I realize that some of us have a hard time pondering the phrase "I'm special," let alone saying it out loud. Fortunately, my daughter Sarah has no trouble with the concept. When she was a little girl and I tucked her in at night, she always wanted me to scratch her back gently. I'm not sure how the ritual evolved from affectionate scratching to communicating, but I remember drawing letters on her back and pausing between words until she guessed what

I had spelled. I began with I. L-O-V-E. Y-O-U. Soon, when I'd scratch the letter I, Sarah would blurt out, "I know, Momma. I love you." One night, I decided to trick her and scratched A-M. S-P-E-C-I-A-L. I'll never forget the night she caught on to that phrase. As I started drawing the letter S, she declared, "I know. I know. I'm special." After that, I always found time to include that "mystery phrase," no matter how much she rolled her eyes. I wish I could say I strategized that scenario from the outset so my daughter would grow up believing and speaking the truth about how special she is. But to be honest, I was astonished the first time I heard her blurt out that declaration.

In the moments that followed, as I continued lightly scratching my daughter's back, I remembered a breakthrough scene I had witnessed as a recent college graduate serving as a high school camp counselor.

The door to my cabin of girls was ajar. I reached to push it open just as my best friend, Sharon, sternly exclaimed, "Say it! I want to hear you say it!"

Why was she in my cabin? Hers was next door. "I can't," came the weak reply. I recognized the voice of a darling girl in my cabin who rarely spoke. She was taller than me and gorgeous, with wavy brown hair and sad blue eyes. I had prayed to get through to her somehow.

"I can say it," Sharon said, a little softer this time. "I'm special. See? Now it's your turn."

I suddenly felt like I was eavesdropping on a significant encounter, but I couldn't help myself. I pressed gently on the door and peeked in. Sharon stood behind the teen with her hands firmly on the girl's shoulders. They were looking into the scratched and dingy mirror hanging above the chipped sink in the back corner of the cabin.

The girl shook her head. "I really can't."

Sharon would not have it. “You are special,” she said. “It’s true, and you need to believe it. I want to hear you say it.”

I saw the teenager’s shoulders rise and fall in a long, heavy sigh under the weight of her doubt and Sharon’s hands. “You really think so?”

“I know so.” Was the counselor from next door pretending to be stern? If so, she fooled me. I could never get away with that attitude. But it was working with this girl. “You are special, and I will hear you say it if it takes all day.”

The girl giggled, and said, “I’m special.”

“Say it again.”

“I’m special.”

“Say it louder!” Sharon nearly shouted.

“I’m special!” They laughed, and the joy was palpable.

“Now get back out there, and don’t you forget it!”

I saw them turn toward me, and I dashed into Sharon’s cabin. My wise and determined friend found me there, wiping my eyes. “You got through to her,” I said. “I couldn’t, but you did.”

Sharon knew when to push and how. I wonder if I need to verbally march you over to your mirror. Can you say the words “I’m special”?

Please put your flower down for a minute so I can teach you the secret signal for the *I’m Special Sisterhood*. No, I haven’t forgotten about the flower, and yes, I’m serious. I crafted this book to help you climb out of the pit of an unmet longing, and you can’t do that by just quietly sitting there and reading. In fact, as you turn the pages you hold in your hands, you will continually collide with a call to action: believe and speak. My insistence on believing and speaking is firmly established in both the Old and New Testaments. According to 2 Corinthians 4:13, “It is written [in Psalm 116:10]: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’ Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak” (NIV).

Some people speak with their hands—literally. I was astounded when I learned how to say “I’m special” in American Sign Language. The first time I saw it, goosebumps coursed from the back of my neck down my arms and back up again. I adopted it as our sign for the *I’m Special Sisterhood*. Before your precious head hits your pillow tonight, would you stand in front of the mirror and tell yourself how special you are? I’d love for you to practice the secret signal while saying “I’m special” out loud. If anybody sees you, you can honestly say you’re learning a phrase in sign language.

To say “I’m” in sign language, you simply point to yourself midchest with the index finger of your right hand.

To sign “special,” you first hold your right hand in front of you, pointing up with the same finger you just used to point to yourself. You should see your other fingers tucked under your thumb. Got it? Now, grab the tip of that index finger with the fingertips of your left hand, and pull it straight up a couple inches.² It’s as if you’re humbly holding out a little stick figure of yourself, and an outside force swoops in and lifts you up. I picture the hand of God reaching down from heaven to pull us out of the miry clay of insignificance.

When you slip on slimy lies, you can rise up and dust off by declaring truth—even if your declaration starts with silently signing “I’m special.” Like the Manifesto of Acceptance, the secret signal will help you refocus on truth when feelings of insignificance hijack your thoughts and send your self-image into a death spiral. Speaking of the Manifesto, I look forward to guiding you through it line by line in the pages to come. I believe the Manifesto’s seven simple declarations hold supernatural keys to freedom that will help you claim your place of belonging—your *rightful* place of belonging. I know these keys work because they opened my eyes to see myself as loved and accepted. They unlocked the truth of my extreme value and esteemed identity.

They exposed lies about my worth as empty words that wilt under the weight of God's promises. Finding and using these supernatural keys will do the same for you, sister. I hope you're OK with me calling you my sister. I meant what I said when I welcomed you to the *I'm Special Sisterhood* and gave you a virtual flower.

Merriam-Webster gives a three-part definition of "sisterhood." It first mentions the relationship of female siblings. Next, it references a religious community of sisters, especially a society of women in a religious order (like nuns). However, the final definition is what inspired the name for our community. Sisterhood also refers to the solidarity of women based on shared conditions, experiences, or concerns. Sisterhood speaks of the empathy women feel for other women.

I feel the pain of any woman wounded by words that belittle or demean. I want my sisters to bask in the joy of acceptance, which drives my motivation to write this book. Based on the fact that you picked it up and read this far, I'm confident that like me, you've tasted the conditions, experiences, and concerns of not being accepted. Can anyone honestly say they've never known rejection? We are in this together, sister. I'm not suggesting we form a misery-loves-company community. Rather, we belong to a fellowship of believers united in purpose to heal from emotional injuries and move forward.

Our solidarity goes beyond our shared longing to belong. Based on growing up with a sister who is practically a twin, raising a daughter into adulthood, working with women's ministry groups across the country, and being female, I'm convinced women share three deeply felt needs that leave an empty ache when we're not accepted: We want to be beautiful. We want to belong. And we want to be loved. I believe rejection strategically targets these vital needs to rob us of the assurance that Jesus already met them for us.

We Want to Be Beautiful

A television commercial came out several years ago that I spent way too much time thinking about. It bothered me so much that I finally had to ask myself why. The exotic model promoting the product (I think it was shampoo) opened the thirty-second advertisement saying, “Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful.” The obvious message of the commercial was if we bought whatever she was selling, we would be beautiful too. While I was annoyed that the advertiser defined beauty in such superficial terms, that lie was not what intensely bothered me. I hated the idea that a beautiful woman would assume other women would hate her just for being beautiful, and I hated that she could stare into the camera with such confidence while saying, “I’m beautiful” when I struggled to believe the same about myself. That stupid TV commercial got under my skin because it exposed a deep need and failed miserably at its promise to satisfy it.

We want to be beautiful, but rejection tells us our lips are too small or our nose is too big; our thighs are too round or our chest is too flat; our legs are too short or our feet are too long. God doesn’t agree with these shallow, critical opinions, and neither should we. He created you and is well pleased with his handiwork. He told me so one day when I was thanking him for the beauty of Yosemite. I live nearby and make every effort to visit once a year. No matter how many times I see it, I will never grow tired of the glorious Tunnel View. I routinely applaud God and sing praises from my perch on the viewing wall, with El Capitan on the left, Bridal Veil Falls framed by The Three Sisters (Cathedral Rocks) on the right, and the magnificent Half Dome center stage. The day I heard from God on this matter, I happened to be singing a popular praise song about how he makes everything glorious. (I try to keep my voice down so I don’t embarrass my family, or I wait until they are well out of earshot.) The chorus repeats a line

three times. I sang and pointed to tall and proud El Capitan. “You made that glorious. Yep!” I sang and pointed to where the falls sent sparkly mist into the air. “Amen! That’s glorious too.” I pointed straight at Half Dome when I sang the line a third time about how he makes everything glorious. Then I felt in my spirit that I was supposed to point to myself and all the people taking in the same view (who may have heard my voice suddenly catch in my throat at the thought). Me? Glorious?

In that moment, God reminded me of the story of creation. In the beginning, God said, “Let there be light” and saw that the light was good. God created the land and the seas, and saw that it was good. God created the plants and the trees, and saw that it was good. God created the sun, moon, and stars, and saw that it was good. God created the creatures of the sea and the birds of the air, and saw that it was good. God created all the animals that move along the ground, and saw that it was good. Finally, God created mankind in his image. He created us—male and female—in his very own image. When he saw all he had made, did he see that it was good? After all, that’s what he saw the first five days of creation. No, it wasn’t good . . . not exactly. Not the day people first populated our planet.

God created male and female, looked around, and saw that it was *very* good. In other words, you are more glorious than all of Yosemite Valley!

Luke 4:16–17 tells us that one Sabbath day early in Jesus’s ministry, he went to the synagogue in Nazareth and read from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. After reciting a certain passage, “he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.” With all eyes locked on him, he said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:20–21 NIV). Considering Jesus had just announced that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him and had anointed him to proclaim good news, recover sight for the blind, and set the

oppressed free, you would think the people would've danced for joy. They actually did speak well of him at first, but only because he was their hometown hero. Jesus could see into their hearts and told them what was hidden there. They didn't like that one bit and drove him right out of town, intending to throw him off a cliff.

Rejected by those who knew him best, Jesus didn't let their treatment of him define him. The following Sabbath, he went to a synagogue in Capernaum, where he continued proclaiming, healing, and freeing. Jesus felt pain, and I'm convinced rejection from his family, friends, and neighbors that day in Nazareth hurt. But it didn't change the way he saw himself. Jesus knew what was written in Isaiah's scroll. If he hadn't stopped and rolled up the scroll when he did, but instead read the entirety of what we today call Isaiah 61, Jesus would've gotten to the part describing each of God's sons and daughters as "a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor" (Isa. 61:3 NIV).

You are a display of God's splendor.

You might have an easier time planting yourself in the scene if you try picturing pure splendor first. Think of the distinction and magnificence of a king. The pomp and grandeur of a palace. The gorgeous appearance of a princess bride. Now imagine all that glorious brilliance shining on you—or even *from* you! Soak in the splendor, sister. Absorb it completely. You don't dimly flicker against the brilliance of prisms glittering off of Bridal Veil Falls. You don't pale in comparison to the majesty of God's creation. You don't fade away in the wash of light streaming from God's radiance. You, my friend, are a magnificent display of pure splendor.

Now, plant yourself in the splendor. Picture yourself reflecting the imposing pomp, brilliant distinction, and great brightness of God. You are beautiful. Don't just take my word for it. Your Creator says so. No matter what brand of shampoo you use, when God looks at you, what he sees is *very* good.

We Want to Belong

For too long, I thought I had to fit in to belong; but belonging isn't the same as fitting in. Trying to fit in where we don't belong inevitably magnifies our longing. When the world shuts me out, I find comfort knowing I don't belong to the world. Instead, I belong to the one who created it.

Jesus said, "If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. The world would love you as one of its own if you belonged to it, but you are no longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world, so it hates you" (John 15:18–19).

Why do we try to fit in to a place Jesus chose us to come out of? My son Scott faced that dilemma soon after graduating high school. He moved away from the safety net of home and his circle of friends at a time when expressing differing views was considered hate speech. He attended classes near Berkeley while working part time as a barista for an extremely popular coffeehouse in the heart of San Francisco, where he encountered a wide array of people from a variety of backgrounds. Scott knew he didn't fit in, and he didn't try. He simply attended classes and served coffee with a smile—living in the world but not trying to fit in with the world. The Saturday before Scott's final exam, on one of his last days at work, my husband and I drove nearly four hours to San Francisco for a cup of coffee. Scott's manager and coworkers told us again and again what a great son we had, what a wonderful worker he was, and how much they were going to miss him. The week he arrived home, Scott was snatched up by a local coffeehouse owned by a Christian man who had established an environment that would invite God's manifest presence. When I asked my son if he enjoyed his new job, he said, "Yes. I *get* to talk about Jesus."

My son knew he belonged to something (and someone) greater than this world. That assurance helped him thrive even in places where he didn't fit in. I'm convinced his need to belong

was met because Jesus prayed for him two thousand years before he was born. If you are a believer, Jesus prayed the same prayer over you. Yes, you! You'll find this prayer in John 17:9–20, which concludes with this: “I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message.”

Jesus knows the world hates believers because he chose us to come out of the world. That's why he prayed way back then for our protection today. He told the Father in heaven, “I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do.”

Experiencing the lasting joy of acceptance in spite of shifting opinions about your worth depends on knowing your life is secure in Christ. Start by believing you belong to the one who loves you enough to lay down his life for you, and then ask the Father to lead you to a place where you fit in. After all, 1 John 5:14-15 says, “We are confident that he hears us whenever we ask for anything that pleases him. And since we know he hears us when we make our requests, we also know that he will give us what we ask for.” So ask! Ask God to show you where you belong.

We Want to Be Loved

My husband, Steve, and I got married more than thirty years ago. Early on, during the honeymoon phase, he said something I knew wasn't true, and I called him on it. I had just told him I loved him, and he responded with, “I love you more.” From where I stood, that wasn't possible. I grew up in a warm family of huggers and kissers. We expressed our love frequently and loudly. His family was far more reserved. They didn't holler “I lahhhhve youuuu” like mine did when a family member exited the building.

“No, I'm pretty sure I love you more,” I said, thinking that would settle it, but he shook his head.

“I love you more.”

That's when I got all philosophical on him. "You can't possibly love me more because I have a greater capacity to love."

He lifted his eyebrows. "Greater capacity?"

"Yes," I said, confident that would end it.

He laughed out loud, pointed to his heart, and said, "Greater capacity. Me more you." After that, he began to sign my birthday cards, Christmas cards, and anniversary cards with "Me more you," instead of "Love," before his name. That silly exchange carried us through an abundance of hard times when neither one of us had the capacity to love like God loves.

God's capacity to love is wide, long, high, and deep enough to embrace you, even in the deepest pit of your unmet longing. What greater longing does anyone have than to be loved? Here's the good news: God thinks you are so worthy of love that he willingly gave his only Son to prove it. Nothing you could ever do can make you unworthy of God's love. There's no better example than the author of Psalm 139. God's capacity to love is so great that he loved David—a man who took a married woman to bed, and when he learned she had conceived, schemed to cause her husband's death on the battlefield. David was an adulterous murderer, and yet he went down in history as a man after God's own heart.

If we believe we are unlovable, we will never know the truth about how powerful God's love is or grasp what it does for us. But when we understand how incredibly lovable we are to our Creator, rejection loses its sway over us. Do you know the children's song "Jesus Loves Me"? The lyrics call to mind a number of places where the Bible tells us that we are loved and that we belong. One of my favorites is 1 John 3:1 (NIV): "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him."

Jesus came down from heaven and fulfilled every prophecy spoken about him, from his birth in Bethlehem to his burial as a criminal. But the world didn't recognize him. The world still doesn't. And it doesn't always recognize how special you and I are either—probably because we don't belong here. Why chase after the love of the world when we are children of the Most High God? His love is high enough to fill us completely. His love is wide enough to keep us strong. His love satisfies our deepest longing. Not the love of another person, no matter how great their capacity may be.

There is no greater love than the love God has for you. I can almost hear him say, “Me more you.”

Finding Your Key

I already told you that climbing out of the pit of an unmet longing requires more than quietly reading. Are you ready to move? Are you ready to search for your key to unlock the chains that bind you from belonging? I hope to challenge you along the way through this book and spur you on to victory. At times, I will ask you to silence lies by declaring truth. At times, I will invite you to study selected verses from Psalm 139 and write down what you learn. At times, I will appeal to your heart and mind with sketches about Bible characters who struggled with real issues.

I love the power of story. Storytelling captivates our thoughts and beckons us to a magical place of understanding. When we curl up with a good book, we can lose ourselves in someone else's circumstances, perhaps to take a break from our own. Good storytelling can help us return to reality with a fresh perspective. The Bible chronicles accounts of vulnerable people who were overlooked and underrated, and yet somehow discovered the joy of acceptance. You will meet characters as diverse as Joseph, who was born into privilege and sold into slavery, and Rahab, who survived

the streets of a pagan culture to establish her name in the lineage of Israel's kings—from King David to King Jesus. My sketches of these and other Bible characters will help you identify with the honest struggles they faced and the hard lessons they learned.

A journal prompt follows each story, with a call to read and reflect on no more than four verses from Psalm 139 at a time. I implore you to climb out of that pit of unmet longing with a pen and some pages as your ladder. Journaling while meditating on short passages of the Bible helps me with right thinking (believing the truth) and right standing (speaking it out loud). After decades of filling journals during my private time of Bible study, I can testify to the substantial role this activity continues to play in transforming my mind and renewing my heart. Prayerfully working your way through the verses of David's beloved Psalm will fill your mind with truth.

The appendix contains instructions for a journaling method with five distinct steps:

1. Look
2. List
3. Learn
4. Listen
5. Live³

As you engage in each journaling activity, I pray you not only sense God's presence but also hear his still, small voice. I believe he has something to say to you.

I will guide your journaling and portion the Manifesto of Acceptance so it won't be a mouthful to memorize. You've already got a sword in your mouth and that's enough. Remember? The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. I encourage you to take it out of its sheath by exercising your tongue. You'll learn—and

declare—one short line of the Manifesto chapter by chapter to help reverse the destructive cycle of wrong thinking and wrong standing.

Would you take a moment right now to read all twenty-four verses of Psalm 139? Its message inspired the Manifesto, and I believe it holds supernatural keys to freedom. You will find the book of Psalms near the center of your Bible. As you read and reflect, God will reveal his love and care for you. He is eager to meet with you and tell you deep and mysterious things. Gaining greater understanding of his intimate knowledge of you, and opening up to receive his unconditional love for you, will satisfy your thirst for acceptance. So tuck a bookmark into this page and turn to your Bible—Psalm 139 to be exact.

While you're welcome to devour this book from cover to cover, I hope you'll take time to savor each chapter. As you absorb the stories, meditate on the scriptures, and apply the lessons, I believe God will reveal your key to freedom and equip you to walk in victory. No longer will disapproving opinions cast doubt on your inherent value. No longer will another's cold shoulder make you feel invisible. I believe this is your time to step up and reach for the key that will set you free. I suggest you start by marching over to a well-lit mirror, practicing our secret signal, and telling yourself how special you are. You are part of the *I'm Special Sisterhood*, and you've got what it takes to win. I believe in you, sister. Let's do this!

Q & A with Shawna Marie Bryant

Longing to Belong

Q) How has COVID-19 increased our longing to belong? And how do we satisfy that longing when so many of us have been isolated?

A) Anyone who has written a book and submitted it to a publisher knows how long it takes to get a book from concept to completion. Who could've known back when I started writing *Longing to Belong* that we'd face a pandemic that changed our daily routines and behaviors? This virus has affected not only the physical health of so many but it also has had devastating consequences on the mental health of millions of people across the globe. In the midst of all this, I release a book called *Longing to Belong*, and have the privilege of offering a message of hope during this unprecedented time. While not everyone experiences the same amount of rejection, I don't know of a soul who hasn't felt the sting of being overlooked at some point. I wrote this book to help anyone who has ever felt unappreciated, unnoticed, or unwanted to change their focus from the pain of their circumstances to the pleasure of knowing—deep-down, truly knowing—that they are loved and accepted by the God who created them. My book gives readers tools to discover the joy of acceptance apart from the opinions or companionship of others. I invite readers to climb out of the pit of their unmet longings. I issue several calls to action throughout the pages, because you can't climb out of a pit unless you get up and do something. For readers of *Longing to Belong*, that "something" is learning to believe and speak seven life-giving affirmations that are drawn from the truths packed into Psalm 139.

Q) What should someone do when they feel rejected or unaccepted? And what do we do with the pain rejection causes?

A) The first thing to do when you feel like someone has rejected you doesn't come naturally. In fact, the first thing you should do is probably the last thing you'd think of. We tend to react to *perceived* offenses the same way we do to *legitimate* offenses. For example, let's say someone doesn't respond to my text for a couple of days and I feel rejected. But then I find out they had a family emergency or they dropped their phone in a toilet. Why did I automatically assume that the reason they didn't respond to my text had to do with me? The first thing to do is to tell yourself that *being* rejected is not the same as *feeling* rejected. In my book, we look at the differences between assuming and presuming. You'll feel a lot more secure if you don't naturally assume that you've been rejected. You'll be less apt to experience the pain of rejection the next



time your text goes unanswered if you say a prayer for the well-being of the person who seems to be ignoring you. You'd be surprised at how much a simple, positive shift in your mindset will ease the pain of rejection. So, what do you do with the pain of a *real* rejection? The quick answer is "read my book."

Q) Was there a particular experience in your life that prompted you to write a book on the subject of rejection?

A) Yes, and that experience made me shake like a wet dog. One day, my women's ministry director took me to lunch. She told me she wanted to offer a second women's Bible study on Wednesday nights because we were bursting at the seams and she didn't want to turn women away. She invited me to teach any subject for any duration, and I accepted her offer without a clue what my topic would be. As I began to pray about what I should teach, I kept hearing the same word pop into my thoughts: "rejection." I did not want to believe God was leading me to spend the hours and hours it would take and deal with the loads of issues sure to come up when teaching on that subject. But every time I asked God, "What should I teach?" I'd hear "rejection." As the deadline to decide crept closer, I finally told God, "I don't want to teach a class on rejection because no one will sign up for it and then I'll feel rejected." I waited on his still small voice, and this is what came to my mind—God called me by name and gently said, "Shawna, if my people believed every single word of Psalm 139, they would never suffer from chronic rejection again." That beautiful thought chased away all the fear I felt about writing on this subject. First of all, I love Psalm 139, so I began poring over the Psalm and knew it would serve as a great resource for anyone longing to belong. As I spent more time in study and prayer, the Lord showed me that he wanted me to focus less on the pain of rejection and more on the joy of acceptance. I took myself through this Bible study before I taught the material to another soul. It transformed my life.

Q) What was the most satisfying part for you as you wrote this book?

A) As I told you in the story of how this book came about, I ended up teaching this material two consecutive semesters because it was so well received. Many of the women from my class shared their stories of transformation, and urged me to publish this material. One woman in my Bible study was a single mom who could not get a job. She felt rejected and abandoned but refused to give up hope. I watched her countenance change as the weeks in class progressed. By the end of the study, she had received three job offers! Another woman came to my class by some miracle because she had been rejected by the church and church people. She conveniently had a job on Sundays so she could avoid attending worship gatherings, but at the pleading of her mother, she agreed to attend my class. She actually came twice in a row and helped me lead worship her



second time around. She has an amazing vocal gift. One Sunday morning a few weeks after the class ended, I was sitting in our big auditorium waiting for the worship team to take the stage and I saw her walk out on the platform, pick up a microphone, and sing. As soon as the gathering ended, I practically ran to the front to catch her before she disappeared backstage. She was grinning ear to ear, and I was weeping. Victories like that are what kept me at my keyboard writing this book. I'm hoping and believing that God will bring about transformation like that in the lives of my readers.

Q) What would you say are the top takeaways from this book?

A) If readers can remember at least two things after reading my book, I hope they never forget that (1) the tongue has the power of life and death, so what they say matters; and (2) they are unconditionally loved and accepted, so they don't have to be defined by opinions that don't agree with who God says they are.



Additional Questions

Q) In your book, you welcome readers into a sisterhood. Does this mean the techniques you share are exclusively for women?

A) My son called me the day I texted him with the news that *Longing to Belong* was available for pre-order on Amazon. Scott is twenty-three, and his reaction to visiting my Amazon page surprised me in a good way. He said, “Mom, it’s probably too late now, but based on your book cover and description, it looks like it’s directed at women.” He paused but I held my tongue, and then he said, “I don’t think you should’ve done that because men struggle with this. We may not want people to know it, but we long to belong too.” His transparency was totally unexpected, but it probably shouldn’t have been because I’d heard as much from other men. I told Scott about the endnotes in the back of my book. The very first one says that even though I wrote the content originally for women’s Bible study, the techniques I teach are not exclusively feminine. While I did focus on my sisters as I wrote *Longing to Belong*, I welcome my brothers who are brave enough to hold a book with such a pretty cover. Men can certainly use the material in this book to devise a game plan to lay claim to their rightful place of belonging. David, the author of Psalm 139, was a man after God’s own heart, and so I invite men who read my book to look to David and Jesus as their teachers.

Q) You have a “secret signal” for your sisterhood. What was your motivation for doing that?

A) I actually had two reasons to create a secret signal, but when I came up with the idea to use sign language and looked up how to sign our secret phrase, God showed me a third reason. First, I want to encourage a spirit of belonging, and I think a one-of-a-kind sign brings about a sense of affinity. A secret signal encourages our sisterhood (or sibling-hood) to coalesce around our shared longing to belong. Second, creating hand motions to a secret phrase would encourage my readers to take action. Throughout the book, I issue several calls to action—like believing and speaking the seven life-affirming declarations drawn from Psalm 139 mentioned earlier. I am convinced of the truth of Proverbs 18:21, which says, “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” I came up with the idea to teach American sign language for the phrase “I’m special” because some people will have a hard time saying “I’m special” out loud. Signing “I’m special” not only eases the phrase into our hearts and minds, but the intentionality of signing the phrase—of taking action to affirm our value—has transformative power. When we sign it, we start to believe it, and then we can say it. Those were my two reasons, but then a third reason came about after I saw a video clip online of someone demonstrating sign language for “I’m special.” I stared at the screen with my jaw in my lap! If you aren’t familiar with this sign, the word “special” is signed by holding your right index finger

out in front of you, pointing up, and then gently pulling that finger up with your left hand. God showed me with that simple hand motion how he feels about me. I picture the hand of God reaching down from heaven to pull me out of the miry clay of insignificance. He's the one who says that I'm special—not in an “everyone gets a trophy just for showing up” kind of way, but in a “you're special because I created you for a unique purpose and you are mine” kind of way.

Q) Why do you think so many people long to belong?

A) In Genesis, God created all living things—plants, animals, and humans. After he created Adam, the first man, he said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” Our Creator knows that we need to live in community. You and I have an innate need to belong. But our divided and finicky world places all kinds of conditions on us in order to belong. We end up feeling like we don't fit in because we can't possibly satisfy all those conditions. The good news is that we already belong in a beautifully diverse yet profoundly unified family with a loving Father who doesn't put any conditions on us at all. Sadly, too many people don't know their Creator as a loving Father. Too many people think God—if he even exists—either doesn't matter or doesn't care. They look for acceptance from this finicky world. But this world will never satisfy that longing—especially when you have to choose sides. The wonderful truth is that we are already accepted by the One who knows our every flaw and loves us enough to lay down his life for us. *Longing to Belong* takes readers on a journey to discover that the joy of acceptance happens once we become fully aware that we're unconditionally loved and accepted.

Q) How do we offer acceptance to others, even while practicing social distancing? What practical things can we do to combat loneliness and give others a sense of belonging?

A) Even though it's counterintuitive, we tend to withdraw when we feel lonely. Another paradox is that it's possible for us to feel even more alone when surrounded by people. When we're in a crowd that doesn't seem to see or appreciate us, we feel the sting of rejection with more intensity than when we're all alone. That's why we withdraw when we're lonely—like a turtle going into its shell to protect itself. When I found myself enveloped by a hard, dark shell of my own, I learned that the steps I took to keep me from feeling lonely actually helped the people around me feel appreciated and seen. The funny thing is I wasn't doing it for them, I was doing it for me! I will never forget the day I came out of my shell. At the time I worked for one of the largest employers in my region, but I sat all alone during my lunch break every day. That particular day, I was looking at social media and learned something about my best and oldest friend, who had moved across the country when she got married. I was devastated that I had to learn such profound news about my closest friend on such a public and impersonal platform. We had fallen out of touch because of the three-hour time difference and our busy schedules with work and

family. But the pain and loneliness of that moment motivated me to make a change. First, I called my girlfriend and set an appointment for a weekly, recurring call that required me to get out of bed an hour earlier so I could spend it on the phone with her. Then, I reached out to three different women I'd met at work whose company I enjoyed and asked if we could meet one day a week for lunch—same time, same day. All three took me up on it! The smallest gesture can make a huge impact to someone who feels abandoned. I'm from California, and we were one of the first states to shut down during the pandemic and among the last to re-open. One Saturday during the lockdown, my husband picked up the phone and made a couple different calls to friends from his past—men he'd played music within high school. They talked at length and each one thanked him for reaching out. If you find yourself thinking, "I wish so-and-so would call," then pick up the phone and make the call yourself. You may be surprised at how doing something for yourself can bless someone else.

Q) How do we become people of acceptance without compromising our faith?

A) Once we understand that acceptance is not the same thing as tolerance, we will never have to compromise our faith. I much prefer being accepted to being tolerated. Don't you? Tolerance refers to a permissive attitude toward opinions, beliefs, and practices that differ from one's own. God doesn't tolerate you, me, or anyone else. Jesus taught that whoever does not believe in him stands condemned. To some, that may sound intolerant. In truth, God has thrown open the door to the kingdom of heaven. Yes, Jesus said that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one can come to the Father except through him, but *anyone* can come to Jesus. Then, Jesus begins the work of sanctifying us by the power of his love. You can come to Jesus just the way you are, but he loves you too much to leave you that way. If you let him, he will transform you into a better you. Why settle for tolerance when Jesus offers ultimate acceptance? I believe we rob people of experiencing the power of God's love and grace when we tolerate opinions, beliefs, and practices that reject Jesus or ignore the hard lessons he taught us. Being a person of acceptance means accepting the way people are and pointing them to Jesus. He loves you so much that he died for you, and he will redeem any opinions, beliefs, and practices that hinder intimacy with him. Jesus prayed that God would sanctify us by the truth. That's why my book is filled with calls to action to believe and speak truth. The tongue has the power of life and death, so what we say matters. I am uncompromising in my faith and unyielding in my acceptance of the people God has called me to love—which includes people who differ from me and my way of thinking.

Q) Is this book best read in a small group or as an individual?

A) I'm glad you used the phrase "best read" because any individual can pick up this book and get something out of it. I bought a book a couple of years ago by one of my favorite authors, and the

first time I sat down with it, I read something to the effect of “don’t read this book on your own.” Guess what? I didn’t read it. I certainly don’t want that to happen with my book. I want my readers to think of me as their friend, and I promise that you will not feel alone if you read the book on your own. That being said, I believe the *best* way to get the most out of this book is to read it with a small circle of friends. That doesn’t mean you have to establish a formal study group or book club that meets once a week. But if you and even one other friend bounce thoughts and reactions off one another at the end of each chapter, you’ll get more out of the journey.

Q) You repeatedly encourage your readers to journal. Why should they put your book down and pick up a journal? What about people who don’t like to journal?

A) My answer to this question echoes what I just said about how to “best read” *Longing to Belong*. I wouldn’t want to discourage you from reading the book by insisting you commit to journaling if you don’t like to journal. I invite readers to journal because I can testify to the transformative power journaling has had in my own life and in the lives of women who took this journey with me through my Bible study. Deciding whether to follow my journal prompts is kind of like deciding how you’ll spend your visit to the gym. You can walk on a treadmill for thirty minutes and get some benefit. You can put that treadmill at an incline and get a greater benefit. Or you can increase the speed as well as the incline and get the greatest benefit. I realize that doing the journaling assignments will be a workout, but I know some amazing success stories of women who went the extra mile and discovered the joy of acceptance because they accepted the challenge.



Contact

If you are interested in receiving a free digital copy of *Longing to Belong*, you may request access to Shawna's book on NetGalley. If you would prefer a physical copy, please send appropriate mailing instructions to Duane.Anderson@acu.edu.

About the Publisher

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