

**“Identity Lost & Restored”
Identity II**

The most important question you can ask yourself is this: who am I? In that deepest place, in your soul, who are you? What, really, is your true identity? How you answer that question profoundly affects how you live your life. Who we believe we are, who others believe we are, and who we are created to be, all influence the choices we make in life, how life turns out for us, and where we will spend eternity.

The Bible, and our Christian faith, has quite a bit to say about who we are, who we belong with, and our purpose in living. The Bible reveals that we, humans, are fearfully and wonderfully made. Humans are not just any other animal. We are special creations of God with capacities (and therefore responsibilities) not found in other creatures. *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* Gen. 1:27. Each individual is made in God’s image with incredible complexity, and each individual is precious in the sight of God. What this means is that you are incredibly complex, unique, and valuable to God who created you.

Your identity is rooted in your Creator. Each of us, unique and precious, were made to mirror God’s character. But that’s where the problem sets in ... not because of what God has done or not done, but because of what humanity has done and not done.

Tarnished Image

Most of you have polished some surface – furniture, silver, a car – so you know that the tarnish and blur can be polished out to reveal a pleasing sheen. We have been created in God’s image, but that image has been tarnished. Perhaps you’ve noticed; it’s ugly! There is violence, oppression, deceit, injustice, mistrust, pain, and suffering in the world. Have you noticed any of those things close to home? Have you noticed any of those things in yourself? Have you noticed that even when you want to do the right thing that sometimes you struggle to do it? It doesn’t even have to be an addiction – drugs, alcohol, or sex – it could simply be small things that break good relations with others, or neglect of things that build closeness to God. We may even say we are God’s creation, fearfully and wonderfully made, and know full well in our heads that we are beloved of God ... and still, our egos may rule our hearts. That image of God in which we are made gets perverted when we seek to be “better” or more “special” than others, or be the center of attention, not realizing we are trying to meet our own emotional needs. When our identity in God is deeply embedded in our hearts we won’t be carried away by misguided emotions. Reminds me of a neighbor in Palo Alto commenting on how he used to drive a full-size Mercedes (like and number of folks in the area), then said “I don’t need to now,” implying that he didn’t need to show status to anyone.

“But,” you may object: Aren’t people generally good and aren’t we meant for good? No and yes. No, people aren’t generally or naturally good. Yes, God meant us for good and to be good. So, how can we be good if we aren’t naturally good?

There's a lot of bad stuff happening in the world, it's easy to spot evil in the other person, group, tribe, or party. But the truly honest people, those who are awakened by the knowledge of God, will look in the mirror and see a distorted image of godly characteristics.

Many years ago, a London newspaper offered a prize for the best answer, in 25 words or less, to the question: what is wrong with the world? Author G. K. Chesterton submitted this: "I am."

The Bible tells us that we were created by and for God. God made all creation good and to be good. (Gen. 1:24a, 25b; Gen. 1:26a, 27.) And God gave a special place to humans to be in personal relationship with Him and to care for the rest of creation. So what happened?

The man and woman were created to have freedom - with the only restriction being that they not eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, ... *for in that day you shall surely die*, Gen. 2:16-17. That is, if you eat of this tree, you will define good and evil as you see fit, and it will kill you. But humans not content with being dependent creatures of God, wanting to be gods themselves, ate of that fruit and still do so today. Humans just have this desire to be in charge and to define their identity outside of God's design. We call this the Fall ... we're fallen from our original state in God's good creation.

The Bible calls this state: sin. Unfortunately for us and the whole world, sin is much more infectious (and deadly) than COVID or any other disease. It's a disease of the soul and everyone has it and it's a sickness unto death. *If we say that we never sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*, 1 John 1:8. Sin has blurred and tarnished God's image in each of us.

The Fall is not an imprisonment in matter but a spiritual rebellion. Long ago the prophet Isaiah said it well: *You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, "You did not make me"? Can the pot say to the potter, "You know nothing"?* Isaiah 29:16. Because people were never designed to be independent from God, the result is that rather than making the world a place to glorify God, humans tend toward violence, war, greed, covetousness, envy, licentiousness, and the like.

Yet God's goodness lingers in the human psyche, and every human attempt to make good, every human scheme to build perfection on earth, is a yearning for that original goodness. As it says, *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse*, Romans 1:20. Yet the fall from God's original settings is so far, the flaw so pervasive, the sin so deep, that even the best attempts at goodness fall short of God's glory and cannot fully achieve God's purpose. (I think communism is a prime example of this with its complete reshaping of society, culture, economy, politics to make a new man and new woman and create heaven on earth. Communism's record is clear, with one hundred years to illustrate: utter misery, poverty, oppression, and death.) Our orientation, regardless of our intentions, is to engage in all the bad thinking and acting that brings all the misery and injustice we know in this world. Does our orientation have to be our identity?

Is it hopeless? Are we doomed forever to follow our evil instincts, forever to be pushed and pulled by the selfish desires of others and of ourselves? Are we doomed to thrash or wander our way through life, never knowing our true identity?

Return to Origins

There's a verse in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that says, *If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creature, the old is gone, new has come.* That sounds simple, right? We become a Christian we get a new identity ...all good ... not so fast ... that old identity is often very hard to shake...

Video clip from Ice Age 2: the Meltdown - and meet Ellie

Can you imagine all that Ellie has gone through, trying to live out this false identity? In the story of the movie, everyone is fleeing because of this cataclysmic event. She joins Manny on this journey, and as hard as he tries to convince her she's a mammoth he can't, but something triggers her memory. She remembers that as a baby she was orphaned and raised by possums. It all begins to come into focus and she starts to live as a mammoth, but it's not easy living this new life... But the only way for her to find love (big hairy mammoth love) is to drop that old identity and embrace and live in the new identity. Her new identity opens her eyes to her true kinship ... belonging, I'll touch on that next week.

Now, when humans spurned God and decided they could define their own identity apart from Him, God had a choice: He could either abandon misguided, immoral humanity, or He could bring a rescue plan into effect. Fortunately, God chose the latter, saying, "I will not leave you alone. I will not let you destroy yourself, each other, and the world I have made. I love you too much to let you alone."

God so loves the world that He could not leave humans in their sorry state. *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,* John 3:16. In Jesus of Nazareth we see the human face of God, and He announced and demonstrated God's plan of redemption to restore us to our original and divine goodness. On the Cross He carried the burden of all humanity's wrong-doing and its consequence of death, all that comes from living a false identity, and there He destroyed it all. *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!* 2 Cor. 5:17. Those who attach themselves to Christ can say, *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me,* Galatians 2:20.

By coming to Jesus Christ, we can be healed of the arrogance of sin that locks us in bad choices and behaviors. In Him we find restoration to right relationship with our Creator. In that right relationship is found our true identity.

The first most important question anyone can ask is "Who am I?" The second most important question in life: "Who do I want to be?" We each have a choice to make and God is offering each of us the opportunity to enter into our true identity through Jesus Christ. Take a conscious look at who you are, and ask yourself: do I want to be this person, or the better person that Jesus Christ can make me ... the person God is calling me to be? We are created to be the mirror image of God and God is looking to see Himself in us. Are you doing anything about it?

When you get your identity straight you get re-oriented to the thinking and behavior that God has designed us for. The first born of the new creation, the new human, is Jesus. In and through Him we can live into our true identity, oriented to godly, rather than devilish, behavior. Here's my orientation: I'm a fallen sinful creature, prone to selfish and un-godly behaviors. But thank God I'm not defined by that orientation, because my identity is that of a one redeemed by Jesus Christ, forgiven of sin, and adopted into God's own family, destined for good works that reflect Him. Never let your orientation rule your life or tell you who you are. Find your true identity in God and let His love rule your life.

When people forget and reject who they were actually made to be, they turn to merely human-made ideas and beliefs that have far-reaching and destructive consequences. If we reject our high calling as God's special creatures, then we lower ourselves and our sense of value to be as subservient as animals. If we are just another animal we will be herded, used, and abused by the powerful and selfish of this world.

Though fallen and sinful, we are still loved by God and worthy of redemption. *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us, Romans 5:8.* Each us was born with a unique set of human DNA, fearfully and wonderfully made. But there's more: God offers Himself to us, to be by His side, to bring us into our full and true identity as His children.

God is still on His throne, and He is transforming us through the Holy Spirit to take on the character of Christ. That's our true identity. He has empowered us as His sons and daughters to be agents of His grace and transforming power. As Scripture reminds us, our model and our hope is Jesus, who:

For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart, Hebrews 12:1.