



The Architecture of Endurance: A Worldview Analysis of Identity Fragility and Theological Resolution

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Abstract: This article examines the instability of human identity when it is built on temporary foundations such as careers, social status, or family roles. Drawing on social and role identity theories, the analysis shows how major life transitions such as military discharge or personal loss can trigger a deep crisis of meaning by removing a person's primary source of structure. The author argues that because purpose and hope are rooted in self-understanding, the collapse of identity inevitably leads to despair. After exploring the limitations of self-created purpose, the paper proposes a theological resolution. It argues that the Christian framework provides a secure foundation by anchoring identity in the unchanging nature of God, offering a sense of purpose and hope that remains durable even in the face of suffering and death.

Introduction

Major life transitions expose realities that daily routine can conceal. In the military context, the end of service is often described as a difficult "transition," but the phenomenon extends beyond the uniform. Similar disruption occurs after retirement, injury, job loss, divorce, public failure, financial collapse, or any event that removes a person's primary source of structure and meaning. What is frequently described as an adjustment problem is often an identity problem.

The crisis begins with a question most people answer superficially: Who are you? In ordinary conversation, the expected response is typically occupational or functional, what one produces, or what one belongs to. The pattern is consistent: identity is frequently expressed through external attachments rather than through a stable internal foundation. When identity is defined by contingent realities, it becomes fragile. When those realities are removed, the individual does not merely lose a role; he experiences the loss of self.

This article argues that identity functions as a foundational category from which purpose and hope derive. When identity collapses, purpose follows suit, and hope becomes aimless. The analysis begins from a worldview-neutral perspective and then evaluates the explanatory power of competing foundations, concluding that the Christian framework provides a coherent resolution for identity, purpose, and hope.

Defining Terms

Because identity, purpose, and hope are used broadly in popular discourse, the terms must be defined with precision.

Identity, as used here, refers to the relatively stable self-understanding by which a person experiences continuity and coherence over time. This usage aligns with classic psychosocial



treatments of identity as a central organizing feature of the self. Identity is also expressed through role-based and group-based categories (e.g., occupational roles, social affiliations), which can become dominant sources of self-definition. When identity commitments are disrupted through significant loss or transition, the individual may experience a corresponding disruption in meaning and self-understanding.¹

Purpose refers to the end (telos) toward which a person orders his life, including both ultimate aims and derivative responsibilities. Purpose is not limited to vocational ambition or personal preference; it includes moral obligation, relational duty, and a sense of accountability.²

Hope is future-oriented confidence grounded in a perceived reliable foundation. In psychological terms, hope is often treated as a cognitive-motivational construct associated with goal pursuit and perceived pathways. In philosophical and theological terms, hope concerns what one believes about the future and what that future ultimately means. Hope functions as both a stabilizer and a motivator: it anchors endurance during adversity and sustains movement toward a future deemed significant.³

Contingent Identity and Its Instability

In practice, identity is often constructed through multiple attachments. A man may identify simultaneously with occupation, social status, physical capability, group membership, reputation, athletic affiliation, fraternity or club participation, or relational role. Social identity theory explains how group membership can become a salient component of self-definition, particularly when belonging provides esteem, security, and a sense of meaning.⁴ Role identity theory likewise shows how social roles become internalized and shape behavior and self-understanding.⁵

The weakness of contingent identity is not that it is socially illegitimate. The weakness is structural. If a man's identity is anchored in what he does, it becomes vulnerable to disruption in his performance, role, or status. When the job ends, the athlete's body fails, the uniform is removed, or public respect collapses, the individual experiences a rupture in the narrative that previously organized his life.

Many men attempt to compensate by layering identities. When one attachment fails, another is used to stabilize the self. Yet if each attachment is contingent, the foundation remains unstable regardless of how many layers exist. Multiple unstable supports do not produce stability; they delay collapse.

A particularly clarifying case is the father who places his entire identity in the role of fatherhood. Fatherhood is morally weighty and socially necessary. Yet when fatherhood becomes the primary identity rather than a derivative role, it can lead to catastrophic collapse in the face of loss. If a father loses a child through death, estrangement, custody loss, addiction, or prolonged rebellion, the pain is not only grief. It becomes identity collapse within grief: "If I am not that father



anymore, then who am I?” The issue is not that fatherhood is unimportant. The issue is that even a good role becomes an unstable foundation if it is treated as ultimate.

For this reason, identity must be evaluated by durability. A foundation is proven not when life is stable, but when life becomes unstable.

Identity, Purpose, and Psychological Risk Under Loss

Purpose is not independent of identity. Purpose presupposes a “who” behind the “what.” A man cannot coherently answer what he should do without first answering what he is and why he exists. For this reason, purpose derives from identity, and the loss of identity commonly produces a corresponding loss of purpose or meaning.

In this context, meaning refers to the individual’s perceived answer to the question of why he exists, what his life is for, or more commonly, “the reason for getting out of bed in the morning”. Purpose justifies effort and acts as an organizing framework that governs direction, significance, and endurance. When identity is grounded primarily in contingent roles, status, or affiliations, their loss produces more than circumstantial disruption. The loss of that role does not merely remove responsibility; it raises questions about aptitude and usefulness. When purpose is grounded in position, the loss of that position removes the structure by which a man locates himself in the world. When purpose is grounded in belonging, exclusion or abandonment does not merely remove community, it removes the perceived reason to live for anyone beyond the self.

Frankl’s work supports the view that meaning is a primary driver of endurance and psychological stability.⁶ Accordingly, the loss of meaning is associated not only with impaired future orientation, but with diminished perceived significance, weakened moral constraint, and reduced capacity to endure suffering.

This loss is not merely theoretical. Empirical research consistently identifies meaning in life as a protective factor against self-destructive outcomes. A meta-analytic review of studies involving youth populations found a significant negative association between meaning in life and suicidal ideation, indicating that lower perceived meaning corresponds with higher suicidal thinking.⁷ Related empirical findings likewise indicate that the presence of meaning in life is associated with reduced risk across multiple dimensions of suicidal ideation and psychological distress.⁸

Hope as Stabilizer and Motivator

If identity is foundational and purpose derives from identity, hope functions as the force that sustains the pursuit of purpose and anchors the individual during adversity. Purpose implies future projection. Men act toward something. The future they believe in becomes the horizon of



their decisions. This is why hope cannot be treated as a secondary concern. If a man has no credible future, he cannot sustain disciplined action in the present.

Snyder's work provides a useful psychological account of hope as a cognitive-motivational construct associated with agency and perceived pathways toward goals.⁹ Yet the deeper question remains: what is the object of hope, and is it durable? Many men place hope in contingent objects, career permanence, wealth accumulation, social recognition, family outcomes, or generational legacy. Some of these aims are legitimate within limits. None are immune to loss, distortion, or mortality.

The Worldview Challenge: Self-Created Purpose and Ultimate Significance

A common objection to the critique of contingent identity is the claim: "I create my own purpose." This assertion expresses agency. It does not establish ultimate significance.

A distinction must be made between self-selected goals and objective meaning. One may choose goals, but choosing a goal does not establish its final importance. If purpose is self-created, then it has no authority beyond the individual's preference. In that case, purpose is not discovered; it is invented. Invented purpose can be replaced under sufficient pressure, particularly when suffering intensifies or when the individual no longer believes the project is worth the cost.

The legacy argument is often used to strengthen self-created purpose: one's purpose is to build something that outlasts the self. Yet legacy depends upon future generations maintaining interest, preserving memory, and sustaining accomplishments. Even when legacy persists for a time, it remains temporary in historical terms.

If one assumes there is no life after death, a further implication follows. If death ends consciousness, the individual will not be aware that he existed, that he hoped, or that he accomplished anything. In such a framework, self-created purpose may feel meaningful while one is alive, but it has no permanence, no final grounding, and no lasting end. The purpose terminates not only biologically but epistemically: the subject of purpose ceases to exist as a knowing agent.

This observation does not imply that atheists cannot live with sincerity, discipline, or moral seriousness. It clarifies the limitations of a framework in which ultimate meaning is not grounded beyond the self and therefore cannot claim permanence or final accountability.

The Theological Resolution: Identity, Purpose, and Hope in Christian Terms

If contingent identity is unstable, self-created purpose lacks ultimate grounding, and perishable hope cannot endure mortality, then a coherent foundation must meet at least three criteria:

1. Non-contingence: not dependent upon changeable circumstances.



2. Teleological coherence: able to account for why human beings exist.
3. Eschatological durability: able to account for death without rendering life meaningless.

The Christian worldview grounds identity, purpose, and hope in God's nature, God's creation, and God's redemptive work.

Identity “in Christ”

In the New Testament, “in Christ” denotes union with Christ and the believer's standing before God as determined by Christ's person and work (e.g., 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 1:3–14; Rom 8:1). This identity is grounded in divine action rather than social recognition, and it cannot be revoked by loss of role, injury, retirement, or death.

The phrase “who God says we are” refers to the identity claims Scripture makes concerning the believer's status and relational standing before God, grounded in adoption and inheritance (e.g., Rom 8:15–17).

Purpose as divine design and moral vocation

Purpose, in Christian terms, is both ultimate and derivative. The ultimate purpose is doxological life ordered toward the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). Derivative purposes include moral vocation and good works prepared by God (Eph 2:10). This framework treats human life as designed rather than accidental and therefore provides objective direction.

This also reframes work and social roles. Work becomes an arena of obedience rather than a source of ultimate selfhood (Col 3:22–24). So also, with roles such as father, husband, son, brother, and friend. Each is treated as a derivative assignment carried out in obedience to Christ, and its final evaluation is not determined by social recognition or immediate outcomes, but by divine accountability. This preserves hope under loss, because identity is grounded not in temporal function but in eternity.

Hope as eschatological certainty

Christian hope is future-oriented confidence grounded in divine promise and eschatological reality (e.g., 1 Pet 1:3–5; Heb 6:19; 2 Cor 4:16–18). It is not dependent upon favorable circumstances. It is anchored in resurrection, inheritance, and final restoration. This framework accounts for suffering without surrendering meaning and accounts for death without collapsing significance (Rom 5:3–5).

Conclusion

When everything that once defined you is removed, what remains and what is left to live for? The identity crisis exposed by military transition is not unique to veterans. It is a human problem: the tendency to ground the self in perishable realities. Men use self-reliant assurances to sustain



their identity and purpose in the face of loss. In that condition, now a man is not hoping for something, but hoping to find something worth hoping for.

The Christian framework resolves these weaknesses by grounding identity, purpose, and hope in what is not contingent: the eternal God. If God is sovereign, eternal, and unchanging, then what He establishes is not subject to the circumstances that govern human life. For this reason, the Christian identity is not threatened by loss of role, failure of performance, or even death.

If a man is in Christ, his purpose is inherent to his identity. The commands of Christ and the character of Christ establish the content of that purpose and the direction of that life. The Christian life is therefore not defined by self-authored significance, but by grace expressed through the authorship of your very existence and the actions that follow. One example of inherent purpose is expressed through service as a functioning member of the body of Christ (e.g., Rom 12:4–8; 1 Cor 12:12–27). The man's purpose is not confined to what he achieves or accumulates for himself, but extends to what he contributes in love for God and for others. God provides each, the faith, the love, and the people.

Hope follows the same logic. Faith in Christ entails belief in who He is, what He has done, and what He has spoken. If Christ is trustworthy, then His promises are trustworthy. The Christian, therefore, places hope not in self-conceived purpose-driven goals but in the promises and character of God, who resides outside the self and is not subject to anything beyond His supreme authority. For this reason, Christian hope is not weakened by suffering; it is clarified and strengthened through endurance, because its foundation is not circumstances, but ordained by God Himself (e.g., Rom 5:3–5).

Footnotes

1. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968)
2. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).
3. C. R. Snyder, "Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind," *Psychological Inquiry* 13, no. 4 (2002): 249–275.
4. Tajfel and Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," 33–47.
5. Stryker and Burke, "The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory," 284–297.
6. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.



7. Daria Gilan et al., “Meaning in Life and Suicidal Ideation in Youth: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 159 (2024).
 8. Renzhi Zhang et al., “Meaning in Life and Suicidal Ideation: A Network Analysis,” *BMC Psychiatry* 20 (2020).
 9. Snyder, “Hope Theory,” 249–275.
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