

Chapter Summary

Discovering SELF— *Through Seeking, Evaluating, Loving, and Finding*

Scriptural Theme

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.—1 Timothy 4:16 (ESV)

Bible Study Quarter One Overview:

Chapter 1: The Danger of Not Knowing Who You Are

In our biblical case study, we will study the experience of four young men who exhibited a remarkable sense of self amid challenge and conflict. We will see how having a strong sense of identity enabled them to make wise life decisions that led to success, in spite of the odds that were against them.

Chapter 2: Staying True to You

In this week’s biblical case study, our subject is one that did not fit the mold of Jewish society. His true identity did not conform to the perception of his peers. As we examine the text, we will take notice of how the subject responded to the challenge of remaining true to himself.

Chapter 3: Identity in Crisis (Part 1)

Our biblical case study is found in Mark 5:1-20. As we take a closer look at this passage, we will observe a man who had found himself in a perilous position. He was in grave danger because he had lost his identity.

Chapter 4: Identity in Crisis (Part 2)

In seeking to develop our identities, it is natural to define our “selves” by belonging to someone or a group. Everyone needs a

friend. Sometimes, in the case of adolescents (but to some measure adults also), the need for friendship can generate a desperate desire to gain validation from others—no matter the cost. As the biblical case study in this chapter will illustrate, not all *friends* or associates have our best interests at heart.

Chapter 5: In the Beginning

In this week's study, we will examine the creation of the first man. We will also contemplate how the knowledge of the first man translates into a better understanding of who we are and how we should be defined.

VBS Schedule

Monday, June 28th- Friday, July 2nd

Monday- Chapter 1

Tuesday- Chapter 2

**Wednesday- Sunday School Exposition
("Attitude of Gratitude")**

Thursday- Chapter 3 & 4

Friday- Chapter 5

THE DANGER OF NOT KNOWING WHO YOU ARE

Who are you? How do you identify yourself? These are more than superficial questions. I am not asking for your name or an identification card bearing a photograph and your vital statistics. But really, who *are* you?

The psychological definition of the word *identity* is “having awareness or a keen sense of self.”

- What are your characteristics—flaws and all?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What are your morals and convictions?
- What are your dreams and goals?

Being able to successfully answer the above questions will lead to your being successful in defining who you really are.

In our biblical case study, we will study the experience of four young men who exhibited a remarkable sense of self amid challenge and conflict. We will see how a strong sense of identity enabled these four men to make wise life decisions, leading to success in spite of the odds that were against them.

❖ THE PASSAGE

Daniel 1:3-20

3 Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—

4 young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.

5 The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

6 Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

7 The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

8 But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.

9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel,

10 but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah,

12 “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink.

13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.”

14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.

16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

17 To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

18 At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar.

19 The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service.

20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

❖ THE STUDY

History indicates that Babylonian palaces were revered places of grandeur, filled with opulent treasures, beautiful gardens, and lavish furnishings. It is here that our four young Hebrew subjects found themselves after being torn from familiar surroundings, families, and friends. Although the passage does not indicate their exact ages,

it is likely that the men were still very young, possibly teenagers. Miles away from home and all that they knew, how well would the Hebrew boys fare in their new environment? Would they assimilate into the Babylonian culture or would they develop and maintain their own individual sense of identity?

Having been raised by their Hebrew parents according to Israelite custom, the boys had been instructed from infancy in Jewish culture and taught the Law of Moses. Their parents selected for them meaningful names, strongly tied to their religious faith. As these young men grew, their upbringing shaped their morals, principles, and values. They developed unique characteristics and manifested individual strengths. In fact, the reason they were selected by the king's men was because they showed remarkable aptitude and possessed other impressive qualities.

These young men were brought to Babylon, the center of rising political power at that time, at the request of the king. For three years, they were force-fed Babylonian culture and practices. They were assigned foods that were foreign and quite offensive to their Hebrew nature. And as if that were not enough, the Babylonians changed their birth-given Hebrew names to Babylonian names with pagan connotations. All of this appears to have been an insidious scheme to make them forget their Israelite customs and practices and eradicate all vestiges of their Hebrew existence.

If this was indeed the intention of the Babylonian officials, they failed miserably. From the passage, it is quite clear that the four Hebrew boys had a strong sense of identity. Throughout the scope of this account, the writer, Daniel, continued to refer to himself and his three companions by their Hebrew names. Not only that, but it is clear that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah stuck to their principles. Rather than indulging in the king's delicacies, they chose humble meals consisting of vegetables and water to maintain their personal morals and values.

❖ THE WORD IN ACTION

A good name is more desirable than riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.—Proverbs 22:1

1. Identify at least three people you know who use *nicknames*. Is there a meaning attached to the nickname? If so, what is it?

2. Do you think it is important that people use their given name instead of assumed names? Explain.

3. Practice referring to people by their birth name during this week, particularly those who use a nickname or an assumed name. Record their reactions.

STAYING TRUE TO YOU

Having a clear sense of self is only part of the battle. Maintaining our identities with a measure of consistency is equally challenging. There are many factors that may coerce us into altering or masking our true identities, but peer pressure has often been cited at the top of that list. We tend to place a very high value on how we are perceived by others. To be accepted, we may find ourselves conforming to fit into molds dictated by society. In doing so, we may find that our clear sense of identity becomes blurred.

In this week's biblical case study, our subject is one that did not fit the mold of Jewish society. His true identity did not conform to the perception of his peers. As we examine the text, we will take notice of how the subject responded to the challenge of remaining true to himself.

❖ THE PASSAGE

John 10:22-42

22 Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter,

23 and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade.

24 The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

25 Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me,

26 but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.

27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.

29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

30 I and the Father are one."

31 Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him,

32 but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?"

33 "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."

34 Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'?"

35 If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—

36 what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’?

37 Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does.

38 But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.”

39 Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.

40 Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. Here he stayed

41 and many people came to him. They said, “Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true.”

42 And in that place many believed in Jesus.

❖ THE STUDY

By now you likely have realized that our subject of study for this chapter is Jesus Himself. In this passage, we find Jesus faced with a daunting crowd bent on proving that He was not who He said He was. Their sarcasm and disbelief eventually escalated to physical intimidation. Had Jesus cowered under their coercion, He very likely could have suffered an identity crisis.

Similarly for us, one of the great challenges to our sense of identity is pressure from those who doubt our genuineness or our sincerity. We find it discouraging when, despite our efforts to remain true to our real character, others continue to make disparaging comments.

How do you respond? Are you intimidated? Do you feel the need to justify or explain yourself? Do you allow the views of others to alter your self-perception?

Of course, we know that Jesus successfully met this challenge and overcame the doubts of naysayers by remaining true to Himself and His role. By taking a closer look at this passage, we will isolate key elements that helped Jesus to avoid undergoing an identity crisis.

First, Jesus accepted the fact that not everyone would be a believer. In spite of the ample evidence presented to them, there were some who just refused to receive it. Likewise, we must understand that there will always be doubters around in the realms of our lives. However, our lifestyles and behavior provide accurate evidence that we are who we profess to be; we should not be overly concerned with the misconceptions of others.

Jesus was willing to let His “actions speak louder than words.” The miracles He performed gave what should have been unquestionable authentication to His identity. In a similar way, our actions speak louder than any argument that we could ever present on our behalf.

Even when those stubborn Jews refused to believe, Jesus was not discouraged because He knew that those who really mattered would accept His identity. Jesus said that His *sheep* would know Him, and because of their loyalty, He would keep them close, and no one would be able to break that bond. This is an important realization. Those who matter will accept our identities. Once we weed out the fickle and fake, and determine those who are truly in our corner, the opinions of those outside our circle will no longer weigh heavily on our minds.

It is also noteworthy that Jesus was not intimidated by the abrasiveness of the nonbelieving Jews. Jesus understood this fact: those unbelievers stood condemned in the face of Jesus’ genuineness. Because they were not truthful regarding their own identities, they did not want to accept the genuineness of Jesus. When we allow

our individuality to shine, those who repress their own identities for whatever reason are threatened and feel as though our genuineness is making them look bad. Thus, they retaliate through intimidating speech and character attacks. Like Jesus, we must recognize the situation for what it is and refuse to allow frauds to alter our personal perception of our identities.

It is also interesting that those who were present deliberately chose to remain ignorant, despite Jesus' irrefutable logic. This goes to show that such individuals are not worthy of any explanation or justification because they purposely bury their heads in the sand. The younger generation has bestowed a term to label those who desperately seek to tear others down: *haters*. These persons are called haters because they dislike the fact that others are genuine, they hate the fact that others are confident in their identities, and they hate the fact that others' confidence is leading them to success. Understand that haters are going to hate. It is their job. However, we can successfully avoid an identity crisis by not cowering to their intimidation, but remaining true to ourselves.

❖ THE WORD IN ACTION

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.
—James 1:23-24

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the un fading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.
—1 Peter 3:3-4

Each day this week, take ten minutes to look at your reflection in a mirror. As you look into the mirror, focus on some trait or characteristic that makes you who you are. Try to dig beyond the surface of mere appearance and, using your journal pages provided, write about what you see.

Day One

Day Two

Day Three

Day Four

Day Five

Day Six

Day Seven

CHAPTER 3

IDENTITY IN CRISIS

(Part 1)

We sometimes have the tendency to view ourselves through rose-colored glasses. We justify or hide our faults. We play up our admirable traits. Few take the time to seriously contemplate who they really are. Quite frankly, some of us are afraid to dig deeper than the surface because we are afraid of what we may find. Still, ignorance is not bliss. A lack of self-knowledge translates into unused potential, troubled relationships, and discontented lives.

Our biblical case study is found in Mark 5:1-20. As we take a closer look at this account, we will observe a man who had found himself in a perilous position. He was in grave danger because he had lost his identity.

❖ THE PASSAGE

Mark 5:1-20

1 They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes.

2 When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him.

3 This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain.

4 For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him.

5 Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

6 When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him.

7 He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won’t torture me!”

8 For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you evil spirit!”

9 Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” “My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.”

10 And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

11 A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside.

12 The demons begged Jesus, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.”

13 He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

14 Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened.

15 When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.

16 Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well.

17 Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

18 As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him.

19 Jesus did not let him, but said, “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”

20 So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.”

❖ THE STUDY

This poor man had suffered an extreme case of identity crisis. Evil and unclean spirits were repressing his real identity. It is ironic that the gospel writer named only the multiple personalities existing inside of him and not the man himself.

Yet, despite the war going on within him, this man from the Gerasenes had enough consciousness to know that he was in need of help. *He* approached the Lord. The real man struggled to emerge by reaching out to Jesus. If we find ourselves on the dangerous edge of losing our sense of self, we should remember that God is able to help us maintain or even retrieve, if necessary, our inner stability.

It is unfortunate that life often leads us to *wear many faces*. For the sake of professionalism, we may develop a business persona. For personal or social reasons, we may mask who we really are. In the face of adversity, we develop an alter ego. For the pretense of love, we may adopt a personality completely foreign to our own. Author Nathaniel Hawthorne observed, “No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to a multitude without finally getting bewildered as to which may be true.”

While some adaptations are necessary and justifiable, we must recognize the real danger of losing ourselves entirely. When we consistently repress who we truly are, like the Gerasenes man, we risk being overtaken by impulsive behavior that may result in harm to others and ourselves. Because of his erratic and even violent tendencies manifested by the spirits invading his body, this man found himself isolated from the world and those he loved. Likewise, when we submerge ourselves in pseudo-personalities, we segregate ourselves from the possibility of developing meaningful relationships.

Lack of self-awareness is the first step on the path to self-destruction. In the account, Legion so thoroughly occupied the man that he neither realized the threat that he posed to others nor the damage that he inflicted upon himself. Similarly, we threaten the happiness and trust of those around us when we deceive them with our false identities. Not only that, but when we indulge in self-deception by neglecting to understand who we really are, we set ourselves up for failure. Our lives become a cesspool of wasted potential. Next stop: loss of self-worth.

Self-worth, simply put, is our sense of personal value. In our case study, the man from the Gerasenes was so consumed by his alter ego that he began to lose his sense of worth. He chose not to identify himself by his Christian name, but by the name *Legion* instead. Even when the Lord called out to the man to grant him release, he begged the Lord not to send the spirits away. The spirits had insidiously

depreciated the man's self-worth in his own mind to the point that he felt he could not exist in their absence. In fact, so overtaken by his multiple personalities, the man forgot that he was first and foremost a child of God.

When we endeavor to perpetrate artificial personas, we risk losing not only our true selves, but also our true value. The pretenses that we display to fool the world eventually deceive us into believing that we are worthless—nothing more than hollow mannequins beneath the masks we wear. We may have forgotten that we, too, are first and foremost children of God. That fact alone gives us value beyond comprehension—for to be a child of God is priceless.

Like the Gerasenes man, we may be dangerously close to losing our real identities to the depths of oblivion. In fact, this man was very possibly on the brink of self-destruction. Yet, somewhere in his subconscious, the man reached out to the Lord and the Lord saw through to the soul and heart of the *real* man. Jesus has the ability to see one for who he or she really is. Hebrews 4:13 reads, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

Jesus was able to find value worthy of redemption in this man's life and, in His mercy, helped this man to regain his balance—to retrieve his true identity. The Lord is doing the same thing for us. He is looking for His children who have lost themselves. He is searching for those of us who have forgotten who we really are. He will help us to reclaim our identities and appreciate our real worth.

Now, let's imagine what would have happened if Jesus had not rescued this man who was masked by Legion. The text tells us that almost immediately after Jesus sent the spirits into the swine, the pigs dove into a lake and drowned. This tragic end likely would have been the fate of the Gerasenes man. Completely consumed by his alter ego, and unable to control their manic thoughts and actions, the man probably would have committed irreversible harm to himself.

It is reasonable to believe that the Gerasenes man had languished for years with this internal war. Over the course of time he lost everything—his home, his family, his friends, his livelihood, and his purpose. Had Jesus not saved this man from himself, he would never have had the opportunity to gain any of these things back. Yet, as we read the text, we learn that the man regained his senses, recovered his dignity, and was dispatched to his family. He gained a new sense of purpose as he went back to his hometown to tell everyone about what the Lord had done for him.

If we have found that we are in danger of losing our true identities, then our reflecting on this passage should help us to appreciate the perilous condition that we are in. We risk severing treasured relationships, losing our sense of worth, wasting our true potential, and neglecting our holy purpose. However, this text also helps us to remember that as long as we have life in our bodies, we are never beyond the loving reach of Jesus. He is always there, seeing through to the real person buried beneath the masks that we have put on. We have only but to approach Him, reach out to Him like the man from the Gerasenes, and He will help us peel back the layers so that our true identities can shine through.

❖ THE WORD IN ACTION

My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken. How long will you assault a man? Would all of you throw him down—this leaning wall, this tottering fence? They fully intend to topple him from his lofty place; they take delight in lies. With their mouths they bless, but in their hearts they curse.—Psalm 62:1-4

1. Recall a situation in which your genuineness or sincerity was questioned. How did you feel? Did you try to justify or explain your case? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 4

IDENTITY IN CRISIS

(Part 2)

Erik Erikson theorized that one’s identity is primarily forged during the adolescent years. According to Erikson, adolescents work through a phase where they try out different roles and perhaps present different *selves* in different situations. The optimal results are that that young individual will eventually resolve his/her role confusion by reshaping his/her self-definition to unite the various roles into one stable, consistent personality or identity (Erikson, 1963). However, most people battle with the age-old question of “Who am I?” well past their teenage years and revisit it at key turning points in their adult lives. In instances where an individual has achieved a clear sense of self, that identity is vulnerable to situations and circumstances.

In our seeking to develop our identities, it is natural to define our identification in part by belonging to someone or a group. Everyone needs friends. Sometimes, especially in the case of adolescents (but to some measure, adults also), the need for friendship can generate a desperate desire to gain validation from others—no matter the cost. As the biblical case study in this chapter will illustrate, not all friends or associates have our best interests at heart.

❖ THE PASSAGE

Judges 16:4-21

4 Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah.

5 The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, “See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver.”

6 So Delilah said to Samson, “Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued.”

7 Samson answered her, “If anyone ties me with seven fresh thongs that have not been dried, I’ll become as weak as any other man.”

8 Then the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh thongs that had not been dried, and she tied him with them.

9 With the men hidden in the room, she called to him, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” But he snapped the thongs easily as a piece of string snaps when it comes close to a flame. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.

10 Then Delilah said to Samson, “You have made a fool of me; you lied to me. Come now, tell me how you can be tied.”

11 He said, “If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I’ll become as weak as any other man.”

12 So Delilah took new ropes and tied him with them. Then, with the men hidden in the room, she called to him, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” But he snapped the ropes off his arms as if they were threads.

13 Delilah then said to Samson, “Until now, you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied.” He replied, “If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric [on the loom] and tighten it with the pin, I’ll become as weak as any other man.” So while he was sleeping, Delilah took the seven braids of his head, wove them into the fabric

14 and tightened it with the pin. Again she called to him, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” He awoke from his sleep and pulled up the pin and the loom, with the fabric.

15 Then she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when you won’t confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven’t told me the secret of your great strength.”

16 With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death.

17 So he told her everything. “No razor has ever been used on my head,” he said, “because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man.”

18 When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, “Come back once more; he has told me everything.” So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands.

19 Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him.

20 Then she called, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” He awoke from his sleep and thought, “I’ll go out as before and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the LORD had left him.

21 Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison.

❖ THE STUDY

Before we delve into this passage, let us first establish some background on our subject. Samson's birth was the result of one of the few miraculous conceptions recorded in the Bible. An angel appeared to the sterile wife of Manoah and announced that she would give birth to a son. With this announcement, the angel went on to identify who this child would be. There were three key elements to Samson's identity:

1. From the time of his birth until his death, he would be a Nazirite set aside for special service to God.
2. He would initiate Israel's deliverance from their forty-year oppression under the Philistines.
3. No razor was to be used to cut his hair.

So even before Samson was born, his identity had been established for him. His parents sought to raise him in accord with the instructions of the angel, and so it is reasonable to conclude that Samson had a very clear sense of who he was and his purpose.

Moving forward to the scene of our passage, we find Samson as an adult who has fallen deeply in love. Love is often a positive emotion and if properly cultivated, it should enhance who we are. However, in Samson's case, it is apparent that his love became obsessive and caused him to lose focus.

Samson, who incidentally had been betrayed by his first wife (who was also a Philistine), became enraptured by Delilah, but Delilah had secretly made a pact with the Philistine men. Reading the passage, we find that three times Delilah tried to trap Samson and deliver him over to them. Now if Samson had been thinking rationally—had he maintained a clear sense of who he was—he should have immediately

recognized what was happening. From birth, he had been taught that he would begin Israel's deliverance from the Philistines. The Israelites and Philistines were sworn enemies! It should not have been difficult for Samson to realize what was at play. Unfortunately, Samson had become absorbed in his relationship with Delilah and forgot the importance of maintaining his own identity.

Similarly today, we may allow ourselves to become absorbed in an obsessive love. It may not necessarily involve a romantic liaison—it could be our careers, our families, or anything that causes us to lose focus on the truth of our identities. While these things may be important, we must be careful not to lose ourselves into them completely. We cannot allow them to define who we are.

In the case of Samson, obsessive love caused him to forget what the angel had told his parents. It caused him to forget the uniqueness of his strength. It caused him to forget that the Philistines were his enemy and they were not to be trusted. Delilah continued to apply pressure. She knew that Samson was vulnerable in his love for her. Notice the tactic that she used in her final attempt to get Samson to reveal his secret. The threat of losing her was evidently too much for Samson to bear—so instead of holding on to his identity, he gave her what she wanted.

We must be on guard against obsessions that would weaken our identities. If we are not careful, we will forget our morals, values, strengths, and goals, which make us whom we really are. Stripped of these, we are vulnerable and exposed, much like Samson was without his hair. So thoroughly was Samson submerged in his passion for Delilah that he did not realize what he had done until it was too late. Robbed of his strength and God's Spirit, Samson was captured and blinded by the Philistines. It can be said that he was literally blinded by obsession.

From this biblical case study then, we see the danger in our allowing external forces to overshadow our identities. When we repress our individuality in an effort to please others, or achieve a certain

position or status, we are putting our identities in crisis. Without a clear sense of who we are, we lose our strength of character. Like Samson, we become weak and vulnerable, unable to successfully meet challenges using our full potential.

❖ THE WORD IN ACTION

1. What personal potential obsessions threaten to obscure your identity?

2. Having identified potential threats that may weaken your sense of self, what proactive measures are you willing to take to circumvent them?

CHAPTER 5

IN THE BEGINNING

It has been argued that we are products of our environments. To some extent this may be true, but it is only because we have allowed this to be so. Romans 12:2 implies that we have the power to escape the identities forced upon us by society. Here, the apostle Paul encouraged believers: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

In other words, we do not have to be products of our environments but we can be the people that God desires us to be by renewing our minds by the power of His Word.

We must recognize that we were not meant to be simply products of our environments, but we are the creation of God’s own hands. To understand who we are, we must first understand our beginning. The book of Genesis contains the record of creation, including that of humans.

In this week’s study, we will examine the creation of the first man and contemplate how this knowledge translates into a better understanding of who we are and what should define us.

❖ THE PASSAGES

Genesis 1:21-27

21 So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

22 God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.”

23 And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

24 And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so.

25 God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Genesis 2:7

7 the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

❖ THE STUDY

Humans are unique among all of God's creations. While God created all living creatures and assigned them to earthly domains, animals were created according to their *own* kind. Animals have natural instinct and lack spiritual characteristics. Humans, on the other hand, were created to be individuals made in God's image.

What does that really mean—that we are made in God's image? Unlike animals, God has given humanity moral capacity. We have the ability to assimilate knowledge, to reason, and to make decisions based on our own self-awareness. The Lord has endowed us with His godly characteristics, such as love, fairness, mercy, patience, and kindness.

Of course, we know that this image was tarnished by the sin of the first man and woman—Adam and Eve. As a result of the introduction of sin to the human race, imperfection has birthed numerous character flaws. Second Timothy 3:1-7 identifies behaviors that would characterize those who allow worldly influence to shape their identities:

- Lovers of themselves, pleasures, and money
- Boastful and proud
- Abusive and disobedient
- Ungrateful and unforgiving
- Slanderous and unholy

These verses also mention that individuals would have a *form of godliness*, and rightly so, because remember, in the beginning we were *all* created in God's image. Sadly, though, some will undergo such a drastic transformation that their godliness will be barely recognizable. According to the Scripture, they are forever learning but "never able to acknowledge the truth." Is it because the knowledge that they feed their minds is not godly and spiritual? They busy themselves learning empty philosophies and fleeting social trends that shape their moral sense. They remain deliberately ignorant so as not to see the truth about who they really are as opposed to who God meant for them to be.

Still, we possess the potential to reject the influence of social constraints and allow God’s Spirit—the same Spirit that He breathed into the first man—to enliven us to become worthy reflections of Him. That Spirit can produce in us the godly qualities cited in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This is what God intended from the beginning. Even though we are imperfect, He is still giving us the Spirit that we need to produce identities defined by His Word.

Referring again to our passages in the book of Genesis, we discover that humans are also uniquely set apart from God’s other creations—in that God has given us a purpose. God told the first human couple to produce offspring who would also be born in His image. He also gave them an assignment related to the earth and its animal inhabitants. In this, we learn that our identities should be defined by the purpose that God has spoken into our lives. You see, there is a marriage between who we are and why we are here. The two concepts merge together to complement and complete one another.

As believers, we must acknowledge that only God has the right and ability to ordain our lives with purpose. Society, politics, worldly trends, peers, and even family should not have the deciding vote in how we identify ourselves. In the beginning, it was God’s Word that declared that humans should be made in His image. It was God’s breath that gave life to the human body. It was God’s will that humans have a purposeful life. It is, therefore, by the Word of God that we seek to define our identities according to His good purpose.

❖ THE WORD IN ACTION

1. We often feel a tremendous pressure to conform to societal influences and trends. How does this chapter encourage you personally to resist being squeezed into a personality that is ungodly?

2. From what source do you feel that you receive the strongest pressure to develop a personality contrary to what God has ordained for you?

3. How do you resolve to overcome or resist the pressures that you may face?
