

Lost in the Middle

Chapter 10: Finding the Real You

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Who Do You Think You Are? (pp. 267-269)

The struggles of midlife are struggles of identity. ... The biblical story is a story of identity given, identity lost, and identity restored. God wants you to know who you are and to live out the practical implications of the identity he has given you in him. That is why Scripture is constantly telling us who we are. As sinners we all tend to suffer from some form of *identity amnesia*. This is what Peter describes in 2 Peter 1:8-9. He says that there are people who know the Lord but are *ineffective and unproductive* in their knowledge of the Lord. Such a person is "nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins." Peter is coupling this blind unfruitfulness with the issue of identity, essentially saying, "Your lives are not productive because you have forgotten who you are."

The problem with identity amnesia is that it gives way to something even more dangerous: *identity replacement*. If I have forgotten who I truly am, that identity will fail to shape my response to the people and situations that I encounter, and I will fill the identity void with something else. My “made to worship and serve the Creator” identity of the Garden of Eden gives way to the “I can be like God” identity of the serpent’s offer. No one ever lives without an identity. The problem is that you probably won’t be aware that an identity migration has taken place in your heart.

Real People, False Identities (pp. 269-272)

God’s story is about calling a people to be his very own, making a covenant with them, and inviting them to have the success of his kingdom become their meaning and purpose. It is also the honest account of how easily sinners forget who they are, how easily they are seduced by other identities, and how much trouble ensues when they step outside of an identity rooted in the Lord. ... The midlife struggle is inextricably connected to identity demise and identity replacement. We have been seduced by false identities that will always fail us, and when they do, it feels like we have lost ourselves.

A Community of Amnesiacs (p. 276)

There are many people in the middle of what our culture calls a midlife crisis who have no idea that their disappointment is the result of the identity they carried into these dynamic midlife experiences. They took on experiences, relationships, or accomplishments as their identity. Sinners tend to move away from defining themselves in relationship to their Creator and begin defining themselves in relationship to the creation. But the creation cannot bear the weight of defining us.

Replacement Parts (pp. 276-286)

Identity replacements tend to fall into four major clusters.

1. *I am my success: Identity in achievement.* God calls us to be fruitful and productive. We should be concerned about our harvest and the return on our investments. But the minute we take on our achievements as an identity, we become slaves to a never-ending stream of potential successes. This is the profile of a workaholic.

If achievement has become their identity, both the person who is losing his ability to achieve and the person who has more opportunity to achieve are in a dangerous place. The first will feel depressed and discouraged because the thing that defined him has been taken out of his hands. The second person will become enslaved to achievement, making bad choices and staying too busy, because success is where he finds his meaning and purpose. ... Achievement was never meant to give us identity, and when it replaces our true biblical identity, it will leave a harvest of bad fruit. But there is a third midlife person to consider here. This is the person who is looking back on his life with great remorse at how achievement drove him.

2. *I am my relationships: Identity in acceptance.* God created us to be social beings. His plan, from day one, was for us to live in meaningful community with one another. It is one of the primary ways that we image him. ... Yet, in our sin, many of us look to

other people to do the one thing they were never designed to do; give us identity. If we are parents, we tend to try to get our identity from our children. ... Our children were never given to us to be trophies on the mantel of our identity. ... Perhaps your marriage is the place where you seek identity. ... As you look to this person for identity, you are not really loving them; you are loving you. You have turned the second great commandment on its ear. Instead of serving people because you love them, you are willing to serve them so that they will love you. ... When your marriage has not turned out like you dreamed it would, it is very important to understand why. Often identity replacement lies at the bottom of it all. ... We asked them to give us identity and, like anything other than the Creator, they failed us.

3. *I am my righteousness: Identity in performance.* It is often in midlife that one's harvest of self-righteousness comes in. ... You begin to see that while you thought you were serving God, you were actually serving yourself. It is a hard pill to swallow when you have left a Pharisee's legacy. But there is another very important dynamic that troubles the midlife years. Some of us have lived so long, blinded by our own righteousness, that it is very hard to look back and take an accurate accounting. ... How much of your midlife trouble is self-righteousness trouble? Is there a chance that you replaced the joy of identity in Christ with the pride of identity in your own righteousness?

4. *I am my possessions: Identity in physical things.* Let's face it: Physical things are seductive precisely because they are physical. We can feel their texture, see their shape and beauty, and smell their aroma. Biblically, we know that the most important things in life are unseen, yet physical things are stiff competition when it comes to what gets our attention and shapes our living. It is very tempting for all of us to define ourselves by the size of our pile of stuff.

We may not even realize the extent to which we define ourselves by the pleasures of the physical world. The three big ones here are food, sex, and leisure. ... Physical appearance can also control and define us. ... The highest paid members of our society are not the people who teach us, heal us, or lead us in worship; the people we are willing to award with inordinate sums of money are the people who entertain us. The evidence is persuasive and the conclusion is clear: we tend to let the physical things of this world define us.

This identity replacement causes havoc for us during the midlife years. Three words capture the chaos: *delusion*, *disappointment*, and *emptiness*. Identity in things is a delusion. True identity is never a matter of the physical but a matter of the heart. ... Other people in midlife struggle more with disappointment. They feel like life has been unfair because they *haven't* ever been able to acquire and enjoy the physical things that so many other people enjoy. ... The final group of people in midlife experiences the emptiness that identity in physical things will always end up producing. Should it surprise us that physical things are devoid of any power to satisfy spiritually? In its broadest sense, the biblical truth that "man shall not live by bread alone," means that we were never constructed to subsist only on the physical. We are spiritual beings who need spiritual sustenance in order to be truly healthy and happy. ... What is your midlife harvest telling you about your relationship to the world of physical things? Is your harvest a heap of delusion, disappointment, or emptiness?

Getting Identity Right (pp. 286-292)

Identity amnesia, misunderstanding, and replacement make the surface issues of disappointment, aging, and regret all the more powerful and potentially destructive. **Here is the critical issue:** When you have defined yourself horizontally (“I am my family, job, marriage, children, possessions, appearance, friendships, career, successes, or position”) you are in big trouble. When you enter the stage of life where those things, or your plans for acquiring them, are taken away, you become lost in identity confusion. We are always heading for trouble when we try to define ourselves horizontally instead of vertically.

What we need in midlife is not a world that is utterly free of disappointment, aging, or regret. We need to get our identity right in order to survive these powerful experiences. When you define your identity vertically, you will be able to stand even when the things around you are passing away. Perhaps you are thinking, “Okay, but what does it mean to define myself vertically?” It means that *true identity is always rooted in worship*. ... The theological principle is that knowledge of the Creator is fundamental to understanding the creation. The identity struggles that rear their ugly heads during the tumult of midlife are really struggles of worship.

There are three pillars of worship that support a true biblical sense of identity.

1. *True identity is rooted in worshipping God as Creator.* This first means fully and completely recognizing that you were made *by* him. David captures it so well in Psalm 139:

¹³For You formed my inward parts;

You covered me in my mother’s womb.

¹⁴I will praise You, for I am fearfully *and* wonderfully made;

Marvelous are Your works,

And *that* my soul knows very well.

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from You,

When I was made in secret,

And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.

¹⁶Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed (Ps. 139:13-16a).

I am deeply persuaded that while many of us worship God as Creator on Sunday, we curse his work during the week. Most of us harbor dissatisfaction with who God made us to be. The short ones want to be tall; the tall ones want to be shorter. The intellectuals secretly wish to be athletic; the mechanically minded people secretly wish they could be more musical. The serious person wishes, just for once, that he could be the life of the party, and the guy who was given the gift to think and to teach wishes he could have been more administrative. There are times in all of our lives when we secretly wish we could rise to the throne of creation and remake ourselves in the image of what we would like to be. ... Are your midlife struggles connected to your failure to celebrate whom the Creator wired you to be?

Worshipping God as Creator also means recognizing that I was made *for* him. ...The fact is that you and I were never meant to live for our own success and glory. Every day we are meant to live like our lives belonged to another. ... As a creature, your life belongs

to Another, and so your life is part of his dream. So much of midlife struggle is because we haven't gotten our own way. We have lived as if we belonged to ourselves, when really we belonged to him.

Worshipping God as Creator also means that we exist *through* him. As Creator, he alone is the giver of life. True life cannot be found outside of him. Paul says, 'he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else' (See Acts 17:25, 28).

2. True identity is rooted in worshipping God as Sovereign. As we have already examined in Chapter 8, the midlife struggle is often the result of a collision between your plans and God's. ... You must rest in the fact that every situation, circumstance, location, experience, and relationship of your life has been under the wise and careful administration of the Lord Almighty. ... Nothing has fallen through the cracks. David captures this comforting fact in Psalm 139:16b:

And in Your book they all were written,
The days fashioned for me,
When as yet there were none of them (Ps. 139:16b).

Wow! It is a view of human identity that takes your breath away. I *do not* write my own story; it has been written for me. My job is to live inside of the plot that God has written for me in the way I have been called by him to live. ... God is sovereign. You and I are not. This is not just theology; it is our identity. God is in absolute control, and he is infinitely good.

3. True identity is rooted in worshipping God as Savior. When you recognize that God is not only your Sovereign Creator, but also your Savior, you have grasped another essential element of your identity. He is Savior because we are sinners. ... The most wonderful thing that I could be called is not boss, or husband, or father, or friend, but "child of God."

This identity defines your deepest, most pervasive problem. ... The Bible says it very clearly: because we are sinners, God is focused on delivering us "from such a deadly peril," rescuing us "from the dominion of darkness," conforming us "to the likeness of his Son," allowing us to "participate in his divine nature," purifying us "from all unrighteousness," to "purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (2 Cor. 1:10; Col. 1:13; Rom. 8:29; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 1:9; Titus 2:14). Phrase after phrase reminds us of our true identity, and therefore, what we truly need.

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxieties;

²⁴And see if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting (Ps. 139:23-24).

When you have failed to worship God as Savior, forgetting your identity as a sinner, you will be completely confused during the midlife years. To the degree that you recognize your identity as sinner, life will begin to make sense to you. God has not forgotten you. He has not singled you out for particular abuse. He is near and he is active. In love he is working on your biggest problem, and he will not stop working until the job is done.