

# Identity #1: Wanted

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Searcy, Arkansas  
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## Scripture Reading

*Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.” (Genesis 1:26 NIV)*

*“You are the one who put me together inside my mother's body, and I praise you because of the wonderful way you created me. Everything you do is marvelous! Of this I have no doubt. Nothing about me is hidden from you! I was secretly woven together out of human sight, but with your own eyes you saw my body being formed. Even before I was born, you had written in your book everything about me.” (Psalm 139:13-16 CEV)*

*For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love... In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.” (Eph 1:3-4, 11-12 NIV)*

## WHO AM I?<sup>1</sup>

3,000 years ago, an Israelite laid on his back in the plush, green grass, and gazing up into the heavens, said this: “When I look at the heavens, the moon and the stars” I think to myself, “What are human beings?” (Psalm 8:3-4 NRSV). Or in the New Century Version: “Why are people important?”

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<sup>1</sup> In this series, I am indebted to James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful You: Discovering the Person Jesus Created You To Be* (IVP, 2022). For this lesson, see chapter 3: “Desired” and chapter 5: “Made For God.”

A few years ago, a comic strip showed two people starting at a “Where’s Waldo” picture. Suddenly, one of them spots Waldo behind a tree. In the last scene of the comic, she says “I usually have no trouble finding Waldo. It’s myself I can’t find.”<sup>2</sup>

Doesn’t that ring true? Stanley Grenz suggest that we may look and act like we have it all together. But deep down, we all seem to wonder at times, “just who am I”? And for so many, we don’t have a clue. So, we spend our lives endlessly searching for an identity.<sup>3</sup>

Gregory was a gentle soul all of his life, even at the age of 69, when he died alone and forgotten in a jail cell at the women’s prison of Dade County, Miami. You heard that right. He had been married 4 times, had 6 children, and was both well-known and highly successful—as a pediatrician and as a minor celebrity. But he was haunted living in the shadow of his father; and he couldn’t win the fight with his alcohol addiction. He lost his medical license. And at the age of 69, Gregory who was now known as “Gloria” died with no comfort and no support except high heels in a women’s prison.

Gregory had not spoken to his father for 50 years. When he was only 19 years old, Gregory was arrested for entering a bar “in drag”, and his mother, so overcome with emotion and already suffering from a stress-related condition, died the very next day. So Gregory’s father told him “this is all your fault.” And for the next 10 years, Gregory would not hear a word from his father, until he received word that his father had killed himself in the same way his grandfather had done before him.

Gregory’s obituary ran in the Times Newspaper because he was famous. He was the youngest son of Ernest Hemingway. And perhaps it’s fitting, since we are speaking of one of the greatest writers who ever picked up a pen, that what happened to him and his son was almost scripted. Because, you see, Ernest Hemmingway, himself, was hated by his parents. They were regular churchgoers, while Ernest was anything but. So, his mother refused to see him. On one of his birthdays, she mailed him a cake along with the gun his father had used to kill himself. And she wrote him letters, letters detailing how a son should act, about his duties and requirements to remain in good standing with his parents and with God. And all it did was create a deep-seated hatred for his mother, for himself, and for God.

But it’s interesting what Hemmingway sensed deep in his bones. What he wanted to be true even when nothing on earth told him it was true. You recall that incident in 1951

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief With Christian Living* (Baker Books, 1998), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, p. 67.

that caused Ernest to stop speaking to his son? Just 2 years later, he wrote a short story about a Spanish father who desperately wanted to reconcile with his son, Paco, who had run away from home. Now full of sorrow, and with a change of heart, the father took out an ad in a national newspaper that read this way:

“Paco meet me at Hotel Montana noon Tuesday, all is forgiven, Papa.”

Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father goes to the hotel he finds eight hundred young men named Paco waiting for their fathers.<sup>4</sup>

### **FALSE STORY: YOU ARE AN ACCIDENT**

If the world could write of its sense of longing, it would be one sad story. So many of us feel unwanted. For some of you, it started in adulthood when your boss called you a “good for nothing,” or your spouse said, “I can’t take it anymore,” as they disassembled your life and carried it out the door with them. For some it started earlier—in grade school. Never picked for the kickball team. Passed over for playing time in favor of the coaches’ son (who you swear to this day “never held a candle” to your LeBron-like moves). For others, it goes all the way back. An unplanned pregnancy. An unwanted delivery. An undesired baby. And whether your adopted parents ever told you that story, you have felt the effects of it all your life.

So, what do we do? When we sense no purpose, we create purpose. We have to. It’s how we are wired. Without purpose, without meaning, without a sense that we are wanted and our contribution is meaningful, we die. But we know all too well that self-created purpose lasts as long as we find interest in it, and it is only as solid as your imagination allows. And the story we are being fed by our culture is crushing.

Last year at the Harding lectureship, Jonathan Stornent gave a keynote in which he shared this important message. Turn on the television. Listen to Grammy-nominated music on Spotify. Read any teenage graphic novel these days. And underneath the lights and the sounds, the busyness that’s meant to distract you, you’ll find a story, a view of life, that goes something like this:

You are a complete accident. There is no inherent meaning. There is no ultimate purpose. It’s all entirely self-created. Don’t you feel it?

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<sup>4</sup> Taken from Stephen Sizer, “You Were Planned for God’s Pleasure.” <https://www.stephensizer.com/2022/02/you-were-planned-for-gods-pleasure-ephesians-21-10/>  
The story originated from Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, pp. 37-38.

1. Human beings are just animals with time and chance on our side.
2. That means one’s sex has no meaning. It’s just a matter of plumbing.
3. That means gender has no meaning. It’s just a social construct.
4. That means having sex has no meaning; it’s just play for grown-ups.
5. That means love has no meaning. Love is just happiness from a sexual desire.
6. That means marriage has no meaning. It is just a cultural construct that is outdated and doesn’t really fit what we see in biology or in nature.
7. That means fidelity has no meaning. The purpose of marriage is happiness for myself, not sacrifice of what makes me happy for the sake of you.
8. That means divorce has no meaning. It is simply what we do when we sense a lack of happiness. This may seem bad for the kids, but they should see you being true to yourself.
9. And don’t go trying to find meaning in that antiquated book called the Bible. That thing is full of sexism, racism, patriarchalism, outdated ideas of sex, and is nothing but an oppressive tool used by churches, and a repressive tool stuck in your psyche.
10. Because the point is this. Life is an accident. There is no creator, which means there is no creation. Nature is red in tooth and claw. So, feel free to come up with whatever meaning you want.
11. “And if you can’t find a cause to give your life to, we have prescription medicine, great food, and great entertainment,” to distract you until you die and it’s all over.<sup>5</sup>

It’s the story which consciously or unconsciously, we are being told every day. Richard Dawkins tried to explain why this story must be true: “The universe, at the bottom, has no design, no evil, and no other good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares.”<sup>6</sup> It’s a story which, for many of us, consciously or unconsciously, we tell ourselves. “Since there is no objective answer to ‘who am I’, I can create whoever I want to be by looking deep within myself.” But deep within myself is a gaping hole; an empty well. It leaves us very sad, very hurt, and very confused.

And yet, we long for meaning. It was Tennyson who wrote “Thou maddest man, he knows not why, he thinks he was not made to die.”<sup>7</sup> So we go looking for meaning. We go looking for a soulmate. But it’s always interesting to note how we—and they—play as if a relationship of love and trust would somehow be meaningful and fulfilling. But we end up disappointing one another, and then see our togetherness as nothing more than bitter disappointment. How could it be otherwise? We go looking for meaning in money and things. But things get old real quick, and money always leads to the need

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Stornent, “Raised In Power.” Harding University Lectureship 2022. <http://hu16-vod.harding.edu/CablecastPublicSite/show/6593?channel=1>

<sup>6</sup> Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden* (Basic Books, 1996), p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Prologue,” in *Memorium*, Stanza 2.

for more money. So, we go seeking for meaning in validation from other people. And do you know what is at the heart of it all? Not the word “couple.” Not the number of our bank account. Not the slap on our back. It’s our need for connection. For sensing that something about us matters.

Everyone wants to be wanted. We desire to be desired. We want meaning that is deeper than the ones we create for ourselves. What we long for, what we sense deep in our bones, what we want to be true even when nothing on earth tells us its true, is that there is something for which we were intended; there is someone for whom we were no accident.

### **THE TRUE STORY: YOU WERE INTENDED**

What if I told you that every single person is a plan of God? That you were wanted. Intended. Planned for. Chosen.

There are two stories. One is the story our culture feeds us. And in a culture much like ours—where a post-Christian culture like ours resembles a pre-Christian culture, the Bible tells a different story.

This is the true story of a father who wanted children. Of an older brother who wanted brothers and sisters. This is the story of God, His Son Jesus Christ, and his intentional creation.

Our story says this: You were intended. Far from being a lump of atoms, the accidental result of the blind workings of a randomless chain of events with no cause, we believe Truth, Beauty, and Goodness himself made light and said, “that’s good.” He made the skies and the seas and says, “that’s good.” He made the gigantic stars in all their splendor; he made the blades of grass and put hair on every one. He made the animals that towered over the earth, and he painted the pattern on the back of the butterfly’s wing. And he said, “that’s good.” And all of this he did with his voice. But then, God said: “Let us make mankind—male and female—in our image, in our likeness.” (Genesis 1:26(&28) NIV). And he bent down and like a skilled artist, he shaped us from the dust of the ground, and breathed into our nostrils the breath of life (Gen 2). And he said, “this is *very* good” (Gen 1:31). *You* are very good in the eyes of your father. You and I were formed. Listen to Psalm 139:

*“You are the one who put me together inside my mother’s body, and I praise you because of the wonderful way you created me. Everything you do is marvelous! Of this I have no doubt. Nothing about me is hidden from you! I was secretly woven together out of human sight, but with your own eyes you saw my body being formed.” (Psalm 139:13-15 CEV)*

But you and I were not just formed. We were pre-formed. God so lovingly told his servant Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I set you apart” (Jer 1:5). And right here in our text, the Psalmist concludes with the same thought:

*Even before I was born, you had written in your book everything about me.” (Psalm 139:16 CEV)*

You were no unplanned surprise. Everything about you was intentional. Oh, I don’t just mean in some general sense (“God wanted to make humans. You happen to be human, so by extension you are derivatively important as well.”) Oh no. You—in all your uniqueness; you with your quirks. You with your strange sense of humor. You with your awkwardness. You with your extreme sensitivity or extreme gregariousness. You with your full trophy case or empty one. You with your obedient nature, or even you with your questioning soul. God designed our difference and loves our distinctiveness. When we give in to the wrong story our culture feeds us, we end up devaluing ourselves. How do you feel when you see someone throwing food or paint on an original Van Gogh? Our negative self-talk, our devaluing words and actions do the same thing. You are an original, made by the master artist. And he declares us special and beloved just the way he made us.

Children can’t help but see the goodness in our differences. They can’t help but laugh with amazement when they encounter something new for the first time.

G. K. Chesterton, a master with words, once said “It is possible that God says every morning, ‘Do it again’ to the sun; and every morning, ‘Do it again’ to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.”<sup>8</sup>

You, in all your difference and beautiful strangeness, you are an image-bearer of God. Do you believe that? I’m not just talking about Christians. The story of creation is a story about every person under heaven. Warts and all. We know that not everything we choose to do is good for us, which means not everything we choose to be is what He intended for us. But right here, right off the bat, I want you to hear something from this church, as we echo the story we have been given by God.

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<sup>8</sup> G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy.

God loves you. He loved you when you had nothing to offer him. He wanted you, and He wants you still. And nothing you do, nothing you can do, nothing you plan to do, can change this fact: God loves you, and He wants you, with an everlasting love, and an everlasting intention. If you are uncertain about your gender or convinced that your gender is not what was marked on your birth certificate, here this word from this church and from the Lord Jesus Christ: Your father adores you. If you are confused about your sexuality, and have followed your desires in ways others approve and in ways others disapprove, I want you to know that your father desperately loves you. I know this is true, because when God looks at you, he sees his own face! For you and I are made in the image of God. He has your baby picture on the heavenly refrigerator, and he wants nothing more than to hold you in his arms forever.

God loves every single person. This is also true for any church member here. Even the one who is having a secret affair. For you who are looking at porn when your spouse isn't around. For the tax cheat, for the gossip and slanderer. For the person in this room with envy and hatred in his heart for his next door neighbor. When we live in ways that don't fit God's design for us, we are acting out of the wrong narrative. We act like we are accountable to no one because we think we belong to no one. I want you to know: You are wanted. Jesus came to seek. Not just to save. He came to seek. He wants everyone in all creation to know....You were made with a purpose. You are here for a reason. And nothing you do can change that.

### **CHOSEN IN CHRIST**

But there is something you can do to *realize* that. What is true in creation is realized in Christ. Let me say that again. What is true in creation is realized in Christ. Augustine was not a Christian. His mother was, but he was sowing his wild oats in every way you can imagine. But one day, feeling a pull, a longing, an itch that couldn't be scratched, a need that couldn't be satisfied, he opened his Bible and read the book of Romans. It changed him forever. And he became a major leader in early Christianity. And in his book "Confessions," he explains why even though intended and wanted, we are so restless: He says in a prayer to God "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

There is no greater feeling than to be chosen for the baseball team. Chosen for the lead role in the play. Chosen for first chair in the orchestra. Chosen by would-be parents at the adoption agency. And Paul says this:

*For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love... In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out*

*everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.” (Eph 1:3-4, 11-12)*

What is true in creation is realized in Christ. I know Christmas is over, but since it’s the most wonderful time of the year, let me bring it back for just one more Sunday. I love the Christmas song “O Holy Night.” It may be my favorite Christmas song. Reflect for just a minute on this remarkable line: “Long lay the world in sin and error pining, till he appeared, and the soul felt its worth.” We had heard that God made us for a reason. We had supposed that our bodies and souls were special. But it wasn’t until God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ; the incarnation—when God became human—that we saw the full weight of glory. How special are we? God became one of us. The image became an image-bearer. God in the flesh—and the soul felt its worth.

Paul is talking to Christians. People who have said “yes” to the God we see in Jesus Christ. The “chosen”, Paul calls us. But what is realized in Christ is true in creation. You—you on the outside, you who are not Christian, hear this: you were created to be chosen. You were made to be wanted, and you are wanted by God to be made anew. He chose you, too. Will you choose Him?

For every one of you who is waiting on the outskirts because you don’t know if you can trust this God; you don’t know if you will find love from God’s people. You don’t know how you will be looked upon or treated, hear me now: In Christ, God posted a sign on the surface of the Sun with blazing letters that said “Paco, meet me in Jesus Christ, and all will be forgiven.”

And that message is so much more than “come as you are and stay that way.” It is “come as you are, and find the meaning that will change your life, the hope that will rule your life, the purpose for which I made you in the first place.” We can find our value in creation. But we realize the full expression of what that means in Jesus Christ, and in Him alone. The same God who knit you together in your mother’s womb, says this: “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Ephesians 2:10 NRSV). Or as the New Living Translation puts it: “We are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago” (Ephesians 2:10). That word translated “masterpiece” or “workmanship” in some Bibles is the Greek word *poiema*, from whence we get the word “poem.” Instead of living out the narrative our culture is feeding us, God wants to tell a different story in and through you. And you are God’s poem, if you will let Him write the verses.



You want meaning and purpose in life? Hear this: you are an original, and God loves you just as you are. But Christ is our original standard, and in His life, we find what it means to be who we are meant to be.

The God who made you, the God who wanted you, the God who purposed you, is the same God who died for you. And before he died for you, He lived for you. And after he died for you, he was raised from the dead for you. Why? Because, says the book of Hebrews, Jesus Christ wanted brothers and sisters. Because God wants more children. We are all made in the image of God. We were all once estranged children of God living as if we were not His. But when we come to Him, he takes us just as we are, but he doesn't leave us that way. Look at Hebrews 2:11:

*“Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.”*

Today, you can come to Jesus to receive healing and grace and declare your desire to proudly wear the name “Son or daughter of God.” We will take you just as you are. And on your confession that Jesus is the model and standard of your life, we will bury everything about your past, and lift you up out of the water as a public display that you are a new creation—created anew in Christ Jesus, to live out the story He has written for you—and for us all.