

THE
FIGHT
TO FIND YOURSELF

Moving from UNCERTAIN
to UNSTOPPABLE

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INTRODUCTION

THE FIGHT

Picture me as a four-year-old kid preaching into a microphone. Except it's not a microphone, it's this curvy vacuum my mom had. I'd grab that vacuum and preach the wallpaper off the wall! I was a traveling evangelist, moving from room to room, preaching to whoever was in my path. *Hallelujah!*

My family did not always appreciate this display. They just wanted me to get the floor clean. But even they had to admit that I had a way with words, a charismatic way of preaching that echoed my own father's preaching style. My siblings and I lived with my mom, but on the first and second Sundays of the month we'd attend our father's church. I dreamed of preaching just like him.

And a few decades later, it looked like I was living my dream. In my thirties and early forties, I appeared to be winning. I was succeeding professionally and personally—in

my marriage, my parenting, and my friendships. I'd grown an Oklahoma church from ten people to close to one thousand. I preached on Wednesday nights and Sunday, and Monday through Saturday, I coached football. I woke up at 3:15 a.m. and drove away from home by 4:00 a.m. to the Division I college football training facility, where I was the assistant head strength and conditioning coach. My job was to teach these young men the traits of a champion. I taught them manhood, teamwork, vulnerability, and how to demonstrate their identity, personally and professionally, in addition to how to build speed and strength. Many of these young men had dreams of playing in the NFL. Every season has a program—football season, in season program, winter program, spring football season, summer season, and then camp. The schedules were routine for its season. In any of the aforementioned seasons, a new athlete would become a part of our team. Often, my messages of encouragement to the football team during the week were springboards for the Sunday stories for my messages to my congregation. I was succeeding. I was using my gifts... wasn't I?

There was only one problem.

Whether it was coaching or pastoring, I found my identity in what I *did*. I wasn't slowing down to look inside at who I *was*. That little kid with the vacuum was living out his God-given role as an encourager. But me—Pastor Joel? I was just following my routine. I was dying on the vine. I knew what I did, but I didn't know who I was. And I didn't want

Introduction

to admit that publicly, and so I kept it hidden from others, and even hidden from myself. I'd stride up to the podium to preach on Sunday, confident and smiling, but on Monday, I'd be left with the hollow knowledge that "preacher" was a role I was playing. Yes, there was a man up on that stage yesterday, but the real Joel was still in hiding. I'd never been brave enough to be truly vulnerable in front of those I loved and especially those I didn't know.

We often become known for what we can do before we even know who we are. I had many of the gifts that made me a good coach and pastor. I was born with these gifts, and I was trying to use them for the glory of God. But my identity was based on what I could *do*, not on who I *was*. Gradually, the strain began to weigh me down. Accusatory thoughts cycled through my mind: *You're a total fake*. I was never truly at rest. I could not honestly say that I trusted God with my family and with my future—I was terrified. Not only did I have anxiety about winning during football season, I also had anxiety about pastoring. About being a good spouse and father. Each day, it became increasingly difficult to be what I needed to be for everyone. No matter how successful I looked on the outside, I was miles behind in my personal development. In some ways, I still felt like a teenager; I even had the angry outbursts and the awkwardness to go along with it. I'd neglected the inner work that could have helped me see myself as a unique, beloved person rather than a collection of external roles.

I had no idea how lost I was.

Introduction

After all, I loved coaching and pastoring. Every day I was determined to present my best self with the same energy and enthusiasm as the previous day. This meant building a wall between what I was doing and the inner turmoil I was feeling, and I was really good at that. Most people had no idea how much I was struggling. The problem was that this coping mechanism left me physically and mentally exhausted. Most people couldn't see it, but it was a different story at home. My family members will be the first to tell you that at that time, if anyone wanted to know how I was really doing they got "the wall." They got resistance. My expression would go totally flat, and I'd offer one-syllable responses until the conversation finally ended. I made it clear that I wasn't interested in disclosing anything too vulnerable. And that's because the person I was on the inside was underdeveloped. I'd grown older, but I hadn't matured emotionally. I was so busy getting by that I hadn't made the choice to grow. I didn't know that I needed to, and I certainly didn't know how. I needed rest, but I did not know how to stop the cycle of the champion mindset: Do more, be more, do more, be more, repeat.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic stopped everything. No one was prepared or knew what to do. I lost church members. The predictable schedule of off-season football ground to a halt. Everyone was walking in fear. It was difficult to be creative, keep people encouraged with hope in the gospel, and keep the church afloat when people were afraid to leave their homes. I did my best to offer hope

to the hopeless and cast vision to those who had become visionless.

During this most difficult time, I was presented with the opportunity to relocate to Dallas, Texas, and learn from one of God's greatest orators of our time, Bishop T.D. Jakes, at his church, the Potter's House. I'd become so uneasy in Oklahoma, so aware of my own shortcomings, and I knew that an ordinary change wasn't going to cut it. This move felt like perfect timing. I made the decision and relocated my family, even though I knew they were hesitant.

And in that season, Bishop pointed out that I was on a journey to find myself. Leaving Oklahoma had been my way of truly committing to this journey. I'm not saying everyone needs to move to find themselves, but I would mark that move as the start of your awareness of your journey. I was able to honestly assess the span of time in my life since I had founded that church, and Bishop Jakes helped me to recognize the ways I had been and still was doing *too much*. I was giving all of myself to my jobs, and there was nothing left for my family or myself. He warned me that I could not continue living like I was. I had been on the same yearly cycle for so long that I did not know or think there was any other way. I was so focused on external things that I had no idea what was going on internally. I could see how I needed to grow—I thought I was on my way to renewal.

However, after settling in for a few months in Dallas, the grief monster came for me.

I was grieving the coaching job that I loved.

Introduction

I was grieving losing the church I founded.

I was grieving the hurt I caused my family by relocating in the first place.

Worst of all, I was grieving the deaths of my oldest son and my father. These tragedies came for me and my family within a year, right after our move to Dallas. First, my son died suddenly, and then, only a year later, we learned that my dad was in his final months of life. Losing my father was the straw that broke the camel's back. I'll tell you more about these losses later, but for now, just understand that I was destroyed. The little confidence I had left in my abilities was completely gone. I started arguing with myself and arguing with my spouse and children. I began thinking about every area I had failed in life, including my son, and every area I could have done better as a son.

I was finally forced to deal with what was inside of me in that season. I would not have had the strength I needed to stand up and give a eulogy for my son if I hadn't been able to lean on my family. I started understanding how much I needed people in my life, and how much I needed their love. I started to wonder what other pain I wasn't letting them see. What else was I hiding? What else was I unwilling to share? If I could have kept going, if I could have kept limping along, hiding behind my accomplishments, I would have. But something broke inside me when my son died. I realized how much I desired my own father's love. I didn't want accolades—I wanted the undivided attention from just one person. It was the first crack in that dam I'd built around my

heart. And when I lost my dad, it all came crashing down. It was an emotional pain that I hadn't experienced before, and I didn't know how to handle it. It was a pain that none of my roles or accomplishments could prevent me from feeling.

In that season I was so undone, so disoriented, so lost, that I was forced to do the hard work of finding myself.

This book is about what I learned during my fight.

I wrote this book for anyone who needs a companion in the fight to find themselves.

Finding yourself is a journey of self-discovery, where you uncover your true values, passions, and purpose. It involves introspection, embracing your uniqueness, and understanding your place in the world. The essence of this journey is about aligning your actions and choices with your authentic self.

Finding yourself leads to a deeper sense of fulfillment and clarity. A person who has found themselves exhibits confidence, purpose, and authenticity; they navigate life with intention and resilience. In contrast, someone who chooses not to embark on this journey may feel lost, disconnected, or uncertain about their path. They might struggle with external expectations, leading to a lack of genuine satisfaction and a sense of wandering. Ultimately, the difference lies in the awareness and acceptance of who you are, allowing you to live a life that truly reflects your inner self.

Maybe you feel like you're going through the motions of someone else's life. Maybe you've taken on roles that you

never wanted in the first place. Maybe you can recognize these patterns, but you have no idea what to do about them. I want to help. The reason I'm so passionate about helping others find their identity is because I didn't discover mine when I was young. I had to fight to find my identity *in my forties*. Please hear me saying this: It's not too late—I don't care how old you are. It's not too late to start the fight. And you don't have to do it alone.

I want to help you find your identity. I want you to know yourself, accept yourself, and feel like *you*. I want you to be able to walk out into the world with your head held high, knowing you are a beloved child of God, already loved, already good enough. I believe that through the grace of God, you can be a victor in the fight to find yourself. Do you ever feel like you're pretending? Do you ever feel like the "real you" is concealed by the disguise you wear every day? I used to feel that way. And I'm telling you, you don't have to live like that anymore. You don't have to pretend to be someone else. You can be the real you, unapologetically, no disguise necessary.

But becoming you means facing resistance—it takes a real fight, a fight to find yourself and be yourself in your real life. While this fight to find yourself could feel a bit indulgent to you, or too extravagant to even consider, I want you to give yourself permission to explore it.

That's all good for you, you might be thinking, but I have responsibilities. I have a job to do and people to take care of—I can't waste my time on finding myself. I'm telling you,

Introduction

finding yourself is one of the most important things you can do to take care of the people you love. You have permission to begin, right where you are, right now, no matter how your identity was lost in the first place. We'll explore the ways your identity can be lost and the resulting circumstances in the following chapters. We can lose ourselves because of emotional trauma. We become someone other than who we were created to be. We armor up. We protect ourselves. And the choices we make are impacted by our trauma. We lose ourselves in a performance: *I don't feel good, but I can make this look good.* We are all formed by what we've experienced in this decidedly imperfect world. And that's why we have to fight to find ourselves. The fight, the work, is to deal with what's inside of us.

Do you have anything damned up behind a wall, things you can't talk about?

Do you keep doing things you don't want to do, and you're just not sure why?

Maybe you're stuck in a job that you hate, but you can't imagine anything else.

Maybe you finally gathered the courage to leave a relationship that was killing you, and now you suddenly have no idea who you are.

Maybe you're remembering the dream you once held in your heart but never pursued. Even the thought of rekindling that part of yourself may feel scary.

Maybe you're leaning too hard on what you can do instead of who you are.

Introduction

Someone can be incredibly successful professionally and still completely lost. They can be working hard to perform as a spouse, as a parent, as an employee, as an employer, and not have discovered who they are. They just keep performing—even receiving praise, accolades—but none of it reaches the place in their heart where they want to be known and loved. Trust me, there’s no accolade that can go that deep. In many ways, “finding yourself” is believing that you are already good enough, already beloved, without any of the accolades. Then, you can accept them for what they are—affirmations of your identity, but not the foundation of it.

Many of us do what we need to do to get by. We push down our trauma. We do what’s expected of us. We keep going. We hide our pain. We smile. We shine. And we discover that we can convince others that we’re doing okay. But, eventually, that act becomes problematic. We keep doing it because it works! We fool others and we fool ourselves. We keep doing what we need to do to avoid the dissonance inside of us. When you haven’t found your true self, there’s a dissonance between what the world sees and what you’re feeling. You still feel like you must pretend to be good enough. Even praise and accomplishments make you feel restless—you’re always searching for what’s next.

I felt like that for decades.

Like a bad actor.

Like a pretender.

Like a fake.

Introduction

And—more than anything else—I felt like there was something deep inside of me that was beyond redemption.

That was before I fought to find myself—to find that part of myself that felt so lost—and embraced all of who I am in light of God’s incredible love for me.

Today, I know who I am. Before anything else, I’m Joel, God’s beloved child. I recognize and have accepted responsibility for the things I’ve done wrong. They no longer torment me. For example, I now know that when I had kids before I was married to my wife, I was recreating what my dad had done to my family. I’m not proud of it, but I’m no longer bullied by it. One of the signs that you’re finding yourself is that you have this measure of freedom from what’s happened to you in the past. Today, I like who I am. I like that I’m a father. I like that I’m a husband. I like that I’ve earned the degrees I set out to earn. I like that I can deliver a message that hits home for the people in my congregation. I like that I’m a good friend. I like that I’m kind. As you offer yourself to God, he is faithful to heal the hurts of your past. As God helps you to find yourself, you can be set free.

Take it from someone who knows—the way to win this fight is to stop hiding and start dealing with what’s inside of you. In these pages, you’ll explore the fight to find yourself. This fight isn’t about what you can do—it’s about who you are. I can’t give you an all-in-one strategy or a quick fix, but I can coach you through what’s worked in my own life. I’m praying that in your fight to find yourself, you can

THE FIGHT TO FIND YOURSELF

avoid making some of the mistakes I've made. Better is not out there; it's in you. Better is not around the corner; it's within you. As you step into the fight, know this: All things work together for the good. Chaos doesn't win. In this fight, the victory is understanding that your identity comes from God. This victory leads to a deep abiding sense of wholeness and satisfaction in yourself—in who you *are*, not in what you can *do*.

Welcome to the fight to find *you*.

Dr. Joel

CHAPTER 1

WHY WE DON'T BELIEVE WHAT GOD SAYS ABOUT US

If I asked you, right now, “Who are you?” How would you respond?

We don't have to make this hypothetical. You can answer.

The typical reflex answer to that question is to say your name or at least to lead with that. When I meet someone and I'm in that “Hello, nice to meet you,” situation, I just say “I'm Joel Tudman.” I don't start off the conversation with a list of things I can do or things I'm good at and expect the other person to do the same. I say my name. Whoever I'm meeting says their name, too. We start with our names. The reason I'm making a point of this is because your name is

THE FIGHT TO FIND YOURSELF

probably not something you chose; it's something that was given to you. The fight to find yourself is about who you are, not about what you do. Who we are is not based on what we do, or what we're named, but something deeper.

But finding yourself is about more than knowing your own name. If that's all it took, you probably wouldn't be reading a book about fighting to find your identity. And listen, I'm not going to bury the answer to "But who are you, really?" in the seventh chapter of this book or anything. I can tell you right now. You are named, in more ways than one. Who are you?

You're a beloved child of God.

You were created a member of the only species on earth made in his image, in his likeness, and you are unrepeatable—he gave you a combination of gifts that is unique to you, and he deeply understands your ancestry and your history. He placed you where you are in time. What you love and what excites you is an impression of his incredible eternal joy in your very soul.

Maybe for some of you, that was an aha moment. But from the others, I can see the eye rolls all the way from here. *I know that. I know that I'm a beloved child of God.*

Okay. You know it. It's good to know it. But why is it so hard to believe it? Why is it so hard to walk around in the world with that confidence that you are a deeply beloved child of a very good Father? We can level with one another on this. For decades, I was teaching and preaching about

God's love and, yes, meaning what I said, but there was this part of me that was still so lost, so broken, and so afraid.

Why?

Why do we have to fight to find ourselves when the answer is right there in front of us?

Let's approach this from two different angles: Let's look at why that is common to all of us, and then let's look at why that's a little more personal. And when I say common to all of us, I mean *all* of us. That's right. The fight to find yourself is rooted at the very beginning of everything.

THE GARDEN AND THE RIVER

Let's take a look at the exact moment when belief that we were God's beloved children became a lifelong struggle instead of a way of life. I'm taking us back to Genesis, the very first book in the Bible. If you've heard this story before, I'd encourage you to listen anyway. There is so much truth in the stories about our beginnings. It may take only a few minutes to read the first three chapters of Genesis, but I'm over here still working on the layers even after all the times I've read them. I've been a pastor for decades, and I'm telling you, there is so much in that story.

If we can understand just a little bit more about how things started, we have deeper understanding about why they went wrong and how that affects us today. So come with me, back to the beginning, and let's see what we find there.

THE FIGHT TO FIND YOURSELF

Our first parents, Adam and Eve, didn't have to fight to find themselves. At least, not at first. They were created by God and placed in a paradise called Eden. They knew that they belonged to him. They could see him in everything, they were surrounded by the beauty of his creation, and they knew his voice. There was no shame or regret or loss in the picture at all. Genesis 2:25 tells us, "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (κΙV). That's a level of vulnerability before God and one another that's hard for most of us to imagine or understand, even momentarily. But Adam and Eve lived that way. They were God's beloved children, and what's more, they believed it.

So what happened? What went so terribly wrong?

One day, Eve saw something unusual by the tree in the middle of the garden, the tree that God told them not to touch. It was a serpent, an enemy in disguise, and when she approached this serpent, it whispered four awful words in her ear: "Did God really say . . ." The enemy called everything about Eve's identity into question with those four words. Here's the whole question the serpent asked: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Gen. 3:1). Eve's first instinct was to correct the serpent, but the cascade of questions began in her mind anyway:

Has God been honest with you?

Are you really a daughter of God?

*Does he really love you—wouldn't he share everything
with you if he did?*

The serpent sowed enough doubt in Eve's heart that she reached out and took one of the fruits from that tree that God had told Adam never to touch. Everything changed when Eve reached for that fruit, ate it, and gave it to Adam. The author of Genesis writes, "Then the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (Gen. 3:7). They became aware of their nakedness, painfully aware. They had received the "knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:17), but they had already forgotten something important: their real identity.

Why do we have to fight to find ourselves? Because Adam and Eve chose sin over relationship. Since then, this terrible doubt has been passed down from generation to generation. We all contend with that decision on a personal level—we all have to decide whether or not we're going to believe that God is who he says he is and that we are who he says we are.

And for each of us, that's a completely different journey, a journey that takes place in our hearts and our histories. Our ancestry and our family history are a part of who we are, an essential part of what it means to be "ourselves." The fight to find ourselves means opening ourselves up to the full reality of our histories, which are a complex mix of good and bad, of gifts and curses, of grace and sin.

I'm incredibly blessed to be my parents' child. My parents were both strong people, loving and passionate people. My father's gone, but my mom's still here, and she's as strong as she ever was. I believe they were doing the best they could with what they had, and I know they worked hard for my

THE FIGHT TO FIND YOURSELF

sake and for my brother and my sister. Brokenness was part of our story, even in my earliest memories. I don't have any memories of my parents being happy together, and they divorced when I was young. We would see my father occasionally, but my mom was the one who raised us. Her mom, my grandmother, helped us. My mom never said a bad thing about my father to us, ever. She was one of the hardest workers I've ever seen, and tough as nails. She's intelligent—two master's degrees kind of intelligent—and she used those gifts to teach school, and teachers didn't make much of anything then. We all knew she was a stickler for pronunciation; if you didn't enunciate each syllable exactly right, you knew she was going to make you say it all over again. She played the piano for a church, which gave her a little extra money. She needed every penny.

I didn't know how bad it was until later, until I'd grown up. Just like she never said anything bad about our father, she never let on to how bad our money situation was. I had hints, though—I'd go to school in these shoes called coasters, and none of the other kids were wearing them. They were cheap shoes, and the other kids would laugh at them. Even if no one had been laughing at my shoes, though, I still would have been a stubborn, angry kid. Always close up to the surface was the thought that I wanted to be with my dad. Why couldn't I be with Dad? I carried that resentment, and there was no way my mom didn't know about that. Some men, really good people, I'm sure, tried to step in to the role of mentor for me, but I wasn't exactly willing.

But as the years went on, my father and I grew apart. We rarely saw each other. In addition, I was doing less preaching with the vacuum cleaner and more getting in trouble at school. At that point I know my mom would have gladly *traded* the preaching for the trouble, as much as the around-the-house routine with the vacuum used to annoy her. Many years later, after a lot healing inside me, I came to understand the power of an earthly father. This was after I was one myself—after I'd made my own laundry list of mistakes, and after I'd started giving my own gifts to my children. Just like my own parents, I was this blend of beauty and brokenness. There was doubt in God's goodness and gratitude for his faithfulness, good days and terrible ones. I grew to understand the role that fathers should play in their children's lives, even though I didn't receive it from my own father. Fathers are intended to affirm their children's identities. To notice their gifts. To recognize their strengths. To point them in the direction of trusted mentors. So, as I grew in this awareness, I tried to give these things to my children. I said I was sorry, and I kept showing up.

I didn't receive the blessing of an earthly father who was able to see me, love me, and affirm me in the ways I needed. A lot of us kids who grew up without that kind of parent stumble into parenting ourselves before we've even had a chance to catch up. And that's why we need to accept that our real identity is given to us by our heavenly Father, an endless source of love that we can pass down to our own children.

THE FIGHT TO FIND YOURSELF

I didn't understand my father until I sat with him as he died. It was as if all the issues that had been between us over the years melted away. Suddenly, the only thing that mattered became clear—I was his beloved child. Despite his mistakes, there at the end, his love for me mirrored the love that God has for all of his children. In those final weeks, I watched God redeem my father, this man who, honestly, was not there for me when I needed him. God gave him some of that time back. God gave *me* some of that time back. It was an incredible gift.

After my father died, my mother told me something I'd never known about him before. As a boy, my grandfather played the guitar, but he never let my father touch his guitar. When my father would beg his mother, she'd just say, "Shut up, boy." But he kept telling her that he could hear this music in his head. Well, one night when he was about ten years old, he had this dream. And in the dream God told him to pick up the guitar and God would show him how to play. When he told his mother about the dream, she finally said he could pick up the guitar. And when he did? God taught him how to play. That convinced me that even when our earthly parents aren't able to give us what we need, God is able to fill in the gaps. That should be consoling to anyone who is a parent or who has one. You're going to mess it up. But God can fill in the gaps.

Because I believe that we were made to discover our unique identity in God, I'm passionate about this business of coaching you to fight to find that identity. And I'm convinced

that nothing else we try to do can take the place of the peace we know when we finally land on it. No award we can win, no money we can make, no extramarital relationship we can find can fill that place.

In the garden, Adam and Eve forgot their identities. They forgot that they were God's beloved children, and they laid the foundation for humanity's struggle to find our identities. But that's not where the story ends. Let's look at a piece of scripture that points us toward the truth that we can claim our identity as God's child, no matter how hard it can be for us to remember. We're about to see restoration and redemption written on the page. If we want to know what it means to be identified by God, if we want we can listen in to what was happening and what was being spoken at Jesus' baptism. We witness Jesus' baptism in the third chapter of Matthew's gospel. And as we think about the way the life of Jesus unfolds, this is a very critical moment when Jesus is being identified by his father.

At the age of thirty, Jesus is set to begin his earthly ministry, and his baptism is when he is launched into that ministry. It's the ceremony in which Jesus is anointed for what he is about to do. After this baptism, he's going to take a personal retreat in the wilderness for forty days, and then it's going to be three years of ministry with his disciples before his execution, resurrection, and ascension. This is the starting line at the marathon. This is where the gun goes off. For a while, Jesus' cousin John the Baptist had been baptizing people from all around the surrounding country, preaching

THE FIGHT TO FIND YOURSELF

repentance and forgiveness of sins. So Jesus was part of a large crowd. And at first, John must have been shocked when Jesus asked him to baptize him. After all, John was one of the earliest believers that Jesus was the Messiah. John believed that Jesus had never sinned. So why would he need to be baptized? Let's look at the passage: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented" (Matt. 3:13–15).

But Jesus' baptism wasn't like the countless others John had done that day. When Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens opened up. And those who were gathered saw something that looked like a dove—Matthew tells us it's the Holy Spirit—descend upon Jesus.

And that's when they heard the voice.

"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17).

God could have whispered in Jesus' ear. The Father could have gently, quietly affirmed Jesus' identity as his own Son. But he doesn't. Instead, God chooses to do this pretty public thing, announcing for all to hear that this is his Son. The translation of the Scriptures called the Message announces, "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life."

I think that all of us long to hear this voice speaking to our hearts. We naturally long to hear it from our earthly

parents. But who we need to hear it from is the Father of Jesus. We need to hear God speaking to our hearts, saying, “You are my child.” “You are chosen and marked by love.” “You are the delight of my life.” Beloved, if you are not convinced that you are beloved by God, it’s going to be hard for you to find yourself. If you don’t truly believe that you belong to God, and that God delights in you, you’ll stay lost. And this is why I’m imploring you to listen for the voice that tells the truth about who you are.

MAN OF STEEL

So, we’ve already established that the real identity of every human person can be summed up as “beloved child of God.” However, this identity has been lost—lost for all of us in the fall of our very first parents and then lost again in the broken circumstances into which all of us are born. *If I am a beloved child of God, why does life hurt like this? Why do I feel so lost?* We have our doubts and questions. But we know we need an identity. No matter how broken up we might be, we know that we need to be somebody. So if we can’t tap into our real identity, we invent one.

Unfortunately, there’s no lack of help when it comes to identity invention. There are strong social pressures working on all of us, telling us who we should be, what we should do, what we should like. Don’t get me wrong, I love football. But there’s also no way that I would have been allowed to *not* love football. Do you see what I’m saying? The pressure

THE FIGHT TO FIND YOURSELF

from my family and my community was so strong in that area that I don't think I could have gotten away with saying that I wanted to do theater instead. There are a thousand other examples, and I'm sure you can think of some from your own life. It's hard to completely tease out "community pressure" from "genuine interest," for any of us, but societal forces have a strong hand.

Maybe your family passed down an interest in something that you genuinely do love. This is kind of like me and football. But that's not always the case. Sometimes, our family can skip over that "beloved child of God" piece and start to hand us an identity that is based on what we can do—or what they want us to be able to do—not on who we are. In the less significant cases, we tolerate music that we're "supposed" to like, and in the more significant cases, we embark on careers that our parents really, really wanted us to have. We even hide the parts of ourselves that don't line up with the culture that surrounds us. This leads to a deep sense of isolation, a horrible feeling that no one really knows who we are.

Our search for an identity is truly satisfied only by understanding that we are God's children. So when we're scrambling to fill that void with something else, we start throwing everything at it. We're trying to fill an infinite hole, after all. Maybe our identity is what we're good at, and so we start listing those things off: *Well, I'm pretty skilled at this one part of my job, and I like to play this sport, and one of my hobbies is...* Those answers start to feel hollow quickly, but

they can be nice to hide behind. They seem to fill the hole, at least momentarily. A list of things you're good at least makes you feel like there's something to you. We can also play up the roles and tasks we have. Our relationships get mixed into this mess, too: Who am I? I'm a good son, and brother, and father . . . Well, hopefully. Hopefully that's all true. But if it is, it's something that's *coming from*—not *contributing to*—who you are at the very deepest level.

Our identity is something that is given to us—not something that we gain.

When I fly, I usually don't watch movies. I'm usually that person conked out against the window. But for some reason, I recently watched that old *Man of Steel* film on a flight home. And God was speaking to me through it. In *Man of Steel*, and all Superman lore, Clark Kent is a Kansas kid who discovers that he's actually an alien from far-off planet Krypton. Since he wasn't born on Earth, he's got supernatural abilities—it's got something to do with the sun that was close to his planet. The result? He's faster than a speeding bullet. He can fly. He's super strong. He becomes the most recognizable superhero of all: Superman.

And what struck me was that the Kents, as much as these parents loved their son, could only teach him how to be a Kent. They couldn't *see* who he was about to become, and they couldn't teach him to *be* what he was about to become. And we hear that when Mr. Kent tells his son to hide his gifts. It's coming from the right place—it's coming from a father who wants to protect his son—but that advice isn't going to

THE FIGHT TO FIND YOURSELF

help Clark live into his truest identity as Kal-el (which was his biological parents' name for him).

One day, though, Jonathan Kent takes his son into the barn and heaves open the huge cellar doors, which are hiding the spaceship in which his son came to earth.

"We found you in this," he finally shares with his teen son.

Clark is feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of who he might be. And like a lot of us, his impulse is to blend in. His impulse is to be like all the other kids who ride his school bus.

"Can't I keep pretending I'm your son?" he begs his father.

His father answers immediately, "You are my son!" Then he adds, "But somewhere out there you have another father, too, who gave you another name. And he sent you here for a reason, Clark."

You have a heavenly Father who has sent you here for a reason. And he wants you to know what that reason is. He wants you to know your purpose. He wants you to *live* your purpose. He wants you to move forward in power. What's in you is something that God deposited in you when he created you. What God is concerned with today, what God cares about right now, isn't the level where you're heading. It isn't what he's called and equipped you to do three years from now, or a decade from now. God wants you to understand who you are, and God equips you to apply that knowledge to what you're doing today. What you're speaking today. What

you're building today. What you're learning today. You're going to realize that purpose when you find your identity in the Father who made you. Who designed you uniquely. Who created you. Who knit you together in your mother's womb.

I think most of us can identify with the teenage Clark Kent in the barn. We're waffling between wanting to accept who we really are and wishing we'd never known it in the first place. Instead of taking hold of the truth, it's easier for us to believe some of the myths about our identity. As you start fighting to find yourself, I want you to see who you really are. Not just the good, and not just the bad. All of it. The painful memories. The gifts you inherited from your parents. Your regrets. Your relationships. What you love. What you're good at. Your failures. Your dreams for the future. Fighting to find yourself isn't easy. There will be resistance at every turn. You have to choose to stay in this fight, and you have to be willing to see yourself as you are—the good, the bad, the awful, the pretending, the hopeful, the messy, the lies, and the truth.

And when you see those things all laid before you, and you're able to accept yourself as you are—not as you wish you were, not as a collection of things you can do—then you're in the fight for real. The fight to find your real identity: *beloved child of God.*

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