

Shaping Identity

Genesis 28

INTRODUCTION: Suppose you were at a party and someone gave you a name tag that said, “**Hello, I am**” and then a blank. But suppose the person who welcomed you told you that we are playing a game tonight to help everyone get to know each other. So instead of your name write something that describes you or identifies you. What would you write? What one word describes who you are? How would you identify yourself?

- Most people would write their occupation - I am an entrepreneur, I am a doctor, I am a teacher.
- Some would write their political affiliation - I am a republican, or a Democrat.
- Others would write their worldview - I am a conservative or a liberal.
- Some would write the city they are from - some of you are like me, the city you are from, no one has ever heard of, so you say a city close to it. For example, I often say, “I’m from Huntsville,” well, I’m not from Huntsville. I’m actually from Dembo Hollar... and I know a lot of people brag about being from Dembo Hollar, but I’m the real deal.
- Some would write a tragedy they experienced - I’m a widow, I’m homeless.
- Some would write their struggles - Maybe an alcoholic, an addict, or an adulterer.
- Maybe some would write their accomplishments - I’m a college graduate, I’m an athlete.
- Still others may write something that others have placed on them - things that were said to them **early and often**.

There is something at the core of your being that affects everything else about you - that is your core identity.

I’ve heard it described like spokes on a wheel. The hub is your identity, and all the spokes flow out from it.

Well, one of the mega themes of the Bible is that your God wants your ultimate identity to be who you are IN CHRIST, and everything else about you to flow out from that center hub of being IN CHRIST.

You see, everything flows from our core identity.

Proverbs 23:7 As a man thinks within his heart, so is he.

Zig Ziglar - *It is impossible to perform consistently in a way that is inconsistent with how you see yourself.*

Ways to identify what is at the hub:

- What angers you most?
- What do you celebrate most?
- What do you replicate most?
- What will you sacrifice for?

You have an identity, and God wants the truest thing about you to be who you are IN CHRIST. Everything that is happening in your life right now is ultimately for that purpose.

CONTEXT: Now, if anyone had a messed-up, jacked-up identity, it was Jacob.

First, his mother named him Jacob, which means "**deceiver**." His name meant liar. And remember what you hear early and often can affect you.

But also, remember what we saw last week? Jacob, a grown man dressed up like his brother, in order to get the attention of his father. Now, that's a man who isn't secure in his identity.

In the next few chapters, we will see God working in Jacob's life to modify and clarify his identity.

We pick up in **Genesis 28:10**, Jacob is fleeing from his brother Esau, who had vowed to kill Jacob. Now Jacob is heading to Haran to hide out with his uncle Laban until Esau's anger subsides.

TEXT: Genesis 28:10–17 (ESV)

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep.

1. Removal of Falty Foundations

Notice that everything in which Jacob had found security and identity had been **taken away from him**. He was removed from his friends, his family, and his home. Now it tells us he came to a "**certain place**", do you know why it says that? Because this place has no name at this time.

And notice, he takes a stone for a pillow. Do you know when you take a stone for a pillow? When there is absolutely NOTHING else you could use. He didn't have a cloak he could fold up for a pillow, no backpack, nothing... he's homeless, he's broke, everything that was significant in his life was gone.

There are some things the Lord can only teach us in the wilderness.

Examples:

- Joseph learned this lesson in the pit and in prison.

- Moses learned this lesson on the back side of Midian.
- Elijah learned this lesson, fleeing from the wicked Queen Jezebel.
- Even our Lord Himself was proven in the desert as he fasted 40 days and was tempted by Satan.

There, you see the terrible, loving hand of God. A love that is so great that it will knock every crutch out from under you so that you will lean on nothing but Christ.

Chuck Swindoll said that God has at least three purposes for removing crutches:

- 1. Crutches become substitutes for God –**
 - a. Have you found yourself turning to others before God?
 - b. Have you trusted your abilities more than God?
- 2. Crutches offer only temporary relief**
 - a. You will find yourself going from crutch to crutch, and you will become angry at the crutches because they don't fix things! It's not their job!
- 3. Crutches keep our focus horizontal**
 - a. Like Peter on the raging sea, to walk on water you must keep your eyes and faith on Jesus.

It was in the year King Uzziah died that Isaiah saw the Lord.

2. Revelation of Divine Access

¹² And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!

Now, the Hebrew word for Ladder, most scholars agree, refers to something like a **ziggurat**. These were commonly used for worship in this part of the world.

We are told that its top reached into Heaven, and Angels are ascending and descending.



IN THE NT, Something similar happens.

Matthew 16:13–18 (ESV)

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “**Who do people say that the Son of Man is?**” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “**But who do you say that I am?**”

There comes a time in life we you are encountered with Christ and you must answer the question - **who do YOU say I am?**

- Not, what does the church teach?
- Not, what did your mother believe?
- Not, what are you supposed to say?

But, YOU, who do YOU say I am?

¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Peter had been with Jesus long enough that he was convinced that this is the Messiah, the one we’ve waited for, the one that will save us.

NOW - notice what happens next...

¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “**Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.**”¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Do you see it? Peter focused on who Christ was and Christ revealed who Peter really was... the truest thing about Peter, the hub of his life.

As the story of Jacob progresses over the next several chapters we will see that Jacob is so radically changed by his encounters with God that ultimately the old name is no longer fitting. **His name, his identity will be changed from Jacob (meaning deceiver) to Israel (which means, God will prevail).**

3. Reorientation to God’s Promise

¹³ And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.

Notice, he didn’t say, “Jacob”

^{13b}. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. ¹⁴ Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” ¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” ¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

So God makes Himself known to Jacob for the first time. That's the primary way God alters our identity - he makes Himself known to us. **He calls us to learn HIS Identity, and as we focus on HIS Identity, our's is changed.**

J.R.R. Tolkien - *The praise of the praiseworthy is beyond all rewards.*

THAT - is why we worship, THAT - is why we give, THAT - is why give Jesus the first day of the week, the first minutes of the day. It's to get that reality down to the hub of our soul, the center of our life.

As we focus on HIS identity, he reveals OUR'S.

At the end of the chapter, Jacob takes the stone he had used to as a pillow and sets it up as a memorial altar and says, "If God will see me through all of this and keep His word to me, I'll return a 10th of everything back to Him at this place".

Do you see how Jacob is already changing? He was known for stealing, now he's giving. He was known for deceiving, now he's worshipping.

2 Corinthians 3:18 (ESV) ¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

By the way, Jesus referenced this story many years later in John 1. He had just called Phillip to be a disciple - Phillip goes and finds his brother Nathaniel and invites him to come and see Jesus.

John 1:47-51 (ESV)

⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!"

Do you understand what this means? An Israel in whom there is no Jacob.

⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Jesus says, I am ultimately not a step to God, but I AM the entire stairway. You come to me, you come to God.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION:

NOW. You have three options - Name yourself, Culture Names you, Christ Names You.

- 1. Look Outside - That's the traditional approach - Culture Names You.** Now you hardly even know this is happening, but it is... Students: When someone asks you, "what sport do you play?" That's what they are doing. They are trying to decide how to name you. Well what if you don't play a sport?
- 2. Look Inside - Modern Approach - Name Yourself -** Have you ever heard someone say, "I'm trying to find myself"? They are saying, "I am searching for who I am, my identity."
- **Christianity says - Look Up - Christ Names You -**

FOCUS ON HIM... as you find Him, you also find the truest YOU.