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*Chapter 1*

# YOUR NOT-SO-SECRET IDENTITY

My son was only four years old when he asked me if I would pray for him to be miraculously transformed into his favorite superhero (and it wasn't me). We were in the midst of playing superheroes when he called for a time-out. Concerned he might be hurt, I asked him what he wanted me to pray for. With a serious and gravelly voice he whispered, "Pray that God will make me Batman." Instantly I pictured my son as an adult running around in tights, talking like Adam West, and spending a week out of every summer at Comic Con.

Before I prayed, I wanted to know which version of Batman he had in mind. I was willing to pray for just about

any version except George Clooney's. My son closed his eyes and folded his hands to indicate that he was serious about his prayer request. He didn't want to just pretend that he had Batman's skills and Bat-suit, he wanted the real thing. He recognized that he didn't currently possess the skills and strength to fight crime and look cool. He wanted to stop dreaming and start being; he wanted an upgrade.

Like my son, we often wish we were a different version of ourselves, a smarter, more successful version. We would love a fatter wallet and a thinner waistline. We want our secret identity to stay secret, mostly because it doesn't fit our idea of a superhero.

I'm not a superhero. When I walk into a room there's no conveniently timed wind blowing through my hair and rippling my cape. For most of my life I struggled to measure up. If life were a Marvel movie, I was an extra who was so unimportant that his name would not be listed in the credits.

As a kid I was always the skinniest one in class. I heard all the insults, like "You're so skinny, you could look through a peephole with both eyes." While I can laugh now, at the time, the only thing smaller than my frame was my self-esteem. Because I was not athletic, I was often picked last or not at all during gym class. I would have taken a hundred dodgeballs to the face just to be picked first for once. I was a C student until college. While the class was noodling problems, I was doodling pictures. I was often lost in a daydream where I was important, powerful, and seen. Partying and drugs eventually became an even more powerful escape.

I would love to say that self-esteem comes with repen-

tance, restoration, and age, but even as an adult, I have continued to struggle with the tension between my potential and my performance. When I married and my wife Suzanne and I exchanged the vows “for better or worse,” we didn’t realize how much “worse” we would endure. In addition to my wife’s physical challenges, the church I started grew more slowly than any of my friends’ churches. Although today we hold two services, we are far from the top hundred fastest-growing churches in America.

I have often felt ordinary in a world of superheroes.

I’m willing to bet that I’m not the only one who wrestles with doubts and fears. The reality is that it’s hard for us to embrace our present-tense self. We struggle with learning from the past, looking forward to the future, and living in the now. It’s so much more tempting to lean toward our future imagined self, the one who gets the awards, has lots of friends, and fits into a pair of skinny jeans.

In 2015, the Bat-suit was one of the most popular costumes for Halloween. My son is not the only one who wants to pretend to have Bruce Wayne’s brains, biceps, and billion-dollar resources. In the movie *Batman Begins*, a criminal asks the caped crusader, “Who are you?” After years of wrestling with his identity, finally Bruce Wayne can confidently say, “I’m Batman.” Unlike Bruce, it’s not always as easy for us to confidently finish the sentence, “I’m \_\_\_\_\_.”

In Exodus 3:11, Moses asks a question all of us wrestle with at some point in our lives: “Who am I . . . ?” God has just asked him to go save the day, and Moses instinctively questions his own identity and competency. When Moses

looks in the mirror, all he sees is a shepherd. When God looks at Moses, he sees a servant leader. When Moses reflects on his life, all he sees is an eighty-year-old man whose best days are behind him. God, on the other hand, sees a man who is about to have the most influential forty years of his life. When Moses looks at his insecurities, he sees a man who is afraid of public speaking. God sees a man who will deliver the iconic Ten Commandments and write the first five books of the world's bestselling book, the Bible. Moses sees a life of shearing sheep. God sees a heroic life of saving others. Moses sees the mundane. God sees the miraculous. Moses could have perfect eyesight, but he has terrible insight. He doesn't see himself the way God does.

The way Moses looks at his life reminds me of the Magic Eye pictures that became popular in the '90s. When you first look at a Magic Eye picture, it appears to be a relatively boring pattern of shapes and colors. But when you look at the picture just right—which involves crossing your eyes and looking ridiculous to the people around you—a 3D image appears. Moses sees the boring pattern; God sees the 3D image. Moses is challenged to align his sense of identity with how God views him, to see himself through his heavenly Father's eyes.

When the prince of Egypt was younger, he attempted to stop an Egyptian bully from abusing an Israelite. In his misguided attempt at carrying out his brand of justice, Moses killed the slave driver. Moses, the man who would eventually carve the words "You shall not murder" into stone tablets, had blood on his hands. He was forced to escape before

facing trial, leaving the Israelite he had tried to defend just as enslaved as he had always been. It was an epic failure.

For the next forty years, Moses hid in the desert. He gave up on the idea of being a hero. His intentions were good, but he didn't have the strength to back up his heart. But then he heard God say something the Israelites had prayed for: “I have indeed seen the misery of my people. . . . I have come down to rescue them” (Ex. 3:7–8).

After four hundred years of seeing His people enslaved, God is getting ready to flex His muscles. Moses is fired up. He can't wait to hear about God's plan. God has had four centuries to work on it.

*Moses, I want you to take your shepherd stick and stand up to Pharaoh and his soul crushing army.*

Moses looks at his resume and realizes he's grossly unqualified. *That's your plan? You've had four hundred years, and You come up with an eighty-year-old man and a stick for the solution? Who am I to go toe-to-toe with the world's most powerful nation?*

“Who am *I*?” That's a question many of us wrestle with. Who am *I* to apply for that job? Who am *I* to volunteer at church? Who am *I* to marry someone clearly out of my league? Who am *I* to think I'll ever make a difference in the world?

God never answers Moses's question, but simply says, “I will be with you.” God gently reminds Moses—and us—that it's not about our skills and strengths. It's not about our power; it's about God's presence.

How do you see yourself? Do you only see your human failings? Or do you also see the person “being transformed

into his image” (2 Cor. 3:18) and equipped “with everything good for doing his will” (Heb. 13:21)?

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presence.*

We need to realize who we truly are in Christ—we are not weak and powerless. We can have strength, wisdom, courage, and peace. We might not be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound or run faster than a speeding bullet, but we can live in the real power of Jesus’ resurrection. And we have purpose.

There are two obvious things that separate us from most of the animal kingdom: opposable thumbs (which is great for text messaging) and self-reflection. Birds never sit around questioning their

purpose. Instinctively they just fly, build nests, and chirp outside your window at inconvenient times of the day. The mayfly doesn’t buzz around questioning why it only gets twenty-four hours of life while the giant tortoise lives nearly two hundred years. On the other hand, people wonder, wrestle, and worry about who they are.

We tend to define ourselves by the titles we collect, such as son, daughter, husband, wife, parent, grandparent, student, employee, boss, barista, or shepherd. At other times our identity is shaped by our successes and failures: employee of the month, valedictorian, prom king or queen, convict, loser,

or alcoholic. We allow ourselves to be identified by our sexuality, ethnicity, gender, and even our favorite sports team.

Humanity's oldest and sometimes greatest exploration is not toward the stars or into the sea, but into oneself. Philosophers challenged their students with the two-word phrase, "Know thyself." We want to know what our purpose is. We want to know if anyone will remember us when we die. We want to know that the world will be a better place because we were born. We want to know that we are contributing as much as we are consuming. The apostle Paul wrote to the Philippian community, "I thank my God every time I remember you." Wouldn't we love to have the kind of reputation that causes others to celebrate when they hear our name?

Every year fifteen million Americans experience identity theft.<sup>1</sup> Millions more give away their identity every day because they believe lies about themselves. They fall victim to the "terrible twos," which are two-word phrases that paralyze us, such as:

I can't.  
I'm ugly.  
I'm stupid.  
I'm poor.  
I'm old.  
I'm nobody.

We need more truth and fewer terrible twos. We need to be defined by what God says so we can defy the world's stereotypes. Listen to the way King David described

himself: “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well” (Ps. 139:14). When is the last time you had a mini worship service to celebrate the way God designed you, your gifts, talents, experiences, and education? We are often better at complaining about who we are and what we can’t do than celebrating the richness of who God made us to be.

We lose sight of the fact that we are not just human beings; we are human becomings. Because our character, personality, and skills are fluid, there will always be a gap between our potential and reality. There will always be tension be-

tween who we are and who we want to be. We must learn to be comfortable living in the gap: striving, yet content; pressing, yet at rest.

Perhaps this is what Peter is hinting at when he says, “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Grace is not just for our salvation; it’s also for our transformation.

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Grace says that you can love who you are today. Yet it is often so hard to embrace the present tense self and to believe that God could possibly use the present tense, imperfect me.

I had a close friend and roommate who died from complications with type 2 diabetes. Barry provided me with a

place to stay when I first became a youth pastor and liked my preaching. Until then, the only compliment I had received was that I had a good reading voice; those are not the words you want to hear as a young preacher, even if you still read off the sermon notes without ever making eye contact.

His funeral is probably one of the most crowded memorial services I have ever attended. People came out not only to grieve his death but to celebrate his life. Our hearts were heavy but our memories were full of light and laughter. While Barry wasn't granted a lot of days on this earth, he made sure every day was a gift. He made the most of his thirty-six years. He liked fast cars, faster motorcycles, and cheesy church jokes like, "Repaint and thin no more." But what he liked more than anything was to make people smile.

Barry never saw himself as someone special. He was often sick because of his erratic blood sugar. Unlike the Israelites who got forty years of manna before enjoying milk and honey, he got the opposite. After a few years of milk and honey he was stuck with manna. He was limited to very bland food—sugar was his nemesis, dessert equaled death. I remember one night when he substituted candy for insulin, and I watched as his body violently shook. In spite of the crippling side effects of his diabetes, like fatigue, dizzy spells, and foggy vision, he refused to stop doing good.

He seemed like an unlikely candidate to save the day, but I know at least fifteen people who owe him their lives. It all started with a small act of kindness. Barry knew a young couple who needed help painting their house, so he volunteered. He owned a painting business and could easily have

charged by the hour, but instead Barry saw it as an opportunity to serve. The family he was helping didn't attend church, and he didn't know which way they leaned when it came to God. Barry invited them to one of our church services, and since he had donated so much time painting, they figured they could donate at least one hour listening to a preacher (even though they probably assumed sermons were like dog years—one hour would feel like seven).

To their surprise, this family fell in love with the church and Jesus. The wife then invited her sister, who in turn invited several friends from high school, and they in turn invited friends. Barry's one act of painting led to over fifteen new people entering into the kingdom of God. We should never underestimate these small acts of kindness. The world is changed for the better through them: a kind word, a few moments of time, an invitation.

While the world saw my friend as a frail diabetic whose name will be forgotten within a generation or two, God saw a humble hero. His death didn't grab national or international attention, but his life made an impact on many people who can trace their eternal destinies back to him.

A man named Gideon wrestled with the same question as Moses. God challenged him to go and save the day as well. The future hero effectively asked God, "Who am I?" Listen to his self-defeating words: "How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family" (Judg. 6:15). Gideon couldn't imagine saving Israel because he couldn't see past his weakness. He was defining his potential by his family's reputation. He saw his current address

and family tree as the ceiling to his hopes and dreams. But listen to how God described Gideon: “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior” (Judg. 6:12). Before he stepped foot into the ring, God had already crowned him the champion. Gideon saw weakness; God saw a mighty warrior. Whose opinion would Gideon listen to? Whose opinion will we listen to? Will we allow our own fears and insecurities to hijack our life? Or will we allow God’s perspective to shape us?

Superman struggled with his identity until he discovered the Fortress of Solitude. All his life he had felt like an outcast. He couldn’t understand why he was so different from everyone else. He was desperate to just be normal. It wasn’t until he was able to talk to his father Jor-El (fun fact: El is one of the Hebrew words for God) that his unique gifts make sense. Like Superman, we need to hear from our heavenly Father. Identity should be less about anthropology and more about theology. The one who designed us needs to be the one who defines us. When you stop allowing haters to define who you are and what you can do, you discover that you have more potential to save the day than you realize. You “can do all this” through Christ who gives you strength (Phil. 4:13). You are a gift from God to this world. You have been given talents, abilities, and resources to make this planet a better place. Out of all the genetic possibilities, God chose you. You were born because God knew the world needed you.

You will encounter several “ordinary” people in this book who are making a difference in their corner of the world. They didn’t set out to impress anyone, but through small acts of heroism, they have blessed a few. They are not always

*The one who designed us needs to be the one who defines us.*

recognized or rewarded. Their stories may not be prominent enough to make the nightly news, but you can be certain they have God's attention. We are surrounded by heroes who will never have a billion-dollar movie made about their life. I'm talking about people like:

The college student swamped by homework, yet he helps at the homeless shelter every Tuesday.

The dad who suffers from panic attacks and social anxiety, yet he takes his kids to the theme park, more concerned about their fun than his fear.

The grandmother who is on a fixed income, yet sets aside a little money every month to help support a missionary in a third-world country.

The single mom who hates both of her jobs, yet she shows up every day so she can support her kids.

These individuals don't wear capes, and they don't have a catchphrase like "up, up and away," but they make this world a more beautiful place.

I believe you also have the potential to be one of these ordinary heroes. Like Gideon, you may wrestle with anxiety and inadequacy. You may feel as shaky as an Iron Man bobble-head on the dash of the Batmobile. But God says you are

more than how you feel. You are a hero, because the Lord is with you like a mighty warrior (Jer. 20:11). While Moses began with the question, “Who am I?” by the end of his life he could confidently say, “I am the servant of the Lord.” God wants you to become confident in your identity in Him as well.

You don’t need to wait for a burning bush or a voice from heaven. Your birth was your invitation to go out and change the world, and God is waiting for you to join the cause! You are an answer to someone’s prayer. You are God’s solution to the world’s great needs.

I learned a lot while working on this book. I didn’t know that in the original comics, Superman couldn’t fly.<sup>2</sup> He was able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but he couldn’t soar through the clouds. I didn’t realize that Bruce Banner could only change into the Incredible Hulk at night during the first few issues. His Hulk smash had nothing to do with anger management initially. All his best friend had to do to protect citizens and insurance premiums was lock Bruce Banner (and at one point named Bob Banner) in a room before the sun went down.<sup>3</sup> I didn’t understand that Batman used a gun in the first couple of comics. Before trading in bullets for Batarangs, Batman had no problem putting villains in the graveyard rather than Arkham Asylum. Later in his career he had no problem scaring and scarring people, but he refused to shoot. In his view, guns were the weapon of the enemy.<sup>4</sup>

As much as I learned about comic book superheroes, I’m less concerned with the Marvel and DC universe than

I am with our universe. You don't have to suffer from Batmania or be a fan of the Man of Steel in order to benefit from this book. You just need to be tired of watching the world implode. Is there something within you that wants to go from passively watching the news to wanting to make the news better? It's not ridiculous to think that you can change the world.