

## You are Your History

It's so good to see all of you here in-person and on-line this morning! I was eagerly waiting for this re-gathering to happen and am looking forward to meeting those who had joined us online and have yet to step foot into Cornerstone Centre! For us who are here, let's give each other an air-hug or an elbow greet. And you online, say Hi to all in the Chat.

Some of you might know a little more about my past – it's kinda semi-open secret; but after today, it'd become public info.

For those of you here in-person, raise your hands if you would like to find out and you are ready to hear it?

For those of you online, say Yes in the Chat.

### **I wanted to be a secret agent like James Bond!**

Ever since my dad took me to watch a James Bond movie when I was a kid, I grew up wanted to be a hands-down-the-best-James-Bond-Sean-Connery look alike spy. I love those race cars with cool

weapons, all the special gadgets provided by Q, the dry martini with ice not stirred, and of course, those actions packed sequences and the final demise of the bad guys.

[Response moment: Do you like James Bond movies? YES.]

Well, as you can see, I am a pastor and didn't make it as a Bond-like spy, but I still watch every Bond movie and love reading spy/espionage novels.

Talking about espionage, one of the recent action-thriller series based on Robert Ludlum's books is Jason Bourne: *The Bourne Identity*, *The Bourne Supremacy*, *The Bourne Ultimatum*. I must confess that I re-watch them many times; and I know at least one other staff member also does the same.

In the first movie, *The Bourne identity*, Matt Damon plays a CIA black ops assassin with a barely alive body found by a crew of fisherman; he wakes up with a blank memory and begins a journey to learn his identity, racing to get away from professional assassins, attempting to regain his memory, and

finding out his true identity. In the process, he must also determine why the CIA want him dead.

In this sermon series based on Klyne Snodgrass' book, *Who God Says You Are*, we explore nine factors that shape our identity. Pastor Jeremy reminded us last week: ***“Your identity is who you are. It’s how you think about yourself. It’s what makes you you. Your identity determines how you make sense of the world and how you’ll live.”***

This whole matter of identity is most relevant in light of controversial issues surrounding social and racial justice, such as identity politics, racism, woke and cancel culture.

When you know who you are, you accept and understand your thoughts, feelings, behaviours, relationships, and life purpose on a deeper level. You have focus and show confidence, clarity, and creativity in whatever you do.

Last week we learned about the first factor that shapes our identity, “You are Your Body”: **We are more than our bodies, but at the same time, we are not less than our bodies – we are created in the**

**image of God as embodied souls and, as Christ-followers, indwelled by the Holy Spirit as His temple.**

Today we are going to talk about the second factor that shapes our identity, “You are Your History”, that is, our history reveals our identity. Both nature and nurture play an integral part of the formation and development of our identity. So and our present IQ, EQ (emotional intelligence), RQ (relational intelligence), and SQ (spiritual intelligence) are continuously impacted by our ...

- Ethnic heritage/family of origins.
- Genetic factors and natural disposition.
- Social & cultural influences.
- Relational and emotional temperament.
- Educational and vocational experiences.
- Spiritual and faith orientation.

No matter what life-stage we are in, we all bring along our own backgrounds, experiences, assumptions, and perspectives wherever we go, whatever we think, feel, do, and say.

Chaim Potok writes, ***“Everything has a past ... If you don’t know the past, you can’t understand the present and plan properly for the future.”***<sup>1</sup>

So the first lesson we need to learn about how our history reveals identity is this:

**Own our past without letting our past own us.**

We tend to fluctuate between “Nostalgia” (stuck in the happy memories and wanting life staying the same like the good old days) and “Denial” (suppressing, minimizing, or even discarding all unpleasant and negative experiences), thus allowing our past to control how we presently think, feel, and behave. Conscious or not, there’s a fatalistic undertone that evokes resignation, rejection, or rebellion.

We can learn how to own the past from the Apostle Paul:

**Phil. 3:4-6** You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent

to God’s law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting the church; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God’s law Book. (*The Message*)

That’s a pretty impressive ***résumé*** wrt his ethnic heritage, family origins, faith orientation, educational credentials, religious zeal and dedication, and holy living!

But Paul does not let past blessings/successes to puff him up and push others down:

**Phil. 3:7-9** The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I’m tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for ... everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I’ve dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him.

Paul also acknowledges his own foible, fault, and failure:

**1 Tim. 1: 13** I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man ... (NIV)

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<sup>1</sup> Snodgrass, Klyne R.. *Who God Says You Are: A Christian Understanding of Identity* (p. 82). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.”

It's instructive to see that Paul does not allow shameful past/failures to pull him down and be stuck in despair.

<sup>1</sup> *Tim. 1: 14* The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus ...<sup>15</sup> [who] came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. <sup>16</sup> But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

Paul is both a beneficiary and a victim of his past, but he doesn't let his past dictate or define the way he conducts his life in the present: He tells the truth, names and faces the good and bad as well as whatever the consequences these experiences generated – he is grateful for all the blessings and takes responsibility for wrongs he'd done.

Like what we see in Paul's history, our history shapes our identity to certain extent, but we must not give it power to manipulate or control what and how we think, feel, and behave. At times we might

even have to act totally opposite to what seems “natural” to us!

In his recent book, *Personality Isn't Permanent: Break Free from Self-Limiting Beliefs and Rewrite Your Story*, psychologist and bestselling author Benjamin Hardy debunks the pervasive myths about personality that prevent us from learning and provides bold strategies for personal transformation. Who we are and our personalities are not hardwired to remain static or “set in stone” – individuals are not pre-programmed and can change.

We can find different popular personality tests and just to name a few, Myer Briggs, DISC, True Colors, StrengthFinder, Enneagram, etc. They are helpful and encourage continuous self-awareness learning. I have gone through a few of these tests – I have gained some insight and increased my own self awareness.

[Response moment: Have you tried any kind of personality test? YES.]

In fact, I would encourage you to visit our webpage to check out and sign up for our next LYS webinar or Strengths Learning Lab.

However, from a Christian perspective, there is no place for “that’s-the-way-I-am” deterministic posture or any defeatist mindset. If one does not handle the past wisely, our identity can be distorted; either an incorrect sense of superiority or inferiority can damage our spirits, stunt our growth, generate relational friction, and cause disharmony.

Paul writes, <sup>Rom. 12:2</sup> Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind ...<sup>3</sup> Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. (NIV)

While it’s true that no one’s history is useless, we must acknowledge, admit, and assess our past in order to live wisely. This is one of the exercises I introduce to those who want to explore Jesus’ call to life mission. If you are interested, email me and I would love to walk you through this exercise.

And this leads to our second lesson we need to learn about how our history reveals identity:

**God doesn’t waste our past; prayerfully discern Jesus-shaping lessons in past defining moments.**

We often live out the story we tell ourselves in our head. Patrick Rothfuss writes, “It’s like everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.”<sup>2</sup>

The operative phrase here is “inside their own head” – what is real can be blurred by self perception and, indeed, whatever is perceived in our head could possibly be coloured by selective memories, misinformation, or biases!

We are born into an already existed family and world. We didn’t write much of our history and we are not responsible for some part of our past because others or circumstances have contributed.

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<sup>2</sup> Snodgrass, Klyne R.. *Who God Says You Are: A Christian Understanding of Identity* (p. 82). Kindle Edition.

As someone once said, “We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are.”

Our understanding or interpretation of our personal history is often incomplete and thus distorted, because of our incapability and limitation. We need resources beyond ourselves, extraordinary grace and wisdom from above.

Paul describes himself this way:

**1 Cor. 15:8** ... last of all [Christ] appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. (NIV)

Here Paul basically is saying that the risen Christ has enabled him to see his past from a different angle.

Or to put it in another way, Paul begins to understand his history/past through the gospel-lens. His past doesn’t define him; his life in Jesus does!

**2 Cor. 5:17** Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

The story of Jesus is no longer a subplot in Paul’s story – it is his life defining story. There’s a gradual change in perspective, a transferral of a distorted storyline to a Christ-shaped storyline.

The risen Christ enables him to discern Jesus-shaping lessons in his faith journey. Paul has been “editing or rewriting” his story since his personal encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, while living out his life purpose and fulfilling his life mission.

C. S. Lewis writes, “The question is not what we intended ourselves to be, but what He intended us to be when He made us.”

In this attention-deficit, distracting culture, success and bottom-line driven economy, and hectic lifestyle, it’s imperative that we learn to listen to God’s voice and attend to the Spirit’s promptings, evaluate and interpret our story in light of God’s intention and purpose!

Cf. Let me share with you the gradual change in my perspective regarding my ministerial calling, i.e., from understanding myself as a “bridge” between first generation and second generation Chinese Christians to being one breaking down walls of separation between peoples.

Of course we can't change our personal history; but we can interpret and process what happened for truth and learning.

This brings us to the third lesson we need to learn about how our history reveals identity:

**Make “echoes of eternity” in our future-past.**

Jürgen Moltmann, the theologian of hope, corrects what he calls the “apocalyptic fantasy,” an often misplaced focus on the terrors of the end of the world. He writes in his book, *In the End—the Beginning: The Life of Hope*:

“Christian expectation is about the beginning: the beginning of true life, the beginning of God’s kingdom, and the beginning of the new creation of all things into their enduring form. The ancient

wisdom of hope says: ‘The last things are as the first.’”<sup>3</sup>

As disciples of Jesus, we are new creation-new beginning future-present people. And new-creation-people are hope-filled, hope-driven people: when we embrace the Jesus who embraces the world and make space for Him to shape us in God’s love, our lives are being moulded along the same lines of the risen Christ, who is the image of the invisible God and has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into His kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Cor. 4:7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God ... <sup>10</sup> We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

Our lives are no longer shackled by the past but liberated to live forward and make new creation imprints here and now. We are “fully alive” in the presence of the Father and have complete access to

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<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End—the Beginning: The Life of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl. Fortress, 2004, loc. 44, Kindle. (Cited in Makoto Fujimura’s *Art and Faith – A Theology of Making*, p. 84.)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rom. 8:28ff.; Col. 1:13ff.

Christ's resurrection power, living moment by moment and entrusted with the privilege and responsibility to revise our autobiography in light of the master story of God restoring the world.

Each moment is not just a "*chronos* [i.e., clock-time] but *kairos* [i.e., opportune time] moment" and has the possibility of becoming a moment of new beginning in anticipation of the coming of the new heaven and new earth.

[Response moment: Do you want to make "echoes of eternity"? Yes.]

Col. 3:1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. <sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Since we are raised with Christ now, filled with the Holy Spirit, and motivated by a living hope, our heart is aligned with what God has purposed in eternity past.

Paul is clear that we are saved, not just for life after death, but for life before death – as Jesus-followers eternal life begins now<sup>5</sup> - we are participants in God's present shaping of the new heaven and earth to come.

Our journey of discipleship is a sign and foretaste of what God plans to do for the entire cosmos – we are empowered to practice eternity future in the present, to make echoes of eternity by the power of Christ's resurrection.

Let me quickly summarize the three crucial lessons we need to learn how history reveals our identity:

- **Own our past without letting our past own us.**
- **God doesn't waste our past; prayerfully discern Jesus-shaping lessons in past defining moments.**
- **Make "echoes of eternity" in our future-past.**

What better moment to close this message on identity than to witness and celebrate the baptism

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jn. 3:16; N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 197ff.



of Calvin and Kristen, two of the four who were baptized a few weeks ago. Their baptism declares to the world that the resurrected Christ doesn't just repair but generates and renews their lives – their testimonies are signs of eternity and their life in Christ makes echoes in eternity now.

You can also check out their written testimonies on our webpage.