



Identity, Story & Purpose.

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When God calls people into relationship with him, he offers them new life. Intrinsic to this new life is the offer and assurance of salvation, yet the transformation to new life is much more than salvation, much more than a mere transaction. What happens, primarily, is that God designates us with a new identity. God changes who we are.

When humans seek to find meaning in our lives, we ask questions about purpose. And purpose is connected to identity. First we seek to understand who we are, then we ask questions about why we exist (our purpose) in relation to who we are. Our identity and our purpose then shape our behaviour.

Christians think of purpose in a variety of ways.

- Our purpose is to go into the world and make disciples
- Our purpose is to participate with God in bringing shalom – the restoration of peace, justice and order to God’s creation
- Our purpose is to praise and glorify God

When we understand purpose in connection to identity, we have the potential to simplify our focus while integrating these major biblical themes, all of which are valid.

We understand who God has made us to be (our identity) and we seek to live a life that is aligned with it. We live into and up

to who God has already made us to be by his grace in Jesus. This reminds us that our purpose is not primarily determined, but discovered. We seek to understand what God has done and is doing through his grace, and align our lives with it.

How do we do this?

By forming our new identity to be aligned with who God says we are. By aligning the reality of who we are with who God created us to be. We both understand and form our identity through story. We reframe our identity into greater alignment with who God created us to be by reframing our stories.

Our desires to be effective agents for God’s work in the world are built on this work of formation:

- Understanding our current perception of who we are (identity) – the stories we currently tell
- Understanding God’s perception of who we are – the stories God tells about us
- Forming ourselves into greater alignment with our God-given identity by reframing our stories

This approach is powerful because it simplifies the pursuit of meaning and purpose. We free ourselves from trying to change the world, and we simply seek to be who God has made us to be. If we learn to live this way, our experience shows us that we will become people who:



- Make disciples
- Participate with God bringing shalom
- change the world
- Glorify God

Story and Identity

Our identity is formed through the stories we tell. The stories we tell about ourselves, our communities and our cultures.

We believe (either consciously or sub-consciously) that the experiences of our lives are not simply a set of random, unconnected events. These events have meaning and purpose. The way we develop meaning is by forming the series of events and experiences that happen to us in life into a story.

When we make choices, we reflect on why we made those choices. They have meaning. The events and experiences of our life are then linked into a story - a series of cause and effect relationships. For example, I might stop and reflect on a moment of feeling embarrassed at my inability to answer a question during a public lecture. 'As I think about that, it probably led me down the path to further study...'

Our story is our expression of how we see ourselves, of who we believe ourselves to be, or how we would like others to perceive us. The fascinating thing is that stories can be reframed. The same events or experiences can be attributed with vastly different meanings. For example, being fired from a job can be framed as an

indication that I'm not good enough and never will be, or as an opportunity to learn. The framing will significantly impact the action that is taken in response.

On a larger level, the foundational framing of our story impacts the way we interpret the particular events and experiences.

For example, if I believe that God wants the best for me, I might see a period of suffering as an opportunity to be refined and to draw closer to God. If I believe God is testing me, I might see that same period of suffering as a reason to be angry at God. The forming of our stories always involves editing. For most of us, we want to be the good girl/guy in the story. We want to be heroes. We edit out the bits of our story that don't contribute to this storyline. If we edit our stories, it means we have the opportunity to frame our stories differently.

So, it is both the places, people and the events of life, as well as the way we frame these things, that contribute to the shape of our stories and the formation of our identity.

Yet our identity is not purely individual, nor do the stories we tell only affect our lives. The groups and communities we associate with influence our stories and vice versa:

If I say I am an Australian, then the communal story/identity of Australia impacts on who I am, and my individual



story/identity impacts the collective story/identity of who Australia is.

If I say I am a member of the Beckett family, then the story and identity of the Beckett family shapes my story/identity, and my individual story/identity shapes the collective story/identity of the Beckett Family. The story of our family will be told differently in the future because I am part of it.

If I say I am a child of God, then the story of God's people becomes my own story and shapes my story/identity. Not only that, but God's story and the identity of God's people is shaped in some way by my story. The community of God's people is different because I am a part of it.

The point – if we believe that God is our creator and king, then God's designation of identity upon us shapes our self-understanding. God's story about the world shapes our understanding of the world. God's purposes become the foundation for understanding our own sense of purpose. How then do we frame our story according to God's? And how can we align our reality with that new story, so that the reality of what we embody in the world aligns with God's designated new identity for us?

A future story

Not only is it possible to reframe our past through story, it is also possible to frame a potential different future. This story about

a desired or potential future then becomes your compelling vision for the future. This story is not just for us, it is for the communities, workplaces and cultures where God has placed us. Communities of purpose form around story. If we can frame a compelling future story for the communities, workplaces and cultures where God has placed us, this becomes the means by which we can then persuade people to act together on behalf of a shared purpose. This is the starting point for change in society that aligns with God's purposes.

We invite people into a compelling shared story that is an embodiment of God's story. Because it is aligned with God's story, we are inviting them to participate in living in alignment with the creator's intention for the creation. In doing that they are experiencing something of the abundant life that scripture talks of. We are also able to tell the story in such a way that we give testimony to the grace of God as the reason and the meaning behind the way we live. If you want your service, your product, your business, your strategy, your life to make a difference for the kingdom of God, if you want it to make meaning for people, then you need to have a story that aligns with God's story.

Stories inspire people. Stories enable people to believe that a different future is possible, particularly in the face of current problems, suffering or pain. Once people gather around a story for a possible future



(imagination) we have the means to create a community of ‘purpose’ – a community of people who own that story, who identify with it – which means they take on that story and that community as part of their individual identity – and allow it to shape their own story, and therefore their behaviours and practises.

Through this process we will learn how to:

- 1) Reframe our stories based on the truth of who God indicates we are. Far from being manipulative, we believe this process aligns our lives with God’s reality, as opposed to who the world or others say we are.
- 2) Develop stories that become an argument for a different potential future in the communities, workplaces and cultures where God has placed us.

Understanding God’s story.

The Bible contains a variety of genres. Some of it is instruction, some is poetry, some is metaphor. However, when we look at the Bible as a whole, one of the best ways to understand it is as story. It lays out for us the story of God’s creation, then the nature of God’s relationship with that creation, particularly with humanity, and even more particularly with the people he chooses to draw into a special relationship. When we read scripture as story, we make a decision as to how we will enter in to the story. How will we place ourselves in this

story? How will we make meaning from it? If we accept that God is creator, we learn certain things about God’s relationships to all of humanity.

For example, we are all created ‘good’ (Gen 1:31) and all humans are endowed with dignity and worth by nature of being created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). If we further accept the offer of forgiveness through Christ, and identify with him, we are told that we are designated with a new identity. We become ‘citizens of God’s kingdom’ (Eph 2), members of God’s family (1 John 3) and the people of God (1 Peter 2), part of the body of Christ (Eph 2:4, 1 Cor 12). As we take on this identity, the story of God’s people becomes our story. That means the biblical story becomes our story and shapes our identity.

As we look at the Old Testament, we find that Israel tells their historical story in particular ways. They make meaning through the people, places and events of their history. They retell their own stories – stories of the Exodus, the giving of the covenant, the building of the temple, David’s battles, the exploits of the kings and prophets - and frame their current reality based on the meaning attributed to those stories of the past. These stories are not just told, they get embedded in their cultural practices, in their temple liturgies (the Psalms). These stories and practices then form their understanding of who God is IN RELATIONSHIP with them. In the New Testament, the gospel writers



begin their stories of Jesus by inserting him into a genealogy of his Israelite family that traces back to King David. In the book of John, he begins by inserting Jesus into a larger cosmic story. Each writer is embedding themselves into the broader story, and making it their own, even as they take on the task of telling the current chapter.

Throughout the story, we find that God comes down at key moments. God, who is distinct from his creation, chooses to enter in to the story of humanity. And this happens most significantly in the Incarnation, where God enters the story in the person of Jesus. After Jesus ascends into heaven, God again comes down through the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, fulfilling the promise of Jesus to always be present with his people. Then finally, at the end of the story, with the return of Jesus, God comes down to make his dwelling place permanently with humanity.

Co-creators

We find our place in this story in the time between Pentecost and the second coming of Jesus. When we are invited into the people of God, we are invited to participate in working out the mission or purposes of God in the world. (John 20:21)

If we are to understand this story and the way it should shape us, we need to spend time 'in' the story. In recent times the church has been guilty of only telling half

the story, which limits the application of the gospel to God's action in saving humans from our sin. This tends to make it all about us, as if God's sole purpose was to get us into heaven. If we only tell half the story, we miss the reality that we are swept up into a much greater story, and invited to play our part in God's big story moving from creation to new creation, where humans and God's people play a central role, but not an exclusive one.

This highlights the reality that our own stories have enormous significance, yet not ultimate significance. They have significance because they are part of a larger story. Our thread is always part of a larger tapestry. Our chapter is always part of a larger compilation. We make a unique contribution to a common story with a common purpose.

Forming/Reframing our story.

How then do we connect our story to God's story? How do we seek to align our behaviours with the trajectory of God's story?

First we need to recognise our tendency to be self-centred. We tend to see God from our perspective, so we invite God into our story, as if we made the approach to God and gave God the privilege of being part of the story we are writing. But in reality God first moved toward us. His is the primary story. God chose to make us part of His story before we decided to make God part



of ours.

So rather than inviting God into our story, our goal is to embed ourselves in God's story, to make God's story our own, so that God's purpose becomes our purpose.

This is a process of discovery. Our culture communicates to our young people that nobody else can tell you who you are. You need to figure out who you are. But, that is fundamentally unbiblical. We believe that God creates us, God gives us an identity, God gives us a story and includes our stories into a larger story. Our identity is discovered, not determined!

So rather than looking within ourselves to figure out who we are, our processes seek to understand our current perception of our stories, then look beyond ourselves, to God, for the resources to reframe our story according to God's reality.

That is the journey we're taking together.