

Week 7 - Answers to Your Deepest Longings: 40 Days through the Bible ***Longing for Identity***

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HS: Hi and welcome friends! If you are studying with us live, then you know First 5 and Online Bible Studies are doing this study together! If you're doing this at a later date, whether it's an archived OBS study or in the First 5 app, we're so excited you are here. Each weekend, we have an audio teaching to connect the chapters we studied this past week. This is where we will be able to dig deeper into the Scripture and content we studied together. So we just finished Week 7 of our study, *The Answers to Your Deepest Longings: 40 Days through the Bible*. My name is Hannah Schindler, and I get to serve on the First 5 team here at Proverbs 31 Ministries, and today we have joining us one of our first 5 writers, Quanny Ard. How are you today, Quanny?

QA: I'm feeling well; how are you, Hannah?

HS: I am so great! I am so glad you are here, and I can't wait to hear your teaching, but let me read our Major Moments before you jump in. So:

- Acts 7, Stephen was the first person recorded to give his life for speaking the good news of Jesus.
- Acts 8, Saul Persecuted the Church.
- Acts 9, Jesus appeared to Saul and ordered him to preach the good news of Jesus to all.
- Acts 10-11, Peter began his ministry.
- Acts 12-14, Paul and Barnabas set out on what has been called the First Missionary Journey.

Alrighty, Quanny, we covered a lot this week, so I can't wait to hear your teaching today.

QA: Perfect, thank you! Before we get started, I want to introduce myself as a little bit of a word nerd. So, I love to read, and I believe in the power and meaning of words. So let's begin with understanding what identity is. Why is it important? So, I found two very wonderful and important definitions. So, the first one is the fact of being who or what a person or thing is: your name or how people recognize you. And the second is the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is, and those examples can be your character or your personality. So they're kind of similar, but they're very different in how we address them. The first definition speaks to things you may or may not change on preferences; the second deals with things that are innate and while you may be able to work on them, they are much more difficult to change without a major shift. So we're looking at a definition that specifically looks at what you can change and one looks at what you maybe you can't change.

QA: This week, we spent a lot of time in the book of Acts, and we discussed three prominent and well-known men in the Bible: Stephen, Saul who eventually becomes Paul, and Peter. Each provides us a lens through which we can view how our longing for identity is developed, and each helps us understand

how knowing who we are in light of who Jesus is makes all the difference. Each man also has his own encounter with Christ, and they are forever changed. How could they not be, right?

QA: So, let's start with Stephen. In Acts 7, we find Stephen preaching a sermon. And I want to make a quick pause here to note that not only did he physically preach a sermon to his Jewish brothers, but he also lived it. And friends, I've found that the most important and impactful sermons are the ones that don't actually require words. So he lived out his faith in Jesus in such a manner that his face actually looked like he had been in the presence of God. So let's back up a few verses, and we're going to look at Acts 6:8. Here, the Bible tells us that Stephen was "*full of grace and power,*" and he "*was doing great wonders and signs among the people.*" This speaks to a lived experience with Jesus. He outwardly manifested the inward transformation of a life that was dedicated to the gospel. His identity was firmly planted in Jesus, the Son of God, through whom all things were possible. So, let's skip forward, back to his sermon. So essentially, he gives the brethren a history lesson, okay? Now, why is it important for him to reiterate their treasured past in their hearing when they already knew it? Let's examine this for a minute. The Jewish people prided themselves on being a part of the Abrahamic lineage and covenant. Being Jewish wasn't just a religious thing; it was a cultural way of life as well. Remember our definitions of identity in the beginning? So we're looking at this first definition here. This was their name, being Jewish was who they were recognized by others as, in their dress, their rituals, and their tradition; it was their physical identity. Stephen understood this very well as a fellow Jew, but his identity had a different source.

HS: Wow.

QA: By pointing out their staunch determination to identify with their forefathers (especially as it related to their errors in persecuting the prophets, particularly those prophets who preached about the fulfillment of the coming Messiah whom they crucified) Stephen was trying to appeal to their false sense of identity in something that would not ultimately last. Nor would it fix the longing for the Savior of whom they dismissed. Stephen's identity was so tied into Christ that he ultimately gave his life so that others could bear witness to a freedom that was not rooted in which tribe to whom you could trace your lineage; he knew to whom he belonged.

HS: Hmm, yeah!

QA: What a life, what a life, what an example!

HS: So, good!

QA: So our next man, our next example in Acts, we're looking at Saul, who eventually becomes Paul. So, there's a slightly different situation here with Saul. Saul was the exemplary Jewish man. He would have most likely been present during Stephen's sermon, and we know he was present at his execution, which we can read here at the end of Acts 7. So we know that Saul was the type of person Stephen was actually trying to appeal to in his sermon. But here's the issue: When your entire way of life, including your vantage points on faith and justice, are linked to a flawed system or even flawed human beings, it

becomes super difficult to see the errors of your ways. You seek out the validation of others who provide for you an echo chamber of support, further cementing your original mindset.

HS: Wow. Yeah!

QA: So there's more challenge here. You just have people who say yes, absolutely. And Saul was this guy. He was overly zealous in protecting his Jewish identity from any scrutiny of any kind, especially from followers of Christ. He felt it his duty to preserve the Jewish way to the point that he persecuted anyone who dared believe that their identity wasn't tethered to the same post as his. Y'all, I'm so grateful God doesn't condemn us by our worst day, nor does He exalt us to our best day only for us to goof up the very next day! God loves us so much! Praise Jesus! Now here is where the story gets really good. Saul's longing to identify as an exemplary Jew wasn't lost on God. Although his longing was misplaced, it was valid. How many of us can relate to this? We were created with longings that were only to be filled externally by our Creator, but sin caused us to refocus those longings internally to what we deemed sufficient. Saul needed an encounter with Jesus to rework the wiring of his longing for identity. And that is exactly what happens in Acts Chapter 9. Now remember, back to our definitions of identity, this one is the second definition. Not only was Saul's name changed, but so was his character.

HS: Wow.

QA: Alright, our last case study: Peter. Now, if anyone had an identity crisis (or two, or several)...

(All laughing)

...it was definitely Peter — it was definitely Peter! He has been called by God to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, but poor Peter still had a few kinks to be worked out. Much like we all do, okay, and like Saul, Peter (and his unorthodox personality) was steeped and stewed in Jewish tradition. Though his encounter with Jesus was every bit as dramatic as Saul's, there were still a few rough edges that had to be polished. So now, we're in Acts 10, and we find that Peter's reliance on his Jewish upbringing and identification with that people group caused a little bit of a prejudice problem. God called Peter to minister to the gentiles. We know that Paul was called to speak to his Jewish brethren. And that ministry wouldn't have been nearly as effective without the tweaking of the definition of identity that Peter had in his head. While he had experienced finding his identity in Christ, he needed another encounter with Him to understand that the same process was for all people. He had to relearn that identity is formed in Christ and in Christ alone. Not in religious and cultural groups, nor in the practices and traditions these groups hold solemn. He finally was able to admit to himself in Acts 10:34 that *"Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him..."* and later on, he says that *"Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all)."* What a statement! It is God's desire for all people that our longings for identity and belonging are found in Him. This is what Peter learned. And this is what we must also come to realize. We cannot attribute our identity to our jobs, our homes, our families, our lineage, our upbringing, our education, or even our status. What people believe about us or how they come to recognize us also lacks in our ability to find true identity. These things are like

tinkling cymbals and do not last. Our hope, our only hope is in our encounter or multiple encounters with Jesus. As we release those things to Him, we can replace the lies that we've held tightly to with the truth of what and who God says we are. We are His, and we are loved.

HS: Hmm, amen. I love, I love that! I feel like these different men that we talked about, I feel like everybody could probably relate to one of them. And so, I love that you broke down the difference in Stephen, and Saul to Paul, and Peter, and I think it's just, it's so great of looking how easy it is for our identity to be wrapped up in everything that we see physically about one another or about ourselves. Or, things like our character and personality, like you were talking about the different definitions, and so I feel like this is such a great reminder for us to realize and believe and truly know God's best for you and for your family. And to know, like Quanny just said, at the end, that our identity is not what we do for a living; it's not our relationship status; it's not our financial status. Our identity is that we are sons and daughters of Christ. And that is our first and most important name and description, and I feel like if we can just remember that, then everything else will flow from that. And there will just be this peace — and even like Stephen, when you said his identity had a new source, to where he wasn't seeking validation from people who looked like him or who didn't look like him. He was seeking validation from the Lord, and he knew who he was and whose he was.

QA: That's right.

HS: So, that was so great Quanny, just thank you so much! Thank you for breaking this down for us. And, sweet Peter, you know, just needing all the (all laughing) but how, I mean, how much can we relate to that?

QA: Absolutely!

HS: Peter just needing these reminders, and even got to walk with Jesus, and still needs more. Even us, if you've even been raised in the church or even if you haven't, we need these reminders of how good our God is. And so, thank you Quanny for this teaching, let me go ahead and close us in prayer.

HS: Father God, we just thank You that we get to have our identity solely wrapped up in You, God. That we are sons and daughters of You! Of the King of kings, of the Lord of lords, the Prince of Peace. God, that You are our identity, that our identity is in You. And so Lord, I pray that this week, we are able to walk in that confidence and that freedom and that boldness of knowing who we are and whose we are, because we are Yours, God. And so Lord we just thank You, we thank You for the examples of these men in Acts. We thank you, God, for allowing us to learn from Your Word and seeing it's okay if we don't get it right the first time, but You don't turn Your back on us, and we can still learn so much. And so Lord, thank You for all that You have done in our lives. Thank You Lord for giving us, and extending Your grace through Your Son coming to earth and dying on the cross and being raised from the dead for our sins. Thank You so much for that gift. And so that we get to spend eternity in heaven with You with having that relationship with You, Jesus. And so Lord, we love You, and we thank You for all that You're doing. In Jesus' name, amen.