

CHAPTER ONE

WHO THE HECK AM I?

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MY ROAD TO TRUE SELF IMAGE

I want to start by talking about God's faithfulness to me through my life so far. You will hear some of my failures in the area of obedience. You will see my human frailty. You will also read about my love for God even when not all of my actions were showing Him that I loved Him.

Unfortunately things have happened in my life that had a great effect on the way I thought and felt about myself. It is probably the same for you. So where will we let our pain and hurt take us? I fought hard during my life to let my pain and hurt take me to a better place, and I knew that I could only get there with the help of God. I never wanted to be taken out by an attack from satan or held bondage to a horrible thing from my past, but sadly, there were times when I chose to stay in a position where there was no freedom in my life for far too long.

Because of the help of the Holy Spirit teaching and guiding me in my life I have been able to endure and overcome many personal issues and not let them dictate my future. When I was knocked down or did something stupid, I got back up and started crying out the name of Jesus because there is no other name. Our God is faithful.

It's amazing how life can throw so many curve balls at us. That sounds like a bit of an old person's saying so I must be showing my age. (*I do have grey hairs now*). But, on a serious note, the saying is so true. Sometimes there are unexpected curve balls from out of nowhere and sometimes they exist because of our own doing.

Life as a Christian is not all smooth sailing, even for someone like me who has been a Christian for most of my life. I was about four years old when I made a choice to give my heart to God. At that age I had a simple but beautiful faith in God. I had a strong belief in Him - so strong that anything was possible. I loved going to Sunday school. I loved doing all the actions to every song and shouting loud praises to God. I also loved all the Bible stories that I learnt about as a kid and saying prayers to God.

As a Christian and as a leader I don't go around pretending every day to be fabulous but I do try and present a confidence to others that is only found in God. I also try to be a representative of God's grace toward others because I know God has given me a lot of grace over the years.

God has turned all the rubbish and mess in my life around. He has truly turned my weaknesses into strength, for His glory. And, the rubbish He has not turned around yet I'm sure He is going to help me deal with in His perfect timing

I grew up in a wonderful family, a safe and supportive environment. My parents always wanted me to just be myself and get the best out of life. With all my ups and downs and my desire to follow God and serve Him they have always been my biggest fans, apart from God of course. Still, for so many years I was insecure about my body and many other things. My thoughts about myself were very lowly and un-Christian.

WHAT MADE AN IMPACT ON ME?

One of the earliest things in my life that had an impact on me was an experience of sexual abuse. Some people are sexually abused over many years. My abuse experience did not occur over a long period, but

the experience still made my life worse. I don't know how many times this happened but I certainly remember the day clearly that my sister found me and the guy next door doing sexual stuff together. My parents found out and one of the main feelings I felt was shame.

Over the coming years I began to feel dirty about my body and I started to think I was a girl trapped in a boy's body. I loved to dress up in girls' clothes and shoes. I felt like a weak boy who was very feminine. The fact that I had been involved with a boy of a similar age who was more dominant than me greatly affected my thinking patterns. I felt inferior to other guys. I started to realise I was not rough and strong like other guys I knew. From the early age of six until I was about ten years old I experienced a lot of insecurities about my identity so during the following years of puberty I had crazy confusion about my sexuality. Little did I know that that confusion would continue in my life for a number of years to come.

I felt different and I was different. I was sensitive and creative. I liked singing, dancing, art and cooking - all the things thought by my peers to be what girls did. It started then. From the age of ten to fourteen, the name-calling started. I was often called a 'fag' and a 'homo' and hassled for the way I talked and walked. My school bag would get stolen from me and emptied out all over the ground. I would get kicked while I was being held down by a group of guys, just for being me. What was wrong with me? I needed to change myself to fit in.

The worst thing for me was that I was having same sex attractions. Was I gay or did I just think this way because my sexual purity was robbed from me at a young age by a guy? My only sexual experience was with a guy!

The whole time that things were going pear shaped in my life I was still in love with God and had a desire to serve Him. At the age of twelve I was beginning to sing in the church worship team and be involved in church plays. By about fourteen I had started helping in the Sunday school as a teacher's assistant. I definitely found it hard to understand why God didn't stop some of the things that were happening to me but I kept believing in the Christian way of life. I tried to love others, but I started to find this so hard to do because I didn't really love myself.

When I reached high school (*year eight and nine*) I was still bullied for being gay and a 'fag' by many people every day, even though I actually wasn't. I guess people thought I was just because I was different. I was a target for having my pants pulled down randomly in front of people. I was called names, punched in the head, pushed into a wall, tripped up while I was walking, spat on and had my lunch taken. I once had my head put in the toilet bowl and had it flushed on my face a number of times and yes, I was even thrown in to the urinal in the school toilets and left to get out soaked in dirty urine. After many years of people calling me gay it started to really get in to my head and I thought I was gay.

Since the age of four when I started going to church I had been trained in God's way of living that I was still getting a handle on. He loved me. He created me and He created me to be in a heterosexual relationship not a homosexual one. I knew this was true but I was so confused. After hard days at school I would go to bed at night and cry myself to sleep and often end up yelling the name of Jesus into my pillow. I needed His help to heal me.

When I was about fourteen I started being in every school play and musical and in the choir. I even joined community theatre groups. This was a way I could build confidence and start to have a voice. When I

was acting on stage I could be someone else and no one could judge me or harm me. This became my way of escape from the world and it gave me a somewhat high experience on performance nights. I didn't want to face my problems and I didn't want to be me anymore.

I made a choice to try and change myself. I was a Christian. I didn't think I could be gay and a Christian. I had to change things. I started to change the way I walked so it was less 'gay' and more 'manly'. I tried to change the way I talked. I stopped going in to changing rooms at sport games and swimming pools because seeing naked guys around was not going to help me with the same sex attraction I was having. I also made sure I didn't touch guys.

I began to isolate myself from guys. By this time I had developed a lot of meaningful friendships with girls and probably only two guys. Girls were definitely more accepting of my differences than guys were. I put some extreme boundaries in place to try and change myself but it just wasn't working. I wanted God to take away my attraction to guys. I tried to force myself to become attracted to girls.

Because of my confusion with my sexuality I used to get times of bad depression and try to sleep it off. Some days after school I would just come home and sleep until dinner. I was very stressed out. This was when I stopped going to church for eighteen months or so. I still loved God but I was certainly annoyed with Him.

I had massive body image problems. I didn't like my face (*acne had arrived*) or my body shape. I couldn't even look in the mirror. I used to compare myself with all the other guys around me that looked masculine and good looking. They had abs, muscles and good looking faces and bodies. Comparing myself to them only made my thoughts

about myself worse. I hated my body and I felt dirty and ugly. I often wanted to just die.

I had been involved in the sport of running for a while and began to run more and more for long periods of time, sometimes every day. It became an addiction of self-abuse. I did not feel good enough for this world, not good looking enough, not thin enough and not masculine enough. Along with the running came a binge eating disorder. I would eat so much junk food and feel so fat and guilty that I would punish myself by going for a run. This cycle went on and on for about four years. I began to skip meals sometimes and overeat at other times.

My life was so out of balance it was unbelievable. I always had a secret stash of junk food hidden away and ate it when no one was around. I did not realise at the time that it was all related to the sexual abuse experience and my confusion with my sexuality. I was a very complex person. I'm sure you were too when you were a teenager.

I also displayed many signs of obsessive compulsive disorder. I had to clean surfaces and wash my hands all the time. I sometimes had three showers a day. I was becoming out of control. I didn't want to touch anything when I left the house. I felt like I was losing control of my life but I was trying so hard to get control back. I was fighting so hard to stay sane and to keep my body sexually pure. I wanted to control every environment I was in but it wasn't working.

At the age of about seventeen I started going back to church and recommitted my life to God. I knew He was the answer to all of my problems. I had to really start to trust in Him and let Him change me. I had been trying so hard to change myself and I had left Him out.

For years I had wanted God to fix all this mess but I realised then that this was going to be a long fight and may last my lifetime. But, I was ready. I had to fight for my Christian faith. I had to fight for the possibility of being in a heterosexual relationship. Mainly I had to fight for freedom, the freedom that Jesus had won for me at the cross - the freedom that I wasn't living in yet.

“Now that we know what we have – Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God – Let’s not let it slip through our fingers. We do not have a High Priest who is out of touch with our reality. He’s been through weakness and testing, experienced it all – all but the sin. So let’s walk right up to Him and get what He is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.” Hebrew 4:14-16 (Message)

HE BRINGS THE BREAKTHROUGH

I was finally ready to change and surrender my whole life to God in a new way because I was making a bit of a mess of it. After high school (year 12) I did a tafe course in hospitality and cheffing. I still did not find much joy in that sort of work. I actually wanted to become a famous movie star because of all my acting skills. However I thought this would have increased my chances of becoming more insecure and possibly turning gay - which is not what I wanted. So I gave up the idea.

I clearly sensed God leading me to go to Bible College to study full time. With the ok from my Dad who was not a Christian at the time and with my Mum's ok who was a Christian, I was off - to a new city to start my fresh journey with God. I knew I was called to lead others and

be in ministry so I had to get rid of every other thought in my mind to be obedient to go. I was eighteen years old at the time.

While at Faith Bible College in New Zealand I experienced a life changing two years. But just because I had moved locations did not mean my issues had gone away. It was time for me to let God work on stuff. My first challenge was related to food and exercise. The more I was getting taught about God's love for me and the more I read about it in the Bible, the more I realised I needed more of God's love - not just for myself but so I could give it to others. I had to open myself up to truly receive God's love instead of relying on myself.

Over the years of being bullied I had become a very strong and determined individual. There it is right there. I was an individual. I thought I didn't really need anyone else to help me and maybe that rubbed off on my personal relationship with God. I loved Him and knew I needed His help but I don't think I was really letting Him show me His great love - the love that He has for all of us.

Anyway, my first emotional and spiritual breakthrough came as I was prompted to stop running. NO running at all. In the two years of being a live-in student at the Bible college I only ran about five times. I also started to force myself to eat three proper meals a day - not skipping meals and not just eating junk food. This worked well because I was a half an hour drive from the city on a farm and I had no money for treats anyway.

This was truly the start of learning to love and accept myself and of finding my security in God alone rather than in my outward appearance. Yes, I had a fear of getting fat and all the other thoughts that a person who is trying to break a stronghold of food and exercise off their life has but I was doing this with God's help.

“Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

1 Samuel 16:7

I began to focus my eyes on Jesus and seek Him. I was water baptised, which I had not done as a Christian yet because I wanted to take the decision seriously and wait until I finally knew what I was doing. I also started speaking in tongues. (*A personal prayer language to God that the Bible says all believers can have.*) Breakthrough in my life kept taking place. One step at a time, true freedom was coming. Chains were being broken off my life. Amen.

Living with a group of guys in bunk beds in the same room at Bible College grew me a lot. I got to know them as mates and had no attractions to them. God was changing my thinking patterns. His Spirit was truly manifesting in me. It was great to also build a few friendships with guys who just accepted me for who I was. I had stopped comparing myself with other guys so much. My obsession and addictions were slowly slipping away. As I focused more on God and less on my dramas, the more my perspective on life become clearer. I began to find balance between the extremes I had been operating in over the years. I worked on a number of personal goals to help bring change. I had to continue to get over the things that were trapping me in my life. I needed the freedom God had for me.

I still have issues to work on and watch out for now. If I am tested it is always in my areas of weakness but God’s strength and faithfulness has always been and is always there for me. I am also aware that Satan can only tempt me in the areas he has seen me struggle in before in my past. He has no new tricks. I must be on the lookout and stand upon the

Word, so I can truly overcome by the Word of God, the blood of the Lamb and the word of my testimony.

“They overcome him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.” Revelations 12:11

YOUR FUTURE IS BRIGHT

I love the fact that God works all things out for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purposes (*Romans 8:28*). My future is bright because of all He is in me. What can stop me? Well, probably only myself. If I stand on His Word and believe it by faith then I will be able to overcome anything. All things are possible with God (*Matthew 19:26*). I am being restored by Him in his perfect timing. You can't get a 'quick fix' emotional healing from Him and sometimes a physical healing doesn't always happen instantly either. God is not the voice you hear or the person you see at the window of a drive through takeaway restaurant.

No matter where you are in your walk with Him, He has the best future planned for you (*Jeremiah 29:11*). Just give yourself to Him so He has something to work with. Surrendering to Him may hurt, but it works. Who cares what you have done in the past that doesn't make you who you are. Your behaviour and who you are today in Christ are two separate things. You are not what you have done. Anyway, I know that the behaviour of Jesus was good enough and that's all that matters. Your behaviour will never be good enough in this life but He made a way for you to be forgiven and empowered by His grace.

You are called to help others: called firstly to lead your family, then to serve in church ministry and then to be a role model in your

community. Don't dwell on old issues from your past. True self-image starts with emotional healing from God and that takes time. Let yourself keep moving forward in Him. You are no longer a victim of circumstances. A Christian has to keep growing. To start with, your growth needs to be intentional and the rest will happen by the Holy Spirit.

I know that I have a stronger trust in God than ever before because I have seen His faithfulness in my life for so many years. Maybe the best is yet to come. My future is bright. Not because of anything I have done to earn it but because of everything He has done. Your future is bright too. I pray you will be able to trust in Him with all your heart and that you will enjoy seeing what He has in store for you.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Acknowledge Him in all your ways and He will direct your path.” Proverbs 3:5

“May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it.” 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

FEELING LOW SOMETIMES

Why is it we feel so low about ourselves sometimes that we think we are ugly? I know what this feels like. I used to look around and see all the attractive people and score them a big fat ten out of ten for looks while I would score myself a five or under. I thought they looked perfect. I would often see a group of good-looking people when I was feeling low and think to myself, “Here come the perfect people.” And, when I saw a couple together who both looked like models I would see

them as perfect people. I would get so self consumed that I would become angry. Then I would have to stop and ‘slap’ myself (*not literally!*) and say, “They have issues too. They are all sinners too and they need God in their lives just as much as me.”

As soon as you start comparing yourself with others you will always end up feeling worse. You need to start telling yourself that you are attractive. You are a unique, attractive and beautiful person and God has made you just the way He wants you to look.

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my Mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”

Psalm 139:13-14

You can’t change what you look like right now. You are God’s design, perfect in His eyes. If you strive to change your physical looks by plastic surgery, tanning salons or any other unnatural processes so you can keep up with the image the world is presenting to you, then maybe, without realising it, you are raising a fist at God’s work in disgust.

There are times that a person needs surgery for medical purposes due to an accident or illness. However if you choose to have surgery out of vanity then I’m sure God would not be that impressed about it. He created you perfectly in His eyes and your choosing to have surgery means that you have some deeper insecurities which need to be addressed. You don’t need plastic surgery - you need spiritual heart surgery.

For years I could often accept the weaknesses and strengths of other people’s appearances and personalities but I found it really hard to accept my own looks and weaknesses. You need to acknowledge your

physical beauty and the strengths of your appearance and focus on those points, not the flaws you see in yourself. You need to get on with enjoying life in your own body. You are spirit and soul. The body is just the package you have been given to do life in while here on earth.

I have a big nose and my ears stick out. I don't have abs and my arms are skinny. I have acne and I have no muscles. Rather sexy, even if I do say so myself! And I'm still single. I know I'm a good catch even though I have never had a date. Growing up I had to repent time and time again to God for the things I did not like about my appearance, the shape of my body and the looks He gave me. Now I have to continue to get over it (*get over myself*) and get on with life, not letting the devil have a foothold in my life anymore. He came with all his lies, feeding me for years. I chose to believe those lies as truth and the result was a life of bondage and pain. What was I thinking!

What lies do you believe about yourself? Isn't it time to choose life and not death? There is a lot of power in realigning your thinking patterns so you are in a position of freedom. A place of freedom is the right place to be as a Christian. But will you choose it?

You need to get hold of every Scripture you can find about **who you are in God** and **who God is in you**. The old has gone, the new has come (*2 Corinthians 5:17*). But has it really happened in your life? Your image, as a Christian, needs to be found in God. You need to speak aloud the Scriptures you find about image. The power of the tongue is crazy. You speak either life or death over yourself and your future (*Proverbs 18:21*). The choice is yours. What choice will you make in this area today? God is a God of free will.

“The tongue has the power of life and death and those who love it will eat its fruit.” Proverbs 18:21

What sort of negativity or lies have you been speaking over your life lately? Are you declaring through Christ how beautiful and gifted you are or are you still choosing to hate things about yourself? What right do you have to tell God He made a mistake when He made you? God does not make mistakes and He can make something beautiful out of your life no matter what has happened to you, how you look, what you have done or where you have come from.

As you become a role model or leader to others, one of the most important things to work on is becoming more secure in who you are in Christ. You can't do it in your own strength. If you are trying to lead and you are insecure about yourself, everyone will see that. You need to lead out of your strengths and not from your personal insecurities. I am not perfect but I work on leading others in the security that I find in God. Yes I still have personal issues to work on, but no one else needs to know those things. That is for God and me to sort out with the help of the Holy Spirit and, maybe in certain seasons in my life, with the help of a pastor or a counselor.

Here is a list of scriptures I have found helpful that you could start speaking aloud over your life. In fact, go one step further than that. Make a point of actually believing them in your heart. Let your true image, your security, confidence and strength be found in God.

“I am God’s child” John 1:12

“I am united with the Lord and one with Him in spirit”

1 Corinthians 6:17

“I have been brought with a price, I belong to God”

1 Corinthians 6:20

“I have been adopted as God’s child” Ephesians 1:5

“I have direct access to God through the Holy Spirit”

Ephesians 2:18

“I have been redeemed and forgiven of all my sins” Colossians 1:14

“I cannot be separated from the love of God” Romans 8:35

“I am hidden with Christ in God” Colossians 3:3

“I am a citizen of heaven” Philippians 3:20

“I can find grace and mercy in time of need” Hebrews 4:16

“I have been chosen and appointed to bear fruit” John 15:16

“I am God’s workmanship” Ephesians 2:10

“I may approach God with freedom and confidence” Ephesians 3:12

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”

Philippians 4:13

DEVELOPING GOD-ESTEEM

The idea of God-esteem may sound peculiar to you. You’ve heard of ‘self-esteem’ and I’m sure you can think of someone you know who has low self-esteem or maybe that’s you? Well, the way I see it is that your self-esteem can only get developed to its fullest potential when you yourself can be found in God and Him in you.

There are many self-help programs around the globe these days, in addition to the many books, tapes and retreats. Some have very good, practical ways to help a person become more positive and confident thus developing their ‘self’. But, the truth is, you can only advance your ‘self’ to a very small degree in your own strength. These self-help programs are often focused on will power to talk yourself into liking who you are. I’m sure that is a very hard task to achieve. Also, having that new positive outlook on life must begin to wear off after a few weeks. Changing your inner self takes time and only God can truly do it.

These programs may help you present a more confident image, giving an illusion of freedom to others around you but you may still feel low

on the inside. God works deep within - from the inside out. You cannot compare the small advancement or growth of 'self' you get by your own strength and will power with the growth of 'self' that takes place in God, with the help of the Holy Spirit. God's growth is endless. It continues until glorification - until you reach your final destination, Heaven.

Once you come to know Christ, no longer will you have to go on striving in your flesh to develop yourself, always continuing to fail at trying to become the person you want to be. What a waste of time and energy. You may want to become like someone else who you are jealous about, whom you will never be like and who God has never intended you to be. The Holy Spirit will help you develop yourself to become more Godly. That is what really counts in the long run. Your esteem (*worth*) should become centered on and built upon Christ. If there is anyone who you should try to become like, it is Jesus.

By beginning to accept your own flaws and weaknesses you will come to realise that God loves you regardless of those things and it gives Him room to work in you because you are not perfect yet. I know this to be so true in my life. God loves a challenge. He is able to work with what you have. By allowing God to show you His love you can come to an understanding that God accepts you right now for who you are. Sometimes the hardest thing is to begin to accept yourself just where you are. I know all about how hard that can be. By acknowledging our shortcomings we will also become more humble and teachable to receive help from God.

Becoming someone who speaks Scripture over your life will bring growth in you. You can also be positive but the most crucial thing is to let God work with you and in you. You will be changed forever and move into greater freedom day by day, if you just let God be God –

something it took me a while to learn. Just start praying to Him about your desire to become more secure in Him. You need to release control to Him and trust Him. Are you ready to do that? I think the most noticeably insecure people are the control freaks and people who have prideful attitudes. Is that you?

If you are called to influence others you need to be secure, not caring about what people think of you and always being true to who you are - the person God has created you to be. Being secure means you don't have to try and control every situation and you won't try and control people. You don't need to get involved in other people's emotional dramas and try to fix all their problems. I'm sure you have enough dramas of your own. I know I do.

In this world so many people are trying to feel like someone special, famous, good looking, talented, cool! The truth is no one is really all that. We all have a sinful nature. "***All have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God.***" ***Romans 3:23*** We were all created in the image of God, but the fall of man has influenced us to strive to become people we are not.

Over the years in ministry God has used my past experiences to help me show grace to those I minister to and relate to them. The moments when I have sinned have impacted my life in such a way that I begun to hate the sin even more. It is good that I have hated the sin and haven't chosen to hate myself because I have messed up in these areas.

You don't need to try and strive to be someone because you are already someone. Everyone is important to God. God made us all. You have to now seek Him and get His help to become who you are meant to be- the person He intends you to be.

GROWTH REVIEW

CHAPTER ONE

WHO THE HECK AM I?

ONE: Did you ever struggle in the area of self-image while growing up? Name something you did not like about yourself and how it affected you? Do you still have these same struggles now?

TWO: Write down three statements that God declares you are from the Bible that you find easy to accept about yourself. Explain.

THREE: Name two statements from the Bible that God declares about you that you still find hard to accept as truth. Why do you find it hard to believe those things about yourself?

FOUR: Write some insecurities you still have about yourself and how you can begin to work on them. What are they? Who will help you work on them? Find a teaching or workbook that will help you grow out of this area of insecurity.

FIVE: Write down as many Bible truths that God has said about who you are in Him. (*Use a bible concordance or work with a friend to do this*). Try and get a list of twenty statements...

SIX: Write about a time recently when you encouraged a friend who was feeling low or insecure. How did you help them? What advice did you give to them? Do you actually believe the advice you gave them and put it into action in your own personal life? Why or why not?

SEVEN: What is a personal goal you can set to help yourself grow to become more secure in a certain area?

EIGHT: Think of three people you may feel comfortable getting help and advice from while working through issues related to insecurities you have.

NINE: Now take some time to write down a list of fifty things you like about yourself. Take your time. You may want to do this over a period of a few weeks. Get to it!