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Confidence

“It is very, very, very, very good.”

How many times a day do you say that? How many times in your life do you say that? This is what the Bible tells us God said when God created the Heavens and the Earth. God looked at all that had been created and uttered the words, “It is very, very, very, very good.”



In a dark, 1981 New York hotel room, a young man named Leonard sat in the middle of the carpeted floor in his underwear. He rocked back and forth in torturous agony and from time to time he would bang his head on the carpet. Something both dark and beautiful had captured his heart. It was something more profound than your normal, “Oh, isn’t that pretty?” Those kinds of comments bothered him. They were trite and simplistic. They failed to get beneath the surface to the tension and the pain.

Since his youth, Leonard had been captivated by this vision of beauty mixed with brokenness. It was the most breathtaking vision he’d ever experienced. Now he wrestled within his soul and his mind. He tried to find the words to share this vision with the world.

The words escaped him.

Yet, he had faith. He believed that it might still be possible to share what he was feeling. His heart told him that with the right combinations of words he could welcome people into a completely new perspective on love.

The words that he searched for were rooted in a history of painful experiences he’d had since childhood. They revealed a broken life that was both twisted and perfect.

To say that Leonard had a unique perspective on love would be an understatement. His father died when Leonard was only nine-years-old. Since then, he had been raised by his grandparents who, at an early age, introduced him to the faith of his forefathers as he studied the Torah. In those stories he found the beauty and conflict with which he now wrestled.

The very first words of scripture speak of a God who created perfect heavens and a perfect earth by a process of division. The light separated from the darkness. Earth took it's shape from a formless chaos. The sea separated from the dry land.

That was the first of two creation stories in the Bible.

The second story depicted God reaching down into the dirt and creating, from that dust, a man and a woman. In that story, God creates a garden for them to live in, and to thrive. God named the garden Eden and was perfect in every way. And life for the man and the woman was also perfect. Everything was provided for them...until a serpent came along and confused the man and woman into believing that God was not *for* them, but that God was *against* them.

The Bible tells us that when the first humans turned their back on God, they perceived their own nakedness for the very first time. Out of this sense of nudity, new emotions of shame and humiliation were born that caused the first people to hide from God. They simply could no longer be comfortable walking this earth in their birthday suits.

One of the most heartbreaking and poetic lines of scripture is this, "They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden." Whatever had taken place in the hearts of the first people caused them to do something new. When they heard the footsteps of God approaching, instead of running toward God, they ran and hid.



At the YMCA in Salt Lake City, where I grew up, we would spend endless summer days playing in the pool and having fun diving down to see how deep we could go. I remember the sensation of profound quiet deep beneath the surface. I loved to sit still on the bottom of the pool, because down there I felt calm. I was relaxed and alone.

High above my head stood a diving board that hovered fifteen feet above the water. To me, it was the ultimate challenge.

One day, I mustered up the courage to climb to the top of the high dive ladder to see exactly how high it was. My legs were weak beneath me as I walked slowly along the board, holding fast to the railings on each side. My heart raced within my chest.

I looked below at the placid water. I was pretty young to be going up there. But, my life was about exploring both the depths and the heights, and pushing myself to the limit. When I got to the end of the diving board I looked down and realized how terrifyingly high in the air I was. I glanced up from the water and I noticed that a collection of kids from the pool had looked up at me and begun to cheer. Some of them were beckoning me to jump from the diving board, while others were telling me to stay put. My attempt to jump for the first time from the high dive had drawn an unusual amount of attention and interest. Why was *my* dive such a big deal?

Then, the most horrific experience happened. Something that only happens in nightmares: my swimsuit was abruptly yanked from my waist all the way down to my ankles. Someone had snuck up behind me and had ‘pantsed’ me in front of everyone in the pool. My first reaction was one of complete shock and embarrassment. My second reaction was to collapse in total shame. With my swimsuit around my ankles I curled into a ball and fell forward from the diving board into the water below. Hitting the water was no longer my greatest fear—it was again my place of refuge. As I splashed down into the water I welcomed the deafening quiet of the water below, and I hid in the darkness. I would have done anything to stay below the water for ten or twenty minutes or even until after the pool was closed. I didn’t want to emerge from my hiding place for fear of having to look anyone in the eye.



It doesn’t take long for paradise to come crashing down to the ground. Hearts can be broken in minutes. Relationships can be destroyed.

Don’t ever assume that you’re immune. We can all easily find ourselves on the hotel room banging our heads into the carpet because of a life filled with brokenness. But, there is something profoundly beautiful that can happen in those moments of struggle.

The story of God’s creative work in the world does not stop at the Garden of Eden. Scripture takes us on a journey where God shapes and forms the people he creates. God’s plan is to bring people back into relationship with God. However, what took God days to create then takes God thousands of years to put back together. And, it appears that the greatest place of brokenness in the human being lies within the heart. Heartbreak is immense. It is powerful. It leaves scars. And it perpetuates itself.

As the old saying goes, “hurt people hurt people.”

Perhaps the reason that there is so much distance between people and God is that the heartbreak is so deep and profound. At our core, we probably all know how much God loves us. Because of that, we carry so much guilt with us for having given up on God. How could we? God has never given up on us. God would never give up on us!



At the end of the first book of the Bible, we meet a man named Jacob. The reason he was named Jacob, which means usurper, was because he was born holding onto the heel of his twin brother Esau. Sure enough, he grew up to usurp Esau by stealing his older brother's birthright. This treachery that Jacob committed against Esau caused so much pain in their family. It reverberated for decades until Jacob decided to travel back to meet his brother face-to-face.

At the end of his journey back home, right before Jacob is about to meet his brother, he sends his entire convoy and family on ahead while he spends a night alone on an island in the middle of a river. That night, Jacob meets God. God appears as an angel and wrestles with Jacob all night long. Yet, Jacob refuses to relent or give up. At the end of the night, God strikes Jacob's hip out of its socket, giving Jacob a limp that carried with him for the rest of his life. From that point on, God gives Jacob a new name. Jacob is now forever to be referred to as Israel, meaning “one who wrestles with God.”

Notice that God does not give Jacob the name “one who is at peace with God.” Instead, God welcomes Jacob into relationship with him. God welcomes Jacob into an identity that is precisely defined by Jacob's struggle with God. The journey of faith can easily be described as a wrestling match with God. Similarly, this thing called love is dynamic. Love is more than a placid “Who cares?” This is what God seeks to communicate to us through the Bible. God wants us to know that we are not alone. We are not the first ones to wrestle and struggle. In fact, to be a part of God's family is to identify as part of the nation of Israel. We are God's children. We are the Israelites, which translates to mean “the ones who wrestle with God.”

I hate to tell you that the story of the family of Israel is not one of peace and tranquility. It is a story of struggle, in-fighting, jealousy, and famine. Because of severe famine they became immigrants in Egypt where over many, many years they grew to become one of the most influential and wealthy groups of people in the history of the world.

Just when things seemed to be going great for the people of Israel, they took a turn for the worse. The king of Egypt, named Pharaoh, became suspicious of the people of Israel. Pharaoh believed that they had become too powerful and too influential, and that their presence was becoming a burden to his nation. In order to limit the threat he perceived, he enslaved the Israelites and set out to kill every young baby boy within the Israelite community. Pharaoh's direct orders were, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

When one of the Hebrew women had a baby, she hid it for three months before placing it in a basket on the river among the reeds. A short time later, Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe there. When she noticed the baby, compassion filled her heart and she decided to raise it as her own child. She named the baby Moses, meaning "one delivered from the water."

Moses grew up within an Egyptian household. From scripture we learn that he had a stutter. Because of this, he didn't see himself as a natural leader, yet he had an inner sense of what was right and wrong. It was this sense of injustice that got him into trouble.

When Moses was out at the quarry one day, he saw a fellow Jew being beaten up by an Egyptian. Thinking that no one was watching, he killed the Egyptian, committing the worst crime imaginable. Just like the first people who turned away from God in the Garden of Eden, Moses tried to cover up his sin. His first attempt to run from the truth of what he had done was to hide the body. However, the next day he found that word had spread about his crime. He was no longer Moses, Son of Pharaoh's Daughter; he was now Moses The Murderer.

In response, Moses ran. He ran as far away as he could. He ran to the mountains hoping to find refuge; but Moses could not run away from himself.

After settling in the mountains, he sat down at a well one day to rest, and he witnessed some shepherds harassing a couple of women trying to collect water for their sheep. Moses jumped to their rescue and chased their assaulters away. Little did Moses know that day that he was meeting and defending his future wives—daughters of a priest named Jethro. Together they became a family, and Moses spent his days herding sheep for his father-in-law.

At first glance it may seem that Moses truly escaped and found his perfect hiding place. However, there was someone that Moses could not hide from.

Yahweh.

While moving the sheep from one mountain pasture to another, Moses encountered a bush that was perpetually aflame. He stopped to marvel at the bush, in flames yet not burning:

When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

God went on to tell Moses that God was calling Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery. That's when Moses asked who is it he was speaking with. What is the name of God?

God replied, 'Yahweh'.

The words in Hebrew mean "I AM." They represent a God who needs no name and no label. The name Yahweh says it all. It states that God has no shame. God has no need to explain God's self to anyone. Instead, God simply declares what no human would ever be able to declare: I AM.

We are forever in search of our identity. We are constantly trying to differentiate ourselves and to understand who we are in relationship to those around us. The most difficult challenge of life is to be able to say the words 'I AM.' And, yet, we will never be able to, because we are not God.



I remember in high school everyone always tried to be cool. *Everyone* did! Well, everyone except the really cool kids. That's when I discovered that the difference between cool kids and uncool kids was that uncool kids tried to be cool...while really cool kids never tried to be cool. By definition, the very minute that any kid (cool or not) tried to be cool, they immediately came across as being very, very, very uncool.

The people who are the most attractive in life are the ones who have a strong sense of self. We also refer to these people as the self-confident ones. They don't look to others to shape their identity.

Instead, they have clarity about who they are, and they own it. They strut it. They embrace it.

Those people who are the least confident are easily the least attractive.



I met my wife one Sunday afternoon in Paso Robles. When I finished cleaning up from the Highlands Church worship services at the movie theater downtown, I went back to my apartment, ate a huge lunch, drank a beer and fell into a wonderful post-church coma. When I woke up later that afternoon I was so happy and could think of nothing more enjoyable than going for a swim in the sweltering summer weather. I had one priority: get cool.

So I put on whatever clothes I could find...red board shorts, a silk Sean Jean cow print shirt I'd received from my relatives in Vegas and some black dress shoes. My hair looked like one of Nick Nolte's mugshots. I didn't care what I looked like at all, because I wasn't trying to impress anyone.

As I approached the swimming pool, I noticed that a young woman was in the water and her boyfriend was lying out in the sun on a deck chair. I thought, "Wow! She seems really cool! I wonder if I can invite her to church." Yes, I know that this sounds pathetic, but her boyfriend looked like a male-model and she was easily one of the prettiest women I'd ever seen. First, I didn't have a chance. Second, I'm not EVER going to hit on another guy's girl.

I introduced myself, found out she had just moved to Paso Robles, and then assured her that she was going to LOVE living on the Central Coast. At the end of our conversation I invited her to come to a party that my roommate and I were throwing at our apartment the next weekend. As far as I was concerned, I met a really beautiful woman who might be my friend. Hardly did I know that because I was not trying to impress her, I had come across as one of the most confident men she had ever met. Translated: She thought I was sexy and she made plans that day to marry me 😊 After I left the pool that day, she told her boyfriend that she thought she had met the man she was going to marry...his response was, "I know."



Confidence is everything. It is one of the most necessary ingredients for love to flourish. The other side of this truth is that if you lose confidence in someone else, then you also lose trust. If you have no confidence in another person, then you really lose almost all hope of continuing a loving relationship with them.

God is totally and utterly confident. God has no uncertainty. The reason for God's confidence is God's perfection. Perfect love has always constantly flowed from God to all humanity since the beginning of time. God has always spoken the words "it is very, very, very, very, very good" to every person that ever lived to remind us of how this all began.

Our response is to hide. We hide from God, because a damn lie has crept into our brains telling us that God doesn't love us. God does love us. God loves us so much that God will not allow us to retreat or to runaway from the truth of our pain and our brokenness. Instead, God draws us into a relationship with God. We are invited into a perpetual wrestling match with God.

The Bible is so helpful because it provides a literal mountain of evidence of God's reliability. God does what God says God will do. God is faithful and always follows through. God is ultimately the only one in whom we can have confidence.

What we also learn from life and from the Bible is that people are not great at maintaining confidence. People are fallible and frail. They fall apart and fail to stand up to the tests of life. There is nothing quite as unreliable as other people. If you're looking for one certainty in life, you can be assured of the fact that people lack true integrity.



Leonard was searching for integrity as he sat in his underwear on the floor of his hotel room in New York City. He was looking for love. Not the kind of cartoonish love that sells Hallmark Cards on Valentines Day. It was the kind of love that reminds us we are created from dirt, that we will ultimately become dirt and that in-between, we are basically walking dirt bags. Leonard was looking to express the truth about love. It is by that truth that we are broken and by some mystery of the universe that we are loved.

Leonard was not from New York City; he was from Canada. But New York is where he searched for his identity. He wanted to make a name for himself. He was striving to stand out in the community of

artists and musicians. Unfortunately, things were just not working out in the Pollyanna way he had imagined. Life was not a storybook. His life was more like a book of the Bible: a series of mixed-up, messed-up experiences. And, looking upward from the floor to the ceiling, he finally uttered the words that he'd struggled to express for so long:

“Baby, I’ve been here before,
I’ve seen this room and I’ve walked this floor,
I used to live alone before I knew ya,
And, I’ve seen your flag on the marble arch,
Love is not a victory march,
It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah.”

The song that Leonard Cohen wrote that night would go on to be one of the greatest hymns ever written. It would captivate the minds and hearts of countless people worldwide and it would set in their minds a new statement about love. It was a song that spoke of love in terms of both beauty and pain. It was honest and it was real. For that reason, people wanted to hear the words to Hallelujah over and over and over and over again.

From the dirt, Leonard created something beautiful. From the raw soil of his existence, Leonard somehow formed a thing of beauty that was a powerful expression of his inner soul. And for years to come he would hear the world say the words, “It is very, very, very, very good.”



God wants us to stand before God in all of our truth. God wants us to be confident and to speak the love that we have experienced. God wants our trust.

Admittedly, it is intimidating to encounter the great I AM. It is difficult to see how vulnerable and exposed we are before our Creator. And, there is an evil and horrible narrative that would claim that a relationship with God would deprive us of our true potential. We are destined to stand before I AM and say—albeit in all of our frailty—the words, “I am.”

The absolute most confident people that I have ever met are people who are totally convinced that God loves them and that God has

their best interests in mind. These same people are the ones who are also keenly aware of their dustiness and brokenness. They are not afraid to admit that they have turned their backs on God and most likely will continue to do so despite their greatest hope at remaining faithful.

What makes these people so confident is not their own abilities. Their confidence is a direct extension of their faith. It is a direct reflection of a God in whom their confidence is well-placed.



When I first got married to Dani, I remember other couples saying things like, “we share everything with each other.” While this was something I wanted in my relationship, it was contrary to my naturally private disposition. But, something profound has taken place in me and it is because of this thing called love that I have experienced. Somehow, love has drawn me out of my shell and I am a more confident person that I have ever been before.

I can see that, with each passing year of marriage, we are becoming more and more confident and more and more comfortable around one another.

Since we’ve been married, we’ve had a dog and three kids. We’ve seen a lot of difficult times as well as a lot of wonderful ones.

God is gradually transforming me through my marriage. God is helping me to overcome vivid and real areas of shame that I have carried with me since I was a young kind. In a way, God was pulling me up out of the deep end, pulling me up out from the murky waters where I would have preferred to hide. Before my wife came along, I was still hiding beneath the surface of the water, holding my breath and hoping that I could stay down there forever.

It’s impossible.

We cannot hide forever. We must be honest about who we are and where we’ve come from. Our job is to be honest about our struggles and to allow ourselves to be defined as the ones who bring those struggles before God.

This is LOVE is a process of digging down deep and being both real and comfortable enough with what we find that we are able to share it with the world. Of course, an awful lie will continue to tell us that if we allow ourselves to be vulnerable we will die. It is quite the opposite. The path to life begins when we approach God in all the brutal honesty of our condition.