



PILLAR ONE: SHEM

# IDENTITY FORMATION GUIDE

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Discover Who God Says You Are So You Can  
Stop Performing and Start Living

*"For we are God's masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,  
which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

*-- Ephesians 2:10*

**THE VERTICAL MAN**

[theverticalman.com](http://theverticalman.com)

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# 01 WHY IDENTITY MATTERS

Something is wrong, and you already know it. You wake up, go through the motions, provide for your family, show up at church -- and still feel like you are living someone else's life. You have achieved things the world says should satisfy you, yet a quiet emptiness sits in your chest that success cannot touch.

You are not alone. According to the American Bible Society's 2025 *State of the Bible* report, **only 30% of Gen Z men reported having a strong sense of identity** -- the weakest identity score of any demographic ever measured. Men across every generation are drowning in performance, approval-seeking, and borrowed identities that crumble the moment life applies pressure.

But here is the breakthrough the same research uncovered: **Scripture engagement is the single strongest predictor of identity strength**. Sixty-three percent of "Scripture Engaged" individuals ranked at the highest level of strong identity. Men who know who they are in Christ are dramatically less lonely, more resilient, and more effective as husbands, fathers, and leaders.

*"Biblical manhood begins with a clear understanding of who God says we are. The enemy's strategy from the very beginning has been to attack our identity and divide. If we don't know who we are then we're easily swayed, insecure, and passive."*

This guide is the first step in The Vertical Man's four-pillar framework. Before you can lead your household (SEDER), fight your battles (GEVURAH), or secure your legacy (NACHALAH), you must answer the most foundational question a man can ask:

## Who am I -- really?

SHEM -- the Hebrew word for *name* -- is the pillar of Identity. It encompasses three dimensions: your **Shem** (Name/Essence), your **Tzelem** (Image), and your **Nephesh** (Soul). Together, they form the bedrock of everything else you will build as a Vertical Man.

The aim is clear: **Men know whose they are, who they are, and why they are here** -- as sons, husbands, fathers, and leaders under God.

## 02 THE BROKEN MIRROR

### Where False Identity Comes From

Every man is looking into a mirror. The question is: which one? The world hands you a mirror built from career achievements, bank accounts, physical appearance, sexual conquest, social status, and the approval of people who do not truly know you. It is a broken mirror -- and it gives back a distorted image.

As Crossway's identity framework states: *"Your instinctive sense of identity is skewed"* apart from Christ. You have been building your sense of self on foundations that were never designed to hold that weight.

*"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." -- Romans 12:2*

### STEP 1: THE IDENTITY AUDIT

Below, list every source you have drawn your identity from. Be ruthlessly honest. Check every box that applies to you:

- My career title or professional status
- My income, net worth, or financial position
- My physical appearance, fitness, or attractiveness
- My wife's or partner's opinion of me
- My children's behavior or achievements
- My social media presence or public image
- The approval of my father or mother
- My ministry role, church title, or spiritual reputation
- My sexual history or romantic conquests
- My peer group's acceptance or respect
- My education, degrees, or intellectual reputation
- My athletic ability or competitive record

#### JOURNAL PROMPT:

*"What was I praised for as a child? What was I criticized for? How has that shaped what I believe about myself today?"*

### SIGNS YOU ARE LIVING FROM A FALSE IDENTITY

- You people-please compulsively -- you cannot say no without guilt
- You are a workaholic -- rest feels lazy or terrifying
- You react with anger or defensiveness when challenged or questioned
- You struggle to be present with your family -- your mind is always elsewhere
- You perform differently at church than you do at home
- You measure your worth by your last achievement
- You feel hollow even after success
- You hide parts of yourself from the people closest to you

**If you checked three or more boxes in either list above, your identity is rooted in something other than Christ.** That is not a condemnation -- it is a starting point. And the fact that you are reading this guide means you are ready to rebuild.

## 03 THE FATHER WOUND

### Understanding Your Story

For most men, the root of false identity traces back to one relationship: your father. Whether he was absent, abusive, distant, overly critical, or simply silent -- the wound he left shaped how you see yourself, how you relate to God, and how you lead your family.

Research confirms this: Barna data shows that practicing Christian men who experienced positive relationships with their fathers demonstrate significantly higher satisfaction across parenting, marriage, career, and overall well-being. The father wound creates a **generational multiplier effect** -- for good or for destruction.

*"Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me." -- Psalm 27:10*

### STEP 2: THE FATHER LETTER

Write an honest, unsent letter to your earthly father. This letter is not about blame -- it is about truth. Address what you received and what you missed. Use the prompts below:

**What I received from you:** Name the gifts -- provision, presence, discipline, humor, work ethic, faith, tenderness, protection. Be specific.

**What I missed:** Name the gaps -- affirmation, attention, emotional safety, physical presence, spiritual leadership, vulnerability, the words "I'm proud of you."

**How it shaped me:** Connect the dots. What patterns in your life today -- your anger, your withdrawal, your performance, your silence -- trace back to what you received or did not receive?

**What I choose now:** Declare what you will carry forward and what you will lay down. You are not destined to repeat your father's story.

#### JOURNAL PROMPT:

*"What question have I been afraid to ask God about who I am?"*

**A note on healing:** This exercise may surface deep pain. That pain is not your enemy -- it is evidence that something real was lost and something real matters to you. If this process brings up overwhelming emotion, reach out to a pastor, counselor, or trusted brother. Healing was never meant to happen alone.

## 04 WHO GOD SAYS YOU ARE

### Your True Identity in Christ

Now we turn the mirror around. If the world has been handing you a broken reflection, Scripture hands you the true one. Your identity in Christ rests on four unshakable pillars -- truths that do not change with your performance, your mood, or your circumstances:

#### YOU ARE CHOSEN

God selected you before the foundation of the world. You are not an accident, an afterthought, or a mistake. Ephesians 1:4-5

#### YOU ARE FORGIVEN

Your past does not define you. Every sin -- past, present, and future -- has been covered by the blood of Christ. Ephesians 1:7-9

#### YOU ARE A NEW CREATION

The old man is dead. You are not a cleaned-up version of your former self -- you are an entirely new being. 2 Corinthians 5:17

#### YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD

You have been adopted into the royal family. You have a Father who will never leave, fail, or abandon you. John 1:12

These four truths form the bedrock. They are not aspirational -- they are *already true* if you are in Christ. The work is not to earn them but to **believe them so deeply that they reshape how you live.**

## 05 KILLING THE POSER

### Removing the Masks

Every man wears masks. You learned to wear them as a boy -- to survive, to be accepted, to avoid pain. The Poser is the false self you constructed to navigate a world that rewarded performance and punished vulnerability. But what kept you safe as a boy is now keeping you imprisoned as a man.

*"For if a man is going to know who he truly is as a man, if he is going to find a life worth living, love a woman deeply, and not pass on his confusion to his children, he simply must get his heart back."*

### STEP 3: THE MASK INVENTORY

Identify 3-5 personas you adopt in different settings. For each, answer honestly:

**AT WORK:** Who do you pretend to be? The invulnerable leader? The guy who has it all figured out? The one who never needs help?

**AT CHURCH:** Are you the "spiritual" version of yourself -- the man who prays louder, smiles wider, and hides deeper?

**AT HOME:** Do your wife and children get the real you -- or the exhausted, distracted leftovers of your performance elsewhere?

**WITH FRIENDS:** Are you performing confidence, humor, or toughness? What would happen if you admitted you were struggling?

**ALONE:** Who are you when no one is watching? What do you turn to? What are you running from?

#### JOURNAL PROMPT:

*"Where do I feel the most pressure to perform? What would happen if I was fully honest there?"*

### ACCOUNTABILITY ASSIGNMENT

This week, share **one unmasked truth** with a trusted brother -- a friend, mentor, pastor, or small group member. Not a dramatic confession. Just one honest admission you have been holding back. The Poser dies in the light.

## 06 LIVING FROM YOUR NEW NAME

### Stepping Into Who God Made You to Be

Throughout Scripture, God renames people at turning points in their story. Abram became Abraham. Jacob became Israel. Simon became Peter. The old name represented the old identity. The new name represented the man God was calling forth.

**He wants to rename you too.**

#### STEP 4: NAME THE LIE, CLAIM THE TRUTH

For each false belief you identified in The Identity Audit (Section 02), write the corresponding biblical truth. Here are examples to get you started:

THE LIE	THE TRUTH
"I am only as valuable as my last achievement."	"I am God's masterpiece, created for good works." -- Ephesians 2:10
"I have to earn love and approval."	"I am chosen and loved before I did anything." -- Ephesians 1:4
"My past disqualifies me."	"I am a new creation. The old has gone." -- 2 Corinthians 5:17
"I am alone in this."	"I have been adopted into God's family." -- John 1:12
"I am not enough."	"God's power is made perfect in my weakness." -- 2 Corinthians 12:9
"Real men don't need help."	"As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." -- Proverbs 27:17

#### JOURNAL PROMPT:

*"If God wrote a one-sentence description of the man He created me to be, what would it say?"*

## 07 THE IDENTITY AUDIT

### Complete Self-Assessment Checklist

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Rate yourself honestly on each statement below. Use a scale of 1 (never true) to 5 (always true). Total your score at the end.

#### SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I can articulate who I am in Christ without hesitation.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I spend time in Scripture daily, not out of duty but desire.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] My sense of worth is anchored in God's Word, not my performance.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I regularly pray about who God is calling me to become.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I can name at least five Scriptures that define my identity.

#### EMOTIONAL IDENTITY

- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I am aware of my emotions and can name what I am feeling.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I do not suppress pain, anger, or sadness -- I process it.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I have at least one person I am fully honest with about my inner life.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I have examined my father wound and its impact on who I am today.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I am not driven by the need for others' approval.

#### RELATIONAL IDENTITY

- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] My wife/closest relationships see the real me, not a performance.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I am the same man at church, at work, and at home.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I have an accountability partner or small group that knows my struggles.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I initiate vulnerable conversations rather than waiting for crisis.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I invest in mentoring relationships -- both receiving and giving.

#### VOCATIONAL IDENTITY

- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I know the difference between what I do and who I am.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] My career serves my calling, not the other way around.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] A professional setback would not destroy my sense of self.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I work with excellence because God made me, not to earn identity.
- [ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 ] I can rest without guilt because my value is not tied to productivity.

YOUR SCORE	WHAT IT MEANS
80-100	Strong Foundation -- You are building from a solid identity in Christ. This guide will sharpen and deepen what is already true in your life.
60-79	Growing Awareness -- You know the truth but struggle to live from it consistently. Focus on the daily practices in this guide to help you grow.
40-59	Critical Turning Point -- You are at the threshold of breakthrough. Commit to the 30-Day Plan and find an accountability partner to help you stay on track.
20-39	Identity Crisis -- This is your moment. God has brought you to this guide for a reason. Do not rush. Work every exercise and prayer to help you find your true identity.

## 08 30-DAY SCRIPTURE IDENTITY PLAN

### Daily Readings to Rewire Your Thinking

Spend 10-15 minutes each day reading the passage, meditating on it, and writing one sentence about how it applies to your identity. Check off each day as you complete it.

DAY	SCRIPTURE	THEME	DAY	SCRIPTURE	THEME
1	Ephesians 2:10	You are God's masterpiece	16	Romans 12:2	Transformed by the renewing of your mind
2	Psalms 139:13-16	You were knit together with purpose	17	Ephesians 1:7-8	Redemption through His blood
3	Jeremiah 1:5	Known before you were born	18	2 Timothy 1:7	Spirit of power, love, and self-discipline
4	Romans 8:15-17	Spirit of adoption, not fear	19	Colossians 2:10	You are complete in Him
5	1 Peter 2:9	A chosen people, a royal priesthood	20	Isaiah 62:2-4	You will be called by a new name
6	Galatians 2:20	Christ lives in you	21	John 15:15-16	Chosen and appointed to bear fruit
7	2 Corinthians 5:17	New creation -- the old is gone	22	Zephaniah 3:17	He rejoices over you with singing
8	Ephesians 1:4-6	Chosen before the foundation of the world	23	1 Corinthians 6:19-20	Your body is a temple
9	Colossians 3:3	Your life is hidden with Christ in God	24	Romans 5:8	God demonstrates His love
10	Isaiah 43:1	I have called you by name; you are mine	25	Ephesians 3:16-19	Rooted and established in love
11	John 1:12	You are a child of God	26	Psalms 8:4-6	Crowned with glory and honor
12	Romans 8:28-30	Called according to His purpose	27	2 Corinthians 12:9	Power made perfect in weakness
13	Philippians 1:6	He who began a good work will complete it	28	Matthew 6:33	Seek first His kingdom
14	1 John 3:1	See what great love the Father has for us	29	Deuteronomy 31:6	He will never leave nor forsake you
15	Psalms 27:10	The Lord will receive you	30	Revelation 2:17	A new name written on a white stone

**CHALLENGE:** Complete all 30 days without breaking the chain. If you miss a day, pick up where you left off -- do not start over. Grace, not perfection, is the goal. Share your progress with an accountability partner.

## 09 YOUR 10 "I AM" DECLARATIONS

### Speak the Truth Over Your Life

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Cut these out or copy them onto index cards. Speak them aloud every morning for 30 days. Your mouth needs to hear what your heart is learning to believe.

**1. I am God's masterpiece,** created in Christ Jesus for good works prepared in advance for me.

*Ephesians 2:10*

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**2. I am chosen** by God before the foundation of the world, holy and blameless in His sight.

*Ephesians 1:4*

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**3. I am a new creation.** The old has gone. The new has come.

*2 Corinthians 5:17*

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**4. I am a child of God,** adopted into His family with full rights as an heir.

*John 1:12; Romans 8:17*

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**5. I am forgiven** -- completely, permanently, irrevocably -- through the blood of Christ.

*Ephesians 1:7*

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**6. I am not defined by my past,** my failures, or my father's wounds. I am defined by my Father's Word.

*Isaiah 43:18-19*

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**7. I am never alone.** God has promised to never leave me nor forsake me.

*Deuteronomy 31:6*

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**8. I am equipped with a spirit** of power, love, and self-discipline -- not of fear.

*2 Timothy 1:7*

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**9. I am complete in Christ.** I lack nothing that God has not already provided.

*Colossians 2:10*

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**10. I am called by a new name,** written on a white stone, known only to God and to me.

*Revelation 2:17*

# 10 YOUR NEXT STEP

## Continue the Journey

This guide gave you the foundation. You have audited your identity, examined your father wound, confronted the Poser, and begun to speak God's truth over your life. But identity formation is not a one-time event -- it is a daily practice of **dying to the false self and rising as the man God created you to be.**

Identity is **Pillar One** of the Vertical Man framework. Three more pillars remain:

<p><b>PILLAR TWO: SEDER (ORDER)</b> <i>How You Lead</i></p>	<p>Build household systems for marriage, parenting, finances, and time that reflect God's order.</p>
<p><b>PILLAR THREE: GEVURAH (POWER)</b> <i>How You Fight</i></p>	<p>Forge physical, mental, and spiritual discipline to stand firm under pressure.</p>
<p><b>PILLAR FOUR: NACHALAH (LEGACY)</b> <i>What You Leave</i></p>	<p>Secure a covenant legacy that blesses your children and their children after them.</p>

## TAKE ACTION NOW

### 1 Complete the Identity Audit

Work through every checklist and journaling prompt in this guide. Do not skip the hard ones.

### 2 Start the 30-Day Scripture Identity Plan

Begin tomorrow morning. Ten minutes a day for thirty days. Watch what God does.

### 3 Speak Your Declarations Daily

Cut out the ten "I Am" declarations. Post them on your mirror. Say them aloud every morning.

### 4 Find an Accountability Partner

Identity formation was never meant to happen alone. Find one man you trust and walk this together.

### 5 Visit [theverticalman.com](http://theverticalman.com)

Access the full Vertical Man program, join the brotherhood, and continue your formation journey.

## READY TO GO DEEPER?

Visit us at [theverticalman.com](https://theverticalman.com)

Email Sean McDonald directly: [sean@theverticalman.com](mailto:sean@theverticalman.com)

Join the brotherhood. Begin your formation. Stand vertical.

# THE VERTICAL MAN

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I am not a man of the world.

I am a man under God.

I seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness.

I know whose I am. I know who I am.

I lead my household with order and grace.

I forge my strength in discipline and prayer.

I secure a legacy that outlives me.

I die daily to the horizontal.

I rise to stand vertical.

## I AM A VERTICAL MAN.

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