

## Chad Hennings1- Identity

I would like to talk about the word identity. Identity is how you view yourself and how the world views you as a man. Many times, the world tells us that to judge your worth or your identity as a man is typically revolved around what you do for a living. Or how much money you make, or the accolades you have achieved, whether you are an all-state football player or a basketball player. I look back at my time with the Dallas Cowboys, and the only thing I thought about was the Dallas Cowboys. It was very easy when you're winning super bowls, but it was a lot more difficult when you're struggling during an 8/8 season. I don't know how these guys today are doing with their identity. But identity is one of the things,

In time, all our identities and perceptions change. I was a former Cowboys' player, now I'm a fan like you. I've been able to do many things. I've worn a lot of different hats as a fighter pilot, as a student athlete, as a professional athlete, and as a businessman. I have had different identities. One of the biggest struggles when my career with the Cowboys was over, I asked myself the question, who am I? It's pretty easy, I was a fighter pilot. I knew what that meant. I was a professional football player. I knew what that meant. But who was I? In the next stage of my life, what was I going to be? How was I going to perform? And I think that's when I really struggled. In the early 20th century, one of the most powerful nations Christian nations on the earth was Germany. In the 1920's statistics showed that over 97% of the German population on any given week would attend church services. So Germany was known as a Christian nation. But you know what happened to them when the national socialist party took over, Hitler came into power and the rest is history. They were identified as a Christian nation. But the thing the Germans miscalculated was that their identity was not necessarily who they were as Christians, but who they were as Germans. In regards to their nationalistic fervor of their tectonic culture was their warrior mentality. That's where they got their identity. They would march into battle and on their belt buckles was the inscription "God with Us." It is one thing for an infantryman, but can you imagine an SS officer in a concentration camp going up to a little twelve year old Jewish girl because he felt and thought that she was subhuman, put a gun to her head, and pulled the trigger and not think twice about it, and then he would go to Sunday School and Church. Identity has consequences. One individual that was on the receiving end of this was Victor Franco. Franco was a Jewish Austrian psychiatrist who spent many years in concentration camps throughout Europe. He spent time in Auschwitz. His wife and his parents were killed, and all his material possessions were taken and an identity was inscribed on his forearm. While he was in the camp, he made several observations as to why some people lived and others died. He noticed that some people lived under harsher conditions. I mean, they were beat on more. They were basically slave labor. They lived in atrocious conditions while those that lived in more lenient conditions died. And he determined, based on his observations that those that died lost their purpose. They lost their will to live. They couldn't grasp their identity as to who they were. It goes along with what a philosopher says, "That he who has a "why" to live for can bear almost anything." Bottom line translation is that he who has a purpose, a meaning to live for, and can walk through anything to achieve it. Now, that can be religious beliefs that can be for a family membership or it can be an emotion or purpose. And when I read his book, *A Man's Search for Meaning*, I thought, "Why am I here? What is my identity?" You see, I really struggled with identity. My whole purpose as a young man involved athletics. My identity was based on athletics and academic performance. Who I was, was based upon how well I did in the classroom, on the football field, or on the wrestling mat. That was where my identity was formulated. For example, I grew up in Iowa. In Iowa, probably my best sport was wrestling and then football. And for you guys, you football players, if you're not wrestling, you need to wrestle. Coach, where are you? I wanted to put a plug in for wrestling. But no, I wrestled and learned the basics during my freshman year. I set my goal to make varsity. I did make varsity. I was wrestling junior varsity in the 138 pounds weight class. There's a little guy that's about half my weight at that time. But when I went out, I didn't necessarily like wrestling that much because I had to cut too much weight. My sophomore year, I went out for basketball, but I soon realized that I wasn't made for basketball because you couldn't cross face anybody, and couldn't tackle anybody. It just wasn't for me. Then I went back to wrestling my junior year, and this time I was wrestling at 185 pounds. I set a goal that I wanted to make it to state. I ended up going all the way to state, and I can remember my first match. I'm from a small town in Iowa, and I only had 125 in my graduating class. I was walked into this veterans auditorium in down town Demoin, Iowa, where there were ten thousand people in the stands. There were 8

wrestling mats on the stadium floor. I was just intimidated; I took my sweats off and go in to shake my opponent's hand. I am looking around and thought to myself, "What the heck am I doing here? I don't deserve to be here. I'm going to get beat." And this performance attitude was not a good thing. So I walked out, shook his hand, the referee blew the whistle and 6 minutes later the match was over. "Man, I'm not going to allow that to happen to me ever again. I'm not going to be defeated mentally again." My attitude from that day reinforced my whole concept of my identity. It was all about me, my performance, and my work ethic. And literally that whole off season, after football, I got on the bench press and I did my normal number of repetitions. Nobody was going to beat me. I'd do one extra rep to win sectionals, one extra rep to make it to district, and one to make it back to state. To win state, I lived, breathed, and slept wrestling. I'd visualize myself every night before I'd go to sleep doing different wrestling moves, single take down, double take down, and a fireman's carry. Whatever it took to win. I lived, breathed, and slept wrestling. After the football season, wrestling started. Nobody scored a point against me in the early matches. I beat everybody by at least 8 points or I'd pinned them. One guy scored one point against me in the semi-final match at state. During that match my opponent was fishing out and didn't want to get rolled over. He was a little fat kid and I crossed-faced him too hard and I gave him a bloody nose. The ref gave him a penalty point. That's how he scored a point against me. And I won! I can remember standing on that medal platform bending down and my coach putting that medal around my neck, I was thinking, "Man, this is what it's all about. It's all about the work ethic. It is just how hard you can work." After that, I approached every aspect of my life the same way - whether it was in the classroom, or on the athletic field. I also approached my faith in the same manner. My relationship with the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, was all about the work. I would go Church on Sunday, go through my confirmation classes, I would make sure I'm there, and make sure I pray. If I don't pray, I'm not going to achieve what God wants me to do. I had this mentality and it was reinforced because I kept achieving success. I was a two-time academic all American. My senior year in college I led the nation in sacks. I had over 24 sacks my senior year. I won the Outland trophy which was given to the best interior lineman in the USA, academic all American, unanimous all American, MVP (most valuable player) of two different ball games which I played. "Man, I'm somebody." Because it's based on how hard I work, my blue collar work ethic that got me there. And my whole time through college as well as my whole young adult life, my walk with Christ was based upon my performance. That was my identity. That's who I was. After I graduated from the Air Force Academy, I served my commitment. I was assigned to fly the A-10 warthog, the Thunderbolt II. How many of you guys know what an A-10 is? The A-10 is a closer support aircraft. It's like a flying tank. The plane had a 30 mm Gatling gun called the avenger. Inside the bullets was depleted uranium, a high explosive. Squeeze the trigger and shoot 4,000 rounds a minute, squeeze the trigger for a second, that's over 100 rounds of depleted uranium. I could shoot the cap off a tank from over 5 miles away. The bullets could penetrate two and a half inches of armor. Literally when you were shooting the gun, you make allowances for wind. Hunters are familiar with the term Kentucky wind age and elevation into the wind. That's what we would basically do with the A-10. We'd have to calculate in our own mind, "okay I know it's about 6,000 feet long range straight shot, I have to elevate it a little bit, pull the jet back, kick in a little rudder, put it right there, and shoot." That's one of the things we used to have an expression in the air force called T-L-A-R (That Looks about Right). Flying that jet was awesome because it was designed to fly really low. I sat in a titanium bathtub. I could take a 20 mm shell, point blank and it wouldn't penetrate the cockpit. I was flying missions in Northern Iraq and when we'd first got there. I'd fly 100 feet above the ground. Sometimes we'd go on little site seeing expeditions and flying down a road. You would see utility poles at your sides with your peripheral vision and think, "I better pull up a little bit." Every mission that I would fly, I'd take off out of Turkish air space at Insula, Turkey, near the city of Adana, near the city of Tarsus where St. Paul and Mary were buried. We would fly across the southern Turkish northern Syrian border and dip into Northern Iraq. Every time I'd refuel, I'd go back into Turkish air space and you could see Mount Ararat off in the distance. You know, from my performance based mentality that I had my faith. This was cool. This was where Abraham left the Caledonians and went down into the promised land of Canaan. This had a very surreal effect on me. And like my performance was based mentality as a Christian, I'd attend chapel services on Sunday if I wasn't flying on base. Turkey being predominately a Muslim society had Turkish nationals that were Christians who would come on base to worship in the chapel services. When talking with

them, you'd hear stories of Christians being persecuted for their faith. Christians were verbally abused and some in the far eastern regions of Turkey were murdered or killed because of their faith. It's one thing to watch Fox News or CNN to see all of the skirmishes, and another to interact with these persecuted Christians. These experiences had an impact on me when I realized that we are living in the greatest nation in the history of mankind where we have the freedom to worship as we choose. We don't have to worry about some secret police breaking into our homes and churches to arrest each and every one of us because we are gathered together talking about Jesus Christ, and our faith. Not everybody in the world has these privileges or freedoms. My performance is based on these experiences. This made me a success on the athletic field, and a success flying jet A-10's?" You know, here I am taking my faith for granted. What do I need to do? I need to work harder. As my first three month rotation, I went back to the base where I was stationed in England, in the UK, and told my wife "we need to work harder on our faith." Here's what we're going to do. We are going to attend a church on Sundays, and get involved with the couple's Bible study. Let's have a daily devotional time that we've always talked about. Let's become more disciplined. Let's improve our faith, and walk with God. My life was continuously being blessed. A couple of months after that, the armed forces went through a force reduction. They waived my commitment which allowed me to go leave the air force to go play for the Dallas Cowboys. Three of my first four years in the NFL, I won three super bowl championship rings. Life was good. My faith walk with the Cowboys was pretty much the same way. I attended chapel services before the game and attend Church afterwards. My life couldn't have been better. I was making more money than I ever thought I could make, and playing for the super bowl Dallas Cowboys.

I had a young son, Chase, who was two and a half at the time. Life was good. I played in the super-bowl 30 in 1996 and my life changed forever. God allows certain experiences in your life, certain pain, and certain sufferings, sometimes to help mold us. I don't know of a better teaching tool than pain and suffering. Not all pain is bad. God can use all things for his good, but on that day, my son Chase woke up with a fever. We took him to the hospital to his pediatrician. They said, "Hey, just go home, give him some Tylenol. Hopefully he gets better. There is nothing we can do for him." He continued to get worse. He kept getting spikes in his fever, and he got to a point where he couldn't walk, had soreness all over. So we'd take him to the hospital. They poked, they prod, they drew blood, and they did not understand why he was ill. We ended up spending five days, six days at the hospital. We didn't know what was going on, and Chase is continuously getting worse. So we take him home. Chase was released with a diagnosis of fever of an unknown origin. What the heck's that? So we take him home and we tried to make him feel better, but he kept getting worse. His temperature was going 101, 102, we'd give him his children's MOTRIN®. I'd give him a dose every four hours, but his fever kept climbing 103, 104, and 105. What do we do now? So we'd draw a cool temperature bath to get our two and a half year old son's temperature down. He's sitting there looking up at me like, "Daddy, why do I feel so bad? Why do I hurt? What's the matter with me? Am I going to be okay?" He doesn't understand. My wife is just crying, and here I am, mister stud. I can't fix it. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't help my son. I was powerless because up until that time, playing for the Cowboys, I was the strongest guy on the Cowboys. I could bench press over 550 pounds. I could squat 750 pounds. At 295 pounds I could run forty yards in 4.7 seconds. But I couldn't help my son. I was hopeless and helpless. Through my identity, I couldn't perform and I couldn't fix it and that's where God really wanted me. He had me in his hands the whole time. And as He began to speak to me over the next few weeks and I had to trust in God.

How many of you guys have had the flu? We don't suffer too well, but our wives, my wife gets the same sickness as I do and she's cooking, she's taking care of me and the kids. She's running the house while I'm over there with my thumb in my mouth, crying like a little baby. But thank God we have a gracious heavenly Father that loves us so much to lead us through painful times. I had a choice to pursue Him or turn my back on Him. You brought this on, I don't agree with you. But that's not His character. That's not who He is. So my wife and I made a commitment. We were trying to pursue God to see who He really was, who we really were. And God began to speak to me and He gave me a picture one time of this big oak tree in my back yard. He said, "This is what I want you to do, Chad. I want you to take your son, Chase, and I want you to tie him up to that tree. I want you to invite all those fans that you mentioned earlier, all those giant fans, all those redskin fans, those demonic Philadelphia eagle fans, and I want you to invite them to come over and make them throw stones at

Chase, call him names. Would you do that for me?” and my reply was, “No, God, that’s my job, I’m his dad, I’m supposed to fix it, I’m supposed to take care of it.” My identity was that through my own strength, I could fix it, I could do it. You see, I had the mentality that you could have taken away all the money that I have earned and it wouldn’t matter. I’d just work harder and get it back. You could put me in the middle of the Sahara desert and I’d work harder to find my way out. But I couldn’t help my son. And I got up the end of the week with that too. He came back and He said, “Would you allow someone to kill your son, Chase? Would you do that for me?” and I was like, “No, God, again, that’s my job.” I don’t know that playing football for 19 years, and taking all those hits to my head had affecting me from responding to God and understanding what He was trying to tell me. It takes time for things to sink in. Sometimes it takes a while for certain things to be absorbed and for us to take ownership. But the light bulb finally went on. It was like God telling me, “Chad, I love you, but you know what, there’s nothing you can do to earn my love. It’s called grace. I sent my Son, Jesus Christ, to live a perfect, sinless life, and to take your sins, past, future, present on the cross on Him and wipe the slate clean. You can’t forgive sin no matter what you do, and you can’t earn my love. It is a gift.” And you talk about a whole weight being lifted off my shoulders because I grasped that. Don’t get me wrong, it is important to work hard. You know in sports competition, even if you’re a Christian, and you pop the guy in the mouth across the line from you. But in regards to your faith, it is a gift. It is grace. I mentioned that I can do all things, one of my favorite verses is Philippians 4:13, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I used to sign my autograph prior to this period in my life, yea, I can do all things. But it was through my weakness, and my inability to overcome, that I found God’s true strength. It doesn’t matter what you do. I was a former fighter pilot, coach, student, football player, basketball player, that’s not who you are. You need faith in Jesus Christ, and walk with Him. You are a son of the living God and your main purpose in life is to worship Him and to make His name known. That’s primary, but it’s through those things that you do, like winning super-bowls, by flying combat missions, by conducting business, by getting good grades, by doing the best that you can do you bring glory and honor to Him. It’s not about us. It’s all about serving God, and I can tell you guys, the other thing that went with this, we weren’t meant to Rambo it, we weren’t meant to walk alone. You have to surround yourself with other men. That’s the whole purpose of wingmen. We’re here to form, Christ centered relationships where we can accept to hold and affirm one another accountable. That’s what we need because if you’re by yourself, you’re going to get picked off. It’s not a matter of if; it’s a matter of when you’re going to go down. We need to lock arms with each other. For example, when I was flying jets in combat, I’d always go out with a minimum of two jets or potentially four jets to accomplish a mission. If I didn’t take care of my wingmen and my wingmen didn’t take care of me, the likelihood of us accomplishing our mission was remote. The likelihood of something bad happening to us, like getting shot down, mechanical malfunction, having to punch out, whatever, that went way up. But men, as I wrap it up here, I want to emphasize for you young men, and your dads that God loves you. He wants the best for you. You don’t have to perform for Him. You accept His grace of love and mercy for what it is. It’s a gift to you. And second, don’t try flying solo. Surround yourself with other strong men that aren’t afraid to get in your face if you’re not on the right path. We need that today. And I’ll just put one quick plug in here, one of the things that we started, yes God, I hear You. One of the things that we started at Wingmen was a wingmen varsity event. This would be like a wingmen varsity where we got dads, I’d bring in different speakers and we got young high school kids, junior high school kids, young men that are coming where the fathers can mentor their young men. I bring different guys in like navy seals to assist me. Guys like Donald Cowen, Michael Irvin, guys that I’ve played against and to inspire you but that’s just the icing on the cake. We need to get together and bond.

Father I thank You. I thank You for Your grace, Your mercy, the love that You have for us. I thank You for these men both young and old, and I pray Lord that you place in us that seed to be men like David, to be men after your own heart, Lord, to pursue You with a fervor and to realize, Lord, that it’s not about us and our performance, that our identity is taken from You as to what You did, what your Son, Jesus Christ, did on the cross. We know that we can come to a full confidence to approach the throne of grace and ask for forgiveness. And I pray, Lord, that You will bless us with the resources that we need to achieve the missions that each and every one of us have in our hearts, that we have a purpose, a passion to fulfill. Bless us, Lord, I pray. Walk with

these young men. Walk with these dads that will go about their day today and inspire them to bring glory and honor to Your name. I pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.