“The Maximus Test”

“Why doesn’t the hero take off his helmet and tell us your real name? You do have a name, don’t you?” from the movie, Gladiator.

It’s the climactic turning point in the movie, Gladiator. The two main characters come face to face. Our hero, Maximus, has witnessed the brutality of the murder of his wife and son. Since then, he has been captured, sold into slavery, trained and excelled as a gladiator – all the while hiding his true identity as the leading general of the Roman army. This culminates with his confrontation with the very man who was responsible for the murder of his family – Claudius, the new and evil emperor.

There, on the Coliseum floor and still wearing his gladiator helmet, Maximus is ordered by Claudius to remove his mask and reveal his true name. He knows he can hide no longer. Maximus takes a deep breath, removes his helmet, turns to face his personal enemy and, with clarity and conviction, reveals his identity.

“My name is Maximus Desmus Meridius, commander of the armies of the north; general to the Felix legions; loyal servant to the true Emperor – Marcus Aureleus; father to a murdered son; husband to a murdered wife; and I will have my vengeance – in this life or the next.”

Vengeance, revenge, personal vendetta. All human emotions that we, as men, struggle with regularly. That’s why, when we watch this movie we can’t blame Maximus for wanting to plant his dagger deep into the heart of the wicked emperor. But these actions are wrong to pursue. However, we aren’t here to critique Maximus’ sense of justice. Instead, we call up this scene to admire the fact that Maximus knew two very
important things: he knew his identity – and he knew that his identity determined his core purpose in life.

Now I’d like to ask you a question. How would you do on the “Maximus Test”? If someone were to stop you on the street, request that you remove your mask, give your identity, and tell how your identity shapes your purpose in life – what would you say? Most guys wouldn’t have a clue.

In fact, the next time you are at one of those boring cocktail gatherings, throw the “Maximus Test” on a few guys and watch them choke on their olive as they try to answer. Why do most guys fail the “Maximus Test”?

First of all, most men probably would never come close to removing their mask. Most of us have grown too accustomed to hiding behind it. Our work, our accomplishments, our performance, our recreations and diversions all serve as common barriers to prevent anyone from getting too close to see who we really are. There is a measure of safety behind these masks and few are willing to risk the exposure.

Another reason for failure is that many men don’t even know who they are or why they are the way they are. Many are simply ignorant and apathetic about who their identity. They don’t know and they don’t really care to find out. The “Masquerade game” is much easier than the “Maximus Test”. It’s simple to live an unexamined life – but, oh is it unfulfilling! Even though we know there is something deeper, our indifference and fear of exposure keeps us in hiding.

Another reason for flunking the “Maximus Test” is that we are confused about who we are. This confusion breeds inconsistency and duplicity. We assume one identity on Saturday night and another completely man comes out Sunday. We will see later, that we’ve got lots of masks from which to choose.

A final reason for our dismal performance is that we lack clarity. We might have a fuzzy identity. Like driving through San Francisco fog, we might briefly see a quick glimpse or
two – but over the long haul, our vision about who we are and what drives us is obscure. We can barely see where we are going and what may be ahead. Our chances of providing a clear and detailed description about the man we see in the mirror each day is about as good as Mr. Magoo giving a detailed visual description of a bank robbery suspect.

When a man fails the “Maximus Test” the results are tragic. We keep our mask firmly in place to play with other posers and hypocrites. We wander aimlessly with no sense of purpose. The result is we go through life confused with more questions than answers, making major mistakes by living under the pretense of these false identities. And tragically, so many draw final breaths with the sighs of deep regrets instead of the joy of a life fulfilled. Why? All because we cannot give the correct answer to the two-fold question:

**Who are you and what drives you?**

Well, Maximus is, of course, a fictional character. But that scene is a great depiction of an historical figure who would have passed the “Maximus Test” with straight “A’s”. He had a very clear understanding of his identity and purpose. Our figure is the Apostle Paul. When we read his letters we see that Paul was just like Maximus. He knew who he was and could articulate his specific identity. And this identity framed his purpose for life, regardless of the hardships he faced.

Let’s do a little long-necking over to the Apostle Paul and see how he was able to pass this test. Don’t worry – we aren’t cheating. Our Instructor actually would love it if we picked up some ways to pass this critical exam.

There are four things that we can observe about Paul’s ability to pass the “Maximus Test”. Let’s first of all set the scene. On the Damascus Road, Paul (known as Saul) has just been struck down by a divine appearance of the Resurrected Lord.

“Maximus Test”  
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“he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city and it will be told you what you must do.” (Acts 9: 4-5)

Although blinded by this encounter, Paul follows the command of Jesus, goes into Damascus and waits three days. During this period of time, God appears in a vision to a follower of Christ named Ananias. In this vision, The Lord commands Ananias to go find Saul (Paul) and lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight. Ananias is fearful. He knows of Saul's reputation as a persecutor of those of the Christian faith, and so, the Lord says to him,

“Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.” – Acts 9: 15-16

There are four things that we can observe about Paul's ability to pass the “Maximus Test”.

First - God's man knows that God establishes his identity. Paul knew from his first encounter with Christ that God had a special plan for him. (“It will be told you what you must do.”) He didn’t have to keep playing the game he had played before. Paul didn't have to invent his own game plan, nor did he have to make up his own identity. Paul’s identity had already been established by God.

As a type-A-to-the-max kind of guy, it must have been difficult for Paul to be lying there blind and thinking of those words, “It will be told you what you must do.” Paul, always a go-getter, was now forced to wait – in darkness for his instructions. But the very fact that there would even be instructions tells Paul that God has created and instigated an identity and purpose for his life. Paul wasn’t in charge – God was. Paul didn’t have to
forge his own identity – God already had. Paul wasn’t to be responsible for trying to figure out what was ahead – God had it figured, planned, established, and created.

The Creator has naming privileges. He knew that one of our biggest questions in life would be the “Who am I?” question. And so he establishes our identity – even before we are born physically, God has already established the number and the design of each day of our lives.

Of course, mankind messed things up by ignoring or rejecting our God-given identity in a vain pursuit of cheap substitutes. As Pascal said, “We all have a God-shaped vacuum.” Many have tried to fit and force so many other things other than God inside that hole. If I could rephrase Pascal – “we all have a God-shaped identity.” Our true identity has already been crafted by God – but we must seek it.

Have you ever read the Robert Ludlum novel, (or seen the movie) Bourne Identity? The plot opens with a man being fished out of the Mediterranean with bullet holes in his back and an account number imbedded in his hip. This man has lost most of his memory. He starts to figure out that he possesses certain intuitions and skills that provide clues to who he is. Bullet holes in his back. Hand-to-hand combat skills. Secret numbers. Throughout the storyline he uses these clues to discover the answer to the question, “Who am I?” He has an identity – but he must discover and recover what it is.

So it is with us. Maybe you find yourself like Jason Bourne. You’ve been out there just floating around. You’re weak. Confused. You have more questions than answers. But deep inside you know that something is there. You know that God has a plan, and perhaps for the first time ever, you’ve got a desire to discover what it is.
Paul realized from that encounter with Christ that something was in store. His identity would soon be discovered – an identity that was God-given. We see this in so many of his letters. In Romans, for instance, he clearly articulates his identity – “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.” (Romans 1:1) In Galatians he writes, “But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles…” (Galatians 1:15) Paul knew from the get-go that God had created and established a special identity.

The second lesson that we learn from Paul is that God’s man knows that his identity is revealed by God. “I will show him…” As God showed Paul – he does the same for us.

God loves us too much to allow us to go through life without knowing who we are. He created our identity and he doesn’t want us to miss it – so He reveals it to us. He goes to the effort to write it down, to preserve and protect it – all so we can understand it. Now, all we must do is read it and trust that what we read is true.

Going back to our Bourne Identity novel, Jason Bourne discovers a file about his identity. This dossier provides his real name, his background, his history. This written record provides information about who he really is and an explanation about so much of his troubled past. For Jason, reading it was one thing. Believing it was another.

Is it much different for us? God has provided a dossier for mankind. It tells our story. It is the written account of who we really are and why we exist. This revelation has been given to answer our questions and to provide direction. But reading it is one thing. Believing it is another. The real quest for our identity is determined by our belief that a God-given identity exists; that it has been revealed; that it can be discovered; and that it is well worth discovering.
When we really believe that God has revealed our identity and that it is worth discovering, then we'll pursue it. We will be diligent to keep reading, keep discovering. We won't give up easily. We'll realize it takes a little digging and mental energy, and ultimately perseverance. We won't discover it through osmosis.

As men, we are called to be diligent. Hard-working. Effort-expending. We are called to depend on what has been revealed daily because our identity needs to be re-established regularly. We need to be continually reminded about how God sees us. Everyday the world comes along and make offers for us to trade our God-given identity for another. We must guard what has been revealed so we don't fall victim to this bad trade.

In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul tells his protégé Timothy, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. In 1 Timothy 6:20 and 2 Timothy 1:14, Paul tells his son in the faith to “guard” what has been revealed. We are to protect what has been revealed – it has extreme value!

Finally, as we take a look at Paul's example we see a third principle that can help us successfully pass the “Maximus Test”. God's man knows that God details our identity. God provides specifics when needed. God provides these details about Paul's God-given, God-revealed identity. Paul will “bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel”.

It's been said that “the devil is in the details” – but aren't we glad that God is in the details as well? When it comes to our identity God provides specifics. As the Master Artist, He paints with a fine brush as He shows us what we are meant to be about. Now admittedly we aren't provided every detail in advance (think about the consequences of that!). But we are provided enough detail and specifics to pass our test.

God provided Paul with enough specific details about his identity and purpose to allow him to effectively carry it out. He wasn't necessarily given all the details – but God
provided enough to know what was ahead and in store – the good, the bad and the ugly. And Paul kept his focus on God so he could clearly see them. Look at one example of these specifics in Acts 20: 22-23

“And now, behold, bound in spirit I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.”

Some details are withheld, some are given. It’s as if God knows that we are on a “need-to-know” basis. When we need to know (according to the One who really knows), we’ll know. If not, let’s trust Him!

God provides details, word pictures, illustrations in order for us to get it. In the weeks ahead, we will take a close look at 6 detailed descriptions. Each of these specific identities will give us clarity and provide a directed purpose.

And speaking of purpose, the last thing we can observe from Paul is that God’s man knows there is a greater purpose for his identity. Maximus missed the mark. His identity was self-driven (“I will have my vengeance – in this life or the next”). Paul, on the other hand, knows that he is being given an identity that goes far beyond his own agenda. God says “he must suffer for my name’s sake”. When God answers the “Who are we” question, He also answers the “Why are we here” question as well. Our identity is linked with our purpose.

When we discover this greater purpose we are provided with motivation and direction. We are given the energy to move forward along with a track to run on. When our identity is established for God’s name, we are given the main reason to live – that’s motivation. The juices will flow. The spark will ignite. When we know who we are and why we exist there’s reason to get out of bed. No floundering. No purposelessness.

And it’s not just motivation. Direction is equally important. No longer are we like the child’s toy car that is turned on and moves forward until it blindly reaches an obstacle,
backs up, turns around and randomly moves on again. When we see our greater purpose of living “for God’s name”, our identity will be the GPS which will guide us. We’ll be given “turn here” directions and also some “recalculating” corrections along the way.

There are many places we could turn in Paul’s letters that speak to his God-glorifying identity. Let’s take a quick stop at just one. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” (2 Corinthians 5: 17, NASB)

Paul realized that a man’s true identity is “in Christ”. We are on a quest to discover that true identity for ourselves. Let’s start out briefly looking at the “old things” – those false and misleading identities that have been offered up to us as ways to measure masculinity. But we’ll also spend the majority of our times looking at the “new things” that have come. We will discover our God—given, God-revealed, God-detailed and God-glorifying identities.

And when we do – “Look Out”! We’ll be more dangerous than an angry gladiator!

There is so much we can learn as we lean over and watch the Apostle Paul! So what does it take to pass the “Maximus Test”? It’s when we discover our God-given, God-revealed, God-detailed and God-glorifying identity. Then look out!

We’ll be more dangerous than an angry gladiator!
How convinced are you that God has established your identity? Comment on the different elements of this statement: “The real quest for our identity is determined by our belief that a God-given identity exists; that it has been revealed; that it can be discovered; and that it is well worth discovering.”

A God-revealed identity is akin to a treasure map. There must be great trust in the reliability of what has been revealed. Look at the reliability factors below. Why is each so important? Which of these presents the greatest challenge to you and why?

- Trust in the reliability of the author.
- Trust in the reliability of the map.
- Trust in the reliability of the reward.

What specific details would you like to know about your identity? Why do you think that God chooses to withhold some of the details?

Compare a “purpose-drive life” with an “identity-directed life”. Which do you think comes first – a purpose or an identity? Does our identity produce one’s purpose or does purpose determine one’s identity?

Look back on Acts 9: 15-16 and observe the details about Paul’s identity. How have these details been passed on to us?

- Our identity is specifically crafted for us by God (“a chosen instrument of mine”). Ephesians 2:10

- Our identity is wrapped up in Christ. (“carry my name”) Colossians 3:17

- Our identity requires hardship. (“he must suffer”) 2 Timothy 1:8

- Our identity provides greater purpose (“for My name’s sake”) Colossians 1:10