

Identity Crisis

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[0 : 01] We live in an age that is obsessed with identity. We're concerned with identity politics, how people self-identify and finding our own identity.

The plot of almost every modern Disney movie sees the protagonist reject the old ways that stifle and constrain them. To be who they truly are, they must break free of the shackles and embrace their own identity.

The prevailing message of our culture is, I think, that to be truly free, you need to embrace who you really are and discover your identity.

Who or what you self-identify is who you are. And when you embrace that, the chains of the past that have been weighing you down will disappear.

I think a good example of this kind of narrative in culture came from, I don't often make a habit of reading agony ant columns, but one caught my eye this week in a local arts magazine.

[1 : 00] And I think this illustrates the prevailing cultural narrative, but also the problems with it. Someone had written in to ask how they should navigate the, in their words, cliché mid-twenties identity crisis.

And they were asking, is there a lasting route out of the ennui? That feeling of dissatisfaction and meaninglessness that most of us will have had some familiarity with either now or at some stage.

And the advice that this person got was lacking, to say the least. The advice they were given was that having an identity crisis was inevitable and kind of beautiful.

They were told, I'm grateful for the ennui, for the mess, for the agency. I had to imperfectly compile my life myself, to do it without a blueprint.

So many things didn't work out, haven't worked out, but like, at least my failures are mine. So the search for identity, at least according to this piece of wisdom, is ultimately a dead end.

[2 : 05] The columnist affirms the quest for identity, praises the beauty of an identity crisis, and says that the end point of that quest and crisis is that we can own our failures.

I think that's desperately sad. The desire to find one's identity is a good one. So often we can feel cut adrift, cut loose, walking on ice.

There's comfort and stability when we know who we are. And interestingly, God has a lot to say about who we are. And as we've sporadically dipped into this letter of 1 Peter, Peter, who is one of the 12 disciples and a leader in the early church, as we've seen in Acts, he has been reminding his readers and us who we really are.

In chapter 1 he said that they used to live in ignorance. They used to follow the empty way of life that had been handed down by their ancestors. But now they have a new identity because they know Jesus.

He has given them new birth, a new identity, and a living hope that changes everything. The message of our culture is that we have to discover our identity.

[3 : 25] We have to look inside and manifest who we really are. The onus is all on us. That's a huge amount of pressure.

Is it any wonder that there's a massive mental health crisis in our country, especially among the young, when that's what we're being told? But the message of the gospel is that in Christ, we don't have to search for an identity or craft an identity.

We receive an identity. And surprisingly, our identity is not about who we are. Our identity is, in fact, rooted in who Jesus is.

And that's what these verses are all about. We're going to look at what Peter says about Jesus and the implications for us and for our identity and our relationship to him.

As Peter describes Jesus, there's three things. The living stone, the rejected stone, and the cornerstone. So Peter begins this chunk of his letter by calling Jesus the living stone.

[4 : 34] It's a bit of an odd phrase, but it conveys a number of helpful truths about who Jesus is. It's in part a reminder that Jesus is God.

Throughout the Bible, God is described as the rock. Take these words from Deuteronomy, for example. For I will proclaim the name of the Lord, ascribe greatness to our God.

The rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. The God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he. Jesus is that same rock, that same stone upon which the whole earth is founded.

He's the creator. He's the king. He's the eternal son of God. But what makes him a living stone? At the start of Peter's letter, he told his readers that they now have a living hope.

That's why we sang from that song earlier. He told them, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

[5 : 48] What makes the Christian hope a living hope is the fact that Jesus has been resurrected from the dead and the promise that those who follow him will also be resurrected to eternal life.

The living hope is the hope of life in Christ. And similarly, Jesus is the living stone because he is the one who was dead but has been raised to life.

He is the foundation stone of creation, but he is also the foundation stone of new creation because he was dead and has been raised again.

And the promise of new creation, of living hope, is resurrection and an eternity spent with Christ in a world where death is just a memory.

And Peter says, As you come to him, the living stone, rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

[7 : 06] So Peter's saying, when you come to Jesus, when you know him and believe in him and follow him, you become like him.

As Jesus is the living stone, his people become like living stones in him. He is the foundation stone of new creation. If we come to Jesus, we then become built into that new creation.

We will be resurrected like he was. We will live forever like he does. And we will live in closeness to God like he does.

And that resurrection life, it starts now. This is what it means to be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood and to offer spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus.

If you've come to Jesus, you are being built into a spiritual house that he's building. There's two aspects to this. On the one hand, a house can refer to a dynasty or a family, like the house of Windsor, for example.

[8 : 15] And like the house of Windsor, the family that God is building in Jesus is a royal house. And Jesus is the son of God and the king whom God has appointed to reign over the earth forever.

When we believe in Jesus and are united to him by faith, well, we too enjoy all the privileges of being part of that royal house.

By believing in the son of God, we too enjoy the privileges of the son of God. And we ourselves can be called children of God.

This is the same point that Paul makes, for example, in his letter to the Romans, where he says that the spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

And if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

[9 : 18] In Christ, we are children of the king, and we stand to inherit our royal estate, the new creation.

But there's also another meaning to being a spiritual house. A spiritual house is also a temple, a house where God's spirit takes up residence.

In the Old Testament, God's spirit dwelt in a tent, the tabernacle, and then a building, the temple. The New Testament teaches us that God's spirit is no longer confined to tents and temples, but rather, if you know Jesus, the spirit of God lives in you.

The temple is all of God's people. God now dwells in his church, not a building, but a family. And his people are not just part of the building, but also the priests.

Peter says that Christians are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood. What that means, it's not as is sometimes suggested that every Christian's to be a minister or can be a minister, but rather what Peter's conveying is that the whole family of Jesus is called to serve him, is called to live for him, and share him with the people around them.

[10 : 46] Priests in the Old Testament, they were representatives of God. The priest would offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the people and represent God to the people.

They were the interface, if you like, between God and humanity. Well, so too today. The church is a holy priesthood who know Jesus and have experienced the love and power of God in their lives.

Christians have the Holy Spirit living in them. And so we're empowered to represent God to those who don't yet know him.

And part of that role and responsibility is the offering of sacrifices. And not the bloody sacrifices of bulls and goats on an altar.

We don't need to do that anymore because those sacrifices all ended when Jesus died as a perfect sacrifice for our sins on the cross. Rather, our sacrifices are to be lives that reflect Jesus Christ.

[11 : 53] Paul in Romans is again helpful. He writes, I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God and what is good and acceptable and perfect.

And so what both Paul and Peter are saying is that our sacrifice is our lives. Lives lived in holiness. As Peter said earlier in his letter, back in chapter one, as obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who calls you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.

Since it is written, you shall be holy, for I am holy. Our sacrifice as Christians is a life of distinctive holiness, and it's rooted in the resurrection life that we now have in Jesus, the living stone.

But what about those who don't come to Jesus? Everything Peter said in these first few verses is predicated on coming to Jesus, believing that he is the resurrected son of God and living for him and in him.

[13 : 21] But there are, of course, lots of people who don't know him. And you might have noticed in verse four that Peter describes Jesus as the living stone who is rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him.

Peter now expands on this idea of Jesus' rejection in the next few verses because not only is he the living stone but he's also the rejected stone, which is our second point.

What Peter does is he quotes from three places in the Old Testament that were speaking prophetically about Jesus. Peter's already, back in chapter one, spoken about the Old Testament prophets who predicted the sufferings of Jesus and the glories that would then follow.

He now shares some of those prophecies. He goes firstly to the prophet Isaiah who said, See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.

This is God speaking in those words and he's making a promise. He was making a promise about his future king, Jesus. And Jesus is described as a stone laid in Zion.

[14 : 39] Zion is the hill that Jerusalem is built on and more specifically, Zion is the hill where the temple stood. God was promising to lay the cornerstone for a new temple, chosen and precious in his sight.

And he promised that whoever put their trust in that cornerstone would never be put to shame. We'll come to Christ's identity as the cornerstone shortly, but where Peter focuses first is on the rejection of this stone.

And so he quotes from two other prophecies to speak about that contrast between those who believe in Jesus and those who don't. For those who believe, Jesus is precious.

For those who don't, he's not. And so from Psalm 118, which we use as our call to worship and sang earlier, Peter says, the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

And from Isaiah, Jesus is a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. During Jesus' time on earth, he wasn't universally loved.

[15 : 52] He suffered and he was rejected. The people, they were looking for a Messiah. They were looking for God to come. But when he did, they didn't like what they saw.

Jesus wasn't the Messiah that they wanted. He was weak. He was poor. He was humble. And he didn't affirm them in all their beliefs, but he challenged them.

Whenever I speak to people about God, and you might find this yourself, all of the time, I'm very happy with the idea of there being a God. out there. Some will even say that they believe in God.

But then, they'll go on to outline the God that they believe in. And it'll be some version of God that they've come up with and cobbled together from different places. And this God is always, pretty much almost always, a God that is effectively made in their own image.

A God who affirms them in everything that they believe, doesn't challenge anything that they think, and doesn't require anything of them. Maybe that's the God that you might say that you believe in.

[17 : 08] If God exists, we can be pretty sure that he's not like that. And that's exactly what people found when Jesus came. He was rejected by the very people who claimed to love and follow God.

He was crucified by them. And Peter, quoting Isaiah, says that he became a stumbling block for them. The Greek word there is skandalon, and I think that captures something of what Jesus is like.

We get our word scandal from that word. And Jesus is scandalous. The gospel is scandalous. It challenges us and it surprises us.

People take issue with Christianity because it refuses to affirm us in all our beliefs. It calls us to be holy and to live in a way that can be quite countercultural, rejecting some of the ideals that our culture holds most dear.

It's also scandalous in its offer of forgiveness to the worst of the worst. If you think of the very worst person in the world, the kind of behavior that just makes your blood boil in despair at the state of humanity, well, that kind of person is invited into Christ's new creation to repent and believe in the gospel.

[18 : 33] People stumble and fall over Jesus like a rock that we might stumble over because he shocks us, he surprises us. He is not the God of our imaginations.

He's the real deal. The one true God who wants to know you. But so many will, as Peter says in verse 8, disobey the message, which is also what they were destined for.

That's a line which can often surprise us. We often wonder why God seems to destine people to reject him. The Bible never gives us a clear answer as to why some people are destined to believe in Jesus and some people are destined to reject him.

But there is an encouragement in this and this is the reason I think why Peter's included this verse. Nothing happens outside of God's control.

We often wonder why God does the things he does or plans the things he plans. And which of us can comprehend the mind of God? Who can fathom the mind of the one who made the universe?

[19 : 41] But we can trust him and we can trust that he is working all things out for good. And Peter's first readers who were having a terrible time really needed that encouragement.

They were suffering because they followed Jesus. They were wondering why people reject him and then reject them and hurt them as a result. Which is why Peter wants to remind them that this is part of God's perfect plan even if right now they can't comprehend it.

He reminds them that Jesus and the gospel will always be scandalous, will always be rejected. Just as Jesus was rejected in his own life, so his people will be rejected too.

But the good news and the surprise of Christianity is, as Psalm 118 said, that the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

What does it mean for Jesus to be the cornerstone? The world rejects Jesus and disobeys his message. They reject who he is and what he's done. They reject the holiness that he calls his people to.

[20 : 57] But that stone that they have rejected, God has made the cornerstone of his temple. If you know Jesus, if you believe that he has died for your sins, if you believe that he rose from the grave, if you believe that he is the son of God, then he is the cornerstone of your life.

He is the foundation on which your life is now built. He is the cornerstone of the temple and we are all stones being built on top of that cornerstone.

We are, in Christ, the temple of the Lord and the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. We began by thinking about identity and since then we've been thinking of Jesus.

He's the living stone, the one who was resurrected and promises resurrection to all who know him. He's the rejected stone, a scandal to all who encounter him and not the God of your imagination but the real thing, the God who will challenge you, not affirm you.

but he's also the cornerstone, the foundation on which we can and should build our life. He is the God who saves.

[22 : 18] The world puts pressure on us to manifest our own identity, to find out who we are and define ourselves by our sexual desires, by our gender, by our race, our class or our background.

It pushes us to find our identity in our accomplishments, in our bank balance, in our interests, in our exam results, in our children or our legacy.

But all of that is fleeting and the rains will come to wash it all away. None of that you can take with you at the end and even before the end comes, it will all look worthless.

Whatever identity that you think you have, you will never escape the sense that there is something missing. There's a great chasm in our heart that we can only ever paper over.

We can never fill it. But Jesus offers something better. When he is the cornerstone of our life, the firm foundation on which we stand, we don't need to find our identity because we are given one in him.

[23 : 38] And that's what Peter says in verses 9 to 10. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

These are rich phrases and they're all drawn from the Old Testament, particularly from Exodus and Isaiah. They used to describe God's people in the Old Testament and the identity that they were given when God saved them from slavery in Egypt.

But Peter uses them now to say, you who believe in Jesus and who rest on him as the cornerstone, you are the people of God and you have now received this new and lasting identity from him.

You are his chosen people. He chose you, not because there's anything you can offer God, but simply because he wanted to. He wanted to put his love and his grace upon you.

[25 : 00] You're a royal priesthood. You are an ambassador for the king, the king of all creation. You represent him to the world because he loves you.

We are a holy nation, a nation that stretches all across the world. We might be citizens of Scotland, but we have a greater citizenship.

We're citizens of heaven. Our home is the new creation. We are God's special possession. He loves to call you his and to place his name and his spirit upon you.

Once upon a time, we were strangers from God. Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people. Once we had not received mercy and the forgiveness of our sins, but now we have.

all the guilt of the past, all our past mistakes, they're washed away. They're washed away by the blood of Jesus.

[26 : 14] We have been called out of darkness and into his marvelous light. God. This is who I am in Christ.

This is who you are in Christ, if you know him. When Christ is our cornerstone, we are given this incredible identity.

Not only are we free from the pressure to craft or find our identity, but we receive this identity that just can't be matched. Nothing you might self-identify as can match Jesus loving you, saving you, and choosing you.

As Paul put it in his letter to the Galatians, I've been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

there is nothing more liberating than Jesus and the gospel. If you know Jesus, you no longer live.

[27 : 27] You've been crucified with Christ and Christ now lives in you. We've been called out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

We are God's chosen people and that is the most wonderful identity that we could possibly have. As I finish, two closing thoughts, two challenges laid down by Peter.

He calls on us to declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness. If this is your identity, if your identity is in Christ, you have a great message of freedom and hope to people who still live in darkness.

Be confident in Christ. He is your cornerstone. He is your life. You know how wonderful and how beautiful he is.

Don't be tempted to be ashamed of him or afraid of sharing him with others. The time is short and there are still people in darkness who need to be brought into his marvelous light, who need to have that chasm filled and receive that marvelous identity from him.

[28 : 50] People will reject him and perhaps reject you too because you follow him. It's to be expected. But people will also be brought into his house and made into living stones with him when we boldly and confidently declare the praises of him who has called us.

If your identity is not in Christ and you do feel adrift trying to find your identity on your own, feeling the weight of that identity crisis that our culture foists upon us, if you feel that chasm that we can never truly fill, let go of the burden of self-identity.

Let go of that fruitless quest that goes nowhere. But instead, I urge you and encourage you to build your life on Christ Jesus.

Jesus is the firmest foundation you will ever find. Don't reject the living stone, but come to him as the cornerstone and receive mercy.

Believe in him, for the one who trusts in Jesus will never be put to shame.