

# **A CRISIS OF IDENTITY**

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# CHAPTER ONE: ONLY A GIRL CALLED DAVID

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One of my childhood memories is of a contemporary of mine, belonging to a family with whom my parents were close friends. They had a daughter. Susan (not her real name) was someone in a past day who would have been spoken of as a 'tom-boy.' She grew up with two brothers. Susan was a very bright child, and she took the unilateral decision to demand that she be known as 'David.' Back then, people would humour a request like that, smiling patronisingly until the notion should wear off – which is what in fact happened, but not before an amusing anecdote when Susan was once taken shopping by her mother in a large department store. You've guessed it – they became separated and Susan came to the attention of the staff who faithfully made the following announcement over the PA system. "Attention shoppers. We have a lost little girl in the manager's office who answers to the name of 'David.'" I'm pretty sure there were more than a few amused or confused faces that day.

Some children seem naturally to go through a temporary phase of wanting to be the other sex and to dress in other clothes, but then appear to 'grow out of it'. That should argue against anyone trying to facilitate premature assistance with gender change (using puberty-blockers and cross-sex hormones), but it's increasingly noted that anything up to a third of boys and up to half of girls persist in this behaviour, with some going on to identify as

bi-sexual or same-sex attracted. I'm using the term boys and girls there according to what would've been their birth classification.

What might be truly called a crisis of identity in gender terms has reached new heights in terms of its public profile in society, and in the media especially. Bruce Jenner, American Olympic gold medal-winning decathlete, made headline news in 2015 when he publicly announced his transition to a female, Caitlyn Jenner.

Transgender people are, of course, those who identify with a different gender to the one assigned to them at birth. In some countries, to have their change of gender recognized, they must be medically diagnosed with significant discomfort or distress as a result of a perceived mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity. They also need to have lived successfully for at least two years while presenting themselves in their adopted gender. But in places these requirements are being simplified and the change is being recognized at earlier stages of life. This follows a move away from viewing transgender identity as a body image disorder or disorder of the mind, and so it's no longer regarded as something to be treated.

For almost 400 years Western societies have settled the question of gender at birth. This has long been done by examining anatomy, supported by genetics and body chemistry, as well as by appearance. Traditionally, there have been two options, male or female. Very rarely, a person is born with genetic or chemical abnormalities, but the two options of male and female are in agreement with the biblical description of humanity having been created as male and female. On the other hand, transsexual people

are those whose biological sex is not in doubt, but they do feel emotionally and psychologically as if they have been born into the 'wrong' body.

Most people feel no mismatch between their biological sex and their sense of gender identity, but some people from an early age experience a degree of distress. Gender is more and more coming to be viewed as a matter of choice. And society is becoming conditioned to thinking of gender identity as 'fluid' rather than fixed, and 'transgender' is the label now commonly used for the various ways in which people might live outside of the simple, traditional and biblical categories of male and female.

The transgender question affects somewhere around one in tens of thousands of people, proportionally more males than females according to their birth classification. Experts speculate about either nature or nurture being the better explanation for this.

As with anyone in any degree of discomfort for any reason, our first response - indeed a Christian response - should be empathy. The question that might be asked is: 'How far should this empathy extend?'. Should a person be supported to alter their body to conform to his or her perceived gender identity (through hormones or transgender surgery), or should he or she be supported to receive psychological treatment or counselling aimed at altering their sense of gender identity to conform to their biology? Or should they simply be supported in their contradictory state? As our culture shifts, society resists the idea of trying to 'correct' a person's gender identity to conform to their biological sex.

Clearly, changing someone's legal identity doesn't change their biological identity. In aspects of health care, it's important to know a person's biological sex. Some people prefer to see a woman doctor and may feel intimidated or uncomfortable if that doctor were to be transsexual. Sports organisations want to be sure that those competing in women's events do so 'on a level playing field'. Which changing-rooms and toilets should transsexual people use? The situation is more complex still if they've changed legal gender but had no hormonal and/or surgical intervention.

The status given by Western society to self-determination and individual choice, and the belief that technology can enable us to transform or escape what in the past was a given, combine to empower the view that gender identity should take priority over one's biological sex.

The Bible teaches that God made human beings in His image and of two sexes – 'male and female he created them'. They are different by design, but equal in value, and as Paul makes clear (Galatians 3:28), enjoy equal access to God's grace. God gave human beings a 'stewardship' mandate to multiply and fill the earth and equipped them with complementary bodies in order to fulfil that plan. In uniting as man and wife, they would become 'one flesh' and the Apostle Paul teaches us that this exclusive and loving union would be a sign of the love and union between Jesus and the Church. In a discussion with his disciples about marriage and divorce, Jesus refers to those 'born as eunuchs' – that is, those who have no natural inclination to heterosexual marriage.

Whilst Christians may have a range of views about gender role stereotypes, they do hold to a binary view of gender as God's created pattern and resist the redefinition of gender as fluid. The Bible makes no specific mention of transsexuality; with the warning against 'cross-dressing' (Deuteronomy 22:5) perhaps best being understood in context as a comment upon actions aimed at blurring or confusing the clear gender distinctions within created design.

Christians acknowledge that, as a result of the Fall, things are no longer as they were meant to be. The knowledge of God is scarce, and His pattern for humans to get the best from life is unknown or ignored by many. The Fall distorts 'both the physical experiences and the cultural expressions of gender'. But the good news at the heart of the Christian message is that God is a redeemer, graciously restoring something of His marred image in those who turn to Him. He then works through them lovingly to restore something of the brokenness in surrounding society. Ultimately, His promise is that all of creation will be fully restored in the new heaven and new earth, but for now we are individual 'works in progress' as the Holy Spirit continues to make us more and more like Jesus Christ.

Christians should recognise the confusing complexity of the conflict being experienced by gender-conflicted persons. They can readily offer them acceptance, community and compassion, all the time pointing them to the One in whose image they are made and in whom wholeness is found. To those wrestling with gender conflict, the gospel brings hope that the God who made us male and female can realign distorted identity and bring in-

creasing coherence between sex and gender, even if such healing may not always be fully realised in this life.

Many transsexual people experience profound loneliness, sometimes aggravated by the shame and rejection they often feel projected towards them by religious people. By offering true friendship and acceptance, Christians can reach out in the same way Christ reached out to those who were considered as the 'untouchables' of his day. True gender discomfort is not a wilful choice, not a deliberate sin. Very few transgender people are intent on deconstructing meaningful categories of sex and gender.

Compassion and empathy should be balanced with clearly teaching that God made humanity in His own image, male and female. Christians must find ways of helping gender-conflicted people experience welcome, identity and community amongst them, discovering for themselves a relationship with God, the transforming power of His loving Fatherhood, and the wisdom of His ways.

A merciful, compassionate Christian response will involve continuing to care for people whatever choices they make. However, continuing to provide care should not imply endorsement of such choices as morally right. How can it be in anyone's best interests to embark on strategies that disregard God's pattern in creation?

Acknowledging the Lordship of Christ means seeking God's grace and strength: neither to surrender to our felt passions and inclinations if they cause us to act contrary to divinely ordained patterns, nor to encourage or assist others to do so. 'Wholeness'

is found in relationship with God, and in following His ways and wisdom. Each of us is called to walk in obedience as a disciple of Christ, regardless of the cost to us personally, just as when a Christian who experiences strong feelings of same-sex attraction chooses not to express them but rather to live a life of faithfulness and celibacy.

Our identity as Christians, whether male, female or gender conflicted, is not in our felt gender but in our gracious Saviour. In the words of one highly respected Christian doctor, John Wyatt, we are 'flawed masterpieces' undergoing restoration in the present and with a glorious future to come.

## CHAPTER TWO: WHEN THE VALUES A SOCIETY STANDS FOR COLLAPSE

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Society turned against David as a young man. He'd been hailed as the people's champion ever since his epic encounter with the giant Goliath. He'd arrived as a more or less unknown shepherd boy at the battlefield to see the soldiers facing off against each other: those of his own people and those of the enemy. He was only there because his older brothers had enlisted with Saul's army, and his father was using him to send supplies and obtain news. In actual fact, nothing much was happening - he'd missed nothing.

For forty days, twice a day (1 Samuel 17:16), the armies had lined up on either side of the Vale of Elah. The army belonging to David's people, the people of God, the Old Testament Israelites, went through the motions every day (vv.20-21). They set themselves up in battle array and shouted their war cry. They looked good and sounded good, but this was a complete charade, because as on the previous 79 occasions, as soon as they raised the war cry, the enemy champion Goliath stepped forward and issued his mocking challenge – for someone to face him in single combat, the outcome to determine the result of the war. As with every one of the previous 79 occasions, the fierce war cry withered on the lips of the impressive-looking army and they cowered away in fear from before the giant. How could they summon up the same enthusiasm time after time to go through with this rit-

ual when they knew what was going to happen next? Were they hoping the giant had died in his sleep? It was utterly farcical, and it seems David saw through it at once.

The army compared the giant with themselves; but David compared him with the God of heaven whose army the giant had insulted, and so imperilled himself. As David saw it, God was with him, so what chance did the poor giant have? And the rest is history, as they say, as the shepherd boy felled the giant with a single sling-shot and shot to fame as a national hero.

Before we leave that scene, dismissing the repeated futile gestures of the Israelite army, we might do well to take a good look at ourselves. Does the same sin or weakness defeat us every week, despite our voice being loudly raised on Sunday in worship of God? Food for thought, perhaps?

But back to David. While he remained popular with many, powerful forces in society soon turned against him. David probably wrote the 11<sup>th</sup> psalm while he was being hunted by King Saul. With borderline insane paranoia, Saul began seeking the life of David, believing the young man was out to get him and take his position as king. David often had to go on the run. Perhaps, at one time in a hiding place, momentarily removed from danger, he asks this question: 'If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?' (Psalm 11:3). Let's read the whole psalm, since it's short, and will give us the full context:

"In the LORD I take refuge; how can you say to my soul, 'Flee like a bird to your mountain, for behold, the wicked bend the bow; they have fitted their arrow

to the string to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart; if the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?' The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD's throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man. The LORD tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. Let him rain coals on the wicked; fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup. For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face" (Psalm 11).

David was discovering the insane paranoia of Saul. It seems to be suggested to him here that he should run away and hide. Although at times he did evade Saul to preserve his life, his understanding was always that God was his refuge as we find stated in the opening line of this psalm: 'In the LORD I take refuge.'

Recently, I've observed again the response of neighbours and friends to devastating news. A loved one dies from an untreatable cancer; a child is born with multiple holes in its heart and breathing is a struggle; a successful business takes a nose-dive into recession; a relationship or marriage appears irretrievably broken ... sadly, this is the stuff of life in a broken world, but thankfully not a world that's beyond the reach of God's healing love. Psalm 112 says concerning the person who respects God: "He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD. His heart is steady; he will not be afraid."

The phone rings in the middle of the night; a visit to the doctor about troubling symptoms; a policeman standing at the door ...

The Bible implies we are not immune to the arrival of devastating news, but it assures us that we need not be crushed by it. Allow me to share an illustration. The twin towers of the World Trade Centre were devastated in the so-called 9/11 event in 2001, but the foundations remained intact. Although totally devastated, those towers could have been rebuilt using the same foundations which had survived the terrible terrorist attack. Isn't there a lesson there? Lives built on Christ, and His words, can rise again. The Lord is our refuge. He is righteous. He is raised on high in the place of incomparable power. If our foundations are still in place, then we can be deeply affected by events, but nothing can totally destroy us.

That is precisely David's point. He's not referring to structures. This psalm is about life. The righteous stand on a firm foundation. Should the foundation of a life be destroyed, that life crumbles. But if the foundation remains secure, no amount of stress - in David's case, no attack on his life by Saul or any of his troops - would cause his life to fracture or crumble. Perhaps David is viewing the treacherous, threatening words of Saul as arrows coming from warriors. He uses a vivid word picture in the second verse: "Behold, the wicked bend the bow, they make ready their arrow upon the string ..." He was thinking in terms of words shot at him or statements made against him, as part of the plot planned to bring him down. But that won't happen to him when the foundations of his life are strong and secure.

I want to turn now to a second application of our text, shifting our focus from our personal foundations to the foundations of society around us. The foundations of the godless, by contrast, can be destroyed. And this is where the idea of what we identify

with becomes relevant. It's good when a society adopts high moral standards. On the walls of a school, in the country I'm visiting, I read the words 'Speak the truth when others do not, and when they will not, and when they cannot.' But what happens when the values a society stands for collapse, where do we take our values from? With whom do we identify? After our parents, the biggest influences on us in our formative years are our peers, the internet, followed by music and media. Society was once founded on God's Word in the western world. Now it's all about being politically correct, but theologically wrong.

Nietzsche was a German philosopher who promoted the idea that 'God was dead.' In other words, he was making the foolhardy claim to have killed God philosophically. Society would be better off without this religious baggage, he proposed. In effect, this began a great social experiment in Germany, one that would have horrific consequences. Hitler put Nietzsche's idea into practice. He acted on it. And history now bears the imprint of what happens when a society is constructed without any foundational belief in God. It's the story of Auschwitz and the destruction of 6 million lives. The plain lesson is that when society turns its back on God, then life becomes unliveable.

Sadly, we're not good at learning the lessons of the past. For some at least, history will repeat itself, as society turns away from God, eliminating God, as it were, from their constitutions, and certainly from their conscious minds. Western societies especially have become, to a large degree, secular. Christianity is definitely not regarded as special: that would be seen as highly politically incorrect. If there has to be a resigned tolerance of religion, it must be plural, with all ideas treated as equal opinions. Inceas-

ingly, faith is something that has to be removed from the public arena: faith has been privatized, and Christianity in particular has become marginalized. The foundations of society are once again in process of being deconstructed. The prophetic writing is on the wall, as the Apostle Paul warned Timothy in his second letter, chapter 3:

“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

Attitudes in society swirl around us, and we hear opinions expressed and endorsed repeatedly through the media: views that are potentially devastating for Christian beliefs. But even when surrounded by such a society, it's far from inevitable that we should adopt its values. Sadly, that's a popular tendency. We see even so-called Christian leaders advocating that 'the church' needs to catch up with the world. In a misguided move to become relevant, they adopt values at variance with the Bible's plain teaching. They have diluted their values. But another response is available to us. We can identify with a different way of thinking, a truly biblical one, and strengthen our convictions in the face of a society which has rejected them. Society crumbles around us but we can retain our personal integrity.

This psalm gives a very clear answer to the question, “If the foundations are destroyed what shall the righteous do?” Our basic values are not based on society around us, but like David, we are to look above. Our citizenship is in heaven. We’re a colony of heaven here on earth. God’s plan is to colonize this planet with the values of heaven. Values that are alien to this world. Do we identify in terms of our values with what is now taken to be politically correct or with the eternal values of God’s Word? What the world says is fair, and what God says is fair are two different things. From where do we take our values?

Laws are being passed now in many countries that are opposed to Biblical values. Society’s values in the west used to be solidly Bible-based, but no longer. There is a lawlessness instead. Society wishes to throw away restraint. Nietzsche had come too early. Now is the time. Something worse than Auschwitz lies ahead. Life becomes unliveable when society adopts the belief that God is dead. We have not learned the lesson of history and are destined to repeat the horrors of this folly.

But back to the clear answer of this psalm. What do we do when society around crumbles and collapses? Our personal foundation remains solid and secure. It is the Lord in his temple. He is our refuge. Society may suffer a moral collapse, but our personal foundation is in the Lord who is in heaven and revealed in his Word.

Finally, I would like us to consider a third application. Every significant structure, every building has a foundation. There’s a house near to where I live that’s been pulled down. The new owner had wanted to add another storey or level. But to go high-

er, they had to dig deeper first. The taller the building, the deeper and more important the foundation. Destroy the building's foundation, and you've toppled the building.

The same is true for us together as Christians. Paul says in First Corinthians chapter 3 (vv.10,16-17):

“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it ... Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.”

The Babylonians came and destroyed God's Old Testament temple situated at Jerusalem. But 70 years later it was rebuilt on the same foundations. At the end of the New Testament period, the first century churches of God were destroyed. This happened when the teaching of the Lord through His Apostles was very seriously compromised. But the foundations remained recorded in the Bible for us to rebuild upon in modern times. God's Word cannot be broken.

# CHAPTER THREE: INTEGRITY – CONSISTENTLY IDENTIFYING WITH WHAT'S RIGHT

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Christian believers living in the Roman colonial city of Philippi lived in a location that was fiercely loyal to the Roman Emperor. Many of its citizens were ex-soldiers, and proud of the achievements of their Emperor and the glory of empire. At civic functions, the amphitheatres would resound with the cry: 'Caesar is Lord.' Such was the cult following the Emperor had. It would certainly have been an intimidating atmosphere for anyone there who was walking to the beat of a different drum. And there were some who were different. We know from the New Testament's history book, The Acts of the Apostles, that a Church of God was established right there, resulting from one of Paul's missionary travels. A least one business woman, one ex-slave girl from whom an evil spirit had been exorcised, and an ex-jailer were part of it (Acts 16).

Paul's later Bible letter to the Philippians contains one of the New Testament's three citations of one of Christianity's earliest credal statements: 'Jesus is Lord' (Philippians 2:11). Later Paul reminds those same believers (Philippians 3:20) that they are citizens of heaven. His words were carefully selected of course, under the Holy Spirit's guidance. These words would have resonated with Christians living in Philippi. Their neighbours were citi-

zens of a Roman colony and lived by the values of faraway Rome, devoted to its emperor. But the Christian believers themselves were a colony of heaven – for that's where their true citizenship lay - and they lived by the values of heaven's throne, devoted to the exalted Jesus of Nazareth. There was no common ground between the conflicting cries of 'Caesar is Lord' and 'Jesus is Lord.' Christians at that time had to select which values they were going to identify with.

In a sense, it's no easier today, even if for some of us the stakes are not life and death, at least not in outright physical terms. All around us, the world tries to squeeze us into its mould. We're influenced by our peers, and by internet content, as well as music and media. If we don't exercise care, these things can subtly desensitize us to the holiness of the God we serve. There have always been two moulds since the beginning of Christianity: the world's mould which tries to shape our thinking with worldly values and beliefs (see Romans 12:3); and the original mould of Christian teaching, spread from the first by the Apostles of our Lord, and still identifiable from the Bible (2 Timothy 1:13; Romans 6:17), which tries to shape our thinking to the mind of Christ. Again, Christian believers on Jesus Christ need to overcome this potential crisis of identity. Notice we talked a moment ago about two contrasting ways of thinking. Worldliness is a state of mind. A past generation thought of it as a list of things to be avoided. But it's not so much what we do, as what we think.

The Apostle John urges his original readers, who were Christian believers, not to love the world with its values and beliefs (1 John 2:14-15). Generally, he tells us that he wrote his Gospel so "that you may believe ..."; in other words, it was a message

to non-believers. But he tells us he wrote his first letter, found near the back of Bibles, for a different reason; it was so “that you may know ...” that you already have God’s gift of eternal life. That means that the themes he covers which are: doing what’s right, maintaining our beliefs, and loving others, are not the way to find forgiveness, but the way to be reassured that we have found that forgiveness already. John’s letters, as distinct from his Gospel, were written to those who were already believers on Christ.

There are what we may call three lies that the Apostle John warns us about. We need to avoid these if we want to display a genuine Christian identity. The Apostle John proceeds in First John to draw our attention to three false claims some believers were making in his day. The striking difference between the claims they were making and the conduct they were displaying betrayed a very real crisis of identity. When someone who belongs to heaven lives as if this world is his or her home, then they have an identity crisis. Which confessional cry do we subscribe to? Which set of colonial values? Which mould shapes our thinking? Are the claims we make true or false?

What were those three false claims made by the Apostle John’s first readers? They were failing the moral, doctrinal and social tests of genuine Christianity. They failed the moral test because they claimed to be enjoying fellowship with the Lord but were actually living in the darkness in terms of the activities they were engaged in. This was John’s challenge to them: “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” (1 John 1:6). It’s a challenge that those deeply committed to the Christian faith and serving God’s purpose in

their lives still face today. There's the real danger of emotional depletion. Many in positions of Christian responsibility run on empty emotional tanks, brought about by continual output in terms of teaching and leadership; always being 'on display' as a public figure; facing criticism of their ministry; and the pressure of relentless expectations.

If, when emotionally depleted or hurting, we don't find something God-honouring to fill our emotional tanks with, we'll be vulnerable to something that isn't. Do we build fences around our thought life in relation to, for example, such things as we view online? These are the challenges of claiming to have fellowship with God in the internet age.

Now we arrive at the second claim some of these early Christians were making. John says: "Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son" (1 John 2:22). What appears to be happening here is that there were those who were claiming to possess the Father while at the same time denying the deity of the Son. This was to fail the doctrinal test of authentic Christianity. It is to claim to possess the Father, but then deny the deity of the Son. It's as if John is very sensitive to this inconsistency, since in his writing there is a special emphasis on the close working relationship between Father and Son in bringing to glorious fulfilment the eternal plans of the divine counsels dating back to before the universe was called into existence.

That leaves us to consider the third lie, or the third claim that some were falsely making back then. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother," the Apostle John writes, "he is a liar; for

he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). There's now the third lie - claiming to love God but hating our brother. Those who were guilty of that were failing the social test of authentic Christianity. In fact, in his fourth chapter, John has some important messages to give us about love. Three facts stand out in verses 7 through 12. First, we're told, it is God's nature (vv.7-8). The next pair of verses (vv.9-10) declare very positively that God manifested the love that He is by sending Jesus.

Since God is spirit, and so John reminds us that no-one has or can see God, then it's by his actions that God shows that He is love – and supremely by the sending of His Son to be our Saviour. And then, in verses 11 and 12, the Apostle John shares the staggering truth that the love we express for one another as Christians is the completed witness to God's love. Overall, then, love is what God is invisibly; it's what He showed in Jesus; and now it's shown in the completeness of God's purpose in Christians, now that Jesus has ascended back to heaven.

Our attention is then drawn to a special feature of this perfected or completed love. “Perfect love casts out fear”, we're told (v.18). This is a text that's often used way outside of its context, as someone with good intentions tries to add biblical support to some well-intentioned encouragement to overcome any kind of fear – maybe even a fear of spiders! But fear in this instance is specifically fear of punishment in future judgement. This judgement is not applicable to anyone who has received Jesus Christ as a personal saviour for the forgiveness of their sins. What's more, those who have received Christ have entered into a relationship with the God who is love, and love should now be typical of them.

It's in this sense – the sense of the different characterization of believer and unbeliever – that we find the statement that tells us fear and love are mutually exclusive. As we say, it's because these emotions are here being used to typify non-Christians and Christians respectively.

But in closing this chapter, we come back to the third claim and the social test, namely that it's hopelessly inconsistent to claim to love God if we don't love our brothers. God cannot be seen, other than by our love, and if we can't love the image of God in our brother, we certainly can't love God, and neither can his love be seen in us by others. For those failing these three tests early on in Christianity, there must have been a definite crisis of identity. They were living a lie. They were saying one thing, but their actions and behaviours betrayed them. As the popular poster slogan says: 'If you were charged with being a Christian, would there be sufficient evidence to convict you?'

## CHAPTER FOUR: DO I SEE MYSELF AS WONDERFULLY MADE?

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Around us, people these days are very conscious, at least in westernised societies, of body image. But the Bible should help us to identify with something that's much more than skin-deep. A craftsman in medieval times would work on a special piece of work that displayed best his artistic skill. Finally, when the work was finished, he would present it to the craftsmen's guild, hoping to achieve the rank of master. If successful, that work would come to be known as his 'masterpiece': the piece of work for which he achieved the rank of a master.

In Psalm 139 we see God as the master craftsman, lovingly at work on His masterpiece, the crowning glory of His creation – and that's us! We're not the products of time and chance. Viewing ourselves as wonderfully made is one way in which we can learn to view ourselves biblically. But let's begin with the one we've already mentioned. It's from Psalm 139 which we'll take the time to read now:

“O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O LORD, You know it all. You have

enclosed me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it. Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, And the light around me will be night," even the darkness is not dark to You, and the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike to You. For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb. I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well.

My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skilfully wrought in the depths of the earth; Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them.

How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand. When I awake, I am still with You. O that You would slay the wicked, O God; depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed. For they speak against You wickedly, and Your ene-

mies take Your name in vain. Do I not hate those who hate You, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with the utmost hatred; they have become my enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way” (Psalm 139:1-24).

What can we immediately observe about this psalm? Perhaps the first thing is that it appears to come full circle. It ends the same way as it begins: with the idea of God examining or searching our hearts. As I read through this familiar psalm again recently, a question popped into my mind. Why does it end in a similar way, perhaps even the same way, to the way in which it began? Why does David end again with: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way”?

Would we be correct if we discerned a change in attitude at the close of the psalm from the attitude expressed in verses 1 and 7? You see, at first, it seems like David wants to hide from God’s unwelcome scrutiny; but later at the close of the psalm in verses 23 and 24, does he not end up inviting it? Are we witnessing a maturing of attitude and mood through prayer and time spent in the presence of God? Could this change be in any way like the change that occurs in a child who starts off early in life being resentful of his or her parents’ seemingly intrusive interest and suffocating care, but then comes to deeply appreciate the love it expresses? In a similar way, does the psalmist, David, turn from

thinking of God's attentions as being somewhat patronising to begin to appreciate them for what they truly are?

On the other hand, it's not easy to always get the correct tense when translating from the Hebrew into English, and so it could be that the ending of the psalm is simply intended as a re-echoing of the opening. The Jerusalem Bible is one translation which follows this line by also phrasing the opening lines in the same present tense as its closing refrain. That tends to make the psalm much more of a unit and throws the spotlight on verses 19-22 which say:

“O that You would slay the wicked, O God; Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed. For they speak against You wickedly, And Your enemies take Your name in vain. Do I not hate those who hate You, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with the utmost hatred; they have become my enemies.”

If that's right, then the whole psalm becomes a plea for justice with the psalmist opening himself up for God to examine his integrity as a basis for vindicating him against his enemies. Seen in that light, this familiar psalm becomes an expanded version of the prayer of the prophet Jeremiah when he said:

“Righteous are You, O LORD, that I would plead my case with You; indeed I would discuss matters of justice with You: Why has the way of the wicked prospered? Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease? You have planted them, they have also taken

root; they grow, they have even produced fruit. You are near to their lips but far from their mind. But You know me, O LORD; You see me; and You examine my heart's attitude toward You. Drag them off like sheep for the slaughter and set them apart for a day of carnage!" (Jeremiah 12:1-3).

And, similar to David in Psalm 139, he recalls God saying, "Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?" (Jeremiah 23:24). In other places throughout the book of psalms, David protests his integrity even as he prays for divine protection. Take Psalm 7:9: "For the righteous God tries the hearts and minds" and also Psalm 26:2: "Examine me, O LORD, and try me; test my mind and my heart."

So the choice before us is either: the process of prayer helping David to mature his thoughts; or David pleading his integrity as a basis for demanding judgement on his enemies. But, either way, having tried to put David's words in their original context, we really should now notice the words David uses here to describe God's activity and artistry in making us – words like 'formed' and 'wove' and 'skilfully wrought.' That last word is one that can be rendered embroidery and it was also used to describe the exceptional artistic creations of the gate of the tabernacle court and the door of the tent of meeting as well as the sash of the priests – all made by people who were specially gifted by God with wisdom and ability for the exquisite task of twisting the multi-coloured strands.

And we are more than the mechanical outworking of the spiral of our DNA strands. There's more than chemistry involved, for

there's information woven into this wonderful molecule that's contained in every one of our 10 trillion or so cells – and all by supernatural design. Did you know that a scientist once compared the likelihood of a cell forming by chance to the same likelihood of a typhoon blowing through a scrapyard and all by itself assembling a jumbo jet?

But let me ask you: 'Do you tend to think of yourself as God's artwork, His masterpiece?' If not, perhaps it's because you allow yourself to be intimidated by the modern western celebrity culture where youth and beauty are excessively glamourized and then air-brushed to perfection. If we accept that as the norm and as a correct evaluation, we can often end up focusing on what we don't have, and it can breed dissatisfaction. In which case, this psalm offers real solid encouragement to those who think of themselves as worthless. For example, in verses 17 and 18, God's thoughts toward us are said to outnumber the sand grains of Sahara. Try spending some time absorbing the wonder of that fact.

And now, I wonder if you'll turn with me to Ephesians 2. This is a further word to believers:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

If you're a born-again believer in Christ, then what I'm about to say applies to you. You have been twice made! What we find

here in Ephesians chapter 2 updates the 139<sup>th</sup> psalm. The quality of God's work defies any comparison – rejoice that you've been made by a master craftsman who has also fashioned the opportunities in life for which he has uniquely equipped you! What an amazing part of our biblical identity this is!

## CHAPTER FIVE: DO I RECOGNIZE THAT I'M DEEPLY FALLEN?

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**D**oes the Bible teach us that we're 'dead in sin' or just injured by it? Are we taught biblically that salvation is a gift of God's free grace or something we must contribute towards in order to fully bring about our own salvation? I was having a conversation along those lines with a young woman just the other day. She'd always assumed she needed to assist the Lord in getting her into heaven. We read together in John's Gospel chapter 11 the story of the raising of Lazarus. I asked her how much Lazarus had done to assist the Lord to bring him back from the dead. She laughed at the nonsense I was inviting her to consider. Then we turned up and read Ephesians 2:1 – that before receiving Christ by faith, we're all spiritually dead in our sins before God. The penny dropped, as the Spirit of God did His work in calling a helpless sinner to 'come forth' from death to life. After that, once John 5:24 was read with its explanation that the person who hears Jesus' call passes from death to life, she was ready to commit her life in the sinner's prayer.

Similarly, we could ask, 'Am I really without hope apart from God's sovereign mercy or do I in some fundamental way select my own destiny?' These are some of the most important issues of all - and yet very often nice, 'respectable' people hate the Bible's answer. For it tells us we're dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1); that salvation is a gracious gift from God alone (Ephesians 2:8) and that

without God, we're completely – totally and utterly - without hope.

It's a myth to think that in our own natural state we genuinely seek after God for who He is. We might seek Him so as to preserve ourselves from death or to enhance our worldly enjoyments - but not for God as He really is in Himself. This is what we mean when we say that we're deeply fallen as a result of our first parents' act of defiant disobedience in Eden's Garden at the very dawning of human history.

Now, sometimes you'll hear the word depravity being used as when someone accustomed to the Bible's teachings talks about 'humanity's total depravity before God.' But we have to stop and ask ourselves, 'exactly what does that mean?' It certainly doesn't mean the same as when say a newspaper talks about someone's depraved behaviour. No, biblically, this is a term that also applies to those nice, respectable people we were mentioning a moment ago – it applies to them every bit as much. When we speak of man's depravity in the light of the Bible's teachings – and after the disaster in Eden's Garden – we're referring to the natural human condition as it now exists apart from any grace God may exert on it so as to restrain or transform us.

In the biblical sense total depravity doesn't mean that we're as bad as bad can be, but rather it means that our rebellion against God is total, and our inability to submit to God or even to reform ourselves is total, and so we're totally deserving of eternal punishment. It's hard to exaggerate the importance of admitting this – to admit that our condition really and truly is this bad. Because, if we should think of ourselves as basically good, or even

just a bit less than totally at odds with God, then our understanding, not to say our appreciation, of Christ's work for our salvation will be defective - and wholly inadequate.

With this conclusion, both parts of the Bible agree. In the first part, the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah says: "the (human) heart is ... desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9). This was expanded upon later by Jesus Christ when He famously said:

"That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man" (Mark 7:20-23).

Clearly, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. People demand evidence. And that's fair enough. God hasn't left himself in any way without evidence – neither for his existence nor for the truth of what the Bible says. And our topic in this chapter – this teaching of the Bible about what we're calling the human condition of total depravity – has to be the Bible teaching for which the most evidence is available to support its truth. Whenever we switch on the TV or internet news or pick up a newspaper, we are every single day of our lives confronted with appalling stories of the atrocities of war or senseless violence or utterly inexcusable aggression against defenceless women and children. Who can be left doubting that the human heart is desperately sick ever since that first moral transgression of God's command at the beginning of history?

But we need to remind ourselves once again that such crimes and extreme behaviours as we've just mentioned are simply the most obvious indicators of the Bible's accurate diagnosis of the human condition. Even the heroes and the celebrated lives are afflicted with the same condition. Although they haven't run to the same excesses, they are still nevertheless guilty of the Bible's charge of depravity. I realize that may seem to you as unreasonable or even incredulous -but let me clarify that's what I am saying because that's plainly what the Bible teaches. Let me, however, try to explain it.

Once a preacher was being challenged by a man who was indignantly asking: 'When is God going to do something about all the evil in this world?' Eventually, the preacher turned the question back on him and enquired of him if he was equally anxious to deal with the evil that existed in his own heart? On this occasion that did seem to silence that particular would-be critic of God. But let me add two things. First, God's reasons, as shared in the Bible, for not intervening in the state of the world are totally different from any human reluctance to acknowledge and tackle personal issues. Second, some people do seem for a while at least to be oblivious to the state of their own heart - especially if they see themselves as helpful, decent-living people who try not to harm anyone.

This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated. The author, George Orwell, once described a wasp that was sucking jam on his plate and so he cut it in half. The wasp paid no attention, merely went on with its meal, while a tiny stream of jam trickled out of its severed oesophagus. Only when it tried to fly away did it grasp the dreadful thing that had happened to it. That wasp and people

without Christ have a lot in common. Severed from their souls, but still greedy and unaware, people continue to consume life's sweetness. Only when it's time to fly away might they grasp their dreadful condition. For example, on the night the Titanic went down, Major Peuchen left \$200k worth of stocks and bonds in his cabin and collected 3 oranges instead. He realized they'd be more useful. But some even with their last breath are oblivious to their state: The circus magnate P. T. Barnum on his deathbed asked: "How are the circus receipts today?"

The Apostle Paul describes (in Ephesians 4) people like that as being of a 'futile mind' – in other words, their lives are devoid of God's purpose. He next writes about their 'darkened understanding' – in the sense that they are without God's revelation to guide them. He then continues to paint his picture of the human condition – of human depravity – by saying that they have 'hardened hearts', meaning they are insensitive to God and his ways. Finally, he mentions 'impure greed' and 'deceitful lusts' – to indicate how people without God live for self-gratification in some form or other.

But this condition is so serious that it's not only in Ephesians chapter 4 that he sketches it for us, but also in Titus chapter 3 verse 3. Here he says: "For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another." Together, these phrases or fragments plumb the depths of our fallen nature, and of our depravity before God.

Let's just focus on the hateful and hating. How we react to one another is a reflection of our attitude to God Himself which may

not be so clearly expressed. Maybe you think that's going a bit too far. Not that many people would describe themselves as militant atheists and yet, according to the Bible, even the most ardent unconverted church-goer and pillar of society is basically at enmity with God. We are spoken of as being 'enemies in our minds' by Paul in Colossians chapter 1. Oh yes, you can do all the right things and say all the right things and yet, without knowing Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, your heart is hostile towards God, whether you suspect it or not. That's why the Gospel appeal can be summed up in these words from the end of Second Corinthians chapter 5: "Be reconciled to God". We are so deeply fallen that only a total re-creation by God will do.

The story is told of Joe and Bill. Once they'd been good friends. But some offence had caused a bitter feud between them. It had been allowed to go on for years. Now Joe was on his death-bed. He sent for Bill and told him he'd forgive all the insults he'd received if Bill would do the same. So things were settled. Eventually Bill stood up to go. He got to the door before Joe called: "But remember the deal's all off if I should recover!"

I want to say to you that God's not like that. God's offer to us is not 'yes' and 'no.' How can we be sure of that? Because a death has taken place to bring about reconciliation: the death of Jesus Christ, God's Son. Listen again to the words of Romans chapter 5 verse 10: "when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son." God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. I sincerely hope and pray that you have identified yourself with 'the Lazarus syndrome' we mentioned earlier; that is, you recognize you cannot in any way help get yourself into heaven, simply because in God's sight you're dead in

your sins. And a dead person can't even reach for the medicine bottle! The good news, of course, is once you realize this, God's ready to do everything for you in His amazing grace!

## CHAPTER SIX: AM I REALLY FULLY FORGIVEN?

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Memories can be painful things. Especially when they cause us to reflect on personal failures. But that's not necessarily a bad thing. Once a year, God used to ask His people to remember and confess their sins over the head of a living goat before sending it away. He wanted them to savour forgiveness. In the second part of the Bible, the New Testament, in the letter to the Hebrews, the writer comments on that now obsolete annual procedure once carried out by Israelites under the Law of Moses. He says:

“For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:1-4).

We might ask what, then, was the point of these annual offerings if it was impossible for them to take away sins? All those animals were sacrificed, but still sins were not taken away! In fact, by reminding the people of their sins, those very same sacrifices in a

way served to add to their guilt. There was a remembrance of sins year by year – in that they brought their faults to mind. Negative feelings would surely be stirred up by the memories of their inadequacies as this goat was paraded before them.

But wait a minute, let's start at the beginning. We're wanting to get on to talk about the forgiveness of sins here, but we'd better first of all define what the Bible means by sins. Within biblical Christianity, the word sin means missing the mark. An archer misses the bulls-eye, the very central part of the target. A high-jumper fails to clear the bar. A sinner fails to achieve God's standard. We were created to be the image and glory of God. But we rebelled and as a result now we all fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23; 1 Corinthians 11:7). Not only do we no longer fulfil our design requirements as part of God's creation, but our sin, the Bible teaches us, is offensive to God. It's an affront to his holy character. His anger burns against sin. But, graciously, God has made provision for it.

In the time of the Old Testament, God gave instruction to His people that if any of them sinned he or she was to take a lamb or goat and approach God's altar, and there the animal was to be offered up in his or her place as a substitute. The person offering the animal as his sacrifice generally identified with it by laying his hands on it. Its life was surrendered in place of his – which was forfeited through sin. Or, in the case of one special day each year when all the people gathered, a goat was then taken for them all, and had their sins confessed upon its head, and it was then taken away and released into a solitary desert place from which it never returned. Symbolically, it bore away their sins. It was this goat

that was originally known as the scapegoat. The chapter of Hebrews that we were previously reading from continues:

“... when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:5-10).

It was God who had specified the Old Testament offerings, but this shows they were never meant to be more than an interim measure. God found no ultimate satisfaction in them. So how effective were such Old Testament sacrifices as the goats we were thinking about? We've heard the Bible itself say that they could not put away sins, so what was the point of them? They were like signposts which all pointed forward to the coming of Christ, the ultimate sacrifice. I also like to picture them as being like bankers' cheques. Think about it - a cheque, by which we might pay for some goods, is only a piece of paper. In itself it's worthless. But it's, in effect, a promise. It's a promise that the person who receives it will soon have in his bank account the same sum

of money that's written on the cheque. The goods we buy with a bankers' cheque are really only paid for when the cheque is finally presented to the bank by the seller who received it from us. At the bank, it's cleared, meaning the money is then finally transferred out of our bank account and into the seller's bank account.

All the sacrifices for sins long ago in the Old Testament were like cheques, in that they held out the promise that one day sin would be properly paid for. They pointed forward to the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. When He died on the cross for our sins, according to the Bible, it was then that sins were actually and finally put away. Previously, in the time of the Old Testament, and by means of the animal sacrifices, sins were only ever passed over. The cross is the one and only place where sins could be – and were – put away. Christ's death there finally paid for all the promises of the Old Testament sacrifices. Jesus' death wasn't a promise for the believer, it's the reality.

The cross is like the bank where all the cheques were cleared – where all our guilt was cleared – in God's sight. And so every believer's sins were fully paid for, settled in full, fully forgiven, totally cleared. And this applies also to those future sins which we've yet to commit. They cannot affect our 'in Christ' status. But when we're conscious of having sinned, we should confess it and clear it with Him according to the instruction found in First John chapter one. This will enable God to continue to be able to use us in His service until the Lord returns and we go to be with Him where sin will never be any more of a problem.

That's so, so wonderful. But some Christians seem to find it too good to be true. They still struggle with feelings of guilt. It's as

if they feel they still need to try to use additional methods to remove guilt. But it's no longer necessary that they try to make themselves worthy in God's sight. If only they could realize that God's view of the true believer in Christ is so different from their view of themselves.

Think of the cross. God does that! Before him, every believer in Christ is holy, guilt-free, and just as worthy as Christ himself, completely and totally forgiven! God sees us through the cross of Christ, and in that way we appear perfect and without any remaining guilt. By reading God's Word and praying, we need to view ourselves through the cross of Christ. We are not the same old person we once were – and that's the main point - but our flawed sin nature can still impact negatively on our life for as long as we're down here.

That being so – because God's promise is to decisively and deliberately refuse to recall our sins to his mind – we should follow his example, by not dwelling on our past failings. Our methods of coping with residual guilt feelings are inherently flawed – we're only tasked with living such that we're 'counted' worthy of our calling (we CANNOT and NEED NOT try to actually make ourselves worthy – see 2 Thessalonians 1:11). Christ has already made us worthy, but we should aim to live worthily; just as Christ has already made us holy, but we should also aim to live a holy life.

So much of the New Testament's teaching for the Christian believer is aimed at us becoming what we already are. At the end of Second Corinthians chapter 4, Paul talks about the realm of the temporal and contrasts it with the realm of the eternal. Tem-

poral things – things belonging to time, to the here and now – are visible; but eternal things are heavenly and invisible. In connection with these things, we're told in the New Testament that we are already viewed as alive to God, justified, glorified, raised and seated with Christ. Our aim now is to live by faith in this temporal realm in a way that's consistent with these unseen realities. Let's appreciate, for God's Word says it, that God has so dealt with our sin at the cross that we already appear before Him as worthy and fully forgiven. We are 'in Christ', one with Him, by God's amazing grace we are seen as being as worthy as he is!

Listen again to how this section of the letter to the Hebrews concludes:

“And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin” (Hebrews 10:11-18).

Notice how the Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this by adding: “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.” Sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary. The believer in Christ is eternally free from any guilt! This is a wonderfully liberating truth! But it doesn’t give us any licence to sin; instead, it’s meant to free us from any guilt feelings. Satan may accuse – and he will – but no-one can lay anything to the charge of God’s elect (see Romans 8). We serve a risen Saviour; we’ve not only identified with Him in His dying but in His living for us now (Romans 5:10).

## CHAPTER SEVEN: AM I REALLY GREATLY BLESSED?

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**W**aylon Prendergast, aged 37, of Tampa, Florida, committed a spur-of-the-moment robbery while on his way home from a late-night drinking session. A very drunk Mr. Prendergast forced his way into a house through an upstairs window which had been left open. Once inside, he filled a suitcase with cash and valuables before setting the living-room on fire in order to cover his tracks. He then escaped through the back door and made his way home, laughing all the way. Only when he turned the corner of his own street, and discovered three fire engines outside his house, did he realize that in his drunkenness he had, in fact, broken into and set fire to his own property. His later comment was: ‘I had no idea I had so many valuable possessions.’

While we may not do anything quite that stupid (at least nothing that makes the national newspapers), there are times when all of us as Christians need to stop and reflect, before identifying with Mr. Prendergast when he said: ‘I had no idea I had so many valuable possessions.’ Let’s take time now to both identify – and identify with – the state of extravagant blessedness God has brought us into in Christ.

Beyond the physical blessings we enjoy, there’s so much more that God has given us through Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his Bible letter to the Ephesians:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace” (Ephesians 1:3-6).

We’ll pause there, for a moment, and reflect on what Paul by the Spirit has just been saying. In a sense we should read on, for the whole section we’re reading - from Ephesians 1:3 down until verse 14 – is one continuous sentence in Paul’s original letter. It’s almost as if when Paul started to list all these blessings, he just couldn’t stop!

There’s an old hymn which encourages us to ‘Count our blessings’ and ‘name them one by one.’ We can start to do that – and it’s good that we do – but we’ll surely never get to the end, for we’ve been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ – and do you think we could ever fathom that depth and sheer wealth of blessing?

Let’s think about which specific blessings have already been listed by Paul. Actually, we’ve split our reading into three parts by using the repeated expression ‘to the praise of the glory of his grace.’ It’s worth reflecting for a moment on these words which Paul uses time and time again here. God has blessed us with this ultimate goal in view – which is that it should all be to the praise of His glorious grace. But just what does that mean? Praise, of

course, is a recognition: when we praise someone, we're recognizing their achievement. And the biblical word for glory seems to be associated with heaviness as reflected in when Paul talks about the 'weight of God's glory (2 Corinthians 4). The fact that we're so blessed seems designed to produce in us a recognition of God's profundity (or gravitas).

Interestingly, we'll find that part one of this list of blessings contains blessings which are attributed to God the Father. Do you remember any of the specific ones? Basically, they centre around the fact that He chose us in the timeless, dateless past and lovingly predestined us to be His adopted sons. No wonder they're placed first: these must be among our most fundamental blessings! But we'd best press on now with further thoughts of God's grace:

“... which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:6-12).

Well, if the first part of this long sentence of Paul's was about blessings we could attribute to the Father, this next part we've just read relates the blessings directly to Christ, the Son. Such things as redemption, forgiveness and a wonderful inheritance feature prominently. Of course, all the blessings in all three parts as we've termed them are all 'in Christ.' That goes to show us how strongly our new Christian identity should affect the way we view ourselves all the time.

Just as a preacher, in concluding his message, may repeat his main point as being the summation of all he's said (Hebrews 8:1), so God will finally bring everything (that's in view here) into a state of being united under and gathered around Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10). This has always been God's master-plan – to sum up all things in Christ: so that Christ should be central and supreme – to achieve it now is our remit; to achieve it ultimately is our destiny.

Sometimes, the loss of harmony in our relationships or the decisions of others to leave the church or the struggle against illness and loss can be like a little piece of grit in our shoe. These real difficulties can become our total preoccupation. At times like that, thinking about the bigger picture which is so loaded with blessing, can help us to restore our perspective. When life seems tough, and following Christ isn't easy, it's good to get a broader perspective by taking an inventory of our blessings - through using a Bible passage like this one, or Psalm 103 where David says:

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; Who pardons all

your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases; Who redeems your life from the pit, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion; Who satisfies your years with good things, So that your youth is renewed like the eagle ... He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him” (Psalm 103:1-5, 10-13).

If David had been feeling down beforehand, I’m sure his spirit was soon praising God as he reflected on all that God had done for him. But we’d better complete our look at Ephesians chapter one – at least its listing of blessings from verses 3-14. Paul concludes his list like this:

“In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation - having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Finally, in this third instalment, the blessings are related to the actions of God the Spirit as we’re reminded of the Spirit’s work inasmuch as we’ve been sealed in Him. The fact that the Holy Spirit is in us is presented here in terms of viewing Him as being the guaranteeing deposit of all that’s to come – a kind of ab-

solutely wonderful down payment in advance of everything that's yet to come. What a blessing it is to know that we're eternally secure in Christ: we can never lose these great blessings. Someone has said, 'Praise is like a fire that needs fuel.' If we're wondering what that means, I think a little glimpse at the next two verses Paul wrote should explain it. After recounting all these blessings in Ephesians 1:3-14, he then says in verse 15:

“For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers.”

For this reason – in other words, because of his review of all that wealth of blessing, Paul now has brought to mind so much to be thankful to God for. May we do the same and thank and praise God now for his blessings to us which are all secured in Christ.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: CAN IT BE TRUE THAT I'M ETERNALLY LOVED?

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A man had been driving all day and night in his car and had become very tired. He was sensible. He decided to stop at the side of the road, park up his car, and go to sleep in it. As he fell asleep an early morning jogger came by and knocked on his window. The driver rolled his window down. The jogger asked him, "Could you tell me the time?" Bleary-eyed the driver looked at his watch and said, "Yes, it's 5:00 in the morning."

He'd just closed his eyes again and started sleeping once more when another jogger came by, knocked on the window, and asked, "Could you tell me the time?" Bleary-eyed, the man looked at his watch again and said, "Yes, it's 5:30." At this rate, it seemed pretty obvious he wasn't going to get much rest, so he came up with an idea. He wrote a short note and stuck it on the side of his car so that anybody running by could see it. It said, "I do not know what time it is."

Just a few minutes later another jogger came along, and would you believe it, he knocked on his window! For the third time, the driver rolled it down, only to hear the jogger say, "Mister, I saw your sign and I just wanted to let you know that it's 6:00 o'clock!

You can write across the window of your life, "I do not have time for trouble," but of this you can be sure, trouble is going to come

knocking just the same! In which case, it really is time for a verse from the Apostle Paul. A few verses in fact, and they are found in Paul's Bible letter to the Romans, that is, to first century Christian believers who were located at Rome, in a local Church of God there. This is for many a favourite chapter of the Bible. Let's enjoy a section of it: from verse 28 until the end:

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE

CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:28-39).

Bible teacher, John Stott, once pointed out, helpfully I think, that there are really five unshakeable convictions in the first verse we read which was verse 28. Let's hear it again – just that one verse: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." True enough, the very first thing we can observe is that it starts with Paul saying 'we know ...' I want us now to explore the five things, according to Paul, which we can know about troubles and difficulties when they intrude into our lives.

But, first of all, let's be clear that we're talking about knowing, not understanding. On the basis of what the Bible shares with us in this great verse, we can know five things. We can have these unshakeable convictions about what's happening to us when we encounter trouble, and all of a sudden life hurts. And we're going to get to grips with them in a moment, starting with the first of them. But I really need to emphasize that this kind of knowing is about a certain perspective we can have on the various difficulties of life; but it's not an explanation of why these specific things are happening to us. We may not understand any of the details of God's plan as He permits trouble in our lives.

Job, who surely suffered more than anyone else in the whole of the Old Testament, never got to discover the reason why all the evils he suffered started piling up on him. We, the readers, in the comfort of our arm-chair, as we read the Bible – we're let in on the secret – but he never was. He simply learnt to trust in God in the humbling appreciation of glimpsing by how much God's wisdom exceeded his own. So having clarified that, let's see what we really can know about what's happening when life hurts, based on God's revelation to us in Romans 8:28.

The first thing we learn is: God is at work in our lives. When we read: God causes all things to work together, we should recognize that God is the active subject of the verb. It's God who causes the things to work together. In reality then, He's the one at work in our lives throughout all the troubles we're facing, unpleasant as they doubtless are. It might feel as if God has turned His back on us and abandoned us. But feelings are very different from faith. This verse teaches us to believe, and so to know, that God is working out His purpose in our life even at that difficult time.

Which brings us to the second of the five truths in this verse. The first was that God is at work in us. And the second is that God is at work in us in all things (v.17, 23). Not just in the good times, but also – and perhaps more so – in the bad times, the times when bad things happen to us. C.S. Lewis put it slightly differently: he said God whispers to us in our pleasures; and shouts to us in our pain – pain being His megaphone. Physical pain is a means by which our body warns us against things that can damage us: such as a child learning not to play with fire. To use another analogy, in times of drought trees grow deeper roots

in search of water. Later, this experience brings with it the reward of greater stability through a better developed root structure extending throughout the soil. The bad time of drought actually left the tree better equipped to face future storms.

Having explored briefly how God can work out His purpose in our lives in the bad times as well as in the good – and perhaps even more so in those tough experiences – let’s hear what the apostle James has to say on this same point:

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4).

But we must move on. We’ve covered two of the five unshakeable convictions hidden like treasure in Romans 8:28. So far, we’ve seen that God is at work in us at all times. The third point begins to deal with God’s intention in allowing His child to pass through such trouble. The verse states that it is ‘for the good’ (vv.29-30) – that is, for our longer-term and future good. We’re not expected to fool ourselves into thinking that the present trouble through which we’re passing is really a good thing in itself after all. No, that would be to part company with reality. Trials are, by definition, not pleasant and so not enjoyable.

But as James was saying a moment ago in what he wrote in James chapter 1 verses 2 to 4, we can by God’s grace through faith in his Word, come to regard the present difficulty as a ‘dreaded friend’ or even as a ‘glorious intruder’ – to quote two Christians I’ve met

who've passed through life-changing illnesses or accidents. Perhaps the analogy here is the tough time we have at the dentist – but it's finally worth it when we are left free of toothache as a result. In the same way we can pass through challenging growing pains in Christian life as we develop more of the character God desires to see in us, and later we may look back and be satisfied.

The fourth truth is a vital reminder. It reminds us that God truly loves us and will not cause His child needless pain. This is where we learn that God is at work in us in all things for the good of those who love Him. This is a necessary limitation. Verse 28 of Romans 8, from which we're bringing out this teaching, only applies to God's children – to those who have put their faith in Christ and so become His own.

Finally, we learn our fifth truth: that the God who works in us in all things for our good, that is the good of those who love Him, is the God who called us at the beginning when we first responded to the Christian good news message and who is continuing to shape us according to His ongoing purpose in us. Everything that happens to us is purposeful if we submit to God's plan. And that ongoing purpose is shared in the very next verse, v.29. But let's read it together with verse 28:

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren.”

Clearly, it's God's purpose that we should become like His son, Jesus. That's our destiny to be totally identified with Him. All believers in the world to come will be perfectly like Christ, but God takes great delight in shaping our lives down here to reflect more and more the character of the One who entered into his glories by the pathway of sufferings. And when we go through troubles, let's not deny God's love to us as His people have at times done (Malachi 1:2), but let's say with Paul:

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

## CHAPTER NINE: A SPIRIT OF NATIONALISM

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**W**e've been thinking until now about issues of personal identity, and how we might refer to ourselves. For example, a successful business-man may be somewhat irked to be referred to as such-a-body's husband – unless his wife is very famous. I can remember very well the occasion when an independently-minded female greeted me on an international conference visit where I'd been invited to address certain issues as the guest speaker – she greeted me with a twinkle in her eye by referring to me as my wife's husband, using of course my wife's name. I realized immediately where she was coming from and affirmed this identification – I hope with sufficient enthusiasm!

But I now want to turn our attention to broader issues, as we move in thought beyond the personal to concerns of national identity. This is serious business since such matters are the cause of many tensions, disputes and wars. The current United States President, Donald Trump, made political capital during his election campaign by tapping into the vexed issue of border control with Mexico, and the flow of illegal immigrants. The anti-immigrant movement, the war on drugs and the war on terrorism have fueled the anti-Mexican and anti-Latino sentiment beyond measure in the US. Law Professor David Cole reports, "... the war on drugs has largely been a war on minorities. It is, after all, drug enforcement that motivates most racial profiling." Similarly, like the war on drugs, according to the American Civil Liber-

ties Union, “the war on terror has quickly turned into a war on immigrants.”

In the late twentieth century, Harvard’s leading political scientist Samuel P. Huntington joined the anti-Mexican immigration propaganda by passionately commenting about the growing Latino population. Then, in the twenty-first century, Professor Huntington, who taught at Harvard University for more than a half-century, went on to state that the single and most immediate and most serious challenge to America’s traditional identity came from the immense and continuing immigration from Latin America, especially from Mexico ... whereas, in the US today, the largest immigrant group is in fact made up of Asians; the largest minority group comprises Latinos; and the largest ethnic minority group is that of the Mexicans.

Which brings us back to Trump. He successfully fired people’s imagination by talking up the idea of building a Mexican border wall. It didn’t matter how realistic or otherwise this was. He’d tapped into a populist vein and used it to ride a wave of support.

This captures the idea of how we humans seem to be very skilled at building walls of one sort or another – often in the narrowed interests of nationalistic views. The Bible documents the rise and fall of many walls, and they’re not all man-made as we see when we work our way through from beginning to end - so it’s not always a bad thing to preserve what’s within from outside influence. Between the Bible’s covers, it seems we travel from the defended perimeter of the Garden of God in Genesis, to the jasper-walled City of God in the book of Revelation.

Mentioning walls, there's also Hadrian's wall which runs between Scotland and England in the United Kingdom. We won't find it in the Bible, of course, but it was the ancient dividing line left by the Romans to monitor the two-way traffic at the border of the Roman Empire and gain current information about tribes to the north. It's been a potent symbol ever since. In 2014, 55% of Scottish voters voted against independence from political rule headquartered in Westminster, England. They later voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union (again a vote against independence). They didn't get that wish on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, 2016, because a majority of voters in the United Kingdom voted in favour of taking their country out of the European Union.

A few years before that, the British census of 2011, was the first survey to ask people to tick boxes for their national identity. The result was that 60% of people in England described themselves as English only, with ethnic minorities tending to prefer to identify as 'British.' I was raised on the north side of the border that divides Scotland and England, and sensed the struggle people had to break free from 'Big Brother' (or England) – sometimes the underdog is the most tenacious, the most passionate ... This may help explain why, whereas the Scots have tended to be quite fiercely patriotic, the English are seemingly less so. In fact, someone has suggested that the English need to "reinvent an identity ... better than the ... cliché-ridden hulk which the retreating tide of imperialism has left them." Perhaps, the increasing celebration of St George's Day is a possible response to that.

But let's return to a more basic question: 'What is Nationalism?' Inevitably, it's about values, history and culture. Can we imagine people on the so-called 'liberal left' in England being prepared to let their country be defined as the country of kings and queens; of Victorian values and the Anglican church; of Margaret Thatcher and *Downton Abbey* (to mention a highly popular TV series in that country which depicts the life of the landed gentry)? Those whose political views might be described as 'left of centre' would generally not identify with these values at all.

What we're illustrating is that values and beliefs; as well as history and culture are all the stuff that a nation's identity gets rooted in. If that is so, it seems highly relevant to ask: 'What are the core values of the holy nation?' We need to define what we mean by 'the holy nation.' But first, it's worth pausing to note that anthropologists – those who study different people groups – have long believed that we can learn about the values and morals of any people group, including ancient civilizations long gone, by carefully studying their rituals.

Let's now return to the question as to what is a holy nation? It's a biblical idea, the first ever mention of which takes us back to the occasion of the giving of the Ten Commandments amid the volcanic eruptions of Mount Sinai. The nation in question back then was the people descended from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, known thereafter as Israelites. They were called to reflect the holiness of the God who identified them there as being his people.

Suppose we were to begin by exploring their rituals. They had a God-given law with many ceremonies expressed through a sac-

rificial system. In it, there were liquid, grain and meat offerings, where the meat came from animal victims. Among sacrifices of that latter type, comprising animal flesh, there were again broadly three types: the first known as burnt offerings where the entire animal was burnt on the altar; then there were offering for sin in which there were elaborate blood rituals; and finally, there were so-called fellowship offerings, being offerings in which the offerer himself received back part of it to eat with his family (and so, as it were, sharing with God and His officiating priests).

As with using the rituals of any people groups to help identify their core values, I suggest that through this God-given system of sacrifices, we can easily perceive that the core values God wanted demonstrated among his people were those of complete dedication to their God, as mirrored in the burnt offerings where the entire animal was offered; as well as a holy sensitivity to sin, obviously rubbed in by the repetition of the sin offerings required of them; and finally, a sense of joyful communion with their God, as readily displayed in the fellowship type offerings in which the offerer shared.

Fifteen hundred years later, when Christ came, he made it very clear on God's behalf that these core values had not materialized, or at least not been sustained, to anything like the desired degree. Christ's uncompromising message to the Jewish people, even as they rejected him, was that their status as a holy nation for God, their status as His kingdom on earth, was going to be removed from the nation of Israel. That is, the physical nation of Israel would no longer be identified with the spiritual or holy nation of God. In Matthew 21:43, He stated very boldly that God was in process then of identifying another people as his holy nation,

one which would produce the 'fruits' God desires. It seems reasonable to draw the conclusion that among those fruits that God wanted to see would be dedication, holiness and joyful communion with himself. It was for these things that God looked among the followers of His son, described in the Bible book of Acts, as being found in the local churches that the Lord's Apostles began establishing after His return to heaven.

Even if there's an identity crisis among the English or the Americans, as we referenced before in secular terms, there really ought never to be a national crisis of identity in New Testament Churches of God. Biblically, it's clear that these numerous local churches were united in the early days into one coherent and cohesive community that could rightly be viewed as a holy nation. From earliest times they strove for a distinct existence, remaining quite separate from variant religious views, such as Judaism and later Gnosticism.

But what or who is God's holy nation today? We must turn, in our next chapter, to the golden rule of Bible interpretation to guide us. No Bible verse or phrase is at liberty to be defined today in any way that denies its original intention, as understood back then. The best way to explain any Bible label such as 'holy nation' is by explaining what it originally meant in its true Bible context, and that's what we've tried to do. It's not so much about us today self-identifying as Evangelical, or Brethren-type, or anything else, as it's about replicating exactly what it meant to be a Christian 2000 years ago – and to do it by building on the very same Apostolic basis for the Christian faith.

## CHAPTER TEN: SEEING OURSELVES AS A PRIZED POSSESSION

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The right to self-determination is a prized virtue these days. As belief in a sovereign God declines in the western world, it appears society at large increasingly believes in human sovereignty and the right of the individual. It's now commonly thought that people should, for example, have the right to determine when their life ends, and others, including medical staff, should be obliged to help them carry out their wishes. It's also increasingly considered the norm that people should also have the right to determine their gender whenever they feel it conflicts with their biological sex.

Europeans have lately witnessed a quite different expression of self-determination. The people of Catalonia voted in a closely watched regional election, called by Spain following a controversial independence referendum. The snap election pitted Catalan pro-independence parties against those who want the region to remain a part of Spain. Spain dismissed the separatist Catalan government in October 2017 after declaring the referendum to be illegal. As it turned out, pro-independence parties secured a renewed majority in the Catalan parliament. Although the pro-union centre-right Citizens were the largest party, the result is a blow to Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy's hopes of defusing the constitutional crisis in Catalonia. However, one of the leaders of the main pro-independence parties is in jail. Another

er is in self-imposed exile in Brussels and would likely face arrest should he return. That makes whatever happens next highly dependent on the attitude of the Spanish government and judiciary.

But imagine there was no nationalism, no difference in language that spawned variations in beliefs and values. Imagine people wanted to combine rather than separate; to unite with the same end in view rather than to squabble over differences. It was once like that before: “The nations were separated on the earth after the Flood” (Genesis 10:32).

While there had been cooperation in those earlier days, sadly it wasn't any cooperation that was in line with God's plans. God stepped in at the Tower of Babel, as recorded in Genesis chapter 11, and by confusing their languages and frustrating their single-minded project, he separated off from himself all those who were non-compliant with his master-plan. He simply shut out the nations that had already turned their backs on Him.

God then, in effect, began again by selecting a nation to know His favour. Peleg (Genesis 10:25) lived in the fifth generation from the Great Flood. The Bible says that it was in his lifetime that the earth was divided, taken here as a reference to the scattering God brought about at the infamous Tower of Babel event. And some further five generations later on from Peleg, God called Abram (Genesis 12:1). This man, later known as Abraham, was the individual to whom the God of Glory appeared early on in Mesopotamia (Acts 7:1-4), calling upon him to separate from his sophisticated urban lifestyle in the cradle of civilization at one end of the so-called Fertile Crescent. God had

said: "I will make you [Abraham] a great nation ... in you all ... the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:1,3).

It was with this man, originally a pagan (Joshua 24:14), that God made a covenant. Genesis 15:5 tells us of a time when Abraham was still childless, a time when God took Abraham outside his tent and asked him to look up: "look toward the heavens ... so shall your descendants be." Abraham believed and it was reckoned as righteousness. This covenant was repeated in the next generation to his son Isaac with an oath, and confirmed unto Jacob for a statute, to Israel for an everlasting covenant (Psalm 105:9-10). But two generations later, Abraham's twin grandsons are going head to head in the womb. This would be the birth of two nations.

"The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is so, why then am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. The LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; and two peoples will be separated from your body" (Genesis 25:22-23).

That was Rebekah's womb, of course. They'd prayed through the trial of infertility. Then the joy of becoming pregnant. But it's a difficult pregnancy. And here we find Rebekah saying if this is finally God's will that I get pregnant, why am I having such a difficult pregnancy? She took herself off to God in prayer for a diagnosis concerning her difficult pregnancy, which was absolutely the right thing to do. The diagnosis turned out to be a prognosis – two nations in your womb and right now they're going head to head. It was to be a shape of things to come!

Jacob, one of the twins, becomes Israel later in life after wrestling again, this time with God. Jacob, you see, struggled with his identity, with who he was, especially the fact he'd been born ever so marginally after his brother Esau. They were twins, but Esau was the first born, and his would be the birthright and the expected paternal blessing. When the time came to give it, Jacob disguised himself as his brother. Bear in mind his father Isaac's eyes were already none too good. When he asked: 'What is your name?' Jacob deceptively answered 'Esau.' This was his underhand way of getting his hands on his brother's blessing.

But much later, when the Angel of the LORD asked: "What is your name?" This time he answered, "Jacob." That was updated with a correction: "You'll be no longer Jacob, but Israel." That was what the angel told him. How apt. The circumstances under which it was given, and the name itself ('Israel'), signified Jacob had been wrestling to get what God has always intended for him anyway. Some make that mistake today with salvation: for neither do we have to wrestle that out of God's hands by our own efforts; it's all by his grace. And so, those who were Jacob's descendants through his twelve sons, they became the people of Israel – and what's more, they became God's prized possession. Not because they were bigger or better, not because they in any way, shape or form have earned it, but simply because God loved them. To be someone's *prized possession*? That's always special. But what about when that someone is God! In Deuteronomy 32:8,9, we find it recorded:

"When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of

the sons of Israel. For the LORD's portion is His people ...”

Then, at the time of the giving of the Ten Commandments, God said (Exodus 19:5,6):

“If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Let's take one more reading, from Deuteronomy chapter 4:

“What great nation is there that has a god so near ... statutes and judgements as righteous ... has any people heard the voice of God ... as you have ... has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you ...?”

It's no mean thing to be the prized possession of the magnificent, transcendent God who is the author of all things! But Israel, over time, rejected specialness - they just wanted to be like everyone else. They lost the plot big time. And so the elders of Israel came to Samuel the prophet, and said: “appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations” (1 Samuel 8:5). They wanted to be like the other nations. In one sense they didn't have enough of a nationalistic spirit.

Warning against a similar mistake, the Lord Jesus said more than once in His famous Sermon on the Mount: “Do not be like them.” That indicates that Israel's exaltation to be a holy nation has lessons for us today. When Peter wrote his first letter to disciples of Christ in five Roman provinces, he viewed them as sprinkled for obedience (1 Peter 1:2) - they'd purified their souls in their obedience to the truth (1 Peter 1:22). He also saw them as ‘coming to the living Stone’ - to be built up as a worshiping house (1 Peter 2:4,5).

Finally, he saw them as “a holy nation” - a people for God's own prized possession (v.9). Unmistakably, that language was selected as a deliberate echo of what God earlier said to Israel. Let's not mess up as they did. Think about the Apostle Paul's words to Timothy: “Our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ ... gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a people for His own possession, zealous of good works” (Titus 2:14).

We're roused by Scripture to a godly, correct form of nationalism, but reflecting God's own values as God's own people it would be rather an insult for us to repeat Israel's mistake and suffer from an identity crisis.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: HOW TO BE NOT OF THIS WORLD

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As I write this, the #MeToo movement in the U.S. is giving a voice to millions of women around the world who were on the losing end of male abuse of power. Those women felt they'd been marginalized when it came to career advancement or in personal relationships. Groups of people or individuals are often defined by characteristics, beliefs, ethnicities, or behaviours that somehow serve to identify them as “winners” and “losers.”

A Gentile woman alone with a daughter would experience little sense of empowerment in first century society within the borders of Israel. As a Gentile and a woman, she'd be an ethnic alien invisible to the society – a situation greatly amplified if she was without a man to represent her in the public realm. But, in Mark's Gospel, we read of one such woman who – as some are doing today - stepped beyond the boundaries society prescribed for her. In her case, it was to seek out Jesus for the sake of her daughter whom she valued, and Jesus praises her publically for it.

This describes Jesus' encounter with an unnamed Syrophoenician woman. It took place when Jesus was passing through the predominantly Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon when this unnamed, Gentile woman approaches Him to ask for healing for her demon-possessed daughter. As a Jewish male, He is an outsider in this Gentile region. Yet, he speaks to her in the voice of a Jewish insider. “It is not good to take the children's food and

give it to the dogs.” In Matthew’s account of this same story, her identity as an outsider is highlighted in even stronger terms. She is a Canaanite woman—a member of the people group Israel was commanded to expel from the land thousands of years earlier.

The woman was undeterred, and cleverly argued: ‘Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Both Matthew and Mark highlight Jesus’s delight at her faithful response. In Mark, Jesus is impressed simply by what she has said; “For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” This story of the Syrophoenician woman demonstrates that God’s promise to Abraham overflows to the outside. The God of the Bible readily identifies with outsiders from society.

When Jesus prayed for His followers in John’s Gospel, chapter 17, he described them as being “not of the world.” He flatly said He was not praying for the world, but for those whom He called His own. That’s a basic identification issue for us: we are in the world but not of it. That is, we’re located here, but we don’t identify with the world of unbelievers, since our citizenship is in heaven.

It’ll help us to avoid identifying with the world if we understand what the Lord was praying for. His prayer was for His followers to be kept true to His Father’s name. As was made plain back in Exodus chapter 34 with the request of Moses when he asked to see God’s glory, and in response the LORD proclaimed His name by declaring its connotation with his goodness, mercy, truth and faithfulness. In other words, Jesus was praying then

that His disciples would be kept loyal to the character of the Father whose name He'd revealed (vv.11-12).

In Romans 8, we learn that the Lord is still interceding for us above. I don't think we can be in any doubt that the present content of his praying was set out in John's gospel chapter 17. I mean that this was not a one-off prayer, but sets the theme for our Lord's ongoing prayerful activity on our behalf. And that means that we should learn from it all the more. In prayer our main concerns should be in full agreement with the Lord's main concerns for us. Let's read them – verse 6-19 of John 17:

“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them.

I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scrip-

ture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth” (John 17:6-19 ESV).

Following His prayer request that His followers be kept in the name of the Father which he'd displayed to them, the Lord details five specifics which should therefore be of great interest to us. In each case, these were things he perfectly exemplified while revealing His Father's name and character in His own life on earth.

First, in verse 11, he requests that we may be united. That they may be one, even as we are one, he asks. The Lord had lived before these men in perfect harmony with the will of His Father, in the perfect unity of the persons of the Godhead: Father, Son and Spirit. His prayer then, and His prayer now, is that the same quality of unity that exists between Him and his Father, should exist between all those who believe in Him, resulting in them leading harmonious lives in a unity achieved by an uncompromising commitment to the plain text of Scripture.

Second, He prayed that they'd be filled with joy in serving God, as He'd been. He asked that they might have His joy fulfilled in themselves (v.13). It had been predicted in Psalm 40 that He'd delight to do God's will on earth, and He had, always, even although His path of serving God led him to the cross. He'd displayed that characteristic as He'd shown them the Father (John 14:9). For them to be kept in His Father's name would involve their rejoicing to serve God by doing His will with real delight. Remember, this is still His prayer.

Third, He who himself overcame the tempter and all of temptation's power, requests that His followers likewise are kept from evil (verse.15), from the evil one who tries to lead us into sin. Holiness is a basic attribute of God, and this aspect was shown in the life of the Lord being One in whom there was no darkness at all (1 John 1). If then the Lord's ongoing prayer is answered, that we be kept in the Father's name – being kept loyal to it – then we, too, should be concerned about holy living.

I recall a young Christian once asking an older Christian advice as to whether it had be all right for her to go to a particular party. Wisely, instead of giving her a list of 'don'ts' he replied 'so long as you remember your Christian identity.' In other words, remember exactly who you are.

Fourth, the Lord prayed that His followers be set apart by their devotion to the truth, adding that God's Word is truth (v.17). Once more, Jesus Himself had set the perfect example, upholding God's Word in His oral teaching from its very first verse. He'd honoured all His Father's laws, laws which humanity routinely break without so much as blinking. God is the God of truth, and

our lives are to reflect that. Another aspect of Jesus' continuing prayer for us.

Fifth, and finally, Jesus is praying that we share the good news of God's salvation for sinners. Our Lord, of course, came to earth from heaven to seek and save that which was lost. He said as the Father sent Him into the world, even so He was sending them (v.18). The same sense of mission burning in His heart must also burn in ours. For that the Lord prayed then – and prays now in His heavenly intercessory ministry as the glorified Man at God's right hand.

If we can live loyal to God's name and character in all five of these points – being united, joyful, holy, biblical and evangelical – then there'll be no crisis of identity in our case.



Did you love *A Crisis of Identity*? Then you should read *Get Real ... Living Every Day as an Authentic Follower of Christ* by Brian Johnston!



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## **About the Author**

Born and educated in Scotland, Brian worked as a government scientist until God called him into full-time Christian ministry on behalf of the Churches of God ([www.churchesofgod.info](http://www.churchesofgod.info)). His voice has been heard on Search For Truth radio broadcasts for over 30 years (visit [www.searchfortruth.podbean.com](http://www.searchfortruth.podbean.com)) during which time he has been an itinerant Bible teacher throughout the UK and Canada. His evangelical and missionary work outside the UK is primarily in Belgium and The Philippines. He is married to Rosemary, with a son and daughter.



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