

The Identity Crisis

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[0:00] Let's come back to God's word. Exodus chapter 3 and the first 14 verses. Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire, it did not burn up. And so Moses thought, I will go over and see this strange sight, why the bush does not burn up.

When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, Moses, Moses. And Moses said, here I am. Do not come any closer, God said. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

And then he said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. At this, Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.

The Lord said, I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land.

[1:19] A land flowing with milk and honey. The home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.

So now go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?

And God said, I will be with you, and this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.

Moses said to God, Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you. And they ask me, What is his name? Then what shall I tell them?

God said to Moses, I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites. I am has sent you. This is the word of the Lord.

[2:22] Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we study this morning. Our gracious God, won't you be merciful to us this morning in allowing us to know your truth from your holy word.

We have this incredible privilege that we open up the pages of the Bible that we hear the voice of the creator God speaking. And so may we hear that voice clearly this morning.

May we remove all distractions, and may our hearts take hold of what we hear, that we may know you and love you. May we seek Christ, who is the center of scripture, and may we be changed by him.

We ask for this in Christ's holy name. Amen. So we're in week two in our little micro series, entitled Life in Crisis, looking at sort of the various crises that people are finding themselves in, in our contemporary culture.

Last week we looked at the whole meaning crisis that exists in our modern world. Today we're going to talk about identity. Identity crisis. You see, because today, probably more than at any time in history, at any culture in history really, we have a sense that we are supposed to discover who it is that we truly are.

[3:41] And that sort of language is incredibly common, wherever you look. Supposedly, all the people in this world who are flourishing at life are the people who have discovered their true self. All the people who are floundering at life are the people who have yet to discover their true self.

And your own floundering at life, if stuff is not going well, if stuff is not working well right now, that floundering is going to come to an end when you finally do discover your true self. You've heard that

message.

This is not news coming from me. It's a cultural narrative that is around us all of the time. And it's focused on this word identity. What exactly is an identity?

I think really an identity is two things. A sense of self and a sense of worth. So knowing who you are and in that knowledge, bringing you some sense of worth that you think, well, I am a meaningful person.

My life has meaning and merit. In older traditional cultures, you got your identity from your role in your community. So you were a father or a mother or a brother, a child, you were part of this clan or you were part of this town.

[4:52] In terms of your career, you often did what your dad did. Your parents' values were your values, were the town's values. And your sense of self and your sense of worth, that identity, came from playing your role in that particular community.

That was the honorable thing to do. And in fact, when you went against that, when you deviated from that role, you actually brought shame upon yourself. You brought shame upon the family and the community.

But in modern Western culture, particularly, we've reacted quite strongly against those traditional conceptions of identity. So people have looked at the past and said, well, you know, in some of those traditional cultures, they can be pretty restricting.

And so we've got to break out of that. And so you have this gradual move then in culture in the West from centering the community to centering you, the individual.

Now what you do to get your sense of self and who you are is you look down inside. That's what you've got to do. You look down deep inside of yourself. You look down there and you look at your feelings, you look at your desires, you look at your wants, your needs, your skills, your hopes, your dreams.

[6:05] And through sort of realizing a collection of these things, you then discover your identity. And then alongside that, you don't stop there because alongside that, there's performance.

You now have to live out this newly discovered identity. So you've got to be true to yourself. Your identity is not inherited anymore from the culture around you. It's not given to you.

You discover it from the inside out. Nobody can tell you who to be. The culture can't assign you an identity. Only you can do that. Now this is an almost unquestioned norm for building an identity in our culture right now.

I mean, if you really want to understand this, you want to understand this modern conception of identity, the best place to go is not to a university or to a class on psychology. The best place to go is to Disney. Think about it.

Think about someone like Moana. Okay? Think about the song she sings. You can have the tune in the back of your mind. I'm not going to sing it. I'm just going to say the words. But she sings that song.

[7:13] I know everybody on this island seems so happy on this island everything is by design. I know everybody on this island has a role on this island so maybe I can roll with mine. I can lead with pride.

I can make us strong. I'll be satisfied if I play along but the voice inside sings a different song. What is wrong with me? And what is wrong with Moana? Well, she hasn't found herself yet.

That's what's wrong with her. She needs to break out of her traditional island culture. She needs to go out onto the open sea and she needs to find her true self.

Now this modern concept of finding herself is a little bit tricky and the more you think about it deeply the more you'll straight away see why it's a little bit tricky because which self do you be true to?

Because you know and I know that you've got a bunch of competing different desires inside of you. Things that you want. Things that you think you'll enjoy. Things that you dream for or hope for. And so if you're to realize a collection of those things or which set of desires do I be true to?

[8:21] And there's a lot riding on this, right? Because remember according to the popular narrative if I get this wrong I basically mess up my life. So I've got to figure out who exactly I really, really am.

And so as a result we have a lot of people in our world today particularly young people running around wrapped up in all sorts of anxiety trying to find their true selves. In his book *Making Sense of God* Timothy Keller he reflects on this whole idea of looking inside yourself finding something in you

that you can sort of build your identity on that aligns with your desires that could be a career or an ideology or a love relationship and then you perform to live up to that identity.

Now here's what he says about that he says this is a trap because you will have to fixate on something some good thing like work or career or romance or love and it will become no longer just another good thing to enjoy it will become you the basis of your identity and that makes you radically vulnerable and fragile.

If your very identity is wrapped up in something and you lose it you lose your very sense of self. The western understanding of identity formation is a crushing burden both for individuals and society as a whole.

And so we have an identity crisis right now and it's really really having a horrible effect on human well-being. Record levels of depression and epidemic of loneliness and disconnectedness incredible pressure being put on certain areas of our lives to sustain our identity so like our careers like our romantic relationships our parenting our engagement in politics and social justice so the question for us this morning is what difference would the God of the Bible make to this particular crisis?

[10:21] Well I want you to go to that place in the Old Testament we read where Moses Moses actually has something of an identity crisis himself in the face of God. Exodus 3 is set in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula and you here encounter one of the most famous stories in the Bible Moses and the burning bush at this point in the story the nation of Israel are being horribly oppressed by an evil pharaoh in Egypt Moses having grown up in Pharaoh's court he sees the suffering of his own people he actually accidentally kills an Egyptian slave driver and so he flees for his life to the wilderness starts a new life with a new family Exodus 3 is actually several years into the future from those earlier events and God is going to seek out Moses commission him to go back to his people and to lead them to freedom when you read it though it's quite a strange commissioning so look down at verse 1 now Moses

Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father in law the priest of Midian and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb the mountain of God there the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up and so Moses thought I will go over and see this strange sight why the bush does not burn up so Moses ends up at Horeb quite far away from where he usually grazes which is really another name for Mount Sinai and he sees this peculiar sight a bush that is burning and yet it's not really burning because the bush has not been consumed by the fire and so he steps forward to come and have a closer look verse 4 when the Lord saw that he had gone over to look God called to him from within the bush Moses Moses and Moses said here I am do not come any closer God said take off your sandals for the place where you are standing is holy ground now you and I can imagine Moses being completely freaked out by this whole experience so he's hurriedly trying to take his sandals off right now because he's not really sure what he's dealing with here and so we want to know well who is Moses dealing with here verse 6 then he said

I am the God of your father the God of Abraham the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob and at this Moses hit his face because he was afraid to look at God notice that when Moses figures out who he's dealing with who the voice is he doesn't just sort of relax and go oh it's you God sorry you had me going there for a second he cowers he covers himself there's a deep holy reverence in response to God and at this point we get the commissioning verse 7 the Lord said I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt I've heard them crying out because of their slave drivers and I am concerned about their suffering so I've come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land a land flowing with milk and honey the home of all the ites and now the cry of the Israelites has reached me and I have seen the way the

Egyptians are oppressing them so go I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt now then curiously what happens despite that initial reverence Moses has a bit of a back and forth with God about whether or not he's actually suitable for this task so verse 11 Moses said to God who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt and God said I will be with you Moses comes again suppose I go to the Israelites and I say to them the God of your fathers has sent me to you and they ask me what is his name then what shall I tell them God God God is God God God reveals himself as the

God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob and when he does that Moses clearly knows who he is Moses who grew up in Pharaoh's court clearly knows who he is so you can bet that the Israelites back in Egypt know who he is so Moses is asking for more than a basic identity here he's asking for God to disclose something of himself that will move the people to listen to him remember in the ancient world names are deeply tied to one's character and one's actions so when God gives us his full name what he's doing is he's telling us who he truly is that's what Moses wants to know and so here's how God responds to his request in verse 14 God said to Moses I am who I am this is what you asked to say to the Israelites I am has sent me to you this is one of the most famous passages in the Bible God discloses his name his name is I am who I am and it's pretty strange right like if you want to go if you have a new born babies over the last decade you're not going to find this name in any of those sorts of lists it's a strange name and when you first hear it it's not entirely clear what it means what

[16:03] God is communicating about himself with this name if you go and read theological journals you'll find there's some debate there's a whole lot of technical nuance but I think what most theologians to put it another way God just is he's not created he didn't appear out of nothing at some point he just is and he always has been he's the bedrock of all existence he's totally and utterly complete in and of himself he is completely self sufficient theologians call this the doctrine of the aseity of God there's a new word for you to learn this morning Merriam Webster defines aseity as this way or aseity the quality of state of being self derived or self originated specifically the absolute self sufficiency independence and autonomy of

God so this is kind of a foundational belief in classic protestant theology we even see it in our own Westminster confession of faith we say it sometimes on Sunday mornings in the service so chapter two in the second paragraph!

of the Westminster confession of faith says God has all life glory goodness and blessedness in and of himself he alone is all sufficient in and to himself not standing in need of any creatures which he has made nor deriving any glory from them but rather manifesting his own glory in by to and on them he alone is the fountain of all being of whom through whom and to whom are all!

One of the things we're going to be doing next week in the evening when we talk about evil and suffering is we're engaging in what Christians might historically call apologetics giving a defense for the Christian faith and we've been doing a lot of apologetics in this church for a number of years and because I've been doing a lot of apologetics one of the things I've always wanted to do is listen to other Christian apologists and listen how they engage with skeptics and atheists nowadays you can do that a ton because it's all over YouTube you can watch all sorts of debates some of them good some of them not so good but if you if you're in that sort of world and you listen to a lot of Christians discussing the faith of non Christians you might occasionally come up with something called the the Christian will say to the atheist where does the universe come from and the atheist will say something like well from the big bang and the

Christian will say so well where does the big bang come from and the atheist will say something like from the singularity I don't know what modern physics says nowadays I did physics a long long time ago and the Christian will say well!

[19:11] where does the singularity come from? and so you get this problem this problem of infinite regress at which point the Christian comes along and he says you see there has to be a first cause and that first cause has to be God now the atheist thinks about this and they go well hang on but then who created God and the atheist thinks this is a gotcha moment like I've caught you in your own reasoning here I've captured you but the problem is they're making a category mistake we ask questions like where did the universe come from because from what we can see everything around us everything in this universe is contingent on something else in order to exist things just don't appear out of nothing that would be really spooky and weird if things just appeared out of nothing but God is not like the universe he is not contingent on anything he just is and he always has been so

Christians don't believe in a contingent God they believe in the great I am now you actually even see the symbolized in the burning bush so Moses encounters a fire that is nourished by its own life so there's a sort of a truly living flame doesn't need anything else outside of itself to burn it's a very well known Old Testament scholar by the name of Alec Motier and he says this he says the essence of this revelation is that Yahweh is the living God a self maintaining self sufficient reality that does not need to draw vitality from outside the fire doesn't need any fuel similarly God he's not

contingent on anything God is perfectly and completely self sufficient within himself that is the great claim of the Bible that is the great claim of Christianity now we need to think this through because this is huge and it changes everything about how you conceive of your identity first of all it changes how you conceive of yourself how we conceive of ourselves there's actually a little bit of a play on words that happens here that you can even see in your

English translations of the passage so in verse 4 God calls Moses from the bush and Moses replies I am here then in verse 6 God says I am the God of your father the God of Abraham the God of Isaac the God of Jacob then in verse 10 God says I am sending you Moses to Pharaoh then in verse 11 Moses says who am I so he inverts all the I am and then it comes to a great crescendo when God in the musical I am I am am I am I am I think I am I think I am I'm glad I am I'm proud I am a religious man very important religious movie now the point is that there's this very clear play on those words

I am and there's one place where it swaps around where Moses in response to God's call asks who am I and it's like he misses the point of everything that's going on around him Moses faced with God faced with the reality of his people enslaved and in suffering and his response is who am I to do anything about this when all of the while God is trying to clearly communicate to him Moses it's not about who you are it's about who I am when you discover God's true identity it de-centers you the self-sufficiency of God who he reveals himself to be tells you that you are not the center of this universe it tells you that who is

God is an infinitely more important and critical question than who am I and so when you think about our culture's current identity crisis can there be a more critical doctrine than the aseity of God his self-sufficiency one one one person from a sort of a secular point of view who's written a lot about this particular form of individualism that we tend to all subscribe to nowadays is sociologist Robert Bellah he gave it a name he called it expressive individualism you've probably heard me use that term before but according to Bellah expressive individualism is the belief that and I quote each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized so that is the Disney mantra for you right there the way you find meaning in this life the way you find purpose in this life is an identity and a sense of belonging is by looking inside there's a

[24 : 47] Christian writer from Australia pastor and writer by the name of Mark Sayers he's got a book called Disappearing Church and in seven summary statements for this expressive individualism and I want to read these to you because I think they're really helpful they help clarify this cultural moment that we're in but these are the summary statements of expressive individualism number one the highest good is individual freedom happiness self definition and self expression number two traditions religions received wisdom regulations and social ties that restrict individual freedom happiness self definition and self expression must be reshaped deconstructed or destroyed number three the world will inevitably improve as the scope of individual freedom grows number four the primary social ethic is tolerance of everyone's self defined quest for individual freedom and self expression any deviation from this ethic of tolerance is dangerous and must not be tolerated interesting therefore social justice is less about economic or class inequality and more about issues of equality relating to individual identity self expression and personal autonomy!

deliver us from our problems and give us personal utopias that water around us appears to be hurting us there is a large amount of data connected to this worldview that suggests growing loneliness pandemic pandemic we experience in our world right now amongst younger people is connected to this there is data connecting it to the growing mental health issue suicide even amongst millennials and Gen Z there is data connecting it to the fact that currently we have some of the lowest percentages of people in long-term committed romantic relationships and marriages in recorded history in that same age group expressive individualism with its focus on the subjective feelings and desires of your inner life over and against the role of your community or your tradition or your religion is having a deeply destructive effect upon our society looking inside of ourselves is not making us happier it's actually making us more miserable it's making us more stressed more anxious as a generation we live in a culture that is like

Moses here repeatedly asking that question who am I the antidote is to stop asking the question who am I and to start asking the question of God who are you if the God of the Bible is the only truly all sufficient one if he is life itself existence itself then we can never ever ever possibly hope to find our meaning our purpose our identity and our joy in this life without first looking to him the way to joy

and the way to contentment is not to run around constantly discovering yourself and expressing the subjective feelings and intuitions of your own heart the way to lasting joy and contentment is to conform your own heart to the objective reality of the great I am so that's the first thing this doctrine changes how we conceive of ourselves secondly though not only does knowing

God's true identity change how we conceive of ourselves it also changes how we relate to him Moses wants to know God's identity because he wants to convince the elders of the Israelites to trust the divine message that he's bringing in the Old Testament you might know that God has lots of different names that in many ways draw out his characteristics and Moses is like well give me one of those give me one of those so I can swing the crowd in my favor like Jehovah Ra God is my shepherd or Jehovah Shammah God who is there or Jehovah Jireh God is our provider in fact that's a good one you're going to provide for their salvation give me that name and I can take that back now God could have given Moses any of those kinds of names and just focus really on one specific characteristic but instead of focusing on any of those God gives him a name that encapsulates his very essence that he is completely self sufficient in himself and if you think about it that is the most comforting and the most reassuring in himself that he doesn't need you he doesn't need you and you are saying why is that comforting and encouraging he doesn't need you he doesn't need your love he doesn't need your worship he doesn't need your service he doesn't need your obedience nothing you can do can add to him even in his rescuing of his people he doesn't gain anything that sort of fulfills him in some way he doesn't get any fulfillment from helping hopeless sinners like you and me he cannot get fulfilled because by nature he is completely fulfilled in himself already he's completely satisfied which means this and this is how it is comforting and this is how it is assuring it means this our relating to

God is purely on the basis of his gracious love to us that he chooses to extend to us there is no I give you something God and you give me something back there's none of that there is only grace from God undeserved unmerited grace God does not owe us anything he does not need anything from us and yet he reaches out to us to love us to rescue us from sin our love that his love to us is so much more in a sense selfless and powerful than any form of human love we will ever ever ever experience it's not conditioned by your ability to love him back because he's completely satisfied in himself there's no hidden motives in his love there's no manipulation there's no secret agenda it is just pure undefiled divine love that is received by grace that love and that grace is most evident is most on display at the cross because their

[32:08] God does not need us but he comes down to us he himself enters into this world in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ taking on frail human flesh there is no deep unfulfilled desire in him to be a sacrificial hero and yet he willingly and selflessly lays down his life for us and when you see that when you really understand then what's happening knowing who God truly is that he would condescend down to us when you see that and you see the beauty of it and you see the glory of it it's at that point and it is only at that point that it's then appropriate to ask the question out of sort of sheer wonder well who am I who am I that you would love me like this oh God as the 17th century hymn writer Samuel Crossman wrote my song is love unknown my savior is love to me love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be oh who am

I that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die divine self-sufficiency means that God relates to you purely on the basis of his gracious and perfect love you don't deserve that love you don't earn that love you cannot manipulate him into giving that love it is by his grace that he loves you that is how God in his all-sufficient wisdom has chosen to relate to us and so I then ask you this question what would happen to you if you built your identity on that love if that love answered the question who am I for you every single waking day if your identity wasn't achieved but rather received from him if you didn't gain your identity by looking inside of yourself at your desires and your aspirations and then trying to live up to them but rather your identity was given to you as the great

I am comes and he says to you do you want to know who you are do you want to know who you truly are you are my child you are the recipient of my love love and love love love love was demonstrated in blood what kind of a person would you be if you built your identity on that C.S. Lewis the great Christian writer and I'm going to close with this thinks you should basically throw away everything else and just run to that this is what he says he says give up yourself and you will find your real self lose your life and you will save it submit to death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end submit with every fiber of your being and

you will find eternal life keep back nothing nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead look for yourself and Christ and you will find him and with him everything else thrown in let's pray together our gracious God merciful father we we are under enormous pressure to find ourselves in this culture even as Christians who understand that our identity is rooted in Christ we live with this narrative front and center all the time and so it can be so tempting to use the world's tools to try and develop an identity and yet when we do that we often create identities that aren't very strong that don't have great foundations and that let us down and they hurt us and so we pray that you would teach us in your great mercy to understand that we have been given an unshakable identity in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ that you the God who needs no one has chosen to love us at cost the cost of your son his death on the cross remind us that that is who we are and let us live out that identity enjoy living out that identity Father I want to pray for any person this morning who is sitting here who does not know the love of Jesus Christ who cannot confidently because he has not repented of their sin and turned away from it to the love that comes in

[37 : 00] Jesus I pray that you would bring them to faith this morning that they would turn and they would trust in Christ Father make us a church of people who are confident in the identity we have been given through Christ it's a humble!

confidence because we didn't earn this identity but it as a testimony and a light to those who are struggling with this identity crisis in our world today we ask for the special grace in Jesus name Amen