

Saved by Grace

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 October 2016

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 0 0] Father God, thank you that you are a God of revelation, that though on our own we were unable to see you, you have given us your word that we might know you. So we pray, please give us heads that can understand your word and hearts that are so moved by what you have done for us that we are willing to change and follow you. For we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well the New York Times described last year, 2015, as the year we obsessed over identity. Rachel Dolezal is a 37-year-old civil rights activist and her white parents outed her as falsely identifying herself as black. She continues still to maintain that she's black because that's how she's choosing to identify herself. In Toronto there was a transgender father of seven children who left his wife and family to start a new life as a six-year-old girl. And it's no longer just gender dysphoria that's hitting the headlines, there's now the concept for the first time of species dysphoria with a 20-year-old Norwegian woman claiming that she's been born in the wrong species.

What's going on? Well these are obviously extremes, but all over our society we're rejecting the idea that identity is a given to us. Instead it's widely accepted now that you can choose your own identity.

Whoever you want to be, whoever you feel you'd like to be, that's who you really are. Of course that's most common now in terms of gender in our society. And the British government's schools commissioner recently posted on their website a questionnaire to be used in schools offering young people aged 13 to 18 the choice of self-identifying in terms of 23 different genders.

So as a society we used to understand gender, whether you're male or female, as a given thing. But now it's being treated as more about what you perceive your own gender to be.

[2 : 1 9] And Glyn Harrison, who we just heard about, has written this book *The Big Ego Trip*, he's recently written about this. He's the professor emeritus of psychiatry at Bristol University. And he's written about the modern crisis of identity. So what he says is, first of all, if you just think what is your identity, your identity is the story that you tell yourself about who you are and what you're for, what your purpose in life is. It's a story that you tell yourselves. And previously, the way that we would work is we go around in the world and you experience connections with the world around you, how people treat you, what people say to you and about you, and what you feel as you go about in the world. And that helps shape your identity.

It modifies and changes the story that you tell yourself about who you are. But now our culture is radically individualistic. So it's as though we have a buffer zone around us as we go into the world. And this is the key thing. When we go out into the world and we've decided who we feel we are, and when the modern self experiences things around them that contradict that self-identity, they don't change their own identity, they change reality. They change their perception of what the real world is around them so that they can keep their identity the same. And there are lots of factors that have contributed to that. Primarily, it's a philosophical view. It started in the the postmodern philosophy departments of our universities and trickled into our society.

But also technology has significantly affected this. Because of technology and social media platforms, the number of interactions we can have every day has radically increased. The people we communicate with the number of relationships we have. And so that means that because you're online, you can choose to be whoever you want. And you can even choose to be one person in one place and a very different kind of person in another place. And you can be who you want to be for as long as you like and then you can change it online. But the problem is that the modern self doesn't really know who it is.

Because we end up lost. We've sought to free ourselves from other people imposing an identity on us. But we've been left fragmented and unstable. So what's the effect of that? Well, Glyn Harrison says that there is a modern fragility of the human self in our society. People don't know who they

really are because they lack a firm story that they're confident in about who they are and what they're for. He says it's at least plausible that that is connected to the increase we're seeing in self-harm among young people today. Because people are filled with self-doubt. They lack self-esteem. People are struggling in relationships because in our insecurity we're spending too much time looking inward at ourselves. And it means we don't have as much time to invest in other people and show sympathy to them and support them. We are very nervous about how fragile and wounded people are. So what we see is we're terrified of someone offending people. We're very nervous about that in society, aren't we? The idea that you'd cause offence to somebody because people feel very vulnerable.

[5 : 54] So what do people most need in our society today with all that going on? What do they need? They need the gospel. Scotland needs the gospel. Because in the gospel God tells us who we really are.

And it's not constraining of God to do that or to tell you who you are. It's liberating so that you can live it out. It's not burdensome because it's all about God's free gift to us. But for the people around us in Scotland, in Glasgow, to see that that's what they need, they need to see us at St Silas living out that identity, taking hold of what God says in terms of who we are and what he's done for us and what he's made us. They need to hear the story from us. They need to see that it gives us a peace that they're looking for, a security in who we are. It's only when they see us living like that that they'll see that that's what they need. So I can't think of a more important passage of the Bible for us today in Glasgow than Ephesians chapter 2. It tells us who you once were, what happened to you, and who you now are. So first of all, what you once were in your life of freedom.

Our situation could not have been more hopeless. Just look again at verse 1. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who were disobedient. I don't know what you think about that, but I think that's a very confronting way to be described, isn't it? You know, if somebody asks me, how did you become a Christian? Tell me that story. I don't tend to say, well, it turns out, at one stage, I was dead. I was dead spiritually. And yet, it's a universal truth. If you have a look at verse 3, all of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Notice there, Paul's saying that. Paul was a devoutly religious person.

All of us, he says, were spiritually dead. Ironically, we often tend to think of the non-Christian life as freedom because you no longer have to think about how God wants you to live. You just live how you want to live. But Paul says it's slavery. We looked at this in our big questions last month, if you were here. You can imagine somebody in a little room, you're looking at somebody in a little room with bars between us and men. That's how often people would view Christians trapped by God. But Paul says, before you became a Christian, you were ruled by three masters. You notice them? You followed the ways of this world. Then you followed the ruler of the kingdom of the air. That's the devil. And thirdly, you followed the desires and thoughts of your flesh, the world, the flesh, the devil. So we might think that Jesus takes away someone's freedom.

He thinks it's the other way around. So I mentioned looking at somebody behind bars. Of course, that person might be looking at us. And from their perspective, we're behind bars.

[9 : 18] And the question is, which room is the prison cell and which one is for visitors? It'd be quite a surprise, wouldn't it, to turn around in our room and find there's no way out, and then to see the other person get up and leave through the door to the visitor's room.

That's the kind of reversal in our thinking that Paul wants us to have about the Christian life here. Just think about it. If you're not living as a Christian, what really governs your own choices and decisions? Paul says, you followed the ways of the world. And we know that's true.

We have to admit that of ourselves, being honest, that we are shaped by our culture. The reason why we have moral values that will be very different to what our grandparents believed about right and wrong is because they were shaped by their culture and we're products of our own.

We follow the ways of the world. Paul also says that we follow the ruler of the kingdom of the air.

The Bible is very clear that just as there is an all-powerful spiritual force for good in the world, there is a less powerful but nonetheless powerful force for evil, the devil, a spiritual force of evil.

He deceives us. He schemes against us. He doesn't want anybody to come to Jesus. And the Ephesians, who Paul was writing to, were very aware of that.

[10:44] Just as lots of cultures outside Scotland today, that would be a completely uncontroversial thing. That there is, of course, there is an evil spiritual power in the world. It helps explain why human beings who are capable of such good in the world can fall to the depths that they do in depravity and wickedness.

And thirdly, before you were a Christian, following the culture around you, shaped by that, deceived by the devil, your decisions were shaped by selfishness.

What Paul describes here as the desires and thoughts of your flesh, not just your heart, but your mind. Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, described human sin, the Bible word sin, rebellion against God.

He described it as this, it is man curved in on himself. So it's not that you love less when you're not a Christian, but that in sin, your love turns away.

God made us to love him and love our neighbour. So our love is meant to be outward focused. Just like God's love between Father, Son and Spirit is outwardly focused. That's how God made us.

[11:53] But what happens is that when we turn from God, we don't love less, we just, the direction of our love shifts. And we curve in on ourselves and love ourselves and serve ourselves.

So Luther said this, See what it's saying?

The sinful heart ultimately is using everything to serve itself. So sometimes that makes you a deeply rebellious person. You do everything wrong that you can get away with, pursuing hedonistic pleasure.

Much more often in life, it makes you a very moral person. You conform to the expectations of people around you because you're seeking their acceptance and their admiration.

You spend your time helping other people. But really, ultimately, it's for you. And having a sinful heart can even make you a very religious person.

[12:57] But you want God simply for what he can give you. And we deserve from God for all of this, what was at the end of verse 3. I know it's very confronting, but it's consistent through the Bible, consistent from Jesus.

End of verse 3. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. In other words, God, in his holiness, is very angry.

Not in the way that we might get angry, losing control, flying off the handle. No, God's anger is his settled, controlled hostility against everything that is wrong in his universe.

We live in his world, and we take the good things from him. And we don't live as though he's at the centre of our lives. And what we deserve for that is to face his holy wrath.

And it is a terrible thing. But Paul wants these Christians and wants us today to be aware of this.

Not so that we fall into depression. But to help us understand what an extraordinary work of God has been done in our lives.

[14:09] See, it's only when you face the greatness of God's wrath against sin that you can be captivated by the greatness of his love. So we've heard what you once were.

Secondly, what happened to you by God's power? It's the big but in verse 4. The big but of the Christian life. Verse 4. See, when you're dead, there's nothing you can do about it.

Even Jesus himself couldn't raise himself from the dead. Right? Jesus didn't raise himself from the dead. He couldn't do it. But the absolutely fundamental thing about the Christian identity is that the moment you put your faith in Jesus, you're in Christ.

So that whatever happens to Jesus happens to you. And as he died for sins, you died with him. He died for your sins. And God has raised him from death.

And just as God raised him physically from the dead, he has raised you from the dead spiritually.

You have a new life now. It's true life because we know God.

[15:27] And not knowing God is spiritual death. So the moment you put your faith in Jesus, this work of immense power has taken place in you by the spirit of God. You were dead, you were enslaved, and God made you alive so that you could know him.

And your resurrection, like that, goes beyond just being made alive. Look at verse 6. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

So where's Jesus now? He is in heaven at the right hand of God. He's being called Lord by God the Father. And he's waiting there until he returns and reigns in glory forever.

And he's not by himself. You see that? Verse 6 says to us, Christian, God has seated you up there with him. And that's how it can be true, what we saw a couple of weeks ago in Ephesians, chapter

1, verse 3.

That the moment you become a Christian, you have every spiritual blessing in Christ. There is no spiritual blessing that you lack. Why has God done that for us?

[16:34] Did he do it because we're great? I go running and cycling with this phone app called Strava. I don't know whether we've got many Strava fans in here. But Strava is essentially a social media platform for people who go running.

And what it does is you can follow your friends and they can follow you. And it means that if you see that your friend's gone out for a run and you want to encourage them, you can hit the thumbs up button.

You can hit like. And when that happens to me, on the rare occasions a friend hits like, I get a message and the message says, Hey Martin, you're kind of a big deal.

James gave you kudos for your run this morning. And you walk a bit taller. Yeah, I'm kind of a big deal. So when God raised us up in Christ, is it because we're a big deal?

That there's something good in us? Not at all. Did you notice how careful I was to make that point?

Verse 5. God made us alive even when we were dead in our transgressions.

[17:37] So why has God done this? Only because of his good character. His goodness. Verse 4. Because of his great love for us.

It's more expressive in the Greek, in the original, it's literally. But God being rich in mercy. Because of his great love with which he loved us. Even when we were dead in transgressions.

Made us alive. And then Paul seems to break off to emphasise it. He comes back to this idea in verse 8, but end of verse 5. It's by grace you've been saved. Grace is God's undeserved kindness to us.

It's his gift. His free gift for us. And we will see that for all eternity. We'll marvel that the God of eternity would, in his love, have loved us.

Verse 7. In order that in the coming ages, he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

[18:35] You get what's going on? We were in a whole world of trouble. A world of death, wrath, slavery. But we got ourselves mixed up with a God who is kind, loving, with a great love.

Rich in mercy, in verse 4. Rich in grace, in verse 7. Thank God he is very rich. So we've heard what we were. And we've heard what happened to us.

Thirdly, who are we now by God's grace? Well in verse 8 we hit what might be the best explanation of the Christian faith in the whole Bible. Verse 8. For it is by grace you have been saved through faith.

And this is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God. Not by works, so that no one can boast. It's extraordinary when you think about it, isn't it?

All over the world, Christians are thought of, by people who are not Christians, as people who think they're better than others. So if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, and you've been made to think that Christians feel superior to you in any way, please let me apologise to you.

[19:44] Because you've been deeply misled about what Christians believe. The Christian faith says, you've been given a new life by God. It's completely undeserved.

It's nothing at all to do with your own merit. It's just that God loves you and did this for you. Even the faith that you have to grab on to Jesus and get these blessings, even that is a gift from him.

In fact, I think it's a struggle to think of any worldview that would make you boast less than that. If you think about it, sometimes it's said you can divide the world into three kinds of people.

And the first kind of people are the people who choose the way of moral conformity for their lives. They choose moralism. They think, if I keep the rules, things will go well for me.

You'll think of lots of people like that. Rule keepers. And they tend to look down on the people who don't keep the rules. There's a second way to live, which is where you say, I'm going to break the rules.

[20:44] I'm going to choose the way of self-discovery from my life. I'm not going to let someone else tell me what's right and wrong. I'm going to choose for myself what's right and wrong and go my own way, the way of self-discovery. But if you do that, you look down on the moralistic people because you think, you guys have never realised what life's really about.

You've not had the nows to do what I've done and live the way of self-discovery. That's the second way to live. The third way is the gospel way. Jesus saves you and he says to you, you were dead.

And God set his love and mercy and grace on you to transform you, to make you a new person. You've got no reason to look down on anybody else. But you've got every reason to rejoice. And what are we for? Verse 10. For we are God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

God has made us who we are. We're his handiwork. We're his masterpiece, if you like. We've been crafted by him as a new people in Jesus. And he did that because he has plans for us.

[21 : 59] Plans that he's already worked out. Works of love that he's prepared for you to do, depending on him and his grace. Works that only come, works that we'll only do if we are captivated by the love that he's shown us.

That's what changes our hearts to make us want to live for him and want to serve him. Now, we're going to hear a lot more about those good works in the rest of Ephesians, about the practical love that God wants us to show as his people.

The radically distinctive lives God wants us to live. In the church, for one another. In the home, as families. In the world, as we serve others. But first of all, it's so important that we just take hold of who we are.

Who has God made us? So let me give just three reflections on this new identity. First of all, it's an identity that answers our prayers. Last time we were in Ephesians, we were looking at this prayer that Paul prayed for the Ephesians and saying it's a great prayer to pray for yourself and for other people, for other Christians.

And he prayed for knowledge of God, knowledge of hope, and knowledge of power. I don't know if you remember that. But our salvation story here gives us those three things.

[23 : 20] Just think about it. It gives us knowledge of God, which is what Paul prayed for. We learn in our salvation story that God, who is rich in grace, rich in mercy, even while we were sticking up two fingers at him because we hated him, loved us with a great love and saved us.

That's the God that we know. Paul said we should pray for knowledge of our hope. And now he tells us God has this plan for our lives of good works that he's prepared in advance for us to do and that one day, when Jesus comes in glory, we will come to realise and enjoy what he's secured for us already in heaven.

Every spiritual blessing is waiting for us. And Paul also prayed that we would know the power of God for us. And now he tells us that we were in a far worse state than we ever realised.

You know, my testimony shouldn't be I was going on okay in life and then I did an alpha course and realised that God had been missing and I started a relationship with him.

Some of that's true, but under the surface, I was dead spiritually and God had to do a work of such great power in me to awaken me to know him.

[24 : 38] It was like raising Jesus from the dead. That's the power of God for us. So do we want to know God better? I take it we do. We go back to the gospel to know God better.

Immerse ourselves in the gospel, the salvation story. We never move on from it as Christians and it's only when we accept the truth about ourselves, when we accept this story is my story, that we learn more about God and what he is like so that we can know him better.

Secondly, this is an identity that speaks to our times. That's how I started, thinking about the modern crisis of identity. It's sometimes tempting though, isn't it, as Christians, to give up on the power of the gospel.

To think, look, the culture in Scotland now is just so far from God, the gospel's just not going to work anymore. It's not what my friends need to hear anymore. Let's just keep quiet and maybe the church will just diminish and die.

But all around us, there is this identity crisis. People are discontent, people are lost, people long for the peace that God promises and the Lord says, let me tell you what you really are now.

[25 : 51] Let me tell you who you are. This is your story, a story of being loved before the dawn of time, chosen by the one who made you because he loves you, to be united with his eternal son and blessed in him so that you have a new purpose to live for and a glorious future ahead of you.

That story is the hope for our world. It's the only hope for our world. It's what we need in our times. And lastly this morning, this is an identity that needs to be lived out.

You see, you can't accept who you are now in Jesus and stay unchanged. Whenever we sin, we're living as though we're still in slavery to the world, the flesh and the devil.

And we don't have to be like that anymore. The power of it has been broken. We're being called to live radically differently now for God. Not because we owe it to him, but because of what he has done for us.

There's a story I heard of a woman coming to church, to a gospel-centered church, and she'd been coming for a couple of weeks, and she went up to the pastor after the service, and she said, all my life I've been going to church and I've been told that you keep the laws of religion so that you will earn God's favor and be accepted by him.

[27 : 13] What I'm hearing from you for the first time, I think, what I think I'm hearing is that because of what Jesus has done, all of that has been won for me, and all I have to do is accept the gift.

And the pastor said, that's right. And her face fell, and she gave this deep sigh, and he said, what's wrong? And she said, I'm just thinking through the consequences of this.

It is wonderful, but if that's true, that God has done that for me, there is nothing that he could now ask of me that would be too much.

So all my life, I thought that it was like a contract with God, and as long as I kept my side of the bargain, I could keep some stuff back for myself.

But if God has done this for me, there is nothing he could now ask for me, that he could ask for me, that I could say, that's too much, God. He's done everything.

[28 : 12] You see the implications of grasping that God has made us alive in his great love, and given us a whole new self to live for him. So that woman was someone who for the first time had understood the wonder of God's grace.

It's what God has done for every Christian, loving us with a great love. That's who he's made us.

And the message in Ephesians 2 is take hold of that so that you go and be who you really are.

Let's have a moment of quiet, and then I'll lead us in a prayer. Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that you set your love upon us to make us alive with Christ, that you saved us by grace and crafted us for good works.

May this salvation be more central to us and more precious to us, that it might govern the direction of our lives, our thoughts, our words, our actions, for the glory of Jesus' name.

Amen.