

Identity Crisis

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[0 : 00] In the movie Memento, you may have seen it, it's about a man named Leonard Shelby who has a head injury. And because of the head injury, he has a type of amnesia that makes it impossible for him to remember anything new for more than a few minutes, including his own identity.

So the whole plot of this movie Memento essentially hinges on Leonard investigating his own identity.

He's trying to figure out who he is, he's trying to piece together the story of who he is, where he came from. And there are various people along the way who try to manipulate Leonard's condition for their own gain.

They try to use his amnesia against him, and they tell him lies about who he is. And as the story builds to a climax, there comes a series of revelations about Leonard that lead him to start to question this identity that he's built for himself.

And I won't tell you how it ends. You need to go out and watch it. It's a phenomenal movie. But the Bible would say that this is really a picture of the human condition. That something has gone wrong.

[1 : 21] We have a kind of spiritual injury. And as a result of that, we've forgotten who we are. And so we live our lives trying to fill in the blanks by placing our identity in all kinds of things.

And just like in the movie, there are a lot of voices trying to tell us who we are. And not all of those voices have our best interest in mind.

This passage in Mark chapter 1 is all about identity. And it shows us this, that if we want to know the truth about our own identity, we first have to understand the truth about Jesus' identity.

If we want to know the truth about our identity, we will find it in the truth of Jesus' identity. So we're going to look at Mark chapter 1, Jesus' identity, and then our identity.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And every week we call upon you to speak through your word. You know us as we prayed earlier.

[2 : 29] You know each of our needs and each of our weaknesses. You know our unique struggles and temptations. You know where we are most in need of your care, Lord.

And so we pray that in your word, through your word, you would minister to your people. We pray this for our good, but ultimately that you would be glorified, Lord.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So first of all, we see something in this passage about Jesus' identity. Have you ever had somebody, you know, and they talk a whole lot and they use a lot of words, but then they get done talking and you're thinking, they didn't really actually say anything.

You know, a lot of, if my wife were here, she'd be like, all the time, Tommy. They use a lot of words and they don't really say anything. Mark is the exact opposite. He uses very few words.

And yet he packs an enormous amount into these few words. This short passage packs a serious punch. Verse 10, Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River.

[3 : 34] And it says in verse 10, when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

Now, we've read that passage a million times, some of us, and we just go right on past it. But it's worth stopping and asking, why would Mark describe the Spirit in this way?

What's the origin of the description of the Holy Spirit being like a dove? Well, it turns out, Mark is deliberately pointing us to the one other place where the Holy Spirit is described as a dove.

In the Targums, these are translations of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic, which was the language that everybody in Jesus' day, including Jesus, spoke.

So it's a translation of the Hebrew Bible into the lingua franca, the common tongue that Jesus and his disciples spoke. And if you go to the creation account in the Targums, Genesis chapter 1, it would say this.

[4 : 39] In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

That's the original Hebrew text. But the word hovering really means something like fluttering in the Hebrew. It's meant to convey the image of a kind of bird.

And so the rabbis, when they would translate this into Aramaic, for the sake of clarity, they would say the Spirit of God was fluttering over the face of the waters like a dove.

So it comes from the Targums. And so what we see here is that Mark is deliberately pointing us back to the creation story that they would have been familiar with in the Aramaic.

And if you know of the creation story, in creation we have God. We have the Spirit of God fluttering over the waters, which represent chaos. And then we have the Word of God.

[5 : 38] God speaking and bringing order to the chaos, bringing light and life and beauty and all that is into being. Okay, so what is Mark saying? By making this reference, what is he saying?

He's saying this. He's saying this. Just as the Spirit once hovered over the waters at creation, so now that same Spirit once again hovers over the waters of baptism and over the Word of God, the Son of God.

What Mark is telling us is that this baptism of Jesus, the coming of Jesus, heralds a new creation event.

Just as God once created all things, now God is going to recreate. He's going to renew. He's going to restore. And not only us, but the entire world, the cosmos.

This is a new creation event. Now I told you it packs a punch. That's not all that's going on in this passage. In the original creation, Adam and Eve face temptation.

[6 : 50] And what happens? Eventually they fail. And as a result, all humanity fell into sin. Our relationship with God has been broken. Then God comes to Abraham and he announces his plan for salvation.

To raise up Abraham's descendants. They will become the nation of Israel. And then God intends to use them as a means to bring his blessing and salvation to the ends of the earth.

Even though the Israelites emerge in captivity in Egypt, God sets them free. This wondrous Exodus event.

And then God sends them into the wilderness on a journey. Now that journey should have taken them through the waters of the Jordan River into the promised land where they would there fulfill God's plan.

But Israel ends up wandering in the wilderness for 40 years where they face temptation.

[7 : 49] And they fail. Instead of being a blessing to the nations, they become like the nations. Instead of worshiping God, they worship the idols of the nations.

Now look what Mark tells us. When Jesus is baptized, he's not just baptized anywhere. He's baptized in the Jordan River.

He's passing through the waters of the Jordan River. And then where does he go? He is driven by the Holy Spirit. Driven conveys a sense of urgency. It's very urgent that right then and there the next thing he does is to go into the wilderness.

And what happens in the wilderness? He spends 40 days being tempted by Satan. And yet, where Adam failed, where Eve failed, where Israel failed, Jesus is victorious.

So in these few verses, Mark is summarizing the entire Old Testament and he's revealing the true identity of Jesus. Mark is telling us that Jesus is the one through whom God plans to recreate and renew this world.

[9 : 04] That Jesus is the true and better Adam. That Jesus is the true and better Israel. That Jesus is able to do what they failed to do. And that all of God's promises are fulfilled in him.

This is the true identity of Jesus according to the gospel writers. And this is the message that Mark wants to convey in just a few verses.

So when people say that Jesus was just a really great teacher, a source of inspiration for the Western imagination, a social reformer who paved the way for future social reformers.

When people say that and they believe that's all Jesus represents, they are missing the whole point. Jesus did not come to tell us how to live a perfect life.

There's plenty of people out there who will tell you how to do that. Jesus came to live a perfect life himself. And that's very important because with every other religious founder, religious leader, you have to separate their teaching from their lifestyle in certain ways.

[10:19] There are certain truths about their life that people wish were not there. They may have had great things to say, but they're also very flawed and in some cases did atrocious things.

You see this in other religions, people like Joseph Smith or the prophet Muhammad. You see murder and rape and enslavement and genocide and things that people really wish weren't true. You see this in the Christian church as well. If you look at the history of some of the popes throughout the centuries, they were notoriously evil. Some of my greatest theological heroes said and did horrible things.

Martin Luther, the great theologian of the Protestant Reformation, said awful things about the Jews. Jonathan Edwards, regarded as one of the most brilliant theologians in the history of our country, if not the world, owned slaves.

And in all these cases, you focus on the teaching, but not so much the lifestyle. And you kind of have to tolerate the lifestyle as best you can, so that you can mine the great ideas that come from these leaders.

[11:34] In all these cases, that's what we have to do, but not so with Jesus. Not so with him. There are no skeletons in his closet.

There are no gaffes, no cover-ups, no scandals. There are no people in his closet. He was a public figure who was wildly popular with the common people, and the entire religious establishment was bent on using every resource at their disposal to do one thing, to discredit him.

And the best they could come up with was to say that the miracles Jesus performed must have been attributed to Satan and not to God. They couldn't even deny that the miracles happened because there were too many eyewitnesses.

So the best they could do is to say, when he healed that little girl who was dead and she came back to life again, that must have been Satan who did that. They couldn't do it.

Every other religion has a founder who offers their teachings. Only Jesus Christ offers himself, his perfect life, his very identity.

[12:51] Jesus came to offer us his identity. Now, what does that have to do with our identity? Well, let me ask you this question. Why did Jesus get baptized?

I mean, that's a common question that people ask, and it's a good one. John is baptizing people who are sinners who want to repent.

Why would a person who lived a perfect life, as we just said, no skeletons in his closet, no sins to confess, why would such a person need to get baptized?

Doesn't make sense. We find the answer a few chapters later in Mark's gospel, in Mark chapter 10, where Jesus says to his disciples, the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

This is the moment when Jesus reveals his true purpose in coming, and the reason that he lived a perfect life. It is so that he could offer himself as a ransom, so that he could take the place of sinners and take the punishment they deserve onto himself.

[14:05] This is saying that Jesus came to live the life that we should have lived, and then to die the death that we deserve to die, in order to set us free and to reconcile us to God.

So we come back to that question, well, why did Jesus get baptized? Well, in Jesus' baptism, he identifies himself with sinners.

He stands in the place of sinners. And this is where identity comes into play. When Jesus is baptized, he identifies with us in our sin.

When we get baptized, we identify with Jesus in his righteousness. Our sin becomes Jesus. His righteousness becomes us. In other words, if you have been baptized and you have put your faith in Jesus, it means that everything that is true about Jesus is now true about you.

[15:07] You have taken on that identity. His identity is yours. Just as the identity of your old self, the unreconciled sinful self, was put on him, where it then was put to death, and no longer lives.

Only Christ, the identity of Christ, now lives in you. And this is hugely important because as we said at the beginning, we are all like Leonard Shelby in Memento, right?

We are born into a massive identity crisis. We have forgotten who we are. We spend our lives trying to put the pieces together, trying to construct and build a consistent sense of self, a coherent narrative of identity.

in the world. And there are all kinds of voices out there speaking into that, trying to tell us who we are, and not all of them have our best interest in mind.

There are the outside voices, the voices that tell you you are a constituent, you are a consumer, first and foremost. But some, there are groups that are saying, you are your race, you are your class, you are your gender, you're your orientation.

[16:34] For one reason or another, all of these voices want us to identify ourselves primarily by this or that or the other thing. But I would say, if you're anything like me, some of the most harmful voices actually come from within.

These are the voices that we've internalized, maybe when we were still young children. Maybe it was an offhand comment by a teacher or a coach or a parent, a bully.

These voices that we internalize that speak continually to us. You're a failure. You're a disappointment.

You're nothing. You're trash. You're worthless. You're unlovable.

You're disgusting. You're tainted. If you have been baptized, if you've put your faith in Jesus, every single time one of those voices speaks, every single time the heavens are torn open and a voice speaks and says, no, this is my beloved child in whom I'm well pleased.

[18:09] Every single time. Baptism is God's gift to remind you who you are every time you forget.

In the movie Blood Diamond, Danny and Solomon have been looking for the site where this priceless diamond is buried. And at this point in the story, Solomon's son, Dia, has been kidnapped. And he has been forced into being a child soldier. And they've sort of reprogrammed him so that that's who he is and what he believes himself to be.

And so Danny and Solomon are digging up the diamond. And once they get the diamond, they turn around and there's Dia, Solomon's son. And he's pointing a gun at them.

And listen to what Solomon says to his son. He says, Dia, what are you doing? Look at me. What are you doing?

[19:15] You are Dia Vandy of the proud Mende tribe. And then Dia points the gun at his father. He says, you are a good boy who loves soccer and school.

And he starts walking up to Dia, even though Dia's pointing the gun at him. And he says, your mother loves you so much she waits by the fire making plantains and red palm oil stew with your sister Nyanda and the new baby.

And tears start to stream down the father's cheeks. And he says, the cows wait for you. And Babu, the wild dog who minds no one but you. And tears are now streaming down Dia's cheeks.

And the gun is trembling. And Solomon continues, I know that they made you do bad things. But you are not a bad boy. I am your father who loves you and you will come home with me and be my son again.

And then Dia puts the gun down and Solomon just embraces it. Every single time we sin, what that means is that for that moment we have forgotten who we really are.

[20:19] And God looks at us and he says, I know that you have done bad things but that is not who you are. You are no longer that person. I am your father who loves you.

Come home with me and be my child again. Let's pray. Lord, may we know the love of our father. May we know your love. Not as a theological truth. But as something that speaks to our innermost parts and silences the harmful voices and rebuilds and reconstitutes a true self.

The identity that we have through your son Jesus. May that be who we really are. May we know that truth and may it set us free to live in the life and the life of your love.

And for those here who have those harmful voices, I pray that those voices and the power of the Holy Spirit would be silenced once and for all. And I pray that your words of love and delight would be the only voice they hear.

[21:39] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.