The Quest for Identity

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Preacher: David Parker

[0:00] If you can turn with me then back to the letter of Peter, Peter's first letter, chapter 1, and we'll read again verses 1 and 2. 1 Peter, chapter 1, verses 1 and 2.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.
Now, I'm going to explore those verses of Peter, chapter 1, verses 1 and 2.
I'm going to explore those verses using three questions. First question is, who am I? The second question is, where do I belong?
And the third question is, what is the meaning and purpose of life? Now, I want to issue what I might call a fair warning to the congregation, which is that my first point will intentionally be somewhat longer than my second and third points.
[1:49] And the other aspect of the fair warning that I'm issuing, I always try to complete a sermon within about 30 minutes. I don't think I'll achieve that today, because you'll see that there's quite a bit that I do want to go through in my first point.

My purpose in this point, and in a sense in the sermon as a whole, is to give a snapshot of the world of thought that we Christians inhabit, and that seek to navigate our way through.
Before I do that, I just want to read a poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
For those of you that don't know who Dietrich Bonhoeffer is, he was a German theologian and pastor who lived at the time of the rise of Nazism and of Hitler.
And as well as being a deep Christian and theologian, he became part of a group of people who sought to assassinate Adolf Hitler.
[3:13] And that plot was discovered, and they weren't successful. And among others, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned, and he was executed in Flossenburg Prison, a concentration camp in 1945.

One month before his execution, he wrote this poem called, Who Am I? And I would like to begin my sermon with reciting this poem to you.
Who am I? They often tell me I stepped from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country house.
Who am I? They often tell me I used to speak to my warders freely and friendly and clearly, as though it were mine to command. Who am I?
They also tell me I bore the days of misfortune equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win.
[4:17] Am I then really that which other men tell of? Or am I only what I myself know of myself, restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath as though hands were compressing me?

Yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds, thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness, tossing in expectation of great events, weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making, faint and ready to say farewell to it all.
Who am I, this or the other? Am I one person today and tomorrow another? Am I both at once a hypocrite before others and before myself a contemptible, woe-begone weakling?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine. I'm just trying to switch this off so that it doesn't go during the sermon.

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[5:54] Bonhoeffer also made this statement once, the ultimate test of a moral society is the kind of world it leaves to its children.

Perhaps you have at one time, or even right now, are asking this question, who am I? As I say, perhaps you've asked it in the past, maybe you'll ask it in the future.
It's a question that has always been asked and will always continue to be asked by human beings. It's uniquely a human question.
The importance of this question is obvious and ought it in the history of ideas. the French philosopher Descartes, who's famous for his catchphrase, cogito ergo sum.
This is a man that lived in the 17th century and one day he woke up and said, I wonder what I can, if I engage in this thought experiment, I wonder what I could rationally doubt.
[7:10] And he came to the conclusion he could rationally doubt everything, except that he was doubting and except that there was a doubter who was doubting.

And that's what his phrase means, cogito ergo sum. I think, therefore I am. Descartes is regarded as the father of modern philosophy and modern ideas and modern thinking about the self because he put at the center of everything the self.
Although philosophers since Descartes, of course, have suggested that he smuggled in the self and that he had no logical right to do that just because he observed that there was an entity that was thinking.
But Descartes' cogito has heavily influenced Western consciousness and its obsession with the individual.
So what Descartes was trying to do was answer the question, who am I? Then there was the French philosopher, another French philosopher, Satre, Jean-Paul Satre, the French philosopher, an existentialist.
[8:37] His catchphrase was, existence precedes essence. What he was saying was this, human beings do not have a human nature, they're born as a blank slate.

And everything that happens to them, either from external sources and influences or internal sources, that is how their nature is formed.
Now, you might say, now, Satre died about, I think it was about 1980 or something like that. Descartes was a 17th century philosopher, Satre a 20th century philosopher.
You might think that, wow, that's all that time ago. But in actual fact, there's a well-known Harvard professor called Stephen Pinker who argues in his book called The Blank Slate that we do come with a human nature.
And in that book, Stephen Pinker says, the blank slate has become the secular religion of modern intellectual life. And you know how our age has been called postmodern and everybody's story is valid and everybody is right and everybody can shape themselves.
[10:03] Do not think for a nanosecond that philosophical ideas stay way up there in some sort of rarefied atmosphere.

do believe me that they cascade down into the people in the street. And as I say, my purpose here is to try and give a snapshot of the kind of world that we Christians are moving through, interacting with and navigating.
This is an important question for today, isn't it? Who am I? It's important in the abortion debate. Is the conceptus or zygote cell a person which should have the same rights as you and I?
Well, we can look at Psalm 139 and Psalm 51 and that feeds in to that discussion and that debate.
There are people today who wish to be identified at least partly by their sexuality. For example, the LGBT community and there are people who do not wish to be identified by their gender because they reject the binary and biological traditional approach to gender.
[11:25] I've got a few grandchildren, let's just put it that way and one of them is 17 and he was telling me that the head teacher at his school has decided not to use the term boy or girl in addressing the pupils anymore.

then again the question of who am I is also an issue for all of us especially at certain stages in our lives such as adolescence during times of illness e.g.
dementia and in issues such as bereavement and loss. When I worked in Airdrie Health Centre and saw 600 patients a year and a third of those were suffering from some loss we usually looked at it as something like an earthquake that had happened in their life and in that new situation that they were in they were trying to understand themselves and their identity now and how they would

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navigate themselves through the new world that they found that they inhabited.
I mentioned Satre earlier and I've stated how what his ideas were are very much according to Stephen Pinker still very much in the consciousness of people today.
So then this is the world of thought that we Christians inhabit and seek to find our own identity. I might ask this question why is this quest for identity cascaded all the way down to the person in the street?
[13:18] Why are these questions very much in people's minds and even if they're not so consciously in their minds they're there? could it be because Western society has dismantled and smashed down the pillars of a Christian Judaic understanding of the world and ourselves and because nothing has been put in place and nothing can be put in place as a plausible substitute?

might it be the case that in our day and age people are groping among the rubble of dismantled Christianity for some scraps of rootedness?
things. But I think there's an even deeper reason for this quest of identity in our day and age.
We are made in the image of God. That's a great truth that the Bible states unequivocally.
And you know all our dreams and all our hopes and our I mentioned in my prayer our impulse to worship something more than ourselves beyond ourselves bigger than ourselves our sense of justice our concern about truth all anthropologists will tell you that every human civilization from the first has had some kind of morality our sense of there are things that are right we might disagree about what is right and wrong but each of us have this sense of right and wrong and as we wrestle with this question would you not agree with me that a proposition like that that we are made in the image of God that at the root of our being is spirit and spirituality but there's something even more profound here and this is in our text isn't it amazing that the first statement almost the out of the mouth of Peter to those people that he is addressing is this to God's elect to God's elect
[16:05] God offers every single person here he offers every single person a new identity identity in Jesus Christ because all of us have messed up if I could put it this way our original identity as people made in the image of God I'm not saying that there isn't any trace of it still there I'm saying we've messed it up and God offers us a new identity and an amazing and brilliant identity Peter is addressing individuals who are in the Roman world in the Roman society the person that's the great power is the notorious Nero the Roman emperor who burned

Christians and made them torches for his own pleasure as he sought to put the blame of the fire that took place in Rome on the Christians the date of this letter and the circumstances of that letter are consistent with the reign of Nero at that time and Peter is writing to those people who are in danger of being persecuted themselves who are probably being persecuted and the first statement out of his mouth is to God's elect now the Greek has no punctuation you want to know exactly what the opening words of this statement says in the Greek it's this to God's elect exiles of the dispersion no comma but a paradox elect exiles of the dispersion we may feel that we are marginalized we may feel that we are laughed at we may feel that we are undermined and that we are persecuted but do not forget
Peter's statement here to God's elect exiles of the dispersion now some people have used this concept of the elect in a way that is unhealthy in my opinion but I want to just say very quickly this is a term of endearment and privilege secondly this is a term not applied to an individual and I think about every case in the entire bible it is not applied to individuals it is applied to a collective Israel in the old testament and look what he's saying here to God's elect exiles it's applied to all the people of God Christ is the real elect one he is the real chosen one there is no election for anybody apart from
Jesus Christ all election is in him what does it mean to be God's elect it means to have a hope it means to have your guilt and your sins and your shame forgiven it means to have a purpose it means to have a sense of belonging it means to know who you are in all the changes of our identity we know that we've got this now I belong to Jesus Jesus belongs to me we know that we are God's special people and that he has a plan and purpose for us as we were singing in that first hymn that will culminate and peak in perfect restoration having seen then that
Peter identifies those Christian believers as God's elect meaning that is who you are that is God's understanding of you that is your true identity I now go on to my second point where do I belong because we must not only remember who we are but also where we belong Peter tells them in that word exiles a sense of belonging is important isn't it it's one of the spin-offs from being a Christian and from being part of the church church people can get a sense of belonging in various ways

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through being part of family friends work colleagues clubs political parties religions belong belonging helps to give people a sense of value and acceptance and it fulfills another deep human need that need
[22:07] I mentioned it already in a sense is a need for transcendence a need to transcend puny little me it's a need for community and does not this chime in very well with being made in the image of God is God not community is God not father son and spirit and is this impulse and need for community is that not an echo of that image when anyone lacks a sense of belonging they feel outed or rejected or that they're not fitting in they feel sad and lonely this can happen especially today with teenagers and their activities and social media although it happened with our own daughter and her activity wasn't focused on social media it can happen with senior citizens who feel they're marginalised and not really that important it can even happen in those places where we're meant to nurture and gain a sense of belonging what do

I mean I mean it can happen this absence of a sense of belonging in church in marriage in work in political parties the German American philosopher Hannah Arendt once said we are isolated individuals in an atomised society the great French intellectual Simon Wies said to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul someone else has said not being loved is difficult but having nobody to love is even worse we need a sense of belonging I've already quoted that great hymn now I belong to
Jesus and Jesus belongs to me what greater sense of belonging could we have to be told that we're God's elect everything that I've said really about belonging is passing apart from the fact that we're God's elect but everything else I've said about belonging is passing and fleeting and temporary think of that great intellect Simone We she said in this life we possess nothing in this life we possess nothing and she's dead right because like that whatever we have can be taken away from us in a flash
Peter tells us negatively where we belong he says you know yes you're God's elect but you're God's elect exiles you're exiles of eternity and that's why we Christians shouldn't build our castles here that's why we Christians shouldn't be completely driven by the treasures of this world this world is not your home I'm just a passing through my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue Jesus could say where your treasure is there will your heart be is this need for belonging would you not agree with me it's an echo of a much deeper and spiritual need so
Peter is pointing us is he not to an answer to those great searching questions and deep and important questions that human beings will always ask who am I where do I belong and then thirdly and finally what is the meaning and purpose of life I mentioned my work in Airdrie for five years seeing 600 patients a year a third of them presenting with mental health a third of them with relationship problems and a third of them with bereavement and loss how many times did I hear a patient sitting in front of me saying this there is no meaning and purpose to my life anymore there is no meaning and purpose to my life anymore they said that sometimes through loss they said that sometimes through a sense of failure and they said that sometimes because they were in a controlling relationship and they said that sometimes because they wanted to end their life let me tell you it's hard to get up out of bed when you feel this way human beings you see are meaning making subjects and that is why particularly if catastrophe or disaster or a major health episode in their life it causes them to wonder what is the meaning and purpose of all this that's happening to me why is my marriage as empty as it is why am I having this experience at university or in the workplace what is the meaning and purpose of my life
[29:52] Peter not only I believe here answers the question who am I and where do I belong but he also answers the question what is the meaning and purpose of my life look what he says to God's elect exiles scattered throughout these different places who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father through the sanctifying work of the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood here is the secret of the real meaning and purpose of your life it is to be renewed after the image of Jesus Christ behold the man here is the embodiment of the real human being the real human being who is beautiful who is in harmony who is at peace who is in his relationship with his father in heaven and please notice that election is no end in itself and please notice in passing that the whole

God is involved in it father son and spirit and please notice that it is a means to an end and that end is to be conformed to the image of Christ that end is to serve the Lord Christ here is the real end or telos or goal of election here is the real end and telos and goal of the meaning and purpose of our

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lives it is to bring us to live for Jesus Christ to be conformed to his image the supreme elect one history does it not declares his existence the church declares her experience of his living presence and the
Bible declares his glory and lordship and I ask you as I close have you been obedient to Jesus Christ and you know here's the thing it's all those that are obedient to Jesus Christ that are his elect God you might say to me but my life is a mess I have so much guilt and shame but listen to what Peter says Peter says those that come to Christ and become his elect those that realize that their need of Christ it is he's calling a race that needs to be sprinkled that needs to be cleansed will you embrace then
God's statement of your identity who you are will you embrace God's statement of where you belong and will you embrace God's call to you for the meaning and purpose of your life does your life have ultimate meaning and purpose purpose it's not true to say that if you're not a Christian your life doesn't have meaning and purpose of course it does you can't live without meaning and purpose just as you can't live without hope but what we're talking about is ultimate meaning and purpose I finish by saying this are you an exile of eternity amen and may the Lord bless these thoughts to each one of us and let's cover

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