

The Promise of Transformation

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening folks. It's great to be with you. You just heard the passage read and I wonder if you're a bit confused about the stuff at the start. It's quite unusual. It's a bit odd, isn't it? Like this whole idea of being hidden with Christ or dying with Christ. What does that mean?

And I wonder if you're a bit disappointed with the stuff at the end. No sex, no obscene talk, etc. It sounds a bit like just tired old Christian moralism. Well, I want to say right at the start that Paul is not a moralist. A moralist is just interested in these sort of external displays of goodness. And this is not Paul. Paul never talks about morality isolated. He never talks about morality without first talking about Christ and our identity in him. And that's really what this section is all about. It's about who you are in Christ and what that means for how you live. Who you are in Christ and what that means for how you live. To begin, I just want to briefly touch on the idea of identity formation in very general terms and really broad strokes. I want us to get our head around that in order to understand the passage better. Okay, so in very broad strokes.

When it comes to identity, we're trying to answer a number of questions, aren't we? Questions like, what am I trying to accomplish in my life? What am I worth? Things like, who gets a say in what my identity is? Who gets an opinion on that? In more traditional cultures, the answer to these questions come more from the outside. Charles Taylor, who's a Canadian philosopher, he says it's often tied to the idea of duty. Duty to God and Queen and country and community and family.

And the idea is like you're fulfilling your duty, so you internally bend and sacrifice for the sake of these external demands, community and job, etc. However, in a more modern culture, identity is formed by looking inwards, not outwards, by looking inwards. So rather than going outwards to find your identity, you look inside yourself. And the great goal is to be true to yourself. You are self-validating.

You live your truth. And the community has to bend and sacrifice and pivot to accommodate your identity. Now, both these models are problematic, aren't they? And I think for obvious reasons, the traditional view on identity formation, well, goodness, how do we live up to these external standards? And what if there are conflicting external standards? And the modern view of identity formation, well, that can just end up, that just ends up crushing us because we're so internally conflicted people, aren't we?

[2 : 5 5] There's a lot. I mean, there's just a lot going on in here. And when you're responsible for validating, you know, your own value, the truth is we're just not up to the task. We're very, we're full of conflicting feelings and beliefs and drives, so it's just not stable. We're just, it's a fragile identity.

All right, so why am I saying all of this? Because our passage directly and indirectly addresses all of this. It says, there are external expectations of you as a member of a community.

Paul says, I expect you to act like this. And there are, there is internal work to be done, hard work that requires you to dig deep in terms of what's going on in your heart.

And it requires you to fight to live in a way that is consistent with who God says you are. So in terms of identity formation, there is an external piece and there's an internal piece, and they hold together. Now, thankfully, they don't have so much of the problems that the purely secular models have because the external expectations come from one source, the only source that really matters, our creator. And we're not crushed by the internal stuff because the passage also recognizes that we won't do this stuff perfectly. There is forgiveness through Christ. You won't live up to these external standards. You won't live up to your own internal standards, but Christ has met those standards. It's been achieved through Christ. And what do you do? You accept that.

All right. That's the big overview. That's the big stuff. Let's dig into some of the details of the passage. So the first section of our passage, Paul says this, if then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, set it at the right hand of God. Set your mind

on the things that are above, not on the things on earth. You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

[5 : 07] Goodness, that's really, really packed. Let's just start with one of those ideas. And it's the one I really love. It's this idea that our lives are hidden with Christ. But what does that mean?

So this was originally written in Greek and the Greek word for hidden is cryptos, which where we get obviously the word crypt from. It's a secret place, isn't it? It's a place where we put precious things and those things are safe there. They're valuable. They're protected. So our identity is hidden in Christ. Who we are is hidden in Christ, meaning it's safe. It's precious. It can't be taken away from us.

So our lives, our identity, they're safely in Christ. That's this external proclamation over our life. In Christ. In Christ. Not in like clothes in a drawer, more organically like a branch is part of a tree and the life of that tree flows into that branch. That's more of the sense of it. You folks are in Christ. Your life is hidden with him. You are connected to the ruler of the universe. His life flows into yours and it might look a little bit mundane from the outside. Others don't comprehend it, but you have this incredible but hidden reality in your life. A hidden life in Christ. Now does the passage say any more about this? Yes it does. It helps unpack that a bit. This in-ness is fleshed out in the first four verses. It tries to help us understand this. It tries to help us get our head around it and the way Paul does that is he describes that in-ness by saying we are united with Christ in these four really big events in Christ's life. Really some big ones here. His death, his resurrection, his ascension and his return. Look at what he says. You have died. You have died and your life is hidden with Christ at the right hand of God. That's the death and the ascension. You have died to a life that was just about you and you have been raised with Christ. You now have a new life, new values, new motivations. Folks, the chapter of your life called non-Christian is over. You have to keep reminding yourself of that. The chapter of your life called Christian has begun. You are forgiven. You are a forgiven person. That's a huge part of who you are. You are in Christ's death, in his resurrection. So that means that God delights in you as if you had done everything that Christ has done. God delights in you as much as he delights in his own son. And Paul says you will appear with him in glory when Christ returns. So this hidden life won't always be hidden. Christ's death, his resurrection, his ascension, his return in some sublime way, in some mysterious way, we are wrapped up in all of those things. In some way we participate in all of those things. It's just, I mean, it's just kind of completely wild stuff, isn't it?

So given these mysterious realities, the passage has two encouragements for us. Verse 1, seek the things that are above where Christ is. Verse 2, set your minds on things that are above. It's essentially saying the same thing. It's saying, given that we are united with Christ, somehow let that shape our lives. Shape our lives around that reality. Orient your life around that invisible reality. It's not saying just think about heaven so you can neglect your daily life, you can neglect your job and your family and your house. No, it's not saying that. It's saying you have a treasure that people can't see, but it's a treasure that directs your behavior and your goals and the fundamental aims of your life. Right, that's the first section. Now we come to the second part.

[9 : 27] And I hope, I hope you understand that the first part helps reframe the next section about anger and sex, etc. It's not tired Christian moralism. Folks, it's a promise. It's a promise.

If you have the reality of verses 1 to 4 in your life, you can change. You don't have to spend your life a vacuous materialist. You don't have to spend your teens and 20s hooking up with people for comfort. You don't have to always have your eyes on what other people have and you don't.

You can change. And verse 9 says it can be like taking off old clothes and putting on new ones. It can be a radical change. And wouldn't that be something? But how does it work?

We're coming into Christmas soon, right? It's like, what was it, like 10 weeks away. There is a sub-genre of Christmas movies called metaphysical second chance comedies. I'll say that again. Write this down. Write this down in your home right now. Grab a pen. There is a sub-genre of Christmas movies called metaphysical second chance comedies.

[10 : 57] They're movies like, when I say them, you'll go, oh, that makes sense. Movies like It's a Wonderful Life with Jimmy Stewart or Groundhog Day by Bill Murray, right? So the New York Times movie reviewer said, it's the kind of movie in which the laws of time and space are bent to give characters access to self-knowledge unavailable in ordinary times so that they can transform themselves. It's the kind of movie where the laws of time and space are bent to give characters access to self-knowledge unavailable in ordinary circumstances so they can transform their lives.

Folks, this is a ridiculous statement, but the gospel says your life can become a metaphysical second chance comedy. God sent Christ into the world, breaking the laws of time and space. He brought forgiveness and knowledge and power that would otherwise be utterly unavailable to you. And he grafted your life into his life. And because of that, your life can be transformed. Now this doesn't mean change just happens and we just lay about and it just happens to us. And I'm going to finish with this. Listen how Paul describes the work we have to do.

In dealing with immorality and selfish desires, et cetera, Paul says, put to death, put to death these things. Take an axe to these attitudes and these behaviours. You have been given new life. Work on helping it flourish. I know people who have given up smartphones because of this. People who had to make an incredibly courageous decision to be very vulnerable and seek prayer or counselling.

It could be like just doing the hard work of identifying the idols in your life and replacing them. It's fighting to keep your mind on things above. It's killing off the things that are going to wreck your soul. You have a new nature. The old one's lurking about. Paul says, do what you need to do so the old nature doesn't run the new nature? Somebody said to me just before the service, sometimes we give up on change. Sometimes we give up on change because we're discouraged. Don't do that, folks.

Take courageous steps. You have been given new life. Now protect that. Amen.