

Questions of Identity

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[0 : 00] Thanks very much, Rachel and Margot. And good morning, everyone. Good to see you if you're in the church here. Good to know there are lots more watching us online. It will be helpful if you've got a Bible in front of you or an electronic device you can read the chapter on because, as Rachel said, we're only able to read part of it and we will be referring to the whole chapter as we go along.

I can say with some confidence that John chapter 7 is the chapter of the Gospel that most of us are least familiar with. Let's just think about that.

I realise this won't resonate with everyone, but let's think through the chapter of John's Gospel up to now. Chapter 1, we have the Word and the Lamb of God. Chapter 2, we have the wedding at Cana. Chapter 3, we have Nicodemus. Chapter 4, we have the woman at the well in Samaria. Chapter 5, we have the lame man who was healed on the Sabbath. Chapter 6, we have the feeding of the 5,000.

And we could go on from Chapter 8 onwards. But Chapter 7, what's it about? Well, we've probably not got that much idea. Most of us, it's not a chapter that immediately resonates.

[1 : 08] It's quite hard work and we have to think about it as we go through. So my job this morning is hopefully to make John Chapter 7 a little bit more memorable for you, but also to think about what its relevance is for us today.

And I think there are some very practical things that we can take from it. So we've got a lot to cover in quite a short time. So here's the plan. We're going to think a bit about the context of John 7.

Context is always important when we study the Bible, perhaps particularly so in this chapter. We're then going to walk through it and see how we can navigate our way through the chapter.

Please do read it all when you get home and certainly before your small group this week. We're going to think about five questions, which I hope will help us see the practical significance of John 7 today.

And then we're going to end with a rock music legend and we'll find out about that when we come to it. But let's begin with context. John's Gospel, as I'm sure you know, the key verse for context is at the end of Chapter 20, when John says that he's written so that we will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

[2 : 26] And everything in John's Gospel is working towards that aim. Every incident, every saying of the Lord Jesus, every conversation that's recorded is to help us to understand who Jesus is, that he's the Messiah, the Son of God.

And John 7 is no different from that. In fact, it's very important in the flow of the Gospel. If we come to the more immediate context, between John 5 and John 10, which makes a little subsection of the book, there are a number of incidents which all happen around the time of Jewish feasts or festivals.

John 5, it doesn't say what the specific festival was, but Jesus was in Jerusalem for a festival and their discussion about the Sabbath, which is, in a sense, a weekly festival. John 6 takes place around the festival of the Passover.

John 7 to 9, around the festival of tabernacles. And then John 10, around the festival of commitment, or what we would these days call Hanukkah.

And all of these festivals do a number of things for us. The first is they help position where Jesus is. As we go through the Gospels, some of what Jesus does we see is in Galilee, and some is in Jerusalem and Judea.

[3 : 48] And if an incident takes place, or a meeting takes place in Jerusalem, you can be confident that it's because Jesus is there for one of the feasts of the Jews. So we're in Jerusalem again today.

Perhaps more importantly, these festivals give us a bit of a countdown to the cross of the Lord Jesus. They draw us nearer and nearer to Calvary.

So chapter 6 is the Passover, a year before Jesus was crucified. The Feast of Tabernacles that we're thinking about today, that took place in September, October.

So that was six months before the crucifixion. Hanukkah, you may know, is in December. So that was about three months before the Lord died. So we've got a bit of a countdown.

The Lord is getting closer and closer to his crucifixion as we go through the Gospel. But perhaps most important of all, in terms of the significance of the feasts, is if we look at what Jesus says and the things that happen, they are very much tied in to the meaning of these festivals.

[4 : 57] Passover, Hanukkah, we could look at, but particularly when we come to the Festival of Tabernacles, it is very much the backdrop to what Jesus is saying.

So I'm going to take just a couple of minutes and we're going to think about what happened at the Festival of Tabernacles. What was it all about? Well, the thing that was most striking about this festival is that for a week, people in Jerusalem lived in temporary dwellings, in kind of tents that were covered with branches.

And that was looking back to when the Israelites were in the wilderness and they had temporary dwellings. And this was quite an exciting week for the Jews.

Think of all the festivals, it was the most joyful. We could think perhaps of young people going to camp these days, getting away from home, going somewhere different, doing something different with different people.

That was very much what it was all about, a time of rejoicing and celebration. And it had three particular aspects to it. It looked backward, it looked at the present, and it looked forward.

[6 : 09] You may see echoes of all of these in John chapter 7, indeed in chapters 8 and 9. So as I said, it looked backwards. It remembered the time when the Israelites had left Egypt and they were going through the wilderness and would ultimately end up in Canaan in the Promised Land.

And it thought about how in that period God had provided for all their needs. He provided water, he provided food, everything they needed, even though there were nomadic people traveling around, God gave them everything that they needed.

In the present, the Feast of Tabernacles, or Saccot as it was called, was the Harvest Thanksgiving. So that's a familiar concept to us when we come together and we give God thanks for his current provision for us.

So the festival took place at the time of the harvest, particularly bringing in grapes perhaps and fruit from trees, and people gave thanks for that. It was a celebration of God's present goodness to his people.

But it also looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. And that's why in John 7 particularly, Messiah is mentioned time and time again. The Jews were looking forward to the one who would be the liberator of their nation.

[7 : 32] Now they had a different idea for what we might of what the liberator of the Messiah would be, but they were very much looking forward to his coming. And a key chapter for understanding how the Festival of Tabernacles works is the prophecy of Zechariah chapter 14.

And one of the things that prophecy says is that when the Messiah comes and tabernacles with his people, people from all nations will gather around him at the Festival of Tabernacles and will worship him.

So there's very much a forward-looking aspect to the festival as well. And we see some fulfillment of that in the Lord Jesus when he came the first time.

It will be completely fulfilled when the Lord Jesus comes again and indeed every knee bows before him. He is recognized as the Messiah, as the Son of God.

So it's the past, the present and the future. And there were two particular themes around the Festival of Tabernacles. One was light.

[8 : 42] I said it was September, October. It was around the time of the equinox. And the Jews were aware the nights were beginning to get longer and darker.

And one of the things that the festival celebrated is the light that God gives us. Every day, 16 huge bowls were lit up in one of the courtyards of the temple.

And apparently you could see throughout the city, you could see the light that came from these. No street lamps, of course, in those days. So light was very important. And as we look at chapters 8

and chapter 9 in the next few weeks, we'll very much be coming back to that. The second thing that was important was water. This was the dry season. Often it was a time of drought. And so as the people came together for this festival, they were aware of God's provision of water and their need of that.

Now I'll go into more detail about that in a few minutes. There's again a ritual involved in it that will help us. But this is a great, joyous festival with lots of different meanings to it.

[9 : 51] And I hope we'll see some of them as today we think through this chapter. Okay, that's enough for context. Let's move on now and think about how we can break down the chapter.

John very helpfully gives us some timings for this. And I think they're the easiest way to look at the chapter. The first few verses are the start of the festival.

There's a bit of discussion about whether Jesus is going or not. And his brothers say he should. And he says he's not going just now. But it's all about the start of the festival. And I think the key word to hang on to here is delay.

That Jesus' brothers say, you should be going to Jerusalem. Look, you're doing all these things in Galilee, but this is a backwater. Who's interested in what happens here? You need to go to Jerusalem and do all the things there and be seen in public.

John tells us it was because they didn't believe in him that they took this view. It's a slightly cynical view, I think. But Jesus says, no, I'm not going now. My time hasn't come yet.

[11 : 01] And so he doesn't immediately go up to the festival, but he's still the talk of the town, even though he's not there. People are saying, well, where is he?

We know about this Jesus. Why hasn't he come? And they're saying, well, who is he? Some people are saying, well, he must be a good man. All the things he does. And other people saying, no, he's just a deceiver.

But all that they were doing kind of whispering, because they knew the Jewish leaders were opposed to Jesus. So that's the start of the festival, the delay that Jesus introduces.

From verse 14, we have the middle of the festival. The passage Rachel read to us says, not until halfway through the festival did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach.

And the key theme of the next 20 or so verses up to verse 36 is this debate about who Jesus is and what he is doing.

[12 : 04] And lots of different views and different arguments. Some of the people thinking, yes, he must be the Messiah. Look at the way he speaks.

He's not been trained. He's not been taught in our synagogues or by our leaders. And yet he says these wonderful things. Surely he must be the Messiah.

And then Jesus talks about why he's able to speak as he does. It's because he comes from God. And if people are obedient to God, they will recognize that and they will be obedient to his teaching. He then comes on and he talks about the miracle in chapter 5. Remember in chapter 5, where the lame man who is beside the pool, Jesus heals him on the Sabbath and he causes uproar among the religious leaders.

And he comes back to that and he makes a very important point. He says, you got on of me because I healed a man on the Sabbath, but you will quite happily circumcise someone on the Sabbath.

[13 : 12] What's the difference? Why is that acceptable and it's not acceptable for me to heal? Get your judgments right. And then again, we have this question, some people concluding that Jesus is the Messiah, some not.

The authority is very much against him. And then he talks about his authority a bit more. He talks about the fact that people don't recognize Jesus because they don't recognize that his authority comes from God the Father.

and again, the authorities are trying to seize him. We read that in verse 31. But the crowd are still thinking, this is someone really special.

How can he do these miracles if he's not from God? And then finally, in the latter part of this section, Jesus talks about him going away.

And again, that causes some confusion. People think, well, where is he going to? Is he going to the Gentiles? Jesus, of course, is talking about the fact that he's going to heaven. He's going to his father by way of the cross.

[14 : 20] So lots of discussion, lots of debate in the middle. We could go into a lot of detail about it, but we don't have time this morning. And then finally, we have the end of the festival.

I've called that decision because this is the time when people have to nail their colors to the mast.

What do you really think about Jesus? We have, first of all, and we'll come back to it, that Jesus stands up and he says, let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.

And we'll come back and look at that wee subsection. It's very important. We'll look at it in a couple of minutes. And some of the people then say, well, he must be a prophet. Others say, well, he must be the Messiah.

And then other people say, no, he can't be. We know that he comes from Galilee. The prophet, the Messiah, doesn't come from Galilee. It can't be Jesus. And again, we have a hardening of the Jewish leaders against him and we have the people divided.

Not sure many of them what's happening, but a good number believing. So as you go through the chapter, if you get a chance to do it in more detail later, hopefully that gives you a bit of a structure.

[15 : 32] Delay the first section, debate in the second, and decisions to be made in the third. But I want to spend the rest of the time thinking through five questions.

Five questions, I think, come at us from the chapter and that are really important as we want to apply it and think what its relevance is today.

So there's when, why, where, what, and who. So the first is a question of when. And the issue is, what do we mean by Jesus' time?

Jesus says, my time has not come, as in verses six and eight, if you're following along. In that context, he's thinking of his time to go and very publicly show himself in Jerusalem.

Now when that time came, around six months later, the Lord Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkey and he received the praises of his people. And I think that is the reference the Lord is making there to his time not having yet come.

[16 : 41] But if we go down to verse 30, John tells us that the Lord Jesus, our, hadn't come yet. That he hadn't yet come to the point when people could seize him and could judge him.

his hour hadn't come so the people, the authorities, weren't able to touch him. And so the hour that they're talking about there is Jesus' death on the cross for us.

His crucifixion at Calvary, which was the time that his whole life had been building up to. Right as far back as chapter two in John, Jesus says to, in this case, to his mother Mary, my time, my hour has not yet come.

And as we follow through the gospel, it's building up to the point where John says in chapter 12, or Jesus says rather, now my hour is come. Why is that significant for us?

Because it tells us that the whole of Jesus' life was directed towards his death on the cross. It was no accident that he went to Calvary and died for us.

[17 : 53] He knew from the start what was going to happen and he was building towards it in everything that he did in his ministry. Jesus' time, the time that he came into the world, the purpose that he came into the world for, was to go to the cross at Calvary to take our place and to die for us.

And as we read through Jesus' life, it's important that we recognize it's all building up to that climax. And as John takes us through and tries to persuade us of the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, he's also doing that knowing that the ultimate evidence will come through the cross and through the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

So Jesus' time refers to his death for us on the cross. Second question then, why did Jesus have authority?

It's very clear from this chapter that Jesus preached with real authority. The people listened to him and they were amazed. And they were a bit confused because they knew their leaders were opposed to Jesus and yet here was someone who was saying such wonderful things and more than that was doing such wonderful miracles.

Where did that come from? And of course, Jesus says his authority comes from God, the Father himself. The words he speaks are not his own words he says.

[19 : 28] They're the words that the Father has given to him. That's in verses 16 and 18 particularly. And the point he makes is that what he's saying is not so that he can come across as this wonderful preacher, but so that his Father will be glorified.

He also says that he was sent by God. That's in verse 29. I know him because I am from him and he sent me.

So the authority that Jesus has is authority that has been given to him by God, the Father. And that's the same authority that Jesus still has today.

Do you remember at the end of Matthew's Gospel we have the great commission of the Lord Jesus to his disciples and he begins by saying all authority has been given to me, given by whom?

By God the Father in heaven and on earth. And John is bringing out for us that Jesus has total authority, authority to teach, authority to heal, authority to tell others what their faults are and to expose their hypocrisy.

[20 : 41] And that authority comes from God. It's the same authority that he still has. Question three, where did Jesus come from?

That's the big question that seems to come back to again and again in the passage. It's the thing that's confusing the people because they're looking at him and thinking, yes, this is someone important, but he's from Galilee.

Galilee is a little backwater, quite a distance away from Jerusalem. Jerusalem is not the kind of place that important people come from. And it's certainly not the place where the Messiah comes from.

Now, it has to be said that people were a little bit confused about where the Messiah comes from. Verse 27, they say his origins are unknown. And then a bit later in verse 41, they say he's going to come from Bethlehem, which is true.

But one thing they knew was he wouldn't come from Galilee. And of course, they just weren't realising the Lord Jesus originally was from Bethlehem. But more important than that, as the Messiah, he had come from God himself.

[21 : 48] Yes, Galilee was his home. It was where he'd lived most of his life. But he was born, as the scripture prophesied, in Bethlehem. And he had come ultimately from the presence of God because he was the eternal son of God.

The people thought he can't be important if he comes from Galilee. Perhaps people today think, first century Israel, how can someone important, someone who's a saviour, come from there?

Well, the fact is, Jesus did come from there. The Messiah was born there, but he came from God ultimately, and we need to recognise that too. Question four, what does Jesus offer?

We're going to come back now to three verses that we didn't read earlier, but I do want to read them now. They're really important in this chapter. So it says, on the last, and this is verses 37 onwards, on the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.

Whoever believes in me, as scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

[23 : 07] Up to that time, the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not been glorified. I said one of the key themes of the Festival of Tabernacles was water.

And what happened was that every day, a procession of priests went down the hill to the Pool of Siloam, and they drew some water from it, and then they processed back up the hill to the altar, and they poured the water onto the altar.

Meanwhile, the people, the normal people, were joined with them and were singing, singing verses from the Old Testament and celebrating what was happening. And then on the last day, the eighth day, it was an eight-day feast, on the last day of the festival, this happened seven times.

Down the hill, collect some water in urns, back up the hill, pour it on the altar. And it appears that it was while this was happening that Jesus shouts out, here.

The one who had, at the beginning, not wanted to go to the festival, not be seen to be drawing attention to himself, now he is ready to draw attention to himself, and as this ritual goes on, he shouts out, and he gives a spiritual application to what's being done.

[24 : 28] Now again, if we look back at the Old Testament, there's significance in the water, and the water came from the rock as the Israelites were going through the wilderness. There's significance, we said earlier, in the present for them in terms of needing water in time of drought.

And if we go back to Zechariah 14, again, the living water is there. It talks about water flowing out from Jerusalem to the nation.

I'm sure Jesus had that in mind when he was speaking. But Jesus says, let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.

Back in chapter 4, Jesus met a Samaritan woman, and he says, if you drink the water I give you, you'll never thirst again. So it's picking up again the same theme.

If we want real sustenance, real meaning in our life, that comes to drinking in from Jesus.

[25 : 27] The water that he will give us is the water that is life-giving, that frees us to do what is right. And John identifies that what he particularly means is that those who believe in Jesus will receive the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit makes all the difference in our present life.

When we trust in Jesus, when we confess our sins and believe in his death for us on the cross, we have eternal life. We can look forward with confidence to heaven.

But we also have in this life the Holy Spirit who is given to us to be our guide, our helper, our friend, our gift giver, the one who changes our lives.

and Jesus is saying, if anyone trusts in me, they will get this wonderful blessing of the Holy Spirit.

But notice he says more than that.

He says, yes, come and drink, drink of me, and you will receive the Holy Spirit. but from you, rivers of living water will flow out.

[26 : 40] Not entirely clear what the Scripture being referred to there is. It may well be Zechariah 14 that I mentioned earlier. But the point is, if we have the Spirit, if we have the Holy Spirit, that is a great blessing to us, but it should also be a great blessing to everyone else.

When we have God working in us through the Spirit, it's not just for our benefit. It's so that we can serve him and so that others will benefit from it.

And I think there's a real challenge for many of us there. If you believe in the Lord Jesus, if you call yourself a Christian, what difference does your life make to others?

When people meet you, do they go away feeling refreshed, feeling there's something different here, there's something that's really helped me and benefited me? Or do they see you just as being like anyone else and there's no difference from the fact that you would call yourself a Christian?

If we have the Spirit, the Spirit working in our lives, changing our character, guiding us to do what is right, should make us visibly different to others.

[27 : 54] As is the case with Jesus, not all of them will welcome it or will think this is a good thing. We should be distinctive as Christians. We shouldn't just be blending in with the world around about us.

We have the Spirit and the Spirit is given to us so that we can bless others, so we can build up others in the church, but also so that we can bless others who are not yet Christians and help them to understand truths about the Lord Jesus.

So what does Jesus offer? He offers us water that satisfies but also that overflows and blesses others as we have the Spirit.

And then finally, the key question, who is Jesus? And that's what really is all through this chapter.

People wrestling with this thought, who is Jesus? Who is this person who is here, who is doing these wonderful things and saying these wonderful, sometimes controversial, things?

Who is he really? And I think there are four different reactions to Jesus in this passage. The first is that some people are very confused by him.

[29 : 06] They're confused at his learning. How can he know so much when he's not had a formal education? They're confused about his origin. Where did he come from?

They're confused about his plans for the future and he says he's going away. What does he mean? Where is he going to? They just can't make sense of Jesus. Perhaps that's where some people here today are too.

Yes, you've heard the story of Jesus. Perhaps you've marveled at some of the things that he said and the things that are written about him in the Bible. But you're still confused. You still can't quite understand is he the Messiah?

Is he someone who you should have a relationship with or not? If you're in that position, I suggest the best thing you can do is to get a gospel by John.

We can provide one if you'd like. Read through it and see whether what John says, what John writes about Jesus makes sense, whether he does make the case that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

[30 : 11] Great to take the gospel of you the time and just to read through it in a sitting and just immerse yourself in what John says about Jesus and then, as God directs your thoughts, come to a conclusion about who Jesus really is.

If you're confused, don't remain confused. Look what the Bible says. Try to understand it. Second group of people weren't so much confused as in denial.

Again, they were seeing everything that Jesus said, but they kept coming up with reasons. how can it be? Particularly where he came from question. How can he really be the Messiah?

Despite everything, despite all they saw and heard, yet they had this stumbling block, I can't quite believe it. And I guess that's true of many people today as well.

Aware of Jesus, aware of what is written about him in the Gospels, and yet saying, how can someone who lived 2,000 years ago in a part of the world far away from us who died a criminal's death, how can he be God with us?

[31 : 23] How can he make any difference in my life now? Now, again, if you're in that position, reading John's Gospel or any part of the Bible is really helpful. But if you have questions, if you can't understand things, do speak to one of us, someone who's been on the platform today or one of the staff team in the church, do speak to us and we can try to help you understand perhaps some of the stumbling blocks and maybe be able to overcome them.

Third group of people, they weren't confused, they weren't in denial, they were just opposed to Jesus. This is the religious leaders, the Pharisees, the chief priests, they just said, he's ruining everything we've built up, he's exposing us, speaking against us, we need to get rid of him. They even sent soldiers to go and arrest him. Slightly amusing because the soldiers go back and they say, we can't arrest him, we've never heard anyone who spoke like this.

And that just riled the leaders even more. They were totally opposed to Jesus. One exception is mentioned then in the chapter, look out for Nicodemus, who we saw previously in chapter 3.

And again today, there are many people who are put off by Jesus, who don't want the challenges that he brings, who don't want him to disturb them out of their comfort and the life they lead and aren't willing to listen to him.

[32 : 57] Hope no one is here today in that position. If you are again, I would urge you, don't have the closed minds of the Jewish leaders.

Look at God's word, think about it, and see that Jesus really is the Messiah. Then the fourth group, they weren't confused, they weren't in denial, they weren't hostile, they believed in Jesus.

Whether it's through what he did in verse 31, or whether it's through what he said in verses 40 to 41, when they talk about him being the prophet or the Messiah, they realized what he said was what he was.

He was the genuine article, he was the one who people had been looking forward to from Old Testament times. Again, if you're not yet in that position, do think about Jesus and who he is and of what he has done and come to the response directed by God's Spirit of believing in him.

Jesus is the only hope we have for forgiveness for all the wrong we've done and for a future that goes well beyond death and that brings us to something much greater when we leave this world.

[34 : 16] Don't be confused, don't be in denial, don't oppose Jesus, come and believe in him. I said it'd end with a rock music legend, so let's do that.

It's Bono, the lead singer of U2. In 2004, there was a terrible terrorist attack in Madrid on the Spanish trains.

193 people were killed. Shortly after that, Bono did an interview with a French journalist. I think they got around to talking about how can people who claim to be religious do such things.

Bono said, it's not our own good works that gets us through the gates of heaven. I hope we can all agree with that. The Jews replied to him, such great hope is wonderful, but it's close to lunacy.

In my view, Christ has his rank among the world's great thinkers, but Son of God isn't that far-fetched. That's very much the attitude of some of the people in John 7.

[35 : 22] And here's what Bono said, I've condensed this slightly. He said, no, it's not far-fetched to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this.

He was a great prophet, obviously a very interesting guy, had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets, be they Muhammad, Buddha, or Confucius.

But actually, Christ doesn't allow you that. Christ says, no, I'm not saying I'm a teacher.

Don't call me a teacher. I'm not saying I'm a prophet. I'm saying I'm the Messiah. I'm saying I am God incarnate. And people say, no, no, please just be a prophet.

We can take a prophet, but don't mention the M word. And Bono says, he goes, actually, I am the Messiah. So what you're left with is either Christ was who he said he was, the Messiah, or a

complete nutcase.

[36 : 29] I'm not joking here. The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half the globe could have his fate changed and turned upside down by a nutcase.

For me, that's far-fetched. So I'd urge you, so would Bodo, think today about Jesus. Jesus.

Recognize in him the Messiah, the one sent from God.

If you've trusted him, follow him. Use the gift of the Spirit he's given you to bless others. If you don't yet know him, prayerfully consider who he is and come to put your trust in him.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word to us this morning. We thank you for this long and in some ways difficult chapter, but yet which clearly presents the Lord Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, with us.

We thank you for his words, for the great teaching that he gives us. We thank you for his works, for these wonderful miracles that we read about. But we thank you especially for his cross, for his death for us on the cross at Calvary, and that he's alive and at your right hand today.

[37 : 43] Help all of us to believe that, to trust him as the Messiah, and to follow him as our Lord. Thank you for our time together. Thank you for the opportunity to meet and to worship.

We commit ourselves to you in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.