

Our Identity

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Thank you for the warm welcome. It's always a privilege to open God's Word. Special thanks to you for praying for us at Grace Mount. We need it.

And we much appreciate your partnership in the gospel in this kind of way. So many thanks for that. If you just keep your Bible open at Genesis 28, that's where we're going to be thinking this morning. I'm going to pray and then we'll look at it together. Father, your Word tells us that the person you esteem is humble and contrite and trembles at your Word.

We pray as we open up the Bible, you'll keep us from being self-deceived, carried away with ourselves or just plain lazy. We pray. Bring the Word of God into our lives today in a transforming kind of way.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Identity is a pressing issue today. So there are young people who are confused about whether they're male or female.

[1 : 27] That's our culture. And if you switch the attention from individuals to countries, we're living at a time when our past is described as shameful.

Because of our involvement in slavery or colonialism or empire, you really ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Confusion and shame are powerful emotions.

And they kind of circulate around people's lives today, leaving them unsure of who they are and what to put their trust in.

But what of the people of God? What is it that should define our life? How should we think of ourselves? Genesis, as you will know, wasn't written for Noah or Abraham.

It wasn't written for Joseph or Isaac. It was written by Moses for the benefit of the descendants of those people to show them who they were, to answer that question of identity.

[2 : 48] So perhaps you can imagine Moses reading Genesis 28 to the people of his day. And you'll see in verse 13 that God introduces himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac.

But of course, when he comes to Moses at the burning bush, if you know the story, next book, chapter 3, he doesn't simply say, I'm the God of Abraham and Isaac.

He adds, I'm the God of Jacob. Now, I'm not the least surprised that God would introduce himself as the God of Abraham. He gets it wrong on occasions, but he is a pretty impressive guy.

But the God of Jacob? Really? So my question is, what does that add to our understanding of ourselves?

That our God is the God of Jacob. Now, the word that you would use to describe Jacob at this point in his life, Genesis 28, is the word lost.

[4 : 02] Now, I don't mean that necessarily in a geographical sense. He has those set out on a journey, Beersheba there, Haran, somewhere up here in Mesopotamia, 480 miles between these two places.

He's gone about 60 miles to what will become known as Bethel. He's isolated, he's lonely, he's vulnerable, and all of it is a consequence of his bad choices.

He's got his brother's birthright in his back pocket. He's got the family blessing that he persuaded his father, his blind father, to confer upon him, but none of it will do him one bit of good as he sets out on this journey.

He's heading for Paddan Aram. His mother's family home. But nobody in Paddan Aram is expecting him.

They don't even know he exists. No one's looking for him. No one's bothered. Except God's waiting for him. And here we discover that God has things to say to him.

[5 : 26] And it's plain to see God doesn't meet him and speak to him because of qualities in his life.

Jacob doesn't prompt God to relate to him in this way, and yet he does. The God of Jacob is, we're being told here, life-giving, hope-creating, mercy-expressing, rescuer of lost people.

And we learn these things by listening to the promises that God makes to this man. Now, the gospel is a promise. Jesus says, in my Father's house are many rooms.

If it were not so, would I have told you I'm going there to prepare a place for you? And you know the way to the place where I'm going. Thomas says, Lord, we don't know where you're going. Never mind, know the way.

Jesus says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Now, here's the thing that you and I need to put in as the kind of foundation.

[6 : 41] I was reading the biography of a, I think I described him as a Christian adventurer, just lots of daring do stuff. And in his biography, he says, my favorite verse is Philippians 4.13.

If you know the verse, it says, I can do all things, at least in certain translations it says this, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. And he is speaking specifically about the occasion that he was enabled to summit on Everest.

God enabled me to summit. Now, when you stop and think about that, you realize that it makes God out to be the kind of bank manager kind of guy.

You know, you go to him with your plans. I've got this business plan. You say, I'd like you to help me fulfill it. No. The thing that people hate is that there's only one truth, there's only one purpose, and there's only one agenda.

He's the God of Jacob. But Jacob needs to get on to his agenda. He needs to get on to this roadmap that God provides for him here in this chapter and shows him the way ahead.

[8 : 11] There is no plan B. You and I need to take a moment today to ask ourselves the question, is this the agenda that we're on?

Are we following God's roadmap? Is that the direction in which our life is going?

Now, he says three things, which is very convenient if you're a preacher. We're always very grateful for three things. So, here's the first of them.

these are a people who are promised a destination. So, look at verse 13. God says to Jacob, I will give you and your descendants the land on which you're lying.

So, obviously, if you're going to be a people, you need to have a place. And Jacob and his descendants share this in common at this point in time. So, you go to Jacob.

[9 : 17] What's going on in your life, Jacob? Well, I'm a fugitive, actually. I'm running away from home. I don't have a home. If you go to Israel, what are they?

They're slaves in Egypt. And both of these people, whether it's Jacob or it's Israel, are people whose lives are characterized by hopelessness.

Now, our world is full of desperate people. We understand that. who are moving around the globe and trying to find a better future for themselves. And some of them do so by means of very courageous and ways that involve huge amounts of endurance.

But that's not what's going on here. This is not a future that will be achieved by entrepreneurship or courage.

courage. This is a future that will be given to them by means of this great promise. Canaan will be a land flowing with milk and honey where they will inherit houses that they hadn't built and cities that they hadn't formed, where God will fight their battles.

[10 : 32] No, Joshua did not fight the battle of Jericho. God did. And this future is disclosed to Jacob in this dream. Now, I don't know what you think when you hear the word dream but please don't think to yourself that these are kind of ideas that are kind of surfacing out of Jacob's subconscious.

No. This is about God interrupting this man's sleep to speak specifically into his life. It is no dream. This is not even Martin Luther King. I've had a dream. No. This is outside of himself. This is God communicating with his man and giving to him a picture of a great future.

Unexpected, glorious, and gracious. And through all that will happen, Bethel will be a special place in Jacob's life.

He'll mark it with his stone. He'll pour oil in it. He'll give it a name, the house of God. He will go back there at a later stage.

[11 : 51] And it will just be remembered. It will be a marker in his life. It's not, oh, well, we'll move on now. No. This is a significant moment in Jacob's life.

Now, our lives are not full of these kind of special occasions. But my guess is if you're a Christian, there will be significant occasions when God has specifically and personally spoken into your life. My wife was brought up in a Christian home, heard the gospel on many occasions. But when she was 17, at an SU camp on the Isle of Aaron, somebody explained the gospel in such a way that it became personal and powerful in a way it had never been before.

And that became a marker in her life. I heard Sinclair Ferguson, you might know his name, kind of theologian, preacher, say that he could remember where he was sitting as a 14-year-old boy in St. George's, Tron, Glasgow. It was a big gallery. It was a Sunday evening. He was sitting on the left-hand side of the preacher who was preaching John 8, verse 12, Jesus' words, I am the light of the world.

[13:24] Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness. And Ferguson said, it was like Jesus was speaking to me. And I don't know what age he is now, but he can remember what happened when he was 14.

It was a kind of specific sacred moment in his life. Now, it might happen to you in times of significant illness.

God just steps in and does stuff and you think, Almighty God's just intervened in my life. Remember that.

Might be bereavement. Might be some other kind of needs. Remembering is massively important. for people of faith.

Bethel. Market. Why? What's the alternative? These words that we're looking at here, Genesis 28, are directed at the Exodus generation.

[14:41] So, here's the Exodus generation. they're promised. God's saying to them, I'll give you a land of your own. I'll give you a land of richness, fruitfulness, milk and honey.

And they get to the borders of the promised land. One year after they've left Egypt, they stand on the brink of promise, of realizing the promise that God has made to them.

They're right on the border, and guess what? They wheel round, elect a leader, and go back in the direction of Egypt. What is going on there?

this is what the New Testament says. Listen to this carefully. See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

But encourage one another daily as long as it's called today, so that none of you may be, this is the bit, hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

[16:00] Sin has a voice. It speaks. Israel's idolatry, grumbling, ingratitude, spoke into their heads as they stand on the brink of Canaan, and they look and they see big cities and powerful armies, and they say to themselves, God's not going to give us, God's not going to give people like us, that world over there.

He's just brought us out here to kill us. That's what the Bible calls the deceitfulness of sin. Okay. And of course, they have forgotten.

They've forgotten that God has rescued them from Egypt. They've forgotten that God has fought for them against the Amalekites. All that has been sidelined.

And the voice that speaks powerfully into their lives is their sin. We all have sin. We all get it wrong. It will speak into our lives.

We need the promise of God to be louder in our lives than the deceitfulness of sin. Genesis 28 says that he is the God of Jacob.

[17:20] He delights to show mercy. He brings hope to the hopeless. He keeps these great promises. Okay, here's the second thing that defines their identity and sets the direction for their lives.

So, look at verse 14. your offspring will be like the dust of the earth and you will spread abroad to the west and the east and to the north and the south.

So, there are people who are not just promised a destination, they're promised expansion. They're going to get big. Now, if you go back to Jacob and you kind of peer into his family life, family life for Jacob was a tough place.

Whether it's Beersheba, his home, Esau, Jacob, not a great place. Or whether it's Paddan Aram and the tension between his wives over children or his sons as they grow up who turn into this kind of, oh, this kind of savage gang who buy their, who buy their ruthlessness, put the whole family at risk.

Or, or, or Jacob's eldest son, Reuben, who turns out to be a massive disappointment.

[18 : 54] Now, what's, what's Jacob's response to that? What does Jacob do as a consequence of the, the, the trials of his family? Answer, he invests in Joseph.

He puts all his affection onto one of his sons. And when that son will go, he'll choose another son called Benjamin, and he'll put all his affections onto Benjamin.

What would you describe that as? Subtraction. His world just gets smaller and smaller, and he kind of writes off the rest of his values.

He's not interested in them. His, his, his horizon is one son. Subtraction.

Now, the fulfillment of these words is not kind of the nation of Israel. The fulfillment of these words is the household of God or the church family. I'm sure that you, I'm sure you know this.

[19 : 59] We certainly know this up at Grace Mount. There's no shortage of people who've had bad experiences of family life. They've got up in the morning not knowing what kind of mood their carers or parents or whoever happens to be around in the house will be in.

Who, who don't know, who don't know whether they're, they're going to meet with indifference or shouting and fear. Now, the place where they ought to encounter something better is in the church family.

You come out of that world, you come into the church, you start to experience something that's better. It's where, it's where families learn to share their lives with those who've been in that place. Where, where, where those of us who are able, and not everybody's able, make space for people to come and live with us. Maybe because things have broken up with their partners, maybe because their new Christians and their home's just so violent, maybe because they're, got an injunction on them by the courts and they're not allowed to go back home.

Room, room. Where our, where our table is a place where we welcome not just our pals, yeah, I guess, there's room for pals.

[21 : 45] But those who have needs, maybe because their marriages are struggling, do you want to come around, talk, have some food, see if we can be of help to each other.

That's the picture, isn't it? Now, for sure, there's a cost involved in that prospect. It's a place of inconvenience and intrusion.

Listen to what Jesus said. No one who has left brothers or sisters, fathers or mothers or children for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age and in the age to come, eternal life.

if you go to the end of Romans, Paul's speaking to the house churches in Rome, 14 and 15, he's speaking into the lives of some with strong views about what you can eat and what you can't eat or what special days should be kept, and those are a completely different view, Jews and Gentiles that make up these churches.

And he's saying to them, yeah, there are right answers to these things. I'm pretty clear in my mind you can. All food is clean. But he says being loving is more important than being right in these secondary matters.

[23 : 21] Accept one another as Christ has accepted you. And then you go to chapter 16, you know the one of all the list of names at the end of it? What's that there for?

But it just lets you see the kind of rich network of friends and relationships that this man has. There are people on the list who have risked their lives for him, people who have been in prison with him, people who have worked hard alongside him.

There's a woman mentioned who he describes as having been a mother to me. I'm not quite sure what would be involved in that, but presumably she looked after him in some way.

just a richness. It's a great picture. But it comes with a cost, obviously. But it is a picture of multiplication.

There's no lack of subtraction around today. You watch churches, you're just getting smaller. Now, it's a complicated question. I'm sure it's not just one reason, but one aspect to it is for sure where we make our biological families more important than the church family.

[24 : 44] Let me say one more thing and then we're pretty much finished. Okay. So there's a third element in this description of our identity.

We have a place, there's a future, we have a people that's expanding, and we have a purpose. And the purpose is stated as this mission. So end of verse 14, and all people on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.

In other words, what are we here for? What do we exist for? For others is the answer. for the good of others. Now what this statement does is two things.

Number one, it makes clear that the promised land cannot be the ultimate destination. Right? I mean, the whole world is not going to move to that little bit of land at the far end of the Mediterranean and end up there.

[25 : 51] No, it's not. Okay. That's not the future. Jacob provides the clue in his reference to the house of God and the ladder resting on the earth and rising to heaven.

It's pointing to the place where heaven and earth are reunited as they were back in that perfect world in the garden of Eden. Heaven and earth in perfect harmony.

the construction of the temple, which is still 500 years away at least from these events. We'll have within it, visually, as you just enter the temple, it's got these reminders.

It's got palm trees and flowers. It's got a lamp stand with flower-like cups and buds and blossoms.

It's got this curtain with fierce angels on it, with big swords, that are all reminders of that garden that they once enjoyed fellowship with God in.

[27 : 02] And in the middle of it all, there's a little glimpse of hope that one man once a year gets to go through the curtain and do what Adam did back in the beginning and as it were, walk with God.

Eden was a sanctuary. It's a place where God and people lived in perfect harmony, where they enjoyed, they just enjoyed each other.

They delighted in each other. God and his creatures, people in their God. God. That's this new creation that God is in the business of.

Now the New Testament when you get to it, shifts the emphasis from this temple to a person. So Jesus clears the traders out of the temple.

They say to him, what right have you got to do that? And he says, destroy this temple and I will rebuild it again in three days. The temple that he spoke of was his own body.

[28 : 19] Here's the place of life that brings about this future. And the question that people were asking was, can Jesus deliver on this future?

Can he bring in this perfect world, this new creation? Can he do that? Can he create a people who are fit to live in this world?

Can he make his church a blessing to the world so that it will be a place that is populated by others?

Now, the reason they crucify him is because they say, no, you can't do that.

You're not able to do that. But of course, it is that very place, that very event, the cross of Jesus Christ, that causes life to flow to the world.

We are called the body of Christ Christ. Because we're those who are meant to put on display the life of the cross as well as to proclaim the cross.

[29 : 41] Life flows from the cross. So, here are some of the ways that that happens. The cross brings about atonement. words that have m-e-n-t at the end mean to make.

So, contentment, to make content. Resentment, to make resentful. Atonement, quite obviously, at one meant, is to make at one.

So, the cross creates that oneness between God and man, but also a oneness among people. The church is a community that puts that oneness on display.

But it's also a community where people get hurt and relationships break down. Now, what's your natural reaction when things don't work out too well?

Answer, we want to take a step back. And the obvious place, that you head for, is your own family. My natural reaction is to withdraw, it's to make sure that it never happens again.

[30 : 56] The cross calls us to bear with one another and forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us. Put it on display, let people see. That's what we're about.

The cross is a source of justification. Justification is about God declaring us righteous, righteous. In other words, it's nothing to do with the core of public opinion.

It's not about looking good in people's eyes, it's about standing right before God. And what that should do for us is it freezes up from having to pretend that hide our sin, play the hypocrite, pretend we're sorted.

it. I don't know if you've noticed this as you read the Psalms. It's one of the remarkable things about the Psalms, isn't it? Particularly the Psalms of David. David doesn't just confess his sin.

David writes songs about his sin for people to sing. Can you imagine that? All right, I'll write a song. That'll be about my sin.

[32 : 05] That's what he does. We have people in our church who come from pretty broken backgrounds. Sometimes they'll fall and it's very easy for them as they look around to think, oh, you guys are all sorted.

And I need to own up to what I guess you might call my more respectable sins. I need to let people say that my marriage is sometimes very clunky like gear wheels reacting to one another. Sometimes my fuse is sadly too short. Sometimes my prayer life is distracted and disordered.

I need to own up to that. Because I've been justified. I'm right because of the cross in God's eyes. And that's what matters. The cross obviously is an outpouring of God's love. This is love, not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his son as a propitiation for our sins.

[33 : 15] There are people that you and I will never meet, people who we have little in common with, people who contribute nothing to our lives, but just because of where they live, because of the culture they're part of, they will never hear the gospel unless somebody takes steps to make that happen, to give money, to pray, to give time to invest in those situations.

It's part of the loving, the engaging, the interest in other people. Now, Jacob will never see the fulfillment of these promises. And yet, when he dies, he will give instructions to his family and say, don't bury me in Egypt, take me back to Canaan, and bury me in the cave where Abraham and his family are buried.

Now, that is not sentimentality. That is Jacob saying, not even death is going to stop me entering into that future that God's promised.

Christ, this is our identity. This is who we are. And it's because that destiny is secure that we can live this kind of life that is a life of cost and sacrifice and involvement in other people.

I'm going to pray and then Ali's going to take over again. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your kindness to us. We're so glad to know that you're the God of Jacob.

[35 : 10] So grateful for being a merciful, gracious, generous Heavenly Father. Pray, Lord, that your character would be reflected in ours.

For Jesus' sake, Amen. for a blessing, even faire aside.
We're so glad that you're doing yourself.