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## Who am I?

### Hot crumpets and odd encounters

One cold winter's day in November 1973, I boarded a train at New Street Station, Birmingham. The following day I was due to attend an interview that would determine whether or not I would obtain a place to read theology at Selwyn College, Cambridge.

I felt very apprehensive.

I grew up in a working-class family in Birmingham. My dad was employed in a grocery shop and also did night shifts at Cadbury's chocolate factory. Mum did a variety of jobs that gave us the few luxuries we enjoyed. No one in my family had ever taken A levels before, never mind gone to university. The idea of going to Cambridge seemed beyond the bounds of imagination. My gran warned me about the dangers of forgetting my roots. Ivory towers seemed a million miles away from anything I had ever experienced.

My school had arranged for me to meet up with an ex-pupil in the second year of a natural sciences degree, so I located his room and we spent the evening toasting crumpets in front of a two-bar electric fire.

I began to relax.

Maybe Cambridge wouldn't be such an exotic place after all. Perhaps the ivory towers were not so different from the down-to-earth realities of Birmingham.

Then in came Tony.

He didn't knock, but just walked in and sat cross-legged on the floor between my host and me. He didn't say a word, nor did he acknowledge us. Yet my host kept on talking to me as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

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The crumpets warmed up and we began to eat. I took one. So did Tony. Still not a word. I took a second and Tony followed suit. This went on until the plate was empty. At this point, still without speaking, Tony got up and walked out into the night.

I must have looked fairly mystified, but my host merely smiled and confided, 'That's Tony. He's in his second year studying philosophy, and he's not sure whether he exists or not.'

For someone who doubted the reality of his existence, he wasn't bad at polishing off crumpets!

## The importance of identity and self-worth

I learned some years later that Tony had become an accountant, so there was light at the end of this particular philosophical tunnel.

I suppose that few of us share Tony's existential dilemma. Most of us, however, wrestle with 'big' questions from time to time. In particular, we grapple with the plethora of questions surrounding the issue of identity and self-image.

- Who am I?
- How do I see myself?
- How do others see me?
- What does God think about me?

Such questions impinge on the even more personal anxieties associated with self-worth.

- Do I feel valued?
- Do I have significance?
- Could anyone really love me?

We live in a culture that is obsessed with these kinds of questions.

In some ways, we affirm the importance of a healthy self-image. We want to feel good about ourselves and the advertising industry takes full advantage of this. Getting a faster car, a better smartphone or the latest technological device will help me build up a

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positive self-image. At the very least, it can make me feel superior to someone else.

The greatest danger to personal and social health, we are assured, is a low self-image. This, rather than the love of money, is the root of all kinds of evil. Make people feel good about themselves and you will heal all the ills of society. A poor self-image may lead to depression, loss of potential and a willingness to tolerate abusive situations and relationships.

One social critic expresses it like this:

incantations for self-worth, self-love and self-acceptance ooze out of the TV tube, drift across the radio waves, and entice through advertising. From the cradle to the grave, self-promoters promise to cure all of society's ills through doses of self-esteem, self-worth, self-acceptance, and self-love. And everyone or nearly everyone echoes the refrain: 'You just need to love and accept yourself the way you are.'<sup>1</sup>

Self-esteem and self-love have never been so important or prominent.

## The crisis of identity

In other ways, however, we have never been as unsure of our identity as we are today.

If the new atheists are to be believed, we humans are nothing more than machines made out of meat, whose only purpose is to perpetuate our genes. Why? To continue the species. Why? The answer is not clear. If matter is all that there is, can we really have any purpose or significance? If not, then where does that leave us?

Richard Dawkins insists that the universe is governed by blind forces with no design or purpose, no right or wrong. Seeking an ultimate meaning is a pointless exercise in self-deception.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, others have struggled with this too. The main character in Woody Allen's film, *Midnight in Paris*, is an aspiring writer who goes back in time to encounter famous authors from the past. One of these, Gertrude Stein, encourages him, as an artist, to provide a

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life-affirming alternative to what she describes as the inherent hopelessness of human existence.

Is it not desirable, then, to simply give up any search for ultimate purpose and make the most of what we have?

In the words of French philosopher and author Albert Camus, 'You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life.'<sup>3</sup>

The author of the book of Ecclesiastes<sup>4</sup> was well aware of this existential angst millennia ago. Imagining a world where only material things exist – a world 'under the sun' – he comes to a devastating conclusion:

'Meaningless! Meaningless!  
says the Teacher.  
'Utterly meaningless!  
Everything is meaningless.'  
(Ecclesiastes 1:2)

It is clear that writers and artists have struggled with identity issues for centuries.

## Looking in the right place

The important issue is not that we get an elevated self-image, but that we get an accurate self-image.

Where do we look for this? We could look into the mirror of popular opinion and be shaped by what people say. This is a very tempting solution. Few of us are immune to the judgment of others. We want people to think that we are cool, successful, clever or beautiful. We allow a cacophony of voices to shape our identity. The problem is that these voices vary so much in their assessments. We can easily end up becoming people pleasers, constantly changing our image, chameleon-like, depending on our environment. But do we really want to go through our whole life wearing a series of uncomfortable and ill-fitting masks?

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If we are brave, we may, instead, look into ourselves and seek to define our identity by what we see there. Forget what people say. I will be true to myself. I will never wear a mask. People must take me as they find me.

Now, this sounds wonderfully liberating but it has two drawbacks. First, we are social creatures and our identity is shaped by our relationships. It is very difficult to cut ourselves off from other people. Refusing to listen to what others say about us can result in eccentricity and isolation. Ploughing my own furrow might lead me into some very strange and lonely fields. Second, how honest can I really be about myself? Self-knowledge is elusive. My vision is subjective and skewed.

The mirrors of popular opinion and personal reflection prove to be distorted and distorting.

Is there a third option?

In the Bible, God – who made us and knows us best – has given us a definitive and perfect reflection of our identity. The Bible is God's accurate and unerring account of the true origin, nature and identity of human beings. This is the mirror into which we must look if we are truly to know ourselves and what we are meant to be.

However, this mirror is designed to not only inform but also to transform. If we merely look into the mirror and then walk away, it will never yield its treasures to us.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do.

(James 1:22–25)

When we look into this mirror, what does it show us? We see that:

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- God made us;
- sin marred us;
- grace transforms us.

## **God made us to have humble dignity**

The first thing that the mirror reflects back is the humble dignity and worth of all human beings. Our race is not the random product of time, matter and chance. We were created by a special act of God and are designed in a particular way and for a specific purpose.

Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'

(Genesis 1:26)

We human beings are finite and personal. As finite creatures, we depend on God for every breath in our bodies. As personal beings we have the unique dignity of bearing his image and likeness, as we saw earlier.

What do we mean by the image of God? We show this in many ways:

- we are personal beings capable of relationships, language, reasoned thought and creativity;
- we are moral beings, responsible for the consequences of our actions;
- we are purposeful beings, created to serve God as vice-regents, responsibly ruling over his creation on his behalf; we are the real 'guardians of the galaxy'.

The Bible tells me that my identity should be expressed in terms of the relationships that God has established. I relate to him as my Creator and Sovereign Lord. I relate to other humans as equal image-bearers and partners. I relate to the world as the sphere in which I fulfil my God-given destiny.

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## Meeting Esme

My eldest granddaughter, Esme, is eleven at the time of writing. We met her on the day after her birth. I well remember the wonder of holding her in my arms for the first time.

Becoming a granddad was a brand-new experience. What was totally unexpected was the sense of awe that I felt. I had been there at the birth of my own children and remember the wonder that it brought, but this was somehow different. Bringing up children is as tough as it is rewarding. When you meet your children's children there is a different kind of emotion, which is difficult to define. There is a sense of continuity – a feeling of a circle being completed. What's more, grandchildren are such fun! You don't have to worry about rules and routines – you can leave that to their parents.

No wonder Solomon tells us, 'Children's children are a crown to the aged' (Proverbs 17:6).

As I held that little bundle of life in my arms for the first time, my mind went to Psalm 8:

When I consider your heavens,  
the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars,  
which you have set in place,  
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?  
You have made them a little lower than the angels  
and crowned them with glory and honour.  
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their feet.  
(Psalm 8:3–6)

Irrespective of class, culture or competence, every person bears the image of God.

Meeting Esme, like meeting my grandson Abe, taught me that everyone we meet is a matchless creation, with immeasurable worth.

## Sin marred us – we are ruined masterpieces

Scripture's mirror reveals a second truth.

Sin has significantly defaced God's image. It has poisoned my relationships and affected the orientation of my heart, so that now I am self-centred rather than God-centred.

We constantly try to downplay sin and its consequences, but the mirror of Scripture won't let us get away with that. Sin is an act of violent rebellion against God, resulting in the corruption of the heart and the defacing of the image.

Listen to the Baptist minister C. H. Spurgeon:<sup>5</sup>

Sin is a defiance of God to his face, a stabbing of God, so far as man can do it, to the very heart! Sin is a monster, a hideous thing, a thing which God will not look upon, and which pure eyes cannot behold but with the utmost detestation. A flood of tears is the proper medium through which a Christian should look at sin.

John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, says that sin is 'the dare of God's justice, the rape of his mercy, the jeer of his patience, the slight of his power, the contempt of his love!'<sup>6</sup>

Sin is always personal. It is the fist that strikes the face of Christ. Sin turns me in on myself and promotes the kind of self-love that corrupts my mind and will and emotions. I do sinful things because I have a sinful heart. The spring is corrupted – no wonder the water is bitter. Jesus says:

What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.

(Mark 7:20–23)

We were created as God's masterpiece, but we have been defaced by sin. We have been ruined.



## **Witley Court**

Have you ever visited Witley Court? It is a ruin of an Italianate mansion in Worcestershire, built in the seventeenth century and expanded in the nineteenth by the architect John Nash. In 1937, a fire devastated the building and it has never been restored. Stand amid the ruins and you will see the degradation, but look carefully and you can appreciate what it once was. Shut your eyes and you can imagine the beauty that once resided there. It is a ruin, but a spectacular ruin!

We are similarly ruined masterpieces.

We feel the cold clutch of decay in everything we do. We are conscious that even when we do our best, it is affected by the baleful influence of self. At the same time, we know that there is more to us than this. Something is missing; something is broken. We long for what we cannot always define.

I am a sinner, but I have dignity because I still bear God's image. The preacher who wants to pander to my sense of self-worth, telling me that the most important thing in life is that I learn to love myself, is doing me a disservice. So too is the one who tells me that I am worthless.

Look at the way in which Jesus treated people. He was not afraid to expose hypocrisy and never pulled his punches when it came to confronting sin. In fact, he took the definition of sin deeper than anyone else, uncovering the roots of rebellion in the human heart. At the same time, when meeting with people in need, there was never a snide word or an unkind gesture. He welcomed sinners and restored renegades.

## **Healthy self-suspicion**

Reading the Bible should alert us to the dangers of the unhealthy self-love that belongs to the culture of self-esteem of our day. It is clear from the Bible that we are called to love God with all our heart and soul, with our strength and mind, and to love our neighbour. But we are not called to love ourselves. Indeed, the Bible consistently tells us to do just the opposite.

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With his eyes on the cross, Jesus commands his disciples:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

(Matthew 16:24–25)

Denying the self is saying ‘no’ to selfish desires and longing for personal comfort. The word ‘deny’ is used elsewhere to describe Peter’s vehement denial of Jesus. We are to be equally vehement in saying no to our own sinful cravings. Taking up the cross meant only one thing in the first century – the cross-carrier was a dead man walking. We are to follow Jesus to the place where sacrifice leads to the death of selfish desires and sinful ambitions.

This is a healthy antidote to the kind of thinking that promotes self-esteem as the ultimate virtue and self-denial as a dangerous and damaging aberration.

It also leads us to the third thing that the mirror of Scripture reveals to us.

## **Grace transforms us**

God’s purpose is to restore the image that has been so badly defaced. Christ’s work is one of glorious renovation. The Holy Spirit’s agenda is to recreate the image of God in us. This process is at work in those who have put their faith in Christ.

As Paul puts it, ‘For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters’ (Romans 8:29).

The Bible tells the greatest story ever: God’s plan to rescue and restore broken people. To do this, God takes on their identity. He becomes one of them and absorbs within himself the consequences of their rebellion. When he breaks out of the prison of death, he rescues the human race from the destruction they rightfully

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deserve. His mission is accomplished and applied to all who put their trust in him. As a Christian, I am a new creation being prepared for a new creation. All that I am now is defined by my relationship with God.

This is what Paul means when he says that we are ‘in Christ’, a phrase that holds the key to unlocking the treasure house of Christian identity. All the blessings of God come to us through Christ. God blesses Christ and then unites us to him and grants the same blessings to us. It does not depend on our performance, feelings or circumstances. Once we are ‘in Christ’, we are in him for ever.

When a poor woman marries a rich man, the two are legally joined and all his riches become hers. We have been joined to Christ. All his treasures have become ours.

The purpose of this book is to explore some of the treasures of our new identity. These far surpass anything that we could ever imagine. If we fail to get excited by them, then it is only because we have not understood them.

Jesus died to give us this amazing identity. It is an identity to die for. Literally.

## Getting to know Ephesians

On our journey, there are many places in the Bible to which we could turn, but I have deliberately chosen Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus.

When Christians write on the subject of identity, they tend to follow one of two paths. One popular approach is to explore the Bible’s teaching from creation to the fall, and on to redemption and new creation. Another approach is to look at the various words and metaphors that are used to describe our identity – saint, sheep, son, soldier and so on.

Both methods are useful and good, but I have chosen a slightly different path. We will explore the theme by looking at a series of passages in the book of Ephesians, not covering every part, but allowing its flow to direct us. It’s a bit like expository preaching: the

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Bible passage rather than the preacher sets the agenda. I will cover the usual bases, but we may also find ourselves in some unexpected places!

Ephesians is one of the most comprehensive statements of the Christian faith ever penned. Ephesus itself was the capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor, a wealthy, religious and self-confident city, dominated by the temple of Diana and steeped in witchcraft. It was intellectually proud and morally corrupt. Paul planted a church there and stayed for three years (Acts 19:1–22). It became a hub church that, in turn, planted other churches.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians was written to strengthen and encourage Gentile Christians living at the heart of a pagan society. The first part of the letter (Ephesians 1 – 3) describes the riches of God's grace given to us in Christ. In the second part (Ephesians 4 – 6), Paul explains how this knowledge affects every part of our lives – the church, the world and the home.

Paul takes the dire consequences of sin very seriously. He describes the human condition in lurid terms: 'All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath' (Ephesians 2:3).

Yet, because of God's grace, we have been reconciled to him, and he is in the process of transforming us into the likeness of Christ. One day this will be completed and Jesus will reign with a new humanity over a restored creation:

With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

(Ephesians 1:8–10)

Ephesians, therefore, is an ideal place to search for spiritual wisdom.

## The restoration of the masterpiece

Back in November 1973, following my interview, I was offered a place to read theology at Cambridge. I began my studies the following October.

Each day, I walked through the grounds of King's College to reach the theology faculty building. Perhaps the most iconic image of Cambridge is the view across the River Cam with King's College Chapel in the background.

The chapel is magnificent. It is probably the finest example of late Perpendicular Gothic architecture in England. For many people, Christmas begins at 3 p.m. on Christmas Eve, when the voice of a lone chorister heralds the *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* from King's College Chapel.

At the east end of the main chapel building, you can see the beautiful painting *The Adoration of the Magi* by Peter Paul Reubens. It is a fitting altarpiece for the chapel.

In June 1974, a vandal with a coin scratched letters half a metre high across the centre of the painting. The scratches were deep enough to threaten the painting's integrity. It was immediately removed and art experts were called in to examine the damage. No expense was spared. Eventually, the experts reported that although the damage was severe, they were certain that it could be fully repaired.

The local Cambridge newspaper announced, 'Damaged masterpiece to be fully restored.'

This could be the headline of God's purpose for mankind. His image has been damaged by the graffiti of sin. At great personal cost, God has made restoration possible. He has begun the process now. One day he will complete it.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ

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appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

(1 John 3:1–3)

One day we will be everything that God intended us to be.

That has to be *an identity to die for*.

## Questions

- 1 Why do you think that questions of identity and self-image are so prominent today?
- 2 Read James 1:23–24. What do these verses tell us about the Bible? How should it shape the way we read the Bible?
- 3 Reread the section on ‘humble dignity’ (‘God made us to have humble dignity’). What does this tell us about the image of God? How should it affect the way we treat people?
- 4 Look at the definitions of sin quoted from Spurgeon and Bunyan. What do they reveal? Do you agree with these definitions?
- 5 Read through the first three chapters of Ephesians and make a list of the blessings recorded there.