

Part 39: How to Survive an Identity Crisis

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Today, I want to talk about how to survive an identity crisis.

The chances are high that at some point, you're going to have to deal with one. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that nearly 24 million people are victims of identity theft each year. This kind of crisis happens when someone who is not you steals your social security number, or your social media and acts as if they are you.

In an identity theft scenario, you know with great clarity who you are. It's the other person who has it wrong. And as costly and tricky as it is to navigate identity theft—today I want to talk about an identity crisis that is perhaps more common and certainly more disorienting.

Whereas the theft of your identity is an external issue, the loss of your own identity is an internal one. When the question shifts from “Who are you?” to “Who am I?” the stakes have gotten a lot higher. It's easy to try and reclaim that which you already know—but what happens when what you thought you knew about yourself no longer provides the confidence you once thought it did?

From an outsider's perspective, we would imagine Paul to be subject to that same kind of experience in our passage today in Acts. Paul is already being forced to defend himself in the court of public opinion—and he doesn't seem to fit anywhere: he's misunderstood by the Romans, rejected by the Jews and even his identity as a Christian and as a Roman come into question.

Maybe you've been in a position like that where you feel out of place and you wonder how you might find yourself belonging. No one in this passage knows who Paul is. But ironically, it's the man who doesn't seem to have a clear identity who is most certain about who he is.

What made Paul so certain, when every external marker of identity brought uncertainty? Paul knew who he was in midst of a crisis of identity--because Paul knew whose he was. Our big idea today is just that: **Making sense of Jesus makes sense of everything in our life.**

We will frequently have places where we don't feel like we belong. But if we want to navigate those with clarity and consistency—you're going to have to know why you don't belong and where you most securely do belong. That's the kind of confidence we will walk through this morning in three parts: **Who We Were, Who He Is**, and finally **Who are You**.

The context of our passage this morning is that Paul has just been arrested by the Romans to save him from the Jews. The Jews think they know who Paul is—and they know they don't like him. Today, Paul himself wants to bring some clarity and you can follow along in **Acts 21:38-39**.

Not wanting to waste an opportunity, Paul asks the Roman soldier, "May I say something?" Paul spoke in Greek, and that catches the Tribune off guard. The soldier had thought Paul was someone else. He says, “Aren't you the Egyptian who led a revolt of four thousand men of the Assassins?” Despite how

masculine it might sound, Paul, being honest—and perhaps a little tired of adventure at this point—says, “No, I am a Jew.”

Receiving permission to speak, Paul motions to quiet the crowd and begins his defense. The word is literally, *an apology*. Kids, you might think that if you were beaten and arrested like Paul was—you might apologize too. But this isn’t Paul saying, “I’m sorry for what I believe” this is Paul giving a reason for what he believes: an *apologetic*. And to understand why Jesus is worth all of this—you’ve got to understand Paul’s back story.

This is our first point this morning: **Who We Were.**

Paul opens by saying, “Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.” The Jews are surprised not only because he’s claiming to belong to the heritage of the Jewish people—but just as the Tribune was surprised that Paul spoke Greek—the Jews are surprised that Paul spoke Hebrew.

The Jewish idea of Paul’s identity was that he was a fearmongering outsider who only wanted to destroy Judaism. But here—he identified himself with the Jewish people relationally and linguistically. He was just like them. The natural question they would have is: “What happened to you?”

Paul continued saying, “I don’t just know Hebrew, I am Hebrew.” Beginning in **Acts 22:3** he describes his pedigree: born in Tarsus, raised in Jerusalem, educated at the feet of the well-known and prestigious Gamaliel. Paul is sharing this not only to identify himself with the Jewish way of life—but to identify the gospel with the Jewish hope. The promise of God in the gospel isn’t contrary to Jewish identity—it’s the culmination of God’s hope for the Jews.

“But,” he says, “I know it’s hard to see that at first.” He says, “I too persecuted the Christians.” And then he goes to call on witnesses. He points to the high priests and says, “Ask them! They knew me as Saul of Tarsus and they actually sent me to Damascus to capture and kill the Christians!” Paul knew who he was—and he wanted them to know who he was.

Christians might never have a photographic memory—but we should all have Paul’s biographic memory.

It is an awareness of who Paul used to be that gave him the emotional maturity and evangelistic confidence to say, “I was no different than you.” A superstar in sports looks different even from a young age. But there was nothing special about Paul that indicated he would be a Christian. In fact, if Paul’s life amounted to anything—it would have been to distance himself from Jesus for he was actively persecuting his church.

None of us, not even Paul was born a saint. We are all born sinners. You can be born a Jew, you can be born a Roman, you can be born white or black, but you cannot be born a Christian. The Bible tells us that we are all born by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Which means when a someone becomes a Christian it is because God has done a work in them. And when a Christian forgets that they not only lose the ever-present grounds for worship—and they lose all motivation for evangelism.

Because if God saves only outsiders and sinners—then he can save any outsider. This biographic memory reminds us that if God saved you, and if God saved Paul, then God can save anyone.

If you're in here today and you feel like an outsider, if you see the way Christians talk and pray and live and you feel like you don't belong—let me tell you: none of us belonged here either. There was nothing about our righteousness, our habits, our holiness or our houses that made us Christian or even deserving of God's grace. We were hostile to God, and blind to him just as you might feel.

So, what changes? Well, for Paul his reason is simple: "I met Jesus."

This brings us to our second point: **Who He Is**. Meeting Jesus changes everything.

Listen to Paul describe this in **Acts 22:6-10**, "As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.'"

You can see a lot of change at your 30-year high school reunion. The borderline drop out might be the CEO, the non-athletic nerd might now be the fit personal trainer. You might ask them what changed and they could probably give you a list of things that explain how they got from where they were to where they now are: good habits, hard work, and a little bit of luck produced the "new you."

That's one way people get from who they were to who they are now. But as visible as those changes are--those aren't the changes Paul is about to talk about. Self-improvement can explain how any of us get smarter, faster, stronger or wealthier--but self-improvement cannot make anyone a Christian.

Paul isn't claiming a self-improvement change. He's not a convertible that finally figured out how to drop the top and look cool. His conversion was to more than a renewed identity—it was a new identity. Like when caterpillar becomes a butterfly. Or maybe more helpful, converted like how a power converted takes a form of power that is otherwise inaccessible and makes it accessible. Or to put it biblically, converted like when a dead man is given a new heart. It's not learning to walk. It's death to life. It's not getting glasses, its being given vision. It's not a makeover--it's a new creation.

And notice the pathway of this conversion. Do you see it? Verse 39, "I am a Jew." Verse 3, "I am a Jew." Verse 8, "I am Jesus." Paul is saying to the crowd, "Who I was, and who I am today--is entirely different because of who this Jesus guy is."

And how did Jesus change him? Paul says Jesus changed him by giving him two experiences. We can call one conversion, and we can call the other commission. Paul focuses first on his commission.

Paul already reminded us of his first commission when the high priest sent him to Damascus to capture Christians. But on the road to Damascus Paul encounters the true high priest who recommissions him: **Acts 22:10**, "Go to Damascus and there you will be told all that I've appointed for you to do."

What's often lost on us about Paul's conversion story is how it follows the same basic story line of God's appearances to Moses in the Old Testament. But the importance of that connection isn't lost on the Jews. They would understand how bold this claim would be. Which is why Paul continues to call witnesses. He points them to Ananias, a devout man, well thought of by the Jews—they could ask him. And in meeting Ananias he says, "'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. And he said, 'The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.'"

Just like Moses, who saw God the burning bush and was to call people out of slavery and into obedience to God's law—Paul here is calling people out of slavery by declaring that the law has been fulfilled by God's *Righteous One*, Jesus Christ. As Moses declared God's law to those saved from Egypt—Paul's commission was to declare the law fulfilled in Jesus Christ to those who would be saved from sin. The message was God's salvation—the content was salvation in Jesus Christ.

But look at what Ananias says next: **Acts 22:16**, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name." We saw his commission and here we see his conversion. Paul gives this story by telling us what happened first in time—but Ananias shows us what happens first in reality. He says, "If you're going to do anything for God—you've got to be converted. You, Paul, must be baptized, and you must wash away your sins, calling on his name."

Conversion to Jesus is not just a change of what we do—it is a change of who we are. God isn't interested in contracted workers—God wants converted Christians. If Paul is going to do anything—he's got to join the church by baptism and he's got to have his sins washed away. And how are his sins washed away? Not by baptism. But by calling on his name—the name of Jesus. You won't do anything for Jesus unless Jesus has first done something for you. That something is called salvation, and it happens when we confess who we were in our sin, see who he is in his righteousness, and call on his name in faith and repentance.

What does it look like to have a Christian identity? It's not going to church, it's not doing good things. While those might indicate our identity, they do not establish it. Christian identity is established when we see who Jesus is and we call upon his name. Murderer, Mormon, or soccer-mom—this is the solution. As the old hymn reminds us: "Oh, perfect redemption, the purchase of blood, to every believer the promise of God; The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives."

What does it look like to live in light of this? Paul draws this out when he describes what happened after his conversion. While in Jerusalem Jesus appeared to him in a dream. And you can see this interaction in **verses 17-19**. Jesus says, Paul, the Christians in Jerusalem are going to struggle to believe you because of the whole persecution thing. Paul responds saying, "You don't know the half of it—there's no where in Palestine where I didn't persecute Jews. There's nowhere I can go here in which they will accept me."

And but notice what Jesus says in **Acts 22:21**. He says, "I was counting on that...Go for I will send you far away to the Gentiles." It was Paul's past life which made him the perfect tool for God to reach the Gentiles.

But as soon as Paul said this line—the Jews lost it. Notice how Luke tells us in **Acts 22:22-23**, "Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.'" Paul used to hold the cloaks for those who killed Christians.

But now, these men threw their cloaks on the ground because this time Paul wouldn't hold their cloaks—but he would be the object of their stones.

Now, why was it that the Jews were fine with Paul's conversion story right up until he mentioned his commission to the Gentiles?

Here's why—and it's something you might experience in your own story—people are generally ok with your "conversion" so long as it doesn't challenge their own means of "salvation." If Paul wanted to be a Jew who followed Jesus—that was fine with the Jews. But if Paul's conversion to Jesus meant that Gentiles would have access to salvation without ever having to become a Jew—then it would force the Jews to consider the nature of their own identity and salvation. And that's the straw that often breaks the camel's back.

If conversion to Jesus means salvation by grace through faith in Jesus alone—it will by nature challenge the things identify with for salvation which are not Jesus. What Paul is saying, is that conversion is not merely the end of old behaviors and the practice of new habits. It's a new identity, a new source code all together. And when that's clear—it confronts the reality of anyone whose identity is not in him.

When you begin to follow Jesus, you might operate with the most sincere and loving concern for those who knew you in your former life. You might tell them that it's not because you were smarter or holier than them. You might share the good news of the gospel of grace so clearly. You might call them to the same well of salvation. And yet just like Paul's hometown crowd—they might say, "God sent you to the nations—but we'd like to send you to the moon."

Peter actually prepares new Christians for this very reality in **1 Peter 4:4**, "With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery and they malign you."

And when you feel rejected by those who used to be your people—you'll face a challenge to your identity. If you're not who you were, and if they won't accept you for who you know are—which identity will you find refuge in?

For some of you—you know that as soon as you leave this building today, you'll go back to friends or families who are increasingly annoyed with your relationship with Jesus. Christian or not, we know the pain of an identity crisis like that. And when we feel our identity in Christ conflict with the identity of some other group or culture—we might want to set Christ aside and find our belonging in something else. But the history of humanity shows that you will never belong enough. It's pride month, and our flags keep getting more colors. You'll never affirm enough for the world. You'll never belong enough to your work. There will always be more demanded from you.

But if we find ourselves in Jesus then you have the promise of the assurance and pleasure of God by grace through faith. His terms aren't changing, and Jesus' sacrifice was once and for all.

Is this where you stand? And I ask that in light of our final point: **Who Are You?**

The Roman soldiers once more step in to save Paul, but you get the feeling they too are becoming increasingly frustrated with who he is. They want to get to bottom of it so, Luke tells us in verse 24, that they were going to examine him by flogging. They were going to beat his identity out of him.

But notice what happens here in **Acts 22:25-28**. But as they stretched Paul out, he said to the centurion, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?" When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said, "What are you about to do? This man is a Roman citizen." So the tribune came and asked, "Are you a Roman citizen?" Paul said, "Yes." The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth."

This is an important scene. Because it was illegal for a Roman citizen to be arrested and beaten without a right to a fair trial. In Rome the consequences of this were serious--but the public perception was almost worse. And when the Tribune realized who Paul was--he at first tried to make himself feel better by saying, "Well, I'm a citizen too. Anyone can buy citizenship these days."

When we are confronted with the gospel--we too might want to rationalize the reality of who we are. "We aren't that bad--there are others worse than me. What's so different about you anyway?"

But Paul wasn't a second hand citizen--he was born a citizen. And when the Tribune discovered this he withdrew in fear because he had bound Paul. You see, when the Tribune understood the truth of the situation his questions went from "Who are you, Paul?" to "Who am I, to disobey Roman law?"

The revelation of who Paul was changed the Tribune's understanding of how he needed to respond. That's part of the irony Luke wants to show us here. As soon as the Tribune realized he was harming someone who had the privileges of Rome--he adjusted himself.

All the while, the Jews have heard Paul making a case that the God of their Father's had commissioned him and yet they have no fear of silencing the man whom God had sent. They are blind to who they are in relationship to God.

The gospel does that to all of us. It reveals that God is God, and we have sinned against Him. We have ignored Him, neglected Him, silenced Him. You may not have put a whip to Paul's back, but your sin put nails in the hands of Jesus. He died because of your rebellion. And unlike that Roman tribune who could hope no one would find out, God knows what you have done.

The question Luke highlights in the text is "Who is Paul?" But the real question Luke calls us to consider is, "Who are you?" If this text defines you—it does so by saying that you are a sinner in need of the cleansing blood of Jesus. You can reject that—and you can try to find your identity somewhere else—but I wonder if that grants you the confidence you really seek?

Because when we make sense of Jesus, that alone makes sense of our own lives—both the good and the bad.

Do you remember when Peter came to this realization? In Matthew 16, Jesus says to Peter, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter responds saying, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah and others a prophet." But then Jesus looks at Peter and says this, "But who do you say that I am?"

It doesn't matter what other people think about Jesus. What matters is what you think. Who is Jesus? And Peter has a moment of clarity and he says, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God."

Peter saw Jesus with clarity--but then Jesus gave Peter clarity on himself: **Matthew 16:17-18**, "And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but

my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

If you want to survive an identity crisis--the best way forward is to make sense of Jesus. Because when we know how Jesus is--he tells us who we are: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." "You are Paul, and I'm sending you to the nations." "You are my sheep, and you will listen to my voice."

We will face moments of identity loss. And the only thing that brings us confidence is identity found. For the Christian, that identity is from Christ. We don't steal it from him. Instead, he freely gives us his identity by faith. We get his righteousness, his name, his standing with the Father and his abiding confidence in all of life's challenges.

That identity should lead us to a humble desire to preach Christ to the lost—for we were once one of them. That identity should comfort you wherever you stand today—because the Christ who converted you stands with you in your commission as a Christian. And when the world asks us, "Who are you?" we might say, "Let me tell you a little bit about who Jesus is."