

# Through Prayer

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] So I want to look back this evening for a little while about our Christian identity, where we find our identity as Christians. And really the aim of the, it's three sermons, three studies, really the aim of it all is to recognise the importance, the centrality of Jesus in our hearts and how that affects everything we are about ourselves. And this evening it's kind of a foundational one and it's maybe not what you would expect, but I'm going to look at our identity in Christ through prayer. Okay? Now I've been mentioned that it's quite a lot and it must be on my mind, but it's really looking at the fact that we find our identity in our communion, in our fellowship, in our prayer life with God. That's tremendously important and that's what I want to look at. Because very often in terms of identity we find our identity in lots of different things don't we? I'm a free church minister, been for 22 years. I can find my identity in that, that everything revolves around that for me, that that's what makes me me. Or it can be in your own work, or it can be in what you're studying, or it can be in your qualifications, or your success, or your marriage, your relationships. And we can make our identity in lots of different things, but what I want to channel our thoughts on is making and remaining as Christians, keeping our identity as those who are God's children. And how that should transform everything.

It should transform how we think about our careers, how we think about our futures, how we think about the use of our gifts, our talents, serving God, how we think about the interpersonal relationships we have. That it's all about our identity in Christ. If someone badmouths you, the first response should be, how do I respond to them as a Christian? Someone who's a child of God. If you get a sack from work, the first thing you say is well, how does that, how do I respond to that as a Christian? Because I belong to Christ. That should be where our identity is and where our thinking lies. You're offered a great promotion. How will that affect my relationship with Christ? So I'm asking us to look at our lives in that relationship. And also maybe some people here are starting a new time in their lives, they're thinking about new jobs, they're studying for the first time and you know, everyone's, you're making new friends and you're kind of developing as a young person your identity.

What can I encourage you to ground it as a Christian in your relationship with Jesus Christ? So the core of our identity as Christians is this relationship with the King of Kings.

We've been singing about the King. We've been reading about the King, King Solomon, different King, but Jesus is the King of Kings. And as Christians, that's the heart of our relationship with, the heart of our identity is our relationship with the King of Kings.

It's a friendship as we've been saying in the morning worship, but maybe not quite as we know it. But I want to just take a little journey from the beginning of the Bible through past chronicles, right to Calvary and then into our own lives. Okay, don't fall asleep.

[ 3 : 46 ] It's important that you don't fall asleep. You keep awake because if you fall asleep, so lie. And then we'll all fall asleep and we'll just need to get beds out and we'll be here all night then. So if you remember that right from the beginning, if you look at the story of the Bible, right from the beginning, it's been about God in relationship with his, with his created beings, wasn't it? Adam and Eve in the garden. It's not just fairytale. It's not fairytale. It's a reality of God telling us that we as human beings are made in his image to be in relationship with them. And at the very beginning, Adam and Eve had this open, trusting, honest relationship. I'm going to say that a lot tonight. Open, trusting, honest relationship. That's what they had. That was symbolized by their nakedness, that they were open and honest and trusting. There was no sin. There was no separation.

They had this open relationship with God, face to face with him. I know one of the saddest bits in it is very important we recognize this because it goes back to who we are or what has happened to us as human beings. Genesis 3 verse 9, one of the saddest little verses in the Bible. God was walking in the garden in the cool of the day and he says, where are you? Where are you? He says of those he's created to be in relationship with, he was obviously used to walking in the garden in the cool of the day with Adam and Eve. And then one day they're not there. Now it's not that God didn't know where they are. He knew what had happened. He says, where are you? And where were they? They had hidden themselves from him because they'd rebelled against him. They'd chosen not to trust him, not to listen to him, not to follow his ways. And you know the story well. They'd broken that loving relationship of trust and Jesus God says to where are you? Where have you gone? Well, if where are they? They're hiding because they're embarrassed. They're hiding because they can't look at them face to face. You know what it's like, don't you? You're stolen from someone and you see them face to face. You don't want to look them in the eye because you know you've done something wrong. And if someone can't look you in the eye, there's something far wrong in that relationship. It's a good thing to be able to look people in the eye. But Adam and Eve couldn't do that. God said, where are you? They'd hidden because they'd broken. They'd broken trust with him. They'd rejected his lordship. And that was of course a hugely significant and serious thing as representatives of mankind because it meant that the relationship with God was broken for good. That death had entered into this world which leaves it in the mess that we find it today, isn't it? The only way back.

It's through the cross, isn't it? The only way back is what we're looking at this morning. I'm not going to go through that at the moment at all. The only way back was if God would bring a situation to bear by redemption where that trust was reformed, where our rebellion was dealt with, where hearts were dealt with. He could only do that. We'd hidden ourselves from God. The relationship had gone. Now that's the story that goes right through the Old Testament. As the Old Testament unfolds, it's telling us about God's, it's preparing us for God bringing healing to that relationship. And he does it through entering into our relationship with his people, the Old Testament people of God, the Israelites. And he redeems them, he saves them, and it's pointing forward to a Saviour who's going to come for the world.

And they're kind of anticipating what Jesus is coming to do in the Old Testament. So you've got this relationship of God with his people, and it's a covenant love where he has brought them back through sacrifice, through the sharing of blood, the forgiveness of sins they can enter into this relationship. So with Noah and Abraham and Moses and David, and right through we've got this relationship with God and his people. Right through to, you know, when they rebel against him and they lose the promised land that he's given them, okay, and they're thrown into exile. They're banished because they turn away from him. And then 70 years later, because he's prophesied that they come back. Now, can I say, this is when Chronicles is written. It's written after they've come back. And it's reminding them of the good days in the past when the temple was built and when Solomon made these promises.

And then Solomon broke these promises, and that's why they went into exile. And yet God's promises are being fulfilled. And really, all I want to say about that is that the temple was there. The temple that Solomon built was a visual explanation of what it meant to trust in God, because it was saying, this is the temple was built in Jerusalem, okay. So it was right in the middle of the city and right in the middle of the nation. And it was God saying, I'm going to be with you. I will be your God. You will be my people. You worship me here. And I will live in the temple. That's what he's doing in the Old Testament. He lives, doesn't he, by his presence in the temple, in the holy of holies of the temple. And it's very difficult to get in to the holy of holies. They need a priest to represent them. And he goes in and he offers sacrifice on the altar, which is right in the middle of the temple. So in the middle of this relationship, there is sacrifice, there is shed blood. But also in the middle of this temple is prayer. It was called a house of prayer. So God was saying, I forgive your sins when you come to me through the shedding of blood of sacrifices, pointing forward to Jesus. And he says, this will be a house of prayer. And you will confess your sins and you will come before me. And as you confess, the relationship between us will be good and loving and perfect. Do you know that's why Jesus was so angry? You know that Jesus was so angry in the New Testament? In the temple? Why? This is a house of prayer, he says, and you've made it into a den of thieves. He hated the fact that it had become a commercial place where abuse and stealing and cheating went on financially. He wanted it to be a house of relationship with himself. So that's the picture of the temple in the

[ 10 : 51 ] Old Testament. I'm going to come back to it a little bit as we finish. But we know that that isn't how God was ending the story. The Old Testament was just pointing forward to Jesus and his finished work. So in that temple, you remember there was a large 70-foot thick curtain that separated off the holy of holies where God was from all the people.

And that takes us up to the crucifixion and beyond. Because what happened at the crucifixion? What happened when Jesus was being sacrificed for our sins, which we were thinking about a little bit this morning, or remembering at the Lord's Supper? Matthew 27 and verse 51, it links the crucifixion with the temple. And we're told there in verse 51, at that moment when Jesus died, the curtain of that temple was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth shook and the rocks split. And that's a simple reminder to us that what was being prepared in the Old Testament came to fulfilment in Jesus Christ. That the way to God again, the friendship, the fellowship, the open, honest and trusting relationship was available through Jesus Christ. Christ had ripped the curtain apart and the way to God is open through

Jesus. You know this, I know you know this. But that's what Jesus comes to do, isn't it? He comes to walk again in fellowship with God. What did Adam and Eve do? They walked with God in the garden, we presume. There was fellowship and friendship. Jesus came, shook on human flesh and he walked this earth in fellowship with his Father. Yet he was nailed and crucified to a tree as a guilty sinner because he was doing it. He was dying in our place. So we lived the perfect life, the life that we'd lost and died the death that we deserve. So you know it's all truth, I know that, but it's significant in terms of what's happening and the relationship that he's building. So what happens in the New Testament is things change. There's no longer a building, a temple that we go to and meet with God. Church isn't a temple. You don't come here to meet with God because that's the only place he is. We've seen, we saw this morning, didn't we, that the Christian is someone in whom God has come to live. And so the New Testament says that the body, the

Christian individual is the temple of the Holy Spirit, that the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit and that the people of God are comparable with the Old Testament covenant people of God, the Israelites. So that it's changed. The temple is no longer a physical building that God is enclosed in, but God comes to us and lives in our hearts. As we saw this morning through his spirit, we're the temple. He comes to us and he restores that broken relationship. So that we can have, what am I going to say, an honest, open, trusting relationship with him. That's what it's all about. It's about again restoring what was lost at the beginning so we can have an open, honest, trusting relationship with him. So our core identity as Christians is that we've become God's people. We belong to God. And that is where our identity is found. We are his. Now can I just go back to setting chronicles here and in verse 14, God says the kind of relationship he wants with his people. It's the same in the Old as it is in the New. If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked way, then I will hear them from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land. My people, that's where our identity is. It's in belonging to God. We are his people. Christian, that's just another name for it.

It started off in the New Testament as a derogatory term. Well, the New Testament times. It kind of was a derogatory term for those who follow Jesus. But now it's, well, maybe it's turning back again to be a derogatory term. But we're Christians. We belong to God. We are his people.

[ 15 : 39 ] He has redeemed us. He's committed to us. He is faithful to us. That's what the whole of Chronicles is about. It's about God reminding this exiled people who have come back that God is faithful to his promises and he doesn't break them. He's true. We're protected. We belong. We are his people. So when you go to work tomorrow or you go to study or you wake up in the morning, it's significant to remind ourselves that we are God's people.

He is saying to us, you're my people. Call by my name. That's who we are. We're God's people. That's what our identity lies. And where does that lie most significantly? It lies, and this is foundational. It lies in prayer, in communion with God. What happened in the, what happened in the garden? They hid from him, didn't they? They didn't talk with him anymore because they turned against him. That's what sin does in our lives. But as Christians, we become those who are in communion with God primarily through prayer.

Okay? And that's what I want to leave with you today, and for you to consider the centrality of prayer in your life. Now, I'm not interested in how you pray. Prayer comes in a million different ways. I'm not necessarily talking about just having a five minute quiet time at the beginning of the day or whatever. I'm saying that we're in communion, we're in fellowship, we're in relationship with God all the time as Christians is there, whether we are speaking or conscious or verbally saying anything or not. But what I want to say is this, this significant reality as Christians, we are now face to face again with God. Primarily you are face to face with God. No hiding, no hypocrisy, but honest, open, loving relationship. That's, you know, that's what it's all about. That is what it's all about, open, honest, loving, communion with God. Now what does that mean? Does it mean we need to be special? We need to be right all the time? We need to have everything together? No! It says we're in an open, honest, trusting relationship with the God who knows everything and we are simply sin or saved by grace, but we're in a relationship with

Him where we're talking to Him. We're confessing where we're going wrong, you know? He says all he asks is that we seek His face, humble ourselves, turn from our wicked ways and hear Him from heaven. There's things that we need to confess. We've lost sight of confession in our lives, but always right. Is God is in the wrong, is He not? Is God we've shrunk down to very small proportions and He's in the wrong? We're right, but He says no, let's change our identity and find it in Him and confess where we are out of, sink out of, filter out of connection with the living God in our lives. As we are in fellowship with Him, the light of Christ shines, let that light shine into the dark portions of your heart where nobody else knows. I want to come back just briefly to that in a minute. Face to face, honest, open, trusting. If you don't take anything else away, you'll take that honest, open, trusting relationship. And nobody else knows that but you and God. And that requires humility, doesn't it? If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray, it requires so much humility. Now I'm going to be very agist here and say, God is not a gunk. Now not many people will know what a gunk is. It was a kind of cuddly toy from the 60s. A little furry thing, a little play thing, a little thing you would stick in your mantelpiece. God isn't like that. He's not that kind of little insignificant toy that we just hang up on our walls. We've made, we've tried to make God so accessible that He's become worthless, isn't He? He's become worthless. We don't need to humble ourselves before Him. But He will never be worth serving. He's never the God of the universe if He is in our back pockets. Now it's not an easy sell, I recognize that, because the greatest, the greatest sin we have is pride. And yet He says as we understand Him, humility is absolutely crucial to our identity in Him. So humility. And also in terms of that prayer, you know, prayer requires that we're humble before Him, doesn't it? We don't come shaking our fists at Him in the sense of us having the answers and Him cowering to us. But it also requires effort, doesn't it, to pray? He says here, if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face, it's going back to this face to face, honest, open, trusting relationship. If you will do that, if you will seek my face. In other words, it's something we've got to fight for, to look for. It doesn't just come like that, you know, for us in our lives. There is a responsibility in a battle in which we're engaged. The easy, do you know what the easy thing is? Is averting our gaze.

That's the easy thing, to not face up to our need before God. To just hide, as they did, to walk away, to close our Bibles, to not pray, to forget God's there. That is easy.

[ 21 : 45 ] We can all do that, we all do that every day. The battle is to seek His face, to make it earnest, to make it significant, to make it important, because He is important. The gift is there, the gift is free, but it isn't cheap, we know that. Don't continue to make it the excuse of averting your gaze from His light that shines in our hearts as we pray to Him. Our identity as Christians is in prayer. It's in communion with Him. If you're a Christian and you never pray, fundamental problem with your life as a Christian. It's not the picture in the wall that we look back to. It is Christ in us, that ongoing relationship with Him.

You must, if you haven't prayed for weeks and weeks, you must do that tonight, however you do it. Whether you do it in your needs, whether you do it walking down the road, whether it's conscious verbalising of words or whether it's just internalising thoughts, you must seek His face again as I must. And also, I think you'll find that this identity has a corporate nature to it. If my people who are called by my name, this isn't just an individual council for us. It's also a reminder that we're a people together and I'm going to finish by saying a little bit about that as well. That our identity as a church should be in open, honest, trusting relationships with one another and in prayer we should be a praying people. Whatever else we are, however mission-minded we are, however open and sensitive we are in our worship services, we must be, whatever we are, we must be a people soaked in prayer as we are in that relationship. Okay, so just want to finish with the reality of what that means then for us, because it does lead for, I do believe, when we recognise our identity in Christ, it leads to a transformation of our thinking. Because we begin to experience what God says He promises to do here. When we have that relationship, He says, I promise forgiveness and healing. My people who are called by my name, humble themselves and pray and seek my face, turn from their wicked ways and I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin and heal their land. It's not great there, it's a very famous verse, it's a great verse as well. Healing and forgiveness, that is massive. That is where we find our identity as we are in confession and relationship with Christ, we know forgiveness and healing.

That's what we know, forgiveness and healing. I'm not speaking primarily again about miraculous broken legs being healed and things like that. I'm talking primarily about character healing, healing of our character insecurity and our dysfunction before God. Because it's in here primarily, it's in the balance of our thinking, it's in our attitudes and our character that He comes and as we confess and recognise deep seated self-centredness or deep seated bitternesses or deep seated pride and as we confess that we begin to know that forgiveness and healing, which makes us whole as individuals. That's where the great healing is. Well God could easily heal a broken leg, He can easily give someone two heads if they want and make them right but that's not fundamental, is it? It's the healing in our very ego, our very being, our very relationship with God that is more fundamental and that's more painful isn't it? Because it requires humility and honest, open, trusting relationship. But as He heals and forgives us, we can be assured of His attention and His presence. I will hear from heaven and my eyes will be open, my ears attentive to their prayers offered in this place. Living presence, not a great thing and He goes on to say in a beautiful phrase, verse 16, my eyes and my heart will always be there. My eyes and my heart will always be there, it's not a beautiful thing, I think the Old Testament is full of real hard things. My eyes and my heart will always be there. Loving presence, closeness, is ear being open, so often we think heavens are like brass, they're closed. He says, look I'm promising you here, you confess and turn to me and have this open and honest and trusting relationship. These are the blessings of that relationship, just flourishing in your life. And the experience then, and I close with this, will be that we experience the nature, the character of

God in an amazing way. And that's why I read verses 1 to 3, because after Solomon prayed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, fire came down from heaven and the priests could not enter the temple because the glory of the Lord filled it. When the Israelites saw the fire come down, the glory above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, they worshiped, gave thanks to the Lord saying, He is good, His love endures forever. So there was an experience of awe, worship, almost probably entirely lost from our experience, certainly lost from mine. But there was this great experience of God in their lives. And I think as we are in honest, open, trusting relationships with God through grace, then our worship will be such that we will begin together to experience the awesome nature of God. You know, and that's a great thing. It's lovely to have a private experience of the glory of God, I guess. It must be. But how much better to have one together?

It's great to go on a mountaintop and just sense the bigness of the moment, the fresh air going through you. It's lovely to experience that. But it's even nicer to experience it with a group of people sometimes, because we all sense it together. Or you know, it's good to laugh at a joke on your own. It's a bit sad, maybe. But it's great to laugh at a joke with lots of other people, share the experience. Have you ever watched a comedian on television and the audience? Or have you ever noticed yourself? You watch yourself, next time you hear a joke, you laugh. Because you look at an audience, they all laugh, but they all look at each other. And they want to see if everyone else is laughing. Because it's a shared experience. It's a good shared experience. It's important. And we want to see the reaction of others. That's why community together in Christ is so important that we would share the awe of God together. It's nice on our own, but it's even better together as we in community share honest, open, trusting relationship with God and with one another.

[ 29 : 35 ] Maybe we too will share the awe of God visiting us in a very special way. But it will enable us also to be thankful. Aren't we thankless? So often. Aren't we annoyed and angry and bitter in so many different ways? And as we are in this relationship, it enables us to say he is good, his love endures forever. That's not easy to say. It's not a trinket kind of statement. But we recognise the great cost. We recognise the astonishing love. We recognise the incredible commitment to us. And we can have a life of thankfulness, even in difficult and dark situations where we can say, even if we don't understand, but we can say because we experience something of his goodness and his love enduring forever.

Isn't thanklessness the most unattractive characteristic that we might have in our lives? We take things for granted. We don't say thank you. We don't return thanks to whoever or whatever. But as we start face to face with God, it enables us to begin to have a thankful heart. When we recognise that identity in a life of prayer, then that's the foundation and the key to all that we are. So I hope that you will be challenged and consider the importance of calling on his name, humbling ourselves, praying, seeking his face, turning from our wicked ways and knowing the blessing of that in our experience. I mean, let's pray together. Lord God, we thank you that we can pray together. We thank you that we can worship together.

We thank you that you haven't called us just to be individual believers standing on the battlements as it were on our own, but you've called us with all the ugliness and the difficulty and the confusion and the failure of each other to live for you and to live for one another.

You've called us to be together. And as we recognise ourselves as your people, called by your name, we ask Lord God that we would be honest and open and trusting and would know the presence and the power and the beauty of communion with God and our identity, sealed in him in maybe a new way. And we pray that that might be the case for all of us tonight, to a greater or lesser degree, give us that courage to do business with God, to be face to face with you and to cry out to you and to confess our need of you. For Jesus' sake, amen.