

2 Timothy 2:1-12 - Finding Your Identity in Christ

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone. I apologize for coughing into the microphone earlier.
! I didn't know I was switched on.! In Paul's second letter to Timothy.
So if you want to go ahead and turn there, Paul's second letter to Timothy. And obviously we're in chapter 1, because that's where we start.
And I want to read the text, then we'll pray, and then we'll get into what the Lord has for us. And so beginning of verse 1, Paul writes, It's Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus.
To Timothy, my beloved child, grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I thank God, whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.

[1:19] As I remember your tears, I long to see you that I may be filled with joy. And I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now I'm sure dwells in you as well.
For this reason, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God gave us a spirit, not of fear, but of power and love and self-control.
Therefore, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me, his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to our holy calling, not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do.
But I am not ashamed, for I know who am I... Apologies, I wanted to break out into that hymn. You know that one? For I know...
Let me start again. Not from verse 1. Don't panic. I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day that which has been entrusted to me.

[2:57] Let's pray. Father, we come before your word, Lord, and we want to acknowledge, Lord, that you are the one who has called us by grace, Lord, and you have entrusted to us the good news of your Son.
And yet our hearts can still be anxious, fearful, and full of shame. And so we pray this morning, lift up our eyes to you. Lord, lift up our hearts from fear to faith.
Lord, that we may see you as you are. Lord, that we may know the calling that you have on our lives. Lord, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. All right.
Every one of us has an identity. Something that quietly answers the question, who are you and where have you come from?

And I want us to think about that this morning. Who are you and where have you come from? Most of us don't walk around, of course, asking the question, who am I? Maybe some people do, but most of us probably don't.

[4:01] But we feel it probably every time we fail, every time we're overlooked, every time life doesn't turn out the way that we prayed for it to turn out. Your identity is whatever you instinctively protect.

Whatever you're most afraid to lose. Whatever makes life feel meaningful or unbearable when it's threatened. And even in church, we may believe the Bible, but still functionally live from something else.

And so the answer to who are you might be answered by one of these. The performance identity.

Who are you? Well, I am what I do. But you're only as good as your last win. And faith sometimes feels like a constant evaluation.

That may be you. You may come from not the performance identity, but more from an approval identity. I am what people think of me.

[5:13] Who are you? Well, I am what everybody thinks I am. And you may be prone to replay conversations in your head. And so faith is whatever the crowd wants it to be.

It may not be performance or approval. It may be moral. You come from a moral identity. And the answer to the question, who am I? I am better than others.

Or at least I'm not like them. And faith becomes comparison. Or it may be the victim identity.

I am what has happened to me in the past. Or I am what is happening right now. And so your past explains everything and excuses nothing changing in your life.

And so faith is bound by past injustice and in the fear of the future. It may not be one of those four.

[6:22] It may be the comfort identity. Who are you? I am safe. And that's my goal. Faith is fine until it costs something.

And so faith is tolerated as long as it's not costly. And look, you take one of those five and probably multiple others and you mix that up with your role as mum, dad, brother, sister, husband, wife, business person, fill in the blank.

Every one of us has an identity. Every one of us answers the question, who are you and where have you come from? Now, this is the exact question that Paul is asking Timothy in this letter.

The exact question. He's going to tell us that identity in Christ is the antidote to shame.

In fact, he's going to tell us that identity in Christ is everything. Just skip ahead to verse 8. I know we normally start at verse 1, breaking the rules today.

[7:26] Hope that's okay. No. All right. Well, skip ahead to verse 8. And Paul has said there, therefore, to Timothy, he says, therefore, do not be ashamed.

And he uses that word ashamed three times in this chapter. He says it in verse 12. Do not be ashamed. And then again in verse 16, where he said, may the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus.

Got my teeth in. Brilliant. For he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains. And again, if it's okay with you, I'd like to explore a little bit this morning what the Bible says about shame and identity before we launch into verse 1.

Because verse 8 is kind of the theme of the letter. And if we understand that, and we understand where kind of Paul is building towards, even in the first eight verses, the other verses surrounding it and what come after it in the other chapters begin to make a little bit more sense.

And so in verse 8, Paul is calling out the problem of shame. Don't be ashamed. Timothy, the problem is shame. Now look, we need to be crystal clear.

[8 : 52] Paul isn't saying that the problem is that Timothy is embarrassed to be a Christian. When he rocks up to work on Monday morning, he keeps his faith to himself.

That's not what Paul is saying. Also, he's not saying that Timothy is too timid. He's not saying that either. Biblically, shame is an identity problem before it is a behavior problem.

The Bible uses three words to describe the Christian identity. It uses status, belonging, and calling. Status is how God legally sees you as a Christian.

So if you want some big theological words, justification, righteousness, sanctification, they are all ways that God sees you.

Right? So as a Christian, he no longer sees you with your sin because you are justified. You are being made righteous and made righteous in his sight.

[9 : 58] You are being sanctified. You are being made holy more and more every single day into Christ's likeness. That's how God sees you. Status.

Status. It's almost like asking the question, what right do you have to be part of the kingdom of God? Status. We're using that word quite a lot now, aren't we?

It was one of the buzzwords of this last year when we talk about immigration and the so-called immigration crisis. Status. What is your status? Are you allowed to be in this country?

What is your status? Right? And so the question that status answers is, what right do you have to be part of the kingdom of God? Right?

Justification, righteousness, sanctification, all of those words. Okay? Status. That's how God legally sees you. But also about belonging. Who do you belong to?

[10 : 56] Whose are you? That's all of the terms that the New Testament uses when it talks about you are a child of God.

You are sons and daughters of God. That's talking predominantly about belonging. Who do you belong to? And then lastly, it's about calling. What's your purpose?

What your life is for now? So when the Bible talks about identity and talks about Christian, it's using, I guess, three words.

Status, belonging, and calling. And you can see that Paul is rooting identity, status, belonging, calling, in the gospel.

In what Jesus has done for us. Look at verse 9. He says, Our Lord, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.

[12 : 10] And so here's the issue. If your identity that we've explored, if your identity is built on your performance, shame comes from failure.

If your identity is built on the approval of others, shame comes from rejection of those people. And so Paul is saying, look, you need to remember your status before God.

Remember who you belong to and remember what your life is now for. What are you doing with your life? And notice the order in verse 9.

Do you notice that word?

He gave us. In Christ Jesus. When did he do that? Well, Paul says, before the ages began. And which now have been manifest or revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

[13:35] Which means that this, if we are Christian, if that is how you want to be identified, if we are Christian, our identity predates our performance.

Right? It outlasts our failure. And it doesn't rise or fall with people's approval.

Why? Because the Christian identity is received and not achieved. It is given to us. And you see identity in the Bible is not primarily how I feel about myself.

Like, oh, I don't feel like I'm a very good Christian. Snap. Join the club. Welcome to the team. Now let's get over that.

How does God see you? That's the question of identity. Not how we see ourselves or how we see each other. But it's how God sees us.

[14:41] Identity is who you are before God because of God. This is why we're not going to see in this letter, Paul tried to motivate us by pressure.

Oh, you should be a better Christian. Agreed. Welcome to the team. Snap. Can we carry on? Can we carry on? You just need to try harder.

Be braver. I know, I know, I know, I know, I know. He motivates him, Timothy, and he motivates us by reminding us who we already are in Christ.

And how we are united with Jesus. And actually, if you really want to kind of dig deep into this idea of unity, or excuse me, identity, it's this word union.

We are united with Christ. We often overlook that so much. You know, Paul writes to the church in Galatia, and he reminds them about union.

[15:56] He says, I've been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

It's about union. Which means that everything true of Christ is now counted as true of you. His perfection becomes your status.

Did you get that? His perfection, not your perfection. His perfection becomes your status. His sonship becomes your belonging. His future becomes your calling.

Identity is given before it is lived out. When identity comes first, obedience, which we should all obey.

Amen? But listen, obedience becomes gratitude, not fear. And failure produces repentance, not despair.

[16:59] And suffering produces meaning, not bitterness. And this identity is actually the antidote to shame. That's why Paul is writing this.

Shame says that you're exposed, you don't measure up, you don't belong. But identity in Christ says that you're covered, you're complete, and you're adopted. That's a gospel declaration.

And so look, with that rather long intro, this is the message we get from Paul in this letter. Remember who you are in Christ. Not what you can do, how you can prove yourself.

If we are secure in our identity, we will live unashamed of our calling. That's Paul's thesis.

It's his idea. It's his suggestion. That's what he's writing for. And so he opens, if you look back in verse 1, as he does so very often, with a personal introduction.

[18:07] He says, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus. It's a great way to start the new year, to be reminded that life is in Christ Jesus.

There's no life in having identity attached to things of this world. And so he says that he's an apostle of Christ Jesus.

It's by the will of God, according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus. And then a note to who he is writing to, and a blessing for that person.

In verse 2, he says, to Timothy, my beloved child, and the blessing is grace, mercy, and peace from God, the Father, and Christ Jesus, our Lord.

And then in verses 3 to 5, there is a note of thanks to God for Timothy. I thank God whom I serve. And look at the language, and we'll come back to this, the language that Paul uses in respect to identity.

[19:14] Who are you and where you've come from? Just look at the language. He says, I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.

As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I'm reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice, and now I am sure dwells in you as well.

And I think it would be good to slow down and listen to that note of thanks to God for Timothy. As we do, we immediately recognize that Paul is actually reinforcing the theme of the letter.

This isn't just an introduction. Oh, by the way, Paul, I've been thinking about you. He's taken us to the very heart of his concerns for Timothy.

He asks the same two questions that we've asked at the beginning. Who are you and where you've come from? You see the language? I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors. So he's talking about identity.

[20:14] And he says in verse five, I'm reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice. And now I'm sure dwells also in you for this reason. And it's probably the reason that faith dwells in him.

Verse six, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God. Now, our first reading, the first time we read this, it might appear that the gift of God that Timothy is being told to fan into flame is his giftedness for ministry.

And we might be persuaded by that. It might be his purpose and his calling as a pastor there in Ephesus. And I think that is okay as far as it goes.

But the following verses make it quite clear that the gift of God is the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, who is constantly confirming Timothy's union with Christ.

Christ. So after Paul refers to this priestly practice of identification, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, that's a priestly identification.

[21:37] He says, verse seven, for God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control. Now, look, in most of our Bibles, and certainly if you're reading from the ESV, as probably most of us are, that word spirit is not capitalized.

Is that right? In most of your Bibles. Which means that Paul is talking about character and personality. But here's the issue.

The translators are very, very reluctant to interpret the Bible. They want to translate the Bible. They're two different things. And so, in reality, the Greek there is a bit ambiguous.

It could be spirit. It could be personality or character. Or it could be the Holy Spirit. And the writers of the ESV, or the translators of the ESV, just leave that up to us to decide which one it is, without making a judgment.

And so, you might say, well, that doesn't help me because I want to know. Or, we might say, well, thanks because I can make it up.

[22:51] Either way. Really, if you look at the context, the context leads to the idea that Paul is actually referring to the Holy Spirit, rather than a personality or character trait.

Because he uses the words power, love, and self-control directly after it, which are often, multiple times in the New Testament, used to describe the work of the Holy Spirit. What does the Holy Spirit do?

Well, the Holy Spirit brings power, love, and self-control. So, really, it should read something like this. For when God gave us his spirit, it was not fear that we received, but power, love, and self-control.

Now, you might say, well, great, so what? What's the point? Who cares? Well, look, the point is this. Paul is talking again about identity. And it is the Holy Spirit who identifies believers with Jesus.

That's what he does. Romans 8, verse 16. The Spirit himself bears witness, Paul says, with our spirit, that we are children of God.

[24:08] Who do we belong to? God. Who tells us that? The Holy Spirit. The Spirit does not give fear, but rather the Spirit breathes power into the weak, love into the loveless, and self-control to those who are out of control.

And you know that. Because before you were saved, you were each one of those. Right? That's how the Bible describes us. How the Bible described me before Christ.

Weak, loveless, out of control. And yet, when we were saved, when we came to know Christ, and the Holy Spirit was put in us, what is the Holy Spirit now doing?

Well, he's making the person who was weak more, or less weak. The person who was loveless, more loving. And the person who was out of control, putting some boundaries around, right?

But more than this, more than that, the Spirit bears witness internally that our status before God is His perfection and not ours.

[25:28] And that our belonging is to God and that our future destiny is with God. That's what the Holy Spirit does. Before the Holy Spirit gives us power to do and things to, you know, minister in and a purpose for our lives and making us witnesses to this world.

Before He does that, what does the Holy Spirit do? Each and every day, each and every moment of the day, He calls out to our spirit and reminds us that we belong to God because of God.

That's what He does. For when God gave us His Spirit, it was not fear that we received.

Why? Because the Holy Spirit is saying, you're a child of God. You're a child of God. You belong to Him. That's not a fearful word, is it?

So off of the back of all of that, Paul then says in verse 8, therefore, because of that, don't be ashamed. If your identity is rooted in God because of God, don't be ashamed.

[26:49] Don't be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord. That testimony. No, this is not embarrassment. This is not timidity. This is the testimony of our Lord that these things are true.

Nor of me, His prisoner, being associated with me, but sharing the suffering of the gospel by the power of God. And of course, Paul, at this point, is writing this letter from prison.

It is, I would say it's his last letter. It's the last letter that we know of that we have. It's his last letter before he is executed.

And later in this letter, we find out that most of his friends have abandoned him, that have left him. We find that he's cold. We find that he doesn't have his books, his writing stuff.

And he's waiting execution. And Roman prisons aren't like our prisons. You know, like you can go to prison and stay there for the rest of your life, right?

[28 : 05] Roman prisons were temporary housing. You weren't sentenced for life. You were either let go or you were sentenced to execution.

And they didn't tend to hold prisoners for a long period of time. And so Paul is predominantly, you know, probably sitting in this prison and he is cold.

He's abandoned. He's feeling very, very lonely. And he doesn't know that the sound of the guards' keys rattling down the corridor are coming for him and whether execution would be that day or that moment.

But listen, I want you to notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say that he is a prisoner of Rome. He says that he's a prisoner of the Lord. He says, nor of me his prisoner.

And you know, that's convicting, isn't it? Because most people quietly believe that if God is with me, like even if I have this identity, right, surely then things should go smoothly.

[29 : 16] My boiler will never pack up. My car will never break down. My job will go very, very well. I'll wake up in the morning and jump out of bed looking forward to what the day has.

I will go and rest my head at the end of the day, thankful to the Lord that he has given me all of these opportunities which I've taken and which have been fruitful. My children will never be disobedient.

They will grow up even stronger in the Lord in me. And my clothes will never wear out. I'll never get hungry. And it's a slight exaggeration.

But look, quite often most people think that way. Most of us think that way. And so when life breaks and life breaks, there are marriage struggles.

There are mental health battles. You've got unanswered prayers. You're experiencing hostility.

[30 : 28] It's easy to assume when those things happen if you have that mindset that something must be wrong with your faith. Right?

Because you read some of the promises of God and you're like, every prayer I pray should be answered. And yeah, how often is it you pray a prayer and it just hits the ceiling and bounces back in your face?

Or worse yet, there's no answer at all. It's just silence. But listen, the gospel doesn't promise ease before obedience and clarity before faith and success before suffering.

It promises presence in pain, purpose in suffering and resurrection after death. Paul doesn't say that the reason you're suffering or the reason I'm suffering is because the gospel has failed.

He doesn't say that hardship is a diversion. The truth is that if suffering disproves your faith, your faith was built on a different identity like comfort, not God.

[31 : 50] And if the gospel only works when life is easy, it's not the gospel. Paul has faced that reality.

And his attitude is that although he is in a Roman prison, all of that is still true. He's not blind to it. Right?

He's not one of those, I don't know if I want to say this. Yeah, I'm going to say it. He's not one of those annoying Christians that always seem happy but they're oblivious to the problems. Yeah, some of you are laughing.

You know what I mean. Right? Like, he knows the issues. He's there experiencing the suffering and the struggles. And yet he actually sees himself because he knows who he belongs to and his status before God and his calling.

Because he knows those three, he's able to say, you know what, I am, I am, it is true, a prisoner of Rome but you know what, I'm a prisoner of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so Paul reminds us that identity in Christ rewrites suffering, it doesn't do away with it.

[32:59] If identity is fragile, suffering feels like we're being erased, right? Or if identity is secure, suffering becomes participation. And that's why Paul says, share.

Share in suffering. Like having this identity and knowing this identity doesn't shield us from suffering, does it?

It gives you purpose in it. So he says in verse 10, which now has been made manifest or has been manifest or revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

And so Paul is saying that this was made possible because of what Jesus has accomplished on the cross. It's been made possible of what Jesus accomplished in the grave.

Paul says that he abolished death and he brought life and immortality.

[34:25] That's our future destiny to live with him forever. And the truth of this doesn't depend on our bravery. It depends on God's power.

He writes there in verse 11, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and a teacher. Which is why I suffer as I do but I'm not ashamed.

Like my identity is not in preaching apostleship or teaching. My identity is in Christ. Because he says I know whom I have believed.

I'm convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. And of course there's a little play on words going on with the idea of being held a prisoner of the Lord.

That he is the one guarding. Paul isn't unashamed because you know he's strong.

[35:31] That's not the reason he's unashamed. He's not unashamed because he's an apostle and a preacher and a teacher. he's unashamed because Jesus is trustworthy.

He says I know whom I believe. This is not a set of theological convictions that you might have.

He says I know whom I have believed. It's a person I believe in. And look at the end of our message this morning.

Maybe it's maybe the most faithful thing that we can do right now is stop defending the identity that we're living from and listen again to what God has already said about us.

I find that when I speak to people and I do occasionally like I do get chatty like the number one issue whether it's a faith crisis whether it's an emotional crisis whatever it may be the number one issue comes down to do you know who you are in Christ do you know where you've come from do you know who's bought that for you oh yeah but you know I don't feel like I'm ever going to be good enough yet you're right right now just get off the theological train and understand who you are and what God is speaking over you to release the identity that we're all trained to do right we're all trained to have this identity built on performance approval comfort control let the voice of

[37:33] God speak louder than the voices that we've trusted because before you achieved anything before you failed at anything before you proved yourself or disappointed yourself God spoke and he called you and he saved you by his grace he named you amongst his own and maybe today isn't about trying harder maybe today isn't about new year's resolutions so I'm so glad that Joe brought that up earlier maybe it's about surrendering false identities and receiving again the identity God gives us in Christ so let's take a moment to bow our heads and close our eyes and quieten our hearts and listen not to fear not to shame not to the pressure to perform but to the voice of

God who says you are mine father we come to you without pretending without performing without trying to clean ourselves up first father you already know us fully and lovingly and yet you still welcome us we confess that we have often looked for identity in places that cannot hold us we try to be enough through our effort our usefulness or our approval or our control and when these things have been shaken we felt exposed and anxious and afraid we want to thank you this morning that in your kindness you don't shame us for that you invite us back thank you for speaking a better word of over us in jesus that before we did anything right or wrong you called us by grace that our truest name is not our failure or fear or our performance but beloved redeemed and secure in you lord jesus you are unashamed to take our place to carry our sin and our shame so that we could stand before the father covered and forgiven and free teach our hearts to rest where you have already finished the work holy spirit quiet the voices that accuse and compare and demand help us hear again the voice of the father who delights in his children re-anchor our identity in what is true not in what is loud and as we go form us form in us a courage that flows from security obedience that flows from grace and faithfulness that lasts even when life is hard father again we place our false identities at your feet and we receive again the life you give us in christ we pray this with hope because you are faithful even when we're not in jesus strong and gentle name amen we're going to gather around lord's table this morning and joe and zach jenny and zach are going to lead us in a couple of songs and we just want to encourage you to take this moment just to prayerfully pray through