

Introduction

Good evening, everyone. Let me try and draw you together. And let me welcome you straight away to the very first week of the Identity course. It's great to see you, and I want to say thank you so much for coming along tonight. I know life is very busy. I'm sure you're nodding away. We seem to run from one thing to the next. Life is very busy for us. So thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy lives to come along and hopefully get a chance to ask and get some answers to some of the big questions that we don't normally have time to think about in our lives.

Now, I've been running courses like this for quite a number of years. I love doing every single one of them. And over that time I've discovered that people come along to courses like this for a whole variety of different reasons. Now, I look out at you, and I don't know why you've come tonight, but I thought what I would try and do is suggest some of the popular reasons and see if you can relate to some of these.

Sometimes people see something in the world around them. Sometimes they see something in the creation, they look at the world, they look at its beauty, they look at its design and they think to themselves, 'There's just got to be more to life than you can see or touch.' You drive cars, you look at cars, and you don't conclude to yourself, do you, that, 'Ha! I'll tell you what happened. Last night some winds blew through the scrap metal yards of Hull, and hey presto! We've got a car.' No, you don't think that, do you? They bear all the hallmarks of design. And we live in our world, and you think, 'Yeah, maybe there is something... someone, maybe, who is responsible for everything that we can see or touch.' You might not know for certain who or what that is, but you've come along because you want to see if Christianity has any answers to some of those questions.

It might be that you've come along tonight, not because of something you've seen, but because of something that you don't have. As I said, life is very busy, we end up just running around on that conveyor belt of life all the time, but maybe you've just taken a bit of time out of the treadmill and taken time to think about some of those bigger questions. You know, all those questions of personal identity: Who am I? Where am I going? Where did I come from? What am I worth? Is there anything I can do in my life that is going to make my life significant? I know we don't normally stop and chat about that, but maybe you've come along tonight because you want some answers. And maybe you want to hear what Christianity has to say.

Sometimes people come along because of something they've seen in a Christian friend. I don't know if this has been you, but you've been maybe watching a Christian for a while. Not in a sort of, creepy, stalky type way, but you've been watching them because for a long time they've told you they follow Jesus. You think, 'Well, I wonder if this is authentic. I wonder if there's some substance to this.' You watched them for a while, and maybe you think there is, so you've come along to find out what is it exactly that they believe.

Maybe you've come along tonight because a Christian friend has asked you. Maybe you've politely said no for a long time, but they've been persistent, and they've said, 'I want you to come and find out a few things as well.'

Or it may be that you're a Christian tonight, and maybe that you've got all sorts of questions of your own. You know that following Jesus doesn't remove all the questions, and maybe you've got a few questions that you would like to find an answer to as well.

Or maybe, as I look around, there is some other reason entirely. Well, I want to say to you, whatever reason you've come along tonight, whatever brings you to a course like this, I want to say: you've come to the right place. I'm not going to put my hands up and say we have all the answers to all the questions. That would be a lie. You know, we don't. But it is my conviction that as we know more and more about the identity and the mission of Jesus, as we learn much more about who Jesus was and what he came to do, then we'll get some of the answers to some of our questions. So I hope that sounds okay to you.

So what we're going to do over the next few weeks to make sure that we engage with the real Jesus of history, and not simply the Jesus of our popular culture – you know, you can pick up all sorts of ideas about Jesus, can't you from all sorts of places. Sometimes it's what our friends say, sometimes it's what our families say, sometimes we just pick it up from the cultural air that we breathe. But to make sure that we engage with the real Jesus of history, what we're going to do over the next few weeks is think about what this book says about Jesus.

Now, you will see these on your tables, and I have some good news for you about these books. The first one is that they're free. They're our gift to you. And another thing you'll notice straight away about this book is that it's really quite small. Now, why is that important? Well, this book is called John's Gospel. It was written by one of the close followers of Jesus, a man called John, someone who walked with Jesus, talked with Jesus, probably for about three or so years. So here's a guy who was an eyewitness to what Jesus said and did, and what he did is, he wrote these things down so that two thousand years later, here we are, we can gather tonight and we can learn the truth about the identity and the mission of Jesus.

Now, you may not consider yourself much of a reader. It might be that some of you tonight are going, 'Yeah, I love reading books, and I would love to devour this and see what he says.' But even if you're not, the thing I love about this book is, it's just really short, isn't it? So even if you don't consider yourself much of a reader, I'm sure we could get through that, couldn't we? A little bit at a time every week, we could engage with what this book says about Jesus. Now, if you want to do that at home, I think the best way to do it is kind of flick it open, have a look through it, grab a pen, even grab a highlighter, scribble some notes down, get your questions, things you don't understand you might want to underline, and bring back some questions, cause I know your group leaders would love you to bring any question and see if they can find answers to that. And then what we'll do, once we gather every week, is, I'm going to open up a section of John's gospel and I'm going to try and explain what is there. And as we do it, week by week, we'll find out more about the real Jesus of history. Find out more about who he is and what he came to do.

Now, three promises. What will happen each week as we do this? I think each week we will discover much more about the God who created us. That's my promise to you: as we know more about Jesus, and we'll see this even later tonight, we will understand much more about the God who created us, which I think is great, cause there are just some things you want to know with truth, don't you? Some things you want to know with certainty. And here's my promise: as we learn more about Jesus, we'll know much more about the God who made us.

But secondly, I think we'll discover much more about who we are. I know we're in this whole culture of identity fraud and identity theft, and people are worried about: will their identities be taken away from them? Well, if only it was that simple. You know, I know my name, I know where I live, I know my bank details... those are easy details. But I'm talking about other sorts of personal identity. Who are we, really? What makes my life significant? And here's my promise: as we understand much more about Jesus, we will discover much more about who we are. We'll discover much more about why we feel the way we do, why we act the way we do, you know, why life happens in the way it does. But even better than that, not only will we discover who we are, but as we discover more about Jesus, then we can discover who we can become. You see, what's great about Jesus, he's not just in the business of information, he's also in the business of transformation. And he wants to tell us, yes, who we are at the moment, but also how he can change us day by day.

And the last thing I want to promise you that will happen week by week is that we'll get some of the answers to some of the popular questions that our culture asks. Cause what we've done is, we've picked seven big questions, seven popular questions that are asked by people today, and every single week we want to make a point of answering those questions. So what will happen is, we'll explain a bit from John's gospel, we'll have a chance to discuss round our tables, and then I'm going to jump up again and we're going to use what we discover from John's Gospel to answer one of the popular questions of our culture.

Now, in just a few moments we're going to get started, we're going to look at the very first page of John's Gospel, but before we do that, why don't you just spend a few minutes round your tables, and I've got a few questions of your own to chat about. Four questions for you, the first one's really easy: what's your name? Most people get that. What's your name? The second: why have you come along tonight? The third question: what kind of God do you believe in? And the fourth question is: if there was one big question that you would want answered over the next few weeks, what would it be?

So take a few minutes round your tables and have a chat about those questions.

Identity – Who is God? Who are we?

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