

Finding Hope by Discovering Your Identity

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The Reason for our Hope
1 Peter 2:4-10
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One of the complaints that people of faith frequently have is that the media is biased against us. You certainly see that regarding the portrayal of Muslims as terrorists, people we need to be frightened of. You see that in the portrayal of Hasidic Jews in Netflix series like “Unorthodox”. And you certainly see that regarding serious followers of Jesus.

Consider the coverage of churches during this COVID-19 pandemic. There are about 350,000 churches in America. Nearly every one of those 350,000 churches has chosen to follow their state’s health department’s recommendations regarding closing the church. But the churches that we hear about during the pandemic are, of course, those handful of churches with publicity-seeking pastors who choose to disregard state health department guidelines. Maybe you read about the pastor who chose to keep his church open and then tragically died of COVID-19.

But we don’t hear the tens of thousands of stories of charity during this pandemic or the millions of Christians who are connecting with one another online, checking on their neighbors, sewing face masks, continuing to do church in safe and God-honoring ways.

Over time, the weight of media and societal perceptions of what it means to be a serious follower of Jesus can wear us down. The general perception of serious followers of Jesus can

cause us to want to hide our light, to not go public that I'm one of those Jesus followers. You know all the negative stereotypes regarding Jesus followers. If you're a serious follower of Jesus you're almost certainly a bigot or a hypocrite. You hate immigrants. You hate women. You hate gays. You hate the environment. If you're a serious follower of Jesus you almost certainly reject science. Your pro-life position only works before birth, but you're anti-life for everyone after birth. You're backward. You're ignorant. You're wildly political. Do some of these stereotypes apply to some people? Probably. Do they apply to most followers of Jesus that I know? Not at all.

The Apostle Peter wrote a letter in the first century to Christians who were similarly being stigmatized by their culture. In their day, they were seen as disloyal to the government – a foreign element. Traitors to the community. And Peter was concerned that his first century audience was getting worn down by all the criticism and all the stigmatizing and would become ashamed of Jesus. So, in today's text, one way that Peter offers hope to Jesus followers is speak to them and to us about our identity. We're not just what people say about us!

I've called today's message "Finding Hope by Discovering Your Identity". Let's pray.

Slide 1 Peter 2:4-10

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy

priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.”

⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”

⁸ and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

There is so much stone and rock imagery in these verses. Nine times Peter mentions stones or rocks. I think it’s not too much of a stretch to remind ourselves that this text was written by a man born Simon, son of Jonah, but who Jesus nicknamed “the rock”. Cephas in Aramaic or Petros in Greek, Peter’s nickname from Jesus meant “rock”. I’m sure Peter spent a lot of time

meditating on rocks and stones. So, he begins this passage using the metaphor of rocks over and over again.

He encourages Christians to continue to hope in the midst of negative portrayals by society and by the media by first having us consider

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What people say about Jesus

Here's what we read:

Slide 1 Peter 2:7-8

⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”

⁸ and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

The point of these verses is that Jesus is always the dividing line between people. You are either for Jesus or against him. There's no neutrality. For those who believe, Jesus is a chosen

and precious cornerstone. Jesus becomes the foundation of our lives – when we’re in a pandemic, when we’re unemployed, when we’re lonely, when we’re afraid of being sick, when we’re overwhelmed by concern for a loved one. Jesus is our precious cornerstone. We’ve chosen by faith to build our lives on him and to seek refuge in him so that we stand no matter what storm comes our way. Jesus is the precious cornerstone. He sets all the angles for our lives.

But for others, Jesus is the stone that makes us stumble and a rock that makes us fall. Peter refers to a rock that makes people fall in verse 8:

Slide 1 Peter 2:8

⁸ and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

Literally, Peter is saying that Jesus is a rock of offense. The Greek word used here is

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skandalou = scandal or offense

Jesus divides families. He said that about himself in Matthew:

Slide Matthew 10:34-36

³⁴ “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to turn

“ ‘a man against his father,

a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

³⁶ a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’

So, if you ever find that someone (maybe your own family) is against you because you are a serious follower of Jesus or that the larger society stereotypes you or the media stigmatizes you, Jesus told us ahead of time that’s what would happen. People would divide over him. Jesus is the point of offense. Jesus scandalizes people. His claims cause offense.

- Jewish people are scandalized by the thought that a man, a mere man, would be called God and that we would worship this man.
- Muslims are scandalized by the claim that Jesus is the Son of God.
- Hindus are scandalized by the claim that Jesus is the unique incarnation of God, not just one of many incarnations.
- Post-moderns are scandalized by the claim that Jesus is the only way to come to God the Father

- Proud people are scandalized by the claim that they need Jesus to be saved; that they can't be saved by their own goodness or their own moral exertion.
- Controlling people are scandalized by the claim that they must surrender control to their lives to Jesus as Lord; that they can't be saved by controlling every circumstance and every person.
- Wounded people are scandalized by Jesus' demands that we forgive if we want to be forgiven.
- Vain people, greedy people, angry people – every one of us is scandalized by Jesus. He is a rock of offense.

For those who have open hearts and are also willing to take a second look at Jesus – for those who are willing to allow his words to penetrate us and who reflect on his life, Jesus is a precious cornerstone. He is the foundation on which we build our identities.

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What God said about Jesus

Jesus may be rejected by most of humanity, but he is precious to God. Peter loves this word “precious”. He used it back in 1 Peter 1:18-19.

Slide 1 Peter 1:18-19

¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

It was important for Jesus to hear what God, his Father, said about him. “Jesus, you are the son I love. With you I am well pleased.”

Friend, in the midst of this pandemic how do you form your identity?

- By your work? What if you are unemployed?
- By your net worth? If your net worth determines your self-worth then your self-worth has taken a beating over these last few months!
- By how much you’re doing for God? It’s easy – especially for any of us who are Christian leaders or pastors, we lead a small group or a ministry to draw our identity from what we’re doing for God. But who are we when we’re sheltering in place and there’s way less for us to do? One of the major questions this pandemic is presenting to all of the world is who are you when people and things and activity are taken out of your life?

There’s no mistake about it, friends. There is no neutrality when it comes to Jesus. Let’s think a little more deeply about

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How should we form our identities?

I want to consider

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The wrong way: listening to what people say about us

I read a story some years ago about a pastor named Doug Murren. Doug had a daughter named Raisa. As a result of difficulties during her birth, Raisa was born with cerebral palsy. She walked clumsily with braces on her legs and crutches. One day, Pastor Doug came home and he could tell his wife was upset. He asked her what was wrong. She pointed to Raisa's room. At this time, Raisa was 13 years old – an adolescent. She was a wonderfully sweet Christian girl who was incredibly empathetic and generous towards others. She was a really kind young woman.

Pastor Doug went into her bedroom and sat down next to his daughter and he said, "Raisa, what's the matter?" And she said, "Nothing." She put her head on her dad's chest and began to sob uncontrollably. He asked again, "Honey, what's wrong?" She said, "At school today, the teacher asked what we'd like to be when we grow up. I answered that I want to be a ballerina and a mom. Melissa pointed at me and began laughing and said, 'You'll never be a ballerina. You're a cripple. And the only boy who will ever marry you is somebody who is blind.'"

Have you ever had someone say something to you or to someone you love that has cut you or them apart? Many of us can remember things that were said to us when we were children – cruel things, things about our future, our destiny said by angry fathers or mothers. You’ll never amount to anything. You’re a loser, just like your father. Cutting words you heard at school, from spouses, from boyfriends and girlfriends. How do we overcome all the negative messages we’ve received about ourselves? How do we overcome all the negative messages we’ve said about ourselves? How do we continue to hope for more, believe for more about who we are.

I’m going to close by talking about

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The right way to form our identity

It’s important to see that everything that Peter says about the Christian identity in this passage is corporate. It’s communal. It’s not just aimed at us as individuals. In verse 5 we read:

Slide 1 Peter 2:5

⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

In other words, we’re not just individuals disconnected stones. Rather, we are a building, a spiritual house, a temple, created by stones dug up from all over the world. That’s what

Vineyard Columbus really is. We are a temple of stones that God has gathered from over 130 different nations. Peter is speaking to us about our corporate identity. Peter doesn't simply address us as individuals. All of his language is communal. All of it is corporate. I want you to see this! The language Peter uses for our identity is not individualistic! It's communal!

Slide 1 Peter 2:9-10

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

What does all of this mean? It means that the way you and I should form our identities is

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By being part of a larger community

These days, when we're trying to help people figure out who they are, we always focus on the individual. We say, "You know how you can figure out who you are? Look inside yourself.

Figure out what your dreams are. Get in touch with the real you! After all, the goal of life is for you to be yourself." A million times over a day we're told to look inside of ourselves to discover "our own truth" because that's how you figure out who you are.

Take this personality test or that temperament test. Everything is focused on you as an individual. We are told that's how you discover your identity. But Peter gives us an older and more profound wisdom. The way you find your identity is not by looking inside yourself, but by attaching yourself to a community that is bigger than you. A community that will help define you. Get caught up in something larger than yourself.

The greatest institutions in our society are marked by this ability to shape an individual's identity. Morehouse College where our own Dr. Charles Montgomery went was the alma mater of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. If you attend Morehouse, you're going to be shaped by that college for life. When you graduate you'll forever be always a Morehouse man. The United States Marine Corps. People join and get swept up in something bigger than themselves. I'm a Marine. I'm a Wheaton grad. Great institutions in society catch us up in something bigger than ourselves. That's what a great church should do! Not just be a collection of individuals meeting our needs but a community bigger than ourselves – that we get swept up in – a community that shapes our identity for life. As pastor, that's what I want for you – whether you stay in Columbus or move to Albuquerque or Timbuktu – you would forever say my life has been marked in the most positive way by being part of Vineyard Columbus!

How else do we form our identities?

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By building something together

In his book *The Home we build together*,

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Book cover

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that in the Bible, the description of the creation of the whole universe – the book of Genesis – is covered in a mere 34 verses. 34 verses to describe how God created the entire universe. But, in the book of Exodus, when describing the building of the tabernacle – a manmade building for the worship of God – a third of the book is taken up with the description of this building.

Rabbi Sacks asks the question: why should the building of this one structure with all of its detailed instructions about the length of the beams and the different kinds of wood and the kind of thread to sew the curtain, why does it take so much space in the Bible? Why so much attention being paid to the building of the tabernacle? The answer is because the Israelites were not yet a people. They were an oppressed and separated group of tribes and individuals. He says this:

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To turn a group of individuals into a covenantal nation, they must build something together!

A people is made by making. Our identities are formed by building something together. What is it that we are building together as Vineyard Columbus? What is the great building project that every church ought to be working on that gives each of our individual lives a sense of purpose and identity and hope.

Peter tells us what the building project is in verse 9:

Slide 1 Peter 2:9

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

There are two dimensions to this. One is upward – we declare God's praises to God. Even though we are not gathered together in person and we're watching online in kitchens and living rooms and bedrooms and offices, I encourage you to sing the worship songs and not just watch our worship team. The other is outward – towards our community. We show people through words and through action how wonderful Jesus Christ is and what he means to us. Invite someone to watch our online services. Reach out to a neighbor! Call someone you know may be lonely.

How do we discover our true identities?

- Being part of a larger community

- Building something together

And finally,

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By listening to God

I told the story of Raisa a little earlier. She was the young woman born with cerebral palsy and was made fun of in her class because she said she wanted to be a ballerina. A girl in her class pointed at her and said, “You’ll never be a ballerina. You’re crippled. And the only boy who will ever marry you is somebody who is blind.” Well, Raisa could have listened to that girl. But do you know what her dad told her? He said, “Sweetheart, you have a long life ahead of you and you may walk like this for your entire life. There are going to be other people who make fun of you. There are going to be people who stare at you. You’re going to have to decide right now who you’re going to listen to. Are you going to live your life listening to what everybody else says about you, or are going to live your life based on what Jesus says about you?”

Raisa wrapped her arms around her dad’s neck and said, “Daddy, I’m going to listen to what Jesus says about me.” Her dad said, “What does Jesus say?” And Raisa said, “Jesus said I’m going to be a ballerina.”

Doug walked out of the room with tears running down his face and he thought to himself, “Yes, one day when Jesus returns, Raisa is going to be a ballerina.” But then he felt the Spirit of God speak to him and say, “No, Doug. Every time your daughter walks across the room with her leg braces on and with her crutches, she’s doing a dance for me.”

Having Christian hope in a pandemic is a choice regarding who you’re going to listen to about your identity. Whose opinion matters most to you in your life? Will you listen to what the whole world says about Jesus followers or, like Raisa, do you listen to what God our Father in Heaven says? Do you need hope during this pandemic? Listen to what God says about you!

Slide 1 Peter 2:9-10

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

GOSPEL CALL:

-In a moment, we want you to indicate to us if this is your FIRST time giving your life to Christ. We have people available to pray online with you, so please respond in the chat so that we can connect with you! If you're watching through church online, you can click the "raise hand" button now.

-If you would like to REcommit your life to Christ or just respond to my message, please request live prayer if you're on church online and let one of our prayer team folks know your situation.

They would love to pray with you. If you're on Facebook/YouTube, just leave a comment for us.

-You can always just go straight to [MYVC.INFO/connectwithus](https://www.vineyardcolumbus.org/CONNECTWITHUS) and let us know if you made a decision today. As long as you include some contact info, we can follow up with you.

MINISTRY CALL:

-I mentioned earlier that we have pastors and leaders standing by to pray for you by chat. On ChurchOnline, just hit the request prayer button. On Facebook/YouTube, you can ask for prayer in the comments and someone will send you a message you.

(The Preaching Pastors will do a closing prayer or scripture reading. Worship team will be on camera for Ministry Time.)