

APRIL 17, 1994

Christian Identity and Christian Destiny

Resource by [John Piper](#) 

Scripture: [1 Peter 2:9–10](#) Topic: [Identity in Christ](#)

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Introduction: The Wonder of Being Human

One day last week I when Noël and I were praying together, I found myself thanking God for the wonder of being a human. We have the astonishing capacity to see and hear and feel, and then to think about all this amazing reality, and then to form judgments about it all and know right and wrong and good and bad and beautiful and ugly, and then to feel profound emotions of love and hate and joy and discouragement and wonder and hope and gratitude, and then to reason and plan our lives in ways that accomplish things. And best of all is to find all these wonderful human capacities caught up in knowing and loving and serving the greatest Being in the universe—our Maker and our Savior and our God. It was one of those rare moments—like a brief brush with eternity.

One of the great benefits of having a dog is the increased awareness that I am not one. I look at our dog, Sable, and think for a moment that she is kind and forgiving and humble and patient and loving and warm and gentle and happy and peaceful. Then I realize she's a dog! She does not know or reason or feel or judge like I do. She does not prize anything because of its true worth—its relation to God. She doesn't know where she came from. She doesn't reflect on her identity and wonder who she is or what it means ultimately in God's scheme of things to be a dog. She doesn't think about why she's here and doesn't know where she's going.

She is a wonder, and can call forth amazing affection. But she is not a human created in the image of God. And as I think about her, I am amazed at my own humanity. And at the incredible wonders of the humans I live with.

Inexpressible Horror or Spectacular Glory

To be alive as a human being with indescribable mysteries at every turn, and to have in front of us an eternal destiny of spectacular glory or inexpressible horror is a weight that can either press you down with fear and trembling or bear you up with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Whether it does the one or the other depends in large measure on whether you know the answer to the big basic human questions or not. Who are you? How did you get that identity? What are you here for? No dog or turtle or fish or squirrel or bird or dolphin or chimpanzee ever lost one night's sleep pondering those questions. Only humans ask these questions. Only humans kill themselves and kill others when they don't get true and satisfying answers to these questions.

Not often do we find such resoundingly clear answers to all three questions in such a small space as we do in this text this morning. Who am I? How did I get this identity? What's it for—Why am I here?

So let's take a deep breath this morning and go back to the beginning as it were—or go down to the rock bottom foundational questions of life, and listen to the Word of God, and wonder and stand in awe of what he has to say about these three things.

Who Are You?

Keep in mind that Peter is identifying Christians. This is who you are if you are a Christian. This is how you got your identity as a Christian. This is what you are here for as a Christian.

First, he gives five ways of describing your identity, answering the question of who you are.

1. You Are a Chosen Race

Verse 9: "You are a chosen race."

I know that this is a corporate identity, he's talking about the church—the true Israel. But the implication is individual, because this race is not racial. The chosen race is not black or white or red or yellow or brown. The chosen race is a new people from all the peoples—all the colors and cultures—who are now aliens and strangers among in the world. See verse 11, "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers . . ."

What gives us our identity is not color or culture. But chosenness. Christians are not the white race; they are the chosen race. Christians are not the black race; they are the chosen race. We are the black chosen and the white chosen and the yellow chosen and the red chosen. Out from all the races we have been chosen—one at a time, not on the basis of belonging to any group.

That's why this amazing phrase is individually crucial for you; you are part of the "chosen race" because the race is made up of individuals who were chosen—from all the races. So your first identity is that you are chosen. God chose you. Not because of your race—or for any other qualification—God chose you. Who am I? I am chosen. I do not know why. It was nothing in me of value above other humans. I did not earn it or merit it, or meet any conditions to get it. It happened before I was born. I stand in awe of it. I tremble with joy at it. I bow and accept it. I long to be faithful to its purpose. I am chosen.

2. You Are Pitied

Verse 10b: ". . . you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

I choose the word "pitied" because the word for mercy in Greek here is a verb and the closest word we have in English like "mercied" is "pitied." It's not a bad translation. When God chose us, he then saw us in our sin and guilt and condemnation and he pitied us. We are not just chosen. We are pitied. We are the not just the objects of his choice, but the objects of his mercy.

I am chosen and I am pitied—or you could say I am "graced." I am "loved." God did not just choose me and stand aloof. He chose me and then drew near in mercy to help me and save me. My identity is fundamentally this: I have been shown mercy. I am a "mercied" person. I get my identity not first from my actions, but from being acted upon—with pity. I am a pitied one.

3. You Are God's Possession

This is expressed twice. Verse 9: "You are . . . a people for God's own possession." Verse 10a: "You once were not a people, but now you are the people of God."

You are chosen by God; you are pitied by God; and the effect of that pity—that mercy—is that God takes you to be his own possession. Now God owns everything. So in one sense everyone is God's possession. So this must mean something special. And, of course, it does. You are God's inheritance. You are the ones he aims to spend eternity with. When God says (in [2 Corinthians 6:16](#)), "I will be their God and they will be my people [my possession]," what he means is that "I will dwell in them and walk among them."

You are chosen; you are pitied; you are God's possession—the ones he will walk among and reveal himself to in a personal relation forever.

4. You Are Holy

Verse 9: "You are a . . . holy nation."

You have been chosen and pitied and possessed by God; and therefore you are not merely part of the world anymore. You are set apart for God. You exist for God. And since God is holy, you are holy. You share his character, because he chose you, pitied you, possessed you. You are holy. If you do not act in a holy way, you act out of character. You contradict your essence as a Christian. For your identity is holiness to the Lord: you are holy.

And finally,

5. You Are a Royal Priest

Verse 9: "You are a . . . royal priesthood."

You are chosen by God and pitied by God and possessed by God and holy like God and royal priests to God. The point here is first that you have immediate access to God—you don't need another human priest as a mediator. God himself provided the one Mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ. You have direct access to God, through God. And, second, you have an exalted, active role in God's presence. You are not chosen, pitied, possessed, and holy just to fritter away your time doing nothing. You are called now to minister in the presence of God. All your life is priestly service. You are never out of God's presence. You are never in a neutral zone. You are always in the court of the temple. And your life is either a spiritual service of worship ([Romans 12:1–2](#)), or it is out of character.

So you can see that your identity—the question, "Who are you?"—leads directly to the question, "What are you here for?" Your identity leads to your destiny. You are chosen, pitied, possessed, and holy—all for a

purpose—to minister as priests. And the heart of that ministry Peter describes for us very clearly.

How Did You Get This Identity?

But before we answer the question what we are here for, let's pause just a moment and answer the middle question: How did I get this identity?

The answer is almost too obvious. We got our identity from God. In fact our identity is our relation to God. We are chosen by GOD. We are pitied by GOD. We are possessed by GOD. We are set apart as holy by GOD. We are invested as royal priests by GOD.

Peter says this in a summary statement at the end of verse 9. He refers to God like this: "Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." The light we live in his the light of our being chosen and pitied and possessed and holy and priestly. And the way we got there is that God called us. He called us out of darkness into this marvelous light.

So the answer to the question: How did we get this identity is that God gave it to us. He gave it to us by virtue of his irresistible call. (I know that we were chosen by God before we were called by God. So it might look like I'm not saying it quite right. But what I mean is that the experience of walking in the light of being chosen—the experience of that identity—is the effect of God's sovereign call.)

God gave us the identity we have.

What Are You Here For?

What we saw was that our identity led directly to our destiny: we are chosen, pitied, possessed, and holy all for the sake of being a royal priesthood. But Peter is more specific when he tells us the precise reason for our existence. He says in verse 9:b that we exist for this reason: "that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." This is the full-time destiny of a royal priest—to make the glories of the king known.

Our Identity and Its Purpose

There is a lot of discussion in our day of self-concept or self-identity. How do we view ourselves? It is an important question. And what I hope you hear this morning is that the specifically biblical angle on this question is that Christian selfhood is not defined in terms of who we are in and of ourselves. It's defined in terms of what God does to us and the relationship he creates with us and the destiny he appoints for us. In other words as a Christian you cannot talk about your identity without talking about the action of God on you, the relationship of God with you, and the purpose of God for you. The biblical understanding of human self-identity is radically God-centered.

Who am I? Who are you? You are a God-chosen one, a God-pitied one, a God-possessed one, a God-sanctified one. The very language of our identity in this text necessitates that God be included as the one who acts. Our identity is not an end in itself, but for the sake of priestly service, which Peter defines as proclaiming the excellencies of the One who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

God made us who we are so that we might proclaim the excellency of his freedom in choosing us. The excellency of his grace in pitying us. The excellencies of his authority and power in possessing us. The excellencies of his worth and purity in making us holy.

In other words he has given us our identity in order that his identity might be proclaimed through us. God made us who we are so we could make known who he is. Our identity is for the sake of making known his identity. The meaning of our identity is that the excellency of God be seen in us.

Therefore being a Christian and making the greatness of God known are almost identical. We can do it in church services with preaching and singing and praying and reading. We can do it in our small groups as we tell each other what God has been for us, or what we need him to be for us. We can do it at work as we tell people what we love about God and why we think he is great. And we can do it in a thousand different ways of love that suit our situation and personality.

The Story of Doug Nichols

For example, I'll close with this wonderful story of how Doug Nichols, the International Director of Action International Ministries, made the excellencies of God known in a tuberculosis sanitarium in India in 1967—he was a missionary with Operation Mobilization and got TB. He was in the sanitarium for several months. He tried to give tracts and copies of the gospel of John away, but no one would take them. They didn't like him and assumed he was a rich American.

At one point for several nights he would wake up coughing at 2 AM. He noticed a little old emaciated man trying to get out of bed. The man couldn't stand up, and began to whimper. He lay back into bed. In the morning the stench in the ward was terrible and everyone was angry at the old man for not containing himself. The nurse who cleaned up even smacked the old man for making such a mess.

The next night the very same thing happened. Doug woke up coughing with his own terrible sickness and weakness. He saw the old man try again to get out of bed. Again he couldn't stand, and began to cry softly. Doug got out of bed went over to the old man. The man cowered with fear. But Doug picked him up with both arms and carried him to the bathroom which was just a hole in the floor, and then brought him back. The man kissed him on the cheek as he put him down in bed.

At 4 AM another patient woke Doug with a steaming cup of tea and made motions that said he wanted a copy of the booklet—the gospel of John. Through that whole day people kept coming to him and asking for his booklets even though he could not speak their language.

In other words one way to declare the excellencies of God is to act them out. When we act out the excellencies of God, people will hear them with even greater eagerness. Which is just another way of saying that our identity—who we are—is for the sake of God. God made us who we are to show the world who he is.

