

# Where Do I Belong?

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Hello everyone, my name is Mark, welcome to our Food for Soul Festival.

This is actually our third and last Sunday and if you haven't had a chance to be with us over the last couple of weeks, in the first week we looked at the topic of who am I, last week we looked at why am I here and tonight as the title suggests we're going to look at where do I belong. So some of the most, I guess, pertinent questions that people ask in their lives. There's a little outline, if you want to follow along, on page 8 as well.

Well, it was term 1 in the year 2009 and Alyssa and I are at our first parent information night. Emma, our eldest, had just started PrEP and I was eager to find out how she was going.

And so there I was, fully expecting to hear about her progress in chemistry and physics and calculus and essay writing, okay, maybe not, maybe just spelling and reading. But I was definitely expecting to be briefed, at the very least, on what homework to expect. But to my surprise, that was a joke by the way, but to my surprise, the teacher informed the parents that the teacher's focus for that term was on social skills. The important thing that term was for the girls to learn how to play well together, how to share, how to make friends, how to fit into class as a whole. Now, I have to admit that as an Asian parent, that didn't sit very well with me.

But after I got over the shock, I began to see the wisdom in what she was saying, that actually the students needed to belong in order to be able to learn. It didn't matter how smart the child was, if they were not going to feel like they belong, they weren't going to begin to learn anything.

[ 2 : 1 0 ] Which is actually quite true, if you stop to think about it, not just for kids, but for all of us, for grown-ups as well. I mean, you could have the best job in the world, but if you can't get along with your boss or your colleagues, you're not going to perform, are you?

And whenever we join a new organization, we come to a new city, one of the first things we try and do is to find friends or people that we can relate with. And that's because relationships are important to us.

We need to belong. It's as basic a need as food and shelter. And one of the most fearful things I find in life when I speak to a lot of people is the fear of being lonely.

So as we get to this question tonight, I guess I want to ask, what is it then that gives us this sense of belonging? Or as I put it in the outline, what are the ingredients to belonging?

What do we need in order to belong? Well, for a start, it's probably important to have something in common with the person you're trying to belong with. Perhaps a shared history, like family, or a shared vision or a shared values or goals.

[ 3 : 2 6 ] Something which is bigger than us. Something which we can become a part of. Then we probably also want validation from the group. We want to be accepted and valued as a member of that group.

To be loved and to be cared for. And as we look at that passage tonight in Genesis, that first passage, that's exactly what we find in the Garden of Eden.

That was the place, that was the first place, where humans found belonging. And so it's on page three of the booklet. God had created Adam and then Eve as his helper.

And both of them were in right relationship with each other. But more importantly, they were in right relationship with God. They shared a common purpose which God gave to them, to work the garden and to name the animals.

And in turn, God cared for them. He put them in a bountiful land with, you know, and it's described as such with four rivers flowing through it, with food from the plants or the trees, and precious things like gold and other materials to show the abundance of the land.

[ 4 : 35 ] Now, regardless of how literally you take chapter two to be, this is a beautiful picture of belonging. It is what life was meant to be like, a place where humans can belong, not just to each other, but to God, and valued by him as part of his creation.

But I want to take you to actually the end of that chapter, on the next page, in verse 25. Because that's where I think you'll find the most important ingredient to belonging.

And so verse 25 says, Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. That is, Adam and Eve had this deep sense of belonging because they experienced what I called shameless nakedness.

Now, this is more than just physical nakedness. It's nakedness in the sense that Adam and Eve had nothing to hide in word, thought, or deed. Adam and Eve could be completely who they were with no fear of judgment or ridicule.

There was nothing to hide because there was nothing to be ashamed of. And so for them, the Garden of Eden was a totally secure and safe place. And I think, if we think about it, that is our deepest desire when it comes to belonging.

[ 5 : 55 ] We want to find a safe place to call home. It's just like that song that Marty sang. So it doesn't matter how far you are or how wide you roam. You want to take great comfort that there's this one place on earth where you can return to, to be safe, a safe place.

It's a place where people understand you, where people will accept you unconditionally, where you can be yourself and not be afraid, where there's no need to conform in order to be accepted, where you can speak your mind and have no fear of being laughed at.

And so I think this is what drives us to seek intimate relationships in life, perhaps in a life partner or with mates in a club or with school friends.

We long for this sort of intimacy. And yet, even as we long for it, we also recognize how hard it is to find such a place.

Because even with our closest friends and loved ones, we can't be totally naked and transparent. There are still things that we will never tell anyone because we are ashamed of it.

[ 7 : 13 ] We're going to run Christianity Explored next month, starting in October. But in one of the weeks, Rico Taiz, the presenter, sets up the following scene. He asks each of us to imagine going into a room and having our entire life projected onto the wall.

Every event in our lives, every single thing we've done, every word we've uttered, screened like a movie for everyone to see, our family and friends, our classmates and colleagues.

And then he asks, how would you feel about that? Well, I'm pretty sure many of you would feel decidedly uncomfortable with that. And the reason?

Well, we all know that we are sinful. We know we've done things wrong, things that we don't want anyone else to know because if they knew, then it would expose the fact that we are actually not as good as we want others to think.

And so that is the difference between our world and the world of the Garden of Eden because we live in a world where everyone is sinful. And it is this sin that prevents all of us from having that deep sense of belonging in the world.

[ 8 : 27 ] We can't be shamelessly naked. Of course, the saddest thing is that we don't just try and hide from each other. We try to hide from God as well. We can't bear to face the truth about ourselves because when we stand before God, we know that there is nowhere to hide.

We know that God sees us and knows everything about us, everything we've done and everything that we've said. And that's exactly what happens in the next chapter to Adam and Eve.

We haven't printed it, but in the story, Adam and Eve sin when they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God had given them everything, but they disobeyed him by eating from the one tree that God said they shouldn't.

And so I printed a couple of verses to just pick up the story from verse 6. And it says, When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.

She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

[ 9 : 44 ] Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, Where are you?

He answered, I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid. And so immediately after Adam and Eve ate, they realized they were naked and were ashamed.

And so they covered themselves with fig leaves. They hid their nakedness from each other, but also from God because they were afraid. And what Adam and Eve did literally, we all do figuratively.

We hide not only from others, but from God as well. Sin severs our relationship with God, not primarily because God rejects us, but because we can't bear to stand in God's presence.

We can't handle the truth. But it also undermines our relationship with each other. And it's true, isn't it? The closest relationships are the ones that causes us the greatest hurt, whether it's in our marriages or our families.

[ 10 : 59 ] It's the relationships which we look to to give us the greatest sense of belonging that are the ones that often causes us great anger, great fear, and great hurt. I mean, I love my family deeply, and yet I can see my own sinfulness and the impact it has on them.

They are the ones, the first ones, to bear the brunt of my frustration, my impatience, my thoughtlessness. And so it is that the relationships that we open ourselves up to the most that are the ones that have the greatest capacity to hurt us, to harm us.

Well, it sounds pretty bleak. And so the question, I guess, is where do we go from here? Is there anything we can do about this impediment which we call sin?

Well, the answer is that there's nothing we can do, but there's something that God has already done. And that's the good news because through his son, Jesus, God has removed this impediment.

He has enabled us to come back to him. He has invited us back into a place of belonging with him, a place where we can be who we are and we can be honest about who we are without being ashamed.

[ 12 : 19 ] And we are given an insight into this in that other reading that we had tonight by that prayer of Jesus in chapter 17 of the Gospel of John. And so that's on page 5 of the handout.

Now, this is actually an amazing prayer because what we are listening into is the conversation that the Son of God is having with his Father.

We are listening in on the plans that they have for this world, the world which they created and over which they rule. And what they're discussing here are the plans that will come to a climax that will come to fruition in the next 24 hours that Jesus was praying.

Now, Jesus knows exactly what was coming because he says in verse 1, the hour has come. He's saying, this is it, Father. Everything has come to this.

Glorify your Son or honor Him that your Son may glorify you. And amazingly, this glory that Jesus was talking about is His own death on the cross.

[ 13 : 24 ] The Father will glorify Him on the cross even as He glorifies the Father. And some of you might be wondering, how can this be?

How can this ugly crucifixion on the cross, this shameful death, be anything but glorious? How can this be the climax of God's plan for the world?

Well, it is because that's the way God is able to bring humanity back into relationship with Him. That was the way He was going to enable humans to belong to Him again just as it was in the Garden of Eden.

So our shame, our guilt, our fear of nakedness, Jesus took upon Himself on the cross hanging naked with nowhere to hide, receiving the judgment that we deserve so that our relationship can be restored with God.

So in verse 2, Jesus says, for you granted Him, that is Jesus, authority over all people that He might give eternal life to all those God has given to Him. Now this is eternal life that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

[ 14 : 37 ] And to know God is not just to know about God but to know Him as a child knows His parent, to be able to stand before Him without being ashamed, not needing to hide, not fearing His judgment.

Now the rest of Jesus' prayer then goes on to show us what has happened or what happens when our relationship with God is restored. It gives a picture actually of the eternal life that Jesus gives to those who believe in Him.

In verses 6 to 19, Jesus focuses His attention on the disciples who were with Him, the 10 or the 12 or the 11, the ones who tell, who will then tell the rest of us what Jesus did and why.

But then in verses 20 to 26, Jesus then prays for the rest of us. As He says in verse 20, those who will believe in Him through the message of the disciples. Now we don't have time to go into the entire prayer tonight but I just want you to know this language that Jesus uses about how we belong to God.

So for example, in verse 6, the disciples are those whom God, whom you gave to me out of the world. And in verse 9, Jesus prays for those you have given me for they are yours.

[ 15 : 51 ] And then again in verse 11, further down, He prays, Holy Father, protect them, that is the disciples, by the power of your name, that the name that you gave me, the name that you gave me so that they may be one as we are one.

What's clear is that the disciples belong to God the Father and to Jesus. And Jesus asks that the Father will protect them when He's no longer with them. And then He turns to verse 20 to the rest of us and His prayer goes like this.

My prayer for them, that is, my prayer is not for them, not just for the 12, but I pray also for those who believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.

May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, so that they may be brought to complete unity.

Friends, can you see what our belonging in Christ is founded on? Jesus prays that we may be one even as He and the Father are one.

[ 17 : 03 ] That is, our unity has the same quality as the unity between the Father and the Son, the same way that Jesus and the Father belong to each other. There is no closer bond than that.

And all that is made possible in verse 23. Jesus prays, I, it just says, I in them, meaning Jesus is in us and the Father is in Jesus, you in me.

That is, we are able to belong because we belong to Jesus. Those of us who believe in Jesus are caught up in Christ so that we belong to God, the creator of this universe, the one who created you and me.

And I have to say that for someone who has spent half his life being raised in one culture and then the other half living in another, this is a great comfort because for many years I kept asking myself, do I belong in Asia where I grew up or in Australia where I now live?

But because I belong to God, I don't have to worry about those questions. I don't have to choose whether I belong here or back there because in Christ I belong up here where God is.

[ 18 : 23 ] And so I can wake up each morning and look out the window and say, this is my Father's world. I don't have to find security or a sense of belonging only with people that are like me.

My ultimate sense of belonging comes from God not subcultures or cliques. And I don't have to conform to a certain culture in order to belong, to wear certain clothes, to drive certain cars, to have certain jobs or to do certain things.

And friends, we belong to each other in this church because of one thing and one thing only. We belong together because we are in Christ.

We have all been forgiven in Christ. We've all had our guilt and our shame taken away by Jesus' death on the cross. And we welcome anyone else to join with us, to share in that by first belonging to God in Christ, by turning away from your sin, turning to Christ, and then when you belong to God, you will automatically belong with us as well.

That's God's invitation to us. And the great mark then after that that as Christians is that we extend to each other the same things that Christ extends to us.

[ 19 : 46 ] That is, we forgive because we have been forgiven. We bear with one another because Christ has been born with us. The Apostle Paul calls it clothing ourselves with Christ's righteousness.

See, the thing is that we can't really go back to Eden in the sense that we can't undo the past and live in shameless nakedness. But neither do we need to cover ourselves with fig leaves, that is, pretend to be who we are not and try and hide from each other and from God.

Rather, in Christ, we can be open and honest with each other because we are clothed with the qualities of Jesus. And so on page 7, there's another reading there.

I just want to pick up verse 12 where Paul says, therefore, therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you and over all these virtues put on love which binds them all together in perfect unity.

[ 21 : 04 ] humanity. And so the question we have tonight is, where do we belong? Well, God's answer is that we belong to him. He created us and that's what he intended for the world.

But as I've said, sin is the one impediment that prevents us from belonging, not just among ourselves, but more importantly, between us and God. But thanks be to God, Jesus has removed it by dying on the cross to take away our guilt and shame.

And so, I want to ask tonight, will you accept God's invitation to belong to him in Christ?