

MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT //

WHAT ABOUT GENDER DYSPHORIA AND THE TRANSGENDER MOVEMENT? |

DECONSTRUCT | RECONSTRUCT

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Well, we are currently about half-way through this series that we have been in called *Deconstruct | Reconstruct*. And deconstruction, if you're unfamiliar with the term, is when some people who used to consider themselves a Christian or a person of faith, maybe they grew up in church, enter into a journey, of sorts, to sort of take apart, reshape or, in many instances, abandon the faith altogether.

That's kind of the backdrop of this series, but what we're doing more specifically is taking a look at a handful of the issues that are oftentimes at the root that sort of get the gears of deconstruction moving in somebody's life. In other words, we're confronted with some of these topics, we've got questions about them and we don't really get compelling enough answers and that sort of enters us into this process of deconstruction.

Now, last week I said that all of us have one of two scripts, whether we realize it or not, that we are reading off of to sort of interpret and to live our lives by—interpret and inform. So we've got the script of God's Word, and then this very large kind of blanket term, what we're referring to as the secular script.

Most of the time, when it comes to deconstruction, the thing that gets placed on the table to deconstruct is the script of God's Word. So we can pick at that and ask questions and challenge it. And that's okay. The Word of God is big enough to handle it and it's durable enough to handle our best questions. We talked about that in week one.

But, here's what I'm doing—specifically last week and this weekend—I just want to put on the table the secular script and just say, "When was the last time that we really got behind that and did a little deconstruction of it?"

Meaning, when was the last time we really examined the logic and the promises and the claims of the secular script to see if it's really delivering what it is that it has promised. At the same time acknowledging that we need a more compelling narrative around God's intent, His plan, and His purposes than what we may have received through church, historically, in our past. It's a long way of saying if you find yourself at a crossroads or crisis don't deconstruct, reconstruct.

Today, we're going to jump right in and here's the title of today's message, *What About Gender Dysphoria and the Transgender Movement?* Now, if this is the first Sunday that you picked to visit Traders Point, you picked a doozy. Alright? And you might be at one



of our campuses or maybe online and you're going, "Man, I never thought that I would hear a sermon on this topic" If that's you, then we are in the same boat because I never, ever thought that I would preach a sermon on this topic. In preparation for this I actually went back to review my notes from Bible College on this subject, and strangely couldn't find them. I must have skipped that day.

But this is highly relevant to all of our lives because, right now, and I think most of know this, we are living in a cultural moment where lots and lots of questions are being asked about what it means to be a man and a woman that just haven't been asked, at least on this scale, in human history.

Now, before you look for the nearest exit or decide that this is the exact moment you should go get an oil change, hang with me. In fact, hang with me all the way to the end because, as we navigate what I'm just going to acknowledge is a minefield of a topic—as we navigate this I think that you're going to find this much more compassionate, compelling, and helpful than maybe what you might have thought you would hear.

I'd also say this. If you're here today and you hear me out to the very end and even if you disagree with me on a few things don't be done.

Now, you might be apprehensive and nervous as we kind of venture into these waters. And I understand why. This is a really complicated and complex issue and maybe, right now, you yourself are walking through this or maybe somebody who you know and love is walking through it. I think this would be a good time to be reminded of 1 Peter 3, which should set the tone every time we talk about something as complex as this. 1 Peter 3:15 says this:

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone," everyone would mean people who are living off of a different script, people who see things differently than you and me, "...who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." This next part is so crucial, "But do this with," What? Say it with me. "...gentleness and respect..." 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)

Now, when it comes to complex issues like this, some Christians, pastors, and churches just will not address them. Others will address them but they won't do so with gentleness and respect. The unfortunate thing is that oftentimes the people with opinions on this are some of the loudest voices and they have a tendency to be the most abrasive and divisive.

We want to be able to do both. We want to acknowledge this but we're going to do so with gentleness and respect. I not only think that it is possible to do so, but I also think it is absolutely necessary that we do so.

I thought I would share a little bit of my heart with you today. I just want to share a little bit of my heart with you today. I don't really want to talk about this like I need to make a point or get on my soapbox. But I know we need to talk about it and the primary reason is because we're talking about it everywhere else. For us to be quiet on it is just awkward and weird.



Not only that, but I want you to know my heart too, especially for those of you who are new around here. I genuinely, regardless of who you are, what you believe, where you come from, whether we know each other or not, I really do want to pastor you. And pastoring is this idea of shepherding. And it comes out of this agrarian society where it's just kind of equated to the church as a flock and a really good shepherd guides the flock through the valleys.

So for me to kind of step back and say, "Well, I'm not going to speak to that. I'm not going to touch that." I'm, in a sense, saying to the sheep, "Well, you all fend for yourselves against the ideological wolves." And I love you too much to do that.

Unfortunately, there is very, very—and you all know this—there is very, very little thoughtful and compassionate dialogue going on around this subject, which is why some of you are really nervous about right now. We're not used to having conversations that are divisive in a way that is constructive.

We live in a politically charged environment and whenever we hear about subjects like this, we usually hear about it as bystanders in the cultural war, where people are picking sides and pointing fingers and weaponizing counter points to make themselves look good and right and brilliant and the other side to look bad, and wrong, and ridiculous.

So oftentimes this discussion, unfortunately, sort of disintegrates into an us versus them mentality, which is really not a heart for people. We're just trying to make a point. But I want you to know today, I'm not up here trying to have all of the answers. I'm not up here to try to make a point. I'm not up here to slam dunk on anybody. What motivates us to talk about this is to help hurting and broken people discover the best that can be true for them because of what Jesus has done for them. And for you to be able to know how Jesus sees you.

Now, I'm really glad that you guys have clapped several times because I'm going to ask you to do something that I've never asked you to do in the 16 years that I've been here. Alright? Normally I love it when you clap and I love it when you say *amen*. I love it when you shout me down when I preach. Little known fact. Tuck this away. When you are audible with me, I preach better and shorter. I just want you to know that. So, if you're like, "Man, we've got to get to lunch. Way to go." Then I'll preach fast.

With all of that said, I'm going to ask you for our next few moments together that you not clap and you not say *amen*. At least until I tell you to at the end. Now, the reason why is because I know that we have people right now who are walking through this very, very complicated issue.

Maybe you've got a teenager at home who is walking through this, you, yourself are walking through this. I do not want anybody to misinterpret our clapping in and *amening* as being against them. That's called empathy. And it's the only place for us to begin when talking about a minefield of a subject like this. We're not good enough at this, as a church or as a society. And we need to begin practicing it.

So, I want you to have a little bit of empathy right now and I want you to imagine being a teenager and you never felt like you fit the typical stereotype of your biological sex. So, as a result you've always felt awkward and out of place.

You were born a boy, but you were never into WWF wrestling or monster trucks. You were born a girl, but you were never into American Girl dolls or dress up. In fact, you would prefer to be in the back yard wrestling with your brothers on the trampoline. And as you grew into adolescents you've wondered when these feelings that you are experiencing, that you are afraid to vocalize, you wonder when they would change, but they just never did.

And, honestly, you're not trying to make a political point, you just want to be at peace, you just want to be happy, you just want to be fulfilled. So you stumble across some videos on Tik Tok where your peers or a peer is announcing a change in gender or going by a pronoun. And you see how they are celebrated and applauded and they just look so happy. And this thought crosses your mind for the first time, "Maybe that's what I should do. Maybe that's the answer.

Imagine being a parent of a teenager who comes to you one day and tells you that he doesn't feel comfortable in the body that he is in, and he wants to change the name that you gave him, his appearance, and his pronoun. And you're perplexed and you're confused by this.

So you go online and you read that adolescents who struggle with something called *gender dysphoria*, which is a term you didn't even know existed a couple of years ago, are at higher risk of suicidal thoughts and ideation.

And your heart is broken as you receive counsel from online forums and secular therapists who tell you that your only option as a loving, supportive parent is to affirm and assist your child in transitioning, and that if you don't you'll be labeled an un-supporting or abusive parent. And this phrase is yielded against you for the first time. "You can either have a trans son or a dead daughter." And it cuts through you like a knife.

Imagine being a grandparent and you go and pick your grandchild up from elementary school one afternoon and he tells you that he's just been given a gender wheel to help him [or her] decide what gender he wants to be. And you have no idea how to navigate this situation. This isn't anything that you have ever been confronted with before in your life.

Now for many, if not most of you, these are not hypotheticals. These are real life situations that are in front of you.

Several years ago there was a prominent ministry leader among our tribe of churches who I'd looked up to since my college days. I read a lot of what he had written, I listened to lots of his sermons and talks, I'd been mentored by him from a distance and then I'd been up close with him when he offered prayer and wisdom and counsel.

About 10 years ago I served on a board of directors with him on a church planting organization. He shocked all of us when he announced to us that as a 60-something-year-old male getting ready to retire from the ministry that he was going to be transitioning to become a female, which he did.

I'll never forget getting a call from him at my home just about five days before Christmas. I spent about an hour with him on the phone as he unpacked and explained his process and his journey that became very, very public and very, very painful.

This issue is not a hypothetical for me and I know it's not a hypothetical for many of you. I've already heard from so many of you today. This is very, very personal. Now, that's empathy.

The next place for us to go is I think that it would be helpful for us to define some terms. I realize, for better or for worse, that this message is going to live online for a really, really long time. And so I think it's important for me to timestamp it because words, terms, and definitions can change as culture changes.

So for those of you listening or watching this message from the future in your flying car or kicking it in Mars—I don't know what you're doing—let me just go ahead and time stamp this. These are the terms as defined in August of 2023.

Sex: historically meant 'male' and 'female'

Sex historically meant 'male' and 'female', typically in reference to chromosomes and internal reproductive anatomy and external genitals. When someone is born his or her sex is identified by anatomy, not assigned. In the past 10 or 15 years there has been a push to separate the two with this new term that has emerged, *gender identity*:

Gender identity: a person's self-perception of whether they are male or female; masculine or feminine

Gender identity means a person's self-perception of whether he [or she] is male or female; masculine or feminine. The idea is that biological sex is observed and declared by the doctor delivering the baby the room. The doctor doesn't look at the baby and go, "Oh, I guess this will be a girl." No, the doctor observes and declares and says, "I'm just naming the gender that this child is." But gender identity is this idea that gender is fluid and it's based upon a person's self-perception or feelings. That leads to the next term:

Gender fluidity: people can move across the genders and be non-binary

Gender fluidity is the idea that people can actually move across the genders and be non-binary, which has brought us to this place where we are confronted with a really, really important question in our culture. What does it mean to be a man and a woman.

Now, ironically, these terms rely upon gender stereotypes. Here's what I mean. Hang with me. There is a difference between gender and the stereotypes we use to code things in our culture: male and female. So what I mean is that gender is biologically

defined. You either have XY or XX chromosomes. Gender stereotypes are culturally constructed and they change in different times and cultures.

Some of you are like, "What are you talking about?" Well, 100 years ago when they did gender reveal parties, which I don't think they did, I don't think that was a thing 100 years ago, but if they did they would have used blue to announce a girl and pink to announce a boy, because 100 years ago blue was associated with femininity and pink was identified with masculinity. But it's changed as the culture changed.

You go to the Scriptures. What does it mean to be a man? Well, you look at a guy like David, who seems to be a pretty manly, man. David was a warrior, a general, and a king. He also played the harp, wrote music, and danced half-naked in front of his buddies as he praised God. So, what box does he fit into?

Look at a woman like Deborah. In the Bible she was a warrior, leader who led Israel into battle. She makes GI Jane look soft. What box does she fit in?

Ironically, a few years ago when Bruce Jenner famously came out and became Kaitlyn Jenner, a cover picture was put on a magazine and the people who were the most upset about the image, ironically, were women's rights activists.

And the reason why they were so upset is because they really felt like what it was doing was it was reducing what it was to be a woman to long hair, make-up, and cleavage. But a woman is much more than that. And I would agree. See, that is such a minimization and misunderstanding of the divine power of God that He has put into as a sexed person.

So I bring all of that up to say this. We need a broader definition of what it means to be male and female because there are some men who don't like big trucks and bow hunting, but they prefer cooking and swing dancing. And there are some women who love power lifting, ax throwing, and they would prefer a beer over a mimosa. It doesn't mean that they are the wrong gender. It means that we've stereotyped them according to culture.

A teen-aged boy who does not fit the description of a typical alpha needs strong, godly men to come around him and help him navigate what it means to be a godly man as God has designed him, not necessarily to match the stereotype around what it means to be a boy, because not all guys like sports, some prefer the arts.

What if you're a girl and you would prefer to watch John Wick over *Pride and Prejudice*? What does that make you? It makes you awesome is what it makes you! Alright?

So, the next term:

Gender dysphoria: sense of mismatch between your physical sex, your body, and your psychological gender identity

Gender dysphoria is a sense of mismatch between your physical sex, your body, and your psychological gender identity. And those wrestling with this feel as if there is a war raging within them, a war that most of them don't want.

The BBC film *Transgender Kids* provides this definition, "At the heart of the debate about transgender children is the idea that your brain can be at war with your body."

Now, I want you to just sit in that for a minute and imagine how that might feel, a painful war going on between your sex and your gender, your mind and your body. And some of you don't have to imagine that.

Even if we don't wrestle with gender dysphoria all of us can have empathy for that because we all, regardless of who we are, wrestle with dysphoria of some kind. If there is anybody who should have empathy and compassion for those facing this, it should be Christians because we know what it is like to have a war going on between our mind and our body—what we know to be true and then what we actually do.

Paul captures this so well in Romans 7. He says:

"For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind..." Romans 7:22-23 (NIV)

And he would go on and say, "The good that I want to do, I don't do. And the evil I don't want to do, I keep on doing." And he's like, "What a wretched man I am." He's describing this battle that is going on within him.

And that's what the Christian life is. The Christian life is a war between my identity, who God declares me to be, and my activity, the things that I actually do. And this conflict that is going on as a result between the two is because of the broken world in which we live. We cannot fix it. We need a Savior.

The last term is the term:

Transgender: umbrella term for many experiences of gender identity that do not align normatively with a person's sex

Transgender is an umbrella term for many experiences of gender identity that do not align normatively with a person's sex. This is represented by a little less than one percent of the population, but the conversation affects 100 percent of us.

Almost 10 years ago, in 2014, *Time Magazine* released this cover and they did a story on those with gender dysphoria and the transgender community. And they said, "What was previously considered a fringe expression was about to become mainstream." They called it the transgender tipping point. And they were right. This is why we are all very well aware of this conversation and it's why so many of us don't exactly know how to engage in it.

And this really kind of brings into question the fundamental meaning of personhood. This is what is at the basis of this. What is a person? And the secular script would divide

the person into mind and body. If you were here last week, I gave you that visual of dualism. Do you remember that? That we are a disintegrated person. But the script of God's Word says that we are an integrated person. So dualism would separate the mind from the body.

Maybe another way to look at is a very high view of the mind and a very low view of the body. So the social script says we must affirm, accept, and assist those who want to alter their bodies to match their minds, because it has a high view of the mind, low view of the body.

In other words, my mind or your mind tells you who you really are and your body is an expendable, biological organism that is an impediment to your happiness, which by the way guys, is nothing new. That is just warmed up Gnosticism. Gnosticism says your body is not who you are.

So where does that leave us?

Well here's what I want to do in the remainder of our time. I just want to unpack three fundamental questions. Here they are:

What does God say about my body and my body about God?

Number two:

What is the science telling us?

What is the science currently telling us?

And then, number three:

How can I be happy?

How can I be happy because for so many of us this isn't about winning a political debate, it is the question of personal fulfillment.

So first question:

What does God say about my body and my body about God?

All of this is spoken to in the first chapter of the Bible. God created us and placed us in the world He created on purpose for a purpose. Genesis, chapter 1, verse 26 says"

"Then God said, 'Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us.'" Genesis 1:26 (NLT)

"So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:27 (NLT)

"Then God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it.'" Genesis 1:28 (NLT)

And in verse 31 it says:

"Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!" Genesis 1:31 (NLT)

So I just want to point out a couple of observations from those verses. Number one: Human beings, you and me, are created intentionally in the image of God. So how we look is intentional and it matters. It was not by chance.

Number two: We are commissioned to steward creation and multiply so our bodies have a divine function and purpose.

Number three: We were created male and female, not a social construct, but set up by God to display something about God. We are imaging who God is and the glory of God here on earth in the two different sexes, equal in value but distinct in purpose and function.

We see this in chapter 2 of Genesis where God pulls a woman out of a man's rib. And that word *rib* in the Hebrew is the word *tsela*. It's mentioned some 40 times in the Old Testament. And every time that it is used the predominant usage of the word *tsela* in the Hebrew means this:

"sacred architecture"

So it's this idea that men and women are the created and intentionally designed beings who hold together and support God's temple of humanity. Scripture says that we are the temple of God—our bodies.

In Genesis 2 when it says God pulled Eve out of Adam's rib, it is saying He pulled Eve out of the sacred architecture of God's design in Adam. She was version 2.0, which we all know is always a much, much better version. You always wait for the updated version. And now, the two together radiate the image and the glory of God to the world.

So, a man and a woman are both pieces of God's sacred structure of creation. He knows what He is doing, which is why in much of history the union of a man and a woman in marriage has served to be the beam upon which society rests. It is also why when broken homes occur, broken societies are soon to follow.

The passage says that God looked out at all creation and He said, "Oh, man. This is good." And then He looked at a male and female and He said, "Oh, this is very good." Why does He say that? Because He didn't place His image on those other things. He placed His image on humanity.

See, human beings are the crowning work of God's creation. Male and female are the extension and the representation of God's image by design. He doesn't blur the differences, He elevates them. So God gave us our bodies and then He sets His image upon them.

I love how Preston Sprinkle says it. He goes, "God could have created a sexless humankind to reflect His image, but he chose to create humans as sexed beings: female and male."

Now some of you may listen to that and say, “Well, that’s all fine and good, but that’s the Old Testament. And you know, I was watching on Tik Tok and they said that Jesus never talked about gender.” The big problem with that statement is that He did.

In Matthew, chapter 19, Jesus is confronted by some religious leaders and they confronted Him about two really, really easy topics: marriage and women’s rights. And so Jesus speaks to that. And when He speaks to them His response to them was affirming everything we just read in Genesis, chapter 1. And this was in Roman society where same sex attraction and cross dressing were very, very popular.

He speaks to a group of people known as eunuchs. And oftentimes people will look at that and say, “Well, what Jesus said about welcoming eunuchs just shows that He affirmed a non-binary view of gender.”

But eunuchs in the ancient world were either born that way due to some sort of malfunctioning chromosomes or they were forced into castration. When Jesus speaks about eunuchs, He’s talking about their identity that is not found in the identity of their body. Their identity is in Christ and they are welcomed in.

Every time Scripture addresses gender boundaries or the crossing of gender boundaries it is consistent. It never exalts it: Deuteronomy 22, we could go to 1 Corinthians 6, we could go to 1 Corinthians 11. Some will point to Galatians 3 and say, “Well, Paul says:”

“There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28 (NLT)

That kind of seems a bit like he’s doing away with gender. We’re going to talk more about this verse next weekend, but Paul isn’t eliminating categories of gender, he was removing the class system of the day. He was saying, “It doesn’t matter your ethnicity, it doesn’t matter your socio economic level, it doesn’t matter your gender, your primary identity as a child of God is in Christ and in Christ alone.

If there is anybody who could have empathy with feelings of dysphoria in the body, it would have been Jesus. Think about it. Jesus was fully God in a human body. He was God in body. If there was anybody who knew the limitations or felt the limitations of a physical body, it would have been Him.

And He has an incredible amount of compassion. He is not aloof to the feelings of incongruence and dysphoria that you or somebody that you know and love may be walking through. What you are walking through, whatever it is, is not from God. But whatever it is, you can bring that to God.

So how do we address the tension? Well, the social script would say, “We need to encourage people to take steps to align their body to their mind.” But:

What is the science telling us?

What does the science currently say? You all know this. Our society has just dived in head first with acceptance and affirmation. The culture is really, really quick to point out



the dangers and evils of something called conversion therapy. And I would actually say they make some pretty good points.

Here's what I want to do. I want to ask about the dangers of affirmation therapy. Here's what I mean. The thinking is along these lines. If we accept somebody's new gender expression, then the hope is that their mental health will improve and that the odds of suicidal thoughts or ideation will go down. But here's the question. Is that happening? Is this cultural response of affirmation really helping people?

Now, we need to get good answers to our questions, but maybe more importantly we need to question some of the answers that we've been given from the secular script.

In the UK there is a transactivist organization and they released these statistics not long ago. It says among trans and non-binary people:

52% have considered suicide

20% have attempted suicide

That's tragic. Now logic would tell us that those stats should be dropping the longer we continue the same approach toward assistance and affirmation. What is startling is that it is not.

When you look at countries that are more affirming than we are and have actually been moving in this direction for longer than we have, who are outside of our political landscape, by the way—countries like Sweden, the UK, and the Netherlands—many of them are shutting down their clinics.

In Sweden transition surgeries have been done for 50 years. Recently it was announced that all gender related treatments for minors are being shut down because they weren't seeing improved results in their patients.

England just recently closed the Tavistock Clinic, which was the nation's only provider of gender surgeries and treatments because an independent national review found:

"The current model of care was leaving young people at 'considerable risk' of poor mental health and distress."

In Amsterdam, of all places, the Center of Expertise on Gender Dysphoria put out a study that found, "65%-94% of trans teens cease to identify as trans by young adulthood." That's huge because if we are urging teens to make a decision that will affect their body permanently when the vast majority will end up phasing out of it later, that's just cruel.

Dr. Paul McHug, a psychiatrist at John's Hopkins University and Hospital said this, "Treatment should not be directed at the body as with surgery and hormones any more than one treats obesity and anorexic patients with lipo-suction. The treatment should strive to correct the false, problematic nature of the assumption."

I want to point out that none of these organizations would be in a Christian environment. Not one of them is found... That's something you might hear from organizations in the buckle of the Bible belt, but these are outside of the biblical worldview.

And the reason why I want to point that out is that there are some that will claim that the reason why trans people and those with gender dysphoria are so at risk for suicidal thoughts and ideation is because of the hatred of Christians.

And even if that is a little true, which I'm going to go ahead and concede there probably is a little bit of truth to that because I've actually met some hateful Christians (and that should rip our hearts out) I also want to say that can't explain all of it, because none of these organizations are in the Bible belt.

All of them are operating in a very secular environment. They've been doing it upwards of 50 years, but they are not seeing their patient's mental health improving. In other words, it's not producing the good that the secular script has promised.

Now, as Christians we need to be compassionate people who lead with love, but we also lead from a place of reality as we seek the good of people who are deeply burdened, hurting, and distressed over a feeling of incongruence within their body.

In Romans, chapter 12 it says this:

"And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God," We oftentimes hear, "Give your heart to God. Give your soul to God. Here it says, "Give your bodies to God."

"...because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world," aka the secular script, "but let God," and here's the key word, "transform you into a new person," How? "by changing the way you think."

This is an all skate. He's inviting all of us into this. And he says:

"Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect."

Romans 12:1-2 (NLT)

So the secular script says:

"listen to your mind and alter your body"

Scripture says:

"Embrace the body God gave you and allow Him to transform/renew your mind"

The question I just want to ask for those of you who say, "Well, that sounds kind of alarming," is, isn't that the way we treat every other medical issue? Just imagine with me, you've got a 100 pound teen-aged girl who goes to her doctor and she says, "I feel like I'm over weight." And a loving, well informed doctor who is looking out for her good

would say, "Well, if that is how you feel, let's put you on diet pills, perform liposuction, and stomach binding surgery." No, a loving doctor would say, "Let's work to help align your mind to your body rather than matching your body to your mind."

I just want to say this. Man, if you have already gone down this road, and maybe you've already transitioned or you love somebody who has or you've got a teenager at home wrestling with gender dysphoria, or if I'm describing you, you might be sitting there in your seat right now going, "Aaron, you've thrown lots of passages my way and lots of statistics. My head is swirling right now. I'm just trying to make sense of all of this."

"And I really don't care about American politics. Honestly, Aaron, I just want to be happy. That's really the thing that is motivating me. I just want the war to end. I just want to be at peace. I just want to know if I can be loved. I just want to know if God sees me. And if God has a hope and a plan and a future for me."

If that's you, I want you to look right at me right now. The answer to that question is unequivocally: Yes. You can be loved. And you can be received. And God does see you and He does have a plan and a purpose for your life.

Did you know that in Acts, chapter 8, the Holy Spirit comes to a guy named Philip and He tells Philip, "Philip, I want you to pack an overnight bag and I want you to head out of the city of Jerusalem on a desert road for 60 miles." But He doesn't tell him why.

What the Holy Spirit was doing is He was setting up a divine encounter between Philip and a man from Ethiopia who was known as a eunuch. Now a eunuch was somebody whose genitals had been cut, crushed, or pierced in order to sterilize and feminize. It was an ancient and a crude form of sex alteration surgery.

And the text tells us that this guy was from the capital city of Ethiopia, which was 1,000 miles away from Jerusalem. But he makes the trek, makes the journey to Jerusalem because he wanted to visit the Temple, which was where the presence of God could be found.

But Acts, chapter 8 says he was returning dejected and rejected. Why? Because historians would have told us that when he walked up the steps toward the Temple he would have read this sign hung by the religious leaders of the day:

"No lame, no diseased, no blind, and no eunuchs may enter."

He traveled 1,000 miles pursuing God and he was turned away by the supposed people of God. And I would imagine that he questioned that, "Man, does God really love me because some of the people who claimed to represent Him stiffed-armed me, they shamed me, and they shunned me away from Him."

So, now he's heading back to Ethiopia and the Holy Spirit sends Philip after him. And when Philip finds him, the Ethiopian eunuch was on the side of the road and he had an Old Testament scroll. So he's scrolling, he's going to read Isaiah 53. But in that same section of the scroll he would have come across these words in Isaiah 56.

“And let no eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree.’ For this is what the LORD says: ‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant - to them I will give within my temple,’” that would have caught his attention, “and its walls a memorial,”

So a sign written by people turned him away, God says, “I will make you a memorial within.”

“... and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.” Isaiah 56:3-5 (NIV)

So, he had traveled all the way to the Temple, he saw the sign, he is reminded of the scars of his cut, crushed, and pierced body and he's thinking, “Because of my scars, I can never enter into the presence of God.” But then he read these words in chapter 53 that Philip would then explain to him. It said this:

“But he,” referring to Jesus, “was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Isaiah 53:5 (NIV)

Rejected and leaving but God loved him so much that He sent Philip after him to find him on the side of the road to say, “Listen, your scars do not define you. His do.”

So, you guys can clap and say *amen* because a bunch of you want to do that right now.

Here's how I want to conclude things. Right now, whatever it is that you're experiencing, whatever it is that you are walking through, whatever scars that you are carrying, whether on your physical body or on your emotional self, your soul, I just want you to know if you are sitting there thinking, “Man, is there a hope and a plan and a future for me?” I want you to know that God declares through His Holy Spirit today, you are child of the living God.

You are sons and daughters of the King. You've been given a name, you've been given an identity, you've been given a body, you've been given a place and a purpose in His house. Because only Jesus gets to tell you who you are. And He says, “You are so loved. You are so loved.”

And I want you to know right now, if you are a transgender or walking through gender dysphoria or you know somebody who is and you love them and you care for them, I want you to know what kind of a church you walked into today. You walked into a church where you will never, ever see a sign out front that says you're not welcome here. No. We will love you. We will serve you. We will honor you. We will have empathy for you. We will not shame you, shun you, judge you, marginalize you, look down upon you.

We will also speak from a place of truth, compassion, grace, and mercy. Speak from a place of reality to invite you into the journey that the rest of us are on, to be transformed by the renewal of our mind.

Here's why. What is the more liberating, joyful place to live from? For you to live with the pressures to decide who you are or for you to claim who God died for you to be, who God declares you to be.

So you are not who you say you are. You are not who I say you are. You're not what others say you are or society says you are. You are who God says you are, "God, I am who you say that I am. God, I declare that I am who You declare me to be."

Father, we come to You right now and I just want to pray a pastoral prayer right now that whatever we may be walking through that Your Holy Spirit would be felt in this room. That You would meet people right where they are seated today and that You would pastor them just as You did with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts, chapter 8.

Father, I pray that today that they would realize that they have been fearfully and wonderfully made. They are made, not by chance, and that we live in a broken, dysfunctional world. That's why we have things like dysphoria. That's why we have things like a battle raging within us. So we cry out to You. We reach out to claim who You died for us to be. Meet us in this space and this place. We ask this in Jesus' name. And everybody said: Amen.

