

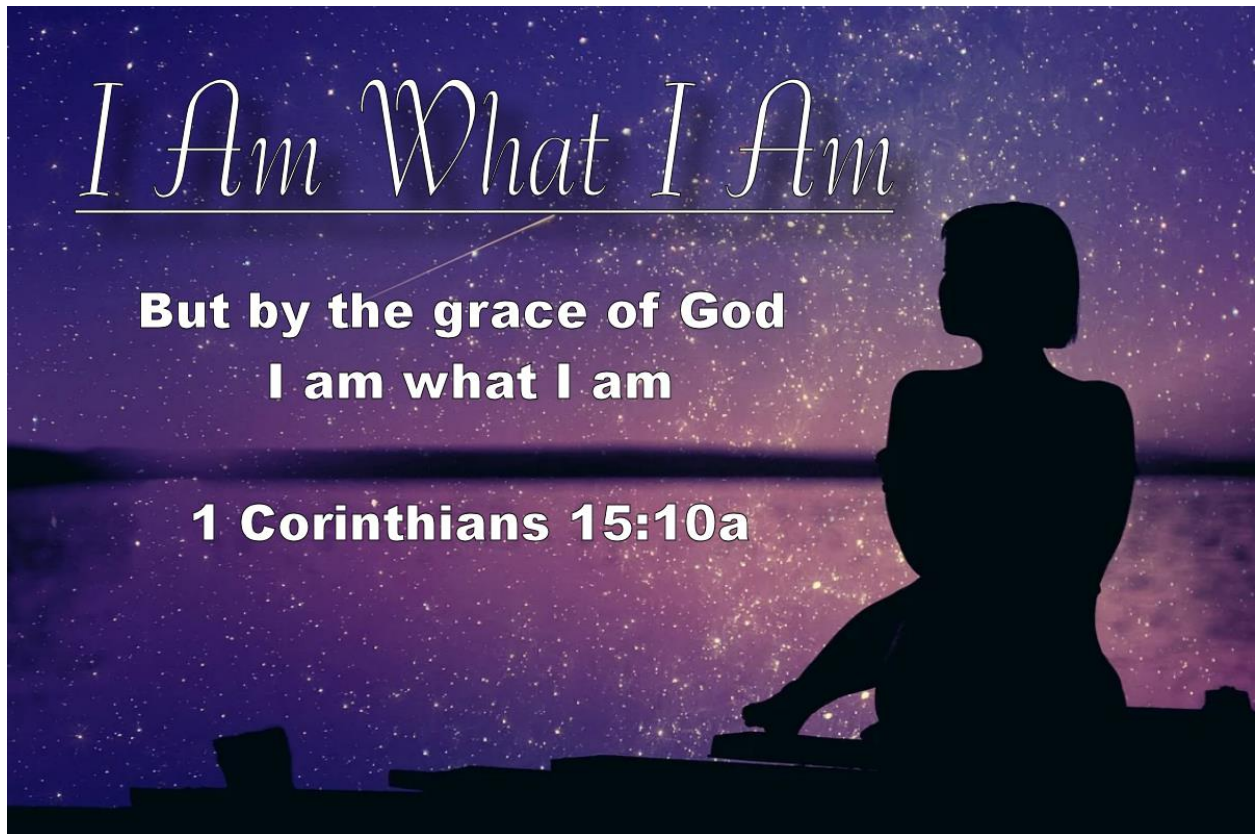
I AM WHAT I AM

1 Corinthians 15:9-11 (NIV)

9 For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

10 **But by the grace of God I am what I am**, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

11 Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.



Opening Hymn “I Stand Amazed in the Presence” 371 All Verses
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcC7MzFfglc>

Special Music: “Who I Am” Ben Fuller
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrpTTtvrRfl>

Doxology: 95
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6xMTGhiuEc>

Servant’s Hymn “Have Thine Own Way” 382 All Verses
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Fdlz8f9hWA>

WHO I AM

Doug Stillwell was just getting settled into his new position manning the watchtower on Jacob's hill. With Deputy Dusty's help, he managed to get the tower set up to be somewhat livable. It certainly beat sleeping in alcoves and alleys. Sheriff Thom had arranged eight weeks of training at Camp Bowie in Brownwood, TX, which had covered a plethora of topics regarding life as a watchman. Most of this training was at a basic level and would need to be followed up with more intense and specific training in the future. His medical training in the army had given him a leg up on emergency first aid. Because of his background, the instructor allowed him to help teach practical techniques for field emergencies. It helped him to begin to feel useful rather than dwell on being an abandoned derelict.

But now he was living in the watch tower with a clean bed, and once again, a uniform to wear. The county had replaced the old radio with an updated digital response unit. There were two new mounted binoculars on the tower as well as various cameras that allowed for viewing things of interest from a distance. The pantry and refrigerator were stocked with food and water. In so many ways, Doug knew that this job was a blessing, especially knowing what things were like when Dusty, first tripped over his feet while Doug was sleeping in the doorway to Audrey's Forgotten Treasures.

Doug would drive into Parable a couple of times a week in the pickup that the forestry service had assigned to him. This was so he could turn his reports in

to Sheriff Thom, do his laundry, and replenish his groceries. Although he wasn't much of a hunter, he did find time to go fishing once in a while. But most of his time was taken up with lookout duties, writing reports, doing wildlife and campground checks, and hiking surrounding trails while taking notes on problems he found. All in all, it was a pretty good life, and he was getting to know the people around town.

Today was a day to check trails. He always did the paths on the north side of Jacobs Hill on Tuesday, and the south side on Thursday. Since this was Tuesday, he would start hiking north right after he finished breakfast. His backpack didn't have much in it. He traveled as lightly as he could. But he did have his first aid kit, a hunting knife, his binoculars, his pocket fisherman (in case he wanted to wet a line for a few minutes), some rope, a couple of garbage bags, water, and a paper bag lunch. Finishing up his eggs and toast, he put his dishes in the sink, grabbed his hat, radio, and backpack, climbed down from the tower, and started to hike north.

The sun was bright with only a few clouds in the sky. The ground was moist but not muddy. The dirt was just wet enough that he had to catch himself a few times when he hit a slick spot. He didn't really enjoy hiking at this time of the year because the trees were mostly bare, except for a few cedars scattered among the foliage. He preferred the forest when it was green. Today, there were a few birds looking for food, and he spotted a couple of coyotes scrounging for whatever they could find. As he drew closer to the river, the path started turning more rocky, which made it less likely for him to slip. There was a turnout from the

path up ahead with a stone bench that overlooked the river. The drop from the path to the river was about thirty feet, which made the turnout an excellent place for him to stop and have his lunch.

He sat on the bench, opened his backpack, and pulled out the paper bag containing a baloney sandwich, some carrot sticks, and a bag of chips. As he ate his sandwich, he looked out over the river below. There was a large log floating in the water, gently driven by the current. Then, he noticed the area around the bench. Yeah, it seemed like others had the same idea as he did, regarding this as a splendid place to grab a bite when on a hike. The trouble was, they didn't bother to clean up after themselves. There were bottles, plastic bags, plastic forks and spoons, and other trash. Doug pulled one of the trash bags out of his backpack and set it to the side. He would pick up all the litter before he continued on his hike.

He glanced back at the log in the water. There seemed to be something not quite right, as if something was clinging to the heavier branches. The log slowly turned, and Doug saw something red, like material of some kind. He grabbed his binoculars from the backpack and trained them on the log where the material was. There. He could see a hand holding onto a branch. Someone was clinging to the log. Doug didn't hesitate. He grabbed his radio and ran down the path that led to the shore level of the river. Quickly pulling off his shoes, he set the radio beside them and stripped off his shirt. He then leaped into the water and swam toward the log. He knew he had to catch the log before it got past the rock slope, or he would not be able to get back to shore until later down the river.

Reaching the log, he grabbed the hand that was holding the branch. It was a young girl whom he didn't recognize. Her hand was not actually holding the branch but caught in the limbs. Doug untangled her fingers and approached her from behind. Her head was out of the water, but it was obvious that she was unconscious and probably suffering from hypothermia. He managed to get his right arm around her and slowly began swimming back to the shore. Swimming against the current left him exhausted, but as soon as they were on the shore, he checked for a pulse. He found one, but it was very faint. Doug began to do CPR on the girl. After a few minutes, the girl coughed up the river water from her lungs but remained unconscious. Doug removed her wet clothes and wrapped her in his dry shirt to help her warm up.

He grabbed his radio and called for help. "Ranger 1 to base. Ranger 1 to base."

"Come back, Ranger 1," Julie Maxwell, the dispatcher, returned his call.

"Base, this is Ranger 1. I have a young girl that I just pulled from the river. ID unknown. Appears to be about 10 with a red shirt. I performed CPR and she is breathing normally but is still unconscious. Pulse is weak and thready. No access for an ambulance. Please send a chopper. I am sending you the coordinates."

"Roger, Ranger 1. Sky 1 will respond. They should be there in about 15. Are you good 'til then?" replied Julie.

"10/4 base. We'll be ready for the chopper," replied Doug.

He returned to the girl to check on her. She had quite a few cuts and bruises but was breathing on her own. She remained unconscious even as the helicopter approached. An EMS tech with a med kit descended from the chopper on a rope. Once down, he quickly checked out the girl and signaled for the chopper to lower the basket. Together, Doug and the tech put the girl in the basket, tied her down, and gave the signal to take her up.

“Do you need to help as well?” asked the tech.

“No, I’m good. I’ll just grab my things and head back to the tower. But I appreciate the offer,” said Doug.

The chopper lifted the tech back to the hatch and then flew in the direction of the hospital which was located in Ruskville. Doug prayed that the girl would be okay. He put on his boots without removing his wet socks, gathered his things, took a few minutes to pick up the litter around the bench, and headed back to the tower. It took him almost two hours to reach the tower, and people were waiting for him. He felt a little guilty about not having a shirt to wear. At the base of the structure were Dusty, Sheriff Thom, several townspeople, and even the mayor. Doug didn’t know if this was a good thing or a bad thing.

When they saw him, they ran towards him shouting, “Thank God, you’re safe,” “It’s a miracle,” “Great job, Doug,” and many other platitudes. They all walked him back towards the station. Someone draped a jacket across his bare shoulders.

**“Sheriff, I’m sorry, but I didn’t get finished with my north trails inspection,”
said Doug.**

Everyone went silent. He could hear a few snickers as well. Then the Sheriff spoke, “Doug, do you really think I am concerned about a Trails Report at this time? You just saved Esther Collins’ little girl, Rachel. If you hadn’t been doing your rounds, she surely would be in the morgue now. Instead, she is in the hospital in Ruskville, recovering.”

“Gee Sheriff, I was just doing my job.”

“You went far beyond doing your job, Doug,” said Sheriff Thom

“You certainly did,” said the mayor. “And we couldn’t be prouder. What made you risk your life like that when you didn’t really know what you would find?”

“Mam, it’s just who I am. I would have done that whether I was the Watchman or not. I’m just glad the girl’s going to be okay. Now if y’all don’t mind, I need to change clothes and get back to work.”

“That’s not happening, Doug,” laughed the Sheriff. “Dusty is going to drive you over to the hospital to be checked out. Standard procedure before you can return to work.”

“But, I’m fine, Sheriff. Really! A little wore out but a shower and a change of clothes and I’ll be ready to go.”

“Don’t argue with me, Doug,” replied the Sheriff. “Help him into the truck, Dusty.”

Doug stopped trying to change their minds and climbed into the truck with some help from Dusty. He still thought they were making too much out of the situation. He had done what anyone in his shoes would have done. It was who he was.

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10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

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Who am I? That simple question has been on the lips of every human being since Adam took his first breath. I know that each of you has asked that question on more than one occasion in your life, most notably when you face a crossroads or feel you have not lived up to your own expectations. “Who am I?” Often followed by questions like: “Why am I here?”, “What purpose do I serve?”, and “Who is God?” Questions that we want answers to but are unwilling to do a deep dive into our beliefs and our history to get those answers. That would take work. Usually, we want the answers given to us. Maybe wrapped in party paper with a bow. Too often, we want other people to define who we are and what purpose we serve. But in those pensive moments, those fork-in-the-road moments, we want to sit alone and ponder our thoughts, sometimes in prayer, sometimes in silence, and often in darkness, where we can ask ourselves, “Who am I?”

Author B.J. Neblett says this: “We are the sum total of our experiences. Those experiences – be they positive or negative – make us the person we are, at any given point in our lives. And, like a flowing river, those same experiences, and those yet to come, continue to influence and reshape the person we are, and the person we become. None of us are the same as we were yesterday, nor will be tomorrow.” I can see how many of us would embrace that answer. But I would change it up a little because I don’t believe the actual experiences define us, but instead, it is our reaction to those circumstances that defines us. The choices we make in these challenging moments, better define who we are than the actual circumstances.

When we are in danger, we can choose to be brave or we can choose to be afraid.

When others have wronged us, we can choose to forgive or we can choose to not forgive.

When we are faced with tough choices, we can trust our own judgment, or we can choose to trust in the judgment of someone we trust whom we believe has better answers.

When facing moral dilemmas, we can choose to do what is right, or we can choose to be selfish.

I believe that these choices define who we really are. And when we fail to make the right choice, we often fail to give ourselves grace for our humanness.

Too often, we fail to see ourselves as God sees us. We become afraid to step into situations that God brings us to because we feel that we are unworthy, unprepared, unskilled, or untrained for the task, or forbidden by cultural circumstances or human mores.

Moses said to the Lord, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.”

Exodus 4:10

“Alas, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”

Jeremiah 1:6

Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—

Ruth 1:12

“I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.

Ezra 9:6

Surely I am only a brute, not a man; I do not have human understanding.

Proverbs 30:2

Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?” Genesis 18:11-12

“I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth.

Job 40:4

Then Elijah walked for a whole day into the desert. He sat down under a bush and asked to die. Elijah prayed, “I have had enough, Lord. Let me die. I am no better than my ancestors.” 1 Kings 19:4

He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

I have no husband,” she replied.

John 4:16-17

Yes, our response to our circumstances can bring some definition to who we are, but only in our own eyes and the eyes of those who bear witness. God sees beyond our excuses. God sees things in us that only he can visualize. He sees greatness within us when we only see weakness. He sees a king when we only see a shepherd boy. He sees a prophet when all we see is a servant in the

Temple. We often allow our faults to define and limit us, but God sees beyond our faults and finds the person created to do his work. He sees potential in us when all we see are excuses. He sees a servant of God when all we see is a sinner, unworthy of carrying the mantle.

Many of us go through our lives saying “I am what I am.” Some of us use that phrase to abandon any thought of being better. And that’s a sad thing. But others see the phrase as a declaration that states: “I am a child of God. That is who I am.”

Ephesians 2:10 tells us this: ‘For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.’

When we step into a relationship with Jesus Christ, we begin to change. We go through a catharsis, a forge, where God begins to change us from within, turning our hearts of stone to hearts of flesh; from what we think we are, into who we are meant to be. We find our limitations become strengths, our passions become ways to express our faith. He enriches the tools that he has given to us and then adds tools that we need to fulfill the tasks that he has for us to accomplish. And before we know it, “I am what I am” becomes “I am what he wants me to be,” as our purpose becomes his. But that only happens if we choose to die to self and embrace the purpose that he is preparing for us. We have to admit that he is the artist and we are the clay. He will take the clay that is our life and mold it into a masterpiece dedicated to his purpose.

Paul knew this when he wrote the words in our scripture today. When he was having his Damascus experience, he could just as easily taken the experience, examined it, and walked away. But he didn't do that. And today we have his words to lean into.

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

No just “I am what I am,” but “I am what I am by the grace of God. And because of that grace, the change in who I am makes me desire to work harder than anyone else. I have a second chance to get things right and God has brought about a change in me to ensure that his purpose is fulfilled through me.”

In our story today, Doug was given a second chance and took the opportunity to grow into a new, more purposeful life. Every one of us has that same opportunity. When the sun rises on the new day, we get to ask ourselves, “Am I going to be who I think I am today, a collection of my experiences and rationalizations, or am I going to be who God has ordained me to be as I allow him to use the experiences of my life to further his kingdom? Is the voice I listen to when I climb out of bed, my own? Or is it God whispering in my ear, directing my thoughts and actions.”

We should never fall into the trap of being satisfied with who we are because we have the Spirit of God moving through us challenging us to do better. So, I challenge us all, when we wake in the morning, I want us all to declare, “I am

yours Lord, to do with as you will. Encourage me to relinquish my sword so that you can make it a tool worthy of your desires. Make me an instrument of your peace.”

God bless you All

AMEN

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