

THE GENESIS OF THE GOSPEL

WEEK 3 | CREATED HUMAN | FOR IMAGE BEARING, FRUITFULNESS & RULING

GENEISIS 1:26-31

²⁶ Then God said, 'Let us make mankind **in our image**, in our likeness, **so that** they may **rule** over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'

²⁷ So God created mankind **in his own image**,
in the image of God he created **them**;
male and **female** he created **them**.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, 'Be **fruitful** and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. **Rule** over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'

²⁹ Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food.' And it was so.

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day.

PSALM 8

¹ LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory in the heavens.

² Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.

³ When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,

⁴ what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?

⁵ You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honour.

⁶ You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:

⁷ all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild,

⁸ the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.

⁹ LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth

Commentary and Background

Day Six - Part 2

I have deliberately chosen to get us to read the passage about day six on two different Sundays. Day Six describes the creation of animals – creatures that fill the earth and feed off the vegetation God has provided. When God sees this final day he says it is very good.

The second half of the Day Six narrative extends the story from animals, all 'in their kinds' to 'mankind', made in God's image. In the way that the text is written, this is clearly the climax of the story. Order has been established out of the 'formless void' and now, at last, God's image bearing creatures are being established as 'rulers' over it all, including the animals – made to oversee, rule, subdue, shape, and develop the creation as God's representatives.

Bearing the image of God

The essence of God

"The image of God is an important theological concept both in Old and New Testaments, with roots that extend back into ancient Near Eastern thought. In the ancient world an image was believed in some ways to carry the essence of that which it represented. An idol image of deity, designated in the same terminology used here, was used in worship because it contained the **deity's essence**... This does not suggest that the image of God could do what the deity did or that it looked the same as the deity. Rather, the deity's work was thought to be **accomplished through the idol**... In a similar way the governing work of God is seen in Genesis to be **accomplished by people**." John Walton (Genesis Commentary)

All of us

When we think about the image of God, we mostly think of it individually. We talk about *each one of us* being made in the image of God. Despite this being common, this is not exactly what the Bible says here. Genesis 1:26-28 is all *plural* – it's about *all humanity*, as a whole. The image of God is corporate, not individual.

It's a similar situation in the New Testament where the 'body of Christ' is corporate not individual. None of us would say, "I am the body of Christ." We know that it's a community thing - while we have a part to play, we're participants, and we're contributors to the body of Christ, the body of Christ is all of us together. It's plural – corporate. It's the same with the 'image of God'. It's a corporate image.

One of the significances of this for those at the time was that in ancient Mesopotamia the king was the 'image of god'. But only him. No-one else. In Mesopotamia only one person is made in the image of God. In Genesis it's all of us, together.

Our calling

Bearing God's image, or being made in his image, didn't mean being made in his physical likeness, as if made to look like him. It didn't mean to carry his abilities – such as thinking or rationality or creativity or speech. It meant being given a *function*, a *purpose*, a *role* and meant carrying that role *on his behalf* – in his likeness

To the ancients the image of God referred to our corporate function. That is, we are image-bearers and order-bringers working alongside of God. We're *in His image* in that we have been given a *task* - a God-like task to bring order, to oversee, to steward and to rule.

Being made in God's image is not therefore primarily something physical, or something psychological, or something physiological. It was our *commission*, the task that we were called to do - it's an identity that we have, and which we only have it because God gives it.

Psalms 8 says that we have been *crowned with glory and honour*, and that God has made us rulers over the works of his hands – that everything has been put under our feet.

God made us as image-bearers. He created us to be just a little lower than the angels, to be order-producers and order-bringers.

A responsibility to carry as much as a value given

When we place this functional and corporate understanding of 'being made in God's image' at the heart of our understanding of this foundational passage our focus shifts from primarily seeing it as an expression of the inherent value of every human being to seeing it as something that is implied or assumed underneath the more significant truth that together we have been made for a purpose. God has imbued humanity with an honour and glory to represent him in the world and dignifies us with value not the other way around. Our value is asserted because of our role.

An example of this might be a prime minister. To be called or made 'prime minister' is to be recognised as someone of significant value to our nation. It is a title to honour and value. But to be made prime minister is primarily a title associated to a calling and a role. It assumes the person being given the title and role is worthy of it, but it is not primarily a statement about their value or character. It is a title that commissions them to a task.

The same is true for humanity in general, and humans as individuals. We have been 'made in his image' to carry out a role. This dignifies us but more importantly it gives us something to do.

Male and Female

Being made in God's image and commissioned to represent Him in the world is shared by us corporately as male and female. The differences between our sexes are part of what enables us to fulfil our role as his image bearers. Specifically as we reproduce – as we are fruitful and multiply and 'filling' the earth - that we express one key aspect of our image bearing role.

Subduing and Ruling

"While the image of God defines a role for humanity, the blessing indicates the functions that people will have as a result of the role to which they were created... The term 'subdue' means to bring something, or someone, under control." John Walton (Genesis commentary)

Subduing the animal kingdom is what happens with domestication and farming. The Subduing of the land is what happens utilising the earth's natural resources, harnessing its power or potential.

The 25 occurrences of 'ruling' show that it concerns the exercise of authority. It can be used of priests, administrators, kings, tribes, or even shepherds exercising authority over their sheep. This is echoed in Day 4 when the sun and moon are given the task of 'governing' the day and the night. But just as they do their 'work' on behalf of God and his world, so 'Mankind' is called to rule and subdue on behalf of God and his purposes too.

"This world is not ours to dispose of as we will, but it has been put under our charge to manage for its owner, God" (John Walton)

Living up to our calling and identity

We should note that our bearing of the 'image of God' is not lost at the but it has been hampered, reduced, or damaged and is in need of restoration.

Genesis 5:1 reads as follows:

When God created mankind, **he made them in the likeness of God.** ² He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them 'Mankind' when they were created.

³ When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, **in his own image;** and he named him Seth.

When added to the idol imagery of chapter 1, which tells us we have been made as his vice-regents containing his essence, this comparison of 'like father, like child' tells us that we have been called to be like him and to act like him. We have been created with the potential to mirror divine attributes.

The qualities of reason, conscience, self-awareness, and spiritual discernment are all tools that enable us to have the capacity to act appropriately in line with God's purposes just as Christ (who is the image of God – Col 1:15) bears the essence of God, reflects his attributes and acts on his behalf.

This is developed in the New Testament in numerous places

Ephesians 4

¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

²⁰ That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹ when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your

minds; ²⁴ and to **put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.**

Colossians 3

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have **put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.** ¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Not mere animals, nor gods, but dignified and blessed 'image bearers'

The biblical narrative of Genesis 1 does a remarkable and beautiful thing. It tells us that we have been made for a purpose, and been dignified and honoured by God to organise, and oversee his world on his behalf.

In contrast to other ancient and modern ideas we are neither 'mere animals', evolutionary flukes at the end of a long process of an ultimately meaningless (even if awesome) process, and neither are we 'gods' free to exploit the created order for our delight, pleasure and desire without reference to a higher morality.

Instead, we are 'made in his image to reflect God's truth and light' – created to rule and oversee God's world and representing him as male and female and blessed by him to fill the earth on his behalf.

As we will see in the next chapter, **we have been formed from the culture of the earth to cultivate the earth and form culture.** We are blessed to be a blessing.

Summary

God did not create the world, molecule by molecule, simply to let it go and do its own thing. He designed it with a cosmic and human **purpose** and **meaning**. As image bearers we have been conferred with a beautiful and **amazing dignity**, entrusted with an **awesome responsibility**, and imbued with a **stunning capacity** to mirror our Creator.

Questions

- What is the best part of this passage for you? Why?
- What difference does it make to see humanity as a whole as being given the **dignity** of God's likeness? What is the source of this dignity and what is it for?
- What is the difference between a 'God-centric' view of creation and a 'human-centric' one? What difference does it make when we see the world as made for God as simply made for us?

- What difference does it make when you see your work (paid or unpaid) as the specific context for you to express the **essence** and character of God's rule and reign? Where is it going well? Or less well?
- After someone dies, we often pray this prayer
"God of mercy, Lord of life, you have made us in your image to reflect your truth and light: we give you thanks for *N*, for the grace and mercy *he/she* received from you, for all that was good in *his/her* life, for the memories we treasure today." If this was prayed after your life, what would you most like to be remembered?
- What should we do with the **responsibility** God has given us to mirror his character and display his will?
- In what ways is the Genesis worldview different from the modern western one sometimes described as 'expressive individualism'?
- We are called to create culture on behalf of God. How are we doing? Where is God's character displayed? Where is it hidden or twisted?
- What is the significance of being created male and female to this narrative and worldview? What does this have to say to our culture today?
- Does this passage have anything to say to the way we ought to think about the abortion of children before birth?

Another Funeral prayer from the Psalms

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great goodness. As a father is tender towards his children, so is the Lord tender to those that fear him. For he knows of what we are made; he remembers that we are but dust. Our days are like the grass; we flourish like a flower of the field; when the wind goes over it, it is gone, and its place will know it no more. But the merciful goodness of the Lord endures for ever and ever toward those that fear him and his righteousness upon their children's children.

We have entrusted our *brother/sister N* to God's mercy, and we now commit *his/her* body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust: in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our frail bodies that they may be conformed to his glorious body, who died, was buried, and rose again for us. To him be glory for ever. Amen