

Humanity: Called

In the Beginning: A Study on Genesis 1-11 Sermon 2

Genesis 1:26-28; 2:4-17

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In 1966, *Time Magazine* released a now-famous edition. Across an ominous black cover ran three words in red, "Is God Dead?" The story covered a trend among teachers of religion at the time who held that God was not only irrelevant to modern life, but the very idea of Him needed to be laid to rest. Lesser known is an article the *New York Times* ran on the same topic a year earlier, "'New' Theologians See Christianity Without God."¹ What the *Times* article noticed—and this is key—was the connection between a society's understanding of God and its understanding of man. With God dead, the article notes, thinkers must now look to "the secular world as the source of spiritual and ethical as well as physical standards" for humankind.² With his maker dead, man must look elsewhere to discover who he is. But what was underestimated at the time, was just how hard it is for human beings to understand themselves by themselves. From childhood onward, we require a great deal of external affirmation, guidance, and encouragement to become healthy people. Turning a deaf ear to God, over the past six decades humans have listened to a cacophony of new voices to figure out who they are.

Science tells us we originate from an "eons-old combustion of gas."³ *We're accidents*. Self-esteem gurus tell us we can be anything. *We're limitless*. Culture tells us we are what we achieve. *We're performers*. Technology tells us we are what we can create. *We're machines*. But as these voices vie for authority to shape our lives, a deep ache lingers. With our maker dead, we sense we are now orphans. In freeing ourselves from God our Creator, we simultaneously lost God our Father. And if there is one thing the human soul desperately needs, it's the affirming voice of the Divine Maker, who is also our Father, calling us forth from darkness into the light of true life.

As we continue in our series on Genesis 1-11, we will see just how closely linked is one's understanding of God to their understanding of humankind. The Bible doesn't open as a story about humanity—it opens with God. But humans appear swiftly and are ushered onto center stage. But our identity and purpose are always bound up in our relationship with our Maker.

Over the next few weeks, we'll be exploring how our beginnings—as revealed in Genesis 1 and 2—help us understand who we really are. The passages we'll focus on today are Genesis 1:26-28 and Genesis 2:4-17. As we turn to God's voice speaking to us in these passages, we turn away from the circus of voices trying to define us today. In listening afresh to our beginnings, we will hear God speak chiefly of two aspects about us: our nature and our vocation—*who we are* and *what we are made to do*.

I. Human Nature: Identity and Dignity

1. God creates us and determines our identity

God creates humankind on the sixth day, as the pinnacle of His work. God's capstone is not a pyramid or cathedral, nor a city or a spaceship—it's a human being. And we are made in His own image:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness....’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26, 27).

That humans are created in God's image is both stunning and rich in meaning. Before commenting on what “image” implies, let's note the significance of the verb *create*.

Three times in verse 26 we hear of God creating humans: “God *created* man,” “He *created* him,” “he *created* them.” This is the same verb from verse 1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1) In the Bible it is only used with God as the subject. Human beings never create, not in this sense. In creating us, God designs us—from our DNA to our physical bodies to our very souls. As Paul says, “In Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). The first fact about being human is this: **we are not our own creators but owe our existence and design to God.**

This immediately sounds out of cord with modern assumptions, especially when it comes to understanding human identity. We are experiencing what one newspaper has called an “obsession” with identity.⁴ People are consumed with thinking about who they are. This fixation is not normal, as one writer observes: In the 1950s, there were 37 books published with the word “identity” in the title. In the current decade, since 2010, more than 10,000 have appeared.⁵

A species obsessed with the topic of identity is going through an identity crisis. This is not a sign of self-confidence, but confusion. Having rejected God, we've lost the one voice that can tell us who we

are with certainty. The Bible reveals that self-understanding begins with looking—not to ourselves—but to our Maker. And we learn that our identity is not something we have to conjure up then hold insecurely in shaky hands. Rather, it's bestowed upon us and rests securely in God's Sovereign Hands.

If God fashions our identity, what more does this passage tell us about who God has made us to be?

2. God calls us His *Image*, meaning His sons and daughters

The key identity marker in the verse is the term "image." This truth, that we are in God's image, is like a diamond; the more we turn it over and study it the more rays of light we see shining forth. A first thing to note is that based on how this term is used later in Genesis 5, it indicates a personal relationship—like parent and child.

In Genesis 5:3 we read: "When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son **in his own likeness, after his image**, and named him Seth." Adam's son is described as being in his image and likeness—the same way God describes us. From the beginning, humans were designed for a unique relationship with God. Our souls, minds, and hearts make this connection possible. The people of God would eventually learn, not only to refer to God as Creator, but as Father.⁶ Sin erodes this close connection—as we turn away from God. However, both in our creation and in our redemption, we are designed to be children of God.⁷

As plants need water, human hearts need the fatherly affection of God. We see this amazing truth played out in the life of the perfect human, Jesus Christ.

"When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened,²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "**You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.**" (Luke 3:21-22).

Our earthly parents are very important for knowing who we are. But notice that what is stressed at the beginning of our creation—as the foundation—is that God is our Father. We may be a "chip off the old block" when standing next to mom or dad, but it is God's image that we ultimately bear. Man is designed to be a son of God.

Recognizing that this is our identity also establishes our dignity. God is pleased with all of His creation—from the mountains to the streams to the birds to the cattle. But only human beings are given the honor of sonship, of daughtership. We can be tempted to reduce one's dignity or worth to what they do or accomplish. Genesis rejects such shallowness. Every human being—whether they painted the Sistine Chapel or slept in a gutter—is created by God, in God's image, for the deepest of fellowship with Him. A person is worth what they are worth to God. And God the Creator "did not spare even His own son" in offering redemption to those that bear His image (Romans 8:32).

So, Genesis establishes these two facts about human nature:

- Our **identity** is given to us by our Maker—we develop it only in an obedient relationship to Him.
- Our **dignity** is forever grounded in God's claim upon us as His image, those made to be His sons and daughters.

Along with speaking about human nature, these vistas of our beginnings speak of human vocation. God's image-bearers are not manikins—we are made to do something. And *who* we are has a lot to do with *what* we are called by God to do.

II. Human Vocation: A Kingly and Priestly Calling

Many commentators point out that in the ancient world it was common for a king to create images of himself throughout his empire. These statues represented the king when he was absent—reminding people of his rule and purposes for his kingdom. Something similar is going on when God makes humans in His image. We are made to represent God in His absence, throughout His Kingdom. We are His living statutes.

In our passages, we can identify two themes for how we represent God. One has to do with how we represent *God the King*, the other with how we represent *God the Holy One*. Humans have a kingly and priestly vocation. Let's unpack this.

1. Kingly: make the King's kingdom flourish

There is an array of words used to describe humanity's vocation in 1:26, 28:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have **dominion**....’ And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be **fruitful and multiply** and **fill the earth** and **subdue** it, and **have dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Genesis 1:26, 28).

Humans are to relate to the rest of God’s creation by filling it, having dominion (or rule) over it, and by subduing it. These terms suggest what a king would do in the ancient world—fill the kingdom with His images, rule over it, and subdue disorder and chaos. Because humans are in the image of God the King, they are, in a sense, “kings” over nature. However, this power is not absolute, nor does it include the license to exploit. Rather, the stress lies in shining God’s character all about His world by how we care for it and cultivate it. This implies opportunity, but also responsibility and accountability.

Our kingship is seen, in part, by how we work in and develop the world. This is clear when we consider the zoom-lens of Genesis 2, where we get a close-up of the creation of Adam. Creation was not all pristine at first, nor was Eden itself perfected.⁸ Rather, creation was full of potential but lacking in a key agent to bring that potential to fruition:

“When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground....” (Genesis 2:5).

Man is created in verse 7, then God plants a Garden in Eden and sets the man there, verse 15:

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15).

Prior to Adam’s creation, we’re told the land was undeveloped because God had not sent rain and because “there was no man to work the ground” (Genesis 2:5). Then in verse 15, we read that God placed Adam in the garden “to work it and keep it.” Man was made to bring forth creation’s potential. Work, therefore, is something integral to being human. After the fall, our work comes under the curse, and it too becomes a source of pain and toil. But in its nature, work is part of what makes a human being a human being. And if we consider the setting in Genesis 2, we can see why.

Adam isn’t tasked merely to prune bushes and dig irrigation ditches. The land around Eden lies undeveloped, fallow, and Adam—as representative of the human race—is called to cultivate it.

You might imagine the analogy of a seed and a forest. In a single seed, we can say lies an entire forest—at least all the essential ingredients. However, in order for that life to be realized, there must be careful cultivation. Human beings are the one creature God has created who can turn the wild, untamed earth into an Eden teeming with the fullness of life.

Consider a few ways this vocation has unfolded. Thousands of years ago, there was no plant like modern-day corn. But a community of people living in Southwestern Mexico began collecting small ears of stony seeds from a tropical grass called Teosinte; it had multiple stems and the kernels of grain were hard—too hard to eat. However, with keen attention to plants differing in ear development and with fewer stems, ancient peoples began to select and grow plants that over time became the corn as we know it today. Now, thousands of years later, corn has been domesticated from a wild grass with little food value into one of the major crops grown throughout the world. Corn provides about 20-25% of the world's calories!⁹

We could also speak of art. In awe of the colors of flowers and stars, human beings would imitate their Creator by making art. They learned how to make paints from dirt and minerals in soils, such as the red in iron oxide. Oils from seeds like linseed provided a base in which organic pigments could be dissolved providing a rich variety of colors. The natural world of color inspired humans to imitate the beauty of nature in the splendor of their own creation—artwork.

We could speak of many more things, not the least of which is technology: boats, cars, and planes. But suffice it to say, that part of what it means to be a human being is to bear the image of God the King. And the King's desire is to see His kingdom flourish—to see its potential brought forth in every way. Of course, due to the fall into sin, this process is frustrated and twisted. But its goodness is still all around us. There is an inherent dignity to work—it's part of what human beings are designed to do.

2. Priestly: guard and protect our patch of Eden from evil

There is another aspect to the first human's vocation. Along with work and cultivation, there is also the idea here of guarding or protecting. The language of "subduing" in verse 28 speaks of bringing order where there is chaos—recalling how God brought order out of the chaos and darkness we read of in Genesis 1:2. And the language of "work and keep" used in 2:15 is later used to describe the duty of priests in the tabernacle.

Thus, in Numbers 3:5-7 we read:

“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him. They shall **keep guard** [וּשְׁמְרוּ] over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister [work] [לַעֲבֹד] at the tabernacle.”

As we will see later in the early days of Adam and Eve, part of their vocation is *guarding* and *protecting* creation from evil and chaos. This is a *priestly* vocation.

Here, then, is another aspect of our human vocation: whatever patch of the earth God has put us on, and whatever things or people He has given us leadership or influence over, we must protect from evil. Parents, you have a *priestly* duty in your home. Your weapons are prayer and the Word of God. You are to keep evil out. You are to mediate, by prayer and teaching and godly behavior, between your children and God. Through you, your children begin to know God. Make your home a holy place. Teachers, you have a *priestly* duty in your classroom. Businessmen and lawyers, you have a *priestly* duty in relation to your employees and clients. You bring order where there is chaos by truth, hard work, integrity—secret prayer—outward love and kindness. Students, you have a *priestly* duty in your classroom—on your basketball team. And for ourselves, as we learn later in the Bible, our very bodies become *the temple of God*—we must defend them from the evil one.

Let’s summarize what we’ve said:

- To know who we are and what we are for, human beings must turn to God’s call upon them.
- God creates us and calls us: we know who we are by drawing near to Him.
- We know and fulfill our purpose by living into His unique call on each of our lives to work and protect in His kingdom.

A final thought as we close. Not a single man or woman has stewarded their human nature and vocation adequately. All of us—we diminish our dignity by disobedience; we fail in our vocation due to selfishness or idleness. But God does not give up on those that bear His image. God sends His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who is the perfect image of God the Father, and displays for us what perfect humanness looks like. Moreover, God the Son was also there working at our creation and works again in our redemption. And in a powerful scene at the end of John’s Gospel, Jesus appears to His disciples and brings anew what God did to Adam in Genesis 2:7.

In Genesis 2:7, God breathes His Spirit into the nostrils of the first man, and he becomes a living creature. In John 20:22, Jesus stands before His disciples—the first of the new creation, and we read:

“Jesus breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22).

Here is God, standing again upon the earth, taking man under His care, and breathing life into His lungs. Through Jesus Christ, we can take up the mantle of our humanness afresh—both the dignity and responsibility of it—and live into the destiny of being, in nature and vocation, the image of God.

Endnotes

1. “‘New’ Theologians See Christianity Without God.” *New York Times* (1965, Oct 17). I owe this insight to Owen Strachan, *Reenchanted Humanity: A Theology of Mankind* (Focus, 2019), 8-9.
2. “‘New’ Theologians See Christianity Without God.” *New York Times* (1965, Oct 17).
3. Owen Strachan, *Reenchanted Humanity: A Theology of Mankind*, 9.
4. The *New York Times* deemed 2015 as “The Year We Obsessed over Identity,” and not long after the Australian National Dictionary Center selected “identity” as the Word of the Year. See Florian Coulmas, *Identity: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 1-2.
5. Florian Coulmas, *Identity: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 1-2.
6. During the Exodus, God starts to refer to Israel as His Son, “²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ²³ and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.”’ (Exod 4:22-23). This becomes a major theme for understanding the nature of God as the Bible continues to unfold.
7. See Rom 8:14-17 for how salvation in Christ leads to adoption as God’s children.
8. See Nancy Guthrie’s excellent article, “10 Things You Should Know about the Garden of Eden.” *Crossway Blog*, Aug 30, 2018.
9. See Sean B. Carroll, “Tracking the Ancestry of Corn Back 9,000 Years.” *New York Times* (May 24, 2010).