

Bearing God's Image

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[0 : 00] Up until 2007, if you lived in DC, you would know that virtually everybody owned a Blackberry. Blackberries were nearly ubiquitous. We called them Crackberries because everybody who was anybody had one, a little smart device with a built-in keyboard with a satisfying click.

And people thought that Blackberries had taken over the world and that they were here to stay. But in 2007, Steve Jobs stood up on a stage and he made an announcement that would change the world. He unveiled for the first time the first generation of the iPhone. And what people realized almost immediately is that this wasn't just an updated or upgraded version of a Blackberry. It was an entirely new concept, re-engineered from the ground up. And in a moment, the nearly ubiquitous Crackberry became entirely obsolete. This kind of thing we see throughout history again and again and again, especially in the world of technology. You have an old model and then at some point a new model, new version comes along, a new concept comes along that changes the game. So think about the printing press or the electric light bulb or the automobile, right now AI, revolutionizing entire industries.

And every time something like this happens, it makes everything that came before obsolete. But it also opens up our minds to possibilities that we never considered before as we look to the future. Now we can debate whether or not this was a good thing or a bad thing for society when this happened back in 2007. But what we want to focus on this morning is that the story of Christmas in the Bible says that of all of these moments, these kind of revolutionary moments, there's actually one moment in history that outshines them all. And that is the moment of Christmas morning. From the earliest days of our existence, from the stone age all the way to the digital age, there's only ever been one model of human. One model, one way to be human. And it's what the Bible refers to as people of the old Adam. For all of history, there's only been one kind of human being, people of the old Adam, or as we might think of it, humanity 1.0. But on Christmas morning, God unveiled an entirely new kind of human being to the world. Jesus was not only a good teacher or a devoted humanitarian, he represents an entirely new way of being human. And the Apostle Paul and the other early Christians clearly recognized this. And that's why Paul refers to Jesus as the new Adam.

If he were alive today, he might say, humanity 2.0. And in this passage that we just heard read from A.J., 1 Corinthians chapter 15, Paul is describing the difference between the old version of humanity and the new version of humanity that we see in Jesus. So that's what I want to focus on this morning. What are the differences between the old and the new humanity? And then what difference does that make for us?

[3 : 53] So that's where we're going to go over the next few minutes. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And though our voices may at times be weak, your voice is always strong. And you always accomplish all that you set out to accomplish through your word.

Lord, and it's your voice that we seek to hear this morning. And we pray that as we hear it in this Advent season, that we would find an answer to our longings, that we would find satisfaction and hope. And we pray this not only for our good, but for the good of the whole world and for your glory. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So what are some of the differences between the old humanity and the new humanity that we see here in verses 42 to 44? We see Paul describing the old humanity as being marked by qualities such as perishability, or dishonor, or weakness. And you know, this speaks to our physical, our moral, and our spiritual limitations.

Perishability means that everything in this world is slowly breaking down and returning to dust. Right? This is the second law of thermodynamics, that everything in creation is expending more energy than it can replenish. Everything's winding down. And this isn't just people. Romans chapter 8 is a place where Paul says that all of creation is in bondage to decay. It's all coming apart.

Right? So cosmically, socially, psychologically, physically, everything breaks down. And we see this. This resonates. Think about governments. Think about our government. It takes more energy to have a good government than a bad government. Right? The path of least resistance leads either to tyranny or anarchy. It takes more energy to have a good government. It requires the investment of citizens. But even the best governments, even the best empires collapse, given enough time. It takes more energy to have a good marriage or a good friendship than a bad one. [6:15] The path of least resistance is to grow apart. Right? You have to invest. But over time, even the best relationships will fade. It takes more energy to be psychologically healthy.

Right? The path of least resistance is neurosis, is distorted thinking, giving in to anxiety or despair. It takes work to be psychologically healthy. But even the most sound mind in time will give way. It takes more energy to be physically healthy than it does to be unhealthy. The path of least resistance... Well, I was going to make a joke about myself, but it's to be like me. No, the path of least resistance is to be unhealthy. But no matter how much we eat right or to exercise, we're still going to grow old and we're still going to die. So this is what perishability means. It's the reality that everything's breaking down. Dishonor means that we are dead to rights, basically. It means that we've rebelled and rejected the God who made us and so we're dead to rights. As one commentator put it, we're spiritually dead and a corpse has no rights. Weakness speaks to our moral limitations as much as our physical limitations. We know the kind of people that we want to be. I can see the kind of man that I want to be. But in our weakness, we cannot ever become that person. There was a renowned child psychiatrist named Robert Coles and he told a story in his graduate class at Harvard University.

He says this, a highly regarded psychiatrist recently told me in despair, I've been doing therapy with a man for 15 years and he's as angry, as self-centered, and as mean as he was the first day he walked into my office. The only difference is that now he knows why he is so angry and mean. You know, Coles went on to say that although the psychiatrist provided his client with insight as to how his childhood emotional wounding had affected his adult dysfunction, the man still had not changed. Coles asked this, could we conclude that what this man needed wasn't just information but transformation? And then he asks this to his Harvard class, but is transformation possible for human beings?

[9:00] Right? He's contending with our limitations as humanity 1.0. We're profoundly limited in our ability to solve the very problems that we create in the world. We can devote ourselves to ending racial discrimination and we should give ourselves to that fully, mind, body, and soul, and do as much as we can.

But human beings are hardwired to prefer people who look like us over people who don't. It's just written into our wiring.

We can devote ourselves to ending poverty. We can devote ourselves to seeking equal rights and opportunities for all people. But human beings are hardwired for greed. We're hardwired for covetousness.

In other words, it's always going to be an uphill battle. It's always going to be an uphill battle. We prefer to think of ourselves as Atlas, holding the world on our shoulders by sheer determination and will, making it a better place.

In reality, we're Sisyphus, continually pushing a boulder uphill only to see it roll back back again and again and again. St. Augustine says this is because we are all curved inward on ourselves.

[10:20] It's sin has a gravitational pull. Sin has a gravitational pull. And it pulls our love and our devotion away from God and into and toward ourselves. And the result is not only alienation from God, but the result is the fracturing of society. This is what Augustine says leads to all the brokenness and injustice in the world.

This is the reality of humanity 1.0. These are the limitations that we contend with. Now look at the way Paul describes the new humanity in Jesus Christ. Imperishable.

Glorious. Powerful. Jesus. When he's unveiled to the world through his birth and then subsequently his resurrection, he shows us a new kind of human body that is imperishable. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, he emerges with a body that is physical and yet it doesn't age, it doesn't decay, it doesn't break down, it doesn't die. It's a body that is built to last into eternity.

And the new humanity is full of glory and power. It's no longer curved inward. It's turned outward and it's turned up to God.

And that is its nature to turn out and up to God. It's full of righteousness and truth. Our current existence compared to that existence, comparing humanity 1.0 to humanity 2.0, would be like comparing a candle to the sun.

[12:15] And here's the most amazing thing about this passage. Not only does Paul give us a vision of what human beings could be, he says that there's actually a way for us to attain this.

We can actually attain this for ourselves. But the question is, how? And reflect on that for just a second. So what did you come up with?

How do we attain this? A couple of things we see in this passage that point us back to Christmas. Number one, we have to recognize that we cannot attain this on our own.

We cannot attain this on our own. You know, throughout history, human beings have always loved to believe that we have the power within ourselves to overcome our limitations, to transcend our creatureliness, and to perfect ourselves. All the way back in the fifth century BC, Socrates was talking about the constant improvement of our souls through meditation, through fasting, through exercise.

The enlightenment was built around the unlimited hope we place in human reason and ingenuity, to transform ourselves and society for the better.

[13:46] In the 1970s, the New Age movement arose and it preached personal transformation and healing by accessing our spiritual energy through yoga or tarot cards or astrology.

These days, Instagram and TikTok are full of self-made, self-proclaimed gurus, teaching their followers how to optimize themselves and live their one wild and precious life to the fullest. Even someone like Jordan Peterson, who has millions of followers, including many Christians, Christians, if you listen closely to what he says, the core message is this, is that each one of us needs to make our bed and clean our room and aim at the highest good we can and take responsibility and hoist the world on our shoulders.

And if enough people do that over enough time, the world will become what it was always meant to be. And there's a lot of wisdom in that message for sure, but ultimately it's all the same message. It's the message of the Tower of Babel. It's the message that with enough hard work and with enough determination, human beings can scaffold our way up to the heavens and forever be changed.

[15:08] But this is the great lie that goes all the way back to the fall itself, that we don't actually ultimately need anything from God. Paul says in verse 48, As was the man of dust, so also are those who are born of the dust.

We are of the dust. Our nature is constrained by that and there's nothing that we can do to escape it. The only way forward, the only way to attain this is to recognize that we need a new nature.

As Jesus says to Nicodemus, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. And then he says, that which is born of the flesh is flesh.

Your nature is of the dust. Your humanity, 1.0. That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the spirit is spirit. You need a new nature.

So that's the first thing. We have to recognize we can't attain this on our own. And then the second point follows after the first. First, we have to be willing, therefore, to die.

[16:30] Notice the image that Paul repeatedly uses in this passage. He compares us again and again to seeds that need to be sown into the ground in order to be transformed into something new.

The point is this. If we want transformation, we have to be willing to die. Firstly, we have to be willing to die to ourselves.

To die to this Babel hope that we cling to. We have to be willing to admit that we've rejected God, that we deserve his wrath. That we have to be willing to reject this false hope of Babel.

We have to be willing to admit that we don't have within ourselves the resources we need to become the people that we are created to be. We have to admit and recognize why Christmas is necessary.

That our only hope rests in a God coming into this world to rescue us. A God who cares so much about our weakness and perishability that he was willing to become weak and perishable.

[17:35] We have to be willing to cry out for mercy. We have to be willing to put our faith in Jesus. It's the only way. But what the Bible says, what the gospel promises, is that when we do that, Jesus responds with grace and mercy.

And in that moment, we are given a new nature. We receive the Holy Spirit. We're united with Christ. We're born not only of the flesh. We are born again of the Spirit.

And this is, by the way, what baptism represents. It represents the death that we die to ourselves and to the old nature. And then the resurrection life and the new nature we gain in Jesus Christ. And this passage tells us that for those who put their faith in Jesus, death itself, physical death, becomes our means of transformation.

So we not only have to die spiritually, but we have to recognize that this changes what it means for us to die physically. You know, we live in a society that is terrified of death, that lives in perpetual denial of death.

[18 : 47] Ernst Becker was a cultural anthropologist who won a Pulitzer for his book, *The Denial of the Death*. And basically, his book says this, that all human beings are caught in a kind of paradox, that on the one hand, we are self-aware.

We have a name. We have a life history. We feel in our bones that we are somehow cosmically significant. So on the one hand, we know all of this in our bones, that there's got to be more to life than this.

I've got to have meaning. There's a reason that I'm here. And on the other hand, we're worm food. And we're going to die, and we're going to rot, and we're going to be dust. And a hundred years from now, nobody's going to know our name.

And he says we cannot resolve this, and so we live in this denial. And he says this is what leads to all kinds of psychological and social ills. He says a lot of what motivates us to get up and to do the hard work that we do and to gut it out is an attempt to build some kind of legacy that will outlive us. This is the sting of death, as Paul calls it. But for Christians, death is simply a doorway into new life. It is the road into the new humanity that Jesus offers.

[20 : 00] It is the way to be transferred from the domain of the old Adam to the kingdom of the new Adam. So Christians are able to embrace the very thing that most people spend their entire lives running from, death itself.

And all of this is because of Christmas. It's no wonder that the early Christian artists commonly used the butterfly as a symbol of death and resurrection. Because the body, this body, is like the caterpillar.

But the promise is that through death, the cocoon of death, we will be transformed into the butterfly. Or as the Anglican priest and poet George Herbert wrote, death used to be an executioner, but the gospel has made him just a gardener.

Through death, we are sown like seeds into the ground, only to emerge as a new being beyond anything we can possibly imagine. So this is the hope that arrives on Christmas morning, as Paul says in verse 49.

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. And that's the promise.

[21 : 24] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for these words of hope that tie Christmas and Easter together and that tie these promises to our lives.

We thank you for the hope that it brings and for all here who are struggling under the burden of our perishability and our weakness, our powerlessness.

Lord, for all who are lamenting our human condition, Lord, we pray that this would offer sound and true hope.

Lord, that as much as we strive now, that one day we will be changed, we will be made new. We pray that as we celebrate the story of the coming of Christ, that you would imbue us with this hope, plant it deeply in our hearts, that it would sustain us through whatever we face.

We pray this, Lord, for our good and for your glory in Jesus' name. Amen.