

The Glory Of Being Human

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Date: 19 September 2010

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[0 : 0 0] In the beginning, God. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And God said, let us make man, humankind, in our image, according to our likeness.

And God created humankind in His image. In His own image, He created male and female, He created them. Just before the dawn of this new century, researchers John Nesbitt and Patricia Arberdine wrote a book entitled Megatrends 2000.

They were building on their 1983 bestseller, Megatrends, which many had touted as a field guide to the future. So on the advent of a new century, they put their research expertise to work to articulate the trends they thought would begin to emerge in this 21st century.

Among the millennial megatrends, as they called them, were the booming global economy, a renaissance of the arts, the emergence of free market socialism, the privatization of the welfare state, the rise of the Pacific Rim, the age of biology, and religious revival all over the world.

They got that one.

[1 : 5 9] So what does it mean to be a human being? Which is why we're taking the time this fall to make our way through the opening chapters of the Bible, to work through Genesis 1 to 11.

As I suggested last Sunday, in Genesis 1 to 11, we have the story that makes sense of our stories. Every culture in every age has some kind of story, some kind of narrative to help make sense of human existence.

Every story, every metanarrative is asking and answering some fundamental questions. Questions like, what are we? Who are we?

Where did we come from? Why are we here? What is wrong with us? Why do we ache at such a deep level? Can the problem be fixed? What happens when we die?

Why does human history have meaning? If so, where is it all going? I suggested last Sunday that our culture or cultures are struggling the way they are because we no longer have any compelling narrative.

[3 : 1 6] Oh, there are many that are being offered, but no one single larger story to make sense of our stories, which is what makes Genesis 1 to 11 such a great gift.

Here is a story which, when given the chance to make its own case, begins to put everything in perspective. The story spoke a liberating word to those who first heard it centuries ago, and it speaks a liberating word to we who live in this century.

For in this story, we begin to understand the glory of being human. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

And God said, let us make humankind in our image and according to our likeness.

Last Sunday in our first study, I suggested that the major affirmation of Genesis 1 is, in the words of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, Creator creates creation.

[4 : 3 0] They are the first three notes of the song of creation. And when we get these notes correct, we can sing the rest of the story in tune.

Creator creates creation. Now, as I mentioned last week also, Genesis 1 is riddled with sevens.

Seven days, seven let there be, seven it was good. And so, in the spirit of the text, I offered seven observations about what the text is saying to us.

And I said last week that I would today offer an eighth observation. Let me review. First observation. We know Creator created creation because the Creator told us so.

What we read in Genesis 1 is not the product of human reasoning. It is the product of divine revelation. No one in the century in which the text was written, and no one of us in this century could come up with what this text declares on our own.

[5 : 44] And what is revealed in the song of creation? Second observation. Creator creates creation out of nothing.

In the beginning, there is God and nothing else. And out of that nothing, God creates creation. I mentioned that the verb that is used in the text is the verb bara.

B-A-R-A. And in scripture, only God bara's. No human being can bara. The verb emphasizes creating without analogy, without precedent. God of creation creates out of nothing.

Third observation. Creator creates creation by speaking. Simply by speaking. No wrestling with hostile forces as the ancient myths declared.

No exertion of massive energy to overcome resistant powers. Just speaking. Seven times. Let there be.

[6 : 50] Fourth observation. Creator creates creation in divine time. On his own time schedule. That, I think, is the major point of the text being constructed in this six plus one format.

Seven. Six plus one is seven. Seven in the Bible is the divine number. Seven is the number of perfection and completeness. And portraying God's creation in seven days is a way of saying, however God did it, he did it in his own time.

Had the divine number been nine, for instance, Genesis one would have been crafted in eight plus one days. Had the divine number been 12, the text would have been put together in an 11 plus one structure.

Fifth observation. Creator creates creation in a divine way. As we saw, Genesis one is actually structured around two major movements.

From day one to three and day four to six. In days one to three, God moves from formlessness to form. In days four to six, God moves from the void to fullness.

[8 : 08] It's the way God works in the world and in our lives. God is always moving from chaos to order, from emptiness to fullness. Bless his name.

Sixth observation. Creator creates creation good. Seven times it was good.

Until we hear an eighth time. It was very good. Why the shift from good to very good? Because we were made.

It is when the creator creates us that his heart sings very good. Which brings us to the seventh observation, where I want us to linger for a while today.

Creator creates a creature in his own image. Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.

[9 : 10] And God barod humankind in his likeness. In the image of God he barod them. Male and female he barod them. Now, let us step back from the text for a few minutes and put this discussion in a larger context.

I wish we had time last week to do that, and I'm not sure I have time to do it this week. But I want to step back and put this whole discussion in a larger context. Like you, and like just about everyone else alive on this planet today, I do not read Genesis 1 in a vacuum.

Like you, I read, Let us make humankind in our image in the context of multiple and even conflicting claims about what it means to be human.

I grew up in the world of science. Understatement. The formative years of my life, from kindergarten to grade 7, were lived in Los Alamos, New Mexico.

A small city, tucked away in the high mountains about 50 kilometers northwest of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Los Alamos is the city where the atomic and hydrogen bombs were designed.

[10 : 31] When we first moved to the city, it was a closed city. Everyone had to have a secret pass to get in and out. All of our mail was sent to post office box 1663, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Our relatives were not allowed to know about Los Alamos. My youngest brother was born in Los Alamos, but his birth certificate says, P.O. Box 1663, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Los Alamos was, and still is, run by the University of California on behalf of the United States Research Laboratories. My father was doing physics for the lab, as they referred to it then, at first working mostly on the design and testing of nuclear weapons, both fission and fusion, both atomic and hydrogen.

He witnessed the explosion of the second hydrogen bomb on the Inuitak Atoll in the South Pacific. And an experience so awesome, as he used to tell me and my brothers, an experience so awesome that he prayed the rest of his life that no human being would ever see it again.

He was on a team of scientists who taught the first bulky computers how to think in two dimensions. He himself was the first person to teach computers to think in three dimensions.

[11 : 58] I grew up in a world of science. As the oldest son of a Swedish father, I was expected to follow in father's footsteps. So I took up physics and mathematics, earning my undergraduate degree at the University of California, San Diego, which at that time was going to be shaped into the premier physics institution in the world.

I had lectures on theoretical physics from people like Edward Teller, the father of the hydrogen bomb. I had lectures on microbiology from people like Jonas Salk, the inventor of the vaccine who bears his name.

And I took the philosophy of science from Thomas Kuhn, who wrote the influential book, The Structures of Scientific Revolution. During my third year of university, I began to wrestle with this tug in my soul to become a preacher of the gospel.

I told you about that a year ago or so. I shared that on April 4th, 1968, the night that Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered, I gave into that call.

The next week, I ventured out to share with my professor of thermodynamics, which is the study of heat and energy transfer, that I was thinking of leaving physics to now go to seminary to prepare to preach Jesus and his gospel.

[13 : 13] He was shocked and he was disappointed. And he said to me, why would you throw away your brains and your promising future to preach Jesus? The person who helped me the most to integrate what I was learning as I read the Bible and what I was learning in university was a man named Richard Bubbe, who at the time was professor of material science and electrical engineering at Stanford University.

In his own field, he's known for books like Electrons in Solids, Photo-Electronic Properties of Semiconductors, Semiconductors and Other Bedtime Reading. In 1971, he wrote the book The Human Quest, which in my mind deserves the label classic.

The Human Quest. Richard Bubbe's central thesis is that reality and human beings within it has to be studied and understood on many different levels from many different angles.

His central thesis is this. There are many levels at which a given situation can be described. An exhaustive description on one level does not preclude a meaningful description on another level.

That makes sense, doesn't it? An exhaustive description on one level does not preclude a meaningful description on other levels. And Richard Bubbe takes as his chief example the sentence, I love you.

[14 : 58] I love you can be described on many different levels. For instance, it can be described on the level of numbers, on the numerical level. There are eight letters.

I-L-O-V-E-Y-O-U. Two of them are repeated. O-O. The letters are the 5th, 9th, 12th, 15th, 21st, and 25th of the English alphabet and they're arranged in the order 9, 12, 15, 22, 5, 25, 15, 21.

This is a true and exhaustive description of that sentence on one level. But there's also the phonetic level, the level of sound.

There is in the sentence the long O, short, the long I, short O, the liquid consonant L, the voiced fricative V, the silent E, the palliative semivowel Y, and the diphthong U.

That too is a true and exhaustive description of that sentence on one level. But there's also the vocabulary level, the level of words, the letters and the sounds, interactive form words, and the words point beyond themselves to something else.

[16 : 07] And there's the grammatical level, the subject I, the verb love, the object you, the verb is in the present tense. That too is a true and exhaustive description of that sentence on one level.

And on it goes to other levels, finally reaching the performative level, the letters, the sounds, the words, the grammar, making something happen.

I love you. moving the heart of the person who hears the words. That's where you want to get, guys, beyond the grammatical and the phonetic to the performative.

The thesis again. There are many levels at which a given situation can be described. An exhaustive description on one level does not preclude an exhaustive description on another level.

Indeed, a complete understanding of any given situation requires description on many levels. Reality, the universe and human beings within it has to be studied and understood on many different levels.

[17 : 17] Physics, chemistry, biology, botany, zoology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, theology. And we do not finally understand the universe or human beings within it until we take into consideration description of reality on all of those levels.

The physicists are right. We are complex packets of mysteriously interacting energy forces. But that is not all we are.

The chemists are right. Atomic and subatomic particles and waves interact to form molecules and non-living matter. We are complex chemical machines.

John Stackhouse called me the other day and he greeted me on the phone. You old bag of dirt. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, molecules to molecules, atoms to atoms.

But that is not all we are. Biologists are right. The chemicals interact and combine to form more complex forms of life. We are complex biological computers.

[18 : 31] But it is not all we are. Botanists and zoologists can describe our world even more fully. And then anthropologists and psychologists come along with new insights.

And sociologists add more. And then the theologians relate it all to ultimate reality, to the maker, upholder, and redeemer of the whole scheme of creation. Again, a complete description of reality on one level does not preclude a complete description on another level.

A complete biological description of a human being, for instance, does not preclude the description of the human being on a theological level. And the description of a human being on a theological level does not preclude a description of the human being on the biological level.

The problem becomes when one level thinks it knows the whole picture. and is not open to the insights from the other levels.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And God said, let us make humanity in our image according to our likeness.

[19 : 44] Up to this point in Genesis 1, we have heard the Creator say, let there be. Let there be light. Let there be affirmament. Let the earth sprout vegetation. But when it comes to the creation of human beings, the wording changes.

God gets more personally involved. Helmut Thielicke, the great German theologian, says that at this point in the text, there is a long pause because God is now going to bring into being a creature who has the potential to mess it up.

Let us. Let us make humankind. Let us make humankind in our image and in our likeness.

It is this understanding, this level of understanding of reality that our culture is dying to know. The universe is not an accident.

The universe is not an accident. And you are not an accident in the universe. In fact, you are more than you can ever figure out on your own. You are a creature created in the image of a creator.

[21 : 02] Now, whole books have been written on this text, and rightly so. In our image, according to our likeness. As I read the text, two main facts about being human are being declared.

Representation and reflection. Representation and reflection. Human beings are created to represent the creator, and human beings are created to reflect the nature and character of the creator.

Take represent first. In the ancient Near East, when kings and emperors overcame a territory, they would set up an image or likeness of themselves as a way of saying, I am now sovereign over this land and its peoples.

Some kings and emperors still do that. They put some kind of statue there to say that they are in charge. The image or the likeness was the emperor's way of representing himself.

It was a visible way to declare what was ordinarily an invisible reality. It was a visible way to say that the invisible emperor is still emperor here. The image somehow represented the presence of the emperor.

[22 : 23] Indeed, the image somehow somehow functioned as the emperor in place of the emperor. Do you see what Genesis 1 is declaring about human beings?

Something none of us would have ever deduced. God has made us to be his representatives in the creation. A kind of visible expression of an invisible reality.

Are we surprised then that the text goes on to say, have God say to us, fill the earth, subdue it, and rule over it?

As Ian Hart puts it. The text is saying that exercising royal dominion over the earth as God's representative is the basic purpose for which God created human beings.

On the creator's behalf, we get to care for creation. What dignity. On the creator's behalf, as his representation, to care for the creation as the creator cares.

[23 : 34] That's the key. To have dominion, to exercise care over in the same way the creator does. Psalm 145, verse 9, the Lord is good to all and has had compassion on all he made.

Compassion and all he made. That is the spirit in which we exercise our human dignity in the created order. Compassion over all that God has made.

I don't need to tell you, something's gone wrong. As we'll see in Genesis 3. But it is still our role. Towards the end of his life, my father lamented that he had been part of the process that opened Pandora's box.

You care for creation according to the creator's concern. It is part of our dignity as human beings.

The other word is reflect. As the image and likeness of the creator, we were created to reflect the creator's nature and character.

[24 : 41] Imagine that. The rest of creation is to look at you and me and see the nature and character of God. In Genesis 5, verse 3, we read that Adam became father again after he lost Cain and Abel.

The text says, he became the father of a son in his own likeness according to his own image. Adam's son, Seth, somehow reflects the nature and character of Adam and Eve.

And somehow we, reflect the nature and character of the living God. Somehow we copy God. What do we reflect?

Obviously, there's no way we can reflect everything about the living God. We are, after all, finite creatures. So there's no way we can reflect everything about an infinite creator. We are not, for instance, and never will be, all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present.

Though some of us try to be. So what about God do we reflect? The capacity to create.

[25 : 49] Do I need to illustrate? The capacity to conceptualize. In Genesis 2, we're going to see the human being take all of the variety of the created order and have the capacity to put it together in categories.

We reflect the capacity to communicate. Of all that God made, it's humans who can verbalize and convey reality in words. No small miracle.

Like God, we have the capacity to discern, to make moral judgments, to separate between dark and light. Though that capacity has been damaged, and as we've seen last week in the news, severely damaged in some people's cases, it is still true that human beings have the capacity to know right from wrong.

We are created to reflect God's capacity to care of all that God has made. It's the human beings who have the ability to put themselves in someone else's shoes and feel what they feel.

But take careful note of the wording of Genesis 1. Let us, in our image, according to our likeness, it would seem that the major thing about God we are created to reflect is the us-ness of God.

[27 : 13] From the very beginning of the story, we meet a God who can use plural pronouns. Indeed, the word for God in Genesis 1 is the word Elohim. It's a plural noun.

It's never used with a plural verb. It's always used with a singular verb. The God who creates us is the God who can speak of himself as us. Yes, the us could be the so-called royal we, like when the queen speaks she will say we when she means I.

But there's nowhere in the rest of Scripture where God uses that kind of custom. And it's possible that this us or we might be the so-called heavenly court referring to these angelic hosts that surround God.

But nowhere else in Scripture is it said that we are created in the image of angels. God's use of us and our takes us into mystery.

That there is within the one God a plurality. The living God is not a solitary monad. The living God is somehow a community.

[28 : 20] As Karl Barth in the last century famously put it the living God is being in fellowship. There is within God an I and a thou a reciprocity an interchange an interaction us our we.

The Genesis text is not overtly speaking of the Trinity but I believe it is opening the door to what the church would later say is the Trinity. And here's the point.

we have been created to reflect the relational nature of the Creator. We have been created to reflect this I-thou relationship of the one God.

To put it more simply humanity in the image of the Creator is humanity in community. God is relationship.

we have been created to reflect that relationship-ness. Simon and Garfunkel Boy am I dating myself now huh? Simon and Garfunkel used to sing a song with the refrain I am a rock I am an island.

[29 : 33] That is not humanity in the image of God. It is inhumanity. We were made for relationship. relationship. Which is why broken relationships hurt so much more than broken bones. Let us make humanity.

We were created to reflect the us-ness of the Creator. We were made for relationship. In fact, we were made for relationship with the God who is relationship. We were made by the relationship us for the relationship us.

we were made to enjoy relationship with the relationship. Indeed, as the story will unfold, we were made to share in the relationship.

Get this. We were made to enter into and live in the us-ness of God. We were made by the relationship for the relationship to live in the relationship.

[30 : 38] relationship. Which means we will finally know who we are when we get in the relationship. We will finally know what it means to be a human being when we live in the relationship that God is.

Which brings us to the eighth observation. I promised that I would give you an eighth on what the Creator is revealing in Genesis 1. Eighth observation. Creator creates a sabbatical creature.

Something none of us would have ever deduced on our own. You see, the apex of creation according to Genesis 1 is not humanity.

The apex of creation is the Sabbath. God has built into the very fabric of the created order a special day heaven.

Just like gravity and electromagnetism, there is this special day, the seventh day. Have you ever noticed in reading Genesis 1 that the seventh day does not end?

[31 : 49] It was evening and morning day one. It was evening and morning day two. It was evening and morning day three. It was evening and morning day four. It was evening and morning day five. It was evening and morning day six. But no, it was evening and morning day seven.

Day seven doesn't end. Because day seven is the purpose of creation. To enter into the joy the creator has in his creation. To actually enjoy the creator. You see, in Genesis 1, although we watch God in boundless energy and creativity, calling forth light and stars and sea monsters, there is more to God than what we meet in God's creative work. Ronald Wallace puts it this way. That the Lord rested the seventh day means that God has not allowed the activity of the days of creation to bind him. He has something to say that could not be said in the work of the six days. He has something to give that is not yet given through all the enthusiasm he's put into the world and creating it. God has something new, something extra to give this world over and above what he has already given it in creation. Wow!

And God has built into the fabric of the universe a day when he comes and gives us what he did not give us in creation. Wallace has God say, I will put a Sabbath day at the heart of the order of things in this universe. I will bless this Sabbath day weekly as it comes around.

And on this day I will communicate to men and women my own Sabbath rest. On this day I will share with men and women that in myself which I've kept back so far from creation. And then he has God say, listen to me as I draw near to speak and respond to me as I draw near to offer you my fellowship and seek this day to draw you to myself.

For we were created by the relationship for the relationship to live in the relationship. And he gives us this day to prevent us from turning into human doings and so that we know how to be human beings.

[34 : 14] In the beginning God created us. Let us make humankind in our image and our likeness. And that is what Jesus Christ has come into the world to make happen.

He is the image and likeness of God in every sense of the word. And he says to you and me, come to me, all who are weary and who have overburdened yourselves.

And I will rest you. I will bring you back into that for which we made you. Let us pray.

Thank you. For telling us about ourselves.

Thank you for telling us what we would have never figured out. And will you in your mercy and grace actually help us live what you've created us to be.

[36 : 02] In Jesus name. Amen.