

Our Place and Purpose in God's Creation

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[0 : 00] Gracious Father, thank you so much for your word, the Bible. We thank you that what you say in it is both authoritative but also relevant for us today. And so, Father, we pray that as we look at it, you would give us minds to understand the truths that you are telling us.

But more than that, hearts that would seek to live in light of them. For we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, it was our daughter's ninth birthday last week on Anzac Day.

And her oldest sister, Kate, brought her a card out of her own money, which I thought was pretty good, until I saw the card. Here it is on the next slide.

It says, Sister, I thought I should give you a really special treat for your birthday. And then on the inside, on the next slide, it says, Then I thought being related to me should be enough of a treat for anyone.

You see, Caitlin's place in our family is as the big sister. And her place comes with a purpose, which apparently is to stir your little sister. But to Caitlin's credit, she also cared for her little sister.

[1 : 08] And after she gave her this card, she then presented a present that she'd bought out of her own pocket money as well, which I thought was pretty good. But you see, our place in our family or workplace or even the world often determines our purpose.

What's more, our place and purpose then often determine our worth, our value as people, as humans. And in our society, it often all revolves around our job, our work.

So, for example, if your place in the workforce is as a janitor, whose purpose is therefore to clean toilets, the world does not hold you in high regard, does it?

It doesn't consider you of great value compared to someone who, for example, has a place in the workforce as a doctor, whose purpose it is to heal people.

And because people in our society often assess their identity and their worth as people based on what they do. It's why when you often meet people, one of the first questions you get asked or you ask is, what do you do for work?

[2 : 18] And if you say, oh, look, I'm a builder, then they'll talk to you and perhaps even try and get some building tips from you for their building project at home. Or, but if you say, like I have said, I'm a church minister, well, they find something else, another place they need to be.

And if you don't have a job, then you can often be made to feel less than human, unless you're retired, of course.

And then they just ask you what holidays you're going on next, I think. But you see, for our society, people's place and purpose and thus their worth as people is very often linked to their job.

But God says it's linked to something else altogether. And so while we focus on the God of creation last week, which is who Genesis 1 focuses on, this week we're returning to the last few verses of Genesis 1 to focus on us and our place and purpose in God's creation.

And as we'll do, we'll see that what really makes us valuable, in fact, what really makes us human in God's sight, is not what we do, but who we are. So we're at point one on your outlines and verse number 26 in your Bibles.

[3 : 29] Have a look there. Then God said, Here we see our place in God's creation.

And as I pointed out last week, Genesis 1 is not written as a scientific account about how God created the world. Rather, Genesis 1 is written to show us who God is as the creator of our world and who we are as people created in the world.

And here it shows us that we are people who are the pinnacle of God's creation, as I said last week.

And not only are we created last, like, you know, saving the best till last, but there are lots of little changes in the language here which show our importance.

So, for example, verse number 26, the language before this has been let there be, let there be, or let the land produce. But verse 26 changes to let us make.

It's the only time the phrase occurs. It seems that God is getting even more personal here.

Something special is being made. Us. We'll take verse 27 and the word create.

[4 : 52] This little important word create is used six times throughout the seven days of creation. And three of those six times, 50% of the time, it's used in verse 27 when it speaks about creating us.

In other words, the language is highlighting how special we are. Or take verse 31. After God creates humanity, it's not just good, as he has said every other day of creation.

It's now, verse 31, very good. You see, these little changes in language make the big point that we have a special place in God's world.

So, what is this place? Well, it's as God's image bearers. Verses 26 and 27 tell us three times, actually, that God has made us in his image.

And verse 26, he adds that we are made in his likeness. This is what makes us truly special. But what does it mean to be made in God's image?

[5 : 54] Well, it means to reflect and represent God in the world. How? Well, often when we hear the word image or likeness, we usually think of something that represents someone in looks.

For example, on the next slide is a sculpture of Augustus Caesar in the British Museum. This sculpture is in his image. It represents him by looking like him, you see.

Or when people have children, they are sometimes said to be in the spitting image of their dad or mum, by which they mean they look like their dad or mum. But when the Bible uses the word image and likeness, it's primarily talking about representing someone's rule, not looks.

And so, on the next slide, for example, statues are sometimes used like this. This is a statue of Saddam Hussein when he was ruling Iraq. He had statues of himself placed around.

Why? Because they represented his rule, that he was the president of Iraq. Which is why on the next slide, they then pulled down the statue to represent that his rule had ended, you see.

[7 : 06] The point is, his image, his statue, represented his rule. Or the next slide, take our coins here in Australia. And the reason we can flip and say heads or tails is because every Australian and British coin, for that matter, has the image of Queen Elizabeth's head on it.

Why? Well, to represent her rule over us. And to remind us that she's technically still our queen. Even though it doesn't seem to make much difference in everyday life.

Well, in the same way, God has made people in his image. And just like the coins represent the queen's rule, we have been created to represent God's rule.

And that's one reason why Israel was not to make any statues to represent God. Because we, humans, are to represent God. Of course, we don't represent God's rule by simply standing still like a statue or being like a coin.

Rather, we represent God's rule by actually ruling like him. This is what it primarily means to be made in God's image. To represent his rule on earth by ruling like him.

[8 : 22] In fact, this is what it means to be human. For humans are made in God's image. It's part of who we are as human beings. Now, there are other ways in which we are to reflect God's likeness.

For example, we are also created good. So we represent God's goodness. We're also created in verse 27 as one mankind, one humanity. But with different persons, male and female.

And that represents God's nature. Who is both one God, but with different persons. Father, Son and Spirit. And so we get a glimpse of that in verse 26 when God says, Let us, plural, make.

So one God, different persons. We're also created with the ability to relate by speaking. Which represents God who relates to us by speaking. We're even created originally to live forever.

Which represents God who lives forever. And so there are other ways in which we reflect God's likeness. But all those other ways are actually meant to help us do the primary way of representing God's rule.

[9 : 28] It's all to help us be God's image on earth and represent God's rule on earth. This is the place we have in creation. We are God's image bearers. We represent the fact that he rules.

And we do it by ruling like him. This means that people are extraordinarily special. Extraordinarily privileged. Valuable in God's sight.

I mean, no other part of creation is made in God's image like us. And no other part of creation rules like us. And so immediately we have special worth and dignity.

In fact, we have such dignity and worth in God's sight that God will hold everyone and everything accountable if they kill people. So on the next slide from Genesis chapter 9, we read this.

God says, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being. Whoever sheds human blood by humans shall their own blood be shed.

[10:33] Why? Well, for or because in the image of God has God made mankind. You see what he's saying? People are special to him because they are made in his image.

Or on the next slide, we read in the New Testament from James chapter 3. He's saying this is a bad thing. And he says, With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father. And with it we curse human beings. Why is it bad to curse human beings?

Well, because they have been made in God's likeness. God's image. You see, being in God's image gives us special place in God's creation. And it automatically gives us dignity and worth. Our dignity and worth is not based on what job we do. It is based on who we are as image bearers of God. And given pride of place in God's creation.

And this has all sorts of implications for how we see human life, does it not? From the hot topic of abortion to how we treat our neighbours. And so we are to show respect to all people, even if we disagree with their beliefs.

[11:37] Why? Because they are made in the image of God. We ought to value people over pets and plants. Why? Because people are made in the image of God.

Don't get me wrong. We'll see that in a moment it's right to care for God's world. And those organisations which seek to care for the world, the environment and animals are good.

But organisations which care for people are better. Because people are made in God's image. And are to reflect God's rule over creation. A little while ago I spoke at a men's breakfast here.

And I showed the men a picture when Michelle and I first got married. And her grandparents were visiting. So it's on the next slide. I'm looking much younger then. And if you think I'm pulling a face, I am.

Because Sam the dog is taking over the picture in the foreground. And I knew Michelle's parents and grandparents all seemed to love Sam more than me.

[12:40] So for example, on the fridge, I might have told you this before. At their house was a photo of Sam the dog, which was strategically placed over my face. A picture of me and Michelle.

It wasn't placed over Michelle's face in the picture. Just my face. With Sam the dog. I'm glad to report that I'm higher up the pecking order now. Mainly because Sam has passed away. But what I could have done was stick Genesis chapter 1 verse 26 just next to the picture.

And put people made in God's image. Maybe that would have been too cheeky. But the point is being in God's image makes people special. It gives us immediate worth and dignity even more than pets and plants.

This is our place in God's creation. And if this is our place in creation, then that determines our purpose. That is, if we are made to represent God's rule by ruling like him, then that's our purpose. To rule like him. So point to in your outlines, verse 29 in your Bibles. Verse 28, sorry. God blessed humanity, them, and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number.

[13:49] 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. 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. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of 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 as well.

And it was so. God saw what he had made and it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning the sixth day. Here we begin to see what it means to rule like God.

There's four things here. First, it means filling the earth like God. Do you remember last week how I tried to show you the first three days of creation was God forming the earth?

I had that little picture I should put out again today. And he forms the earth. And the second three days, he fills the earth. So he forms the earth with sea and sky. And then another day, he fills the sea with fish and fills the sky with birds.

[15 : 00] He fills the earth with life, in other words. And so too are we then to fill the earth with life, like him. This is partly why humanity was created as male and female, so that those who get married could be fruitful, increase in number and fill the earth.

Now, we humans seem to have done all right at this part, haven't we? I mean, the current world population is 7.5 billion people. And it means, I take it, that those who get married or are planning to get married ought to try for kids at some stage if they are able, rather than simply choosing not to because they'd prefer a quieter life.

I remember meeting some Christians at an old church of mine, and they said the reason that they didn't have kids and were not planning children was not because of infertility issues or their age or some other problem, but they said it was because kids would get in the way of our weekend.

I'm not sure they were ruling like God at that point. And for those who are single, I take it that you should have a positive attitude towards kids, like Jesus did, who was single.

For ruling God's world in His image, firstly, means filling it. Secondly, it means subduing it. That is to bring creation under our control. And again, we've done okay at this.

[16 : 24] After all, we've created solar energy to harness the power of the sun. We have ruled over gravity by creating planes and rocket ships. We have controlled the water of rivers and seas with dams and hydroelectric plants and so on.

We're doing all right at subduing. We're to rule it by bringing it under control, he says. And third, we have to rule by working God's creation. Come across in your Bibles to chapter 2, verse 15.

It's towards the top of page 3, chapter 2, verse 15, where we're given another look of what it means to rule the world. The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden.

Why? Well, to work it and take care of it, he says. So here, ruling the world means, firstly, to work the world, to use its resources for good, like food and enjoyment.

It's okay to use things in the world for food and enjoyment. Chapter 4 of Genesis, a guy called Jubal creates music for enjoyment. Genesis 4, verse 22, another guy called Tubal Cain uses iron and bronze to make tools.

[17 : 32] Chapter 9, verse 20, Noah uses grapes to make wine. Ruling means working the world and using it, but not abusing it.

Because, fourthly, ruling God's world means caring for it. Chapter 2, verse 15. So I take it this means not wasting water and electricity, which I'm trying to teach my children not to do.

Not just because it saves us money, but because it's part of caring for God's world. It means there's a reason to recycle. It means there's a reason not to litter. It means there's a reason to care for plants and animals.

And we have some in our church who are particularly good at this. Because all this is what it means to be in God's image and rule like him. Our kids are getting old enough for me to leave them at home for a little while.

If I've got a meeting here at church, I can duck across. And sometimes when I go, I'll say, oh, so-and-so, you're in charge. Once when I said that to one of them, they responded by singing, I've got the power.

[18 : 33] I then chose someone else. No, I didn't actually, because they're kind of right, actually. They are made in my image. They look like me, unfortunately.

And then they have my authority to rule like me. In fact, they even started speaking like me. Put your bags away. Fruit before biscuits. And all those other things I apparently say.

Being in God's image means we have the power to rule over creation. Or certainly we were created to have the power anyway. This is our place. And this is our purpose. But it's not our only purpose. We're also created to rest with God. So point through in your outlines, chapter 2, verse 1 in your Bibles. Notice how three times we're told here that God worked.

Work is a good thing. But it's not the goal. Rest is the goal. And the six days were headed towards the seventh day, the day of rest.

[19 : 47] And that's why the seventh day is special. It's why God blessed it and made it holy. That is, set it apart as special. Because on it, he had reached his goal of rest. God worked at making his creation so that he might then rest with his creation, including us.

It's a picture of fellowship. That once the creation was done, it was now time to enjoy and rest in fellowship with it. And as I said last week, the seventh day of rest and fellowship had no end.

Do you notice? There is no morning or evening on the seventh day. There's no eighth day. This rest and fellowship was meant to last forever. And so this picture here is a little bit different to our week where we work for five days or whatever it is and then rest for two.

Here in Genesis, the rest was to continue the whole time while they worked. It's a picture of humanity enjoying God's rest even as they work.

As humanity rules by filling and subduing, by working and caring, they do so always in fellowship and enjoyment with God. It's as though even humanity's work was restful.

[21 : 00] I mean, I remember when my children were younger and after spending a whole weekend with them, I'd go back to work for a rest, right? I don't know how Michelle and all you other mums do it.

But that's not the picture here. Rather, our rule like God was created to be in constant fellowship with God, such that even our work was restful. Wouldn't that be nice?

You see, we have a special place in God's world as God's image bearers who represent his rule.

And so our purpose is to rule the world like him, but in fellowship with him.

Of course, the problem is we live this side of Genesis chapter 3, where sin came into the world. Sin has corrupted our image and ruined our rule and rest.

How? Well, instead of always filling the world with life, there is now disease like infertility and there is death, which takes life. Instead of always subduing creation, it sometimes subdues us.

[22 : 00] You know, with floods and earthquakes. Tsunamis and cyclones. Drought and fire. And then there's death that subdues us all.

And our work? Well, it's now often hard and not restful. Not always joyful. As Genesis 3 will say, the ground is now cursed and so we work it by the sweat of our brow.

It's hard. Which is why we have Monday-itis. I mean, how many of you workers out there wake up on Monday morning full of excitement at the prospect of another full week of work?

Yes. Not many. If any. If any. Work is now hard. And even though we work hard at something, another person can come along and ruin it.

And although you may be able to help people with your work, death will one day put an end to it all. And caring for God's creation? Well, the creation that we are to use for good, we end up misusing for bad.

[23 : 08] And so instead of ruling over these things, they rule over us. For example, when Noah used grapes to make wine in chapter 9, he ends up getting drunk. The wine ends up ruling over him.

Or the tools created in Genesis 4 are then misused in Genesis 11 to build the Tower of Babel. Or we simply don't care enough for God's world and selfishly abuse it.

Or we care too much for it such that plants and animals become so important they end up ruling over us. And we serve them. You see, every part of our rule over creation is spoiled by sin.

We can still rule, yes, but only partially, not perfectly. And what's more, even our rest is ruined by sin. It has broken our fellowship with God and kicked us out of God's rest.

And all this means that our very humanity as God's image bearers is fatally flawed. The good news, of course, is that Christ, in Christ, our humanity can be restored.

[24 : 11] Which brings us to our final point, point four, and our second reading. So on the next slide, we heard from Colossians chapter 1, this. The Son, that is Jesus, is the image of the invisible God.

The firstborn, by which he means the ruler, the heir, over all creation. For all things were created through him and for him. To be ruled by him.

And notice here that image is again linked to ruling. And Jesus is the perfect image of God who rules over all things. And that makes him the perfect human.

Because being human is to be made in God's image, remember? And just as God ruled for the good of his creation, so too did Jesus. For he didn't stay on his throne in heaven, but he came down to earth for us.

He went to the cross to pay for our sins so that we can be forgiven and have our image restored. We can be human again, in other words.

[25 : 14] For by believing in Jesus, God gives us new spiritual life now, which is being renewed in his image. And so on the next slide, in chapter 3 of Colossians, we read that those who believe in Jesus have put on the new self.

That new spiritual life, which is being renewed in the knowledge and the image of its creator. In the image of God. What's more, we'll also be given new physical life later in heaven.

Again, in the image of Christ. So that we'll be able to rule over creation as we were meant to. So on the bottom of the screen there, from 1 Corinthians, we read, And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, Adam, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man, Jesus.

You see, Jesus is the one who enables us to be restored into God's image again. And to have new spiritual life now, which is being renewed in God's image. And to have new physical life later in Christ's image.

And by doing so, Jesus is the one who enables our very humanity to be restored. For to be human is to be made in God's image, remember. But Jesus can only do all this for those who believe in him.

[26 : 24] And so the first question is, do you? Do you believe in Jesus? Because if you don't, then you won't be truly human.

Your image will continue to be fatally flawed, which means your humanity will continue to be fatally flawed. Jesus not only restores the image, he restores our humanity.

And for us who do, then it means that while we are to continue to fill this world with life by having or helping kids, depending on our situation, we are all to fill the world to come with life by promoting and proclaiming the gospel.

For then people will come to life eternal. And enjoy the new creation where there's no more disease and death that prevents and takes life.

Instead, there'll only be life to the full. And while we are to keep subduing the world now with limited success, we know that we will subdue the world to come with complete success.

[27 : 24] For we will reign on earth with Christ. I even wonder if we'll be able to control the winds and the waves like Christ. I used to surf a long time ago.

And the thought of being able to command a nice set of waves to surf on in the world to come is quite appealing to me. I'm not sure if that's actually going to happen or not.

But either way, while we only partially subdue and control the world now, we will fully subdue the world to come and even death.

And while we're to keep working in this world, since God sees work as good and laziness as bad, Christ gives us even more reason to find joy in work. For the Bible says that we are to work wholeheartedly as those serving the Lord.

Knowing we will receive an inheritance from him as a reward, says Colossians 3. Christ even gives us work that will never be in vain, that death will never take away.

[28 : 26] The work of the Lord. Whether it's teaching Sunday school or Bible study or praying for people or encouraging one another in the faith, God will use that work to impact people's lives for eternity.

And so it will never be in vain, that work. Death will never take that work away. It has eternal value. And while we're to keep caring for this creation, we're to do so knowing that there is a new creation to come.

And so not hold too tightly to this one. He even restores our rest. For as we believe in Christ, we are given spiritual rest with God now, such that we are always in fellowship with him all the time.

And on that last day, Christ will also give us physical rest in heaven. And so we are to encourage each other to keep trusting in Jesus until we enter that physical rest.

For we are God's image bearers, restored in Christ, and so even more valuable in God's sight. And our purpose is to rule God's world in Christ and to enjoy God's rest with Christ, both now and the life to come.

[29 : 32] Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we do thank you for this word, although it's been longer and a bit trickier to understand. We're not used to thinking in these ways, but there is great truth and richness to be enjoyed.

That our humanity finds its value in being made in your image. And that in Christ, we are restored to that image, now spiritually and later physically.

Father, we do pray that you would help us, therefore, to keep rejoicing in who you've made us to be. Help us to keep seeking to be renewed in the likeness of your Son. Help us to encourage one another to that final day of rest in heaven.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.