

What Is Man?

Genesis 1:26-27

What does it mean to be a human being?

People have wondered this as long as thinking has been a thing—and with good reason! Few other questions have such enormous consequences for how we live our lives and treat others. For as long as humans have been pondering this, you might think that we should have settled on a satisfying answer by now. (One ancient philosopher who proposed to define man as a “featherless biped” was promptly gifted a chicken with its feathers plucked off, along this note: “Here’s your man!”) Are humans part of a passing phase in the meandering stroll of evolution? Are we complex arrangements of a few basic elements? Are we minds trapped in bodies? The ironic thing about this question is that we ask it about *ourselves*. Shouldn’t it be obvious to us what we are?

This seems very strange.

But strangeness itself gives us a clue: whatever it means to be human cannot be answered on our own. We are a part of something bigger than ourselves—a puzzle piece shaped to fit something or someone else.

To the question people have long puzzled over, the Bible gives a clear answer: Human beings are made in the image of God so that, in loving obedience to God, we may wisely cultivate the rest of God’s creation for God’s glory.

1. What bearing God’s image *means*

What does it mean that we bear God’s image? In Genesis 1:26-28 we see three essential components:

- a. **Resemblance.** The word *image* tells us that *we resemble God*. Suppose a king sets up a statue of himself. When his subjects look at the statue, they should get an idea of what their king looks like. In a similar way, something about God’s nature is reflected in human beings.
- b. **Relationship.** Taken together, the words *image* and *likeness* (along with the fact that God engages in a personal relationship with humans) tells us that *we are meant to enjoy a relationship with God*. In Genesis 5:3 the same words (image and likeness) used in Genesis 1:26 are used to describe the relationship between Adam and his son Seth.
- c. **Rule.** The practical outworking of our resemblance to God and relationship with God is that *we are to rule for God*. God made humans in his image and likeness *so that* they may have dominion/rule over the other creatures. For this dominion to work properly, humans must stand in a right relationship with God, resembling God in his benevolent purposes for which he created the universe.

Obviously, our bearing God’s image must be seen in light of another reality: we have fallen into sin. Therefore, to properly describe the human condition, we must say that *humans continue to bear God’s image but in a distorted way*. To be a sin-infected human is to live in contradiction to our own humanness.

2. What this truth *does for us*

The truth—that humans bear God’s image but have fallen into sin—is immensely valuable.

- a. **It explains us.** Here is the key that unlocks the mystery of our bizarre beliefs and behavior—of our striving for greatness but always falling into wretchedness, of our

search for certainty but constant feeling of uncertainty. No other theory of human behavior is bold or broad enough to wrap its arms around the puzzle of the human condition. The only answer that can properly explain us is the one the Bible gives us: we are created in God's image but have fallen into sin.

- b. **It unsettles us.** This explanation satisfies our minds, but it unsettles our hearts. It may explain why we behave the way we do, but it also tells us that we ought not to be this way.
- c. **It points us to Christ.**
 - i. **As our Savior.** The New Testament picks up the theme of humans bearing God's image, teaching us that Jesus of Nazareth is *the* image of God (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3; 2 Corinthians 4:4). He is so because he perfectly *resembles* God—he is, after all, God the Son). He enjoyed a perfect *relationship* with God—always obeying and loving him. And in his resemblance and relationship, he also perfectly *ruled* for God—but in the most unexpected way. As conquering King, he triumphed over sin and death by dying on a cross.
 - ii. **As our goal.** Jesus not only stands in our place as the true image of God, but he also enables us to become what we should be. Having been rescued by Christ, we his followers are now becoming like Christ: we are “being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18); we are to “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24).

This process of becoming like Christ is . . .

1. **Gradual** - It is by “degrees” (2 Corinthians 3:18) and mirrors biological development (1 Peter 2:2)
2. **Painful** - It involves suffering—but suffering guaranteed not to be pointless, but purposeful (Romans 8:16-18; 2 Corinthians 4:17)
3. **Glorious** - The goal is glorious, and so is each step along the way (2 Corinthians 3:18), even though this glory is “in jars of clay” (4:7).
4. **Certain** - There is an unbroken line from God's having chosen us before the foundations of the world to God's bringing his purpose to completion. “Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29).

Discussion

1. Why is it important to have a clear understanding of what it means to be a human—in terms of how we think about ourselves and others?
2. There are other views of what it means to be a human. How are these views affecting our culture?
3. Understanding the Bible's explanation for the human condition (we are created in God's image but have fallen into sin) can give us both courage and compassion in speaking with our friends, coworkers, and neighbors. What are some topics of conversations in which both qualities are especially important?
4. Jesus is the true image of God: he perfectly resembles God, relates to God, and rules for God. How should that truth shape our attitude and affections toward him?
5. The Christian life is a gradual, painful, glorious, and certain progress toward Christlikeness. If you had to choose one of these aspects to be thinking about as you wake up on Monday morning, which would you choose and why?