

Genesis 1-2 - What does it mean to be human

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[0 : 00] A reading from Psalms 8, page 546. What is mankind that you are mindful of them?

Human beings that you care for them. You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands. You put everything under their feet, all flocks and herds and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. Amen. That's great. Thank you for reading for us, Elle. Do turn in your Bibles to Genesis chapter 1, which we're going to refer to Psalm 8 briefly, but do turn to Genesis 1.

It's right at the beginning of your Bibles. Like I said with the children, we've been looking over these summer weeks at the doctrine of creation. So not so much working through Genesis 1 to 3, verse by verse, but looking at the themes of creation, what does it mean that God made the world?

[1 : 32] So we looked at the God who made the world and we thought about that together. What is God like? We then looked at the world that God made. What kind of world did God make?

We realized that he made the world to be with us. And this week we're thinking about humanity, the people that God made. And next week we're going to be looking at the fall, what went wrong in the world that God made.

So let me pray and ask for the Lord's help as we come to his word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, it would be very easy for us just to think of this as a human exercise for me trying to pass information from my brains into the brains of those people in front of me.

But Lord, that's not what's going on here. These are your words. And we, all of us, me and everyone else, are sitting to listen to you.

We long, Lord, not just to learn new ideas, but to hear your voice. We long to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus. We long to live lives of purpose and meaning and significance for his praise and his glory.

[2 : 45] So be with us and help us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Now, I think probably one of the most important Christian books of the last 10 years was a book called Love Thy Body.

Nancy Peercy, who's the author, points out in the book that most people in the West now think very differently to their grandparents or certainly their great-grandparents about issues such as abortion or euthanasia or marriage or gender or sex and sexuality.

Now, that's not that surprising, isn't it? We all know that. In fact, if the most important Christian book of the last 10 years just told you that, then any of us in this room could have written it, couldn't we?

But we didn't. And Nancy Peercy is brighter than all of us.

Probably most of us all put together as well. But actually, the thing that comes through from that book, which is really fascinating, is that the reason behind those changes, the reason that you and I think differently or most people around us will think differently to their grandparents on these issues, is because of one single change that's behind them all, a fundamental shift in our thinking.

In other words, new ideas about marriage, gender, sex, abortion, and euthanasia are, she says, symptoms of a deeper change, a deeper shift in thinking. And Peercy argues that it's a shift in what we think it means to be human.

[4 : 09] Now, forgive me for just going into the detail of this this morning, but it is important for us. We, all of us, whether you call yourself a Christian or not this morning, all of us have lived and are living through a period of massive cultural change.

And it is largely driven by this shift in thinking about what it means to be human. It means for most people now, being human is understood by splitting apart two things which have traditionally been held together, are certainly held together in Christian theology.

The West today tells us that our physical bodies and our minds are separate from one another and that actually our minds and our feelings and our perceptions are primary and our bodies are secondary.

And that mind first, body later shift means that if you want to know what your life is for, what is the purpose of your existence, you look not at your body but you look to your mind.

What are your feelings? How do you think? Think about it like this with me and this is Piercy's illustration, not mine, so if you don't like it you can pick it up with her. But imagine a car and a driver. [5 : 25] The car is the means of getting from A to B but the rule and the decision and the purpose come from the driver of the car. And in modern thinking now, your body is just a car that your mind is driving.

The body is sort of a container for the real you. It is not the real you. And sometimes, in contemporary thought at least, the car is an unreliable one.

It needs a few modifications to make it suit the driver's preferences. Now think about how that works. If your mind is you and your body is just the container, then it means, doesn't it, that if somebody has a mind that is damaged but a body that is functional, maybe because of age or dementia or disability or perhaps because they're an unborn child who is not yet capable of articulating thoughts and feelings, in contemporary speak you are less than someone who is of sound mind.

And so what can you do? Well, you are able, under certain circumstances, to dispose of those with bodies without functioning minds, which of course is abortion and euthanasia.

Nancy Pearcey gives other examples. She gives the example of sexuality. She says, you know, think about when the sexual desires of your mind don't match up with the sexual makeup of your body. Which one wins?

[6 : 54] Your body or your mind? Now for centuries it's been our bodies but now of course it's our minds and that's why marriage has been redefined. Or what about if you find yourself drawn to the particular cultural stereotypes that go along with a gender that doesn't match your body?

Do you follow your mind or do you follow your body? Well, the shift in thinking says the mind should win. The mind is more important than the body. Your mind is telling the truth, your body is lying and needs to be corrected or rejected or just ignored.

Now I realise the danger of starting here is that this is all very theoretical, isn't it? This is all in the ideas of sort of philosophy and worldview. But we're not really in that realm, are we? This shift in how we think about what it means to be human has lots of deeply personal effects on us.

I don't think there's anybody in this room who remains unaffected by this shift in thinking. It's impacted not only people that we love but it's also become confusing for ourselves.

You know, what are we supposed to say to children when they come home from school telling us that they feel like they're in the wrong body? That's how they've been told to understand themselves. Or what do we do when family members start putting in place plans for assisted suicide in the face of sickness?

[8 : 07] What do we do when feelings and desires that we have personally, that our grandparents would have told us to resist, we're now told that we must act on them for our own good? It's a confusing and painful world to live in.

And so as we come to Genesis 1 and 2 this morning and we're going to think about what it means to be human in God's definition, we are in the kind of world of ideas and theories but we are also boots on the ground in real life.

I want to show you from Genesis 1 to 3 that the definition of being human from here gives you the possibility of a richer, deeper, more fulfilling life than anything the world has to offer.

In fact, I think I'd go as far as to say that it is impossible for any of us in this room to flourish as people without understanding God's definition of what it means to be human from Genesis 1 and 2. So let's get into this. Let me start off with a definition of being human from Genesis 1 and 2 and then I'm going to break it down for you. This I think is a fair summary of what we will find in these chapters that a human being is both body and spirit, either male or female and always made in the image of God.

[9 : 17] We're going to just look at those three main parts and then I'm going to think about some applications for us. The first one is body and spirit. A human being is both body and spirit.

Now you'll know if you were with us last week that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 both contain the creation account with different camera angles on it and we are told in chapter 2 verse 7 that the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being.

Here we see the two interwoven components of a person. Flesh from the dust and life from the breath of God. Body and spirit.

And it's the combination of those things together which make us a living being. It's worth noting that the word for living beings is the same as the word for living creature in chapter 1 verse 20 and 21 and 24 is the word translated the breath of life in chapter 1 verse 30.

So in the first sense the idea here is that to be human is to possess a living animated thinking sensing perceiving flesh like an animal. But there is also a unique dignity that means that human beings are distinct from the other living beings.

[10:39] The breath of God is breathed in personally in verse 7 through the nose. It seems to be an indication of the proximity of God. His breath was focused. It's not a gust of wind that just happens to pass by.

And then again in the creation of woman from the side of man God fashions her from the rib and brings her to the man. An idea which gets expanded on of humanity being made in the image of God which we're going to consider in a moment.

But for now just see that God didn't just make minds and then put them into bodies but God made us bodies and minds living beings people of both body and spirit.

The body is the person. It's not so much a car and a driver. I was trying to think of what's an alternative illustration to a car and a driver. I couldn't really think of one but here you go. It's more like a flying carpet where body and spirit are the interwoven fabric of the carpet.

Right? They are they are intimately involved with one another. A mind cannot be trapped in the wrong body because the body and the mind are so close together that it's not possible. Of course it's true isn't it?

[11:48] In a post-fall world and we'll think about this next week that it is possible for our spirits to be separated from our bodies our souls to live separate from our bodies in the glories of heaven as we wait for the return of Christ.

But the Christian hope is not a bodiless existence floating around in the sky the Christian hope is the hope of the resurrection of the body the physical return of Jesus Christ to this earth in his resurrection body to raise our bodies that they may be reunited with our souls to live with him in a physical universe.

But it's worth pondering this isn't it? The Bible is unashamed of your body not because the Bible is immodest God covers the nakedness of his people in Genesis 3 we'll find next week but all the same God does not think that your body is embarrassing or dirty or to be ignored.

Genesis 1 and 2 contradicts the idea that how you are made has nothing to say about what your life is for. God has designed your body and has given it to you to teach you what your life is for.

You are mind and body body and soul and when God comes to save he comes in the person of the son who clothes himself in flesh like ours not just so that he can die although of course that is central to his mission dying for sin and for salvation that he might forgive us for our sins but also for the purpose of resurrection too a physical presence that God might be with us in body.

[13:26] So we are made body and spirit secondly we are male and female look back at chapter 1 verse 27 so God created mankind in his own image in the image of God he created them male and female he created them again this is linked to what it means to be made in the image of God and we are coming to that in a moment but let's notice this distinction between men and women that is woven into creation from the beginning here in chapter 1 as humanity is made in the same time in chapter 1 and then in chapter 2 made independently with the woman being fashioned by God from the rib of man Matthew Henry the commentator famously pointed out 300 years ago that woman was made not from the foot of man to be downtrodden nor from the head to rule over him but from the side to walk alongside him whether that's the meaning of the rib is debatable but the point is that the distinction between the sexes is not to do with cultural stereotypes there are no cultural stereotypes in Genesis 1 and 2 right no one's written a piece of music yet no one has built a building no one has done any art yet there is no cultural stereotypes football was not invented yet ballet had not been done yet okay so there's no cultural stereotypes with which God makes man and woman rather he makes them male and female the distinction is a distinction given by God so

that man and woman are by definitions given to them by him sorry that was a completely confusing sentence the definition of man and woman was given to them by God which are biologically present in every cell of their bodies you know so that despite the huge similarity between us as men and women the difference is literally watermarked in us all the way through us again this is really precious the more you think about it you know the shift that we've experienced in contemporary culture this splitting apart of the body and the mind that we were thinking about means that the world asks our children don't they are you a boy or a girl how do you feel what do you think what are you more drawn to and then they're medicated to make their bodies conform to the decision that their immature mind has made and we call that freedom but it's actually oppression and the bible comes along with true freedom doesn't it and says listen

God made you he made you and he loves you he's made you body and spirit male or female now go and explore how you can bring glory to him and that is wonderfully liberating it's wonderfully precious as we're made with that kind of dignity so humanity is made body and spirit we're made male or female next we are made in the image of God now we could spend ages on this because really if you want a headline for what the bible says about it means what it means to be human you could just say it means we are made in the image of God a human being is the image of God so look back at chapter 1 verse 26 then God said let us make mankind in our image in our likeness so that they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds in the sky over the livestock and over all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground so God created mankind in his own image in the image of God he created them male and female he created them

God blessed them and said to them be fruitful and increase in number 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 in the ground now notice here that being in the image of God is a unique dignity afforded to humanity alone so that all creation reflects the glory of the one who made it but humanity is uniquely made in the image of God this is really important it is not so much that humanity carry the image of God people sometimes use the word that we are image bearers but it's more than that we are ourselves the image of God think about it like this it's not like someone says to you what does God look like you pull out a picture in your pocket and say you know this is what God looks like you wouldn't do that with God because you can't take a picture of God maybe your father what does your father look like and you pull a picture out your pocket it's not that you're not carrying an image of God you are the image of God what does your father look like he looks like me you can see him in me and that's what's going on here uniquely humanity carry in themselves the image of God it seems doesn't it in the context that this image is related to the purpose that humanity are given according to verse 26 it's so that they might rule they are made to be ambassadors in God's world stewarding and caring for what he has made they're to continue this gardening work that was started by God in chapter 2 verses 5 and 6 this is what

El read for us in Psalm 6 Psalm 8 isn't it verse 6 you made them rulers over the work of your hands this is how God has made us you put everything under their feet all flocks and herds and the animals of the wild the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea all that swim the paths of the seas God hands responsibility to humanity uniquely responsible for the world that God has made and they are accountable to God for stewarding his creation again we're going to see more of this next week but they are given rules by which to do it in other words being God's image means doing his work in righteous ways doing it in conformity to the commands that he has given them naming the creatures forming and filling the garden in a way that all the other living creatures are incapable of it also seems that this image though is something that is done by the complementarity of male and female it seems that it is impossible on their own for a man or a woman to reflect the image of God in quite the same way as that they're able to together it is the diversity in men and women that is made to reflect the diversity of father son and spirit it is man and woman who are the image of God as the writer of Genesis

Moses points out in chapter 2 verses 24 and 25 if you glance over to that he's there got a little editorial note about what marriage is he says the two become one flesh not just for their own pleasure but as they serve this greater good of reflecting God to creation Adam and Eve come together and bear children and work the garden as father son and spirit united together have created the universe so Adam can't do what God has given him to do without a woman which means not only that man and woman are equal image bearers but that it is their unity which brings the image of God even more apparent now we could spend longer on that I've whistled through

those three things we are made body and spirit male or female and we're made in the image of God now those things stand in stark contrast to how the world defines what it means to be human but let me pull out three specific applications for us I want to talk about dignity I want to talk about authority and I want to talk about community so let's start with dignity

[20 : 48] I want to suggest to you that actually everybody loves the idea of dignity don't they we all want to be treated personally we want to be treated with dignity even the famous euthanasia clinic is called dignitas it's this idea of dignity but really I want to tell you that it's only Genesis 1 and 2 that gives you an account of the dignity that we have as humans I don't know whether you know but what your body is made up of right 60% of our bodies is made up of just water right 16% of us is protein 16% give or take a little bit is fat and 6% is minerals and then a few other bits alongside it now according to the internet which is a source of absolute reliability the price of those constituent parts is 78 pounds 66 pence if you wanted to buy the elements that make up a human being it would cost you 78 pounds 66 pence that is if you're using a particularly expensive form of hydrogen as well if you were prepared to just use water from the tap it would cost you about 35 quid which is a bargain right in other words because the value of our bodies has very little to do with our constituent parts right that the value of humanity is a value that is assigned to it from outside of itself not something that springs from itself because of what it's made of now that might be a bit complicated it's really important so let me give you an example imagine for a moment you collect autographs that's not a thing anyone does anymore is it you collect selfies now but right okay imagine that you collected autographs and so you came to me in a moment of weakness because you're really struggling right you came to me and said will you sign my autograph so I sign your autograph yeah I'll sign that you know and you take my autograph right and then you walk out church and you see

Stormzy walking down the street and you go I know him he got an honorary! PhD from Cambridge this week did you know that or was it Oxford one of the two anyway and you go I know him I'm going to get his autograph as well so he signs your book right now those two pages in your book are worth exactly the same amount right Steve Stormzy similar length right so there's a similar amount of ink on the page the constituent elements of those two pieces of paper are worth exactly the same but which is more important to you which is more precious of course it's Stormzy's isn't it because of who he is he has signed it it carries his signature there is an assigned value to that page which is higher than the value of the page that I signed because of who wrote it and that's the same here isn't it God has assigned a value to humanity which is greater than the 35 pounds that it would cost to make us because we have his signature on us we are signed by the one who made us and that is where our dignity comes from we are from the dust aren't we without the animating work of God that is all we are but in Genesis 1 and 2 humanity is given a dignity beyond the value of its elements as a reflection of the glory of God

God had his fingerprints all over us and we are called good very good by the God who made us in his image now importantly that dignity belongs to us regardless of who we are right regardless of what we've done regardless of where we are from an unborn child carries that same dignity as you or I do that the person who is lost in dementia has that same dignity that you or I do because it is assigned to them by God it's not because of what they are capable of it is because of whose image they were made in so it's not just wrong to kill the unborn child because it is a real baby it is wrong to kill the child because they are created in the image of God and they carry the divine dignity euthanasia is wrong because even when you are lost in dementia or you are facing the end of your life through a terminal illness you still carry the dignity of God assigned to us made in his image there are loads more implications of that aren't there let me just pull out one to you which I think is particularly important for us think about racism we live in a world blighted by racial discrimination don't we where people's experience of life has often been dictated to them by the colour of their skin or the cultural heritage that they're from the story of humanity has tragic chapters of enslavement and colonisation now I would imagine that if you spoke to almost anybody in London if you spoke to someone on the bus which you're not really supposed to do but you can do it if you want to speak to someone on the bus and you said to them what do you think about racism I think 99% of people would tell you that they they are bored they think it's a terrible thing they think it's wrong if you then say to them why they're going to be stumped why is it wrong why is it wrong to treat people differently based on the colour of their skin if we are not made by God in the image of God if we are just here by chance and really it is selfish self-interest which defines what the human

life is for the mind ruling trying to get its own way and making everyone else conform to what my mind says if that's the story and there is no assigned dignity to people then racism can't be wrong but if the truth is that we were created by God assigned dignity by the one who made us who loves the difference and the distinction in the world that he's made in fact is especially glorified by that distinction then of course racism is wrong not only because it's an offence to the person who's receiving it but because it's an offence to the God who made them we're precious you know our church should be the safest place in the world to be and to be who you are because we know that everyone in this room is precious because we are signed by the God of glory who made us with dignity secondly authority authority notice here that God made humanity with a purpose of ruling over creation they're given this subordinate authority over what he's made and actually those two things go together don't they it is it is as Adam and Eve submit to God and his rule that they gain authority over what he has made we're going to think about that some more what went wrong next week but it means doesn't it that life has a purpose right life has been given to you to me that we might continue what God has started in creation that we might fail subdue and rule over creation now obviously you don't need me to tell you that idea has been massively abused is it we don't have the sort of privilege of pillaging creation for whatever we desire there's a sense of stewardship and responsibility that's given here but still God has given us work to do not as a punishment but as a blessing creation does not need to be left to go to wild it needs humanity to garden it's a blessing to creation and it's part of following him you know the garden in the bible becomes you know we get excluded from it but then as you go on in the story it becomes you know a camp a settlement a town a city a nation a global economy as humanity in a very broken way are carrying on with this work of filling and subduing the earth we have this collective responsibility not as ultimate authority but as subordinate with what is called the cultural mandate now that means loads of different things doesn't it but amongst other things

I don't know where you're going to find yourself tomorrow what is it you're going to be doing tomorrow maybe you're going to work maybe you don't like your job very much maybe you're going to be at home and you know that you've got chores to do you've got washing to fold tomorrow you've got meals to cook for people it means doesn't it that actually God is interested in even those things and those things are an opportunity for us to live out the lives that he's given us by doing a good job by organising our little corner of creation by folding the washing tidying the flat serving those around us that is our opportunity to bring God glory it's fascinating isn't it if in the world's eyes this idea of splitting your mind and your body means that what the purpose of your life is to think really hard about what it is that you want and there you will find your purpose if Genesis 1 and 2 are true then what you find is actually your job is to reflect who God is in the way that he's made you and use that as an opportunity to serve those around you and there you will find purpose and it's a much more satisfying way to live finally community we don't have loads of time left to go into this but let's try and discover it quickly notice humanity are not only made for relationship with God we saw that last week don't we are made to be with him but we are also made for relationship with one another look down at chapter 2 verse 18 the Lord God said it is not good for the man to be alone [30 : 26] I will make a helper suitable for him now that I think is an easily misunderstood verse what is not good I don't think it's loneliness it's not just that he looks at man and says it is sad that he's on his own when in verse 20 it says that no suitable helper is found it's not about companionship so much as it is about service it's really here about being able to do and to be what God has called Adam to be and to do Adam on his own is unable to fill and subdue creation he needs a suitable helper he needs a woman so that together they can work not just on the garden but also on the procreation that will be needed to fill the earth now we don't have time to uncover all of the Bible's teaching on sex marriage and singleness and it's more nuanced than what's just in Genesis 1 and 2 it's changed by the fall it's changed and transformed actually by the need for people to hear of Jesus which actually is even more important isn't it and again we're going to consider that more in a moment but the main point here is that we cannot be truly human on our own we need one another not just in marriage but we need friendships we need co-workers filling the earth and subduing the earth is not something we can do on our own not just because of procreation but also because of the need for community and fellowship and friendship and working alongside one another in fact it seems that living the good life is for the benefit of others this is what we're made for communities of mutual benefit where we put the needs of one another ahead of our own not the survival of the fittest but support for the weakest body and spirit man or woman in the image of God dignity authority and community now just as we finish return to this massive cultural

shift that we have lived through a shift that's risen from this redefinition of what it means to be human

I want you to see that the basic difference between what the world says it means to be human and what the Bible says it is to be human is the presence of God right what the world has effectively done is it's pushed God out of the definition of what it means to be human and what we think we've done is we've lost God and gained ourselves what we've really done is we've lost God and we lost ourselves with him and so really in order to be truly human you need not only to understand how God made you and what God made you for you also need to know God that's what Genesis 1 and 2 are saying you know without God without his image in us you will not really be able to understand dignity authority or community you'll have scraps of them because you've got leftovers of them glimmers of them but you won't have the real thing and that means doesn't it that the need of our world your need this morning whether you'd call yourself a Christian or not your need my need this morning is I need

God in my life I need to know the Lord to know myself I need to know the one who made me and of course as I think about that I think that's really difficult how can how can I know God I know that I've lived my life for myself I know that I've lived as if I could live perfectly well without God and I've lost myself as a result how can I possibly invite God back into my life well the good news of the gospel is that God hasn't waited for you to come and meet with him he knew he'd never do that he has come to meet with us God the son took on human flesh he was born into this world coming to meet us and forgive us liberating us not only from our crazy definitions of humanity but also from the weight of guilt that piles up from using this life that God has given us for the purposes of selfishness God creates us in his image he saves us by taking on ours being born as a man dying on a cross that we might find ourselves in knowing him let me pray and then we'll sing loving heavenly father we thank you so much that our preciousness is a gift from you thank you that every person in this room has your fingerprints all over them and so we want to pray please that you would help us to find ourselves in knowing you we pray especially maybe for people in this room who would not yet call themselves Christians we pray that they might realize that this great search for themselves is found in looking to you and knowing you and we pray please that through the person of the Lord Jesus we might all meet with you this morning and we ask these things in his name amen
amen