

In the beginning

Part 4 – Made in God’s image. But what for?

How would you rewrite Genesis in twenty first century terms to make its meaning clear? How, for instance, would you explain in language people understand today what **Genesis 1:27** means? It says in that verse that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.”

That’s a pretty important verse, because it states very clearly that it was God who designed human beings, both male and female - and what he designed us for, to be his image-bearers. But how do we explain what that means to people in our age today, so that they’re excited by it, and they really come alive with a new sense of purpose for their lives?

And I use the word ‘excited’, because wasn’t that how God felt at the creation of our world? You can almost hear the excitement in his voice in **verse 26** when he says, “Let’s make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

This wasn’t some dry old stick commanding everything into existence reluctantly, or a domineering god like the gods of the ancient Near East creating humans to be their slaves. This was the great Creator of all things forming a creature that could really make something of the wonderful world he’d created. Can we sense the joy, therefore, that God had in creating little versions of himself who would relish the chance to get at this marvelous world he’d brought into being to see what it’s made of?

It’s like the joy parents have in creating children, because now they’ve got these little spitting images of themselves who get excited at the same things they as parents get excited about. And it’s a huge joy for a parent watching a child’s eyes light up at some new discovery, and he can’t wait to get at it or learn more about it. And this is the God portrayed in Genesis, that the true God and Creator of all things delighted in creating little images of himself, whose eyes would light up at what he’d built into his creation and what they could make of it - because they understand this was exactly what he’d made this world for.

And the reason Genesis describes God in these terms is because the people of that day would understand what they meant. They'd see that God was very much like their own gods of the ancient world, who also had little images of themselves made and placed in their temples. But that's as far as the similarity went, because Genesis also made it abundantly clear that the true Creator God was vastly different to all the other gods. God, the true God, that is, had made HUMANS to be his images, not some lifeless thing made of wood, stone or metal.

This was staggeringly different to anything known in the ancient world, that the image God had made of himself and placed in **his** temple was a human being. And the reason for that was to equip humans to rule the world, not the gods. Humans had now been elevated to the highest position in creation, and they were fully capable of ruling it too, because God had made humans in his own likeness.

And that opened up other possibilities unheard of before too, because if God had made humans in his likeness, it meant humans liked what God likes. And by interesting coincidence Genesis describes exactly what God likes, because every time God created something he said it was very good. In other words, God loves his creation. He loves every bit of this world he made. So at the very heart and core of every human being is that same love for creation too.

At the heart and core of every human being, therefore, is the desire to look after this world and make it flourish, because to us it's very good too. And here we have the secret to what excites us humans and what makes us come alive with a real sense of purpose in life. It all goes back to the beginning, and realizing God made us in his image to love what he loves, and love it so much that as males and females we'd also love creating little baby images of God to share that love with. It's no wonder, then, that **Genesis 1:28** says we humans would "fill the earth and subdue it." We'd love reproducing children to share the enormous fun of exploring and discovering what this beautiful, amazing creation has to offer. And together as humans we'd love "subduing" it, or making it flourish and produce as God obviously intended and designed it - and us - for.

So what **did** God intend and design the Earth for? Well, surprisingly, to begin with, not much at all, as we see in **Genesis 2:4-6**, because "When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, no shrub of the field yet appeared on the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprung up (because) the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground."

Well, that sounds a bit odd, because in **Genesis 1:11-12** on the third day of creation “God said, ‘Let the land produce seed-bearing plants and trees that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.’ And it was so. The land produced vegetation...” So the land was already producing plants and trees on the third day. What’s the meaning, then, of no shrubs and no plants existing in the fields in chapter 2? And what’s all this about God holding back the rain, when he’d already said in **verse 29**, “I give you every seed-bearing plant and every tree that has fruit with seed in it for your food”?

Plants and trees are already producing food for humans, therefore, but they’re doing it without rain. How was that possible? Well, according to **Genesis 2:6**, “streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground.” Ah, so water was coming from streams bubbling up from below. But that being the case, why was rain necessary then? If the plants and trees could successfully produce food without rain, why have rain as well?

There are two clues for solving this mystery in **verse 5**. The first clue is in the phrase, “no shrub **of the field.**” The word ‘field’ suggests cultivation and farming. Farmers have fields. So that’s our first clue, that proper agriculture is being referred to here. Agriculture by definition means “the science or practice of farming, including cultivation of the soil for the growing of crops and the rearing of animals to provide food, wool, and other products.” That’s what humans do in fields. Fields are the deliberate spaces created by humans for the science and practice of farming to grow crops and rear animals.

The very first hint of what God intended and designed this Earth for, therefore, was the development of agriculture, the growing of plants and shrubs in fields. So when God provided all sorts of plants and trees for food and said, “Let’s make men and women in our image and likeness” to fill the earth and subdue it with their own babies, he meant, first and foremost, get busy being farmers. Learn how to work the land to make it produce abundant crops.

And to help with that God would produce rain at exactly the right time, when the seeds needed it to grow and fill out, and no rain when the seeds needed to ripen and be harvested. Rain in due season would be God’s part in the process.

The second clue in **verse 5** ties in perfectly with that too, of this lovely scene of farming families working the land and God providing the rain, in the phrase, “there was no man to work the ground.”

Up to this point, then, humans haven't been working the land. So nothing's appearing in any field yet because the process of agriculture hasn't begun. God's been bubbling up streams of water from below ground to keep things ticking over, yes, but he didn't create humans to live by simply plucking fruit off already existing trees, or snipping off a lettuce wherever they found one. He created humans to "subdue" the Earth, meaning set about the calculated, deliberate science and practice of farming the land to make it produce. And not only had God equipped men and women to do that, he would also bring rain in due season so that their work on the land would be wonderfully successful.

So here we have God and man working together to make the Earth flourish and support life for all those baby images of God being produced by male and female humans that would fill the Earth, spreading God's love for creation worldwide and making this planet work as he intended.

But notice that none of this got started **until** there was a "man to work the ground." For civilizations to grow and spread around the world to make God's creation prosper as he intended, it would need humans who naturally relish growing things from the land. And we only have to look at our world today as evidence of that. Which countries today, for instance, have grown and flourished the most, not only in the growth of their own sophisticated civilizations, but also in their contribution to the health and wealth of the world? It's the countries that have mastered the science of agriculture and producing crops. We also have what we still call "primitive people," who are still stuck in hunting and gathering mode, and where are they today? They're hidden away in jungles, contributing absolutely nothing to the rest of the world, and in danger of becoming extinct themselves.

God gave us the key right off the bat, then, as to what he made us in his image for. It was to cultivate and nurture what he'd created. This is what he meant by humans having dominion over the creation and subduing it. He meant develop it, starting with agriculture and learning the science of food production. A love for cultivating the land, therefore, was the first key step in humans experiencing and practicing being God's image-bearers.

Is it any surprise, then, that only two verses later in **Genesis 2:7**, God "formed man from the dust of the ground," and that it's mentioned right smack in the context of there being no crops in fields yet, because humans aren't working the land?

To kick off the cultivation of crops and to get the process of agriculture started, therefore, God forms a man of the soil, who from this point on would love working with the soil to make it produce. It's like a love of the soil had been placed at this moment in man's DNA, so that rather than just living off what the land was already producing from the plants and trees God created on Day 3 of creation, humans would want to work the soil to produce crops in deliberately laid out fields. It was this newly minted love for the land in humans that would make the growth of productive civilization possible, just as God intended.

And the Japanese are one group of people who especially understand this, insisting on their executives spending some time each year getting their hands dirty in the soil. The Japanese see the connection between the growth of a successful civilization and a love for the land. And there are more people in our own Western countries who are making that connection too, as city dwellers with good paying jobs decide to leave the city and "go back to the land," risking all sorts of ventures in organic farming and vineyards with no previous experience, and discovering in many cases that they are total naturals at it, and they turn out to be highly successful.

We're discovering it's in our DNA to want to get our hands into the soil to grow things, and create little vegetable plots even in the smallest yards. But in Genesis 2:7 we know why that is; it's because "God formed man from the dust of the ground." He grounded us in the ground. He put a love for the land into our DNA, so we can't help ourselves wanting to get at the soil and make it produce.

It explains why my 10 year-old granddaughter and I happily rescued a tiny little tree growing in our driveway, and replanted it in healthy soil with transplanting fertilizer to make it grow and flourish. And I noticed she loved every minute of it, taking it on as if she'd been a gardener all her life. She even talked to the tree each day too, telling it how much she loved it to encourage to grow.

To say instead that Genesis 2:7 is only describing the creation of the first ever human from ground dust is sad, because it misses out on the context of HOW God intended humans to go about having dominion over the Earth and subduing it. It was God's clear plan that it would begin with humans working the land and developing it, and that's why he gave us a love for the land. This is what we're made of and made for, so that humans would become God's very own architects, builders and developers of his creation. That's our calling, and it's so much higher than the typical view of humans at the time that Genesis was written.

And the way **Genesis 2:7** is phrased shows that. “God forming man from the dust of the ground” was taken from the typical view of humans in the ancient Near East, that the gods were like potters churning out little clay humans by the bucket load to become their slaves. To the gods humans were just unimportant minions designed to keep the world functioning on the gods’ behalf, so the gods didn’t have to do it. The gods had no other interest in humans otherwise.

But that wasn’t the case with the real Creator God. He formed humans for a completely different reason, and that’s what Genesis was written for, to explain that reason, and how vastly different it was to the prevailing views at the time.

The reason was simple: God had made the Earth his jewel in the universe, the location of his royal palace and temple, and he made humans in his likeness to share his love for this planet and his purpose for it. What humans would need, then - and what they were given in verse 7 - was the desire and the ability to work with the materials God had already created, all of which would come from the soil in some form or other, whether it was plant or tree material, metals, chemicals, and whatever else would be needed for developing his creation into a practical and beautiful society for God and humans dwelling together.

If, instead, Genesis 2:7 was only talking about the creation of the first ever human, then unfortunately it clashes with God having already made male and female humans on the sixth day of creation in Genesis 1:27. Humans, both male and female, in other words, already existed by the time we get to Genesis 2:7.

Ah, but doesn’t it say in the rest of **verse 7** that God “breathed into man’s nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being”? Isn’t that talking about life for the first time being given to a human being? But if that’s the case, then it too clashes with **verse 1** that says, “the heavens and the earth were completed” by the end of the sixth day, which back in Genesis 1:26-27 **included** the completion of living human beings too. Humans already exist as living beings, therefore, when God breathes into this one man’s nostrils. Humans already have “life.” So what other “life” is being breathed into this man, then? And how can he “**become** a living being” when humans are already living beings?

Well, let’s try putting this verse in the context it’s already in - the context being the need for humans to work the ground and produce crops from it, as the first essential step in developing what God has created and spreading it to the whole world, because that’s what God designed humans for.

Up to this point in **Genesis 2:7** humans are no better or more advanced than any other animal or creature. Like all the other creatures, humans are simply existing and living off what the land is producing automatically from the “seed-bearing plants and fruit-bearing trees” that God made on the third day of creation. Life for humans is no different to life for all the other creatures either; it’s about surviving by eating. Humans as yet, then, are contributing nothing to God’s purpose for his creation. They’re living a totally self-centred existence.

Leading up to Genesis 2:7, therefore, humans have no inkling yet what it is they’re supposed to do, or how to go about doing it. They haven’t even got started yet in what they’ve been created for. And as far as fulfilling their function as God’s image-bearers they’re not accomplishing anything so far.

But things change in Genesis 2. God makes it clear he’s got something very different in mind for humans. He’s formed a man for a different life purpose and a different life function, to see the land very differently, through different eyes, as something to be worked and developed, rather than just used for survival.

God then instills that different life purpose and function into the man by “breathing” into him - which he didn’t do when he made humans on the sixth day of creation. So something special is happening here in verse 7 that’s geared to humans alone. And in context it’s about humans working the land as the first and essential step toward ‘subduing’ the whole world as God’s image-bearers.

But why does God ‘breathe’ into a man? Because people back then believed that their metal, wood and stone images of the gods came to life as real living beings when the gods breathed on them. So people actually fed and dressed these images of their gods every day, believing they were real and alive. But Genesis makes one thing clear, that when God breathes life into his images it’s not so they can be cared for, it’s to enable them to be the carers, the ones **doing** the caring and nurturing of all creation. It’s a vastly higher calling with a far greater and far more exciting purpose in life.

When God breathed into the man he instilled his own imagination for the planet into humans, just as parents try to capture their child’s imagination with a view of the world that makes the child want to get out there and get his hands dirty, and take pleasure in developing skills that will make him a confident, caring, useful member of society, so that the planet and other people benefit greatly from what he does. This is what God breathed into humans.

It was the first time a human became a living being capable of developing God's creation as God intended. So now we've got a human on the planet who's been specifically breathed into and equipped by God himself with both the desire and the ability to work the land, which prepares the man beautifully for what God has in mind next. God plants a garden in Eden, **Genesis 2:8**, and he puts this man he's just breathed into "to work it and take care of it" (15).

Well, that makes sense because the man's brain has just been tuned by God to love nurturing and cultivating the land. But the man is totally new to the job as yet, and he has a lot to learn before he's got fields producing crops and he's discovered what to plant when and where according to the soil types and seasons. So God makes sure the man has plenty of food-producing trees in the garden to keep him alive in the meantime (verse 9). And this is how God starts humans off on the long and exciting road to civilizing the whole world, through the man practicing his new God-breathed desire to work the ground in a garden of God's making.

In the beginning, therefore, God's plan for this planet was so simple - it was to grow culture through agriculture, and spread civilization through cultivation. A civilized world fit for God and humans would then gradually develop from the God-breathed love for the land in humans, and the desire to make it produce.

And history shows that great civilizations have grown from kings who loved gardens and making the land flourish. King Sennacherib, for instance, who ruled Assyria from 705 to 681 BC, loved constructing parks, gardens and orchards. He imported flowers and plants from all over his empire to fill his exquisite palace gardens in the city of Nineveh, which is now thought to be the true location of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. And just to irrigate his gardens Sennacherib built a canal 100 metres wide and 50 kilometres long, which can still be seen from space.

Sennacherib admitted he created his fabulous Gardens to show off and amaze people at how great he was, but it's still remarkable that a brutal military man wanted to show off his greatness with a garden. But in the movie 'Greenfingers' we see a similar story, of real-life murderers and other criminals winning major awards at a top British Garden Show when given the chance to work with plants and flowers. It's been breathed into our genes, then, even into the worst of us, to want to get our hands into the soil to see what it can produce. And when we're productive that's when we're at our happiest too.

To the people of the Ancient Near East, then, Genesis 2 was familiar reading because kings of that time loved their palace gardens, and everyone's life revolved around the agricultural seasons. The one big difference revealed in Genesis, however, is WHO set all this in motion and why. Genesis was written to make it clear that there's just one Creator God who formed us, not multiple gods, and the reason he formed us was to give us a love for the land to work it so that the whole planet would prosper and show HIM off for how great he is.

But let's bring all this up to date, and what it means for us reading Genesis 2 in the twenty-first century. Here WE are, still made in God's image, and still formed with a love of the land in our DNA to make this world work as God intended.

But how does it relate to what you and I are doing in our everyday lives? None of us are actively farming or cultivating crops. Our love of the land may only amount now to planting a few flowers. We're hardly contributing to the world's food production either, or showing off God's creative glory in our gardens. But still throbbing away in our heads is a love for what God has created, and making it the focus of what we do, just as God intended for his human image-bearers.

And as Christians we also realize that Jesus ascended to provide us with gifts to make our contribution to this planet as image-bearers of God still possible, no matter who we are, or what circumstances we're in. It's from our own lives and experience, therefore, that we can rewrite Genesis in twenty first century terms.

So what is our experience as Christians? Well, it's the same experience humans went through in Genesis, from simply existing on the planet in Genesis 1 to caring for the planet in Genesis 2. As Christians we go through a similar transformation, from being selfish to being caring. We move from simply using creation for our own ends and survival to dedicating everything we do to caring for what God created. And how that manifests itself in our lives is very personal. But one thing is common to all of us - that the focus of what we now do is a love for this planet and the desire to contribute to it, not take from it.

Christ has also restored us to being living images of God just like he is. We now come alive as living images of God like him, then, with the same dedicated desire Jesus has to bring glory to God in all that we do. And we can see that unfolding in our own lives in the care of a pet cat or dog, in feeding the birds, in helping a neighbour, in volunteering our help in the community, in recycling, in making things last, and not chucking garbage out the car window.

We discover in ourselves that we view the world and people and all that we do every day through different eyes, **the same different eyes** that God gave humans in Genesis 2:7, to enable us to do our part too in making this planet work as God intended. And in so doing that's how we bring glory to God, by loving what he created in the same way he does.

For you it may be a love for animals, or a love for the elderly, or a love for the handicapped, or a love for looking after your body, or a love for making things, or a love for fixing things, or a love for shaping wood or metal, or looking after the car to keep its pollution to the lowest level. It may be a love for plumbing, or a love for art, music, or photography. Whatever we find we love doing, it was the one great Creator God who breathed that love into us in Genesis 2, and we're simply reliving that moment in verse 7 whenever we find ourselves loving what God made, and made possible, in his creation.

Can we then relay Genesis in those terms to people in our twenty first century, to excite them with a sense of purpose, that this is what God intended for us and made possible for us so that we can actually feel it happening to us, and our lives take on meaning far beyond just existing and using creation for our own ends.

And we now have clear results in our world as to what happens when we love what God created and when we don't. When we exploit the environment for our own ends the whole creation suffers, from pollution, desertification and chemical waste, resulting in poverty, sickness, wasted lives and conflict. But when people value the land, as they did in World War 2 in England, it pulled people together and they flourished in the most difficult circumstances. We have ample proof in our modern day too, therefore, of what God was getting at in Genesis.

And if we don't get that message now, I can see it being a shock when people are resurrected and Jesus hands them a shovel and tells them it's time to clean up the mess we humans have made of this planet, as practice for living in the new heavens and new earth, pictured coincidentally by a flourishing garden from which rivers of healing pour out to the whole world. Then we'll know for sure what God meant in Genesis and what he designed us as his image-bearers for.

We're not left wondering what our future life is like either, because God has given us the chance through the life of his Son in us to start living it now. Through his Spirit he breathes into us the same message of Genesis, that the exciting purpose of life is discovering what we can give, not get, because that's what God put in our DNA to make us happy.