

God is restoring his image

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Date: 20 January 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. One of the things I like to look at are photography exhibitions. And recently I've been looking at the work of a photographer called Mustafa Kankaya.

Mustafa works at Ataturk Airport in Turkey. And last year he started a project called 100 Faces, 100 Countries, where he takes pictures of people from all over the world passing through the airport.

Here are some of his photos. Let's see if this works. There you go. This is Ibrahim from Rwanda, who's a dancer. This is Bash from Lebanon, who's a percussion drummer, just back from performing at a festival in the United States.

Here's Shema from Kuwait. She's a medical student in Malta and also volunteers for refugees in Athens. Here's Takeshi from Japan, who's an architect and fashion designer.

And here's Florencia from Argentina, who is a professional forensic anthropologist. If you're not sure what that is, just think of the crime show CSI.

[1 : 0 7] And looking through all those photos, what is striking is the sheer diversity of people there are on this planet. We are all so different.

Ethnically, culturally, socially, educationally, physically, and psychologically. We all have so many different stories to tell.

That's what can make life so fun. In the internet age, I don't think there's any generation before us that's been so aware of our diversity.

But it also means, I believe, that more than ever, 21st century people wrestle with questions of identity. In this world of diversity, we ask constantly, Who am I?

And why am I here? How do I fit in? It's a question everyone asks, even Christians. I don't think it's an accident that Rick Warren's book, The Purpose Driven Life, was such a bestseller over a decade ago, since it was trying to answer the question, What on earth am I here for?

[2 : 1 9] And of course, people have tried to answer those questions, Who am I? And why am I here? In a variety of ways. To do so, we might take personality tests, like the Myers-Briggs.

For those of you who know and are interested in such things, I'm classified as an INFJ, supposedly the rarest personality type. In Sarawak, in recent years, our politicians have been actively encouraging us to identify as Sarawakians first, especially in opposition to so-called Orang Melaya from the West.

Perhaps some of us answer based on the jobs and hobbies we have. Who am I? I'm a working mother who likes to travel and paint.

Those are all interesting ways of trying to answer that question. But when we turn to the Bible, we discover that the Bible says all those answers suffer from one big deficiency.

They all leave God out of the picture. But the Bible insists that to know who we are, we need to go beyond hobbies, beyond the place of birth, beyond even biology.

[3 : 35] We need to go to the very roots of our identity. And to get to the roots of our identity, we need to go to God.

About 2,000 years ago, the Apostle Paul was addressing a group of non-Christian Greeks in Athens. In Acts 17 verse 24, he tells them that there is a God who made the world and everything in it, and he is the Lord of heaven and earth who does not live in temples built by human hands.

And then, quoting one of their own philosophers, he says, verse 28, it is in this very God that we live and move and have our being. Later on, in 1 Corinthians 8 verse 6, this time addressing Christian believers, he reminds them of the same truth.

Yet for us, there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live, and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

In other words, our identity is directly and permanently rooted in God. We can find the source of our identity and purpose only in him.

[5 : 04] As John Calvin, one of Christianity's best theologians, famously said, if we don't know God, we cannot know ourselves. So to answer the question, who am I?

Why am I here? We also need to answer the question, what in the world is God doing by making you and I? So this morning, once again, like last week, I'm going to take you on a journey through the entire story of the Bible.

But we're going to do it from a different angle. We're going to think about how the entire Bible, from beginning to the end, says about who we are.

And to guide us through, just like last week, I'm once again going to divide up the story into five episodes. But I'll spend a big chunk of time in episode one because it sets up everything else.

So here's episode one. We're made in God's image. We are made in God's image. Now one of the ways people investigate their own identity is by exploring their origin stories.

[6 : 19] Think of the way young children ask their grandma and grandpa to tell them stories about their family history, about what mom and dad were like, and so on. They are trying to figure out their identity by where they come from.

Or think of the way young adults explore their cultural heritage as a way of figuring out who they are. Think of the recent explosion of superhero movies and how many of them make sure to tell us how Superman or Spider-Man or whichever superhero it is originated as a way of helping us understand them and what motivates them.

And the Bible tells us about humanity's origin story. And to show just how unique and incredible the Bible's origin story is, let me first tell you two other origin stories people have told about how humanity came to be as a point of comparison.

One of them is more historical. That is, people believed it a long time ago, but it will be hard to find anyone who believes this today. The other is a bit more modern, believed still by plenty of people today.

So the first origin story is Babylonian. In the beginning, there were a number of gods, greater gods, and lesser gods.

[7 : 55] The minor gods live on earth, working the fields and the rivers to feed the greater gods. But they got tired and went on strike. They petitioned the great god Enlil, who eventually agreed to their demands.

Seven men and seven women were created to do the work instead. The greater gods declared to the minor gods, I have removed your heavy work.

I have imposed your toil on man. But basically, the creation of humans created another problem. They grew in number, and the noise they made working stopped the gods from sleeping.

So now, the gods tried to kill off humankind by means of drought and famine. The great god even tried to redesign humans a little by making sure that women now suffered infertility.

Now, think about what is being said here. Humans, in this way of thinking, are created originally as slaves. They are there to feed their bosses, the gods, and ensure that they can have a nice long nap.

[9 : 13] And think about the relationship between the humans and the gods and the gods here, one of ongoing conflict. Imagine a culture that believes this origin story and think about how that would affect their view of themselves.

At the core of their being, they are fundamentally slaves. They have no rights. There is no love lost between them and their gods.

Women, in particular, are threatening since they are able to reproduce which the gods don't want. And so, a lot of ancient cultures had a low view of humans.

If this is your origin story, that's not a surprise. Now, let me tell you a second, more modern origin story. In the beginning, there was nothing at all.

Just a big black hole, if you like. In this reality, there are some particles known as the singularity, and then one day, for unknown reasons, it suddenly began expanding and expanding until bang, a big bang happened.

[10 : 27] Somehow, particles and atoms began to form, and out of those particles came the potential for life. Molecules and DNA began to replicate, and somehow, humans came into being.

Now, once again, think about what is being said here. Who are we? Just a bunch of chemicals who somehow managed to lock our way into existence.

We are still slaves, just slaves to our DNA. A. And what are we made for? Who knows? We are left to somehow invent for ourselves our own purpose in life.

If you find something that makes you happy, great. If you don't, that's just too bad. And imagine a culture where most people believe this.

What would be their basis for enjoying music and the arts? what would be their basis for human rights? After all, we are just cells. We are meaningless. Do cells have rights?

[11 : 40] Yet, this is an origin story that many people believe today. But now, let's come to the Bible's origin story. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

And throughout Genesis 1, he makes all kinds of things, and he keeps saying, it was good. The majestic nighttime sky, the lush blue oceans, the infinite variety of plants and animals, all this beauty and splendor.

But to cap it all off, he scooped some dust and decided to make the ultimate masterpiece of his creation, something even better than what he's made so far.

Earth. Genesis 1, verse 26. Then God said, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. Now, in ancient cultures, it was sometimes taught that the earthly king bore the divine image.

They alone had a relationship with the gods. So imagine if you're a person from the ancient world, and you heard the Bible say that every single person in this world, not just earthly kings, but even lowly servants, bear God's image.

[13 : 08] And, Genesis 1, verse 29, God gives humans every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruits with seed in it.

They will be yours for food. The Babylonian gods created humans to feed them. This god provides and feeds humans instead.

The other origin stories have human beings as slaves. Our god gives us a garden and makes us royalty. And he delights in us.

Genesis 1, verse 31, God saw all that he had made and it was very good. God says we are very good because he has made us like himself.

Our life is sacred because he has put his stamp on us. Can you see how the Christian worldview immediately sets us apart and grants us dignity like no other?

[14 : 14] And to be made in God's image means we can now say three things about who we are and what we are created to do. Firstly, to be made in God's image means we personally belong to God.

The best way to illustrate this is to recall an incident that happened in Jesus' ministry in Mark 12. The Pharisees as ever were trying to trap Jesus and so they asked him this question, Mark 12, verse 14.

Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity, therefore is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?

And with that, the Pharisees think they've got Jesus. If Jesus says no, then he risks a rest from the Romans who would consider him a political rebel.

But if he says yes, that would make him unpopular with the Jewish crowds, since he would be seen as siding with the enemy. So how does Jesus answer?

[15 : 25] He asked for a Roman coin, a denarius. And then verse 16, they brought him a coin and he asked them, whose image is this?

And whose inscription? Caesar's, they replied. Caesar, of course, was the Roman emperor of that time. His image was imprinted onto the coins.

And of course, the taxes will go to him eventually. In that sense, the coin belongs to Caesar. So Jesus now makes his point, verse 17.

Then Jesus said to them, give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. In other words, by all means, return to Caesar what is his.

Pay those taxes. Give him the coins that bear his image. But, make sure you return to God what is his.

[16 : 25] People who bear his image. And with that, Jesus turns a question about taxes into a profound statement about who we really are.

We are made in God's image. We belong to him. We are made for relationship with him. We are made for worship. We are to give ourselves wholly to him.

Give to God what is God's. Us. We are made to delight in him. And remember, for him to delight in us.

So, one implication of this is that we have intrinsic value. Nothing can deny the fact that God made us, he owns us, and he cares for us.

Not disability, not any injury, not any lack of intellectual capacity. We are not merely highly evolved animals. We are not just what other people think of us.

[17 : 32] We belong to God. God. But the flip side of that, of course, is that we are not God. We belong to him, we are dependent on him, but we are not him.

So we can't be at the center of the universe. Any attempts to put us at the center will only end in disaster. And we don't need to be at the center to retain our dignity and value.

We are already made in God's image. And one other implication is that we shouldn't treat other human beings simply like tools or economic resources.

How do we know when we are doing so? It's when we subconsciously assign more value to someone who is working as a neurosurgeon than someone who is waiting tables at the hawker center.

Even in churches, we can fall into this trap. It's when we see people only as means to pluck certain ministry vacancies rather than as people who need to know God's love and to experience love from others.

[18 : 46] But if we remember that people are made in God's image and belong to him, that would help guard us from such tendencies. We want to care properly for what God owns.

Secondly, to be made in God's image means we are God's representatives. The logic here is simple. We are not God, we are not all knowing or all powerful, but to be made in God's image means we are like him in some way and we are to be God-like in the way we reflect.

his character. And that's why in the Old Testament, God constantly asks people to imitate his righteousness.

Look at Leviticus chapter 19 verse 1 and 2. The Lord said to Moses, speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them, be holy.

Why? Because I, the Lord your God, am holy. And this isn't just an Old Testament thing. It's repeated in the New Testament in 1 Peter.

[20 : 00] And what does this imitation look like? Well, God gives a concrete example further down in verse 34. When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them.

The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native born. Love them as yourself. Why? For you were foreigners in Egypt.

I am the Lord your God. In other words, God is saying, you need to treat the outsider precisely the way I treated you when you were outsiders.

You are to imitate me. me. And so the implication is that from the very beginning, we are to act as a kind of mirror to God to reflect his virtues.

One pastor explains it like this, we are like icons on a computer screen. Icons are tiny picture files, but when you double-click them, it opens up to a much bigger file of the computer program.

[21 : 13] It represents. Icons don't point to themselves, but open up to something bigger. And so human beings are representative of something bigger.

They point to God's noble character and so magnify his glory. Thirdly, to be made in God's image means we have responsible stewardship over creation.

Last week, we saw how we are regents acting on behalf of God the King. We rule over creation, but we rule as stewards, not as absolute dictators.

And Genesis chapter 2 verse 15 captures our responsibilities well. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

So how are we acting as mirrors of God when we do this? Well, you see, just as God works, so we work.

[22 : 20] And just as God creates, so we create. Have you ever considered that our creative impulses are a result of us being made in the image of God?

We don't create like God, that's for sure. We don't create something out of nothing. But we do cultivate the raw materials that God has given us in this world.

So in that sense, we are creators. You might not think of yourself as a creative person. But every time you choose to bake something, gathering all those ingredients together to turn it into the end product of a lovely cheesecake, did you know you are imaging God?

Every time you take the time and loving care to do some lettering to add some beauty into this world, did you know you are imaging God? If you are an engineer or architect, every time you're producing a blueprint or working out how to put all those materials of steel and metal and so on so that a building or a bridge can be set up, did you know you are imaging God?

You are creating something just like him. This is what God made you for. That's why you get so much satisfaction when you see a project completed.

[23 : 46] It's just like when God saw his creation project completed and said, that's good. That's the image of God in you. That's what you and I were made for.

And just before we leave episode 1, and don't worry, episodes 2 to 5 will be briefer. There's one more thing to point out. In Genesis chapter 1 verse 28, God calls Adam and Eve to multiply and be fruitful.

Why? Because he wants the whole earth to be filled with his image bearers. He wants the descendants of Adam and Eve to act as his representatives, to be his responsible stewards over every inch of this earth, not just in a garden in the corner somewhere.

He wants to populate the whole earth with those who bear his image to bring him glory. But what's the problem?

Well, here's episode 2. We become idol factories. We become idol factories. In Genesis 3, as we saw last week, the serpent comes with a promise.

[24 : 58] Genesis chapter 3 verse 5. If you eat the fruit, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

And I hope you noticed straight away from episode 1 how hollow the serpent's promise is. We've just spent the whole sermon establishing how Adam and Eve already reflect God in profound ways.

the serpent actually offers nothing that God hasn't already given to us. But sadly, of course, Adam and Eve listen to the serpent and they turn away from God.

And when we look at the rest of the Old Testament, we notice that the way humans repeatedly turn away from God is by falling into what we call idolatry.

For instance, in Exodus 32, while waiting for Moses to come down the mountain with the Ten Commandments, the people decide to build a golden calf, an idol.

[26 : 07] And this is especially tragic because think carefully about what idols are. Essentially, they are images of a God.

They are representatives of a God. But wait a minute. aren't human beings already images of God? Aren't we already representatives of God himself?

But the tragedy of idolatry is that these substitute images convince us that they, not we, bear the divine image.

And that is tragic because as Isaiah 44 reminds us, human beings are living whereas idols are dead. Look at Isaiah 44 verse 12.

The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals. He shapes an idol with hammers. He forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength.

[27 : 10] He drinks no water and grows faint. How ironic. It is a living human being who makes these dead idols, lovingly crafting these images.

So why are we worshipping dead idols that we created? When God prohibits idols, he is actually reminding us that we are so much better than these pieces of wood.

We are his living images. So don't go after idols. But the tragedy doesn't stop there. For look at how the psalmist describes idols and what happens to those who worship them.

They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes but cannot see, they have ears but cannot hear, noses but cannot smell, they have hands but cannot feel, feet but cannot walk, nor can they utter a sound with their throats.

Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them. In other words, whatever idol it is that we worship, we will eventually come to resemble them.

[28 : 25] For instance, as Israel bowed down to the golden calf, they began to resemble the image of the calf. Just look at Exodus 32, verse 9.

I have seen my people, the Lord said to Moses, and they are a stiff-necked people. They are stiff-necked, stubborn, just like the golden calf they worship.

They are no longer reflecting the image of their gracious living God, but they are dead idol, and ironically, they become dehumanized.

So whatever idol we bow down to, we will eventually come to resemble them. If we bow down to the idol of children, we will cling to them in unhealthy ways, even when they are adults, living our lives through theirs, so much so that we can behave like a child ourselves.

And in turn, idols can cause us to treat others sub-humanly. If we bow down to the idol of comfort, for example, we begin to resent those who call on our help, who call on our time, and we treat them harshly.

[29 : 47] Idolatry causes us to become less human and to treat others in a less human way. And God cannot let this state of affairs remain.

He grieves to see us giving up the privileges that come from being made in God's image. So what in the world is God doing? From Genesis 3 onwards, he's on a mission to restore us to what we were made to be, his image.

That's episode 3. We need the perfect image. The good news is, although we have been defaced as God's image by our turn to idolatry, God's image in us is never lost completely.

After the fall, God still reaffirms that human beings are made in God's image. You can find that in Genesis 5, verse 1 to 2.

I think I'm not going to read it. But what happens is that we are like shattered mirrors. We are broken, but we can still reflect God in bits and pieces.

[31 : 03] We still retain God's image, but imperfectly. And we need somebody to come and put us back together again.

But who can do that? The current president of the United States, I'm told, has an unfortunate habit of tearing up his mammals when he's done with them, which by law he shouldn't.

And I read that apparently there's a team of people whose job is to try to take all those torn pieces of paper together to try to glue and sellotape them back together.

Now what a job, isn't it? Now think about us. We are shattered mirrors. We are like those torn pieces of paper. And who in the world can put together a mirror that has been shattered back together again?

And this is where Jesus comes in. Human beings being made in God's image are like God in some way. But what about Jesus?

[32 : 11] Look at these verses. The sun is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. Colossians 1 verse 15.

The sun is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. Hebrews chapter 1 verse 3.

If we are made in God's image, Jesus is God's image. He is the absolute perfect expression of God himself.

He is God's perfect representative, embodying his character exactly in the way he loves, God's in the way he treats the outsider, in the way he never does wrong.

And as the image of the invisible God, like Adam, he is given authority to rule, but not just over earth, but over everything.

[33 : 18] I didn't put down, in Colossians chapter 1 verse 16, it's not on the screen, but we read it earlier, Jesus rules over things in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities.

But this authority comes only because he is the perfect human being and therefore can become the perfect mediator.

He perfectly represents both God and man. Hebrews chapter 2 verse 9 helps us capture this. But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, like human beings, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

And in doing so, Christ bought human beings at a price. We now belong again to God. And Christ now unites us to himself.

When our lives are hidden with God, we can finally die to our old selves because we become reflections of Jesus. We become whatever he is.

[34 : 44] We belong to Jesus, our Lord, God, just like the coin belongs to Caesar. And that brings us to episode four.

We are now being restored and renewed in his image. In other words, when we become Christians, we are being restored to what we were meant to be.

We are being restored to our full humanity. have you ever thought of becoming a Christian in this way? When we believe, we become more human than ever before.

Our identity is in Christ. But now, for the rest of our lives, God's project is to help us to become what we are.

He's helping us to grow into our identity. He's renewing us day by day to be conformed to the image of Christ.

[35 : 50] And that's what lies behind verses like Ephesians 4, verse 22 to 24 and Colossians chapter 3, verse 9 and 10. Ephesians, you were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires, to be made new in the attitude of your minds, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Colossians, do not lie to each other. Why? Since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in the knowledge, in the image of its creator.

God is doing in us. And this is what we should be working towards.

Over the past week, many of you on Facebook would have seen the 10-year challenge, where you publish an image of yourself from 10 years ago and compare it to an image from today.

You may be fatter, you may be fitter. But what about a 10-year challenge in terms of Christ-likeness? Wouldn't it be great if in 2029, you look back at 2019, and you said, yes, I'm still very much a work in progress, but I am reflecting Christ more now than I did in 2019.

[37 : 32] I am more in Christ's image than I was 10 years ago. You see, this is our ultimate purpose in life.

It is with the help of the Spirit to grow more and more like Jesus every day. Do you consider this to be your big aim in life?

The scriptures tell us it should be. And part of using that being made in God's glory. It is using our gifts to give God glory.

Remember how being made in God's image means being stewards over creation? And so we continue to do that. We cook and bake to God's glory.

We build and design things to God's glory. We teach and clean to God's glory. And a big part of doing all those things is to do it in service to others.

[38 : 33] Here's 1 Peter 4 10-11. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. That's how we fulfill our calling as God's images today. We steward whatever God has given us and serve others.

Whatever our occupation, whatever our marital status, whatever our position in church. But there's another thing we're called to do.

Do you remember how Adam and Eve are called to fill the earth and multiply so that the world is filled with God's image bearers? Well, we are to do the same.

[39 : 39] But how do we do it? We do it by calling people to the one who can renew and restore them in God's image. We want to multiply the numbers of those who belong to Christ and who therefore can become Christ-like.

That's the New Testament fulfillment of multiplying image bearers. And as the earth is filled with worshippers of the true living God and not worshippers of false images of idols, then the whole earth will be filled with God's glory.

Evangelism and growing disciples rose is part and parcel of what it means to be God's new humanity. And finally, we reach episode five.

We have an invitation to glory. We are on a journey. We know that we are not all that we could be. but one day, one day, we will be completely remade in God's image.

Listen to these promises from 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 John 3. 1 Corinthians 15 49. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.

[41 : 12] Dear children, now we are children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him.

For we shall see him as he is. We will no longer be broken mirrors, but true reflections of Christ.

And we will be fully restored to our original vocation to reign over the earth under God. Look at Revelation 5 verse 10. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God.

We saw that last week. And they will reign over all the earth. This is what God is up to. This is what God is doing.

He pursues the wayward and establishes his kingly rule. And he does so in order to restore us in his image that we might be fully human and discover our true identity.

[42 : 23] You want to be fully human? You want to discover who you really are? Then pursue Christlikeness. Work for his glory.

Invite others to be remade in the image of Jesus. Let's pray. Father, thank you that from the very beginning you have granted us this privilege to be made in your image.

We know that in this fallen world, we are broken, we are shattered mirrors, we have reflected our idolatries. But thank you so much for the Lord Jesus.

the true and perfect image of God. And the one who rescued us and who now restores us to be remade in your image.

So help us to be part of your project. Help us to cooperate with you as you renew your image in us. And as we look forward to being one day seeing Jesus and being just like he is.

[43 : 36] For his glory and his name's sake we pray. Amen. Amen.