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chapter 2

Imago Dei: Life as It Is Meant to Be

"There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal."—C. S. Lewis

And it was good. When God was ready to put His Great Plan into action, when He finally stepped out from behind that curtain of darkness, He did so without trumpet or fanfare. There was no press release or opening night gala. In His own subtle elegance, He began with a few simple words: "Let there be light."

And as those words reverberated across the darkness, the world unfurled herself. Light cut through shadow, waters gathered together, and sky and land hedged their boundaries. Next, brushy reeds, forsythia, and lilac carpeted the prairies, woodlands, and craggy mountains. By day, the sky glowed under a majestic sun and at night became a beauty swathed in velvet, decked by diamond studs and pendant moon. Soon fowl and fish, each schooled in their own migratory dances, swarmed in sea and sky. Then, creatures of every shape and dimension emerged from the dust; from the rough-contoured scaly beasts to the petite scampering grey mouse and skittish red squirrel, each came to life at the call of their Master.

And it was good. Very, very good.

There is an unmistakable majesty that throbs and pulses through nature—the kind of wonder that captures you as you gaze into a summer night’s sky or stand beside a thundering waterfall. The kind of wonder that makes you both swell with the possibilities this life holds at the same time it makes you shrink back with the knowledge that you are a very, very small part of this massive cosmos.

I remember feeling this one summer when my husband, Nathan, and I drove from Seattle to Los Angeles on Highway 101. We had both been raised in the eastern United States, more at home in the rolling Appalachians than anywhere else, but this summer, we were visiting friends in Seattle and decided to drive down the Pacific coast before flying out of LA. We had been on the road only a few hours when, somewhere in Oregon, we crested a bend and I saw the Pacific Ocean for the first time. I yelled at Nathan to stop the car, quickly jumped out, and ran to a short length of beach. I stood there taking it all in—the waves pounding against the rocky coast, the rough winds whipping my helpless hair, the gulls crying as they somersaulted above the water, and the salt sea biting at my upturned face.

And I felt very small.

Over the next several days, we continued down the coast hedged on our right by a massive, foggy ocean and on our left by towering mountains and ancient forests. And all I could think was how little, how vulnerable, how insignificant I felt. And I realized how easily one person could get lost in all of this, how easily one person could be forgotten. Like David, I couldn’t help but think, “What is man that you are mindful of him? And the son of man that you care for him?”¹ And I wondered, *How does one person make any difference in all this?*

1. Psalm 8:4.

Specks of Dust

The fear that our lives lack significance, that we are merely specks of dust floating in the massive cosmos, can easily spark the search for identity. When you consider the enormity of the universe, when you realize that Earth itself comprises only an infinitesimal part of it, and when you recognize that you are only one out of the *billions* of people who have lived, it's easy to feel small. Add to this the fact that we must devote vast amounts of time on the basics of daily life (I once calculated that in my lifetime I will prepare nearly 50,000 meals for my family), and it's a wonder we all don't run off to exotic places in search of ourselves!

This fear that we simply trudge through our allotted days without ever making a difference drives some women on a never-ending pursuit of success and perfection. From the fast-paced executive always scrambling for the next deal to the tiger mom bent on shaping her child into a future Supreme Court justice, we are hounded by the thought that our existence will somehow be worthless unless we achieve quantifiable success. For others, this same fear causes them to retreat into their own zone of comfort and hide from the greater world, content to be a big fish in a small pond if it means avoiding the constant reminders of their limitations and irrelevance.

And yet the deeper magic is that no matter how small we may feel—no matter how small we actually may be—we are not insignificant. We are not lost in the grand cosmos. We do matter. But it's not because of anything we've done; it's because of something *God* did back at the beginning. Because back when God created all this beauty, all this life, all this splendor, He capped it off with one final masterpiece—one that He did not leave to words alone. No, for this final masterpiece, He stooped down and left His own fingerprints in the dust.

And that final masterpiece was us.

Crowned with Glory and Honor

"My God, I heard this day / That none doth build a stately habitation / But he that means to dwell therein. / What house more stately has there been / Or can be, than is Man?"

—George Herbert, "Man"

Genesis describes the first moments of human existence like this: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . .' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them."²

Unlike the rest of creation, as majestic and glorious as it is, only men and women are made in the image of God. Only we have the breath, the very spirit of God, flowing in our earthly lungs; only we can be truly called His children.

And this is why your life is significant.

It's not because of what you accomplish or how many people you influence. Your life is significant because when God created you, He "crowned [you] with glory and honor"³ by making you like Himself. Because as certainly as God formed our first parents, He formed you in your mother's womb,⁴ and just as certainly as they bore His image, you bear His image today. As you walk and talk and live and move—and prepare those 50,000 meals—your very existence, your life itself, reflects and represents Him on this earth.

This is where you must find identity—you must find it *imago dei*.

For centuries, philosophers and theologians have used the brief Latin phrase *imago dei* to communicate a hefty truth. Literally translated, *imago dei* simply means "in the image of God." But in reality, *imago dei* means so much more. *Imago dei* means that

2. Genesis 1:26–27.

3. Psalm 8:5.

4. Psalm 139:13.

your life has purpose and meaning because God has made you to be like Himself. *Imago dei* means that your life has intrinsic value, not simply because of who you are as an individual, but because of who He is as your God. *Imago dei* means that your life is sacred because He has stamped His identity onto yours.

When Genesis teaches that we are made *imago dei*, it is doing more than simply explaining how we came into existence or offering an argument for why we should respect and care for one another. By revealing that we are made in God's image, it is revealing *how we are to exist*, how we are made to live, and what it means to be human. Being human means sharing God's nature in some way; being human means living as He lives and doing what He does.

In a sense, the image of God is something like DNA. If you remember high school biology (or have watched enough episodes of *CSI*), you'll know that DNA is a chemical substance found in nearly every cell of your body—from the tips of your fingers to the ends of your hair. It is the "secret code" that determines how your cells will develop, what color your eyes will be, whether your hair will be curly or straight, and even more basically, whether you are a lion or a human. And if the need arises, DNA can also identify you, because everything about your physical identity flows directly from it.

Just as your DNA determines what you will look like and how your body will function, being made in God's image determines what you were made to *be* and what you were made to *do*. So when you ask the question, "Who am I and why am I here?" the answer is surprisingly simple. Because you are made in God's image, you exist to reflect and represent Him on this earth. Because you are made in God's image, you are made to proclaim what He is like by doing what He does.

Because you are made in God's image, you are made for glory.

A God-Shaped Heart

"It is the pervading law of all things . . . that form ever follows function."—Louis Sullivan

But as simple as it is to say that you are made to reflect and represent God, unpacking it is not so simple. Because God is a vast, infinitely complex Being, those who are made in His likeness will also be vast and infinitely complex. And yet, Scripture does give us clues about our *imago dei* identity; and it does so in context of the relationships we share with God, with each other, and with creation.⁵

First, finding identity as an image bearer means that you are made to live in dependent communion with God. When God created us in His image, He established a relationship with us that the rest of creation does not share. While creation enjoys a type of fellowship with God—Paul talks in Romans 8 about the earth groaning as it waits for redemption; and Jesus Himself promised that the very stones would cry out in praise to their Creator if the people did not—only human beings live in dependent, personal communion with Him. St. Augustine, a fifth century African bishop, captured this dependency when he wrote, "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." Pastors often communicate the same sentiment when they reference the "God-shaped hole" in the heart of every person that can only be filled by a relationship with Him. That "hole" is the direct result of being made in His image. Apart from Him, you cannot be fully human; apart from Him, you cannot be fully yourself.

Jesus taught something similar during His earthly ministry. Always looking for a way to discredit Jesus' teaching, the Jewish

5. I am indebted to Anthony Hoekema who explores this structure more fully in his book *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986). He bases the three elements of this paradigm on Genesis 1:26–27.

religious leaders had sent men to ask Him this question: "Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?"⁶ This was a no-win situation; if Jesus answered that the Jews should not pay taxes to Caesar, He risked arrest and punishment as a political zealot. If He answered that they should pay taxes, He risked losing the people's loyalty, and the religious leaders could easily brand Him as unfaithful to Israel and, in a pinch, to Israel's God.

But with divine wisdom, Jesus responded to the question with a question. "Show me a denarius," He said. "Whose likeness and inscription does it have?"

The answer was, of course, "Caesar's."

As the ruler of the known world, Caesar had imprinted his image—his likeness—onto coins. These coins were then distributed throughout his empire and established his authority over each region. Because no one else had the power to make coins, all buying and selling, essentially all the business of life, had to be transacted via his image. It was a subtle, daily reminder to every citizen and every conquered subject that they were dependent on their emperor.

So when the people answered, "Caesar," Jesus replied simply, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

And with those words, He turned the tables on the religious leaders and propelled the conversation one step further. If God expects us to return to Caesar the things that bear *his* image (in this case, a coin), how much more does He expect us to return to Him the things that bear *His* image: our very selves? By elevating what appeared to be a simple debate about taxes, Jesus taught that part of being made in the image of God means acknowledging His sovereignty in our lives and our dependence on Him.

6. Luke 20:19–26.

And this is far more difficult than paying taxes could ever be.

We are people who love our autonomy; our very society is founded on the concept of individuality and freedom. We have so connected the two that we believe that we cannot truly be ourselves if we are tied to someone else. This is why we leave our marriages when we feel stifled and why we want to be alone to find ourselves. Because of this, the dependency that comes from being made in the image of God could sound like a cruel joke or the design of an egomaniacal deity. By making us this way, God ensures that we will never be able to know ourselves apart from Him; and because we can't, He ensures that we cannot live independently of Him.

Our very nature ties us to Him.

But we are not the only ones tied.

He is tied to us. By placing His image in us, God assumes an extra measure of ownership and responsibility for our lives. We are His brand, His trademark. You may remember that the second commandment prohibits making graven images of God. Part of the reason behind this is that God has already graven an image of Himself—in us.

But more than this, by placing His image on us, God has bound Himself to us as a parent. We are His children.⁷ And like any good parent, He must protect and nurture His children. The beauty and genius of this is that our good and His glory are inseparable. While our good is found by displaying His glory, His glory is found by bringing about our good.⁸

7. In Acts 17:28, Paul reminds the Athenians that “we are His offspring.”

8. Romans 9:23.

No Islands

*"No man is an island entire of itself.
Every man is a piece of the continent, part of the main."
—John Donne*

Second, finding identity as image bearers means learning to live in relationship with other human beings. Genesis 2 records that when God made us, He formed the man first and placed him in the midst of His creation. But then He said something puzzling; He said, "It is not good that the man should be alone."⁹ Despite the beauty and grandeur of this world, something was missing. So acting on His own command, God formed the woman.

Scripture says, "The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man."¹⁰

By doing this, God revealed two fundamental truths about our humanity: (1) both men and women are fully formed, equal image bearers, and (2) we are different from each other and therefore dependent on each other. In other words, while each of us is fully in the image of God, none of us can fully reflect and represent God alone. Instead we reveal the nature of God *together*; and as a result, we also find identity *together*.

We don't always recognize this as we should, in part, because we misunderstand the main reason for the woman's creation. Rather than simply providing the man with a sort of assistant, Scripture records that God formed her in direct response to the fact that the man was *alone*. But this was not loneliness

9. Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 also explores the weaknesses of being alone and says that "two are better than one . . . [and] a threefold cord is not easily broken."

10. Genesis 2:21–22.

in the way we commonly understand it; instead his “aloneness” was a deep, persistent sense of isolation and incompleteness that reached every aspect of his identity and directly impeded his ability to live *imago dei*. It was so pervasive that even meaningful work and Eden’s abundant plant and animal life could not compensate for the lack of human relationship.

So God created woman. And when the man saw her for the first time, he broke into song. “This *at last* is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman for she was taken out of Man” (Genesis 2:23).¹¹ In her, he recognized another human being—not another animal—but a person made in the likeness of God just as he was. And with her, he could live in intimate, daily communion; he could love and be loved.

God’s Stewards

Finally, finding identity as image bearers means stewarding creation the way God does. After God made man and woman, He blessed them and entrusted them with caring for His creation. He said, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”¹²

Generations later, David echoed this by saying, “You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet.”¹³ So in a sense, being an image bearer means being God’s representative; while He is the ultimate Sovereign, He has delegated authority to us to care and steward what He has created. And we do that the same way He does—by being creative,

11. By making the woman from the man’s rib, God shows that she is the same substance and essence as him. In a sense, the rib was a “starter” much the same way that yogurt or sourdough bread begins with a starter.

12. Genesis 1:28.

13. Psalm 8:6.

life-giving people just as He is a creative, life-giving God.

In many ways, this third element of identity flows directly from the first two. If existing in communion with God and others is who you are designed to *be*, then stewarding creation is what you were designed to *do*. And yet, we cannot separate the *being* from the *doing*—a hammer is a hammer both because of how it is shaped and what it accomplishes.

One example of how this being and doing connect is the mystery of conception. Every human being that exists is, in some way, a product of the relationship between a man and a woman. Ideally, this happens in marriage as the love between a husband and wife draws them together in a physical intimacy that mirrors the intimacy of their spirits. Then, when they come together (and as God ordains), a new life begins; *by joining together as image bearers, they form new image bearers just as God did so long ago.*

And this is precisely why it is so breathtaking.

When we see a baby born and when we hear that first cry, we are witnessing not only the miracle of a new life but the miracle of existing as we are intended to exist. In this one moment, the three elements of *imago dei* identity align. As a couple depends (1) on God's grace and (2) they join themselves together in love, they (3) fulfill the call to steward creation by being fruitful and multiplying. The genius is that the very design of our bodies as male and female—who we *are*—is what allows us to *do* what God Himself does. In this one moment, our *being* and our *doing* meet.

But conception is not the only place this happens. Our ability to image God is not dependent on whether we are sexually active or ever conceive a child. Instead it is found in the relationships that we share with Him, with each other, and as stewards over creation. Whether we work as executives, homemakers, educators, or farmers, we all can experience the same breathtaking joy of living as image bearers. Because just as a husband and wife cannot conceive

a child without dependence on God and each other, we cannot exercise our creativity—we cannot steward creation—apart from dependence on God and each other. So when you collaborate to make a thing of beauty, when you design a bridge that can support ten thousand tons, when you step back from a project and can say, “That’s good,” you are doing what God did when He first created. You are living *imago dei*.

The Glory of God

“The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God.”—Irenaeus

As an image bearer, you are made to reflect and represent God on this earth.¹⁴ And this happens as you live at the convergence of the three aspects of identity. In order to know yourself and exist as you were meant to exist, you must live in dependent communion with Him; you must be in loving relationship with others; and you must exercise creative care over creation. And when any one of these elements is off-kilter, you will experience a loss of identity and feel disoriented simply because you are not existing as you were created to exist.

And yet, when these three elements are working in coordination, you will become fully alive. You will know yourself and God’s image will radiate through your life like light radiates through a prism. Each element will act as a plane, and working in coordination with the others, bend His glory through your identity, revealing not only the depth and brilliance of who He is but illuminating your own existence as well. What once seemed so elusive, what you could not see with your naked eye, will suddenly burst forth in a

14. As St. Bonaventure wrote, this means you exist, not to somehow “increase His glory, but to show it forth and to communicate it” (St. Bonaventure, In *II Sent.* I, 2, 2, 1).

Technicolor rainbow. And you will finally see.

You will finally see who you are and what you are to do—you will find your identity—because you will finally see the splendor of your great and glorious God.