

Being Human in God's World

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[0 : 0 0] The life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Not my words, not God's words either, but the words of Thomas Hobbes in 1651.

He was one of the most influential thinkers of his day. I don't imagine he got invited, though, to many parties. But it seemed to him at that time that for human beings to thrive, well, we needed to get organized, get our act together.

Human life, in his view, was basically a state of constant war because, he said, we are naturally greedy and selfish. We have been, he said, since the beginning. It's how we are, it's how we always will be.

And therefore, our lives are solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. And so, he said, to change that, well, we need something bigger and stronger to rule over us, protect us, keep us all in check, and bring peace.

What we, as human beings, really need to thrive, he said, was a really big government. You get the right people in power, and then human beings can flourish and thrive and have the life that we all want.

[1 : 2 1] Now, that idea might seem strange, outdated, nearly 400 years old. But let me ask you, how many people, I wonder, went out to vote on Thursday telling themselves a version of that story?

That the outcome of this election will make or break our country for the next five years. You think of the big headlines, the heady triumphs, and the crushing defeats, the outrage when the result isn't what was hoped for, and the boasting and the gloating when it is.

Or even people, perhaps, resigning themselves to disappointment and not bothering to go out because we can't seem to get the right people in power. Elections, one of many occasions in our society that holds up a mirror to us and shows us, I think, how we see ourselves, how we view human life, our vision for human flourishing.

What do we think we need for life to be how it's meant to be? Well, what does it mean for us to have life to the full, to thrive and to flourish as human beings in a human society?

You have a deeply buried. We all have an answer to that question. We all long in our hearts for life to be as it should be. And our different answers and longings will be wrapped up in what we began to think about last week in our study, the book of Genesis, our worldview, how we see our world and our place in our world.

[3 : 0 8] And the book of Genesis continues to surprise us, I think, with the worldview that it gives us. In chapter 1, Genesis began to give us a vision of an unimaginably good and powerful and glorious God and his brilliant world that he made.

And chapter 2, it continues that and focuses in on our place in this world and under this God. And we find out, to our delight, I imagine, that our lives are not designed to be nasty, brutish, and short.

Genesis tells us we are created to flourish in God's good world, in God's presence, under God's word, and together for God's glory.

And so our passage tonight is a glorious vision of human life as it was always meant to be, and importantly, how it still can be.

And I hope tonight we'll see that it is a better, far better view or vision of human life in our world than our world itself can possibly offer us. So who really are we?

[4 : 19] How do we thrive as human beings? Well, to answer that question, we need to go back to the beginning. Where do we come from? So our first point then, human beings are created and redeemed.

Now, if you were listening carefully, as we read, you have noticed that the first people here we saw created back in chapter one last week are created again in chapter two.

Do you notice there in chapter one, verse 27, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God, he created them. Male and female, he created them. And so why in chapter two does God seemingly need to create the first man and woman again, so to speak?

Some people will straight away assume that the Bible is contradicting itself. Some scholars instinctively will say, well, it's just poor editing. The people who put the book together just couldn't get the story straight.

But something here tells us that chapter two isn't contradicting chapter one, but is actually recapping what it's already told us about day six.

[5 : 35] Now, as I said last week, Genesis is a book of beginnings, plural. Chapter one, of course, is the big beginning, the introduction to the whole book. But the rest of Genesis is divided up into 10 beginnings.

The first of which starts there in chapter two, in verse four. If you just glance there with me, this is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

We get a formula like this 10 times in the book of Genesis. It begins the account of, and that's the translation of the Hebrew word. You can tuck this in your back pocket.

Toledot will help you immensely in your study of the book of Genesis. Genesis. And that word literally means the family history of. The ESV has these are the generations of.

It's Moses, the author of the book, saying, right, I'm tearing off a new page to start a new family tree. So Genesis itself is saying, right, draw a line under this new section.

[6 : 42] And reading on, we see this section is actually starting back, as I say, on day six of creation. And it's taken the opportunity to zoom in on those verses that we read about the creation of human beings.

It's taken the chance to tell us in more detail about what it meant for God to create human beings, male and female, in his image. The fact that there are no plants in verse five, well, it isn't because God hadn't created plants yet, but because we've zoned in on this one incredibly dusty and dry part of the earth, where God is about to do the act of creating a human being.

One of the things that tells us that is the sections much more detailed, so much detail in it. And that tells us, doesn't it, the way God creates this man is incredibly significant.

Now, if I asked you, without looking, okay, don't look, the only times I'm going to tell you not to look at the Bible, okay, without looking for a minute, where did God create the first man?

What would we say instinctively? Probably, I imagine, our instinct is to say Eden, right? Well, let's have a look there at verses seven and eight.

[8 : 06] You'd read with me, then 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. Now, the Lord God had planted a garden in the east in Eden, and there he put the man he had formed.

Okay, did you get that? He was created in this dry place and then put in a garden, which is in Eden. Let me show you that on slides. Okay, dry, dusty bit of ground, no rain, no water system.

There the Lord God formed the man out of the dust. It was a different place in the east called Eden. In it, God has planted a garden, and there he has put the man that he created.

Okay, not what we tend to imagine, right? When we think of the creation of the first human beings, but that is what it says. Now, why do we need to know that?

Well, it is really significant. Okay, we gloss over that because to us it doesn't mean anything. But remember, this book was not written for us.

[9 : 17] It was written for the people God had rescued back then, and it meant the world to them. Okay, remember what has just happened to them?

God has just taken them out of a dry, dusty place where he'd formed them as a nation. Exodus opens with words that deliberately echo the beginning of Genesis, that in Egypt, they were fruitful and multiplied and filled the land.

There God had created and formed Israel. But God had brought them out of that land and sent them east, where he'd promised them a wonderful land to live in.

And so they are standing here when they read for the first time how God created the first human being, which would lead us to ask, would this account of Adam's creation have rung any bells for them in their minds?

Well, yeah, big, massive, huge bells because God's rescue of them was following the very same pattern that he had used when he created the first human being, formed in the dust and taken out to be put in paradise.

[10 : 37] Now, what would that have told them? What does it have to teach us? Well, firstly, it teaches us about the goal of God's rescue plan.

By rescuing them from slavery, what this told them was that God was not starting something brand new from scratch, but dusting off and restoring and recreating his original design for human life.

In saving them, he was giving them what humanity was made for. If you've seen The Repair Shop, BBC, I don't know if that's something that you watch, but God is doing that.

People bring their old, broken family treasures to the experts, precious items that just seem beyond repairing. But then, these experts, these artisans, they restore them, and by the end, they are as good as new.

And that is part of what God does for us when he rescues us in Christ. God loves restoring what he has created because he loves what he has created.

[11 : 50] Commentators will point out in verse 7 that the language there suggests the words of an artisan, a potter, forming the clay with great care and skill.

God didn't just throw Adam together. He was lovingly fashioned with a plan over time. And then God breathes his life into his nostrils.

You can barely imagine a more tender scene between creator and creature. It's like the kiss of life that God gives to this newly created being.

God loves our humanity. He created it. And so, friends, when God saves us, he delights in recreating us and restoring us to our original factory setting, setting, so to speak, so that we live rightly as human beings in his world, not only to survive, but to thrive.

So what does that teach us? Well, when we turn to him, God doesn't throw away our humanity, doesn't discard our humanity, and we don't kind of transcend our humanity and become superhuman beings.

[13 : 05] No, God begins to fix our humanity, to repair his own broken image in us. Because the goal of his rescue is that we become more and more what we were created to be in the beginning.

In short, we are in Christ a new humanity, a new creation. Now, is that how our world would describe becoming a Christian?

No, it's not. Our world sees us, doesn't it, taking up our cross, denying ourselves, following Jesus, and would tell us that we are denying parts of our humanity.

How can you thrive, be truly human, without indulging your every sexual impulse? Or working constantly to get ahead and succeed?

Or spending money you don't have to attain a lifestyle that is fashionable and desirable? Or cultivating, curating, or working on your image on social media?

[14 : 17] Perhaps we ourselves have internalized this struggle. And in our hearts, we perhaps tell ourselves the story as if denying our sin, we're denying who we truly are.

Well, friends, the book of Genesis tells us that is an absolute lie. Sin is an intruder in the human heart. It is not part of what it means to be truly human.

Otherwise, how could Jesus have been truly human and yet without sin? No, Jesus says the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.

I have come that they may have life in all its fullness. God has saved us from that thief, that intruder of sin in Christ and he has freed us to live as we have been created to live, life to the full, to thrive in our bodies, in our minds as well as in our hearts and our souls.

It is in Christ that we become who we truly are not by giving in to sin but by turning instead to him, our creator, who has become our redeemer.

[15 : 39] The second big thing it teaches us this creation and rescue story is the direction of God's plan. That's the goal. What's the direction? Well, God's plan tells us for human flourishing isn't just for us who are in the church.

It holds out hope for all people everywhere because one of the things that would have been obvious to these first hearers, the Israelites, is that Adam was not an Israelite.

He was simply a human being and yet we see God's pattern of new creation of redemption written first in his life.

And so it's not as if this one nation in the desert was suddenly truly human and everyone else in the world was irredeemably lost. No, the story tells us that human beings, whoever and wherever they were, could be restored and redeemed by being rescued by the God who had created them in the beginning.

Yes, this nation had been created, formed, chosen by God, but for what purpose? Because through you, says God, I will bless every family of the earth.

[16 : 58] That is the direction of this rescue, which should give us, friends, incredible hope for the people that we cross paths with throughout the week, shouldn't it?

we are surrounded by broken people and by rebellious people, people sometimes who we know and are dear to us and who we love and perhaps we wonder, what hope is there for them?

What hope for broken, fallen humanity? What hope is there for you this evening? If you find yourself here, you don't normally come to church, perhaps, you're not a Christian, what hope for you?

Well, there is the same hope for us who are in Christ to be made whole and set free to live life in all its fullness in and through Jesus because when we turn to our creator who has become our redeemer, he restores in us what was broken and ruined, his own glorious image.

And so, brothers and sisters, we find, don't we, the blueprints of true human dignity and purpose in this chapter.

[18 : 15] What then do these blueprints tell us about the good life that God wants for us? How do we thrive as human beings in his world? Well, we see in this chapter that true human flourishing involves three things.

Firstly, we are created and redeemed by God to live in his presence, to live in his presence. Now, last week, we touched briefly on the idea that the whole universe is God's temple.

That's how he created it and he put humanity in it to be his worshippers, to glorify him. Well, if the cosmos is God's temple, we now find in this chapter that the garden that God has planted is the holy of holies, the holy place where he lives.

Because we find in the garden all sorts of things that the Israelites will have found in God's special dwelling place, his special tent called the tabernacle.

Okay, as you see there in verse 12, what sorts of minerals are scattered in this region. we see gold, good gold, not bad gold, don't know what that means, aromatic resin, onyx stones.

[19 : 40] Where would Israel have seen this collection in their own lives? Well, in the gold that shot on everything in God's tent and in the incense that was burned in his worship on the altar and in the onyx stones that the high priest carried on his vest as he led the worship of God's people.

Even the tree that is in the middle of the garden, the tree of life, they would have seen reflected in the golden lampstand that stood on the altar designed and made to look like an almond tree in blossom.

See, what would have struck the first readers as they heard this chapter read to them is that God's tent was in fact a mini garden of Eden.

So the incredible thing is that even though they are on their way to a new land, yet God's people do not have to wait till they get there to come back into God's presence because they come back into the garden in a way to a new humanity there and then when they go into God's tent, into his presence.

just as much now for them as it was there and then. So keep that up. And then, of course, there is Adam himself who's put there.

[21 : 06] What is he doing? In verse 15, he's put there. The Lord God took the man, put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. Now often that role description is taken to speak of work in general and there's truth in that, but the language and the context suggests that Adam wasn't preoccupied mainly with trimming hedges and pulling weeds because those words, work and take care of, in Hebrew, are the words serve and guard, which when they're used together are often used to describe the work of priests.

So this is Numbers chapter 18, verse 7. The Lord says to the high priest, you and your sons with you shall guard your priesthood for all that concerns the altar, all that's within the veil, and you shall serve.

So Adam is not only a king ruling over creation, but a priest caring for the worship of God in his holy place. And all of this tells us, doesn't it, that human beings were created to live coram deo, Latin phrase that means before the face of God.

That is our true home. Adam's home was the holy of holies. Of course, for the Israelites it was much harder to get into the holy of holies, one man, once a year, but it hadn't always been so.

It hadn't always been so. That is our true home. Friends, that is what our darkened and sinful souls cry out for. It's a deep nostalgia within us for what our first parents had, but lost.

[22 : 52] Imagine living in the presence of the God we met in the first chapter of Genesis, the great, glorious, and majestic God who created the world and everything in it.

Imagine being friends so intimately with this creator who breathed life into his nostrils. That is what we have lost, but friends, in Jesus it's what we have again.

Paul tells us that our bodies, if we're Christians, and our church bodies are now the dwelling place of the living God. What an awesome thought that the Holy Spirit, God himself, lives in us and among us.

He sanctifies our being, he satisfies our hearts with his presence. Just as the Israelites had God living with them, there and then in his tent, now we have God living in and among us more closely by his spirit than even they did.

And in his intimate and his immediate presence, before his face, we worship him. That is what we are made for, our lives, our relationships, our work, yes, whatever kind of work it is that we do, if the spirit of God lives within us, it is now set apart for glorifying him.

[24 : 23] We pray, given over more and more to worshipping our creator because that curtain that once kept us out of God's presence, what happened when Jesus breathed his last?

It tore from top to bottom and now we live once again freely, fearlessly in the presence of our creator and before his face.

We are made to live in God's presence. But how do we do that? How do we live in the presence of God? Well, secondly, we see we are created to live under his word.

Did you notice that in verse 16? God speaks yet again as he did in chapter one, but this time not to create, but to command. Lord God commanded the man, you are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will certainly die.

And now perhaps we are wondering how the God who spoke all things into being could now give such a seemingly strange and arbitrary rule and how that fits into his picture of human flourishing.

[25 : 42] God planted a tree, didn't he, in the middle of the garden, tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and now he tells Adam, do not eat of it on pain of death.

Seems strange, why would he do that? Well, if you've never read C.S. Lewis's space trilogy, it is well worth it, if only for this one quote.

Why this rule among so many obviously good and wise rules? As one of the characters says, in all these other things, what you call obeying him is but doing what seems good in your own eyes also.

Is love content with that? You do them indeed because they are his will, but not only because they are his will. Where can you taste the joy of obeying unless he bids you do something for which his bidding is the only reason?

In short, God's one command to the man was to be a test of his love. Was he obeying God out of a heart of love?

[26 : 51] Or would it only be so far as he thought reasonable in his own eyes? God isn't a tyrant who makes senseless rules on the spot as he goes along.

In fact, just before he rules out that one tree, what does he do? Tells Adam, you're free to eat from any tree in the garden. So he could hardly call God unfair or stingy.

He's given one command, he's ruled out one tree. Yet that one command will test Adam's love for God, won't it? And indeed, Adam fails the test, and the results are disastrous.

But that is next week. Again, if you are reading this as an Israelite in the desert, which I hope you're beginning to be by now, well, it's obvious, isn't it, why this is so important.

What does God do once he's rescued his people out of slavery? Well, he speaks and commands them to show their love for him in the way they live for him.

[27 : 54] A guy called Gordon Wenham points out in his commentary that the way God's command there is phrased, you must not eat, is the same way as in Hebrew, the Ten Commandments are phrased.

So you could say, thou shalt not eat from that tree, if you like. And where do the tablets, where do the tablets for the Ten Commandments written on them live?

in the Holy of Holies, in the Ark of the Covenant, in the center, the heart of God's tent, his dwelling place.

And so Genesis would remind them and us today that to thrive as human beings, we need not to look inwards, not to live as is right in our own eyes, but instead to listen to our creator and to live by his every word.

Contrary to what our world would tell us, we live out our true identity as human beings when we give up our self-rule, our right to self-determination, our self-love, and love and serve God, our creator, instead.

[29 : 07] As we turn away from our own way and walk his way under his word. It might not be obvious to us at times, why it is that God wants us to live or not live in certain ways, why God says not to sleep with this person or marry this person, or why to live and work and relate and speak and rest and worship in these ways and not in these ways.

God's people in the desert struggled deeply with obeying God's words. Adam struggled deeply, as we struggle deeply too, do we not?

But when we come to know the God of the Bible, who speaks to us in these words, and we see his supreme goodness and his infinite wisdom by which he created it, all things, we know that he never speaks to harm us, to ruin our lives.

That when we come to love him, we come to trust that everything he wants for us is good and true and right, even, friends, when we can't fully understand it.

He helps us by his spirit to thrive under his loving rule as we live under his good word. God's glory. So we created and redeemed to live under his word, in his presence, and thirdly, and finally, together for God's glory.

[30 : 49] Have a glance with me, please, at verse 18. The Lord God said, it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.

Now, lest we think that silence is golden, that solitude is what we are designed for, here, God's verdict, okay, on his work up to this point. It is not good.

Not good. Those words should shock us. Six times God has said it's good. The seventh time he said it's very good. Now he says it is not good.

Why? Because the man is alone. Brothers and sisters, we are not created and designed to love and serve God on our own. It's not how it was.

God creates a woman in paradise to complete his vision for human flourishing. Just as carefully and lovingly as God created the man, now he creates the woman.

[31 : 50] Verse 21, the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh.

The Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man and brought her to the man. The gift of another human being connected, united to the man, yet different and distinct from the man.

God calls her a suitable helper. That word suitable, it suggests a counterpart. The idea is that she will be a fit for Adam, different from him, and yet his equal because she will be a helper.

Now when we call someone a helper, it can be quite patronizing, can't it? But that's not the idea here. In fact, most times this word's used in the Old Testament, it's used of God being the help of his people.

And so the idea is that the woman will make things possible for the man that would not otherwise be possible for either of them. Man and woman were created for a partnership, to be complementary, to work together in ways that neither of them could manage alone.

[33 : 04] And namely, in their case, it was to carry out God's commission to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. That was the mission back then, to produce little image bearers to fill God's world with his glory.

Now there's stacks we could say at this point, but let me just say what is obvious but so often overlooked about this passage. This vision in Genesis of a dependent partnership in life and service and worship between a man and a woman as equals, both having royal dignity, both being created specially by God, was brilliant news and had never before been heard in the ancient world.

No other civilization had dreamt that a man and a woman might be equals and serve God together. This vision was as non-intuitive and as counter-cultural back then as it is to so many today, but as it was then, so it is now wonderful truth that frees us as men and women to value the bodies and minds and souls that God has given us and to partner together for his glory.

yes, sometimes by getting married, but let's not forget, friends, why the man and the woman needed each other in paradise to carry out God's mission, which now in Christ is no longer primarily to procreate, but to make disciples of all nations.

And so now, wonderfully, all men and women, all men and women are called to partner together in the church to pursue God's glory in our witness and service and worship of him.

[35 : 05] We are a new humanity and this, says God, is how we thrive and flourish, as a new humanity, men and women serving together in Christ's body.

Yes, we are different, maybe different spheres of service we are called to, but that is a wonderful thing, isn't it? Because it means, brothers, we need our sisters.

We cannot do it. And sisters, of course, you need your brothers. We cannot thrive as God's people without each of us, men and women, taking up our God-given parts to build up the body.

And so let us embrace who God created us to be, male and female, and let us partner together in the gospel to build up his church.

What a witness that will be, brothers and sisters, in a world that is so confused about what it means for human beings to thrive. Watching in our church, or seeing in our homes, or glimpsing in our workplaces, the vision of a new humanity restored, recreated, created in the design and in the image of the one true and living God, a people living in God's presence, a people living under his word, a people living together for God's glory.

[36 : 37] Friends, that is who we are in Christ, who we are created to be, who we are saved to be, this glorious vision of life to the full that God has given us in his son and by his Holy Spirit.

let us embrace it and let us pray that God would help us to do so now. Let's pray. God, our Father, we are humbled by the dignity that you bestow on us, by virtue of your having created us.

Our Father, we are in awe that you, the eternal God, should create us in your own image, that you should have such a wonderful design for us, that you should have such vision for our lives, and that it should be so good.

Our Father, we thank you that you care so deeply for human flourishing. We thank you that that is what you created this world for. Father, we pray that you would help each of us to renew our vision, Lord, for our own lives in light of your word.

Lord, we pray that you would please help us to put away the things that we have believed wrongly, Lord, from our world, about who we are and our place in your world, and that instead, our Father, you would help us to live into this wonderful vision.

[38 : 11] we thank you that you freely dwell with us. We thank you that you freely speak to us, and we thank you that you knit us together to worship you.

Our Father, we don't deserve the least of your good things, and yet you have restored and redeemed us in Christ, and we praise you for that. So help us, we pray, Lord, may this vision be seen in our church, may it be seen in our marriages and our homes, Lord, may it be seen in our work.

Lord, may it be seen by the world around, and may it draw people to know you, the great and glorious God, both through what they see in our small and weak and so often compromised lives.

By your Holy Spirit, we pray, use us and bring people to know you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to pray.