

## Core 52 Week 2 Beginnings - Identity

The book and movie *Fight Club* is a depressing descent into nihilism and anarchy. In one scene, a central character in the story, Tyler Durden, is heard telling new recruits:

You are not special. You are not a beautiful or unique snowflake. You're the same decaying organic matter as everything else. We're all part of the same compost heap.

Just a book. Just a movie, you say. Nobel Prize winning playwright, Samuel Beckett, wrote what is considered to be the shortest play ever written. It's called *Breath*, the curtain opens to a stage littered with garbage. You hear the sound of a birth cry followed by the sound of breathing. The light brightens as the breathing continues and then dims until the breathing stops. Then you hear a final cry of death. Thirty-five seconds after the curtain opens, it closes. That's it— the whole play. The message: life begins and ends with a cry. Everything in between is garbage. This most depressing piece of theater has been performed more than 1,300 times and viewed by more than 85 million people.<sup>i</sup>

It's just a play. On July 7, 2012 a prominent group of scientists released the *Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness* which states that human beings are not unique in ways that matter.<sup>ii</sup> In other words, "There's nothing special about being human." Humanity no longer occupies a special place in the natural order of things. Ingrid Newkirk, founder of PETA once declared "a rat is a pig is a dog is a boy." There's no difference.

Many scientists and philosophers are skeptical about whether human life has any special meaning or intrinsic value at all. MIT physicist, Jeremy England argues that the purpose of human existence is to use up energy in the universe.<sup>iii</sup>

Our society is entering a culture-wide identity crisis. We have lost our source of identity and are now trying to replace it with such things as pleasure, power, environmentalism, and identity politics. If no one put us here and we aren't here for any sort of meaningful reason, then who are we and why are we here?

### **We are here by Choice Not by Chance.**

The opening chapters of the Bible are an unequivocal affirmation of our true identity as people. We are a creation of God. The overwhelming message of Genesis is that we are here by choice, not by chance. We are here because God put us here; He wanted us here. Of all the life on this planet, humanity is exceptional. We hold a special place in the cosmos, and we are categorically and essentially different from all other species.

We are in a series called Core 52 in which we are exploring the 52 most important passages of Scripture and the essential stories and themes connected to them. By understanding these verses of God's eternal word, we aim to increase our overall knowledge of God's word, grow in our spiritual maturity and increase our intimacy with God.

Last week, we saw that creation shows us that that the God who created all this must be powerful, purposeful, eternal, and good. This morning's core verse comes from Genesis 1:26 which says this. If you are following along with the Core 52 devotions either in the book or on our website, this is the verse you want memorize this week,

*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."*

There are three truths that we need to understand from the Creation account that are essential to a proper sense of identity and our understanding of the sanctity of human life.

### I. **You Have a God-Based Identity**

The first truth is this: you have a God-based identity. Genesis 1:26 is an unequivocal declaration that we are a special creation of God. Though we may disagree, debate, and discuss some of the particulars, our sense of identity comes from God Himself.

In vs. 26, God is talking to himself. Picture Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a sort of divine council. Notice that the pronouns here are plural, and God isn't talking to the angels when He says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

You notice how whenever anyone has a baby, everyone seems to know if the baby looks just like their mom or their dad. Big nose, well he looks just like his dad. Blonde hair— she looks just like her mother. Personally, I think we see what we want to see, but you should be concerned when someone says, "Hey, he looks just like the UPS guy." Unless, of course, you're married to the UPS guy.

Here's the reality, every single human being on this planet carries the divine image of God. C.S. Lewis wrote,

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal...it is immortals we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—...Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.

In the ancient world, when a statue was made in someone's likeness, it was this word that was used. It was in their image. When a coin was minted by hammering the bust of the king on its face, it was "in his image." You are the image of God. You carry the likeness of your heavenly Father.

It is this "Image of God" in you that separates you from everything else in creation. It's what makes you special. It's what gives your lives innate value and worth. This is the basis for the sanctity of human life.

It is immediately obvious that God is doing something special here. With everything else in creation God simply spoke it into existence. There was no deliberation that went into the process. But here God is holding counsel with himself. Let us do this. No other creature is said to be made in God's image. Only humanity, and notice it isn't only Adam, but it also includes Eve. Verse 27 says, "*So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*"

Another thing that sticks out about God's creation of people is that God made us differently than everything else. With every other living creature, it was simply, "God said...and it was so." But God does something very different here.

Notice what Genesis 2:7 says, "*then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.*" God didn't just speak Adam into existence. He fashioned him. He formed him. It was a custom sculpting job. This was something very unique about the creation of man.

Our life came directly from God. It says God breathed into Adam the breath of life. In the Hebrew, the word for *spirit* and the word for *breath* are the same word. You could just as easily read this as "God breathed into him the spirit of life."

The point here is that we have a kind of life that is distinct from every other creature. We have a spiritual life. We have a soul, a spirit. Of all creatures on this planet, we are uniquely spiritual beings.

This helps explain Genesis 1:31. After every day of Creation God sees what He has made and sees that it is *good*, but in verse 31 after He has made Adam and Eve, it says, *“And it was very good.”*

We are the pinnacle of creation. It’s like a chef bringing out the crowning achievement of his meal with broad smile on his face saying, *“This is my pièce de résistance.”* We are God’s masterpiece.

So what does it mean that we have God’s image? What separates us from the rest of creation? There are many layers to this answer. For instance, we are rational beings who have the ability to reason and we share a higher intelligence than anything in the animal kingdom. We also share with God a love of beauty. You will never see your dog contemplating a beautiful sunset. As far as I know, no cats have ever built an art museum. We also set apart by an innate sense of morality. We are motivated by what we ought to do, and guilt and shame if we don’t. Animals can learn to follow rules, but they don’t do this because of any built-in sense of morality. They want to avoid our disapproval, but I guarantee you when your dog is eating your sofa or your cat is pooping in your new shoes, questions of good and evil never enter their minds.

## II. You Have a God-Given Purpose

First, you have a God-based identity. Secondly, you have a God-given purpose. Life is not meaningless. We don’t have to invent our own purpose in life in the grandest sense of our reason for existence. Not only did God put us here. He put us here for a reason. We have an important role to play in creation.

Our purpose gets spelled out in verses 28-30

<sup>28</sup> (2 Slides) *And God blessed them. And God said to them, “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.”* <sup>29</sup> *And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.”* <sup>30</sup> *And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.*

(Advance Slide) According to these verses we are not just one accident of nature among many other accidents of nature. We don’t just have a place in the cosmos, but we have a purpose. That purpose is contained in the word used here in verse 28, *dominion*. We have been given dominion over the natural world, at least on this planet. This world is our domain.

God gave us this world as you might gift an artist with canvas and paints. Fill the earth, subdue it, have dominion over the animals. He’s talking about building civilization and making something out of this world. It was never God’s intention that this world would remain some pristine, untouched garden. God gave us a beautiful world, not just to enjoy, but to build something with it.

The Bible ends where it begins. In Genesis God creates the heavens and the earth. In Revelation, He creates the new heavens and the new earth. At the center of both is the tree of life, but in Revelation the tree is no longer in a garden. It’s in the middle of a beautiful, perfect city, full of life. Our destiny is not a nature reserve, but a city; not a garden, but a civilization. God gave us this world because He wants us to make something out of it.

Even the very image of a garden is something that is tended, cared for, cultured, grown, and developed. Genesis 2:15 says, *“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”* Not only was Adam to tend the garden, humanity was never intended to stay in the garden. They were to fill the earth. This call to fill the earth is more than just having babies and populating the planet. It also means to fulfill. As we fill this world and make something of it, we fulfill its purpose. It’s what it’s made for. It’s what we’re made for.

What God is doing here is inviting us to partner with Him in creation. God created the world, but then He wants us to create something with the world. I personally think that this is the greatest indication of the image of God within us—our ability and desire to create. We imagine, we dream, we plan, we prepare, we build, we sculpt, we shape, we mold, we paint, we sing, we write. We are creators, just like our heavenly Father.

There is nothing like us in all of nature. Birds make nests, beavers make dams, and bees make hives, but that is all they make. That’s all they have ever made. They never create something new. It’s hardwired into them. It’s instinct. But we’re something different. The Mona Lisa, Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus, the semiconductor, the light bulb, the Eiffel Tower, Mount Rushmore, the artificial heart, the internet, Sue Henry’s quilts, Mary Willis’ strawberry rhubarb pie, Mason and Marshall with their 3D printers, Aubrey’s photographs, or Randy being able to put a car together using nothing but rust, spit and a few spare parts. It all shows our innate passion to create.

Our dominion over creation is a divine commission to turn the world into a showcase of the glory and beauty of God in whose image we’re made. Theologians call this passage the “cultural mandate” because all this filling the earth and subduing it means the creation of culture and civilization. God expected us to build society. Bob Thune writes that one of his seminary professors was fond of saying, “God expected Adam and Eve to split the Atom.” God built things into creation knowing it would take us thousands of years to understand. I imagine He still gets excited about stuff we haven’t discovered yet.

Our purpose in having dominion over creation, however, doesn’t give us license to be reckless with nature. We may be superior within nature, but we are also stewards of nature. We are to use creation, not abuse it. Our dominion is a privilege, not a right.

In the ancient world, the owner of a property would entrust control of some aspect of his wealth or business to a servant. That servant had dominion over that area, but she was to be a steward of it. The steward would oversee it, care for it, and be responsible for it. There were often privileges and status associated with this position, but it was still a position of responsibility. The steward was always accountable to the owner, to the master, to the king for what kind of stewardship they provided.

I believe God cares deeply what kind of stewardship we provide for the planet He’s given us. Jesus says in Matthew 10:29-31, *“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care.”* Two of the greatest black marks against the church in history have come because the church failed to understand and apply the truth of Genesis 1 and 2. The first was the widespread acceptance of human slavery which is a fundamental denial that all people are created in the image of God, and second was the widespread acceptance of environmental abuse, which is a fundamental denial of our stewardship of creation. We have treated our world like a bunch of drunken teens having a wild party while the parents are away.

One of the consequences of this failure of environmental conscience is that we've abdicated the stewardship of the environment and allowed it to be taken over by a bunch of radical, anti-human, neo-pagans who want to worship mother earth instead of having proper dominion over it. This in turn makes us servants of nature rather than servants of God. It turns God's whole design upside down.

The answer to human abuse of the environment is not for us to become servants of nature, but to be servants of the God who created nature. Genesis 1 is sharp rebuke to both environmental abuse and radical environmentalism.

### **III. You Share in God's Community**

The third thing we see in God's creation of Adam and Eve is that we were created for community. You have a God-centered community. You were created for relationship. Just as God lives in eternal community as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we too were created for community.

We have seen that seven times, God says creation is good. It's about halfway through chapter 2 when we see the first thing that isn't good. Vs. 18 says this, "*Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone: I will make a helper fit for him."*" This means somebody designed to correspond precisely for him.

Interestingly though, God doesn't immediately make Eve. Instead, He brings all the animals before Adam, and he gives them names, but vs. 20 says, "*But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him."* Your dog may be your best friend. But we can't relate with our pets on the deepest level. We need human relationships, we need community. Maybe that's what God is trying to impress on Adam. Animals can be great companions, but you were created for something more.

This is when God creates Eve. And just like God did with Adam, God makes Eve in way that is unique from everything else. I love Matthew Henry's statement about this:

The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.

Man is unique and special in all creation. Woman is unique and special in all creation.

Our most intimate experience of this human community is in marriage. I believe marriage and all its corresponding intimacy was created by God as a reflection of His own divine community he experiences as a trinity. Marriage is something created by God in the perfection of the Garden. It true that we experience marriage as something stained by sin and selfishness, but marriage done right is taste of divine community.

To a lesser extent all human relationships are blessed by God. This is something inherent in the call to be fruitful and multiply. We are to live in relationship with other people. We experience this deeply with our closest friends, loved ones, and family. We share this community more broadly with those we work with, live next to, cheer with and cheer for. At the widest angle we share in a global community as we have filled the earth.

But we aren't just called to live in relationship with each other. We were created for a relationship with God. In the opening chapters of Genesis we see God in the garden talking with Adam and Eve. He blesses them. He gives them instructions. He provides for them. He cares for them.

Even in Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve screw up royally, and they eat of the forbidden tree, and their relationship with God begins to be torn apart, we get a glimpse of what that relationship was. Verse 8 says, “And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.” God is just hanging out; taking a stroll through the garden.

You get the impression that this was just an ordinary everyday occurrence for God. He takes a walk in the garden. He chills with Adam and Eve for a while. The talk about stuff. Only this time something is different. Vs 8 continues, “and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.”

Now they are scared. They’re embarrassed. They’re ashamed. They don’t want to hang it with God. We’ll talk about that next week. Core 52 week 3 – What went wrong.

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But this morning I want you to know this. You were made in the image of God. You are a spiritual creation. This gives you a God-based identity. You have a God-given purpose, and you share in God’s community. You were created for relationship.

You were created for a relationship with your creator. God wants to be with you. He wants to know you, talk to you, hang out with you; take walks in the garden with you so to speak. But maybe you’re still hiding from Him. You are embarrassed or ashamed about something in your life. You think God would never want to be your friend.

I want you to know this morning nothing could be further from the truth. Even after Adam and Eve messed things up in the garden, God still came looking for them. God still wanted relationship with them. Quit running. Quit hiding. God already knows where you are. He already knows what you did. And as we will learn as we continue Core 52, He’s already made a way to make it right. You just need to come to Him.

You were also made for relationships with other people. As Christians, some of the most important relationships come from the community we share as the body of Christ. In Jesus, we are family. God made all of us, as different as we are, from all of our different backgrounds, to our wildly different journeys here, He’s made us brothers and sisters in Christ.

I urge you, don’t just show up and be an individual who sits under the same roof for an hour and a half. Be a part of our community. Build relationship with us. Be a part of the Son-Rise family. We aren’t perfect, but we are perfectly loved, and we serve a perfect God. If you are willing to call Jesus your Lord and Savior, if you’re willing to strive to follow him the best you can, and if you’ve been baptized into Christ, we would love to call you family, and we’d love Son-Rise to be your church home.

We don’t care if you were baptized in another church, or you want to be baptized here this morning, all who are immersed into Christ are our brothers and sisters. God doesn’t love one church more than another, but you do need to be a part of a body and live in relationship with a group of other believers. We were created for relationship.

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<sup>i</sup> C.J. Ackerley and SE Gontarski (Eds.) *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p 73.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.peta.org/blog/rat-pig-dog-boy/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.quantamagazine.org/a-new-thermodynamics-theory-of-the-origin-of-life-20140122/>