

# HUMANS: WHO ARE WE?

GENESIS 2:4-25

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There is a very intentional phrase that is used eleven times in Genesis at specific transitional points in the book. It is the phrase, "These are the generations of \_\_\_\_." It is meant to be a title that introduces the next section in the book and a link that connects the next section with what just came before it.<sup>1</sup> Another way that you might interpret this phrase is, "Here is a fuller development of the story of \_\_\_\_."

Now when we get to Genesis 2:4, we notice that the rhythms, repetitions and patterns of Genesis 1 come to a stop. It's almost as if the introductory song is finished, and we are now ready to begin the story. And the story begins with the phrase that we just mentioned:

"These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens." (Genesis 2:4)

This is the title introducing us to the next section which will be a fuller development of the story of the heavens and the earth. It is providing a link between the introductory song about our Creator in Genesis 1 and this intimate story about the origins of humanity that begins in Genesis 2. And the scenes in these two chapters are strikingly similar, but the spotlight has shifted.

The story begins much like the previous chapter. The land is portrayed as an uninhabited wild wasteland covered with water (2:5-6), but this time it is portrayed as somewhat awaiting the arrival of humanity. Humanity has become the center of our focus. And we should not overlook the fact that even God is referred to in a way that highlights his relationship to humanity. In Genesis 1, we were introduced to Elohim (translated 'God'); in Genesis 2, he is now referred to in a much more personal way as Yahweh Elohim (translated 'the Lord God').

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<sup>1</sup> see Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 19; 37:2

As David Atkinson points out:

“Our focus of interest is no longer the cosmic perspective of the One who made the stars. It is the intimacy of fellowship with the One who calls Man by his name.”<sup>2</sup>

In Genesis 1, the primary focus was God as the Creator of the cosmos, but now the focus becomes more set on humanity here on earth. Who are we and what does it mean to be human? The garden story in Genesis 2 gives us an answer:

**Humanity was created to be the resident caretakers of the creation who were made for loving fellowship with one another and trusting obedience towards God.**

Human beings were created with a special relationship with the creation, with one another and with God, and when any of these relationships are missing or become fractured, we lose a significant element of what it means to be human. And so, let's look at each one of these relationships as they are originally portrayed here in the garden story.

## **Our Relationship with Creation**

Genesis 2 begins the story of humanity by once again describing God bringing order and life to what was previously formless and void. From out of the watery wasteland described in verses 2:5-6, we read that:

“The Lord God formed the man out of the dirt from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” (Genesis 2:7)

This one verse, with profound simplicity, reveals the common but yet complex nature of human beings in relation to the rest of creation. On the one hand, we are living creatures like the other animals that are made up of the common chemicals associated with the natural world (from the ground). But on the other hand, there is a supernatural element given to humanity that God does not give to any other creature in his creation.

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<sup>2</sup> David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11: The Dawn of Creation*, (Inter-Varsity Press:1990), 54

In Genesis 2, we see the Lord God forming humanity from the mud like a potter forms a lump of clay into a new pot<sup>3</sup>, and then we see God breathe into humanity the breath of life. This verse seems to match and complete the general statement made about the creation of humanity in Genesis 1:27 – the Lord God carefully formed humanity in his image and intimately breathed into him his own life and likeness.

While human beings have much in common with other living beings, we are much more than the mere by-product of natural processes or just the reigning champions of the survival of the fittest competition. And deep down within us, we can sense this inner paradox of our own existence.

As G.K. Chesterton puts it:

“The simplest truth about man is that he is a very strange being; almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth. In all sobriety, he has much more of the external appearance of one bringing alien habits from another land than of a mere growth of this one.”<sup>4</sup>

We know that there is something uniquely different about us, and we can sense that there is a purpose behind our existence that exceeds the purpose of any other creature. And regardless of our worldview or spiritual beliefs, human beings know that we have the leading role when it comes to taking care of this world. We feel an instinctive responsibility towards the rest of the creation, and the author of Genesis seeks to tell us why.

Combining what we see in Genesis 2 and Genesis 1, we read:

“And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put humanity whom he had formed... to work it and to keep it... 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 sky and over every living thing that moves on the land.””

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<sup>3</sup> see Psalm 139:14-16

<sup>4</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*

Human beings are the resident caretakers of God's entire creation. Like a tenant that you place in your own home to take care of it on your behalf, we have been entrusted with the role and responsibility of cultivating and preserving the resources of God's own creation. We are not permitted to exploit the earth or its creatures in order to satisfy our own greed or selfishness; we must take care of the world with the same sense of concern and care that God has as the owner of his creation.

As the psalms tell us:

"The earth is the LORD's... but the earth he has given to man." (Psalm 24:1, 115:16)

To understand who we are, we must understand our relationship with the creation. We are created creatures made from the same natural chemicals common to all creatures. Therefore, we must not exalt ourselves to the level of gods. But we are complex creatures carefully formed by our Creator in his image and intimately given his supernatural life and likeness. Therefore, we must not reduce ourselves to mere animals.

We are the resident caretakers of the creation. To be truly human means that we should be bothered by disorder and destruction in this world, and that we ought to never feel at home in a world full of chaos and corruption. As human beings, we exhibit our truest humanity whenever we "confront the formless and disordered places of our world, and of our lives, and make them places of beauty and goodness."<sup>5</sup>

## **Our Relationship with One Another**

The next thing that we learn about what it means to be a human being is summed up in the phrase, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (2:18). This is a foundational truth for what it means to be truly human. We are creatures made to experience fellowship with one another. And therefore, an existence separated from fellowship with other human beings is a sub-human existence.

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<sup>5</sup> Atkinson, 62

We might notice that in all the descriptions of God creating the things of this world, we are told over and over again that God said, "Let there be... and then God made." However, it is only when we get to the creation of humanity that the language changes. In Genesis 1:26, God said, "Let US make man in OUR image, after OUR likeness." Could it be that the plural nature of the Triunity of God is referred to intentionally here in God's creation of humanity?

We can only speculate, but Timothy Keller points to this intentional change in the language as a reason for why human beings are creatures made for fellowship with one another. He says:

"We are made in the image of someone who is not just a me but an us, and therefore we will not be our true selves until we are not just a me but also an us."

Despite the many good things that have come out of the Enlightenment period, one of the more devastating consequences of that philosophy is the hyper-individualistic way of viewing and thinking about life in this world. The emphasis on the individual as the center of the universe has led to a sense of isolation and loneliness for much of our modern society.

A human being is a creature made to experience fellowship with other humans, and it is actually this kind of fellowship with other humans that brings out the different elements of our own humanity. In his book, *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis describes this well when talking about what happened among his friends after one of them passed away. He writes:

"In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Charles joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him "to myself" now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald."

Human beings are made for fellowship, and so whether in marriage or family or friendships or community, we must embrace the foundational truth that it is not good for man to be alone.

Here in Genesis 2, we see God fulfilling this need through a marriage. We read:

“I will make him a helper fit for him... So 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... Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

God created a companion like the man (but not just like the man) who would be able to compliment the man and supply something that he lacked in himself. The woman was not created as an inferior made to serve the superior; she was the perfect match made of the same substance and made in the image of God.

As Matthew Henry once expressed:

“[The woman was] not made out of [the man’s] head to top him, not 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.”

While there is so much more to be said on the institution of marriage here in Genesis 2, it is enough for our current argument to simply say that we are made for loving fellowship with other human beings.<sup>6</sup>

To be truly human means that we will not be comfortable with isolation. This is why solitary confinement is considered a form of punishment in human society. As human beings, we exhibit our truest humanity when we seek out and enjoy mutual loving relationships with other human beings.

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<sup>6</sup> As it pertains to marriage, we must not overlook the fact that God created only one woman for the man and not several women or another man. We can fill our need for fellowship with other human beings through friendships between the sexes and among the same sex, but we cannot pursue the marriage union or the sexual acts that belong to that union through multiple partners or homosexual practice.

## Our Relationship with God

And now the last element of our humanity that we will look at from the garden story of Genesis 2, is the fact that we were made to experience a relationship of trusting obedience towards God. As the specially formed creatures made in the image of God and given his life and likeness, we are created to reflect the goodness of God. We were not created with the autonomy to define good and evil for ourselves.

Our post-Enlightenment minds may tell us that there are no absolutes and that what is true for you doesn't have to be true for me. However, deep within the essence of our being, there is an instinctive awareness of something that we can call "goodness" which exists beyond us and beyond the decisions that we make. Human beings were not made with the autonomy to recreate or redefine what is right and what is wrong, and the garden story of Genesis 2 gets at the heart of this.

In these first two chapters of Genesis, we see God create a world full of beauty and order, perfectly designed for humanity to flourish and enjoy, and then he gives humanity the keys to the creation as his special representatives and the resident caretakers of his world. He tells them to enjoy it and to cultivate it for good. He gives humanity incredible freedom, and it's a freedom that is defined by only one restriction – humanity must not try to be God.

In Genesis 2, we see God giving the one boundary that humans must never cross. We read:

"And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil... And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."" (Genesis 2:9, 16-17)

God gave this one command in the context of his care and his provision for human beings. "It is not a harsh restriction, but rather a symbol of the fact that crossing the God-given limits diminishes rather than enhances human well-being."<sup>7</sup> Whether we like it or not, human

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<sup>7</sup> Atkinson, 65

beings have been created to find fulfillment through a relationship of trusting obedience towards their Sovereign Creator.

To try and live as a human being outside of a trusting relationship with the Lord God is to live a sub-human life that is always looking for and asking, "What is truth?" Humans were made for God's presence, and that is why they instinctively sense his absence.

We exhibit our truest humanity when we live according to God's definition of good and evil, and when we learn to trust him even when we do not fully understand why we should.

Many of us need to rediscover who we are as human beings, and what it means to be human. To be a human being is so much more than to be a mammal who has gained incredible mental capacities through a random selection of natural processes. Despite what the textbooks will tell you, our closest ancient ancestor is not a gorilla but a gardener. And so this means that human beings will only find fulfillment by growing in a relationship with their Creator and caring for his creation according to his commands.

And so who are we?

We are the resident caretakers of the creation who were made for loving fellowship with one another and trusting obedience towards God. And if any of these relationships are missing or have become fractured, we are failing to live the life they we were meant to live, and we would have lost a significant element of what it means to be human.