

This Is Us  
*Meant to Be*  
March 17, 2019

**PRE-SERVICE VIDEO**

**Worship Songs – Blessed Be Your Name / Good,  
Good Father / Transition / Who You Say I Am**

**Video – Behind the Scenes**

**Feature – “I Lived” / Offering**

Good morning everyone.

What a great way to kick off this new series, *This Is Us*, because this series is about the life we live and the life we *hope* to live; the life we *long* to live.

Over the next five weeks we’re going to talk about *why we are the way we are* – all the good and glorious things about us

as human beings as well as the not-so-good and not-so-good glorious; why there is a gap between the life we hope to live, we long to live – the life we were *meant* to live – and the life we *actually do* live.

Of course, all of that has been discussed and debated for as long as men and women have pondered the nature of the world and our own existence in it.

- Why are we here?
- How did we get here?
- Is there a master plan to all of this?
- (More importantly) *Does my life matter* in the grand scheme and story of the world and of human

history?

... a wondering which leads to an even greater question which has been and currently is the focus of much discussion and debate: specifically, *what exactly IS the grand story of the world and of human history?*

It's no exaggeration to say that never has there been less agreement and more alternative *and competing* answers to that question than there are today.

That's because pluralism, globalism, and the expansion of technology (especially social media) have combined to produce ...

**... what one sociologist calls ...**

*“... the fundamental dismantling of any collective understanding of anthropology. In other words, there is no longer any coherent sense of what it means to be human.”*

As a result, you and I now live in a culture of contradiction when it comes to the most basic issues of human life.

For instance:

- We have the MeToo# movement against sexual assault and violence while, at the same time, winking at – even celebrating – the “hook-up culture.”

*There’s no coherent sense of what human sexuality is for.*

- We demand justice and respect for the disadvantaged and oppressed while, at the same time, eliminating unwanted or disabled children in utero.

*There's no coherent sense of what human dignity demands.*

- And we announce with great certainty that a person's sexual orientation is unchangeable – “they're just born that way” – while, at the same time, insisting that gender is fluid and can vary from day-to-day.

*There's no coherent sense of what it means to be male and female.*

And the list could go on and on.<sup>i</sup>

Point being that the question of “the grand narrative of the world and human history” isn’t some mere intellectual curiosity.

Instead, it’s a question that matters to each of us because ...

**... as one philosopher puts it:**

*I can only answer the question “What am I to do?”*

In other words, “what am I here for? What is my life about? What am I meant to be?”

*I can only answer the question “What am I to*

do?” ... IF I can answer the prior question “Of what story do I find myself a part?”<sup>ii</sup>

Now, that’s kind of a heady concept so let me give you a very down to earth illustration.

As you’ve probably heard, the Chiefs just released three of their best defensive players ever: Justin Houston, Dee Ford and Eric Berry.

Why? Because we have the greatest young QB ever, but our defense kept us from going to the Super Bowl. We’re were *this* close.

That’s the story – the overarching narrative – of “Chiefs Kingdom.”

And it’s that story into which new (and

hopefully better) players are coming every day. As those new guys think about their roles and what they are to do, their attitude and their intensity is going to be amped up by that story and the idea that “we are this close.”

Across the parking lot at Kaufmann Stadium, as you probably know, the Royals are coming off of a season in which they lost over 100 games. Plus, the heart and soul of their team, Sal Perez, is out for the year. We’re not very good and we have a *long* way to go until we are close.

That’s the grand narrative of the Royals into which new players are coming every day. As those new guys think about their roles and what they are to do, their attitude and their intensity is



likely going to be dampened somewhat by that narrative. “This is not a sprint, it’s a marathon.”

Now, those are obviously trivial examples but I think the point is clear:

The question isn’t whether or not some grand narrative will shape your life and mine.

The question is *which one* will shape it.

And, as I just alluded to, there are many to choose from these days.

For example:

**There’s the technology meta-narrative ...**

... which says that people used to live in darkness because they didn't know anything about how the world really worked. But science and technology and education are saving the day and will keep advancing to the point where no one ever need suffer and everyone can live happily ever after.

**There's the "cosmic good fortune" meta-narrative ...**

... which says the whole universe just kind of happened. You and I are the lucky accidents of the process. We're only here because our primal ancestors won the battle of "survival of the fittest." Unfortunately, as a species, we probably won't survive. There is no happily ever after.

**And then there's the meta-narrative of**

## postmodernism ...

... which claims that *there is no single overarching* meta-narrative for all times and all places. So, you have to create your own by piecing together whatever seems right to you. And once you do that, you'll live happily ever after.

Of course, the problem with postmodernism is that *it is itself* a meta-narrative which means that, logically, it refutes its own claim.

But postmodernism isn't unique in its failure because every meta-narrative – every overarching grand story – that attempts to explain “why the world is as it is” and “why we are as we are” has weaknesses.

In fact, the reigning meta-narratives of our day are revealing themselves to be more and more inadequate at explaining why, in spite of centuries of dramatic technological and economic progress, something is terribly wrong with our world.

In spite of increasing human comfort and prosperity, human behavior seems to be getting collectively *worse* instead of *better*, as evidenced by:

- The societal breakdown of marriage and the family
- The increasing addiction to drugs and alcohol
- The chronic abuse of power and position
- The escalation of animosity and

hatred among various “tribes”

- The growing problem of anxiety and depression among young people
- The expanding use of technology for purposes of evil

So, the question is – since we’re all going to live our lives according to *some* meta-narrative ... some overarching explanation of why things are the way they are and why we are the way we are ...

The question is: *is there a grand story that not only explains things but also provides hope of fixing things?*

There is. It’s actually been around for quite a while.

And it starts out like this ...

If you've been around church very much or if you're familiar with the Bible at all, I'm sure you recognize that as coming from Genesis chapter 1 and 2 – the first pages of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

## **Two Helpful Principles**

Now, there's several things I want to highlight in that story that are key to understanding “us” – why we are the way we are – but before we get into that, I think we probably need to take a few minutes to talk about the elephant in the room when it comes to the biblical account of creation.

And that is ... *how literal should we take this story?*

- Is the Bible attempting to give us a scientific description of the creation process?
- If so, how does that match up with what geologists and biologists and astronomers have discovered about our world?
- Did the creation actually take place over six 24-hour days like ours?

You know how the questions go, right? I mean, we could go on and on with that.

Furthermore, if the account *is* intended to be literal and yet doesn't match up with science (as many claim), then *what*

*does that mean concerning our faith* for those of us who are Christians?

I mean, if we can't trust what we're reading in this story, maybe it's not much help as an overarching grand story that helps us know who we are and what we're to do.

So, let me give you two principles that have helped me deal with this issue personally. The first actually applies to understanding scripture in general ... which is ...

**1. You always need to ask “what did this mean to those who first heard it?”**

One of the few things I remember from seminary was a professor saying “Never forget that what you're reading in the Bible was God's Word to someone else



before it became God's Word to you.”

Point being that what God was saying to *them* is always the starting point of understanding what He might be saying to *you*.

So, concerning the Genesis creation account ...

- How would the Jewish people in about 550 B.C. (when this story was first written down) have heard it?
- Would they have understood it to be describing a literal chronological process?
- Or would they have taken it to be describing something else entirely?

I think it's possible that they may have taken it literally (after all they didn't do geology or astronomy back then) but I also think there's a very strong case that they heard it as describing something else, too.

We'll talk more about that later in this message.

The second principle that's been helpful to me – and you've heard me say this before – is that ...

**2. The Christian faith does not rest on the scientific accuracy of the creation account.**

Let's suppose that science comes up with an airtight case that there is no way creation happened the way it reads – and many claim that it has.

I say “so what?”

And I say that because the reason I’m a Christian doesn’t have anything to do with Genesis chapter 1 (and 2 and 3) or, in fact, *anything* in the Old Testament.

The reason I’m a Christian is because of what happened to Jesus following His death and burial.

**The Apostle Paul puts it like this:**

*If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God. 1 Corinthians 15:14-15 (NIV)*

In other words, everything rises and

falls on the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Prove *that* didn't happen and you got me. I'm out.

Actually, *we're all out* because as Christians, where our faith begins is with Jesus and His real in-the-flesh resurrection from the dead, which, in my thinking, is an even greater miracle than a six-day creation ... and a miracle for which there is a great deal of evidence, which I've talked about on many occasions.

Everything else (including the creation account in Genesis) is subordinate to that event.

Now, with all of that said ... in case you're interested ... here's what I personally believe about creation and

the Genesis account. (I'm talking main points here).

- I believe the eternal God (meaning the Three-in-One Supreme Being who exists outside of space and time) “spoke” and stuff happened.
- I think the Big Bang is very likely the echo of God’s “spoken word” that created space and time.
- I don’t think the order described in days one through six is meant to be thought of scientifically or chronologically. I think there’s some “poetic license” going on here, especially when you look at the Hebrew form of writing in this passage.

- I think there could have been a very, very, very long time from “day one” through “day six”; time in which God was preparing the world for humanity.
- I believe there was a literal first man and first woman, each individually created by God. In other words, I believe that Adam and Eve were real people to whom God gave a spirit (which differentiated them – and us – from the animals).
- More importantly, I wouldn’t argue my opinions on any what I just said because, again, my faith is rooted in Jesus not in Genesis.
- *Most* importantly, I believe that the

*message* of Genesis chapter 1 (and 2 and 3) is absolutely true. It's dead-on accurate.

In fact, I believe it is *the* meta-narrative (or at least the beginning of *the* meta-narrative) – that best describes me and you – us – in all of our glory and in all of our shame. It tells us who we are meant to be *and also* why we are so often *not* who we are meant to be.

And, in the time we have left, we're going to dive deeper into this story and its message and, specifically, look at what it says about who we are meant to be and what we're supposed to be doing. You might call it “the glorious nature of what it means to be human.”

And then, over the next few weeks, we'll

look at the not-so-glorious nature of what it means to be human and what that means for us and for our world.

So let's take a closer look.

## **Our Glorious Nature**

And the first thing to notice about the story we just heard is the initial state of the world following its creation.

At the end of every day, God pronounces his work as being “good.” On the sixth day – after creating humanity – He even goes so far as to label the whole thing “*very good.*”

Then, on the seventh day, God “rests” ... which seems a little weird because it sounds like maybe all that creating wore



Him out!

But, if you were part of the culture in which this story was originally told, you wouldn't think that at all.<sup>iii</sup>

Instead, you would understand that this is what a king does when he has finished building his palace. He takes up occupancy in what he has created – *he comes to rest in that place*, he ceases the labor of building – but his work is not finished. It is just beginning as He now *rules* from that space.

And that's what's being communicated here. It's as if God has finished building His glorious palace (which is our universe) and is now becoming its Ruler and King.

So, the initial state of the world is clear. *Everything is as it should be.* God is on the throne and all of creation (including Adam and Eve) is in perfect harmony.

And these interconnected relationships between God, humanity, and creation are often (and best) described by the Hebrew word *shalom* which, in my opinion, is one of the most beautiful words in all of the world.

I like how one author describes it:

Shalom is ... the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight.

Shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness and delight – a rich state of affairs in which

natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, all under the arch of God's love.

**“Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be...the full flourishing of human life in all aspects, as God intended.”<sup>iv</sup>**

So, in the beginning God created ... and it was good. It was “shalomy” (so to speak).

That's what the world is meant to be. That's what we're meant to experience.

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Now, let's talk about what *we're* meant to be in this kind of a world.

That's described in verse 27 of this first chapter of the Bible – at the point where

the work of creation is about to be completed.

**It says that after creating everything else ...**

*God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27 (NIV)*

Now, even if you're not a Christian or a religious person, you've heard it said that "every person is made in the image of God." You may have even said it yourself.

Of course, if you're like most people (including Christians), you probably don't know what it really means ... which isn't surprising because there's no explanation in this statement and, in

fact, there isn't any explanation throughout the rest of the Bible!

And that's left open the door for Christians throughout the ages to define the "image of God" in various ways, most often in terms of what makes human beings distinct from other creatures; characteristics such as ...

- Intelligence
- Reasoning ability
- Emotions
- The ability to commune with God
- Self-awareness (or the ability to think about our thinking)
- Language/ communication ability
- The presence of a soul or spirit
- A conscience
- A sense of justice
- Free will

All those things *do* make us distinct from animals but they're not what's meant by "the image of God."<sup>v</sup>

To understand what *is* meant, you again have to go back to the world and the thinking of those who first heard this story.

The nation of Israel was surrounded by nations whose people worshipped idols; "gods" *they had made instead of a God who had made them*. And that wasn't just a minor theological difference of opinion. It had real consequences for what it meant to be human.

Without going into too much detail, the "Ancient Near East" system of gods and goddesses was, in reality, a system of

belief designed by the ruling class to maintain the status quo – to keep the powerful (them) in power over the powerless.<sup>vi</sup>

And to accomplish that, only one person was considered to be “made in the image of a god” – the king. He was considered to be a special chosen representative of the gods, ruling and reigning on their behalf ... which meant that the fundamental purpose of human beings was to serve *him!*

But Israel’s God said, “NO, that’s not how it really is.”

He said, “*every person* is created in My image” ... which reveals a mind-blowing concept:

**In God's mind, *all* humans are meant to be kings (and queens!)**

This idea would have been shocking to Israel's neighbors. And hopefully it shocks you too!<sup>vii</sup>

As one commentator puts it, It's as if Genesis 1 (and the Imago Dei) was intended to subvert an oppressive social system.<sup>viii</sup>

Wow! That's amazing. What an amazing God.

Now, to be clear, and as we'll see next week, it didn't always work out that way. In fact, from the very beginning, this gets messed up – royally (no pun intended).

But this was – and is – God's original



intention for humanity. *That's* what we're meant to be.

- Not cogs in a wheel.
- Not grunts in some spiritual system designed to keep the powerful in power.
- We're meant to be royalty in a world of shalom.

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Now the question becomes ... what are we humans supposed to *do* in our royal roles as kings and queens?

That's what comes next in the story. Right after creating humans ...

**Genesis 1 tells us that ...**

*God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”*

*Genesis 1:28*

*(NIV)*

One biblical scholar says that the first phrase, ‘be fruitful and increase in number,’ means to *develop the social world*: build families, churches, schools, cities, governments, laws.

The second phrase, ‘subdue the earth,’ means to *harness the natural world*: plant crops, build bridges, design computers, and compose music.

This passage is sometimes called the

“Cultural Mandate” because it tells us that our we are to use our power and authority as God’s representatives on earth to create cultures and build civilizations<sup>ix</sup> ... characterized by shalom.

That’s why we are here. That’s what we’re to be doing.

**Our fundamental purpose as humans is to build and create in ways that increase “shalom” – the full flourishing of human life in all its aspects.**

We’re to take what God originally created (which He described as being “very good”) and make it even better in ways that bring about the best for all of creation.

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Now, I realize that a lot of what I just said is pretty technical and intellectual and historical and it might not be easy to follow the first time you hear it.

So, I want to show you the first part of a very creative video from The Bible Project which explains it in a more visual way.<sup>x</sup>

Let's watch.

**Video Clip – 2 IMAGE OF GOD (2.4 min)**

(Begin) “The Bible Project” logo on screen.

(End) Voice: “This is humanity’s divine and sacred task.”

## Getting Practical

So, what have we learned from the beginning of the biblical meta-narrative – the overarching grand story of the Bible – concerning “the glorious nature of what it means to be human?” About who we are meant to be and what we’re supposed to be doing?

**Again, three things:**

- That “shalom” is the way the world is meant to be...the full flourishing of human life in all aspects.
- That ALL humans are meant to be kings and queens!
- That our purpose is to use our power and authority to build and

create in ways that increase  
“shalom.”

So what does this mean, practically speaking? How do we implement all of this in real life?

I'll just throw out a few ideas.

- Work. If you can't get a job, then volunteer. Do something that adds value to people or creates beauty and organization. Do something that lifts the culture up instead of degrading it.
- Invest and create wealth but not just for yourself but for everyone. Start a business, make money, be generous. Use your financial resources to make the world better.

- Get married and/or raise a family and thereby make society better because, statistics show that marriage and children make society better.
- Educate yourself. Learn something. Improve yourself.
- Invent something. Build something. Program something. Paint something. Write something. Photograph or film something. Decorate something. Organize something. Cook something. Grow something (legal that is). Sell something. Buy something.
- Make your bed; clean up your room. Get rid of the junk piles in your basement.

- Clean up your yard. Clean up your street.
- Recycle your trash. Don't pollute. Drive an electric car. Use solar power.
- Do things that add to the overall value of people and the world; things that produce shalom in the culture and creation; things that bring healing, prosperity, joy and celebration, peace and harmony.
- Work, play, love, worship, plan, create, share, teach, care in such a way that the world and the people in it become better than it and they already are.
- Respect and honor people – even



those you don't like - because in God's sight, they are kings and queens. They are made in his image.

- Believe the best about people because, as those created in the image of God, they have great power and capacity for good.

Those are just a few things you could do.

Now, I want you to notice something about my suggestions. None of these things are terribly hard to do. And none of them are overly spiritual. You don't even need to be a Christian to fulfill the cultural mandate.

Just make it your purpose to add value to the people and the world around you

and you will be fulfilling the glorious purpose for which you are made in the image of God.

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Now, at this point, we're almost done except for one tiny issue ... one small question:

“If this was God’s plan – to create royal images of Himself; men and women with the authority and power to live and move and have their being in a world of ever-expanding shalom ... then what happened? Why isn’t that reality everywhere? Why isn’t that who we are? Why are we so often so much less than that?”

You see we *are* kings and queens with

power and authority. But our power and authority are *delegated* which means that we ourselves are under authority – God’s authority.

**However, in the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah ...**

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way.  
Isaiah 53:6 (NIV)*

And that’s where we’ll pick up next week as we continue this series “This Is Us.”

Would you stand for closing prayer?

Father I am thankful that you have revealed to us your glorious intentions for our lives and for our world. It’s so easy for us to lose sight of that because,

for a lot of us, that's just not our reality.

But I pray that you will use this message to inspire all of us to think differently about ourselves and the kings and queens with whom we interact each day.

For those of us who have a job or some kind of task to do this week, I pray that you will allow us to sense your smile as we do that work. Help us to see the value that our efforts bring to the world.

Amen.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The above is based on comments by John Stonestreet, President of the Colson Center and co-author of *A Practical Guide to Culture* @ <http://www.breakpoint.org/2018/01/challenges-facing-church-2018/>

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ii Alasdair MacIntyre

iii See John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, described @ <https://biologos.org/articles/series/reflections-on-the-lost-world-of-genesis-1-by-john-walton/creation-is-the-temple-where-god-rests>

iv Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Engaging God's World*, pp. 14-15

v Heiser, Michael S. *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (p. 40). Lexham Press. Kindle Edition.

vi See

[https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted\\_hildebrandt/otesources/01-genesis/text/articles-books/middleton-imagodei-csr.pdf](https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/otesources/01-genesis/text/articles-books/middleton-imagodei-csr.pdf) for an amazing explanation of this.

vii See <https://thebibleproject.com/blog/what-does-it-mean-to-be-human/>

viii From J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image? Interpreting the Imago Dei in Context*

ix Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth*, quoted @ <https://tifwe.org/our-job-description-from-the-beginning-the-cultural-mandate-part-2/>

x From The Bible Project “Image of God” @ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbipxLDtY8c>