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BIRTHRIGHT

CHRISTIAN, DO YOU KNOW
WHO YOU ARE?



David Needham

Birthright

CHRISTIAN, DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE?

D a v i d C.
N e e d h a m



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BIRTHRIGHT

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To Mary Jo, my wife,
who, next to my Lord,
is the sunshine of my life.

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P R E F A C E

If you are familiar with the first edition of *Birthright*, *Christian Do You Know Who You Are?* and *Alive for the First Time*, you will discover that this present book contains what, hopefully you will agree, is the best of those two books. Here and there additions and clarifications have been made in both text and end notes.

Because some portions of this book may appear to be nontraditional, I have attempted to do two things. First, the text itself is written in a form I hope you will find quite readable, with ample illustrations to clarify the truth. Second, in addition to the text I have included numerous end notes (some quite lengthy) plus two appendices to aid those of you who wish to interact more in-depth both with the issues and with the perspectives of other writers.

You should not assume that my inclusion of statements by other writers implies that these writers agree with all I have written. Nevertheless, it is my hope that I have been faithful to the writer's intent in my use of any quotation. Though most of my references to the works of others are in some measure parallel with the various emphases of this book, in a few cases they represent an opposing view. I urge you to assume that though disagreeing on one issue, I may very well not only be in agreement with much of what such individuals teach, but may also value them highly for their contributions to God's people.

To write concerning God's truth is a dangerous, almost frightening proposition. That danger is multiplied if the ideas shared appear to be different from traditional statements of the faith.

The danger lies in two areas. First, new expressions of spiritual truth can play right into the hands of the Christian radical whose chief delight lies in upsetting orthodox ideas. Milking every opportunity to fracture harmony in the body of Christ, this misdirected zealot willingly rearranges what is being said to suit his own purpose.

But there is another, more subtle danger.

Many sincere believers have found a comfortable security in neatly sys-

tematized statements of theology. Over the years, these systems have grown in prominence and familiarity until they seem as inspired as the Bible itself.

To those who subscribe unquestioningly to these traditional statements, this book will raise red flags. Rather than challenging them to think objectively, it will alarm them into hasty emotional reactions. Recognizing these dangers, I write to you, the individual in that middle group of God's people. You are fully committed to the authority of Scripture. You are also committed to remaining open to the truth. You are a biblicist. If indeed the Holy Spirit is pleased with the following study, then you too will happily respond and praise God for his truth—biblical truth.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

While in college, there came a day when I felt I simply could not go on assuming all those victorious Christian beliefs while at the same time knowing that my “good guy” behavior was largely a mask to cover my own self-centeredness. With a passion, I longed for genuineness—a warm heart for God and for people.

Cutting all my classes, I went for a day-long hike up into the hills behind our campus. With almost every step I took, I pleaded with God that he would make himself real to me; that he would set me free from myself.

Never have I prayed harder, nor have I ever ended a day more discouraged. I am sure if I had spent a week in earnest prayer it would have made no difference. Nothing happened. Was it not enough that I had poured out to him the anguish of my heart? What more did he want from me? Was I asking the impossible? Perhaps I simply was never cut out to be spiritual, I thought. Maybe some people have it and some don't. At least now I knew. Yes, I would continue to move toward Christian service. I couldn't go back on that.

And so I did—for years after that day—with little joy and even less hope. I poured myself into the demands of seminary, then youth work, the pastorate, and finally, Bible college teaching. How different those years would have been if only someone had come alongside me back at that crisis point and introduced me to the freedom and freshness of the marvelous discovery that being born again involved a far greater miracle—a living miracle—than I had ever dreamed! The crucial issue for me was not some new type of spiritual discipline or experiential encounter, but truth.

This book is about the marvelous adventure involved in our being the supernatural products of God's new creation—people who are alive for the first time. As we follow this adventure, we will move from tragedy to triumph, from bondage to freedom, from futility to fulfillment, from darkness to light. At times the light will appear too bright and we will be tempted to turn back to the counterfeit comfort of our low expectations. The word *natural* is a comfortable word. We can manage it. But *supernatural*? How do

we manage that? Do we actually “not belong to the world” in the same way as Jesus did not belong? That’s what he said. Then how are we to understand those obsessive “earthy” feelings we all have?

God tells us we are alive in a way we have never been alive before, possessing a birthright we never possessed before. In that moment when we received Christ, God’s miraculous “birthing” act gave us a value, a beauty, a preciousness that lifts us above all earthy measurements. He encourages us to look deep within at his workmanship and make that unexpected discovery of passion for him and a holiness that will set us free to be ourselves—free to live and to love. He invites us to believe the unbelievable about the miracles he has performed in us that enable us to say enthusiastically “Yes!” to him and “Yes” to life, while at the same time saying “Yes” to who we most deeply are.

Could it be that a major reason for the indifference, the epidemic occurrences of moral shipwreck in our evangelical churches, and the shattering of Christian homes is because we have seen ourselves as nothing more than “Christian” forgiven sinners—failing to be what we should be, because we cannot stop being what we think we are?

May we trust that God in his patience will yet awaken his church to the implications of the bigness of the miracles by which we have become the children of God, the sharers of his life—his joy, his purity, his love, his passion, his peace—in a most mysterious fellowship of the saints which reveals, as nothing else has or ever will, the wonder of the glory of God.

What's So Great about Being Human?

This book is about you. It is also about a miracle so gigantic, so spectacular, it belongs in the same class as the miracle of the creation of the universe. In response to that event,

“the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy” (Job 38:71).

As the infinite imagination of God splashed his creativity upon the nothingness, the climactic moment came when he shaped human beings from the dust of the earth—uniquely made in his image.

Yet as remarkable as that creative moment was, the miracle that will be the focus of this book transcends it. The product of this miracle is a state higher than Adam and Eve knew, even in their innocence.² Though the original creation displayed the wonder of the glory of God, this miracle exhibits even greater divine glory because it displays the full spectrum of his attributes.

Since God described his creative acts as “good,” one might expect we would begin this chapter with a great, reverberating trumpet fanfare as the audience is hushed and the curtain is drawn. With a gasp of joy and amazement, there on stage we would see his marvelous masterpiece, the pinnacle

of divine creative capacity—human beings.

Indeed, Romans 8:17–21 depicts such a scene—not of that event, but of the greater one—when all creation is described as breathless in eager anticipation of a yet-future moment when at last God will draw back the curtain and unveil the collective exhibit of his majesty: the children of God, the glorious co-heirs with Christ of his eternal kingdom.

This book is about a miracle God either has performed or would like to perform upon you. Despite this major focus upon you, we will discover that the end product of this miracle will be not man-centered, but God-centered. It's the miracle God calls his "new creation."

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

What does it mean to be a human being? It makes little difference what answers we may find to the other big questions if this one remains a mystery.

Before we turn to God's answer, there is one thing we will need to do that is almost impossible, but we must try. All of us come to the Bible with beliefs about one thing or another that are already well-entrenched, like hardened furrows dug deep in the soil. Furrows are fine if they direct the water in the right direction. But on the subject "What is man?" the furrows we and others have dug go in all sorts of opposing directions.

What we will need to do is try to find an unfurrowed space somewhere in our minds and then allow the Scriptures to make a fresh ditch. Maybe it will go in exactly the direction we anticipated; maybe not. But at least it will be a fresh furrow. It's worth a try, anyway.

Well then, what does the Bible tell us about what it means to be a human being?

The best place to start is in the book of beginnings, the book of Genesis, with one of the first references to man—Genesis 2:7.

Out of the Dust

What do we find? We were made from dust! That's a nice, humble beginning, isn't it? What does this do to your sense of self-worth? But

there's more. This verse also says God breathed into man "the breath of life."

That sounds special, but it really isn't. Genesis 7:22 says the same of animals. They too have the "breath of life." In fact, this passage describing animals is even more expressive than the one describing man. Animals have "the breath of the spirit of life." What does this mean? Simply that God is the source of life for animals as well as for man. No difference.

Since we don't want to play into the evolutionist's hand, I fear our temptation as Christians is to latch on to anything that will secure for us our human uniqueness. We try to squeeze out of every passage the last ounce of human dignity we might find. But we can squeeze too hard. Too many have tried to do so with this verse.

A Living Soul

There is one more description in this verse. Maybe it will save our dignity. "And man became a living soul." A living soul—that must elevate us above animals. Yes, we are living souls...but Genesis again is clear in telling us that animals, too, are souls!

If you happen to be looking at your Bible right now, I can hear you say, "But my Bible doesn't say that man became a 'living soul'; it says 'a living being.'"

Is the Hebrew word for *soul* (*nepes*) really there? Yes, it is, but only one of the English Bibles I have on my desk reveals this fact in a marginal note. For good reasons, translators have chosen to render the word *nepes* by the English words *life* or *living being* or *living creature*; that is what that Hebrew word usually means. As such, animals are as much living beings as humans are.

The word itself says little more than to express the truth that creatures (human beings and animals) have life. The following passages all refer to animals by using the Hebrew word *nepes* (soul): Genesis 1:30; 2:19; 9:15–16; cf. Leviticus 17:11; Deuteronomy 12:23.³

Where does this leave us? Are we nothing more than a special class of animals?

In the Image of God

Happily, Genesis 1 provides us with one expression never used of animals: the “image of God.” That does sound loaded with dignity. It must mean something special.

Indeed it does. We are more than animals.⁴

There is something about human beings that images God.⁵ What is it? One of the first things we discover from Genesis 1:27—especially encouraging to one-half of the human race—is that the text assures us it is not only men who bear God’s image, but also women: “in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”⁶ Far too many pages of history (including the present pages) have dark blotches marking the shameful disrespect for one class or another of human beings, even though each person—every one—bears God’s image, both Christian and non-Christian.⁷ Still, we have yet to uncover what “image” is referring to.

Could it be that we, as does God, possess those qualities of intellect, emotions, and will that give us personality?⁸

Or, since the persons of the Trinity exist in close relationship, is image tied to some sort of relational idea? Building on this possibility, does “image of God” point to a uniqueness in mankind that allows for a conscious interaction between God and people that animals do not have?

Perhaps it is due to some moral parallel between man and God.

As another possibility, might this expression mean *if* God chose to reveal himself physically, the form he would take would be “human” in appearance—that sort of image?⁹

Or is it found in the fact that as God is creative, so we bear God’s creative image? How creative are we? Well, creative enough to think up all of these possibilities!

Toward a Working Definition

Surprisingly, the Bible never defines “image of God.” Rather than tell us what human beings *are* because they are in God’s image, it tells us what they *are to do*. Within the same verse that introduces the image idea (1:26), God declared the role human beings were to play in his creation:

“let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”¹⁰

Interestingly, the first thing we find Adam doing is exactly that.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. . . . So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name (Genesis 2:15, 19).

From this we conclude that whatever qualities God has that are needed to fulfill this job description comprise the ingredients of the image of God. The powers of thought, imagination, and choice, plus being capable of relating to others, must be key aspects of God's image in people. Clearly, the relating part involved more than grunts; it involved that most remarkable gift—complex language, which allowed for the prospect of a profound relationship with God.¹¹

Is the Image of God Mystical?

Through the centuries, both Christians and religious people in general have assumed that being in the image of God pointed to some sort of mystical or nonmaterial, spirit-level, God-conscious quality.¹² Yet to our surprise, we find nothing in Genesis that even hints at this. In fact, the emphasis falls on the fleshiness of humanity (Genesis 6:3, 12, 13, 17, 19; 7:21; 9:9–17).

It is important to understand that in centuries past, a mystical explanation for the superiority of human personality was all anyone had available.¹³ But times have changed. Medical and other scientific technology now enable us to identify most human distinctions from animals physiologically rather than mystically.

There is growing evidence that the uniqueness of the human brain provides ample explanations for various human characteristics that used to be viewed as coming from some sort of nonmaterial level of humanness. Scientists are becoming increasingly aware of animals who possess most of the

same abilities, though to a far lesser degree. (To humble us a bit more, think of various animals who have capacities you only dream about—the directional abilities of a honey bee, for example. It’s so hard to pull into the service station after saying emphatically, “I am not lost!” Or think of the patience of a spider when a customer simply will not make up its mind.)

It is easy to forget that much of what we assume the Scriptures mean has been built on information foundations laid long before anyone undertook the scientific evaluation of animal abilities and before technology was available to investigate the mysteries of brain/mind connections.¹⁴

Though God’s Word remains solid, our theological deductions at times may need to be upgraded. The wonder of Scripture is that its claims concerning human beings are not outdated by more recently discovered truth. (I encourage you to turn to the following extended footnote for excerpts from a fascinating book, *The Amazing Body Human*, by evangelical author Mark Cosgrove. His insights underline this rapidly developing area of discovery.¹⁵)

What Then Is Man?

Man’s uniqueness is not found in the fact that God breathed into him the “breath of life” or in his being described as a “living being (soul).” Rather, it is in his being made in God’s image and possessing those remarkable capacities of personality that, perhaps most of all, emanate from the gift of complex language. This gift is inseparable from such evaluative qualities as imagination, self-conscious reflection, and choice, which in turn enable deep relationships far beyond the animal level.¹⁶ Why? Unless we read between the lines, the Genesis purpose was for humans to serve as stewards of life on this planet in a dependent, responsive love relationship with God. In fact, the remainder of the Bible reveals that this God/man love relationship idea was the central purpose.¹⁷

But is this all? Though we are getting ahead of our story, Hebrews 2:6–10, along with many other Scriptures in both the Old and the New Testaments, informs us that God’s ultimate intention in creating people was far greater than he first revealed in Genesis! In fact, in light of the New Testament’s unfolding of God’s awesome, eternal plans he has always had in

mind for people, Jesus described the value of a single human soul as being of more worth than all the world! (See Matthew 16:26.)¹⁸

Since the goal of this book is to capture something of the exhilaration of God's spiritual masterpieces—his new creation saints—in later chapters we will look at another set of passages that use the expression “image of God” in a marvelous, new way. But before we can do that, we must take a painful look at the tragedy that befell those first imagers of God.

THEN CAME THE FALL

One of the best ways to appreciate anything is to see it in contrast. A diamond against black velvet. A lush oasis in the midst of a desert. The Bible does this with people by first telling us what the human race is now—in itself, by itself. Only then, with this as the backdrop, does it tell us about the miracle.

But first, the disaster.

We cannot understand human beings as they now are without first coming to grips with the Fall, the cataclysmic sin of Adam and Eve. At that cosmic crossroad were two trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. One offered the potential for a dimension of life beyond anything Adam and Eve had yet known. The other offered only death. In this supremely tragic moment of history, choosing to believe the serpent rather than God, Adam and Eve chose death (Genesis 2:16–17; 3:1–5, 11–13, 22–24). They were now “alienated from the life of God.”

Spiritual Death or Physical Death?

Automatically, Christians have assumed the words “You shall surely die” meant primarily spiritual death.¹⁹ We do know from Ephesians 4:18 that this one act of disobedience placed humans in a state of chosen independence, walking “in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart” (Ephesians 4:17–18).

In that sense, Adam and Eve were dead in their transgressions (Ephesians 2:1). Yet the Old Testament consistently emphasizes that death was the tragic cessation of physical life.

Some argue, since Adam and Eve did not die physically “on the day” they disobeyed, physical death was not in view. The fact remains that on that day the dying process began—they became mortals, embraced by death. In that moment, the dream of immortality shriveled up and died. Satan had lied.

Physical death was certainly on God’s mind as he pronounced his judgment on Adam and Eve:

*By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return (Genesis 3:19).*

“Dust you are.” How humiliating. How earthy. “And to dust you shall return.” From Genesis 4 and throughout the Bible, people are described as mortals,²⁰ those who are in the inescapable grip of physical death.

Think about human life for a moment, at its best and at its worst. Try picturing a tiny baby in her mother’s arms. So soft, so lovable. Picture her again a couple of years later with the sun in her hair. Chubby little hands, sparkling eyes, tiny nose, delicate smile, spontaneous laugh, running across the lawn and calling out, “Daddy’s home.” Or look at any little boy, four years old, hanging upside down from his swing, wondering why the world looks so strange. Freckles, holes in his jeans, baseball cards—so fully alive! Fifteen years later—so beautiful, so handsome, so expectant. And then...long years, stress, illness, surgeries, wrinkles, pain, sorrow, stooping, decay, dim eyes, the wheelchair, white sheets, jumbled words, a final gasp, death, a box...a grave. That final offense against “the imagers of God.”

And as if that were not enough, all through those years there is the ugly side, the evil essence haunting man’s highest moments: destructive pride, cruelty, envy, deceit.

The Bible's View of Mortals

To allow this dark truth to sink in, let's look at some of the Bible's many descriptions of human mortality.

*He remembered that they were but flesh,
a passing breeze that does not return (Psalm 78:39, NIV).*

*For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.
As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone... (Psalm 103:14–15).*

*You turn us back to dust,
and say, "Turn back, you mortals..."
You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers (Psalm 90:3, 5–6).*

*All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass (Isaiah 40:6, 7, NASB).*

More cynical are Solomon's bitter words,

*I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them
to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of
animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same
breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity.
All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.²¹
Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit²² of ani-
mals goes downward to the earth? (Ecclesiastes 3:18–21)*

But What About Human Worth?

“Yes,” you may be saying, “but aren’t you ignoring all those marvelous qualities of humanness we should rightly treasure with some measure of pride?”

It is most appropriate for us to appreciate quality wherever it is found, including all those wonderful, God-given, unique human endowments. Yes, there is a proper place for a Christian humanism expressed in a respect for the humanities—music, art, literature, the constructive values of the sciences, the many evidences of human kindness, plus all the other special giftednesses that identify us above other life forms on earth. In fact, Christians rightly should be at the forefront of efforts to restore a public sense of the value of human life.

It is true that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” And we should be most grateful for all those treasured capacities such as sight and hearing and the complexity of all of the systems by which our flesh functions. Yes, we are remarkable. But so is a dolphin; so is a spider.

It is strange how we are so quick to credit whatever an animal does to that vaguest of ideas, instinct,²³ in order to maintain our vast superiority. Are you baffled by the complexity of the DNA molecules that determine so much about us? Then first be baffled by the DNA of a salamander.

Indeed, we have bigger brains, greatly enlarged frontal lobes, plus a highly developed left brain–right brain configuration. We possess the transforming capacity of complex language, which opens the door to reflective thinking, relating past and future, and to imagination, which stirs aesthetics. Still, God has decided that the writers of Scripture should use with considerable frequency the word *flesh* to identify human beings. “Flesh—flesh as grass.” *Flesh*. What a gross, humbling word.²⁴

In light of this, we should blush when we think of the flip ways we speak of God. The times we toss our prayers upward with the flick of a tongue. In sharp contrast, remember the time when God was ready to kill Moses for his casualness (Exodus 4:24). Then there was Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:6–9) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11).

Oh! The absolute transcendence of God! The absolute lowliness of

man! And then on top of all of this—man's sinfulness! We must never forget God's warning:

*“Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom
or the strong man boast of his strength
or the rich man boast of his riches,
but let him who boasts boast about this:
that he understands and knows me
that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight”* (Jeremiah 9:23–24, NIV).

It is to this one, God says,

*But this is the one to whom I will look,
to the humble and contrite in spirit,
who trembles at my word* (Isaiah 66:2).

Though the book of Job is packed with the best of man's wisdom, it concludes with God saying, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” And Job responds, “but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 38:2; 42:5, 6).

Indeed, “the foolishness of God is wiser than man.” If God could think a foolish thought, the Einsteins of the world would be forced to bow low beneath such transcendent wisdom. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” In fact, God often selects the lesser-gifted individuals to be his channels of wisdom. Why? He tells us—in order to remove any doubt as to the vast distance between God's wisdom and man's—“that no flesh might boast in the presence of God”²⁵ (1 Corinthians 1:25, 29; Isaiah 55:9).

When speaking of human worth, it would be different if people gave God the glory for the talents they possess. (See Daniel 1:17; 2:30. Contrast Daniel 4:28–32.)²⁶ Yet there is scarcely a whisper in the world of such an attitude. Take, for example, one of the greatest exhibits of human accomplishment and boasting—the great cities of the world. Proudly they display

the best of human creativity—marvelous artistry, advanced technology, phenomenal organization. Yet when was the last time you heard anyone redirect the glory from man to God? In light of this, Isaiah's words are so fitting:

*He humbles those who dwell on high,
he lays the lofty city low;
he levels it to the ground
and casts it down to the dust (Isaiah 26:5, NIV).*

*[A]gainst every high tower,
and against every fortified wall;
against all the ships of Tarshish,
and against all the beautiful craft.
The haughtiness of people shall be humbled,
and the pride of everyone shall be brought low;
and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day
(Isaiah 2:15–17, cf. Revelation 18:10–18).*

The Result of Human Autonomy

After centuries of arrogant, independent human stewardship of this planet, what has happened? Everywhere we have left our polluted trademark on all we have touched—the oceans and rivers, the air, the dirt, genetic codes and, most horribly, the moral character of the human race itself. In keeping with this dark reality, listen to Isaiah's description of our planet:

*The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant (Isaiah 24:5).*

What is the ultimate end of the great human adventure that began at the wrong tree?

*The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers,*

the exalted of the earth languish...
The city is left in ruins,
its gate is battered to pieces.
So it will be on the earth
and among the nations...
The earth is broken up,
the earth is split asunder,
the earth is thoroughly shaken.
The earth reels like a drunkard,
it sways like a hut in the wind;
so heavy upon it is the guilt of its rebellion
that it falls—never to rise again (Isaiah 24:4, 12–13, 19–20 NIV).

The Apostle John, seeing that great apocalyptic moment when God as judge takes his next dramatic step into human history, wrote:

The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell.
God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of
his wrath (Revelation 16:19).

Carnival!

I spent my earliest years in the small, sleepy town of Glendora in southern California. But once a year, at least in my childhood recollections, it came alive. During the night, overloaded trucks rumbled into town, depositing all sorts of marvelous contraptions onto a large, ugly vacant lot near our school. The carnival had arrived!

The next day our teachers must have had a terrible time gaining our attention. Never did the clock hands move so slowly. From time to time I would reach into my pocket to be sure those few nickels were still there. All ears, including our teacher's, listened for only one sound—the closing bell.

Moments after, we found ourselves pressing through the brightly colored, beckoning passageway, past canvas walls and into a fantasy world of motion, sounds, and smells. Hours raced by as we slipped past the hawkers, shouting above the sounds of the wheezing steam calliope. Voices

tantalized us to win plaster of paris prizes by tossing a ring or knocking down bottles or popping balloons. There were the sword swallower, the fat woman, the maze of mirrors, the fortune teller, the upside-down rides.

This, I thought, was life as it should be—pulsating with excitement and adventure. As darkness arrived, the bright-colored lights mingled with the smells of pink cotton candy and caramel apples. Shadows danced everywhere. Swept along by the noisy crowd, we squeezed our way through the looming bodies of the throng that pressed in around us. From high overhead came the screams from the swirling, neon Ferris wheel. Our sleepy town no longer existed. This alone was real!

All too soon, Mom and Dad would beckon us home. The sounds faded away into the distance while older ones danced long into the night as we were tucked into bed. Then while we slept, the calliope breathed its last, the lights dimmed. Everything came down, was folded away, and long before dawn those huge trucks lurched over the curb and slipped out of town.

Next morning, on our way to school, there it was—that same vacant lot, ugly, dirty, flattened down. Trash caught on crushed thistles; bottle caps and broken glass littered the place. Sticky cotton candy twisted into the sawdust. Had it ever really happened? Could it have been only a dream?

Often when I think of that time long ago, I imagine the world Adam and Eve saw beyond the flaming sword. They were on their own! They were “free” from God. A world to make of their own choosing. Through the centuries, though always “subjected to futility,” the children of Adam have attempted to turn this vacant lot into their own “Vanity Fair.” Drowning out the screams and groans of human tragedy, the carnival has continued its show. Newer sideshows, brighter lights, voracious video games—until at last we find ourselves on the edge of “virtual reality,” the ultimate fantasy.

But darkness will come. There is a day when God will say, “The show is over. Close it down!”

*The new wine mourns,
The vine decays,*

*All the merry-hearted sigh.
 The gaiety of tambourines ceases,
 The noise of the revelers stops,
 The gaiety of the harp ceases...
 The city of chaos is broken down...
 All joy turns to gloom.
 The gaiety of the earth is banished (Isaiah 24:7–8, 10, 11, NASB).*

Looking at Infinity

Though the details are fuzzy, I remember a story told about Theodore Roosevelt. After a day spent with the great men of the earth, grappling with weighty issues, evening came. Taking one of his associates, he walked out into the gardens of the White House under the stars. There, they maintained a long, almost painful silence as they stared heavenward. Finally the stillness was broken by Roosevelt's comment,

“Well...now that we see ourselves as small and insignificant as we really are, let's go to bed.”

We too must make that kind of effort to get off alone under the stars as David did in Psalm 8, looking long enough to be humbled to the point of utter, almost unbearable smallness. I should warn you if you try to do this, you will not find it easy. You will be tempted to look away. It is so difficult to look at infinity. But don't turn away. Keep on staring into that speckled blackness.

Outdoors on some clear dark night, alone, force yourself to grapple with the vastness of the sky above; vastness that came into existence by a simple word from God. I hope you will see some portion of the Milky Way—those wispy clouds of innumerable stars. Selecting one tiny strand, attempt to narrow your vision to just one of those lesser flickering pin-points. Have you done that?

Next, exercising that marvelous gift, try to imagine that star is our sun. Then picture yourself standing as you are—way out there—on the dirt of your lonely planet—earth—(a planet far too small to see...one millionth the size of that remote star it circles). This kind of imagination demands the toughest concentration.

Now, broaden your vision again until you see that star as it is, lost among the myriad stars filling the sky. Keep remembering where you are. Where? Way, way off there—standing on a tiny spot of sod on an unseen speck of a speck within a speck within a speck of a single galactic system with billions more beyond. An almost infinite universe.

To do this—to truly do this—is to watch your own sense of importance shrivel to embarrassing nothingness, to the point of almost forgetting to breathe.

Could it be that the brilliance and extravagance of our great cities—the glitter of the Las Vegases of the world—has kept us from doing as David did when he lay beneath the stars, contemplating his own smallness, asking “What is man?” Remember, when he lived he knew so little about the indescribable vastness of the universe, knowledge we take with glib familiarity today. He knew nothing of the billions of galactic spiral universes, each with their hundreds of billions of stars, not to mention the probability of their innumerable circling planets. How much more humbled we should be today!

Then do something else. After looking up, look down and inside and allow yourself to suffer the embarrassing process of contemplating your own fragile flesh—the “bodies of our humble state.” Think of the weakness of your will, the fickleness of your emotions. Think about your own pitifully small brain behind your eyes—can you see it? A brain that still is unable to explain the existence of something as familiar as the law of gravity. Think of your own profound mortality. That fleshy pumping heart, the air from your spongy lungs as you feel it whisking through your nostrils. Always, just one breath away from death.

*Those of low estate are but a breath,
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath (Psalm 62:9).*

Out under the stars, force yourself to ask those agonizing questions:

“Where did I ever get the preposterous idea that I could be of any importance to the Being who spoke this universe into existence—that I am significant to him?”

No!

Impossible!

That he would love me?

That he would send his Son to die for me—for me!²⁷

No! Beyond belief!

Indeed, Paul was right when he wrote of “the body of our humble state.” Or Jesus, “that which is born of the flesh is flesh”; or the psalmist’s words, “he is mindful that we are but dust” (Philippians 3:21; John 3:6; Psalm 103:14, *NASB*). To even suggest that we are significant to God would be the worst of human arrogance were it not for one fact:

We are confronted with the voice of this same God who in his Word says that it is true!

We are significant to him. He loves us.

Bow Low before Him

It is time to look back down the furrow we have been digging. Yes, it is true to Scripture. Yes, it is terribly humbling. Even apart from sin, people at their best are still humble creatures in comparison to the God of both the vastness of galactic clusters and the smallness of atoms and quarks.

To this we added the Fall—the monstrosity of human sin, the tragedy of human mortality, and our chosen alienation from God. Dare we yet talk about the dignity of man? Bow low, down on the floor—face and body pressed flat into the carpet. Low and trembling before the God who once said:

*Turn away from mortals,
who have only breath in their nostrils,
for of what account are they? (Isaiah 2:22).*

It is here, in this position, we must begin.



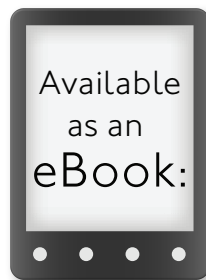
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