

The Story That Makes Sense of our Stories

“Human Significance”

Genesis 1:26-27; 2:7; Psalm 8:1-9

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on February 6, 2022

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 01)** In this new series we’re saying that we’ve all been born into the gigantic story of this universe and we have to figure out what it all means.
 - There are many different stories that people tell to explain this giant story we find ourselves in. The problem is that they can’t all be true. For instance, the Christian story says there is one God, the Hindu story says there are many gods, and the atheist story says there are no gods at all.
 - And so what we’re doing in this series is asking which story makes the best sense of this giant story we find ourselves in. We’re comparing and contrasting different stories with the Bible’s story in Genesis 1-3.
- Today I want us to look at the topic of significance. We all believe our lives are significant. We all believe that to be human is to have value, dignity, and worth. We expect others to treat us properly and we condemn behaviors that tell a child they are worthless or that looks down on someone because of the colour of their skin.
 - Do you believe that human beings have value, dignity, and worth? I assume you do! But why do you believe that? We must be able to answer this because it affects every area of life from raising children, to how women get treated, and to human rights issues across the globe.
- So today we are asking the question, **(SHOW SLIDE 02) What story makes the best sense of our belief that human beings have value, dignity, and worth?**
 - So let’s look at four stories: the ancient religious story, the modern scientific story, the western individualist story, and the forgotten Genesis story.

THE ANCIENT RELIGIOUS STORY

- Let’s start by looking at **(SHOW SLIDE 03) the ancient religious story.**
 - In most ancient religions, the universe came into existence for the sake of the gods, not for us. A common ancient story was that the gods got tired of working. They still had to feed themselves and so they created humans.
 - In other words, human beings are an afterthought and were made as slave labour for the gods.
- For most of ancient history almost no one believed this idea that every person has value, dignity, and worth. This was particularly true for slaves and women.
 - Since the gods made us to be their slaves, it followed that making other people into slaves was a good and necessary thing. For instance, the famous philosopher Aristotle who lived a few hundred years before Christ said, **(SHOW SLIDE 04) “Slaves and brute animals . . . cannot form a state, for they have no share in the happiness or in a life of free choice.”¹**

¹ Cited in Ian Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion*, 97.

- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 05)** It was just as bad or worse for women. For instance, in Greek mythology Prometheus was the champion of men because he stole fire from the gods and gave it to men. In response, the gods then created women to punish men. If you believe that story of women you can see how it would effect your treatment of them. Listen to Aristotle again, **(SHOW SLIDE 06) “the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior, and the one rules, and the other is ruled.”**²
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 07)** Now I am assuming you are repulsed by all that and that you don’t believe it. But I want to ask you why? What story do you believe that would correct that ancient story and would give solid grounds for treating all people with value, dignity, and worth?
 - Well’s let’s turn to look at some of our modern stories and see what they say.

THE MODERN SCIENTIFIC STORY

- In the second place, let’s look at **(SHOW SLIDE 08) the modern scientific story.**
 - I am talking here about the story that most people believe modern science teaches us about what it means to be human. The short answer, of course, is that we are an accident. This story says there is no God, that the universe came into existence at the Big Bang, and that through a long process of evolution, human beings eventually came into existence.
 - So, what does this modern scientific story teach us about what it means to be human. Are we significant? Do we matter?
- Let’s listen to the famous 20th century philosopher and atheist Bertrand Russell. **(SHOW SLIDE 09) “That man is the product of causes that had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms ... (SHOW SLIDE 10) that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system ... Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.”**
 - That’s quite wordy, but he is saying that there is no God and that means you and I are nothing more than atoms. We don’t ultimately matter. Even though this leads to despair, they are the facts. We must face these facts and build our lives on them.
- Here’s another way to put that from the great comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** In the first panel Calvin stares up into the stars of the night sky. He then screams up at the sky, **“I’m significant!”** In the third panel he stares up at the stars. Then in the final panel he says, **“Screamed the dust speck.”**
 - We feel we are significant, but if there is no God it is hard to see why. We’re just specs of dust and we will soon blow away.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 12)** Samuel Beckett was a playwright. He wrote a play called “Breath.” It’s about 35 seconds long. A single spotlight turns on to reveal a stage filled

² Ibid. 96.

with old objects like lamps, blankets, and a cement mixer in a giant pile. Then there is the sound of someone inhaling air. There is a pause as you look at all this trash on the stage. Then there is the sound of someone exhaling. It sounds like a dying breath. Then the play is over.

- What is Beckett saying? Oh yes, you feel significant, but really you're not. You're here for a few seconds, you make a bunch of stuff that ends up as trash, and then you're gone.
 - Within this larger scientific story it is hard to see how there is a basis for saying human beings are significant and have value.
- I read a story about a Christian doctor. He said that when he was a medical resident, he was with a group of other students and they were doing rounds at the psychiatric ward. At one point they had just finished seeing a patient who was depressed, who hated himself, and was suicidal.
 - When they finished seeing the patient the doctor was debriefing with the group and one of the residents said, ***"What we have to do is show him that he is a valuable person. He's not trash. He is significant and valuable just because he is human."*** Do you know what the doctor said to the residents?
 - He said, ***"how do you know that? We're scientists. What scientific basis is there for saying that?"*** That was probably just a good Socratic teaching method but he was pushing them to think. He was saying, ***"Oh yes, we all have this deep sense that we are significant, but science doesn't teach us that."***
- So all these people are saying that although science can teach us a lot of things about the human body and mind, the modern scientific story cannot make sense of your deep belief that you are significant and that human beings have value.
 - In ancient religions human beings are an afterthought. In the modern scientific story human beings are an accident.

THE WESTERN INDIVIDUALIST STORY

- Since none of us can really live with this belief and we can't build a society on this belief, we have created a third story that is really a positive version of the modern scientific story. In the third place let's talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 13) the western individualist story.**
 - The story goes like this: however we got here, whether through God creating us or through evolutionary chance, we look inside ourselves to find significance. We don't look out at the universe or out to God, but inward to our own selves.
- There is a sociologist named Robert Bellah. He wrote a book called *Habits of the Heart*. He talks about how he and his team of researchers interviewed a woman whose views represent so many.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 14) Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and describes her faith as "Sheilaism." "I believe in God," Sheila says. "I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." (SHOW SLIDE 15) Sheila's faith has some tenets beyond belief in God,**

though not many. In defining what she calls “my own Sheilaism,” she said: “It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think [God] would want us to take care of each other.”

- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 16)** So, this is the idea that we find significance not by looking outside ourselves, but by looking inside ourselves. This may include a belief in God as long as God agrees with how I feel. The whole goal in life then is to discover and express our own feelings of significance. We don’t allow anyone else to tell us what to do or what to believe. We make up our own significance.
 - This story is so powerful in our culture that advertisers are always using it. For instance, there is an advertisement for a Jeep Renegade. It focuses on a group of young female music stars posed by a Jeep Renegade. They say things like, “*I have chosen to be . . . unapologetically me.*” “*A renegade is someone who doesn’t seek the approval of other people.*” “*A renegade sets their own standard.*”
 - Meanwhile, a line of text appears at the bottom of the screen, reading, “*Be unique. Be authentic.*” Of course, it is rather ironic that being a unique renegade means being persuaded by a commercial to buy a mass marketed Jeep that millions of others will buy, but the commercial is tapping into the story of our day.
- This story sounds so empowering, but it does not deliver on what it promises. It cannot give a solid identity that feels significant. Why not?
 - Well, first of all, our inner feelings are always changing. It is an ongoing identity crisis as we move from one thing to the next.
- But worse than this, all those things we try to find our identity in will eat us alive.
 - If we look within and say, “*I feel significant because I am beautiful*” then we will fall apart as we age.
 - If we look within and say, “*I feel significant because I’m successful in my career*” then we will always live in fear of failure and will struggle with feeling significant when we lose our jobs or retire.
 - If we look within and say, “*I feel significant because others love me*” we will always fear losing their love, will always have to work to keep their approval, and will feel insignificant if they leave us.
 - So you see, when we look within there is no solid ground to build for that sense of significance and value. It is dependent on things that will eat us alive.
- So once again, it is hard to see how this western individualistic story makes sense of the fact that we all believe we have value and significance.

THE FORGOTTEN GENESIS STORY

- Let’s turn in the final place to consider one more story. Let’s look at what I am calling **(SHOW SLIDE 17) the forgotten Genesis story.**
 - I say it is forgotten because as I will talk about in two weeks, our entire western idea of human rights is built on it. But we are forgetting it now.

- So, let's go back and look at the forgotten story of Genesis. Genesis was originally written for the Israelites to help them make sense of the universe they found themselves in.
 - The Genesis story speaks very clearly to the questions of ***“what is a human being?”*** and ***“do humans have value and significance?”***
 - So what does the Genesis story teach us about what it means to be human?
- First, **(SHOW SLIDE 18) Human beings are dust.**
 - Genesis 1 recounts how God creates everything and human beings are part of this creation story. In Genesis 2 we read **(SHOW SLIDE 19) 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.**
 - This should humble us. We are not gods who stand above creation. We are made from the dust. We must breathe to stay alive. I saw a great meme that said, **(SHOW SLIDE 20) You technically have 2 minutes to live but every time you breathe it restarts the timer.** In this sense we are no different from the animals. We are part of creation. We are dust.
- Second, **(SHOW SLIDE 21) Human beings are divine.**
 - Genesis 1 gives a very high view of what a human being is. Notice that human beings are the last thing that God creates. He creates human beings on the sixth day after the earth has been formed and filled with life. As Ian Provan notes, **(SHOW SLIDE 22) “Human beings were not made on the sixth day because we come late in God’s thinking, when he is tired, but because we represent the high point of creation.”**
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 23)** Genesis 1 declares that human beings are the crown of God’s creation. In all the other parts of creation God just says, ***“Let there be”*** and it happens. Before he creates humanity there is a pause. All of verse 26 describes God consulting with himself about this last important step of creation.
 - Verse 26 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 24) 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.”** So God’s plan before he creates is to make human beings to be the kings and queens over the earth – it is their job to care for it.
 - It is only when this careful deliberation is done that God then acts to create human beings. Verse 27 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 25) So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.**
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 26)** So human beings are created at the high point of God’s work, are created with careful deliberation, and are made to be the kings and queens over the earth. But most important is that we are made in the image of God.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 27) Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”. . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.**

- No other creature is made in God's image. Human beings alone have this exalted status. We are in some sense like God himself. And notice that it is not just men who are made in God's image. Both males and females are made in God's image.

Do you realize what Genesis is saying? The Bible is relentless in teaching that there is only God. There are no other gods in this universe. The Bible is also relentless in stressing the fact that nothing in creation can compare to the Creator. He is in a class all by himself.

- And yet, to our amazement we read here, that God has placed little images of himself within the universe he has created. Those little images are human beings. Every human being reflects the Creator himself!
- King David was amazed by this exalted status that human beings have been given. In Psalm 8 he says, **(SHOW SLIDE 28)**
 - **When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?**
 - We all know what it is like to be look up at the stars and to feel really small like Calvin did in the comic strip. What staggered King David and what should stagger you as well is that despite how small we are, God our Creator cares about us and is mindful of us. The Bible says that when you stare into space and feel small, God's voice shouts down to us, **"You are significant!"**
 - I love how the author and blogger Tim Challies puts this. He says, **(SHOW SLIDE 29) "We are very, very small, and we are very, very significant."**
- Do you not think that the Genesis story is in perfect sync with your experience? On the one hand you know that you are small and nothing more than a speck of dust? And yet on the other hand, you believe that you are significant and that every human being has value, dignity and worth?
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 30)** The Genesis story makes perfect sense of both of these things. So, when the doctor asks how his residents can know that the man in the psychiatric ward is valuable, Genesis answers, **"This man is not trash. He is a special creation of God himself. He bears the image of the Creator. And so he has value."**
 - To our western individualistic culture that longs to find significance, Genesis says, **"Do not look within yourself. Listen to the voice of your Creator. You bear his image. You are like God himself. You have immense value."** Build your identity on this solid foundation.
- Genesis declares that the universe is not an accident. You are not an accident. Every human being is the special creation of God himself. Every human being is made of dust but is also divine.
 - When a child is scarred by a parent who told them they aren't worth anything, God says, **"You are of great worth in my eyes."**

- When men treat women as inferior God says, ***“Girls and women are my special creation and I’ve made them equal with boys and men.”***
- When people treat others as less than human because of the colour of their skin, God says, ***“All people, regardless of their colour, are my image bearers.”***
 - The Genesis story says that the elderly person in the nursing home, the child in the womb, and the person struggling with a disability all have value, dignity, and worth simply by being human – for to be human is to be God-like, one who bears God’s image.
- And then in the final place Genesis says that **(SHOW SLIDE 31) Human beings are destined for glory.**
 - God commanded Adam and Eve to have children who would also bear his image, to fill the earth with people who would all treat each other as image bearers and who would all reflect their Creator in creating culture, beauty, and making the earth to be a wonderful home.
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 32)** But clearly something went wrong because that is not where we are at. We will look at this in a few weeks but the short answer is that human beings turned their backs on God. We want to be our own gods. As a result, we brought sin, death, and destruction to the planet and our lives. We don’t treat each other and we don’t reflect our Creator as we ought to.
- But from before creation God has always had a plan to rescue us from this mess we have made and to make us into perfect image bearers. What is that plan? We read of one who is not just like God, not made in God’s image, but one who is the very image of God himself. He is God’s own eternal Son. Hebrews 1 says that **(SHOW SLIDE 33) The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.**
 - The eternal Son of God is the very image of God. We are mere dust but in order to save us the Son of God chose to clothe himself in dust by taking on a human nature. God chose to become a man and be made of the same stuff that we are.
 - Jesus came into this world to purify us from our sins through his death on the cross in order that we might be remade into the human beings God intended. When we give our lives to Christ God makes us into a new creation. His end goal is to make us into perfected human beings. For as Paul writes in Rom 8:29, **(SHOW SLIDE 34) For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.”** That process begins when we become Christians and it will be completed when Jesus returns for as 1 John 3 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 35) what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.**
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 36)** Do you want to experience all that you are meant to be as a human being? Give your life to Jesus Christ. Ask him to forgive your sins and begin the process of transforming you into that person who perfectly bears the image of God.