

THE PURPOSE OF MANKIND: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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Section I: God's Delight

Given his nature, God decided on certain purposes. In light of those purposes, he made the creation, including humankind. So God made the nature of man the way he did because of the purposes he had for us in his creation and beyond.

God made mankind simply because he delighted in doing so. Aside from any further considerations, persons experience fulfillment in being creative. The same holds for our personal God. Because of sheer delight, God expressed himself creatively and “*saw that it was good.*” That recurring statement in Genesis 1 expresses his sense of satisfaction in doing so (Genesis 1:31; cp. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). In that respect, God created us for something of the same reason he made the rest of creation.

What in the structure of Genesis 1 shows how much God delighted in making humankind? Genesis puts mankind last as the apex of God’s creativity in nature and gives humans the most space in the account of origins.

What is there about the way Genesis 2 is put together that says something about the value of mankind in his creator’s eyes? He stands in the center of the account; Genesis organizes other things God created around the record of mankind’s origin.

What indicators stress the uniqueness of mankind in comparison to the rest of the creation—inorganic, plant, animal?

Only mankind has “*the image of God*”; no cohabitation allowed between man and animal; with other creative acts God said, “*Let there be,*” but with mankind he said, “*Let us make*”; animals could be killed, but not people; animals would fear people.

Section II: God’s Grace

God made mankind as someone to shower his grace on. Beyond creating everything to delight in, God created us as someone to delight in—to show his goodness to, to give fellowship to, and give purpose to. Even though poets find fulfillment in writing poetry, they do not write it simply for themselves. Likewise, the heavens declare God’s glory to us (Psalm 19:1). He created us to share his presence with (note Genesis 3:8). His making us is comparable to Christ’s calling the twelve “*that they might be with him, and he might send them to preach*” (Mark 3:14). For us there is delight in simply *experiencing existence* in fellowship and in *sensing purpose*. Making us in a way that we can be blessed in these ways, God provides additional outlets for his tendency as a person to show grace. We all experience this “common grace” of creation.

In what ways does God’s desire to create mankind compare with a couple’s desire to have children? They have someone to love, someone that relates to them in a special way, someone that “looks like them” and shares identity with them.

Is there any sense in which God's creating mankind ends up putting some limitations on himself? In order to be self-consistent, God must now make his decisions in light of the personal beings he has brought into existence to share reality with. Couples have children despite knowing that certain limitations will come to own movements.]

If there are such "limitations," what does his creating us anyway say about him, about his attitude toward us, and about us? He is not a self-centered God.

How does creating us as "caretakers of creation" (Genesis 1:26, 28) show us grace? Look at Psalm 8, for example. Giving us responsibility gives us dignity and honor, which helps give us a sense of worth, which in turn helps make life good.

Section III: God's Glory

Creating mankind for *fellowship* and *stewardship* results in God's glory because we thank and praise him for those previous graces. Paul makes a threefold statement of that pattern in Ephesians 1:3-14 when he says that God "*foreordained us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace* [= to the praise of his glorious grace] *that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.*"

The previous two reasons for God's creating us (delight and grace) illustrate "transaction," getting something out of the activity in the very process of doing it. God also "gets something out of" creating through "reciprocation," getting something out of an activity when the results of the work come back on the One who first did it. We glorify God by our worship, obedience, and service. When we praise and thank him for his common grace of creation and continued blessing, we glorify him. Since he knows everything, he knew "*before the foundation of the world*" (cp. Ephesians 1:4) that we would respond that way to his previous grace. So that "result" cannot entirely be separated in God's mind from his "purpose" for creating in the first place.

How do we avoid the idea of a self-centered creator if God made us for his own glory? What help is the comparison with a couple who want children? They know their kids will be grateful for their blessings. Self-glorification is not the first reason. Knowing ahead of time that we would sin did not stop him from making us. He has given more than he will get. He knew we would sin and bring him grief—as kids often do.

From our perspective, why is it best to focus on God's glory as the most important reason for being created? It keeps us from being self-centered. We need to praise. We may add that from his perspective, creating us provides an opportunity for him to bestow himself on ones who have the ability to appreciate it and be happy as a result of it.

Section IV: Mankind's Meaningfulness

There are two main dimensions to life: existence and hope. Existence includes all the aspects of our present situation—our vertical and horizontal *relationships*, our *activities* in those relationships, and our *nature* through which we experience what goes on around us and in us (existential). Hope stresses the forward movement of life that grows out of *present processes* and *outside contributions* God will bring into history (eschatological). Together these two aspects of living set up the context that provides for meaningful living.

Actual worth and our sense of worth lie partially in positive relationships with other persons—both God and people. **Explain how your set of friendships and activities “define” who you are.**

Which ones of these stand out as positive and good, and why is that so?

Are there any associations you have that work against your sense of worth—as, for instance, by people’s “using” you?

Actual worth and our sense of worth are also partially based in positive purposes. When we are tied into the purposes of almighty God, we can rest assured that no third party will frustrate what he plans to accomplish. Our participation in his purposes provides an unmovable framework for objective—and therefore subjective—worth/value/meaning/significance.

Why is it proper to say that if we have moved away from relationship with our creator and have stepped aside from his purposes for his creatures, we have lost most of our basis of worth? If this is so, no wonder so many people feel worthless, especially when they do not realize God has made them in this image. That third basis of worth is the subject of the next segment: the fact that we are created in God’s image.

The Image of God in Man

Section I: Interpersonal Being

The purposes of mankind (last lesson) determine the nature of mankind (this lesson). The purpose of something determines how it is made. The most basic thing we can say about ourselves is the first thing God said about us: “*Let’s make mankind in our image*”; “*let’s make mankind like us*” (Genesis 1:26; cp. Genesis 5:1; 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9, and even Acts 17:28-29). That statement reflects the interpersonal nature of God himself: “us” (cp. 3:22; 11:7; Isaiah 6:8). We can say that God’s image in us is the interpersonal capacity. He constituted us for fellowship with him and other persons.

What kinds of capacities do people have in contrast to what is not personal? We have rational capacity, affection/emotion, will, conscience, self-transcendence, self-consciousness, and derivatives like language and humor. We have them in degrees and kinds that do not appear in the animal kingdom.

How do persons and animals differ?

The origin of something defines it and sets its potentials. Adam did not find anything among the animals that corresponded with him. **What difference does it make in the way people feel about themselves if they know their primary nature resembles what is above rather than what is below—God rather than an animal?**

Can you put into words the difference it makes in the way you feel about yourself, knowing that by his creation you share significant characteristics with God?

Section II: Responsible Being

Persons can take responsibility. From the beginning God gave us given responsibility: we were to exercise responsibility over the creation God placed us in (Genesis 1:26-28). This

commission immediately connects with the statement about creating us in his image. Specifically, the text of Genesis says that God commanded mankind to till the ground and dress the Garden (2:5 + 3:22; 2:16). Part of what it means then to be in God's image is the ability to take responsibility.

Later, in Genesis 9:1-7, after God had destroyed humanity, he made the rainbow covenant with the remaining family of Noah and his descendants. He did so at the same time as he commanded mankind not to kill other people because they are in God's image. An agreement with promises and conditions takes place between persons and guides their interaction. "Built-in law" governs impersonal reality, but covenants hold persons together. Commissions and covenants imply that the ones who receive them are responsible beings and therefore have interpersonal capacity.

How does the original commission to the human race apply to the contemporary concern for ecology and the environment?

Besides the original "dominion mandate," what other commissions and responsibilities has God given his people?

What psychological values come from being outward-directed toward purposes beyond ourselves, purposes that are bigger than ourselves?

Being responsible implies that we are answerable to someone "above" us, answerable for whatever is "below" us, and answerable for the purposes that lie "ahead" of us. **How does that fact comfort and at the same time humble us so we do not exploit what we have dominion over?**

Section III: Ethical Being

In the beginning, God gave mankind two commandments, one positive and one negative. People were to exercise dominion over the plant and animal kingdoms (Genesis 1:26-30; 2:5-9). They were not to eat from the "tree of knowledge" (Genesis 2:16-17). By making these commands and prohibitions, God put Adam and Eve in a "morality matrix." They existed in a setting where right and wrong applied. The tree of knowledge corresponds with the principle of free will, which can cross over the boundaries that revelation sets. Adam and Eve used free will to disobey God's injunction not to eat from the tree, and thereby they became *immoral, unethical*, beings.

Likewise, we have received revelation that specifies responsibilities and gives prohibitions. We exist in a moral matrix as well. Like our first parents, when we sin, we become self-conscious, which they reflected in trying to hide from God. The sense of guilt is largely interpersonal. Guilt and self-consciousness relate to our unique characteristic of blushing. Mankind has the capacity for morality, which is part and parcel of what it means to be persons. Ethical being relates interpersonal capacity to being in God's image and likeness.

What ethical and moral expectations do we have that correspond to the commandments and prohibitions our first parents received?

Can we override our innate sense of ethical responsibility, self-consciousness, conscience, and guilt?

How do we deal with moral imperfection so it does not destroy us or drive us in on ourselves? What are some ways of trying to deal with guilt that do not work? [see *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp.55-56]

Section IV: Communicating Being

One more characteristic of interpersonal beings is their capacity to communicate. In the beginning, God revealed himself to mankind. God “said” to man; he did not genetically encode his will into us. When Satan approached Eve, he played on our ability to be influenced by words. Influence contrasts with force as the way one person affects another person’s behavior. Human language is unique to interpersonal capacity and relationship in keeping with its deriving from the rational capacity. Ultimately, this set of abilities fits into the idea that God’s image in us is our interpersonal capacity.

How can we use our communicating ability to enhance interpersonal relationship with God? Prayer, singing, Bible reading, and acting out his will for the way we should live

What does our interpersonal nature and our communicative ability imply about how to have fulfillment and happiness? We need to be around other people in positive relationships. We need to express ourselves verbally. These observations about ourselves relate to the effectiveness of “talk therapy,” counseling, fellowship.

Why was it not good that the man should be alone (Genesis 2:18)? That circumstance would not have been good because God had already constituted us for communication and interpersonal relationship.

The Effects of Sin on Mankind

(*What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 38-45)

Section I: Consequences of Sin—Personal Perversion and Meaninglessness

God and his people have “shared values.” The things he tells us to do or refrain from doing are not arbitrary. They help us live in ways that fit with how God created us (our nature—Image of God). They foster happy and harmonious relationship with him, other people, and our surroundings. They further the purposes he had in creating us, and they remove hindrances to the healthy purposes we get in our minds for ourselves as well. Sin works against our nature, relationships, and purposes.

Sin brings personal perversion (Romans 1:18-32). **How does sin disorient our affections and emotions (Romans 1:24-27; Ephesians 4:17-19; Colossians 3:5)? How does sin perverts our bodily drives? Describe how sin weakens our willpower. What are some examples of how sin confuses our minds (Romans 1:21-24, 28)? What eventually happens to our conscience when we keep sinning in some way (Romans 1:32; 1 Timothy 4:2)? How do we become “hardened” (Hebrews 3:13; 1 Timothy 4:1-2ff.)?**

Sin brings a sense of meaninglessness. **What happens to us when we feel worthless, when we have no sense of purpose, when we don’t see any point to anything?**

Section II: Consequences of Sin—Guilt, Alienation, and Destruction of the Environment

When we sin, we break a standard of behavior; we are guilty. But there is more to it than that. We also must face the ones we have sinned against. **Would you agree that the feeling**

of guilt is one of the most devastating experiences a person can have? What happens in extreme cases of a guilt complex?

Both with God and other people, when we sin, we end up separated from the ones we have sinned against (Isaiah 59:2; Amos 3:3; Romans 1:29-31; 2 Peter 2:12; Titus 3:9-11). **Do you know what it feels like to be alienated from somebody because of something you said or did?**

God has given us responsibility for the world we live in (Psalm 8:3-8); so we are supposed to take care of the environment. **What things do people do t around them that illustrate plain old selfishness?**

Section III: Perpetuating Sin—The Effects of Ignorance

Once sin entered the human race, it continued to move from person to person and from generation to generation down to our own day. In our own experience, we get it started and keep it moving “unassisted.” Sometimes we get help from other people! In this section we are thinking about some ways our **ignorance** can get sin started and keep it moving without much input other people.

(1) There are different kinds of ignorance. Ignorance can be simply not knowing that something is wrong. We may never have been told that it is not good for us, what consequences it brings. Effects can take a while to show up, or they are subtle enough that we miss the connection between what we are doing and the bad effects that come from it.

Can you think of something you got started doing without realizing it was bad for you or the people around you?

(2) Another kind of ignorance is the simple fact that God is invisible to us (John 1:18; Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 6:16; Hebrews 11:27; 1 John 4:12, plus many Old Testament passages like Exodus 33:20). “*Out of sight, out of mind*” leads to “*out of mind, no effect on behavior.*”

Can you see how it contributed to your weakness in the face of temptation? Do you see any tendency on your part to do what you would not do if God were more real to you?

How can we offset the effect that God’s invisibility may have on our behavior by doing what helps keep his real presence in front of us: spiritual exercises like Bible reading, prayer, fellowship with other Christians, meditation, worship—in short, whatever raises the level of our God-consciousness.

Why do you suppose God does not “show his face” to us if his invisibility is having this negative effect on us?

(3) A third kind of ignorance is the viewpoint from which we look at things. Since we look at the world from our own eyes, we can do things that harm or offend other people simply because “we don’t stop and think.” This situation results in self-centeredness. **What can we do to minimize this problem?**

Section IV: Perpetuating Sin—Influence and Desire

We have been thinking about our “nature” as sinners. Besides different kinds of ignorance, we get into sinful practices because of other people’s influence and our own bodily desires.

Social influence includes more than just sinful example. The sin around us is not just there; it is aimed at us in social pressure. Beyond that, when we “go along with the crowd,” they praise and accept us. That adds social reinforcement—the tendency to repeat behavior that gains approval. There are even cases of misinterpreted good example. We misread what another person is doing and end up doing something we should not. **Can you think of situations where that might happen (1 Corinthians 8; Romans 14)?** Weaker brother situations afford ready examples.

How can we counteract negative evil influence? (1 Corinthians 15:33]). Avoiding evil people removes lots of temptation (Hebrews 10:19-25). Stay around good people.

Our bodily desires are not wrong in themselves, but we can satisfy them the wrong way. So our physical constitution becomes an important doorway for sin to enter (James 1:14-15). **How can we help eliminate sin that comes in through the physical aspect of our nature (1 Corinthians 7:1-2)?** One idea is to fulfill bodily desires in acceptable ways; materials in *Basic Christianity* under “Coping with Temptation” may help here.