

Image of God

Genesis 5.1-5

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

We have been going through the first chapters of the book of Genesis in the past weeks. Today we will consider the meaning of Genesis 5 - the first five verses. And they contain some strange aspects. Did men long ago really get that old? I will say a few things about this.

But more important is what we read in those verses about the nature of humanity. God made man in his own image, and then, when Adam fathered his son Seth, Seth was made in Adam's likeness and image.

1. Man made in God's image

God made mankind in his own image and likeness.

We have seen that in Genesis 1, a few weeks ago I spoke about it. And today we read the same words again, in Genesis 5. As it is repeated, I must be of some importance.

In the Middle East, what did people think of when they spoke of an image of God, in those days?

Archaeologists have dug up many images of the gods - they can still be seen in the museums of Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo. And European archeologists took many of those statues to the European museums.

An image of God in Middle Eastern culture meant, a statue that represents the invisible god. Baal cannot be seen, Astarte is invisible, but their devotees made images, statues, to represent them.

Jews and Christians are expressly forbidden to make images of God. Of course we don't. God himself made images to represent him. He made humankind. A shocking thought, is it not?

Mankind was made to be pointers to the invisible God. Mankind was made to represent God.

Why is a tree not an image of God? I think certain characteristics of humans make us the best representations God could have made of himself. We are personal, creative, rational, moral characters, and we can communicate with each other and with God. We are almost like him.



So imagine how bad it is if people then start to make so-called 'images' of God, like a golden cow, or a wooden pole.

We put those things in temples for the gods, we then dress them up nicely, we paint them, and then we say to the dead piece of metal or wood: now you represent the gods and we bow down before you.

How humiliating for God. He made us to be his images, but we decided that we need to use other things to remind us of God.

But really, it is mostly humiliating for us. God made you to be his representative, but then you fall down for other things as if wood, or metal, or gold, represents God. Thereby you make yourself lower than that wood, or metal, or gold.

The issue must be important, so the editor of Genesis repeats it. Mankind - men and women - are made in the image of God.

Imagine someone sitting down to write the story of the beginnings of our world. He knew the stories of Israel that were told around the campfire, but he also had written materials to use. The old traditions of the people of God.

Chapter 5 seems to have been a separate tradition, probably written on a tablet of clay. The opening line of the tablet was "This is the book of the generations of Adam".

But do not think of our sort of books. Clay tablets were the normal medium used for writing. A clay tablet is a more or less flat surface made of clay. Using a sort of stick, symbols were pressed into the soft clay, and then dried in the sun.

Archaeologists have found massive numbers of those clay tablets. The British Museum alone has about 130.000 of them.

The one who wrote Genesis had finished with chapter 1-4. That ended with humanity spiralling down with Cain's murder. And in chapter 6 he would describe how the morality of the world continued to spiral down.

So why did he decide to insert the verses that we read - the genealogy of Adam and Eve - and why repeat from chapter 1 of Genesis the words that God made Adam and Eve in his likeness, as his image.

2. Even in our dark world, man is still God's image

And in this repeat, he totally ignores the fall of Adam and Eve and the murderous society that developed, but he describes that the posterity of Adam and Eve was also made in the same image of God.

As if nothing had happened.



That is what is meant, I think, with the statement that Seth was made in the image and likeness of Adam. God's imprint on Adam and Eve, was handed over to the next generation.

But Adam and Eve, by their Declaration of Independence from God, had also changed. Had they stayed close to God, they would have been his perfect image.

But now, the children of Adam and Eve - that is us - also inherit something that is peculiar to each of our parents. Look at yourself.

If people in my family want to really hurt me, they say things like: 'You look more and more like your mother.'

And it is true. We all reflect so many behavioural characteristics of our parents.

But at the same time, by physical reproduction, we hand over something of the image of God.

Even after the fall of Adam and Eve, mankind is still personal, creative, rational, moral, and we can communicate with each other and with God, because we have the life-breath of God in us.

That is why in Psalm 8 the writer cries out:

What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?
You have [...] crowned them with glory and honour.
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet.

Yes, how we use our creative powers, our moral understanding, our brain, our communication skills, is often a clear show of our imperfection. We mess up in all areas.

But those abilities in themselves are still a pointer to God. Even fragile, mortal man who ends up studying the roots of the grass from below, is a representative of the Creator. And we are still made to rule and manage this world.

Even humankind that turns to dust.

This mortality is underlined in Genesis 5 as well. If you read the whole chapter, eight times you read: "And then he died."

This is repeated as a sad refrain. Death reigned after Adam and Eve became independent of God.

But what about those weird long lifespans?

The Sumerians, in Mesopotamia, had many mythologies about their prehistoric kings. Those were seen as the real representatives of the gods. The kings, they were seen as the images of God.

If you see those lists of kings, and we have many lists thanks to tablets being conserved well in the dry ground of Mesopotamia, you notice that their earliest kings were believed to have lived almost 30.000 years, and then slowly the age of the kings becomes more normal.

Compare the genealogy in Genesis, and you notice that it also begins with high ages - though not as ridiculous as the Sumerians. It is as if the writer of Genesis wants to make a comparison. Between those Sumerian kings and all of humanity as fathered by Adam.

It is as if the writer of Genesis is criticising those Sumerians for making their history look more eternal than it really was.

And the writer of Genesis speaks of all people as the images of God. This was, for the normal people of God, very uplifting.

We, humans, are in Genesis spoken off, as the Sumerians spoke of their kings.

Each individual, each person, is important as the image of God. You may not be a political leader, a person of power, not a Sumerian king - but you, as you are, are Gods image. A statue of God in the temple of the universe.

3. Renewed in Christ

This image and likeness of God is stamped on every human being, whatever his or her race, or gender, or age, and even independently of how they behave.

From this it follows that our primary attitude towards others should be respectful and loving. Hurt a man, a woman, and you dishonour God.

And treat a person with love and respect, and you praise God. Because all humans represent him.

So to praise God with words, and at the same time to disgrace any of his human creatures, is completely shameful. In this regard I had to think of the words of James in his letter,

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

You deserve such care from other people, because you are the image of God. By being a human being, by being a son or daughter of Adam and Eve you are entitled to the highest respect and care and love.

This human quality - being the image of God - was marred but not lost through sin. Sin makes the image of God look ugly, but it is still his image. And in Christ, it is restored.

Jesus Christ is the true and perfect image of God, and by faith in him, God has renewed our lives. We are in a renewal process.

If we believe in him, and we listen to him, if we align our lives with him, he begins to clean our faces from the dirt that sin has caused. He makes us live more in line with our task as priest for God, as his image, as his representative.

If you believe in Jesus Christ, and you desire to follow him as your Lord, I can tell with the words of God that Paul wrote to the church in Rome, 'you are predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son' (Romans 8.29).

Predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son. He is the perfect image of God, and as Adam dragged us down, so Christ pulls us up.

This is a mystical matter. This is awesome. God took the initiative to restore mankind. To renew us and to make us his perfect images again.

Conclusion

But it is also a process. It has an educational aspect. Let me read to you from Paul's letter to the church in Colossae, chapter 3.9-11.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

This sums up many of the things we have seen in the past weeks, in the first chapters of Genesis. We have inherited the old self with its habits, that is who we are by nature. Thank you, Adam and Eve.

We are by nature, as we were born, part of the old, worn out humanity. Whatever our background, we all share in the same corrupt humanness. Mostly nice people, but often with troubled history.

But we are also a new person. Christ is all, and he is each of us here. And that unites us. He united us. We eat the same bread, we drink from the same cup. We are one people of God.

And we are being renewed, Paul says, after the image of our Creator. By doing away with that old life, and by adopting a new lifestyle.

God is undoing the damage. This is a long process, a painful process often. But He created you, He made you in his image, and through Jesus Christ he has recreated you, he made you be born again in a new humanity - the people of Jesus Christ - and he lifts you up to eventually, be his perfect image again.

Amen.

