

THE CLUE—WEEK 1

GOD'S IMAGE



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A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Clue, Week 1 — God's Image

God made man in His image. That's a powerful clue to His personality, even to His motives. Specifically, our creativity generates some useful analogies.

This opens a door into deeper worship.

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1 Genesis 1:26–27 (NKJV)

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

“Why God, why?”

No one gets through life without asking that question—certainly no believer. Terrible things happen. We accept that God’s ways are not our ways and that we aren’t equipped to understand His perspective, but it’d be nice to have some kind of an explanation for why things are the way they are.

Turns out, there is one. The fact that we’re created in the image of God gives us a handle on what He’s up to. It’s only a partial explanation, but it’s better than nothing.

Today’s passage, in context, says four things:

- 1) We’re created in God’s image.
- 2) Everything else isn’t.
- 3) That image is equally in both man and woman.
- 4) God told us this.

That last point is often underappreciated in interpreting Scripture. Anything that made the cut to get into the Bible is there for a reason. God doesn’t waste words.

The third point is important to preclude a particularly sinful behavior that would have surely resulted had God not included it. That’s why it made the cut. It also serves to emphasize that everyone is in the image of God—not just both sexes, but all nations, all classes, etc.

It’s the first two points, and the comparison between them, that yield some of the deepest insights. God gave us a wonderful clue about Himself when He told us that we are created in His image.

God must have intended us to pay attention to this; He said it three times in Genesis 1:26-27.

This series, titled “The Clue,” will try to answer some of life’s toughest questions by investigating God’s image in us. This, in turn, can give us a more accurate mental image of God.

Of course, our mental image of God can never be glorious enough. Still, we can’t avoid having some kind of image of Him. That’s like trying to not think of an elephant. Right or wrong, we’ll always have some concept of who God is. Getting this right (or as right as possible) is of inestimable value.

“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” — John 4:24 (NKJV)

A proper mental image of God is essential to worship.

2 Habakkuk 2:18 (ESV)

*“What profit is an idol
when its maker has shaped it,
a metal image, a teacher of lies?*

*For its maker trusts in his own creation
when he makes speechless idols!”*

One of the saddest things about idols is that people pay attention to *a speechless teacher of lies*, while a legitimate image of God (us) is right there handy.

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. — Acts 17:29 (ESV)

Unfortunately, sin makes us broken images of God. The same sin that causes us to make dumb idols makes it difficult to figure out which human traits are in God's image and which ones aren't.

One trait that's clearly in His image is our creativity. We are like the creator in that we are creative. This is a huge difference between us and the animals. No animal is a tenth as creative as a small child. Kids with time on their hands are explosions of creativity. That's why restaurants give crayons to children.

This leads somewhere. Because we're creative, we pretend things. Part of that pretending is to write plays, novels, and other things that create little “universes.” The universes we create are nothing compared to God's created universe, but we still get to see the relationship between creators and their creations.

From that, we can learn many wondrous things.

Let's start with a simple example. I don't write plays; I write computer programs. Imagine for a moment that my programs were somehow aware of their creator. What kind of questions might they ask about me?

Is he 16-bit, 32-bit, or 64-bit?

(They might even wonder if I'm as an unimaginably awesome 128-bit program.)

Does he have a graphical user interface?

Can he be ported between platforms?

Of course, these questions are misguided. Programs (even magical ones that can ask about their creator) only understand the concepts of their world. They have no concept of a human or the world I live in.

Our attempts to understand God are bound to be misguided too. We ask questions that make sense to us, but they aren't the right questions. We wouldn't understand the right questions anyway.

The takeaway here is just to get some sense of the enormity of the gulf between us and our creator. That can stretch our minds but doesn't give us any details.

But there are some details—in God's word. That's next.

3 Exodus 3:13–14 (NKJV)

Then Moses said to God, “Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?”

And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

“I AM” is in all caps because the Hebrew construct implies that He IS in a special way—a greater way than we are. Consider the image of God in William Shakespeare, as he acts to create a universe.

What’s the main difference between Shakespeare and his created character—Romeo?

Shakespeare is real and Romeo is fictitious. The difference is a level of reality. Shakespeare exists in a way that Romeo doesn’t.

So it is with us and our creator. There’s something different about the way He IS.

That said, we mustn’t overapply the Shakespeare analogy. Scripture says that God IS in a way that we aren’t. The point of the Shakespeare analogy is to give us a sense of the meaning of IS—of the concept of levels of reality—but it’s not an exact analogy.

Like we saw with the computer program analogy, we’re incapable of understanding how God IS.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. — 1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV)

So then, what is eternal life? Is it just an infinite amount of this life? Or is it something else? Scripture makes it clear, over and over, that it’s something else.

“For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” — Mark 12:25 (ESV)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” — John 5:24 (ESV)

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. — 1 Corinthians 15:51–53 (ESV)

To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. — 2 Peter 3:18b (ESV)

Be careful here. These passages do not say that we will BE the way God IS.

But they do say something awesome.

4 Titus 1:1–2 (NKJV)

Paul, a bondservant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect and the acknowledgment of the truth which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began,

Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." — John 8:58 (NKJV)

If God is outside of our time dimension, then the future and the past are not fundamentally different in His eyes. This supports the Reformed Doctrine of Predestination, though in a complex way. As always, I want to emphasize that this isn't "the answer;" it's just meant to stretch your mind. The whole truth is too wondrous for us to comprehend. Still, we should meditate on these wondrous things.

Suppose you're a playwright, and suppose your created beings are aware of their creator. What questions would they ask about you?

Is he/she a main character?

Does he/she have a speaking role?

How many scenes old is he/she?

One of the errors they would make is seeing your age in terms of scenes. They live in a time dimension that their creator isn't stuck inside. So it is with us and our creator. God isn't any age; he invented age.

But there's another insight to be gained here—the concept of order. The Bible makes it clear that Creation was chronological. God did something first, then He did something second, etc. However, that chronology need not be in the same order as events inside our time.

When Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, did he write the ending last?

Maybe; maybe not. He may have even written the ending first, or at least conceived of it first. The order of creation is typically not the same as the order of things inside the creation.

I didn't write this in the order you're reading it. I roughed in the outline, then filled in bits here and there, then fixed a bunch of mistakes, then rewrote parts, etc. If writers, being in the image of God, don't create things in the same order as the things inside of what they're writing, then maybe God doesn't either.

The creation story in Genesis 1 and 2 feels like that. It describes the work of creation from God's point of view, culminating in His rest. Some commentators view His rest as what Hebrews 11:3 is referring to.

"So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.' " — Hebrews 3:11 (NKJV)

That's a different view of time—God's time.

Also, Hebrews 3:11 might be the key reference for yesterday's question, "What is eternal life?"

5 John 11:35 (NKJV)

Jesus wept.

If God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, then how can He be sad about anything that happens? Wouldn't that be absurd?

Well, consider Shakespeare as he is writing *Romeo and Juliet*. While he is foreordaining everything in the play, might he have felt some of the sadness he was writing into the ending? Would you?

When the movie version came out in the late 1960's, I wondered if anyone would want to see it, given that they all knew the ending. (Spoiler alert—they both die.)

Turns out that lots of people did go see it, and lots of people cried.

Why cry at a fictional account of something sad that you know is going to happen?

It happens.

So, the lesson we draw from thinking about God's image in us is, "If we act this way, maybe it's not so absurd for God to act this way."

God's sadness makes sense.

Our emotions are in God's image, though His are perfect and ours are marred by sin.

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. — 1 John 4:8 (NIV)

But this leads to another question like the one above. Scripture says that God wants everyone to be saved but also says that not everyone is saved. If God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, then how can His desires be thwarted?

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. — 2 Peter 3:9 (NIV)

This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. — 2 Timothy 2:3–4 (NIV)

People gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done. — Revelation 16:10b–11 (NIV)

The answer is explained well in "*Knowing God's Will*" by Blaine Smith. There are two different Greek words for God's will. βούλη (boo-LAY) means His immutable will or decree. θέλημα (thuh-LAY-ma) means what He desires or prefers. The NIV translates θέλημα wisely, using "want" instead of "will."

Shakespeare isn't love the way that God is love, but he still didn't "want" Romeo to die.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What is your mental image of God?
2. If you could ask God a question, what would it be?
3. What is your idea of eternity?
4. What is your view of rest in Hebrews 3:11?
5. Can you see God's image in your emotions?

Items for prayer: