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1

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

What is your most pressing parenting question right now? Whatever age and stage your child is currently in, you likely have a question at the forefront of your mind. A question that nags at you throughout the day. A question about what to do and how to do it. A question about how to help your child with something. A question about what to say yes to and what to say no to. Not knowing the answer likely leaves you feeling frustrated and helpless.

I don't know about you, but I've had questions about parenting since the moment my first child was born. Sixteen years later, the questions continue. These questions change with the child's age and stage, situation and circumstance, and even with what is going on in the world around me at the time. Often, I've wanted someone to step in and just tell me what to do.

Perhaps some of these questions resonate with you:

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- When should I expect my child to crawl, walk, speak, or _____?
- How do I get my child to sleep through the night?
- What do I do when my child won't do _____?
- How do I talk to my child about _____?
- How do I help my child make friends?
- How do I teach my child to _____?
- Should I let my child _____, listen to _____, watch _____?

All parents have questions about raising children. I once had a job working as a counselor for families in crisis. One of my main tasks was to meet with families in their homes, observe the parents' interactions with their children, and then teach them parenting skills.

During our first few sessions, I liked to help these parents create a foundation upon which they could build their parenting. I wanted them to think through their purpose and goals for parenting. I wanted to help them see the big picture before we zeroed in on the specifics.

What I quickly found is that most parents did not want to look at the big picture. They wanted me to help address the current problem at hand. They often said things to me like, "Just tell me what to do when my son says _____ or does _____." Or, "Tell me what to do to get my daughter to stop _____." They wanted me to answer their most pressing question: How?

Fast-forward a number of years. I had my first child and found myself flipping through the pages of parenting books at the bookstore wondering the same thing those parents once asked me: "How do I get my baby to sleep longer stretches?" "How do I keep my toddler from touching things that can hurt him?" "How do I

handle conflicts during playdates?” And most importantly, “How do I keep my patience in all the chaos?”

While just about everything in life seems to come with an instruction manual, our children do not. This does not mean people haven't tried to develop such manuals. Bookstores are lined with them. There are magazines focused entirely on parenting. Browse online and you'll find plenty of blogs providing how-to lists like “Ten Ways to Get Your Child to Eat Vegetables” or “Three Steps to Getting Your Child to Pick Up After Themselves.” You know those blogs. You click on them in anticipation, follow the steps word for word, only to find that the solution simply did not work with your child. Or perhaps it was helpful with one child but not the other. Or maybe your child responded positively at first, but then the method fell flat and you were back to where you started.

Perhaps you've opened your Bible hoping for some parenting help but found little in the way of step-by-step instruction. There doesn't seem to be an answer to the “How?” questions of parenthood. That's interesting, isn't it? As much as we would like it to, we can't open the Bible and expect to find a verse or passage that says, “When your child will only eat chicken nuggets three times a day, do this: ____.” Or, “When your child has trouble making friends in school, do these three things: ____.” Or, “Two steps to get your child to say please and thank you.” This is true for many things in life, including questions about employment and marriage and the future. That's because the Bible isn't a step-by-step manual on how to live life. It's the story of God's redemption for His people. It's the story of who God is and what He has done for us in Christ.

Yet don't despair, dear friend! God's Word does have things to teach us as parents. The Bible may not answer the question “how?” but it does answer the question “who?” God's Word teaches us

The Bible isn't a step-by-step manual on how to live life. It's the story of God's redemption for His people.

who He is and who we are, and these truths both have a significant impact on how we parent. While the Bible may not provide steps and procedures

to follow, it does point us to truths that can shape the whole of our parenting.

Let's start exploring this question of "who?" by going back to the beginning, to the book of Genesis. There we'll get a picture of who God is and who we are.

In the Beginning

"In the beginning, God . . ." (Gen. 1:1).

As the first book of the Bible, Genesis lays the foundation for all that is to come. Its name is telling, for the word genesis means "beginning," and the book tells us how everything came to be. Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible to instruct Israel about the God who rescued them from slavery in Egypt. They had been in bondage for four hundred years, living in a land ruled by pharaohs and filled with idols to thousands of gods. They needed to know not only who God is, but who they were as well.

Genesis 1 and 2 recounts the story of creation—how God spoke this world into being, filled it with life, and placed human-kind on it. Genesis 1:3 tells us God merely called forth light, and the light appeared; He spoke, and there it was. When we walk into a dark room, we have to toggle on the light switch before the lamp comes on. Yet, God, the Maker, speaks and all life appears *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. These beginning verses of Genesis are fundamental to our understanding of who God is: He is the Creator

and sustainer of all things; He is the first cause to our existence. We are His creatures and are dependent on Him.

The creation account then tells us how God brought shape and form to the earth and then filled it with plants like grass, trees, and flowers, and with creatures like fish, birds, and bears. The Bible tells us the plants and trees were to sprout forth more plants and trees “according to its kind” (1:11). It also tells us that God made birds and fish and other animals “according to their kinds” (1:21). God then looked at His creation and called it good.

Then the Bible tells us about the creation of human beings. This account stands out from the rest of the creation story as something special and different:

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 created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26–27)

Humankind stands apart from everything else God made because, unlike the rest of creation, we are made not according to an animal’s kind, but in the image of God, the *imago Dei*.

This passage is significant, for it tells us of our inherent dignity, value, and worth. As the psalmist wrote, “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:13–14). God crafted us with His own hand and in His image, marking us as significant—not because of who we would one day become or what we would one day do, but because of who our Maker is. Every human life is valuable because we bear the image of God.

In God's Image

But just what does it mean that we are made in the image of God?¹ What does it mean to be created in His likeness? First, we were created as God's children. In Luke's gospel, he refers to Adam as God's son (Luke 3:38). Sinclair Ferguson points out that being a son of God and being made in God's image and likeness are interchangeable; they are synonymous.² He writes, "If we wish to understand what man was intended to be, we need to think of him as a son of God. If, in turn, we ask what it means to be a son of God, the answer must be found in terms of being God's image and likeness."³ Ultimately, we see God's image in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, who is the "exact representation of his being" (Heb. 1:3 NIV). When we want to know what it looks like to image God, Christ sets the standard. In the next chapter, we'll look more into what it means that God is our Father and we are His children. For now, though, let's continue to explore the significance of being an image bearer.

This passage in Genesis teaches us who we are and what our purpose is on this earth. We are God's sons and daughters. We are His image bearers; we were made to image and reflect our Maker. We were made to mirror God; we point to Him. The moon in the dark night sky has no light of its own; rather, it reflects to us the light of the sun. In a similar way, we image to the world—and to our children—who God is. As theologian R. C. Sproul wrote, "The task that is given to mankind in creation is to bear witness to the holiness of God, to be His image bearer. We are made to mirror and reflect the holiness of God. We are made to be His ambassadors."⁴

Further, as God's children, we glorify Him when we live our lives for Him. He made us and sustains us. He gives us life, breath, and everything else. Author Hannah Anderson explains that one result of bearing God's image is that we belong to Him: "He is tied to us. By placing His image in us, God assumes an extra measure

of ownership and responsibility for our lives. We are His brand, His trademark.”⁵ We glorify God when we live our lives in dependence on Him, relying on and trusting in Him, rather than ourselves. We glorify Him when we return thanks for His goodness and kindness to us. We glorify Him when He is first in our heart, when He is our greatest joy and delight.

Have you looked up at the night sky with your child and marveled together at the sheer number of stars? They sparkle against the darkness of the sky. The psalmist wrote that the heavens “declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). When we look at what God created, we marvel at His handiwork, and He is glorified. Like the stars in the sky, we glorify God when we do things that make much of Him. We glorify Him when we display the wonders of who He is. We glorify Him when we worship and praise Him for who He is and all He has done.

Imaging God’s Character

Many people say my youngest son is the mirror image of my husband, especially when we look at old pictures of my husband as a child. We often joke with our son about it. My husband will say to him, “Hey, how’s my face doing today?” Or, “Look at my face. It’ll be yours one day.” My son laughs and embraces being my husband’s “mini-me.” In this way, my son represents his father. He is like him in terms of what he looks like. He also mirrors his father in his sense of humor. My husband and son often compete for the title of “Funniest Person in the Family.” (To be honest, I always vote for my son!)

While we don’t physically look like God because He is a spirit, our bodies do point to the power and wonder of God. The intricacies in how each part works together testifies to the creativity

of our Maker. We also bear God's image in terms of who He is in His character and in what He does. And when we mirror Him, we live out our purpose and give Him the honor He is due. We show others who He is as we glorify Him. The Bible tells us this is why God created us, "everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" (Isa. 43:7). We don't make God glorious; He already is. Rather, we highlight and exalt who He is in His character, being, and works as we bear His image in the world.

God's Incommunicable Attributes

One of the key takeaways we learn from the creation account in Genesis is that God is the Creator; we are His creatures. He stands apart from us as the One who creates all things from nothing. He is the sovereign King and Ruler of all that exists. Nothing and no one can compare to Him. As Moses later wrote, "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" (Ex. 15:11).

When we consider the ways in which we image God in this world, we have to separate those characteristics that belong to God alone from those we share with Him. Theologians refer to the characteristics we do not share with God as incommunicable attributes. These are characteristics inherent to God and His divine nature.

For example, we are not omniscient. Only God knows all things. Because we are enfleshed beings, we cannot be omnipresent; that is, everywhere at once as God can be. He is all-powerful, self-existent, and eternal. And, as English pastor Arthur Pink noted, God has no needs.

There was a time . . . when God, in the unity of His nature (though subsisting equally in three Divine Persons),

dwelt all alone. . . . There was nothing, no one, but God. . . . During a past eternity, God was alone: self-contained, self-sufficient, self-satisfied; in need of nothing.⁶

This is hard for us as dependent creatures to imagine. We simply can't fathom what it would be like to have no needs, to be self-sufficient within oneself. We are born needy and dependent on others. Consider all our children need us to do for them! From the moment our children are born, they need us to feed and clothe them. We change their messy diapers, take them to the doctor for checkups, and put them to bed when they are tired. We are alert to safety concerns, buckling them up tight in their car seat and ensuring dangerous items are kept out of reach. We do these things because they cannot do them for themselves. Yet, even as children mature, they are still dependent on others. Even when they are grown and have their own homes and jobs, they will never be fully self-sufficient. They will still need the wisdom of others. They will still need help accomplishing tasks. They will still be dependent on God for their daily bread. This is true of all humanity, and this "needing" is what separates us from God.

In addition, God's attributes have no limits. As author and Bible teacher Jen Wilkin explains, "Everything that is true about God's nature and character is infinitely true. He is infinitely creative, infinitely sustaining, unlimited by time. God knows no limits on his presence, knowledge, power, and authority."⁷ In contrast, we are limited by our humanity. Our knowledge on a subject only extends so far. Think of how many "why" questions our children ask and for which we have no answer! We are constrained by time and space. We might run a house or a business or even a nation, but our authority goes no further. When we consider God's incommunicable attributes, we are humbled by the truth that God is God and we are not.

God's Communicable Attributes

However, there are many characteristics and attributes of God that are communicable to us. These are attributes that originate in God and are shared with us. Throughout the Bible, we read of these attributes, often found in instructions or commands. For example, the apostle John teaches us that God is love, an essential attribute to His character: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). God is love, and when we love others, we image God. In our acts of love toward others, we demonstrate that we know God and that we belong to Him. When we comfort our daughter after she’s fallen off the swing at the park or when a schoolmate hasn’t invited her to the party, we show her the love of God.

When we invent and create and problem-solve, we image the One who made us. When we speak with truth, we image the God of all truth. When we promote justice, we point to the God who is perfectly just. When we show up to work on time and labor hard for our employer, we image the God who first worked for us. When we show patience to our tired and whiny child, we reflect the patience God has for us. When we share and sacrifice for another, we mirror the God who sent His Son as a sacrifice for us.

As image bearers, we glorify God when we do what He does—when we image Him in His character, works, and ways. All of God’s communicable attributes are available to us. However, we know we often fail to image Him. We don’t love others the way God loves us. We don’t have patience with our children. We don’t sacrifice our wants for the needs of others.

What happened to God’s image in human beings? Why doesn’t all humanity live for the glory of God and image Him as His children in this world?

Redeemed Image Bearers

In chapter three of Genesis, Moses transitions from the story of creation to explain how we got to where we are today. We no longer live in Eden as our first parents did. Humanity does not enjoy fellowship with God by walking with Him in the cool of the evening, as Adam and Eve once did. Genesis 3 tells us that our first parents fell into sin by eating of the one tree in the garden from which they were forbidden to eat. Eve believed Satan's lie when he asked her, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'? . . . You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:1, 4–5). When they ate the forbidden fruit, sin entered the world, and with it the death and decay of all things.

Everything changed for humanity on that fateful day. The ground was cursed, and, as a result, we get our food by the sweat of our brow. From then on, childbirth would bring great pain and every human would be born with a sin nature. Mankind was barred from the garden and could no longer be in God's presence. And the image of God in us was marred. It's still there, but instead of living for God's glory, we live for our own. We no longer do the things God does. We seek our own way. We hurt, lie, cheat, and steal. We snap at our children or put our wants and desires before their needs. We sin in our thoughts, words, and deeds. And rather than find our life and hope in God, we look to false gods and worship them instead.

But God.

These are two of the greatest words in all the world! Just as God sent Moses to rescue His people from Pharaoh, He sent a Redeemer to rescue us from sin. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, left the royal halls of heaven and came to earth. He took on human flesh and fulfilled the promise God made to Adam and Eve

in Genesis 3:15 to bruise the head of Satan. He came to defeat sin by living the life we could not live and dying the death we deserved. He came to remake us into people who can once again live out our purpose as image bearers on this earth. Through faith in who Jesus is and what He has done for us, we are set free from sin and are made new so that we can live our lives for the glory of God.

In fact, the very Spirit of Christ now resides in our hearts. He works in and through us, transforming us into the image of our Savior. He strips away the old, creating within us the new. We are redeemed image bearers who can once again image God as we were created to do.

Imaging God to Our Children

At the beginning of this chapter, I said that the Bible may not answer the question “how?” but it does answer the question “who?” So, who are you? Who am I? This is the most important question one can ask in life. The answer to these questions first lies in who God is. God is our Creator. He made us and sustains us. He created us with a purpose: to bear His image as His children in this world. As sinners saved by grace through faith, we are redeemed image bearers. We live for God and His glory.

But what does all this have to do with our parenting? What does knowing who God is and who we are as image bearers have to do with raising our children? How does the answer to “who?” impact our “how?” questions?

Because we are image bearers, we image God to those around us. We reflect Him to others as we do what He does and as we display His character in our lives. And who do we see most often in our day to day life? Our children. As parents, we are often the first glimpse they see of who God is. In our responses and actions, we

point our children to the God who made them and saved them. When we image and reflect God's communicable attributes, they learn more of who God is. When we parent our children the way God parents us, they see God through us.

The more we take time to dwell on the character of God and consider the ways He has made us to reflect Him, the more it shapes how we parent. The "who?" inevitably shapes the "how?" As we move throughout this book, we will look at specific ways we can image God in our parenting.

In the next chapter we will dig deeper into how God parents us. We'll talk about our adoption into God's family and the privilege it is to call Him Father.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think many of our parenting questions have to do with "how?"
2. Why is it important to know who God is and who we are?
3. Take some time to consider more about who God is.
Read Exodus 34:6-8; Romans 11:33-36; and Revelation 4:11. What do you learn about Him?
4. Read Psalms 16:11; 27:4; and 42:1-2. What does the psalmist find in God?
5. How does knowing our purpose as image bearers transform how we live our day-to-day lives?
6. Read 2 Corinthians 5:21. What has Jesus done for us? What does this mean for us as we seek to glorify God with our lives?

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7. What are some attributes of God you can image today as you interact with your children?

A Parent's Prayer

Father in heaven, I thank You for the gift of life. You are a marvelous Creator, and all Your works are good. Help me understand the significance of what it means to bear Your image in this world. Help me as I consider what it looks like to image You to my children. Be at work in me as I seek to glorify You in my parenting.

In Jesus' name, amen.

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