

The Nature, Purpose and Destiny of Man

by Richie Temple
Cary, North Carolina

There are few more important topics in the Bible than the biblical view of the *purpose, nature* and *destiny* of man. Our understanding in regard to many other biblical subjects is directly affected by our beliefs on these key topics. Not surprisingly, they have been the subject of countless theological discussions as well as the cause of seemingly endless controversies throughout the centuries amongst the various branches of Christendom.

The Bible, however, is amazingly clear about these matters if we allow it to speak apart from theological biases. In Psalm 8 David surveys the wonders of God's creation and exclaims:

When I consider 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, the son of man that you care for him?

You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.

You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet (Psalm 8:3-6).

These verses are an obvious allusion to the biblical account of the creation of man recorded in the Book of Genesis. Apparently, David was not moved when he considered the majesty of God's awesome universe to think that he may have evolved from some lower form of life. Instead, God's wondrous creation turned his mind to God's "invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature" - through which God had created all things, including man, for the *purpose* of God's own glory (Rom. 1:20f; Isaiah 43:7).

The original account of man's creation provides the sure foundation for a proper understanding of man's *purpose* in life and the *nature* of his being. With this biblical understanding also comes the key

to unlocking the ultimate *destiny* of God's people - the people of faith. Let us begin in Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Though there has long been speculation about the meaning of the phrase "in the image of God", Old Testament scholars generally agree that this is the language of royalty. God created man in his own image in order to endow man with a "god-like" kingship or rulership over the created earth - to be exercised in fellowship with God. This intimate relationship was meant to bring blessing to man and glory to God. The *NIV Study Bible* explains these verses as follows:

God speaks as the Creator-King, announcing his crowning work to the members of his heavenly court ... Man is the climax of God's creative activity, and God has "crowned him with glory and honor" and "made him ruler" over the rest of his creation (Ps. 8:5-8). Since man was created in the image of the divine king, delegated sovereignty (kingship) was bestowed on him.

Victor P. Hamilton adds the following comments in relationship to the fact that much of Genesis 1 is an obvious contrasting of God's true creation order to the mythological creation stories and beliefs of the nations that surrounded Israel:

In ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian society the king, or some other high-ranking official, might be called "the image of God." Such a designation, however, was not applied to the canal digger or to the mason who worked on a ziggurat. Gen. 1 may be using royal language to describe simply "man." In God's eyes all of mankind is royal. All of humanity is related to God, not just the king (*The New Int. Com. of the OT*, p. 135).

Let us note that nowhere does the Bible ever say that man lost this status of being "in the image of God" after his expulsion from the garden of Eden (cf. Gen. 9:6; James 3:9). Yes, creation was "cursed" but the very fact that man was created in the image of God is the basis upon which other biblical statements are

made (e.g. it is the reason for the death penalty being prescribed for murder, Gen. 9:6; cf. James 3:9).

This understanding of man created "in the image of God" has important consequences for our understanding of the *nature* of man as a unity rather than as separable parts. Hamilton continues in his commentary on these verses:

It is clear that v. 26 is not interested in defining what is the image of God in man. The verse simply states the fact, which is repeated in the following verse. Nevertheless, innumerable definitions have been suggested: conscience, the soul, original righteousness, reason, the capacity for fellowship with God ... etc. Most of these definitions are based on subjective inferences rather than objective exegesis. Any approach that focuses on one aspect of man - be that physical, spiritual, or intellectual - to the neglect of the rest of man's constituent features seems doomed to failure. Gen. 1:26 is simply saying that to be human is to bear the image of God. This understanding emphasizes man as a unity. No part of man, no function of man is subordinated to some other, higher part or activity.

The popular notion that man is a "spiritual being housed in a body" is totally contrary to the biblical way of thinking. In the Bible man is pictured not as a three-part or two-part being but as a single unity - a "living being" (Gen. 2:7). When the Bible speaks of man's "spirit, soul and body" (I Thess. 5:23) it is not delineating a three-part being anymore than it is teaching a four-part being when it tells us to love God with all our "heart, soul, mind and strength." This is simply a biblical way of

emphasizing the *whole person*, not a method of differentiating parts.

In the Bible salvation has to do with the *whole* man and the *whole* creation (Rom. 8:18f). Man was the crowning achievement of that creation and the biblical doctrine of redemption and salvation has as its goal the restoration and establishment of an even greater "inhabited world to come" (Heb. 2:4). Our *destiny* is not to be found in a resting place "beyond the sky." Instead, the biblical hope is for "the restoration of all things"- to be fulfilled at the second coming of Christ (Acts 3:21). It is true that the "kingdom of God" which we will inherit (I Cor. 15:50) is called a "heavenly kingdom" (II Tim. 4:18) but that is only because it is now "kept in heaven" until it will be "revealed in the last time" (I Pet. 1:4-5). The letter of II Peter sums up the clear biblical hope for the final *destiny* of man:

But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness (II Pet. 3:13).

Though this was first promised to the Old Testament people of God, it continues to be a promise for God's new covenant people as well. Man was created to rule over the earth and in the re-created "world to come" God's people will once again, with Christ, enjoy that rulership free from the sin, frustrations and death of this present evil age. May this hope be the "anchor" of our lives (Heb. 6:19) as we seek in this life to truly live for him.

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