

1. THE IMAGE OF GOD

November, 1730

An Introductory Comment

This sermon is a first in a couple of ways. It was John Wesley's first university sermon preached at St. Mary's on November 15, 1730 (O, 4:290), and due to its subject matter with its strong theme of creation, this sermon marks the very beginning of the way of salvation. Wesley preached on this same text about two dozen times, from London to Manchester and on to Armagh, Ireland, where he noted in his *Journal* late in his career on June 11, 1775, that he had preached to a huge congregation, "But I could not find the way to their hearts" (WH, 22:455). Following Matthew Henry, the great commentator, Wesley viewed verse 26, "Let us make man . . .," in a trinitarian fashion, and he believed that the terms *image* and *likeness* referred to the very same reality (H, [Gen. 1:26](#)).

Wesley laid out his basic doctrine of humanity (anthropology) in this sermon by noting that human beings are a "compound of matter and spirit" (O, 4:296) and could not therefore be *reduced* to the "image of . . . the beasts that perish" (O, 4:292). Elsewhere he observed that *Homo sapiens* is not "mere matter, a clod of earth, a lump of clay, without sense or understanding; but a spirit like [the] Creator" (O, 2:400). Generally speaking, Wesley defined the *imago Dei* as "righteousness and true holiness" (O, 1:162), and he affirmed, "It was *free grace* that . . . stamped on that soul the image of God" (O, 1:117). Beyond this, Wesley specifically understood the image of God in a threefold manner along the lines of natural, political, and moral images, with an emphasis on

the last. Human beings, then, are marked by understanding, will, and liberty and in their best sense by holiness and happiness.

The Image of God

1. A truth that honors human nature should not fail
 - A. Some in every age have gladly received it
 - B. Human beings were made in the image of God
 2. Why, then, do human beings exhibit so many imperfections?
 3. Many contend that humans were created in the image of beasts
 4. God created human beings upright, but they rebelled against their Creator
 5. I will explain the doctrine more distinctly by inquiring:
 - A. How humans were made in the image of God
 - B. How they lost that image
 - C. How they may recover that image
- I. Human beings were originally made in the image of God
1. They were given power to distinguish truth from falsehood
 2. Far greater and nobler was their second endowment, a perfect will
 3. God implanted perfect freedom in their nature
 4. God crowned all of this with perfect happiness
- II. How did human beings lose their perfection?
- A. Liberty required some trial so that they could have true choice
 - B. Adam ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil
 - C. Eating the forbidden fruit had numerous effects
 1. The first effect was the loss of immortality
 2. The understanding was destroyed, and error and ignorance increased
 3. The perfect will became subject to imperfection, anger, and shame
 4. The loss of freedom enslaved the mind to vice
 5. The consequence of this enslavement was the reversal of

happiness

III. Who shall recover us from the body of this death?

A. Jesus Christ our Lord, who conquered death

1. The first step toward recovery is knowledge of our condition
2. This understanding directs us to reform our will by charity
3. The law of the Spirit makes us free from the law of sin and

death

IV. Concluding remarks

1. Those who refuse the love of Christ are in a sad condition
2. The duty of Christians is to spread the love of Christ with

unbelievers

Sermon 141: The Image of God, 1730

[Genesis 1:27](#)

In the [first](#) chapter of Genesis at the [twenty-seventh](#) verse it is thus written:

So God created man in his own image.

[1.] A truth that does so much honour to human nature, that gives so advantageous an account of it as this, could not fail, one would think, of being well entertained by all to whom that nature belonged. And accordingly some there have been in all ages who gladly received and firmly retained it; who asserted, not only that man was sprung from God, but that he was his likeness from whom he sprung; that the image of his divine Parent was still visible upon him, who had transfused as much of himself into this his picture as the materials on which he drew would allow.

[2.] But to this it has constantly been opposed: if man was made in the image of God, whence flow those numberless imperfections that stain and dishonour his nature? Why is his body exposed to sickness

and pain, and at last to a total dissolution? Why is his soul still more disgraced and deformed by ignorance and error, by unruly passions, and what is worse than all, as it contains them all, by vice? A fine picture—this ignorant, wretched, guilty creature—of a wise, happy, and holy Creator!

[3.] I am ashamed to say there are [those] of our age and nation who greedily close with this old objection, and eagerly maintain that they were not made in the image of the living God, but of the beasts that perish; who heartily contend that it was not the divine but the brutal likeness in which they were created, and earnestly assert ‘that they themselves are beasts’ in a more literal sense than ever Solomon meant it. These consequently reject with scorn the account God has given of man, and affirm it to be contrary to reason and [to the account] itself, as well as it is to their practice.

[4.] The substance of his account is this: ‘God created man upright; in the image of God created he him; but man found out to himself many inventions.’ Abusing the liberty wherewith he was endowed, he rebelled against his Creator, and wilfully changed the image of the incorruptible God into sin, misery, and corruption. Yet his merciful, though rejected, Creator would not forsake even the depraved work of his own hands, but provided for him, and offered to him a means of being ‘renewed after the image of him that created him’.

[5.] That it may appear whether this account of man is contrary to itself and reason or no, I shall endeavour to show the parts of it more distinctly, by inquiring: I, how man was made in the image of God; II, how he lost that image; and III, how he may recover it.

I. Man was originally made in the image of God.

1. First with regard to his understanding. He was endued, after the likeness of his Maker, with a power of distinguishing truth from falsehood; either by a simple view wherein he made the nearest approach

to that all-seeing Nature, or by comparing one thing with another (a manner of knowledge perhaps peculiar to himself) and often inferring farther truths from these preceding comparisons.

(1.) And in several properties of it, as well as in the faculty itself, man at first resembled God. His understanding was just; everything appeared to him according to its real nature. It never was betrayed into any mistake; whatever he perceived, he perceived as it was. He thought not at all of many things, but he thought wrong of none. (2.) And as it was just, it was likewise clear. Truth and evidence went hand in hand; as nothing appeared in a false light, so neither in a glimmering one. Light and darkness there were, but no twilight; whenever the shades of ignorance withdrew, in that moment the broader day appeared, the full blaze of knowledge shined. He was equally a stranger to error and doubt; either he saw not at all, or he saw plainly. (3.) And hence arose that other excellence of his understanding: being just and clear, it was swift in its motion. Nothing was then as quick as thought but that which alone is capable of it—spirit. How far anything of which we have any conception must fall short of expressing its swiftness will be readily seen by all who observe but one instance of it in our first father: in how short a space he ‘gave names to all cattle, and to the fowls of the air, and to every beast of the field’. And names not arbitrarily imposed, but expressive of their inward natures. (4.) Sufficiently showing thereby not only the swiftness, but likewise the greatness of his understanding. For how extensive a view must he have had who could command so vast a prospect! What a comprehension was that, to take in at once almost an infinity of objects! Such doubtless it was that the visible creation would soon have been too small for its capacity.

2. And yet even this just, this clear, this swift, this comprehensive understanding was the least part of that image of God wherein man was originally made. Far greater and nobler was his second endowment, namely, a will equally perfect. It could not but be perfect while it followed the dictates of such an understanding. His affections were

rational, even, and regular—if we may be allowed to say ‘affections’, for properly speaking he had but one: man was what God is, Love . Love filled the whole expansion of his soul; it possessed him without a rival. Every movement of his heart was love: it knew no other fervour. Love was his vital heat; it was the genial warmth that animated his whole frame. And the flame of it was continually streaming forth, directly to him from whom it came, and by reflection to all sensitive natures, inasmuch as they too were his offspring; but especially to those superior beings who bore not only the superscription, but likewise the image of their Creator.

3. What made his image yet plainer in his human offspring was, thirdly, the liberty he originally enjoyed; the perfect freedom implanted in his nature, and interwoven with all its parts . Man was made with an entire indifference, either to keep or change his first estate: it was left to himself what he would do; his own choice was to determine him in all things. The balance did not incline to one side or the other unless by his own deed. His Creator would not, and no creature besides himself could, weigh down either scale. So that, in this sense, he was the sole lord and sovereign judge of his own actions.

4. The result of all these—an unerring understanding, an uncorrupt will, and perfect freedom—gave the last stroke to the image of God in man, by crowning all these with happiness. Then indeed to live was to enjoy, when every faculty was in its perfection, amidst abundance of objects which infinite wisdom had purposely suited to it, when man’s understanding was satisfied with truth, as his will was with good; when he was at full liberty to enjoy either the Creator or the creation; to indulge in rivers of pleasure, ever new, ever pure from any mixture of pain.

II. How it was this wise, virtuous, happy creature was deprived of these perfections, how man lost the image of God, we are, secondly, to inquire. And the plain answer is this: the liberty of man necessarily

required that he should have some trial; else he would have had no choice whether he would stand or no, that is, no liberty at all. In order to this necessary trial God said unto him, 'Of every tree of the garden thou mayst freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it.' To secure him from transgressing this sole command, as far as could be done without destroying his liberty, the consequence was laid before him: 'In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.' Yet man did eat of it, and the consequence accordingly was death on him and all his descendants, and preparatory to death, sickness and pain, and folly and vice and slavery.

And 'tis easy to observe by what regular steps all these would succeed each other, if God did not miraculously prevent it, but suffer nature to take its course. But we should observe, first, that man even at his creation was a compound of matter and spirit; and that it was ordained by the original law that during this vital union neither part of the compound should act at all but together with its companion; that the dependence of each upon the other should be inviolably maintained; that even the operations of the soul should so far depend upon the body as to be exerted in a more or less perfect manner, as this was more or less aptly disposed.

This being observed, we may easily conceive how the forbidden fruit might work all those effects which are implied in the word 'death', as being introductory to, and paving the way for it. Which particulars of the following account are founded on Scripture and consequently certain, and which are built on conjecture and therefore proposed only as probable, it will not be hard to distinguish.

1. Its first effect must have been on his body, which, being before prepared for immortality, had no seeds of corruption within itself and adopted none from without. All its original particles were incorruptible, and therefore the additional ones taken in, being for pleasure rather than use, cannot be supposed ever to have cleaved to its native substance, ever to have adhered to any part of it, as none needed any

reparation. By this means both the juices contained must have been still of the same consistence, and the vessels containing them have kept the same spring, and remained ever clear and open.

On the contrary, the fruit of that tree alone of whose deadly nature he was forewarned seems to have contained a juice, the particles of which were apt to cleave to whatever they touched. Some of these, being received into the human body, might adhere to the inner coats of the finer vessels; to which again other particles that before floated loose in the blood, continually joining, would naturally lay a foundation for numberless disorders in all parts of the machine. For death in particular; since, more foreign matter cleaving to the former every day, the solid parts of the body would every day lose something of their spring, and so be less able to contribute their necessary assistance to the circulation of the fluids. The smaller channels would gradually fill up, especially those that lie near the extremities, where the current, by reason of its distance from the fountain, was always more slow and languid. The whole tide, as the force that threw it forward abated, must [also] have abated its swiftness in proportion, till at length that force utterly failing, it ceased to move, and rested in death.

Indeed had Adam taken the antidote as well as the poison, had he again put forth his hand, and taken of the fruit of the Tree of Life, nothing of this could have followed. 'Tis sure this would have made him live for ever, naturally speaking, notwithstanding he had eaten death. 'Tis likely it would have done so by its thin, abstersive nature, particularly fitted to counteract the other, to wipe off its particles, wheresoever adhering, and so restore the eater to immortality.

However this be, thus much is certain: the moment wherein that fruit was tasted, the sentence of death passed on that body, which before was impassive and immortal. And this immortal having put on mortality, the next stroke fell on its companion: the soul felt a like change through all her powers, except only that she could not die. The instrument being now quite untuned, she could no longer make the same

harmony: 'the corruptible body pressed down the soul', with which it soared so high during its incorruption.

2. His understanding first found the want of suitable organs; its notions were just no longer. It mistook falsehood for truth, and truth for falsehood. Error succeeded and increased ignorance. And no wonder, when it was no longer clear; when it not only saw through a glass, but darkly too, that glass being now grown thick and dull, having lost great part of its transparency. And hence it was that doubt perplexed it as well as error, that it could neither rest in knowledge nor ignorance. Through clouds like these its most laborious steps could win but little ground. With its clearness went its swiftness too; confusion and slowness came together. Instead of being able to find out the natures of ten thousand creatures almost in a moment, it became unable to trace out fully the nature of any one in many years. Nay, unable (so was the largeness of its capacity impaired, as well as the swiftness of its progress) with that apprehension for which the visible world was before but a scanty prospect, to take in at one view all the properties of any single creature therein.

3. How much the will suffered when its guide was thus blinded we may easily comprehend. Instead of the glorious one that possessed it whole *before*, it was *now* seized by legions of vile affections. Grief and anger and hatred and fear and shame, at once rushed in upon it; the whole train of earthly, sensual, and devilish passions fastened on and tore it in pieces. Nay, love itself, that ray of the Godhead, that balm of life, now became a torment. Its light being gone, it wandered about seeking rest and finding none; till at length, equally unable to subsist without any and to feel out its proper object, it reclined itself upon the painted trifles, the gilded poison of earthly enjoyments.

4. Indeed, what else could the human mind do when it had no freedom left? Liberty went away with virtue; instead of an indulgent master it was under a merciless tyrant. The subject of virtue became the slave of vice. It was not willingly that the creature obeyed vanity; the rule was

now perforce; the sceptre of gold was changed into a rod of iron. Before, the bands of love indeed drew him toward heaven; yet if he would, he could stoop down to earth. But now, he was so chained down to earth he could not so much as lift up his eyes toward heaven.

5. The consequence of his being enslaved to a depraved understanding and a corrupted will could be no other than the reverse of that happiness which flowed from them when in their perfection. Then were the days of man evil as well as few; then, when both his faculties were decayed, and bitterness poured on their earthly objects, and heavenly ones withdrawn, the mortal, foolish, vicious, enslaved creature was delivered over to his [un]sought-for misery.

How such a creature as this, as every fair inquirer finds by experience himself to be, could come from the hands of the good God, has been the just wonder of all ages. And let the infidel look to it; let him surmount the difficulty if he can upon any scheme beside the Christian. Upon this indeed it is no difficulty at all; all is rational, plain, and easy, while we observe, on the one hand, that not the good God but man himself made man what he is now; on the other, how he may recover what he wilfully lost, which is the subject of our third inquiry.

III. Who indeed shall recover us from the body of this death? Who shall restore our native immortality? We answer with the Apostle, 'I thank God, Jesus Christ our Lord!' 'As in Adam all died, so in Christ shall all be made alive'—all who accept of the means which he hath prepared, who walk by the rules which he hath given them. All these shall by dying conquer the first death, and shall never taste the second. The seeds of spiritual death they shall gradually expel, before this earthly tabernacle is dissolved, that this too, when it has been taken down and thoroughly purged, may be rebuilt 'eternal in the heavens'.

1. The first step to this glorious change is humility, a knowledge of ourselves, a just sense of our condition: which the evil spirit himself, either overruled by or mimicking the true God, recommended on the

front of his temple in those celebrated words, ‘Know Thyself’, which a better prophet than he recommends to all those who would ‘be transformed by the renewing of their minds’—‘I say unto every man—not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think.’

’Tis almost needless to remark how conducive this is to the attainment of all other knowledge; or, in other words, how conducive it is to the improvement of the understanding. An erroneous opinion of ourselves naturally leads us into numberless errors; whereas to those who know their own folly (beside the natural advantage of it) the Lord of nature ‘giveth the spirit of wisdom, and enlightens the eyes of their understanding, after the likeness in which they were created’ ([Eph. 1:17-18](#); [[Col. 3:10](#)]).

2. The understanding, thus enlightened by humility, immediately directs us to reform our will by charity. To root out of our souls all unmanly passions, and to give place to them, no, not an hour; to put away all malice, uncleanness, intemperance, ‘all bitterness, wrath, and evil-speaking’; to collect the scattered beams of that affection which is truly human, truly divine, and fix them on that Sovereign Good ‘in whom we live, move, and have our being’; for his sake, lastly, and after his example, to be ‘kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ’s sake, hath forgiven us’ ([Eph. 4:32](#)).

3. Thus it is that the ‘law of the Spirit of life makes us free from the law of sin and death’; thus it restores us, first to knowledge, and then to virtue, and freedom, and happiness. Thus are we ‘delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the sons of God’; into that liberty which not only implies the absence of all pain, unless what is necessary to future pleasure, but such a measure of present happiness as is a fit introduction to that which flows at God’s right hand for evermore!

[IV.1.] One thing I would observe from what has been said—how extremely pitiable their condition is who are insensible of their innate

disease, or refuse the only cure of it. 'Tis true, even those who are not invested with authority (such doubtless 'bear not the sword in vain') are apt to look upon these as the proper objects of anger, and not of compassion. Yet our Lord, when he beheld even that city which had killed the servants, and was about to murder the son, of its master, wept over it, and suffered all other passions to melt down into commiseration. Yet those whom we are often tempted to behold with passions of quite another nature, 'who are alienated from the image of God through the ignorance that is in them', are by our confession not more guilty than these, and little less unhappy. They are always sick, often in pain; destruction and unhappiness are in their ways; the way of peace have they not known, 'an evil disease cleaves to them'; their inward parts are very misery. Their understanding is darkened; clouds of ignorance and error are ever before their eyes, 'because the God of this world hath blinded their hearts', and infinitely increased its native corruption. Their love is fixed on mean, perishing, unsatisfying objects, and the frequent anguish that must flow from such a choice is sharpened by innumerable restless passions, that tear asunder their helpless prey. God help him who is a slave to such masters! Man cannot; he can only pity him! He can only, when he seeth such a one dragging his chain, and possibly talking loud of his own freedom, plunging through the flames of a fever into those that never shall be quenched, and perhaps dreaming he is in perfect health, recommend [him] to that All-sufficient Mercy to which all things are possible!

2. Yes, one step farther he may, he ought to go: he ought to acknowledge the riches of that mercy shown to himself, and indeed to all of us who have our education in a truly Christian country; who have all the opportunities of obtaining a better mind which the art of man and the wisdom of God can give; of obtaining this knowledge—knowledge, the basis of whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are honourable or lovely—[which] is held out to us with no sparing hand; we are suffered, courted, pressed to enjoy it. Others are glad if they can snatch a

few drops from the rivulets that flow hence: we lie at the fountain-head of these living waters, and command all their various streams. The attainment of knowledge is the pleasure of many; of us, 'tis the business too. Our business it is to know in particular that we are all originally foolish and vicious, and that there is no truth in our whole religion more absolutely necessary to be known than this. Because if man be not naturally corrupt, then all religion, Jewish and Christian, is vain, seeing it is

all built on this—all method[s] of cure presupposing the disease. We can scarce avoid knowing how slight all objections against this fundamental truth must be while there is even this one argument for it: if man be naturally mortal, then he is naturally sinful; seeing one cause must work both sin and death. The seeds of natural being likewise the seeds of moral corruption, must undermine our understanding as well as our life, and the affections with the understanding. We are almost forced to know both the necessity and the divine efficacy of our religion; to see that if man be naturally corrupt, then Christianity is of God; seeing there is no other religion, as 'there is no other God which can deliver after this sort' from that corruption. We, lastly, have daily opportunities of knowing, if Christianity be of God, then of how glorious a privilege are they thought worthy who persuade others to accept of its benefits. Seeing when the author of it 'cometh in the clouds of heaven,' and 'those that slept in the dust of the earth shall awake,' they who have saved others from sin and its attendant death 'shall shine as the brightness of the firmament'; they who have reprinted the image of God on many souls 'as the stars for ever'!

Now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all honour and praise, now and for ever.