

The Significance of Genesis 9:6

In evangelicalism today, we major on the New Testament Scriptures, and at that, mostly Paul's letters, with occasional references here and there and elsewhere in the Bible. But by doing that, we miss the grand narrative that unfolds in the Bible beginning with the first 11 chapters of Genesis. Also in our modern churches, we focus almost exclusively on the sacrificial, substitutionary, atoning work of Christ and barely ever consider what else God was doing at Calvary. Let's discuss a verse of great importance, one that we hardly ever think about, Genesis 9:6.

The "imago dei" (the image of God) appears three times in the (so-called) prologue to the Bible, Chapters 1-11. It occurs at the beginning of this unit, at the end, and at the very middle. So the "image of God" frames this entire segment of the Bible's story. Expositors now think that the "image" refers to humanity's function as a representative of God, His vice-regent on earth, a "servant king." But it's more, because we were "made" as the image, which means certain capacities were given to us, capacities the animals don't have but that mirror God's attributes. At creation, the first human was commissioned to fill the earth and "subdue" it. That must mean manage it on God's behalf. And to do that man was given dominion or rule over all the animals, birds and fish. And in Chapter 2, the man further was given the task of serving God and guarding God's territory for Him. What privileges!

When the woman was made, the image of God was hers too. In Genesis 5, the image of God refers to their offspring. So all humanity is God's image, distorted though it is because of the Fall in Chapter 3. The "image" means we were given the capacities to reflect God's Person, that is, to be like Him and to love Him. That all humans are the image means we're all a unity, we're one race, one corporate "image." As the Godhead (the Trinity) is a unity, so is His "image," us.

Adam didn't guard the garden as he was supposed to. The beautiful serpent entered and wreaked havoc with the woman's soul. Adam then willfully, flagrantly disobeyed God, and so sin entered the human race. And sin devastated the human race. In Chapter 4, Cain murdered his brother, Abel. Then we read of Lamech boasting of murdering even more people than Cain did. Then we read in Chapter 6 that the whole race of humans had become violent, murderers. The "image of God" wantonly murdering each other necessitated God's intervention. So, the Flood. The waters washed the earth clean of all the blood that was shed. But man hadn't changed! Sin still was in total control of the "image." The lone survivors, Noah and his family, repopulated the earth, but humanity was still in the iron grip of sin, enslaved to it. What God then did is startling.

Back in Genesis 3, God judged man and limited his dominion by making all creation frustrate him. Then, in Genesis 9, God changed things so that the animals would fear man. Not only they wouldn't submit to his rule, they would run from him. And, worse, man could eat the animals! That idyllic creational relationship – gone. In Chapter 9, God fundamentally changed the order of things for the post-Flood world. It continues: God said, "Whoever sheds human blood will be accountable to Me" (a paraphrase of 9:5). Repeatedly in verse 5 God said that violent persons would be accountable to Him, and humans are "brothers" to each other. But in the very next verse, **"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, because in the image of God has God made man."** So get this! A murderer is accountable to God, but the responsibility or the authority for the accountability rests with man, because man is God's representative, the guardian of His possessions. And humans are God's possessions! And human life is sacred.

In these first chapters of the Bible, God's very good creation is progressively marred by the entry of evil and its necessary judgments, but at the same time God is active, limiting the power of sin and seeking to restore His beloved creatures so they can be blessed. The entire 1-11 narrative anticipates something decisive that is yet to come. The rest of Scripture is the story of how that unfolds. But more: What about that serpent? He has to be dealt with too, and just possibly that defeat of evil is even more important to an inherently good God.

Back to the text. We commonly understand verse 6 in Chapter 9 to mean capital punishment is ordained. OK, sure. We also see this verse as instituting human government. OK, that too. But I suggest that there's more here. This verse implies more than merely God's delegating to humans the responsibility to limit sin (though it clearly is that). Humans are to manage other humans. We're responsible to each other. We act, live, as a corporate unity on God's behalf. We're an extended family, all brothers and sisters looking out for each other. In the same way that the Godhead is a unity, so is all humanity. (There's no such thing in Scripture as "races;" that's a modern political invention.)

So what I'm suggesting here is this: The Ten Commandments are written as negatives ("Thou shalt not..."), but they are to be understood as positives. So, for example, "Thou shalt not steal" really means we are to be generous in giving to others who have need. So, in the same way, although written as humans policing other humans to control violence, because that's the underlying issue in these chapters, this verse probably also intends the converse. Instead of murdering each other, we're to look out for each other and care for each other. It's necessary because the dreadful sin nature persists in the human race.

Humans now have expanded authority, more than what was given at creation, although that creational mandate was just minimized (and evidently it was not being fulfilled pre-Flood anyway). Humans now have dominion over other humans. Humans are responsible for justice—and, by implication, love—in this new world order, because humans are God's image, they reflect God as a mirror does.

The dispersal of humanity at the Tower of Babel episode (Chapter 11) further limited the influence of sin. But then the call of Abraham to take blessing to all the people on earth, by my understanding builds upon 9:6. So does the command, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." So does all the rest of Scripture. To God, justice and love complement each other. As we're the agents of God's justice for each other, so too we're agents of God's care and love.

I believe that the text allows this interpretation. I'm offering a canonically interpreted reading that derives from the context of Genesis 1-11 and that makes sense of these chapters. It's a reading that attempts to understand what the image of God means and God's creational purpose for our existence. I suspect that there's yet more.

In the Gospels, Jesus said (Matthew 24:37) that when He returns, it'll be "as it was in the days of Noah." How was that? The people then were murdering each other. Paul said (2 Thessalonians 2:6-7) that when Jesus returns, the "restraint" will be removed. What restraint? I believe that it was the mandate of Genesis 9:6 and the dispersal of humans in 11:8-9. So just prior to Jesus' Return in glory to establish a Messianic Kingdom on earth, there'll be unrestrained violence in all the earth, to an extent unheard of in this era, because people will sense no responsibility for each other nor regard life as sacred. Already, our modern culture glorifies killing; the internet unites people everywhere; and secularized people despise even the concept of being an "image of God." So the people then will be deserving of great and terrible world-wide judgment (Revelation Chapters 6-19). The "image of God" is only for those who are in Christ, following Christ, who become glorified and just like Jesus, the incarnate Son. See Hebrews 1:3 and Colossian 1:15.

Dear reader, we're responsible for each other. It's inescapable; God built it into His world order. Selfishness keeps us from fulfilling God's commission. Indifference to the life of others is indifference to God. Now that the Son has come, however, there's no excuse for selfishness or indifference, nor for yielding to the Serpent. Jesus' ascension and the sending of the Spirit enables us to fulfill God's will, if only we yield to the Spirit and live obediently to the Word. As God's agents, His servants, we're here to bring blessing to all our "brothers and sisters" in the world, and that means sharing the Gospel as well as meeting their needs. We're here to reflect God, for that glorifies Him.