

What Is Man?

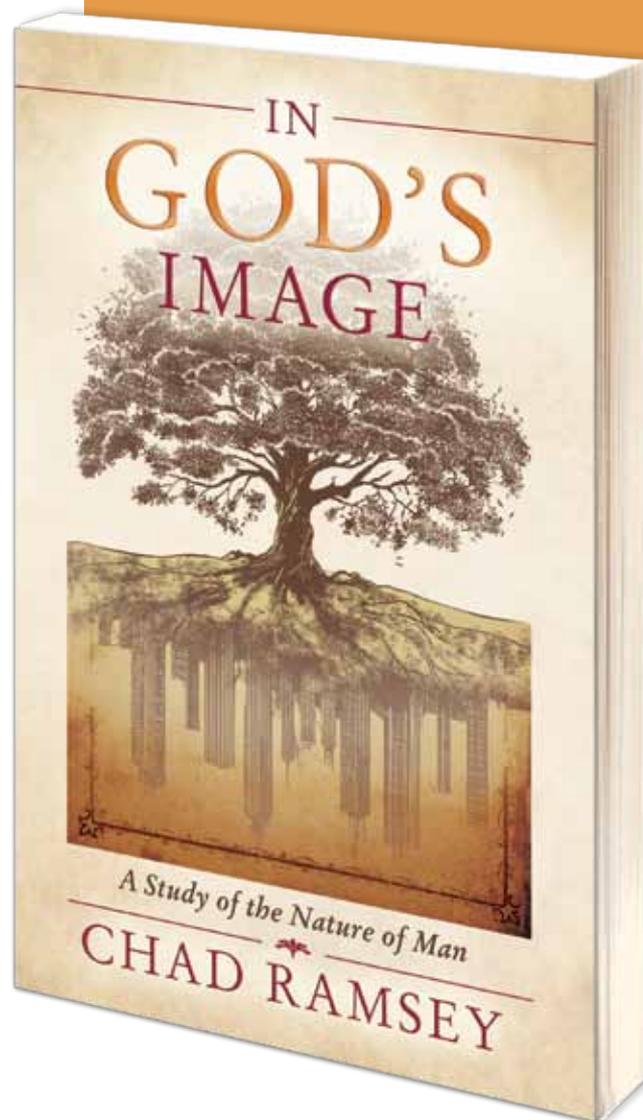
Book Excerpt From *In God's Image*
by Chad Ramsey

“**W**hat is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?” (Psalm 8:4 NKJV). When those words were written, the psalmist was pondering the vastness of the universe. As he considered the complexities of creation, he wrestled with the idea that man, in comparison with all of God’s magnificent works, seems small and unimportant. Despite this seeming insignificance, however, he recognized that God showed interest in the well-being of humanity.

The question of man’s position is one that has been considered throughout the ages of time. Is man a creature who owes his existence to chance? Is he perched precariously atop the evolutionary chain? Or does man exist intentionally? And if man exists intentionally, what role was he created to fill? Along with these questions, any thorough discussion of man’s nature must also address his composition. Is man an animal? Or is he more than a highly developed physical specimen?

A study of the nature of man will lead the honest student into a variety of fields. To answer questions about man’s physical nature, he must look closely at the origin of our universe; to answer questions about man’s spiritual nature, he must delve deeply into what it means to be created in God’s own image (Genesis 1:27). A study of man’s nature will address social issues such as the importance of fellowship.

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It will address ethical issues. And ultimately, it will focus upon the question raised in Job 14:14: "If a man dies, shall he live again?"

Historical Perspective

Not surprisingly, mankind has long been concerned with man's nature. This fascination can be traced in secular history at least as far back as the Greek philosopher Protagoras (c. 490–420 B.C.). Protagoras is best known for this statement: "Man is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not."¹ And while the exact meaning of this statement is debated, the assessment of William F. Lawhead seems reasonable:

"Two interpretations have been given of this slogan: (1) each individual person provides his or her own standard for implementing things, or (2) society as a whole is the measure of all things. Under either interpretation, he expresses a radical humanism and relativism that says there is no standard other than those that individuals or societies invent. Actually, Protagoras seems to have embraced both alternatives ... he affirmed an individualistic subjectivism with respect to perception and a social subjectivism with respect to ethics."²

Regardless of whether Protagoras had the individual man or human race in mind, his assessment promotes relativism³ and leaves little room for absolute truth.

In stark contrast to Protagoras' view of man, Solomon's assessment, found in the book of Ecclesiastes, serves to reject relativism and promote submission to God. Having searched for life's meaning in various self-gratifying ventures, Solomon concluded his treatise with these words: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Whereas Protagoras assigned to man the place of prominence, Solomon reserved that position for God. Instead of man (whether individually

or collectively) having the ability to determine for himself what is true, Solomon emphasized that it is God who must be obeyed.

According to Solomon, life's meaning is not found in man's wisdom (Ecclesiastes 1:16-18), pleasure (2:1-3), possessions (vv. 4-11), popularity (4:13-16), ambition (6:3-9), or ability (9:10-12). Instead, life's meaning is found in the respectful obedience of the one who recognizes that he or she exists for the purpose of seeking the Lord.⁴ Rather than being the measure of all things, man therefore is *measured* by the One who created all things.

Man's Nature

Establishing man's position under the authority of God in no way diminishes the position he occupies in the created realm. He was, as Psalm 8:5 notes, created "a little lower than the angels." Nevertheless, God "crowned him with glory and honor." The record of man's exaltation above the physical creation is found in Genesis 1:26-30. In this text he is given dominion over both the plant and animal kingdoms. And this dominion, according to the text, was awarded because man was created in the very image of God.

But what does it mean to be created in God's image? The comments of noted 19th-century commentator Adam Clarke are worthy of consideration:

"[Man's soul] was made in the *image* and *likeness* of God. Now, as the Divine Being is infinite, he is neither limited by parts, nor definable by passions; therefore he can have no *corporeal image* after which he made the body of man. The image and likeness must necessarily be intellectual; his mind, his soul, must have been formed after the nature and perfections of his God. The human mind is still endowed with the most extraordinary capacities; it was more so when issuing out of the hands of the Creator. God was now producing a spirit, and a spirit, too, formed after the perfections of his own nature. God is the fountain whence this spirit issued, hence the stream must resemble the spring which produced it. God is holy, just, wise, good, and

perfect; so must the soul be that sprang from him: there could be in it nothing impure, unjust, ignorant, evil, low, base, mean, or vile."⁵

In essence, man is not *just* a physical being. He is composed of both body *and* spirit.

The idea that man is a twofold being is not limited to Scripture. French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) drew this conclusion upon purely rational grounds. Longing to find some truth that he could recognize as certain, he sought to systematically doubt everything he believed to be true. Ironically, this very process led Descartes away from skepticism. He reasoned: "I was persuaded that there was nothing in all the world, that there was no heaven, no earth, that there were no minds, nor any bodies: was I not then likewise persuaded that I did not exist? Not at all; of a surety I myself did exist since I persuaded myself of something."⁶

In other words, Descartes came to realize that even if he doubted the existence of everything, he could not doubt that he – a thinking being – existed. Descartes' thought process led him to accept that man also possesses a body – a thing entirely different from the mind. Thus, he concluded that man is composed of both mind and body.

No doubt the method employed by Descartes to reach his conclusion was nothing short of brilliant. And although he is often credited with articulating the idea of mind-body dualism, we must not lose sight of the fact that this point was stressed in Scripture long before Descartes set forth the idea. According to Genesis 2:7, the body of the first man was formed from the dust of the ground, and God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life."

Man did not become a living being without both a physical body and the soul provided by God (see Zechariah 12:1). The apostle Paul emphasized the duality of man when he wrote the following: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). But perhaps James made

the point best of all when he wrote, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:26).

Scripture stresses that man has the ability to control both body and spirit. Emphasizing this, Paul reminded the Corinthians: "For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:20). Note that Paul did not simply instruct the Corinthians to control themselves; instead, he made a clear statement charging the Corinthians to exercise control over their entire beings – both body and spirit. When we consider the context in which this statement is found – a passage warning the Corinthians to avoid sexual sins – the idea becomes all the more important.

In essence, Paul was saying: Do not just refrain from engaging in sexual sins, but make sure you keep your thoughts under control too. This seems to be the same idea Jesus had under consideration when He said: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27-28). Man has the ability and the obligation to control himself both externally and internally.

Conclusion

Given the instructions found in Scripture governing both physical and mental actions, we may conclude that man is clearly a complex being whose characteristics deserve thoughtful consideration. Both experience and revelation teach that man's body will not last forever. The soul, however, is another matter (cf. Ecclesiastes 12:7; Hebrews 9:27). No doubt this is why Jesus issued this warning: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

Man is vastly superior to the rest of God's creation; he is woefully inferior to his Creator. Nevertheless, he is faced with the task of utilizing all of his being

to glorify the One in whose image he is made (cf. Matthew 22:37). □

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Endnotes

1 Wallace I. Matson, *A New History of Philosophy: From Thales to Ockham*, vol. 1 (San Diego: Harcourt, 1987) 68.

2 William F. Lawhead, *The Voyage of*

Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002) 31.

3 Relativism is the idea that truth is dependent upon the perspective of the individual. This philosophy asserts that there is more than one correct way to view things.

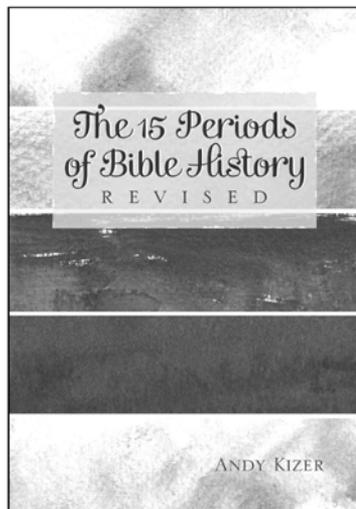
4 Solomon's statement is similar to that found in Paul's sermon on Mars' Hill describing how men should "seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him" (Acts 17:27).

5 Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977) 38.

6 René Descartes, *Descartes Selections*, ed. Ralph M. Eaton (New York: Scribner's, 1955) 96.



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