

SESSION 1

# HUMANITY:

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

*...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 honour. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.*  
(Psalm 8:4–8, NIV 1984)

In 2010, British farmers slaughtered nearly 25,000 cattle and introduced emergency measures to curb the spread of bovine tuberculosis, costing the taxpayer £90 million. In response, government ministers approved the cull of up to 100,000 badgers thought to be responsible for harbouring the disease. The move provoked the largest animal rights protest since those over fox hunting in the 1990s. Dr Brian May, astrophysicist and lead guitarist for the rock group Queen, set up an e-petition to 'stop the badger cull'. When over 155,000 people signed, it prompted a parliamentary debate.

Few would argue that animals are not worthy of respect and care but some people today will go to extraordinary lengths in the fight to protect them. For some, it's mere sentimentality. But for others it's a deeply felt and serious ideological conviction that it's wrong to believe human beings are somehow superior or more important than animals.

*Caleigh's friends were strict vegetarians and were passionate about animal rights. They wrote letters to MPs about factory farming and animal experimentation and looked down on people who ate meat or wore fur. Caleigh believed that caring for animals was part of good Christian stewardship and had a lot of sympathy with their position. But when they got involved in violent protests she wondered if they had got things a bit out of perspective. She was struck by what Jesus said about the value of human beings relative to sheep and sparrows and noted that he cooked fish for his disciples and ate lamb at the Passover. Thinking through these things helped her reach a more balanced view on the relative value of human beings and animals.*

Australian philosopher Peter Singer popularised the term 'speciesism' in his 1975 book *Animal Liberation* which many regard as giving the animal rights movement its intellectual basis. In a landmark article titled 'Sanctity of Life or Quality of Life?', published in the influential American Journal *Pediatrics* in 1983, he wrote:

*We can no longer base our ethics on the idea that human beings are a special form of creation, made in the image of God...Once the religious mumbo-jumbo surrounding the term 'human' has been stripped away, we may continue to see normal members of our species as possessing greater qualities of rationality, self-consciousness, communication and so on than members of any other species, but we will not regard as sacrosanct the life of every member of our species, no matter how limited its capacity for intelligent or even conscious life may be... If we can put aside the obsolete and erroneous notion of the sanctity of all human life, we may start to look at human life as it really is, at the quality of human life that each human being has or can achieve.<sup>1</sup>*

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1. Singer P. Sanctity of life or quality of life? *Pediatrics* 1983; 72(1) pp. 128–129

To Singer and many influential thinkers like him, humans are nothing but the product of matter, chance and time in a godless universe; merely highly specialised animals. The value of an individual human being is determined by his or her level of rationality, self-consciousness, physical attributes or capacity for relationships. This view has led him controversially to support human embryo research, abortion, euthanasia and even infanticide.

## Just animals?

There is an element of truth in what Singer says. Humans are living beings with body structures and physiological functions that are very similar to many other living creatures. In fact we share a large proportion of our DNA – our genetic programming – with chimpanzees.

But the Bible insists that we are different from animals. Human beings are made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). Animals are not. This does not mean that we don't share some characteristics with animals. We do. Both animals and humans are made of flesh and blood out of inanimate matter, 'from the dust of the ground' (Genesis 2:7, 19; Ecclesiastes 3:19–20). Like animals we have body structures and organ systems (anatomy), functions (physiology) and complex cellular activity (biochemistry). What makes us unique is that we're made in God's image.

Throughout this book we will come back again and again to the question: 'What does it mean to be human?' As we think through health-related topics we are forced to realise that we are not talking about veterinary medicine but about human beings who are fundamentally different from all the other beings God created.

It's important to acknowledge here that the Bible does see animal welfare as very important. The Bible says that 'the righteous care for the needs of their animals' (Proverbs 12:10). This is indeed what God himself does (Psalm 36:6, 104:10–18). But Jesus himself also said that people were far more valuable than birds and sheep (Matthew 6:26, 12:12) and on one occasion he sent 2,000 pigs to their deaths in order

to restore the sanity of one demon possessed man! (Mark 5:1–20). He caught fish and cooked them for breakfast (John 21:9–13). Jesus taught that human beings were more important than animals. He was, in other words, unashamedly 'speciesist'. Why was that? We get a clue from an encounter between Jesus and some of his opponents, recorded in Mark 12 and Matthew 22.

*When John was 12 his dog Kylie was run over and killed. He didn't know she had followed him across the road and was only alerted by the screech of brakes. When he picked her up off the road she was still convulsing and she died in his arms as he stumbled home. John was devastated and felt personally responsible. He cried inconsolably all night but with his parents' help and support buried her the next day in her favourite place. When he reflected as a Christian on the experience many years later he realised how much getting through it had taught him personally about bearing loss and grief. It also caused him to think about why the loss of his pet had affected him so deeply and made him more sensitive to supporting others through human bereavement.*

When the Pharisees (Jewish teachers of the law) tried to trap him by asking whether it was right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar, Jesus asked them to show him a coin. They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, 'Whose image is this? And whose inscription?' When they replied 'Caesar's', he said, 'So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.' The Pharisees' focus is on a coin, but Jesus' comments uncover a much deeper question. If a denarius bears the image of Caesar, then what is it that bears the image of God? Because the thing that bears the image of God belongs to God and must be given to him.

As we shall discover, the Bible tells us that human beings have a special status: They are the pinnacle of God's creation.

*Paul's father had been a very successful businessman and was an accomplished and much-loved lay preacher who served his church faithfully for many years. But when he was in his mid-fifties he was forced to take early retirement after a major heart valve operation. Later he suffered a number of tiny strokes as a recognised complication of the surgery. Two decades later he developed a rapidly progressive dementia which robbed him of his memory and led to an unpleasant personality change. Paul tried to cope with this by remembering his father as he once was until a Christian friend who had lost his mother in similar circumstances encouraged him to think of him as he would be after the resurrection. This helped him to cope much better with his father's eventual death.*

## Made in his image

The Bible begins with the four majestic words, 'In the beginning God...'. Genesis 1 tells us about *who* did *what* and a little about *why*; it does not however satisfy our every curiosity about the *when*, *where* and *how*. For fuller answers to those questions we have to go to the other 'book' that God has revealed himself in – the book of nature (Psalm 19:1–4). Nature progressively reveals its secrets about God's creation as scientific researchers carefully observe it and, as Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) said, 'think God's thoughts after him'. Among Christians seeking to take the Bible seriously as God's word there are a range of views on questions such as the age of the earth and the role evolution might have played; these are beyond the scope of this book. But in the present context it is sufficient to say that, however we think the creation narrative should be interpreted, it clearly teaches something fundamentally profound about what it means to be human.

At the end of the creation narrative in Genesis 1, after making and shaping the world and filling it with plants and animals, God reaches the crowning point of his work:

*Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our*

*likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'*

(Genesis 1:26–27)

So it is human beings – both male and female – who are made in the image of God and who therefore belong to God and should be given to God. This was the point ironically lost on the Pharisees in Jesus' encounter over the coin. They had refused to give themselves to God despite belonging to him. Of course everything in the universe belongs to God (Psalm 24:1), even Caesar's coins, but in all God's creation only human beings are made in God's image and have a special status that no other part of creation enjoys.

## Special status

What does being made in God's image entail? The following verses in Genesis 1–2 reveal that human beings have a special status in six dimensions. They are representative, spiritual, moral, immortal, relational and creative.

### *Representative*

Human beings are to represent God on earth and to reflect something of his glory:

*God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'*

(Genesis 1:28)

This is not a licence to exploit and destroy the earth, as some have mistakenly argued, but a commission to look after the earth and its creatures and vegetation in the same way that God himself would, with loving care. Not as asset strippers but as diligent stewards. Human beings, carrying God's delegated authority, were called to be responsible, reliable and accountable in their rule over the earth.

### *Spiritual*

Humans are spiritual beings carrying the breath of God: 'The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life' (Genesis 2:7). Unlike the animals, as spiritual beings we seek meaning and purpose and ask questions – Who am I? Why am I here? Why pain? Why suffering? Why me? Bible commentator Derek Kidner observes: If '*formed*' expresses the relation of craftsman to material...*breathed* is warmly personal, with the face-to-face intimacy of a kiss and the significance that this was an act of giving as well as making; and self-giving at that'.<sup>2</sup>

### *Moral*

Human beings, unlike the animals, are given instructions about what they must and must not do (Genesis 2:16–17). We are created with the capacity to make moral choices. There are boundaries for human behaviour. Although, tragically, Eve and then Adam disobey God's command, the very existence of the prohibition about eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil confirms that we all have the capacity for moral choice. Like God himself, we are moral beings.

### *Immortal*

Humans are immortal beings. God intended us to live forever. In Genesis 2:17, God introduces death as an unwelcome intruder into God's creation: 'You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die'. As the biblical testimony bears out, human beings exist beyond death. Death is not the end but a gateway to an encounter with God our creator and judge and then one of only two possible destinies.

### *Relational*

Humans are relational beings: 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him' (Genesis 2:18). Western culture is becoming ever more individualistic, self-centred and narcissistic. But human beings were made to live in relationships: in families and communities. As the poet John Donne (1572–1631) so poignantly reminded us, 'No man is an island'.

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2. Kidner D. *Genesis: An introduction and commentary*. London: Tyndale Press, 1967, p.60

Note how in Genesis 1:26 God says 'Let us make man in *our* image...'. God himself is one God, but exists in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the very first verses of Genesis we are introduced to God (the Father) who created the heavens and the earth by means of his Word (Jesus), and that his Spirit (the third person in the trinity) hovered over the water. God himself exists in relationship and has made us for relationship with him and with each other.

### *Creative*

Finally, like God, humans are creative. The first job human beings were given in the Garden of Eden was to name the animals (Genesis 2:19). This process of naming is the basis of taxonomy (the classification of plants and animals) and the beginning of science. Imagine the creativity and influence involved in going from aardvark to zebra! Later in Genesis 4:20–22 we read of human beings domesticating animals, building tents, making musical instruments and developing tools and technology. This creativity is not programmed like that of bees or beavers, but free, expansive, individualised and godlike. Not only is every human being gifted, but each human being has different creative gifts.

## **Secular models of humanity**

The secular world has developed many different models for human beings. *Psychoanalytical* models like that of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) see human beings as the product of a complex reaction between super-ego, ego and id. The self (ego) is said to be engaged in a tug of war between the demands of conscience (super-ego) and its animal desires (id) creating a conflict which needs to be resolved. *Behaviourists* like B F Skinner (1904–1990) see human beings as complex stimulus-response machines. Human behaviour is shaped by reward and punishment, pleasure and pain. Then there are the *anthropologists* who see humans as simply clever monkeys, or as anthropologist Desmond Morris (b. 1928) termed it, 'naked apes'. Finally we have the *biochemists* who see humans as a series of complex chemical reactions, the product of matter, chance and time in a universe without meaning or purpose. Even consciousness and reason are simply the product of electrochemical impulses.

These are all 'reductionist' models; they assert that humans are nothing but the sum of their individual parts. There is of course an element of truth in all of them. Doctors, scientists and psychologists draw on these models in seeking to understand how human beings function. Biochemistry, physiology and anatomy are important because human beings are physical entities. Psychology, social anthropology and sociology are also relevant because human beings are more than just physical entities – they need to be understood as thinking entities existing in relationship. Philosophy and religion exist because human beings ask deep questions about morality, purpose and destiny. Human beings are also spiritual. We are physical, social and spiritual beings but none of these elements describes us exhaustively and they cannot be separated.

## **Spirit, soul and body**

The Bible teaches that human beings are a complex unity of spirit, soul and body; and that these elements together form an inseparable whole. When Paul talks about 'your whole spirit, soul and body' (1 Thessalonians 5:23) he is really saying 'your whole self'. We can be understood in physical terms because we are made from physical elements, but we are more than just physical beings, more than just bodies. We have souls and spirits too, and these three parts of our natures – spirit, soul and body – interact in a complex fashion. These notions are fundamental to a proper understanding of health and wellbeing. We know that our physical health has profound effects on the way that we think, and that illness causes us to ask questions about meaning and purpose. We know that the mind can also affect physical health in the case of psychosomatic illness. We know that major life events like bereavement or divorce can have profound effects on our health. If doctors treat their patients simply as physical bodies they do them a gross disservice.

It is true that people have physical bodies and that they may need their biochemistry corrected, their physiology normalised and their anatomy realigned. However, human beings are also souls enmeshed in a complex set of relationships and spirits asking serious questions

about hope, meaning and destiny. These factors have profound implications for health and need to be addressed too. Theologians wax lyrical over the precise natures of body, soul and spirit and the way they interact, but such detail is far beyond the scope of this short book. Nevertheless the biblical picture is that human beings are not bodies that have souls, nor souls who have bodies. We are 'ensouled bodies' and 'embodied souls'.

Furthermore, our eternal destiny is to remain this way. When Jesus was raised from the dead he did not come back as a disembodied soul, but as a living human being with a real body. He could be touched. He spoke. He lit fires and made beach barbecues. He ate fish. He was recognisable as the same Jesus his disciples had come to know and love. And yet he was also able to appear and disappear at will and enter locked rooms without going through the door. His was a real body, but it was a different kind of body from those we have. Our destiny as believers is to have a body like his (Philippians 3:21; 1 Corinthians 15:35–57; 2 Corinthians 5:1–10) and to live with God in a new heaven and new earth where 'there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain', where all things will be made new (Revelation 21:1–5).

## The image defaced

In the Prologue we noted that the biblical metanarrative (or big overarching story) is in four parts: Creation, Fall, Salvation and New Creation.

In the Fall, human beings reject God's rightful rule, disobey his commands and unilaterally break their relationship with God. Adam and Eve have been granted the freedom of eating of every tree in the Garden of Eden bar one. But they succumb to the serpent's cunning and fall from grace. The serpent first seeks to persuade them that God is unreasonable and restrictive when in fact he has granted them wonderful liberty: 'Did God really say, "You must not eat from *any* tree in the garden"?' (Genesis 3:1, emphasis added).

God, of course did not say this at all, but the woman has already

fallen into the trap and twists God's words in her reply: 'We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not *touch* it, or you will die"' (Genesis 3:2, emphasis added).

God only forbade *eating* from the one tree; touching it was allowed. But then the serpent goes for the big lie: "'You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"' (Genesis 3:4–5). God is thus portrayed by the serpent not just as restrictive but also as having a selfish agenda and protecting his power through deception. So the woman eats the fruit of the tree, as does her husband (who is no innocent or less guilty party, as he was with her at the time and yet did not intervene). The consequences of this act of disobedience are immediate and far-reaching.

When God arrives back in the garden the harmonious relationship has been broken. Confidence and trust have given way to guilt, fear, shame and blame. The man blames the woman. The woman blames the serpent. Both hide from God. The apostle Paul later spells out the cosmic significance of this event: '...sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned' (Romans 5:12).

In addition to breaking the relationship between God and human beings, the Fall breaks relationships at all levels in creation. Genesis 3:16–19 describe the terrible consequences of sin: the man and woman are now at war, 'Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you'. The relationship between human beings and creation is also fractured: 'with painful labour you will give birth to children' and 'cursed is the ground because of you'. There is to be 'painful toil', 'thorns and thistles', 'sweat' and physical death: 'dust you are and to dust you will return'. Work is difficult and frustrating, man has become mortal.

Paradise has been lost, but more than this, human beings are no longer able to exist in close fellowship with God but need to be

protected from his glory. They are expelled from the sanctuary of the garden into a world red in tooth and claw, where the serpent, later identified in Revelation 12:9 as the devil himself, will have them and their descendants under his powerful influence. The Fall is complete. Spiritual death has occurred. The perfect relationship is broken and physical death and judgment will follow for the man, the woman and the whole human race.

## The stirring of hope

In the depths of this tragedy and ruin there is a glimmer of hope. Adam and Eve are told that the offspring of the woman will one day crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). This is the first reference in Scripture to Christ's coming victory over Satan through his death and resurrection. But we also gain a glimpse of the price that will be necessary to save human beings from their predicament. Adam and Eve are clothed in the skins of animals. These are not only to protect them from the elements and keep them warm. The skins point to the fact that shedding blood will be necessary for their continued protection from God's judgment and to secure their rescue and adoption as his children. This would also be foreshadowed in animal sacrifices, but ultimately fulfilled in the shed blood of Jesus on the cross.

We began this chapter by asking whether humans were 'just animals'; in the vastness of the universe are we just highly developed, but ultimately insignificant organisms? In Psalm 8, David asks a similar question as he looks in wonder at the starry heavens. Echoing parts of our headline passage in Genesis 1:26–28, he is led to ask in humility: 'What is man that you are mindful of him?'

The Genesis account of creation shows that human beings are more than just animals, they are uniquely made in the image of God. But there is another, supremely greater, reason to see humans as special. The Christian physician Thomas Sydenham (1624–1689), known as 'the English Hippocrates' and 'the father of English medicine', wrote that 'We may ascertain the worth of the human race since for its sake

God's only begotten Son became man and thereby ennobled the nature that he took upon him'. In the incarnation, God himself took on human flesh to rescue and become reconciled to human beings. This has huge implications; Professor John Wyatt, a specialist in the care of newborn babies, writes, 'Christians treat the human body with special respect. Why? [because] this is the form in which God became flesh!' <sup>3</sup>

*When Jane first ventured into a neonatal unit as part of her nursing training she was repulsed by the appearance of the 'skinny and scraggy' premature babies and wondered whether all the time and money spent caring for them was a waste of resources that could be used better elsewhere. But she was struck by the compassion and care shown by the more senior staff and the devotion of the parents. As she witnessed first-hand what a difference the treatment made and saw families and their babies come through the experience her attitudes began to change and she gradually came to love and respect these little ones as precious creations of God. She later specialised in neonatal care.*

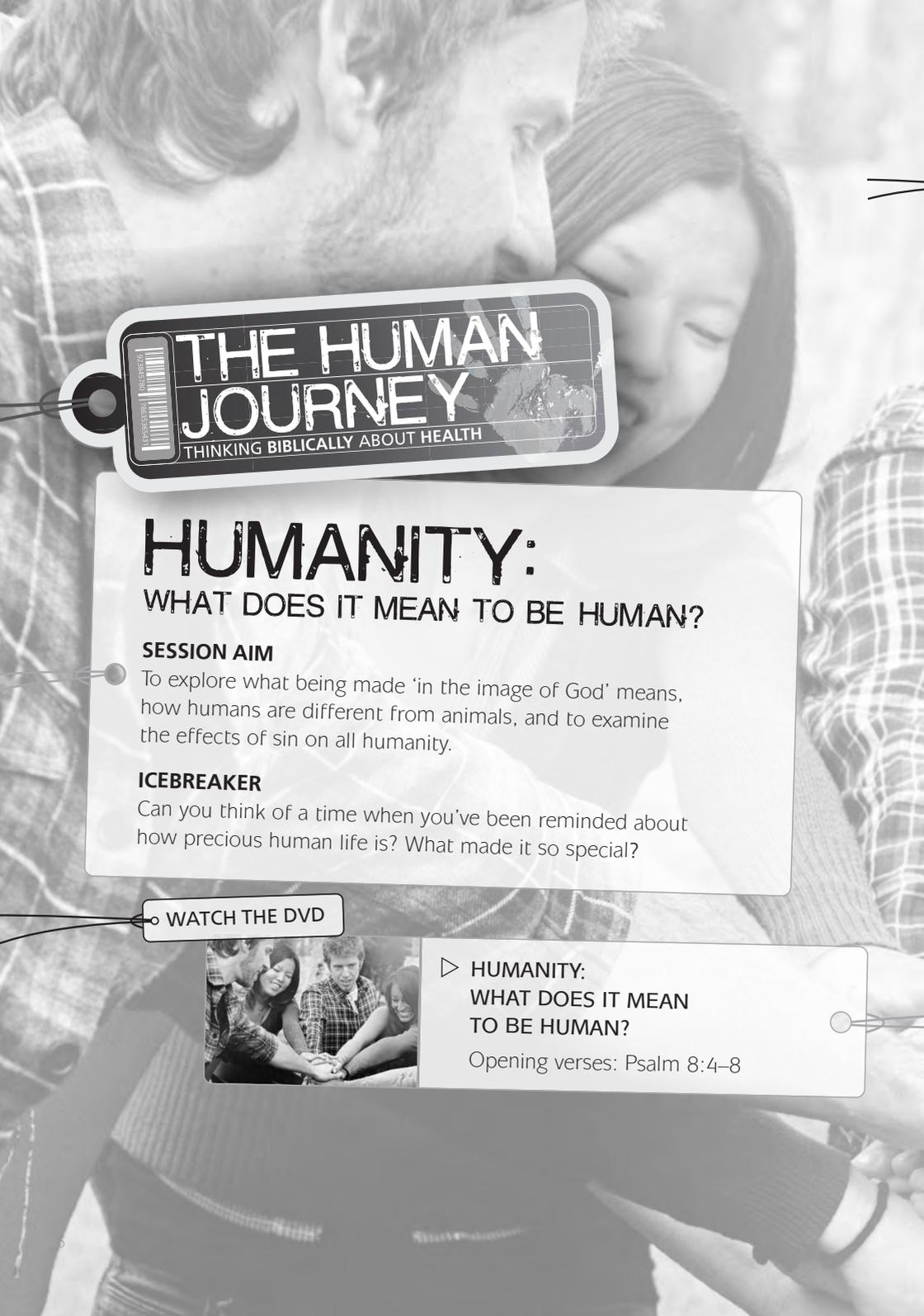
Jesus was fully human. He took on our human existence in all its frailty. Jesus was a baby in the womb who went through the trauma of birth and had to be wrapped up to protect him from the cold. He had a body like ours that became tired, felt hunger and thirsty and experienced pain – a body that would ultimately bleed and die. He felt the full range of human emotions too: joy and sorrow, love and compassion, astonishment and anger. In the garden of Gethsemane he was 'overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death' (Matthew 26:37). He 'wept over Jerusalem' (Luke 19:41). At Lazarus' death we're told that he was 'deeply moved in spirit and troubled' (John 11:33). Jesus shared our nature and in doing so gave a unique and special status to human beings.

3. Wyatt J. *Matters of life and death: Human dilemmas in the light of Christian faith*. Nottingham: IVP, 2009, p.77

Human beings are special because they are made in God's image and because God himself became a human being. This is the basis from which we will build in the coming chapters as we seek to build a biblical understanding of health that will enable us to face the issues of the 21st century.

#### FURTHER READING

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- Wyatt J. Biblical perspectives on humanness in *Matters of life and death*. Nottingham: IVP, 2009 [bit.ly/173frat](http://bit.ly/173frat)
- Wyatt J. Quality of life. *CMF Files* 30, 2005 [bit.ly/1oyBqAi](http://bit.ly/1oyBqAi)
- Wyatt J. What does it mean to be a person? *Nucleus* 2004; Spring pp. 10–15 [bit.ly/1vuXmDX](http://bit.ly/1vuXmDX)



# THE HUMAN JOURNEY

THINKING BIBLICALLY ABOUT HEALTH

## HUMANITY: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

### SESSION AIM

To explore what being made 'in the image of God' means, how humans are different from animals, and to examine the effects of sin on all humanity.

### ICEBREAKER

Can you think of a time when you've been reminded about how precious human life is? What made it so special?

### WATCH THE DVD



### ▷ HUMANITY: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

Opening verses: Psalm 8:4–8

## DVD KEY POINTS

After centuries of debate, the question of what it means to be human is still hotly disputed today.

**Animal rights and 'Speciesism'****Made in God's image**

The bearer of the image of God belongs to God (Matthew 22:15–22)

This special status has six dimensions:

- Representative (Genesis 1:28)
- Spiritual (Genesis 2:7)
- Moral (Genesis 2:16–17)
- Immortal (Genesis 2:17)
- Relational (Genesis 2:18)
- Creative (Genesis 2:19)

**Secular models of humanity****Spirit, soul and body****The Fall (Genesis 3)**

Relationships are broken:

- With God
- With one another
- With creation

**Summary**

Humans are unique because we are made in the image of God. This conveys special responsibilities and marks humans off from animals. But due to the Fall, humans are fatally flawed and relationships at all levels are distorted. All that was lost in the Fall, however, will be restored through Christ.

EXPLORE

**Key passages: Genesis 1:26–31; Psalm 8.**

Use these, and any other relevant passages you can think of, to help you discuss the following questions together.

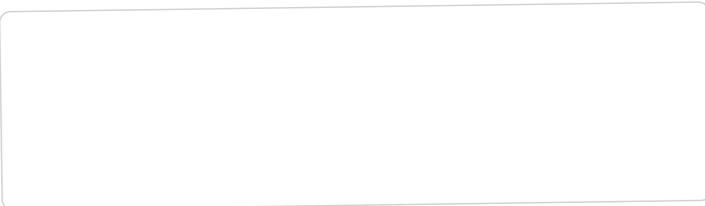
**1** How does society generally view human nature? Why do you think this is?



**2** The video highlighted six aspects of what it means to be made 'in the image of God'. Can you think of any other ways that humans reflect God?



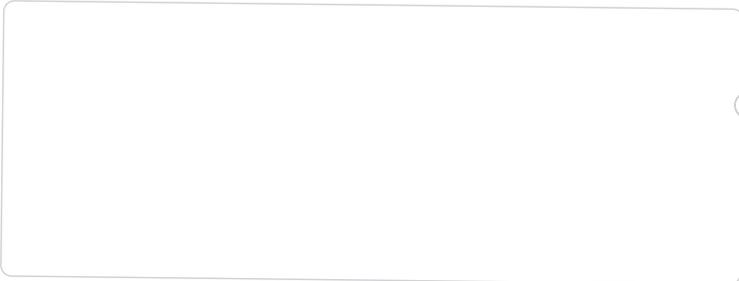
**3** '*Humans are no different to animals.*' What do you think of this statement? What does Scripture teach about this?



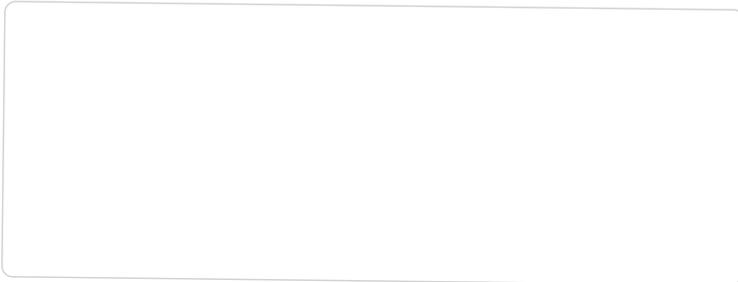
**4** How has the Fall (Genesis 3) affected humans? In what ways have you seen these effects in yourself and others? (See eg, Romans 1:28–32, 3:9–18)



**5** If humans are made in the image of God, how might this shape our attitudes to those who are weak and vulnerable, or who are looked down on in our society?



**6** All humans are fallen and affected by sin. How does Jesus offer us hope? (eg Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 15:49; 2 Corinthians 3:18)



## THE HUMAN JOURNEY

### GO FURTHER

- Is there someone you know in your church or circle of friends who is vulnerable or in need? How could you encourage them, help them and remind them that they too are made in God's image?
- Before the next session, read Psalm 139 and use this to reflect on the value and preciousness of life in God's sight (this will also help you prepare for the next session).

### PRAY

Pray together or in smaller groups about what you've learned in this session. You may like to use these points as a guide:

- Thank God for the unique blessing of being made in his image.
- Pray for wisdom to carry out the responsibilities we have as his people.
- Pray that we would see the image of God in all people, and value them as we should.
- Thank God for sending his Son, Jesus Christ who was fully human and fully God, to rescue and restore the relationship broken by the Fall.
- Ask God to help us be committed to standing up for and serving those who are most vulnerable in society.

## GLOSSARY

- **Reductionism:** A philosophical position which holds that a complex system is nothing but the sum of its parts.
- **Speciesism:** A term used to argue that privileging one species over another (eg assigning greater value to humans than animals) is a prejudice similar to racism or sexism.
- **Taxonomy:** A field of science that involves the description, identification, naming and classification of living organisms.

To continue thinking about the topics raised in this session read chapter one of *The Human Journey* book: 'Humanity: What does it mean to be human?'

More resources on Humanity are available at [www.humanjourney.org.uk](http://www.humanjourney.org.uk)