



IMAGO DEI

GOD'S IMAGE
GOD'S PEOPLE
GOD'S MISSION

MIKE COSPER

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How to Use This Study

This Bible study provides a guided process for individuals and small groups to explore what it means to be made in the image of God and to understand how this foundational doctrine shapes our lives. Six weeks of study examine different dimensions of the imago Dei:

1. *Imago Dei in Creation and Fall*
2. *Imago Dei in Redemption and Restoration*
3. *Imago Dei in You*
4. *Imago Dei in Others*
5. *Imago Dei and Power*
6. *Imago Dei and Missio Dei*

One week of Bible study is devoted to each of these topics, and each week is divided into three sections of personal study:

1. *Biblical Understanding*
2. *Changed Hearts*
3. *Gospel Application*

In these sections you'll find biblical teaching and interactive questions that will help you understand and apply the teaching.

In addition to the personal study, six group sessions are provided that are designed to spark gospel conversations around brief video teachings. Each group session is divided into four sections:

1. **START** focuses participants on the topic of the session's video teaching.
2. **WATCH** provides key ideas presented in the video and space to take notes.
3. **DISCUSS** guides the group to examine and understand the video teaching.
4. **RESPOND** helps the group apply the video teaching.

Tips for Leading a Small Group

Prayerfully Prepare

Prepare for each group session with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to work through you and the group discussion as you point to Jesus each week through God's Word.

REVIEW the personal study and the group sessions ahead of time.

PRAY for each person in the group.

Minimize Distractions

Do everything in your ability to help people focus on what's most important: connecting with God, with the Bible, and with one another.

CREATE A COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT. If group members are uncomfortable, they'll be distracted and therefore not engaged in the group experience.

TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION seating, temperature, lighting, refreshments, surrounding noise, and general cleanliness.

At best, thoughtfulness and hospitality show guests and group members they're welcome and valued in whatever environment you choose to gather. At worst, people may never notice your effort, but they're also not distracted.

Include Others

Your goal is to foster a community in which people are welcome just as they are but encouraged to grow spiritually. Always be aware of opportunities to include and invite.

INCLUDE anyone who visits the group.

INVITE new people to join your group.

Encourage Discussion

A good small-group experience has the following characteristics.

EVERYONE PARTICIPATES. Encourage everyone to ask questions, share responses, or read aloud.

NO ONE DOMINATES—NOT EVEN THE LEADER. Be sure your time speaking as a leader takes up less than half your time together as a group. Politely guide the discussion if anyone dominates.

NOBODY IS RUSHED THROUGH QUESTIONS. Don't feel that a moment of silence is a bad thing. People often need time to think about their responses to questions they've just heard or to gain courage to share what God is stirring in their hearts.

INPUT IS AFFIRMED AND FOLLOWED UP. Make sure you point out something true or helpful in a response. Don't just move on. Build community with follow-up questions, asking how other people have experienced similar things or how a truth has shaped their understanding of God and the Scripture you're studying. People are less likely to speak up if they fear that you don't actually want to hear their answers or that you're looking for only a certain answer.

GOD AND HIS WORD ARE CENTRAL. Opinions and experiences can be helpful, but God has given us the truth. Trust Scripture to be the authority and God's Spirit to work in people's lives. You can't change anyone, but God can. Continually point people to the Word and to active steps of faith.

Keep Connecting

Think of ways to connect with group members during the week. Participation during the group session always improves when members spend time connecting with one another outside the group sessions. The more people are comfortable with and involved in one another's lives, the more they'll look forward to being together. When people move beyond being friendly to truly being friends who form a community, they come to each session eager to engage instead of merely attending.

ENCOURAGE GROUP MEMBERS with thoughts, commitments, or questions from the session by connecting through emails, texts, and social media.

BUILD DEEPER FRIENDSHIPS by planning or spontaneously inviting group members to join you outside your regularly scheduled group time for meals; fun activities; and projects around your home, church, or community.

About the Author

MIKE COSPER served for sixteen years as one of the founding pastors at Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He started Harbor Media in 2016. He's the author of several books, including *Faith among the Faithless: Learning from Esther How to Live in a World Gone Mad* (Nelson, 2018), *The Stories We Tell* (Crossway, 2014), and *Recapturing the Wonder: Transcendent Faith in a Disenchanted World* (Intervarsity, 2017). He and his wife, Sarah, live in Louisville, Kentucky, with their daughters, Dorothy and Maggie. You can follow him on Twitter @MikeCospere.

About The Gospel Coalition

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have become deeply concerned about some movements within traditional evangelicalism that seem to be diminishing the church's life and leading us away from our historical beliefs and practices. On the one hand, we're troubled by the idolatry of personal consumerism and the politicization of faith; on the other hand, we're distressed by the unchallenged acceptance of theological and moral relativism. These movements have led to the easy abandonment of both biblical truth and the transformed living mandated by our historical faith. We not only hear of these influences but also see their effects. We've committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy, based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We believe that in many evangelical churches a deep and broad consensus exists about the truths of the gospel. Yet we often see the celebration of our union with Christ replaced by the age-old attractions of power and affluence or by monastic retreats into ritual, liturgy, and sacrament. Any replacement for the gospel will never promote a mission-hearted faith anchored in enduring truth that works itself out in unashamed discipleship eager to stand the tests of Kingdom calling and sacrifice.

We desire to advance along the King's highway, always aiming to provide gospel advocacy, encouragement, and education so that current and next-generation church leaders are better equipped to fuel their ministries with principles and practices that glorify the Savior and do good to those for whom He shed His life's blood.

We want to generate a unified effort among all peoples—an effort that's zealous to honor Christ and multiply His disciples, joining in a true coalition for Jesus. Such a biblically grounded and united mission is the only enduring future for the church. This reality compels us to stand with others who are stirred by the conviction that the mercy of God in Jesus Christ is our only hope of eternal salvation. We desire to champion this gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy, gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines.

Our desire is to serve the church we love by inviting all our brothers and sisters to join us in an effort to renew the contemporary church in the ancient gospel of Christ so that we truly speak and live for Him in a way that clearly communicates to our age. As pastors, we intend to do this in our churches through the usual means of His grace: prayer, ministry of the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the fellowship of the saints. We yearn to work with all who seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.



IMAGO DEI
in Creation & Fall

Week 1

Start

Today we begin our study of the imago Dei, the image of God that He places in every human being. In this Bible study we'll explore this idea from a number of angles, tracing its uses and implications throughout Scripture. The phrase first appears in Genesis 1:

God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth."

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

GENESIS 1:26-27

Have you ever heard the phrase "the image of God" (v. 27)? Where have you encountered this idea in the past?

What does it mean to be made in the image of God? What traits does this concept include?

This study will let the Scriptures give shape to a holistic understanding of the imago Dei. A well-rounded view of this idea will help us better understand ourselves, God, and the restoring work of salvation that comes to us through Jesus Christ. We can understand what God intended the imago Dei to be, how sin has corrupted it, and how Jesus restores it through the power of the cross and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

To understand the imago Dei, we have to start with the Book of Genesis.

Read Genesis 1; 2:15-23; and 3:1-7 together as a group. Then watch video session 1.

Watch

Human beings are created to picture God and God's care for, God's love of, and God's rule over the rest of creation.

We are God's physical representations on this earth.

A part of what that image means is to be spiritual beings and to be moral beings.

As image bearers, we alone could sin, and we did.

Sin corrupts, but sin cannot destroy the image of God.

The image of God has been preserved in us because God is much bigger and much more powerful than our sin.

The bottom line of sin is that God is holy, and we are not like Him.

We are still held accountable, as free moral agents, for truth and for goodness.

Even though we are wonderful, noble, gifted creatures made in the image of God, because of sin and depravity we're capable of the most horrific things.

Our imageness of God is deeply baked into our DNA. There is no part of me that does not bear God's image.

Discuss

The imago Dei has wide-reaching implications for the ways we think about human nature, our relationship to creation, our relationships with one another, and our relationship with God. It's a thread that runs through the Bible, beginning with creation. Being created in the image of God separates humankind from the rest of creation.

A combination of freedom and responsibility comes with bearing God's image. Freedom comes from the fact that we're distinct from the rest of creation and uniquely empowered to rule over it. Responsibility comes from the fact that the God whose image we bear is a loving, nurturing, self-sacrificing ruler over His creation.

In what ways do we see this freedom and responsibility come into tension in relationships?

It's interesting to contrast the Bible's understanding of the image of God with the views and practices of the rest of the ancient world. Other cultures fashioned images of their gods through idols and other physical representations, but the Bible prohibits that practice (see Ex. 20:4-6). Instead, Scripture reveals that humanity itself is God's image.

What does being made in God's image teach us about human dignity? What does it indicate about idols and idol worship?

God makes us uniquely male and uniquely female. We're distinct biologically, and we're distinctly masculine or feminine. Nonetheless, we're both equal recipients of the image of God.

What can we learn from the fact that both men and women—with the many differences that exist between us—are equally able to reflect the image of God? What does it tell us about God? What does it tell us about ourselves?

Imago Dei

Imagine, for a moment, a world without humanity and without image bearers. It would be a world without a “garden”—without cities, without culture, without any kind of human imprint or expression. This thought experiment can help us imagine what it means to be an image bearer.

What does the idea of a world without image bearers teach us about God’s character as the Creator? What does it reveal about the way we reflect the image of God in human culture?

The Bible makes clear, from Genesis 3 onward, that the image of God was distorted and marred by sin.

What are some ways we see distortions of the image of God? In your own life and heart, how do you see your failure to reflect the image of God?

On the video Albert Mohler stated that the image of God survived the advent of sin and the flood. It’s present in humanity, whether or not humanity acknowledges it as a reality. In a variety of ways, our culture attempts to diminish or deny the existence of the image of God and the dignity of humanity.

What are some ways sin distorted your relationship with God and others? What are some ways sin has broken the world around you?

How does the culture around us diminish the imago Dei and the dignity of humanity?

Respond

Reflecting on the ways our capacity as image bearers has been distorted and broken by sin can be discouraging. Yet the gospel frees us from the guilt that comes from that failure and invites us to see how God's grace can transform the sin and brokenness in our lives.

Where in life are you able to see God's good design as well as the brokenness that comes from sin?

What areas of your life show that the image of God has been broken by sin? How have these areas been distorted from their original designs or intentions?

Why is it important to be able to recognize the story line of Scripture as the backdrop for our life stories?

Closing Prayer

God, our Father, in Your grace You've made each of us in Your image. You've made us creatures of infinite worth and dignity, and You've allowed us to reflect Your glory to creation in a way that's wholly unique. We confess, Lord, that we've sinned and fallen short of that glory and that again and again we fail to bear Your image, whether through intentional sins of pride and ego or by passively allowing the fallen world around us to trample the dignity of Your image bearers. Give us the grace to better reflect Your image as You transform us into the likeness of Jesus, and give us boldness to speak up for the dignity of all image bearers. We ask all this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Biblical Understanding

For years I found the phrase *imago Dei* both intriguing and confusing. Intriguing because the idea of the image of God sounds mysterious and wonderful. Confusing because Scripture provides very little direct definition of a concept so important and foundational to our identity. The phrase comes from Genesis 1, which records the creation of humanity:

God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth."

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

GENESIS 1:26-27

Genesis 5:1-3 reiterates that God made people in His image and likewise states that Adam and Eve's sons were made in Adam's image. Therefore, we know the image continued after Adam and after humanity's fall into sin in Genesis 3.

Broadly, being made in the image of God means that humanity is uniquely designed to represent God. Human beings are like God in ways other created beings are not. It means we alone have a spirit that allows us to relate to God. Although Scripture mentions the image of God many times (you'll see those passages in detail as you continue this study), it never gives us a precise definition. That's because the image of God is meant to be something we ponder and explore. The image of God is experienced personally and intimately as we live with God and interact with the rest of creation. It's an expression that invites us to understand our relationship with God as Creator and our relationship with creation in a clearer, more intimate way.

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase *imago Dei*?

How significant is this concept for understanding the grand narrative of Scripture?

To start, it's helpful to explore humanity's unique place in creation. A psalmist explored this idea in Psalm 8:

*When I observe your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you set in place,
what is a human being that you remember him,
a son of man that you look after him?
You made him little less than God
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

Think for a moment about the glory of creation. Now consider that God counts human beings as more significant and honorable. What reasons did the psalmist give us for that honor?

Of all God made, He chose human beings to be rulers of creation, under His own rule, and He has given us the intelligence, insight, and skills necessary to accomplish that task. All of our caretaking and culture-making work—from farming to teaching to engineering to painting—is a product of our role as image bearers.

Imago Dei

List on the chart a few ways your work, caretaking, and creativity reflect those characteristics of God.

Work	Caretaking	Creativity

It's important to notice that when the Bible describes us as image bearers, it says He created us male and female. Part of what it means to be made in the image of God is to be made with a God-given sex. Our sex isn't a social construct but a distinction bestowed as part of God's good design.

We live in a time when the culture around us tries to blur the lines around gender, manhood, and womanhood. But gender distinctions are rooted in creation, and men and women reflect God's nature in different ways. Those distinctions are important if we're to know God well and to understand our identity in Him.

What are some unique ways you see men and women bearing God's image? What do those distinctive expressions indicate about the importance of maleness and femaleness?

Of course, all the goodness and glory that came with image bearing were disrupted in Genesis 3, when sin entered the world:

The serpent was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You can't eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit from the trees in the garden. But about the fruit of the tree

in the middle of the garden, God said, 'You must not eat it or touch it, or you will die.' "No! You will not die," the serpent said to the woman. "In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." The woman saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at, and that it was desirable for obtaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

GENESIS 3:1-7

Notice that the serpent tempted Eve with the promise of greater glory: “You will be like God” (v. 5), he said. This temptation is actually an attack on the *imago Dei*: you aren’t enough. Satan whispered, “That’s not good enough.” It’s an attack that has echoed throughout the world ever since—in the ways one human being diminishes another; in the ways we’re made to feel diminished by advertising (“You’re not enough, so buy our stuff.”) or social media (“Your life is dull. You’re not enough.”); or in dozens of other ways that signal we aren’t complete human beings.

Where have you seen sinful attacks on the image of God in our culture?

In fact, the consequence of sin is that the glory of the *imago Dei* is diminished. Adam and Eve didn’t get what the devil promised. Instead, they were subject to a series of curses that would follow humanity forever.

Fortunately, the story didn’t end there. A restoration would come that would reverse the devil’s work. And even in the meantime the *imago Dei* isn’t destroyed. We still bear God’s image in many ways. That image carries with it the hope of redemption, even in a fallen world.

Changed Hearts

Paul painted a bleak picture of the fallen heart:

God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth, since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse. For though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became worthless, and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles. Therefore God delivered them over in the desires of their hearts to sexual impurity, so that their bodies were degraded among themselves. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served what has been created instead of the Creator, who is praised forever. Amen.

ROMANS 1:18-25

Sin leaves us with deeply corrupted hearts. Paul said, “What can be known about God is evident” (v. 19), but humanity chose to suppress the truth. As a result, our “thinking became worthless” and our “senseless hearts were darkened” (v. 21). God turned humanity over to its rebellion and let us go from bad to worse. Key here to our discussion of the imago Dei is Paul’s teaching that humanity “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles” (v. 23). In rebellion we looked for lesser gods—idols—and we failed to reflect the goodness of God. The image of God was effaced, but it wasn’t erased. Humanity retains its dignity and a measure of its glory, even at its

most corrupt. But that glory is dimmed or hidden. Only through Jesus can we begin to flourish and reclaim God's design for our lives.

Romans 1 is true for all image bearers. When have you exchanged the glory of God for lesser images? What were the results?

If we're not reflecting God's glory, we begin to reflect whatever we worship. As one psalmist put it:

*Those who make them [idols] are just like them,
as are all who trust in them.*

PSALM 115:8

If we give our lives over to worshiping fame, power, money, or sex, we'll begin to reflect what we worship without reflecting the God who gives any of those things their purpose. And the image we present won't be pretty.

List specific ways you see image bearers (including yourself) becoming like the idols they worship.

When we worship idols, we fail not only to worship the image of God but also even to recognize it when we see it. Paul wrote:

*The god of this age has blinded the minds of the
unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the
gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:4

Imago Dei

As a result, we're left blind to Jesus' identity and His nature. It's a hopeless situation apart from the grace of God. But that grace is extraordinary, and when it touches our lives, it changes everything.

Grace comes by the power of the Holy Spirit. Just as blind men were healed and able to see when Jesus touched them, our souls are cured of their spiritual blindness when the Holy Spirit touches them. Jesus Himself described this transformation when He promised the coming of the Holy Spirit. He told his followers:

It is for your benefit that I go away, because if I don't go away the Counselor will not come to you. If I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment: About sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will no longer see me; and about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. I still have many things to tell you, but you can't bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. For he will not speak on his own, but he will speak whatever he hears. He will also declare to you what is to come. He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you. Everything the Father has is mine. This is why I told you that he takes from what is mine and will declare it to you.

JOHN 16:7-15

Jesus was describing the work of grace. It begins with the Holy Spirit's convicting work, revealing the sinfulness of the world, the righteousness of God, and the judgment that's coming as a result of our rebellion against God. Only when we're taken to this low place and made aware of our sin and our idols are we able to fully comprehend the depth of our sin. At that point, we're able to see the light of the gospel in the redeeming work of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. From this place of humble brokenness, the Spirit continues His work, guiding us to truth. The Spirit enables us to see Jesus for who He truly is, and that's the first step on the road to the restoration of the imago Dei within us.

As you've walked with Jesus, how have you begun to see more clearly the sin in your own heart and in the world around you?

How does the Holy Spirit's ongoing restoring work help you see the image of God more clearly?

Restoration continues as we live our lives with Jesus, seeking to follow Him in all the ways He taught and learning to trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Such a life is transformative. As we begin to look more like Jesus, we begin to more beautifully reflect the image of God:

We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit.

2 CORINTHIANS 3:18

The imago Dei is shattered and distorted by sin, but it doesn't have to remain broken. In Jesus we have a pathway to its restoration and, furthermore, to a restoration of the world around us. The restored imago Dei makes us better neighbors; better caretakers of creation; and better husbands, wives, brothers, and sisters. Image bearers are the best-equipped people to bring peace and reconciliation to society. They're best equipped to tear down boundaries of race, class, and ethnicity. Their presence heals their communities as they carry the glory and love of God with them wherever they go. As we go about our lives in this tumultuous world, we should pray that God will give us a vision for ways to demonstrate the healing power of His image.

Gospel Application

The imago Dei is a big idea, and we're just beginning to explore what it means for us and for God's redemptive plan. But even as we begin this journey, let's consider what we already know about the image of God and what we need to learn about being image bearers.

Read Genesis 2 in light of the imago Dei. How do you see evidence of image bearing in the way God created human beings and put us to work in His world?

Compared to the glory given to image bearers at creation, how has the image of God been corrupted through the fall? How do we grow in our ability to recognize the created goodness and the harmful brokenness?

The Christian life is a journey that transforms us more and more into the image of Jesus. When we believe the gospel, we accepted an invitation from God the Father, conditioned by the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf and applied to our lives through God the Spirit, to recover and pursue the imago Dei in us. The process of sanctification restores the image of God within us.

How have you seen, over time, a restoration of the imago Dei in your life? In the lives of friends or family?

How are people better image bearers after walking with Jesus?

Read Romans 2:15. What does it mean for God's law to be written on our hearts? In what way do all people have an intrinsic understanding of the image of God, whether or not they recognize it?

How can this universal impression of God's law lead us to help others recover and pursue the image of God in their lives?

All people possess a germinal knowledge that God exists. Theologian John Calvin called this the *sensus divinitatis*, or sense of divinity, that's part of being made in the image of God.¹ This is essentially what Paul was referring to in Romans 2:15. All people show they have a sense of God by trying to obey His laws. Our hearts want to return to God and flourish as image bearers, but this can happen only through the redeeming work of the gospel. The problem with sin is that it corrupts our ability to pursue God. The Holy Spirit must work in our hearts to show us how we've gone astray and to enable us to pursue God. The sense of divinity shows us that we need to be redeemed. Helping people identify their brokenness can begin a conversation to help them see the glory for which they were intended.

Whom do you know who's lost and searching right now? How can you help them see the glory of being an image bearer despite their brokenness?

Whom could you affirm in their glory and worth as an image bearer?

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, ed. Anthony Uyl (Ontario: Devoted, 2016), 43.