

The Ultimate Vision: Be Like Him, Part 3

Bearing the Image of the Heavenly Man

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Bearing the image of a man that is heavenly seems at first impossible, if not audacious. How does one come to be heavenly?



God the Creator came from heaven and dwelt among men to give us an earthly image [example] of what it looks like to bear the image [example] of the heavenly.

What does “bearing the image of the heavenly man” even mean? Does it have any practical application today and in the future? Or is it an ethereal, metaphysical construct that is of no practical value?

Fortunately, the Bible provides not only a vision that is ultimate, but also a tangible example of how to achieve it that can be summed up in a few words: *Be like Him—Jesus Christ*. This vision of “being like Him” ultimately anticipates a destiny “unspeakable in the likeness of God” that defines what God desires His children to become (Johann Albrecht Bengel’s Gnomon of the New Testament).

Still, the Bible defines this destiny in tangible terms in John’s encounter with *the heavenly man*—the risen Christ in glory—which John recorded for us in definitive and comparative terms. The *heavenly man* had both “head and hair” (definitive) that were “white like wool” (comparative). We need look no further for a definition of the heavenly man, which at first glance appears unspeakable—the Bible puts it in terms that are tangible and understandable.

This promise yet future of a grand destiny John describes as a time in which “we will be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (**1 John 3:2**). This leaves us with the question of the practical reality of *being like Him today by bearing the image of the heavenly man*. This brings us to the point where this *hope for tomorrow* is transformed into *help for today*.

We return to Paul’s message to the Corinthian church: “And just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, *let us also* bear the image of the man of heaven (**1 Corinthians 15:49**, New English Translation, emphasis added throughout). The New English Translation brings into focus what other translations note in the margin—our present responsibility.

“Let us bear [present tense] the image of the man of heaven”; this translates our future hope into our present responsibility to live in a manner now consistent with future destiny—the *heavenly*. Before we conclude that “things heavenly” are ethereal, or even mystical, we must look at the life and example of the “heavenly man.”

The heavenly man is first described in the Bible as the “Word [who] was with God, and the Word [who] was God” (**John 1:1**). Lest his readers conclude he is writing a philosophical treatise, John identifies the Word as the Creator and Maker of “all things.”

John moves the conversation very quickly from the philosophical construct of the Word [Logos] to the all-powerful Maker of all things to something very earthy and personal: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (**John 1:14**).

The Word, as God, did the unthinkable—He came to be flesh and dwelt among us so we could behold His glory and follow His example of “grace and truth.” He “being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking on the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men” (**Philippians 2:6-7**).

There is much to be said about the philosophical significance of what the Word did to become flesh, but we should not miss the most obvious: He gives us a tangible example of *bearing the image of the heavenly* so that we could walk it into action by following His simple but oft repeated command—Follow Me!

Ponder this: God the Creator came from heaven and dwelt among men to give us an earthly image [example] of what it looks like to bear the image [example] of the heavenly. This is as simple as it is profound.

First, not only can everyone *understand* the concept “Follow Me”; it is baked right into the human psyche. It is what we already do; it is only a matter of *whom* we follow. Almost from the moment of birth children imitate [follow] their parents, then their siblings, then their peers, then the culture in which they live. Second, that God the Word was willing to empty Himself of His glory to come in the likeness of men so that this type of emulation is possible says more about His love for His people than any other singular act.

Jesus describes what it takes to make this work: **But simple does not mean easy.**
 “Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me’” (**Luke 9:23**).

Following Him by default bears the image of the heavenly, but comes with the earthly cost of self-denial and taking up the burden of our *personal cross*, daily. The former goes against everything earthly and human, the latter requires confronting our personal issues, daily. Both require work that can only be accomplished through the power of the Spirit.

When Jesus came to Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, He immediately called disciples using this command: “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men. Then they immediately left their nets and followed Him” (**Matthew 4:19-20**). The disciples “denied their vocation” by dropping their nets to follow Him daily.

Jesus used the same methodology when he found Phillip and said to him, “Follow me!” Phillip not only followed Jesus, but immediately adopted Jesus’ example of seeking out others: “Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph’” (**John 1:43, 45**)

When Nathanael questioned the authenticity of Philip’s claim by asking, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip simply relied on the power of authentic example and said to him, “Come and see” (**John 1:46**)

The apostles adopted this model and took it to the world. Peter wrote late in life, “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps” (**1 Peter 2:21**). Paul implored the gentile Church in Corinth, “Imitate me, *just as I also imitate Christ*” (**1 Corinthians 11:1**).

Just professing to follow Christ is a very academic and anemic discussion that requires no action. But, if we actually take up our cross daily, deny ourselves and put boots on the ground to follow Him step after arduous step, it is life-changing because it bears the image of the heavenly man.

Their example of leadership within the model of Christ-followership rocked the Roman world because they were literally bearing the image of the heavenly man.

This means we will follow Him into the synagogue on the Sabbath and stand up to read. We will follow Him into our communities and give the hungry bread. We will follow Him to the public square and preach the gospel of the kingdom of God with a call to repentance and authentic belief. We will follow Him with sincerity and truth as we keep the Feasts of the Lord that provide a roadmap in the true pursuit of life, liberty and happiness.

It is a marvelous journey that is invigorating but difficult, empowering but painful that leads to the ultimate vision of who we are to become—*just like Him as we bear the image of the heavenly man*.

Paul sums it up this way, “If indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (**Romans 8:17**).



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