

# E-mail - A Window into Humanity

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[ 0 : 00 ] I will be reading from Genesis chapter 2 verses 15 to chapter 3 verses 10.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. Then the Lord God commanded the man, you are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it, you will certainly die.

The Lord God said, it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him. Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground the wild animals and all the birds in the sky.

He brought them to the man to see what he would name them, and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky, and all the wild animals.

But for Adam, no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. And while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh.

[ 1 : 29 ] Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.

She shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man. That is why a man leaves his father and mother, and he is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. Now the snake was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, did God really say, you must not eat from any tree in the garden? The woman said to the snake, 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.

You will not certainly die, the snake 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.

[ 2 : 47 ] When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food, and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some 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 realized that they were naked.

So they sewed the fig leaves together, and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord, as he was walking in the middle of the garden in the cool of the day.

And they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, where are you? He answered, I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.

And he said, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat? And that's the word of God.

[ 3 : 54 ] Thank you. The second reading is from Hebrews chapter 1, and can be found on page 1201.

Reading from verse 1 to verse 4. In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways.

But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

And after he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

[ 5 : 18 ] This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Well, thanks very much for those readings.

Let's pray as we come to God's word together. Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much for the freedom we have to gather around your word with one another. And we pray, please, that as we do so, you, by your spirit, will be at work in our lives.

And as we listen now to your word and as we talk to one another later, we pray that you would bring your word to bear on our lives. Hear us, we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. Welcome to our new Sunday morning series. You all know iPhone and iPad. Well, this is iLife, the gospel and the human condition and the online world.

Facebook, email, online gaming, internet porn, texting, Twitter, wiki, bloggies, Googling. That's what we're going to be thinking about over these next four weeks, the good, the bad, and the ugly of the online world.

[ 6 : 25 ] A world that most of us now inhabit. Hands up if you haven't been online in this last week. Okay. Excellent. One. Hands up if you're too embarrassed to admit that you haven't been online this week.

Let me just say for those of you who are young among us, it is perfectly possible to have an entirely happy life and never go online. Strange, but true.

Why this series? Well, first, because this is just the air we now all breathe. It's fitting that this is an international morning because just over 50% of the world's population now, 3.9 billion people are internet users.

And we often find that things close to us are hard to look at because they're just so familiar. Sometimes it's good to step back and consider familiar things from a bit of a distance.

Second, because the online world is so inclusive of humanity, there are things about it that give us really helpful insights into what it is to be a human being.

[ 7 : 33 ] Now, one could so easily think superficially about this whole area. Come up with a list of do's and don'ts for online living. Pornography is bad.

Don't do that. Email is neutral. Do it if you like. Facebook is good. Well, we want to qualify that these days, don't we quite? But on the whole, the more friends we have, the better, we thought.

But we're not going to do that, partly because these topics are much more joined up than you might think. But most importantly, because Christianity is never a list of do's and don'ts.

First of all, it's about Jesus and what Jesus has done and who he is and how that has changed everything for everyone forever. However, Jesus is the very center of why the world is here and what human beings are for and what God is doing in eternity.

And it's absolutely pointless having a useful set of do's and don'ts if we don't understand how they relate to him. So our big question for this series is, how does who Jesus is and what he's done relate to the online world that we inhabit?

[ 8 : 50 ] Now, on these four mornings, we're not going to be looking at one Bible passage or one Bible book, which is our normal habit here. We'll be doing it more thematically. We'll spend a good deal of time in Genesis chapters 1 to 3 because they're really foundational.

But every week we'll be going somewhere else as well. Handouts will therefore be provided partly for you to make notes if you wish, partly to reassure you that we are in fact making progress every week towards a destination, and also to give you an opportunity afterwards to check up whether what I've said from these Bible passages, which we'll touch on briefly each morning, is in fact true.

We're going to start off this morning by thinking about email. Email, email, a window into humanity and human experience. Why this one?

Well, because it's, for various reasons, a very helpful jumping off point in thinking more widely about the whole area. If you're an internet user, you've got mail.

How does your inbox make you feel? Well, it may be joy. At last, my friend has got in touch. My guess is that for many of us, it's become one of the great burdens of life.

[ 10 : 04 ] That jammed inbox as you return from holiday or even as you return from the weekend away to work every Monday morning. However you feel, there's no doubt that email is here to stay.

It's just made mass communication so easy. Already, by nearly 12 o'clock, over 120 billion emails will have been sent today.

The world has come to depend on it. Businesses, individuals, churches have come to depend on it. But it has its problems. There are the obvious ones.

The stuffed inbox. The technology envy. You know that little line at the bottom of the email sent from my iPhone 10? Grr.

But there are other problems. Over the last few years, I've spent a good deal of time trying to deal with big pastoral problems caused by email.

[ 11 : 06 ] Someone's got upset because they've sent an email that hasn't been responded to or responded to quickly enough. Someone's got upset because they've been sent an email that they've interpreted negatively, even though it wasn't meant negatively.

Someone has received a negative email that they've got steamed up about and bashed one off in response while they were still steamed up. And that's gone very badly indeed.

You know the kind of thing? Here's the issue. Here's the beginning of today's little window into humanity. Email has the permanence of a letter.

But because it's quick to produce the sense of spontaneity of the spoken word, it has the permanence of a letter. You can read it and reread it.

But it often lacks the deliberateness of a letter. When you sit down and write a letter, especially if it's a complicated letter, it takes a while. And it takes a while because you know that you have to be careful when you're only using words, that your words are not misunderstood.

[ 12 : 15 ] Is this going to be taken the way I want it to be taken? If I use that phrase, how will that go down? And so on. You see, we know that letters are read and reread.

And we know that words without facial expression and tone of voice and other clues like that need care because the other person can't see the face and can't hear the tone of voice.

And can't pick up any of those usual verbal things that tell us what kind of conversation this is actually. So in written communication, generally, we're very careful with our words.

And if you're writing, especially if you're enough of a dinosaur to be using a pen, production takes time. Not so with email.

It happens very quickly. You get one. You read it. It upsets you. You bang off another one in the heat of the moment. You hit the button. It's gone. You don't have till tomorrow's post to chew it over.

[ 13 : 26 ] There's no cooling down time. No time for reflection. And it's permanent. It has nearly all the speed of communicating by voice, but none of the helpful contextual information.

And that's the difficulty. See, if I say something to you face to face, I quickly know by the look on your face whether you've got what I'm saying. And I can add or qualify or reassure.

Not so with email. And of course, that applies to any kind of digital communication, doesn't it? Here's what I want to deal with for the rest of this morning. The fact that human words and human bodies really belong together with one another.

So obvious that it hardly merits consideration, you might think, but it does. Human beings are not just words, are we? Of course, there's nothing wrong with words on their own.

They're often very useful. Think of books and newspapers and letters and the internet, for example. Some things are better communicated and not face to face, aren't they?

[ 14 : 36 ] Some difficult things are easier said by letter than face to face. Relating with just words is a God-given thing. But our most important human relationships are done face to face and with spoken words, not written words.

And the more we gravitate towards non-face to face and non-spoken, the more we run into real practical and theological issues.

I want to make three big points this morning about the inescapably bodily nature of human relating and apply them to the online world that we all inhabit.

You'll find it helpful to have a Bible in front of you. Please turn to Genesis chapter 1. Three big, obvious, straightforward points. Number one, we are made bodily with bodies.

It's surprising, in fact, startling to see that at the heart of the great plan of the eternal God, a God who is spirit, is the creation of bodily creatures that bear His likeness.

[ 15 : 56 ] Isn't that a surprise? Genesis chapter 1 verse 26. 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 and the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

So God created mankind in His own image. In the image of God, He created them. Male and female, He created them. God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth and subdue it and rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and every living creature that moves on the ground.

Isn't that surprising? The storyline of the Bible never strays from the idea that the eternal God has huge plans involving small bodily creatures.

Isn't that a surprise? And we find then that the human body is the vehicle for critically important relationships. It's the vehicle for person-to-person relationship.

Look at chapter 2 verse 23. We're on the search for a co-worker for the man. And at last, at the end of a long procession of animals, God makes a woman.

[ 17 : 13 ] And the man says, verse 23, How cool is that? That is just the thing we've been looking for. Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.

And the chapter ends, verse 25. Adam and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame. The body is the vehicle for person-to-person relationship in the Bible.

It's also the vehicle for people relating to God. There's no suggestion in Genesis that we were designed to relate to God in some kind of esoteric, mystical sort of way back at the beginning.

In Genesis chapter 3 verse 8, just turn to that. After a great wickedness has just occurred, the Lord God walks in the garden and looks for the now hiding body of the one made in his own image.

God relates to embodied people, not just their inner lives. The whole God-given enterprise in the Bible is intensely relational at a bodily level.

[ 18 : 22 ] Be fruitful. Multiply. Subdue the earth. Multiplying and subdue the earth are pretty bodily sorts of functions, aren't they? There is no point in life, friends, at which our bodies and our voices are out at the edge of God's great purposes for the world.

God made us embodied. So what, you might ask? Well, let's make some obvious suggestions. First, words and bodies go together.

Of course, it's true that our words can extend way out there beyond the realm of our body. But most of our important human relationships are done face-to-face and by spoken words.

So perhaps it's not surprising that words without sound, words without facial expression, need special care to overcome the limitations of not having a body present.

It's part of the way we're made that words and bodies go together. Second, you might want to think whether a preference for communicating in disembodied words didn't rather go against the grain of the created order.

[ 19 : 40 ] Let me illustrate with another example. In Genesis chapter 1, God makes day and night. They're God-given things. And in general, the Bible assumes that daytime is time for doing things and nighttime is time for resting.

Of course, it's not wrong to work at night. Some people can't get employment apart from at nighttime. But there would be something slightly odd, wouldn't there, to want to be up all night and asleep all day if one had the chance.

And you might want to consider whether somebody who loved night and hated day wasn't pushing against the boundaries of what it means to be human.

So here's a question. What does it mean that many of us like email better than face-to-face, like communication at a distance rather than communication up close, like messaging more than meeting, hang around in the same room all on their phones rather than talking to one another?

Many of us feel more comfortable with words at a distance than with words face-to-face. Of course, disembodied words are fine, but liking it better than face-to-face, feeling more secure at a distance from people is not what we're made for.

[ 21 : 17 ] And that takes us on to our second point. We are fallen bodily. Genesis chapter 3, the moment that Adam and Eve sin, the effects are felt in their bodily relationships.

Verse 7, they hide from each other. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked, so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

And verse 8, they hide from God. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

It ought to have been meeting time. But they hid from the Lord God among the trees in the garden. They cannot be face-to-face anymore with one another or with God in the way they were.

Now, often this is thought of as being a metaphor, a kind of poetic idea illustrating human shame, but I think it's best understood as pointing to the fact that human beings are a unity, body and soul.

[ 22 : 32 ] We are estranged from one another and from our Creator. And you'll notice that they now prefer words without bodily appearing.

God speaks to the man and from his hiding place in the trees, the man answers. One of the observations that people often make about the online world is how dramatic the levels of self-disclosure are online.

That people share things online with those they've never seen that they never share with people they have seen. Here's an example from one person's blog.

There is the real world where I live, including the online world, which is broken, messy, scary, profane, filled with risk and sadness and loneliness and sickness, hate, fear, doubt, death, love, hope, mercy, grace, friends, faith, faithlessness.

Then there's the church world. I haven't talked to anyone in that world about what's real in many, many years. Now, there are all sorts of issues there, aren't there?

[ 23 : 46 ] How tragic that church has become a place of pretending. However, one thing ought not to be missed about that. There is a difference between relating with disembodied words and relating face-to-face.

Sin affects how we relate face-to-face in a way that it doesn't, speaking to people far away who we don't know and can't see. Being open with people in the flesh is much harder than writing to people who are only words to us.

Sin has done that to our relationships. In the body, we find it hard to be straightforward face-to-face. There is a feeling of intimacy and trust relating online without bodies.

But it's not the same level of intimacy and trust as come when someone who can see you and who knows you accepts you as you really are.

That is a whole different ballgame. Now, we're going to say much more about this in coming weeks, but for now, let me say, I don't think it's a surprise at all that email and virtual communication has become so massively important.

[ 25 : 05 ] Of course, it's efficient. Of course, it's quick. But also, it's just more comfortable in significant ways. It removes some of the sin-induced discomfort of relating to people face-to-face.

If we are the kind of people who find it more comfortable to be open at a distance, there's a real reason for that, a theological one. Could it be that the level of disclosure we often see online reflects a great God-given need, hardwired for intimacy to be known and accepted as we are?

An intimacy that's very hard to find in face-to-face relationship. Virtual relating does in part get around one of our deepest problems that now we have discomfort face-to-face.

So there is a kind of intimacy online, but it's not the full shilling. It's not face-to-face knowledge. It's not face-to-face acceptance.

And the tragedy is that in the middle of a huge explosion in online relating, so many people in this world feel increasingly alone.

[ 26 : 27 ] we are fallen bodily and our longing for intimacy will only really be satisfied when our face-to-face relationships are finally recreated and joy, that is exactly what Jesus has come to do.

We're created bodily, fallen bodily. Third, we are rescued bodily. when God sent John the Baptist to announce the birth of Jesus, he did not just send a disembodied voice through a loud megaphone from heaven.

He sent a man who spoke and he suffered because of what he spoke. And the one that John spoke about, Jesus, was not just a voice either.

He was a preacher. But alienation from one another and from God can't be solved just by information transfer. Information could have been done at a distance.

It could have been done by email. But that's not how God has made himself known to us. No, he made himself known through people and supremely through a bodily rescuer.

[ 27 : 44 ] Turn to Hebrews chapter 1, which we read earlier on, please. page 1201. When God created at the beginning, he did it just with words, but his great recreating work is done through a body.

Hebrews chapter 1, in the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he's spoken to us by his son, who preached our best sermons ever.

But that's not how it's put, is it? The way it's put is that the one through whom all things were made came as something made, a man with a body, a man who died in the body to take sins away, a man whose body is now right there in the place where God is, bringing rescue to us bodily humans, needed a human body and a sacrifice to take sins away.

And now, today, there is a human body face to face in the place where God is. And that magnificent person who died for the sins of others, intends to bring countless thousands of others back to that face to face intimacy.

And therefore, bringing bodily humans to bodily rescue is where the Bible story joyfully ends. The end of the book of Revelation chapter 21 describes a future at Jesus' return in which bodies don't die anymore and don't decay with age and perhaps more wonderful than any of those.

[ 29 : 43 ] Think about this. When Jesus returns, those who belong to him, think about this, will be able to relate to one another without complication, openly, and to relate to God face to face without hiding or shame.

Think about that. It's almost unimaginable. one day there will be nothing left to be ashamed of, for sin will have been destroyed forever.

That's where the future is headed. That's what Jesus came in a body to bring. That's the marvelous reality that you can be part of through belonging to Jesus now.

Well, we've covered a lot of ground in a short period. Let's just draw one or two conclusions. We started with email. Let's end with email. Email. Be careful with it.

It feels instant. It feels spontaneous, but it lacks the bodily information that makes spontaneous conversation possible. Treat it carelessly, and you'll have a whole heap of misunderstanding to deal with.

[ 31 : 04 ] Bang off a quick response in the heat of the moment, and you will have all kinds of problems to deal with as a result. Never, ever, ever send an email when you're angry, ever.

It's just not a helpful thing to do. Words are very powerful and precious things, and written words need time.

But more generally, let me say three things. First, if you, like many of us, find certain aspects of relating easier online, you've got hold of something really important, a window into what makes us human beings what we are.

there is a massive problem with face-to-face relationship. Openness is hard face-to-face, and, says the Bible, that's a symptom of how profoundly, profoundly damaging our sin is.

the opportunity to relate so easily in words can sidestep the face-to-face problem in various ways, useful ways, indeed.

[ 32 : 25 ] But don't confuse that disembodied intimacy online with the real thing, with real human interaction, which is primarily, first of all, an embodied thing.

It's a great supplement, but a poor substitute for that, because the acceptance, the knowledge experienced face-to-face, though much harder won, is greater and deeper, and, indeed, what we were made for.

And though in this age, it's not all that it might be, it's where everything is heading in the end. In the end, those who depend on Jesus will see him face-to-face, face, without embarrassment, without shame, with no guilt or difficulty, because he will have dealt with sin, guilt, shame, embarrassment forever.

In the end, those who belong to Jesus will be able to know and be known by one another with no shame or hiding or complication because they will have been made perfect by his brilliant work.

second, don't lose heart, therefore, in face-to-face relating. Face-to-face relating is really hard.

[ 33 : 52 ] Some of you will be experiencing the difficult end of that in the moment. At the moment, your family relationships, your work relationships, your church relationships, may be really hard at the moment.

We live in a world of difficult relationships. Don't lose heart in working at them. It's so easy to retire hurt, to give up, to run away, to seek a sort of intimacy in virtual relationship.

relationship. But it's not where creation is heading. So easy in church to remain distant from one another.

It's hard to get closer. We're a very diverse group of people here this morning. It's hard to get close to people who are not like you. Easy to hurt one another inadvertently.

Hard to forgive one another. But God is building a great reconstituted humanity of which things like this are a beginning, a little window into what the end will be like.

[ 35 : 07 ] It's worth working at. Don't lose heart. And third, and finally, Jesus is the only route to the acceptance and intimacy that we all crave.

don't whatever you do, let the digital world dull your appetite for that great future that he is bringing about.

He's raised from the dead. In a body, he sits now in the presence of God. In the future, he will return in the same body and will raise with a word in an instant all the bodies that have ever lived to a lifetime, an eternal lifetime in the body, a future either of wonder or catastrophe, of ultimate shame or ultimate glory, the intimacy we all long for or the aloneness we most fear.

Jesus is the only route to all that we long for most deeply. Let's pray together. Just a moment to reflect on what we said and to pray to God ourselves and then I'll lead us in prayer.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.

[ 37 : 03 ] Thank you.

Thank you. And yet a landscape of brilliant hope, Jesus has come in the body, died as a sacrifice for sins, is bringing us back to eternal embodied relationship with you and with one another.

Please help us to grasp what we've learned this morning. Thank you that you've created in us a longing for intimacy, to be known and to know others.

We thank you that you've provided in Jesus the route to all that we were made for. Please help us to trust him.



And please help us, with your Spirit's help, to keep working at the difficult business of face-to-face relationship. We ask these things in his name.

[ 38 : 43 ] Amen.