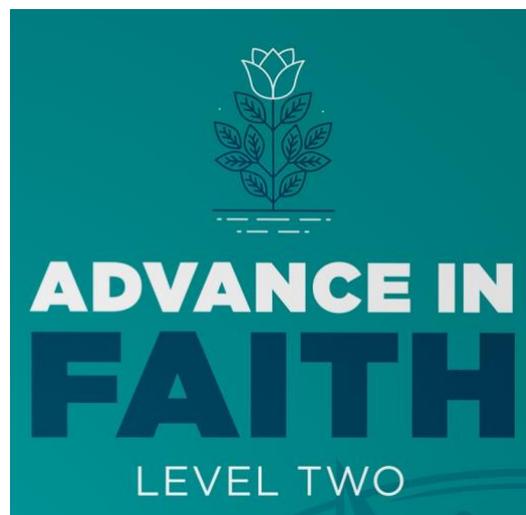


# Earth Matters

## Christian Faith and the Future of the Planet

### Week 3

### A Theological case for the care of the Earth



## Introduction

Christians eager to better understand the heart of God are opening their own hearts and minds to God's concern for all within the created order and rethinking the propositions and assumptions of an inherited modernist perspective on the environment. This in turn is leading to a rediscovery of the purpose and place of the created order as well as the role of mankind within that order.

### The purpose of this session is:

- *To explore the theological (biblical) grounds for the care of the earth and formulate an appropriate Christian response.*

With the notions of 'Earth as creation', 'Creation as revelation', 'Earth as God's possession' and 'Earth as our habitation' firmly in place as a foundation, we will now consider the formulation of a 'creation theology' and a corresponding environmental ethic.

As with any moral question, the Christian approach to environmentalism must include as a central source the revelation of Scripture as a genuinely Christian ethic is one that is compatible with the Biblical witness and one that emanates from a sound biblical theology.

## The Biblical Basis for Environmental Theology

Biblical creation theology is distributed throughout the scriptures but is most visible in Genesis, the Psalms, the Wisdom literature of ancient Israel and in parts of the New Testament penned by the apostle Paul. This body of theology has important implications for our attempt to interpret and respond to the environmental crisis.

Perhaps the five most important passages of scripture with regard to the subject of creation theology are:

### ***Psalm 104***

One might expect an attempt to articulate biblical Christian environmentalism to begin with Genesis 1 and its statement of the foundational truth that God is the Creator. While that truth deserves pride of place, we choose to use Psalm 104 to highlight it. In this psalm we find not only the statement of the truth that God created the world but also the expression of related truths so that the psalm presents a more fully developed picture of the relationship that exists between God and creation. It might even be argued that if one had to choose but one passage to support a Christian environmentalism it should be this psalm.

The contribution of Psalm 104 might be summarised as follows:

- God created the earth and all things in it, and he continues to sustain the earth and all things in it by the loving exercise of his sovereign power.
- The earth and all things in it belong to God by virtue of his creative work, and all things find their reason for being fundamentally in relation to him.
- The earth and all things in it were created perfectly - each creature in itself and the entire creation in its interrelatedness.
- Even after the entrance of sin into the created order this perfection still shines through so as to be perceivable by man. Thus, creation continually bears witness to the perfection of God's character and encourages in man praise toward God.

### **Genesis 1-2**

There is an obvious structural parallel between Psalm 104 and the creation account in Genesis 1. This parallelism supports the argument that Psalm 104 is a deliberate attempt to interpret and flesh out the Genesis account<sup>1</sup>. Given the fullness of Psalm 104 and its unique relationship with the opening chapters of Genesis, we find that much of their ground has already been covered. There is one contribution in these chapters, however, which stands, in order of importance, second only to the statement that God is the creator of the universe. A primary concern of theology and of Christian environmentalism is that of determining mankind's proper place and role before God in the context of creation. It is in addressing this concern that Genesis 1-2 delivers its greatest value.

The contribution of Genesis 1-2 might be summarised as follows:

- God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them.
- All that which God created he pronounced good, i.e. it existed exactly as he intended it.
- Of all His creation God created only man in his own image, thus causing man to occupy a position distinct from and above the rest of creation.
- God blessed both human and non-human creation by imbuing both with powers of procreation and encouraging both to exercise those powers liberally.
- God gave to mankind the responsibility of mastery over non-human creation, and he commanded him to exercise that mastery toward the preservation of, and fuller realisation of, creation's goodness.

### **Genesis 9:8-17**

The contribution of Gen 9:8-17 is single and simple but essential to a Christian environmentalism. God has established an everlasting covenant with *all living creatures* of every kind wherein he has promised never again to destroy them by the waters of a flood. The covenant contained in Genesis 9 is usually understood as presenting a promise to Noah and his family and through them to all their descendants. In fact, many theologians prefer not to refer to this as the Noachian covenant but rather as the Creation covenant. This is simply because in it God makes abundantly clear that his promise is for every living creature. Perhaps the most striking feature of the covenant is the amount of repetition. In the space of these ten verses there are eight occurrences of the word 'covenant,' three references to the 'sign' of the covenant (the rainbow) and three repetitions of the promise to 'never again destroy by flood.' The entire passage could be reduced to the space of one verse without any loss of content. The actual length of the covenantal pronouncement is due to a passionate emphasis, and the thing that is emphasised above everything else is that this covenant is made with 'all life' and with 'every living creature'. Nine times God reiterates this point, and it is clear from the emphasis they receive and the positions these reiterations occupy that God wants the point to be clear.

### **Romans 8:18-23**

While it is in the climactic movement of the final chapters of Revelation that the hope of Christian environmentalism finds its most poetic and perhaps most eloquent expression, it is in Paul's letter to the Romans that the theological context for that hope is most clearly set forth.

The primary contribution of Rom 8:18-23 can be summarised as follows:

- Non-human creation was cursed by God as a consequence of man's sin. This curse has profoundly affected all of creation by keeping it from realising God's original intention for it.
- However, the condition in which creation presently exists is temporary, for at some point in the future, in connection with the glorification of the children of God, all of creation will be set free from the curse and the ongoing effects of man's sinfulness and will enjoy a glorious renewal of its ability to be as it was created to be.

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth analysis of this parallel, see D. Kidner, *Psalms* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1975: 368).

**Colossians 1:15-17**

There are several things we should note in this wonderful text. Paul is talking about the whole of creation. He first says, “all creation” (v. 15), and then uses the phrase “all things in heaven and earth” (v. 16). It could not be clearer that Paul has in mind *the whole of the created universe*—not just human beings. Paul links *Christ and creation* in the most comprehensive way. Christ was there, of course, as the Son of God, even before creation existed (v. 17). Christ is the source of the creation of the universe (v. 16). Christ is beneficiary or heir of all creation (“the firstborn” [v. 15], “for him” [v. 16]). Christ sustains creation in existence (v. 17). Paul includes creation in *the saving power of the cross*. Christ has redeemed creation (v. 20). It is vital to see here that the blood of Christ, shed on the cross, is the means of the reconciliation of *creation* to God, not only of *sinners*. “All things” that are reconciled in verse 20 must have the same universal meaning as the “all things” that were created in verse 16.

The order of Paul’s argument here is also revealing and runs counter to the way we tend to describe the gospel. We start from the other end. We tend to start with individuals who need to have their sin problem dealt with. The cross is the answer to that individual problem, so that you can be saved and go to heaven. Meanwhile, you need fellowship and company on the way to heaven, and that’s what the church is for, so you’d better join one. As for the world out there, we have to live in it until we get to heaven, but we should not get too obsessed with it, since only what is “heavenly” really counts. But Paul’s gospel works in the exact opposite direction. God has a very big plan indeed.

Paul starts with creation—and relates that to Christ as its creator and sustainer. Then he moves to the church (v. 18), which will be the people of the new creation, because they are in Christ, who is the firstborn of the new creation just as he is the firstborn of the original creation. That is to say, the church belongs to Christ because all things belong to Christ, but also because the church is already, in this creation, the anticipation of the redeemed people of God in the new creation. Then, having spoken of all creation and of the whole church, Paul sums up their totality in the reconciling work of the cross (v. 20). Finally, having sketched the grand plan of God for the whole universe and emphasised the centrality of the cross within it, Paul adds — “Oh yes, even you too (“and you” at the beginning of v. 21 is emphatic), you get to be part of this! You who were Gentile outsiders (as described in Eph. 2:11–12) can be among the reconciled, through faith in this gospel, which is now for everybody everywhere” (“proclaimed to every creature under heaven”, v. 23, could be better translated as “proclaimed in the whole creation / in all creation under heaven” [(as in REB and ESV). Paul sees the whole created earth as the sphere of gospel proclamation.<sup>2</sup>

**The following as a summary of the essential elements of biblical creation theology:**

- The entire created order has its origins in the sovereign, creative and sustaining power of God. In other words, creation is centred on God, or it is Theo-centric.
- Creation is not a singular event; it is an on-going process requiring the continual sustaining power and presence of God.
- Central to the biblical notion of creation is the idea of order. God creates order out of primordial chaos. This order is moral as well as physical; it therefore requires ethical behaviour to maintain the harmonious working of creation.
- Creation, as heaven and earth, is a relational entity, a harmonious whole in which all creatures fulfill their appointed places and functions in interdependent relationship.

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, C. *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission*, Biblical Theology for Life. Chapter 3 - ‘People Who Care For Creation’.

Within the domain of creation theology lies biblical anthropology, the study of man, his origin, his place, his purpose and his ultimate destiny as revealed in the scriptures. As the only creature created in God's own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27) mankind enjoys a special position and possesses an important purpose in the divine economy.

This purpose is best understood in three dimensions: Representation, Reconciliation and Stewardship.

### ***Representation: Being Image-Bearers***

***“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. 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; 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 1:26-28***

‘Image’ and ‘likeness’ are used in a technical fashion to refer to a statue or some other physical representation of themselves that monarchs erect to remind their subjects of who is in power. Genesis 1:26-28 therefore implies that human beings are living reminders to all creation that the Creator is the King of the universe.

The idea of ‘image of God’ and ‘dominion’ found in Genesis 1 receives considerable development in the New Testament and Christ is presented as the perfect fulfilment of both the image of God and the paradigm of dominion – both of which we should seek to emulate. In this time of environmental crisis, we should remember that the Kingdom of God not only offers salvation to humanity but points to the future renewal and restoration of all creation. When interpreted through the lens of faith, the stewardship of creation becomes the calling of redeemed mankind to participate in the redemptive future of God and in an anticipatory ethic that seeks to protect, sustain, and restore creation.

N.T. Wright suggests that what the book of Genesis and the apostle Paul mean by humans reflecting the image of God is less a static picture and more of a “creative, dynamic” proposition. He uses the metaphor of an angled mirror as example. To contextualise this in practical terms, he recounts a childhood anecdote about being ill in bed as a child and having his mother rest an angled mirror on his bedroom door, so he would be able to see the comings and goings of other family members and not feel so isolated and alone. Similarly, Wright comments, we can use this metaphor to understand what the Bible means about being an image bearer—God can reflect his love and care through humans to the world, and in turn, they can reflect the praise of creation back to God. As such, the “image of God” is not something about us - instead, it is what we do and how we do it. That is, how we reflect God into the world, aptly described by Paul in Colossians 3:9-10:

*“Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator”.*

### ***Reconciliation: Being Ambassadors***

***“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his***

***appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God". - 2 Corinthians 5:17-21***

We often think of sin as 'broken rules' but it is more accurate to understand sin as 'broken relationship'. The ultimate break in relationship was the one between man and God but that separation eventually resulted in broken relationship between man and his fellow and broken relationship has characterised the human condition ever since. Consequently all 'sin' is in some way a violation of the demands of right relationship and that is why the antidote to a life of sin is a life of love - love for God and love for one's neighbour - which is at the heart of what Jesus both taught and modelled.

With that thought in mind, I'd like to suggest that there is another manifestation of 'sin' (broken relationship) that is perhaps not as obvious as the two mentioned above and that is the break in relationship between human beings and their home - the earth. It is becoming ever more apparent that we have lost our sense of connection to the only context we have ever known - planet earth. It is imperative that we rediscover how to better 'relate' to the world in which we live. Human beings, as representatives of God and those who bear His image should be at the leading edge of helping humanity reconnect with their context and better relate to the natural world in which we live. This process of reconciling people to the creation can also play a role in reconciling them with their Creator i.e. it has an evangelistic dimension.

### ***Stewardship: Being Managers***

***"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; 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 1:27-28***

Stewardship refers to the purpose and role of humanity in relation to creation. The Bible contains twenty-six explicit references to the 'steward' or to 'stewardship' most of which occur in the Old Testament which uses the term in a technical fashion to denote a specific office or a vocation in society. A steward is one who has been given the responsibility for the management and service of something belonging to another, and his office pre-supposes a particular kind of trust on the part of the owner or master.

In the Old Testament the term was linked to Israel's king, who ruled God's people as His steward and so was accountable to God. A beautiful example of this is found in Psalm 8, which is a song of praise linking God's self-disclosure through creation to our vocation and ultimately to the royal model of stewardship (8:5-8). This royal interpretation of stewardship helps us to understand the first chapter of Genesis, the biblical text that most shapes our interpretation of creation stewardship and the one that is most widely misunderstood.

Another Old Testament image of stewardship is found in the creation account of Genesis 2. Here the image of our vocation provides a more organic and less monarchic interpretation of stewardship, i.e. it stresses our common bond with the rest of creation insofar as all creatures come 'out of the ground' and therefore share the same source. We are made of the same matter and therefore share the same origin. We are 'linked by substance'. As stewards we are *partners with* nature rather than *owners of* nature.

The whole account of Genesis 2 stresses the interrelatedness of creation, and in this context our role in creation is characterised by the vocational activity of farming or shepherding rather than royal dominion. In Genesis 2:16 mankind is clearly instructed to cultivate and care for the garden.

Many Christian scholars agree that the 'stewardship of creation' paradigm is the foundation and framework for a Christian ethical response to earth's environmental crisis. Yet before we act, we must refine and enlarge our understanding of stewardship in conversation with additional sources of human wisdom, particularly the natural sciences, secular environmental ethics and the emerging vision of sustainability.

## What about the 'end of the world'?

Conservative evangelical Christians in particular have long held apocalyptic visions of the future that include a fiery and cataclysmic end for the planet that may well be imminent. These views have been largely but not exclusively informed by statements made by the apostle Peter.

***'Most importantly, I want to remind you that in the last days scoffers will come, mocking the truth and following their own desires. <sup>4</sup> They will say, "What happened to the promise that Jesus is coming again? From before the times of our ancestors, everything has remained the same since the world was first created.<sup>5</sup> They deliberately forget that God made the heavens long ago by the word of his command, and he brought the earth out from the water and surrounded it with water. <sup>6</sup> Then he used the water to destroy the ancient world with a mighty flood. <sup>7</sup> And by the same word, the present heavens and earth have been stored up for fire. They are being kept for the day of judgment, when ungodly people will be destroyed.<sup>8</sup> But you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. <sup>9</sup> The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed but wants everyone to repent. <sup>10</sup> But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and the very elements themselves will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be found to deserve judgment.<sup>11</sup> Since everything around us is going to be destroyed like this, what holy and godly lives you should live, <sup>12</sup> looking forward to the day of God and hurrying it along. On that day, he will set the heavens on fire, and the elements will melt away in the flames. <sup>13</sup> But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness.***

– 2 Peter 3:3-13

These statements from Peter seem to challenge Paul's hopeful vision for creation (Romans 8) and suggest that the current earth is reserved for annihilation as part of God's final judgement. One way to deal with the apparent conflict is to assume that Peter and Paul disagree theologically on the fate of the world and some scholars are happy to make this assumption but it is highly unlikely that this is the case (see 2 Peter 3:15-16).

In their book *Let Creation Rejoice, Biblical Hope and Ecological Crisis*, Moo and White (2014: 113-130) offer an alternative interpretation that explores both the context of the passage as well as the 'borrowed' language of Peter found in the apocalyptic genre of the Old Testament. Based on their assessment the conclusion offered is that in this passage Peter is trying to create a heightened sense of urgency in the face of false teaching from 'scoffers' who deny both the return of the Lord and the judgement of God. His ultimate purpose is to emphasise a discontinuity between this present age and the one to come by clearly stating that things will not always be as they are now. There will be a return from the Lord. Judgment will come. The earth will be changed.

To do this he borrows imagery and language from the apocalyptic writings of the prophets and these should not be read literally but figuratively (e.g. when the prophets declare that 'the moon will turn to blood' and 'the stars fall from the sky' and 'the sun become sackcloth' they are creating urgency in the face of impending judgement that may well come in the form of invasion by foreign forces for instance but not necessarily in the form of an actual cataclysmic natural disaster).

Peter's statements about the 'elements melting' for example, serve the same purpose and have the same effect but need not be taken literally.

## Why has Creation Care, Environmental Concern and Eco-Justice been overlooked?

For much of Western Christianity, the doctrine of Creation has been eclipsed by a disproportionate emphasis on the doctrine of the Fall. This has resulted in God's inherently valuable handiwork being degraded into nothing more than man's bargain resource for profitable exploitation. All sense of wonder and awe over the splendour and beauty of creation is lost to a pre-occupation with personal, individual sin and the sacredness of creation as something God-inspired and affirmed is overshadowed by self-concern. The anthropocentric nature of modernism's emphasis on the consequences of sin (man's rebellion against God) has also overshadowed the consequences for the rest of creation, including non-human sentient beings with whom we share the planet.

The Eschatology of the modernist era saw nothing but spiritual decline and global destruction for the future of the world and consequently held out no hope for the present age. Rather it offered, as Brian McLaren puts it:

*'...a skyhook Second Coming, wrapping up the whole of creation like an empty candy wrapper and throwing it into the cosmic dumpster so that God can finally bring our souls to heaven, beyond time, beyond messy matter, beyond this creation entirely.'*

This area of Evangelical-dispensational theology was made popular by the *Left Behind* series of novels authored by Tim La Haye and Larry Jenkins. The books helped to reinforce the idea that there was nothing worth holding onto in the here and now as God intended to ultimately remove the believers who remained at the end of the age and destroy the earth. This generated large-scale abandonment of pursuits considered by many conservatives to be too 'worldly' including environmental activism and creation care. This line of thought also allowed for no continuity whatsoever between this present Creation and the highly anticipated new heavenly creation<sup>3</sup> and resulted in the Old Testament prophetic notion of *Shalom* and Reconciliation<sup>4</sup> being pushed forward *beyond* history into either a spiritualised heaven or a post-historic time-zone, somewhere between history and eternity.

By contrast, the theology of the post-modern era emphasises the present hope of the Kingdom of God that appears so central to the message of Jesus. In this present manifestation of the Kingdom sparrows matter, lilies of the field matter, in fact everything created by God matters, including people, who remain His priority but cannot lay claim to any exclusivity. This perspective recognises that the same forces that hurt and oppress the orphan and the widow also displace the songbirds and the trout i.e. greed, consumerism, indifference, selfishness, competition as well as a theology that cares for souls but has no regard for bodies, one that focuses on heaven at the expense of earth. As compassion and concern grows for oppressed and afflicted humanity, one automatically begins to become aware of the plight of other creatures within creation which are subject to the same brutality and harm.

We need to think of ourselves in terms of both our local environment and our relationship to other environments beyond the boundaries of our national / state designations. Environments remain interconnected despite man's attempt to segregate nations and states by drawing up borders and boundaries on a map. Smokestacks in Japan can kill Orcas in Puget Sound, runoff from farms in

<sup>3</sup> See Isaiah 65:17-25; 66:22-24; 52:1 John 21:20;

<sup>4</sup> *Shalom* (שָׁלוֹם) is a Hebrew word meaning *peace, Nothing missing, Nothing broken, wellbeing, and complete*, and used to mean *hello*, and *goodbye*. It can refer to either peace between two entities (especially between man and God or between two countries), or to the well-being, welfare or safety of an individual or a group of individuals. The notion of a tri-part Reconciliation between God, man and all of creation, characterised by *shalom*, was a predominant theme in the Prophetic writings of the Old Testament and was usually expressed metaphorically in terms of lions and lambs, children and serpents, swords and plowshares, spears and pruning hooks - See Isaiah ...

Pennsylvania can bury oysters in Chesapeake Bay and the pet trade in the USA can deplete rare parrot populations in Brazil<sup>5</sup>.

This realisation calls for greater consideration for one's neighbours (human and non-human) in terms of both time and space, with thought given to those who are literally 'downstream', 'downwind' and 'downhill' from us as well as those 'down-time' from us i.e. 'downstream' from us in history – the generations to come. Care must be given to ensure that the world we leave to our children and our children's children is not one deprived of the resources and pleasures we have enjoyed or one so polluted that it becomes unbearable and life-threatening.

The more we consider our Christian obligation toward our neighbours, the more seriously we will take our responsibility to steward creation.

## Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. Reflecting on your faith journey so far, how has your theology (the way you think about God) shaped your beliefs about and attitudes toward the planet?
2. If someone asked you why, as a Christian, you believe earth matters, how would you answer?
3. As 'stewards' of Creation what practical responsibilities might we have toward the rest of the natural world?
4. In what way does our responsible stewardship reflect the image and likeness of God to others as well as the rest of creation? What about God do we communicate to others when we care for creation responsibly?

## Memory Verse

### Genesis 1:27-28

***“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; 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”.***

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<sup>5</sup> While the ecological problems we face will certainly require nation-states to address them, those nation-states will have to be willing to give precedence to the environment and acknowledge the interconnectedness of our planetary system while relegating their national concerns to a lesser priority.