



The Just Love Guide To Environmental Theology

'We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.'

Romans 8:22-24

Reading the Bible, we can see that Jesus' life on Earth and sacrifice on the cross was centred on restoring relationships broken by sin. His death on the cross and resurrection restored our relationship with God – the way he treated those around him and the words of his parables teach us how to restore relationships with each other, and by his freshly revealed love for us and by the Holy Spirit our relationship with ourselves is being renewed and restored as we journey through our life learning what it means to be made in the image of God. As followers of Christ it seems obvious that we should be pursuing these relationships in every aspect of our lives; praying and reading the Bible daily, loving those around us at work or home, taking frequent rests – and so on.

However, one relationship, seemingly overlooked by many Christians, is that between us and creation itself. One only has to switch on the news to see the latest major issue facing the environment, whether it's a natural disaster, record pollution highs in air and water, another species gone extinct, global warming, or drought. None of this sounds like the Earth God made 'very good' we read of in Genesis 1 and 2, and it is clear how excessive consumption and carelessness have caused the damage to go this far. This document explores some of the theology and biblical ideas behind why and how we should be doing more in our personal lives and as humanity to bring the world closer to what God intended it to be.

1. Why is the World Here? Because it is Good, and it Brings Him Glory

*'But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you;
Or speak to the earth, and it will teach you,
or let the fish in the sea inform you.
Which of all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
In his hand is the life of every creature
and the breath of all mankind.'*

Job 12:7-10

In the beginning, we see in Genesis 1, that God lovingly made all things in the Universe, and even before humankind was made, we're told 'God saw that it was *good*.' God made all the stars, planets, the sun, the land, sea, plants and animals because they were good things to exist, and God being in his very nature good (Ex. 34:6, James 1:17) is pleased by their existence. We ourselves can admire a scenic view and appreciate its beauty, but only God, seeing the world in its entirety and all its intricacies can see just *how* good creation is. God made the world to please him, and to please all of its inhabitants, and for the sake of beauty and goodness itself. The addition of humans to this creation made it 'very good', however it's the *combination* of humans and creation that makes creation so good.

Not only does the goodness of the creation please God, but it also glorifies Him! There are countless verses that show how creation itself knows and calls out to God and declares his glory: Job 12:7-10, Psalm 96:11-13, and Psalm 19:1 are three of these. All of creation intimately knows its creator and has its own relationship with him. But because of the way it is treated it is 'waiting in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed' and is 'groaning as in the pains of childbirth' due to the 'bondage and decay' it's being subjected to. (Rom. 8)

The vastness and beauty of creation are also both a reflection of God and a physical declaration of his glory. Creation asks us the question: Who can deny God's glory, power and wisdom when all of this beauty is here? This is seen particularly clearly in the book of Job – when Job is angry, confused and feeling far from God, God reveals himself to Job not through a huge sign or obvious miracle, but through revealing how wonderfully incredible creation is. Seeing God as creator of all of this, from the tiniest of atoms to the ends of the universe, Job sees both how glorious and powerful God is for making it all, but also how much larger a perspective God has of his situation compared to him.

2. Does the Earth Belong to Us or Do We Belong to Creation?

As we've just explored, God made the world because it is good, it pleases Him and it brings him glory through revealing his wisdom, love and gentleness. Notice though that it doesn't appear he made creation 'as a gift' for us. If anything God made us for creation! Colossians 1:16 says 'all things have been created through him and for him'. Psalm 24:1 makes it clear; the 'Earth is the LORD's and all that is in it'. The Earth was made by God, for God, and is still God's precious possession - so if we want to serve God, then surely we must also serve that which he has lovingly made and cares deeply for as well? God 'did not create the Earth to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited' (Isaiah 45:13) but that doesn't mean he created it a) to be inhabited solely by us or b) to be exploited and abused by its inhabitants. God designed the Earth to be inhabited, but that wasn't the only reason he designed it at all (see part 1). One way to look at the situation might be that a landlord owns a house, and will allow others to live in it, but that house is still the landlord's property, and part of the agreement for living in the house is to take care of it and respect the landlord by doing so.

In Genesis God made man in his likeness so that we may 'rule over' the animals and all the land, and this single first command may be one big reason we've become so confused about our rights and responsibilities over the Earth – does rule over mean to do as we wish with? Or does it mean to be in charge of but loving it at the same time – as a loving parent could be said to 'rule over' their children, but in order to protect and help them? The trouble is, on its own the verse doesn't tell us much – it isn't necessarily clear how God intended for us to rule over it – just that we have to.

However if we put the verse into the context of the rest of the passage, everything points towards ruling selflessly and generously over the Earth. The words immediately preceding this command are that we are 'made in His image' and from what we see in the rest of Genesis 1, God is creative, loves the creation he's made and spends time appreciating it. He uses that which sets him and us apart from creation – wisdom, creativity, love and so much more - to *better* creation, and that is *why* we are made in his image – so that we can do the same! 'Let us make mankind in our image so they may rule over...' The Earth was made to be inhabited and we were made to inhabit the Earth – both made for each other, a two way relationship.

3. Does Sin Damage the World? How?

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the LORD said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them." Genesis 6: 5-7

Now that we see we are made for relationship with not only God and each other, but also with creation itself, we can explore what it is that is holding us back in this relationship. It might seem obvious – physically, we abuse the Earth's resources, damage the atmosphere, throw waste into oceans, rivers and across vast areas of land – but there's also a spiritual aspect to it. In Genesis 6, the story of Noah, God sees the wickedness of mankind, but doesn't just destroy the humans. As a result of human sin, *all* creatures were corrupted and had to be destroyed. While we were made in the image of God, we were also made out of the dust of the earth, and are as much a part of creation as we are set apart from it, so it is inevitable that as sin has entered into the part of creation that is us, the harmonious relationship God intended to exist between us and creation we see described in the previous section breaks down and creation suffers as a result.

This link between sin and creation is seen everywhere in scripture: the ground is cursed because of Adam's sin in Eden; in Romans 8:18-22 Paul talks about creation groaning against its will waiting for the children of God to reveal themselves; Deuteronomy 28 describes a curse that will come upon the land of Israel, damaging its crops and animals if the people are disobedient; and in countless other stories of droughts, famines and plagues.

This might now seem quite a hopeless situation, since we aren't perfect and there doesn't seem much chance for creation to ever be free from sin, but there is hope! The very same hope that we have, in Jesus! Perhaps the most famous verse from the Bible, John 3:16 says 'For God so loved the *world* he sent his one and only son...' – in Jesus' sacrifice, our sin was taken away and our relationship with God restored, and in doing so, our relationship with creation is also being restored! Jesus didn't come to die *just* for us, but for *all* of creation! By giving us freedom from sin, he's given us the freedom to love creation again and move towards restoring our relationship with it towards what God intended it to be! Just as we must repent against our sins against God and accept responsibility for what we have done, we must also accept that we are responsible for the state of creation for God to restore or relationship with it. Our relationship with God is crucial to our

relationship with creation but our relationship to creation – just as in Genesis 1-3 – is crucial to our relationship with God.

4. How do we Love The Earth Without Loving Earthly Things?

Loving and caring for the Earth is clearly a large part of what it means to be human, and what it means to be a Christian – but how do we do this while still bearing in mind verses such as Colossians 3:2: ‘Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things’ and 1 John 2:15: ‘Do not love the world or anything of the world. If anyone loves the world then God is not in them.’? These seem to encourage us to *avoid* loving things on earth and focussing on Godly things alone, which seems to clash directly with our commission in Genesis to rule over the earth and all creatures in it. In the psalms we see plenty of examples of writers admiring creation, calling it beautiful and incredible. Isn’t this loving the world?

What we can see in the psalms is that creation points the writers towards God, and their love and appreciation of it brings them closer to Him. Colossians 3:2 tells us to keep our minds on things above, not on earthly things – this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t care about the world we’ve been placed in! We can, and must care for the planet, but this verse is saying that it is our heart and our *motivation* for caring that is important. We have to make sure we are loving God through our love for creation, and not loving creation for what we can gain from it ourselves. The love of the world described in 1 John 2:15 as something to avoid is a more material love – loving the world for what it gives us, how it makes us feel, and becoming attached to it to the extent of fearing leaving it to be with God – this still isn’t the relationship God designed us to have with the earth. This is supported by other verses in the New Testament – for example Matthew 16:23, Psalm 119:36-37, and Luke 12:15 – which are more explicit about the sin of loving earthly things and property, and being selfish. In reality it is this greed over resources and our freedom to use them that has *caused* significant damage to the planet. Again it seems our love for creation *must* come naturally out of our love for God and a desire to serve him, otherwise we will find ourselves becoming attached to this world and losing sight of the very God who made it all. We were made by God, to rule over creation, since God made it to be good, and doing so glorifies Him.

5. Why Didn’t Jesus Talk About Creation?

A reasonable question to ask, since he is the very foundation of our faith, is why didn’t Jesus talk about creation care in any of his teaching? We hear him talk a huge amount about social justice, loving God, loving people, particularly the widowed, the orphaned, the homeless and the sick – but hardly anything directly about creation care. There are a few answers to this question; the first and perhaps most obvious is that in Jesus’ time the earth was not in the crisis we are in now. The world was nowhere close to being as polluted as it is now, there were less people to feed (estimated 400 million compared to the current 7.5 billion!), there was little to no deforestation, and there were no big landfills. Jesus preached messages relevant to the people he was preaching to – so its not surprising in his teaching he didn’t directly tell people to care more for the environment!

Secondly, our actions with regard to the environment have a HUGE impact on other people, and ourselves. Global warming has been found to have strong likelihoods to have caused and decreased crop yields, and made temperatures globally more extreme. The World Health Organisation estimate

that *7 million* people a year die prematurely due to pollution. The UN has estimated that as many as 122 million more people could end up living in extreme poverty by 2030 as the result of climate change. We've also seen more frequent extreme weather events than ever before, and they are more damaging than they have been in the past. All of this affects people, and it affects those far from us most harshly due to an already difficult climate and poor infrastructure to deal with a more extreme climate. Climate change has been linked to wars, slavery, refugee crises and extreme poverty. Jesus definitely talked about loving people, listing it as the commandment second only to loving God, but knowingly contributing to this global issue is doing so much harm, and by taking more care with our relationship with the environment, we can love our global neighbours so much more!

Finally, returning to John 3:16, God sent his son because he so loved the *world!* Jesus death was the beginning of the restoration of mankind's relationship not only with God but also to creation.