



renew
our
world



MAKING A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE



DAVE BOOKLESS &
RENEW OUR WORLD







MAKING A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

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RENEW OUR WORLD**



We are united in believing that now is a critical time for the world, what the Bible calls a *kairos* moment, and that God is calling the worldwide church to listen, pray and act. There is an urgency that compels us because we see God's creation groaning, and people suffering, in every part of the world.

This little book has been written by one person¹, but it has been informed, shaped and revised by Christians from every inhabited continent, who have prayed, shared, listened and worked together. We are from different countries and different Christian traditions, but we share a passion for:

- God's word (the Bible, and Jesus the Living Word),
- God's people (the church, but also all human beings because every person is made in God's image), and
- God's world (this fragile, beautiful and complex planet we depend on, share, and are called to care for).

¹ Dave Bookless was born and lived in India until the age of ten and has lived in the UK since. For the past 30 years he has been based in a multicultural suburb of London where people of Indian, Somali, Sri Lankan and Pakistani origin form the majority communities. Dave is passionate about applying the Good News of Jesus to every part of life. He is married with four grown daughters, is an ordained pastor, has a PhD in theology, has written several books (now translated into multiple languages), and has spoken in over 40 countries across six continents. He works for A Rocha International, an international Christian conservation organisation, and has spent much of the past 10 years co-leading a global network for the Lausanne Movement and World Evangelical Alliance, including organising creation care conferences in all 12 regions of the world.

QUESTIONS



**WHERE ARE YOU
SENSING SIGNS OF
CREATION GROANING,
AND PEOPLE SUFFERING,
IN YOUR LOCAL AREA OR
NATIONAL CONTEXT?**

**HOW DO YOU THINK GOD
FEELS ABOUT THIS?**

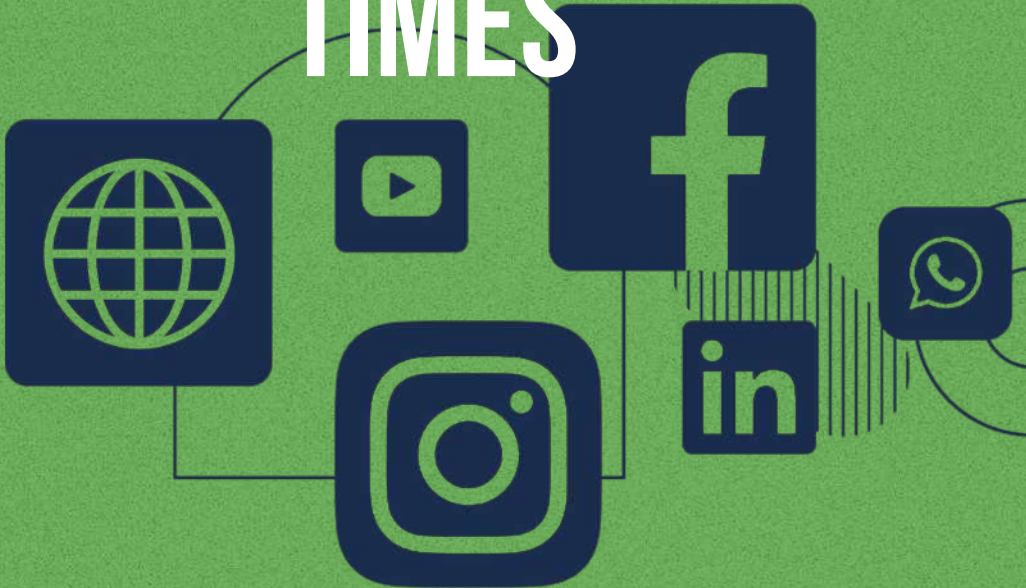
**HOW IS GOD CALLING
YOU AND YOUR CHURCH
TO RESPOND?**

As we share our stories, some of which we include here, and read reports from global bodies, a few of which we'll summarise briefly, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. What is happening is already a tragedy on an unimaginable scale. Yet, our message is not one of despair but ultimately one of hope. As you read through this short book it will take you on a journey. You may find yourself facing uncomfortable new facts or being reminded of what you know but are avoiding. You will be taken back to the Bible, to see how the story of what we see around the world today fits within God's big story linking Genesis to Revelation, creation to new creation. You will be encouraged to ask questions, to reflect about your own choices and your church or organisation's priorities. And finally, you will read stories of encouragement and hope, rooted in scripture and in God's work today all around the world, that we pray will inspire you to get involved in caring for creation.



SECTION ONE

CONTEXT: WE LIVE IN 'INTERESTING TIMES'






1

BETTER CONNECTED?

Think back to how your grandparents lived when they were young. It's likely that their lives have been very different from yours. They may have lived in one local area, perhaps even in the same house, all their lives. Today, that is becoming very unusual. They are more likely to have lived in a rural community than you are, and quite possibly in a place where their ancestors lived for many generations. Today, more than half of the world's population lives in cities, where people from diverse cultures, languages, tribes and religions encounter each other on a daily basis. We have moved from being deeply rooted, to a mobile and rootless global culture.



If your grandparents travelled outside their own country it was most likely during wartime, either in the armed forces or as refugees, or possibly as settlers seeking a better life. International travel for work and leisure is a modern luxury.

Even seeing other countries on TV or online, which we take for granted, is only two generations old. Before that, for nearly everybody, anything beyond the local was strange, exotic, and filtered through the words and pictures of others. Today we can travel the world with a click, air travel is – at least for some – more affordable and accessible, and our screens bring glimpses of other places and peoples right to us.

In Acts 17:26-27, the apostle Paul, preaching in Athens, says: 'From one man he [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.' This implies that (as in the Old Testament) we do not relate to God in a vacuum but from a particular place or context – something many indigenous communities understand very well.

QUESTIONS



DOES IT MATTER THAT SO MANY OF US TODAY
DO NOT HAVE THOSE 'ROOTS' IN ONE PLACE?

WHAT DO PAUL'S WORDS MEAN FOR PEOPLE TODAY
WHO ARE REFUGEES, ECONOMIC MIGRANTS, OR
SIMPLY LIVING A LONG WAY FROM HOME?

WHERE DO YOU THINK OF AS 'HOME'?

DOES YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LAND AND A
SENSE OF BELONGING OR 'ROOTS' HAVE ANYTHING
TO DO WITH YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

IS IT HARDER TO FIND GOD WHEN YOU DO NOT HAVE
DEEP ROOTS IN A PARTICULAR PLACE OR COMMUNITY?

2

BETTER INFORMED?

Mobile phones, WiFi, multiple TV channels, social media and the internet have transformed how we communicate. We can answer questions in seconds, which used to require visits to a library and searching through endless books. Sometimes we may feel overwhelmed with the quantity of data, the expectation of an instant reply, and social media apps that bombard us with news and views.

How do we know what to believe? Those who own newspapers and TV stations control how stories are presented and which stories we do or don't hear. Governments can interfere with media organisations to silence certain stories and give a high profile to others. Our social media often becomes an 'echo chamber', where we select 'friends' who agree with what we already think, and we're then shocked to discover that not everybody shares our views. Two areas where this has happened a lot are around climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic.

While the world's scientific communities have been united on the serious threats from both climate change and Covid-19, many of us get our news from Facebook, WhatsApp or media sources with their own agendas. This can cause confusion and undermine public confidence about what is really happening. Of course, fake news has always existed. Governments and those who oppose them have used propaganda to give their version of the story and to suppress others. However, today some say we are in a post-truth world, where people prefer to believe what is convenient and comfortable, rather than what is true.



QUESTIONS



WHAT'S YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIAL MEDIA
AND WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR NEWS FROM?

HOW DO WE KNOW WHO TO BELIEVE AND TRUST?

CAN WE ASSUME THAT CHRISTIANS
ALWAYS TELL THE TRUTH?

AS HAPPENED IN THE ERA OF COLONIALISM,
COULD IT BE THAT WELL-FUNDED CHRISTIAN
ORGANISATIONS STILL SOMETIMES ABUSE THEIR
POWER FOR CULTURAL AND POLITICAL ENDS?

HOW DO THESE WORDS OF JESUS APPLY? 'WATCH
OUT FOR FALSE PROPHETS. THEY COME TO YOU
IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING, BUT INWARDLY THEY ARE
FEROCIOUS WOLVES', AND 'BY THEIR FRUIT YOU
WILL RECOGNISE THEM' (MATTHEW 7:15, 20)



3

INCREASINGLY UNSTABLE

In many parts of the world, the late twentieth century was a time of comparative stability and optimism. After the terrors of two world wars, the end of old empires, and independence from colonialism for many countries, came a time when institutions such as the United Nations and flourishing global trade brought an increase in living standards, better healthcare and education, and peace in many places. Of course, this was never true for everybody, and now we are finding that the 21st century is turning into a time of great uncertainty, instability and inequality all over the world. We can see this in a number of ways:

1. SOCIAL INEQUALITY IS GROWING.

The world's richest one per cent have as much wealth as the rest of the world put together (Oxfam, 2023), and the gap is widening every year. The world's economic system makes it easy for the super-rich to avoid paying taxes and to influence policies. Meanwhile, research suggests that levels of happiness within a country get lower as the gap between rich and poor widens.² Where inequality grows, some groups always suffer worse, usually women, children, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities

and indigenous communities. In many countries, people living in rural areas can no longer make a living from the land, and so cities grow rapidly as people seek livelihoods, but very few ever prosper. Of course, other factors including conflict, instability, unjust structures, and the media-fuelled myth of urban prosperity also add to the growth of cities. More than half of the world's population is now living in urban areas. Most join the urban poor, uprooted from their ancestral lands and vulnerable to being exploited by landlords, employers, lenders and radical and extremist groups.

2 Harvard Business Review, 2016: <https://hbr.org/2016/01/income-inequality-makes-whole-countries-less-happy>

2. FINANCIAL SYSTEMS ARE DANGEROUSLY RISKY AND NOT FIT FOR PURPOSE.

When the 2008 global economic crash took place, many ordinary people lost their homes and savings, while big banks and wealthy financiers were largely bailed out by governments. Today's global economy leads to growing inequality, environmental destruction and, in some places, the funding of conflict and division. Global capitalism is based on the idea that growth can continue without limits, yet we live in a world that has limits – sometimes called planetary boundaries – and we cannot keep exploiting and destroying, along with producing waste in ever-increasing amounts, without dangerous risks. The Covid-19 pandemic is a clear illustration of the weakness of an economic system that does not count the true cost of exploiting nature, and that cannot cope with a tiny virus spreading rapidly due to global travel and trade. It illustrates that everything in our world is connected to everything else. We cannot destroy nature without it having an impact on economics and society.

3. POLITICAL EXTREMISM IS INCREASING.

When societies and economies are unstable, people look for groups to blame. In the Roman Empire, Christians were victimised and blamed for plagues and military losses. In Nazi Germany, Jewish, Roma (Gypsy) and LGBT+ people, those with disabilities and others were persecuted. Today too, populist, authoritarian 'strong men' seek to take advantage of uncertainty and exploit differences. Sometimes this may include 'weaponising' differences in religion or language, or might lead to indigenous groups being displaced from ancestral lands. Numerous countries have seen a shift away from democracy, an increase in the unaccountable power of big companies or the state, attacks on critics and journalists, and a tendency to victimise particular groups as 'the problem', often on ethnic or religious grounds. This leads to a rise in nationalism, ethnocentrism and xenophobia (fear of foreigners), which is a major cause of the rapid increase in migration and refugees in many places.

QUESTIONS



**WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INSTABILITY
AND POLITICAL EXTREMISM WHERE YOU LIVE?**

HOW ARE CHURCHES RESPONDING?

**DO THEY TEACH THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE ABOUT GOD'S HEART FOR JUSTICE AND
FOR THE POOR (PSALM 82:3, ISAIAH 1:17, MICAH 6:8, MATTHEW 25:31-46)?**

**ARE THEY GETTING INVOLVED IN ACTION AROUND THESE ISSUES, PERHAPS
WITH PROGRAMMES TO HELP PEOPLE LIVING IN POVERTY AND REFUGEES?**

**DO CHURCHES HAVE THE FREEDOM TO SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER,
OR DO THEY FACE PERSECUTION IF THEY DON'T FOLLOW THE
GOVERNMENT'S LINE OR THEIR SOCIETY'S CONVENTIONS?**

**ARE POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS HELD IN YOUR CHURCH, IS YOUR
CHURCH DOMINATED BY ONE POLITICAL FACTION, OR IS POLITICS
SEEN AS SOMETHING CHRISTIANS SHOULD AVOID?**

**WHAT DOES THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST AND HIS MESSAGE
OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD SAY ABOUT THESE ISSUES?**

4

SHAKEN BY COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic turned our world upside down and made existing difficulties much worse. It has been described as everybody being in the same storm but in very different boats. Some countries had excellent healthcare for all, whereas in others only the rich could afford treatment. In many rural areas and less wealthy countries, it was difficult to measure the number of cases and deaths from Covid-19. While rich nations offered economic support to those who could not work, in most parts of the world, there was terrible suffering for those whose income suddenly disappeared.

What about the church? For most of us, church changed drastically during the pandemic. Many churches moved online. Some found this brought a new virtual congregation, but post-Covid many churches have struggled to get people back into the building. Across the world, churches were at the heart of their community's response by providing food for the hungry, caring for the isolated and comforting the grieving. However, there was also confusion and disagreement among Christians.

QUESTIONS



WHAT QUESTIONS OR ISSUES DID THE PANDEMIC LEAD TO IN YOUR CHURCH?

HAVE ATTITUDES CHANGED OVER TIME?

WERE THERE QUESTIONS ABOUT WHETHER COVID-19 CAME FROM, OR IF IT WAS A SIGN FROM, GOD?

DID IT LEAD TO DISCUSSIONS ABOUT WHEN WE SHOULD OBEY OR DISOBEY GOVERNING AUTHORITIES?

DID THE INEQUALITIES REVEALED BY THE PANDEMIC LEAD TO TALK OR ACTION FOR THE VULNERABLE AND MARGINALISED?

The problem with suggesting the pandemic was God's judgement, or a sign of the end times, is Christian history. Ever since Jesus ascended to heaven there have been times when believers became convinced that the end was near. Sometimes they left houses or jobs to wait for Jesus. Often, they stopped engaging with the rest of the world, stopped loving their neighbours or caring for widows and orphans, and simply focused on prayer and waiting. So far, they have been wrong every time. In Matthew 24:36-44, Jesus warns us that the Son of Man will return like a thief in the night and nobody can know the day or hour, not the angels nor even the Son. Rather than looking for signs, Jesus challenges us to always be ready.

So, what does it mean to be ready? In the next chapter, Matthew 25, Jesus tells three stories to explain. First, the wise and foolish virgins, or bridesmaids, where to be foolish is to let your lamp go out, and to be wise is to keep it burning. Next, a master goes on a long journey and gives three servants bags of gold to look after. Two manage to double the gold they are given while the master is away, while the third buries the gold. When the master returns, he commends the wisdom of those who used their 'talents' of gold to make more, whereas the third servant is described as lazy and worthless, and thrown out into the darkness.



The final story is the last judgement, where people are divided like sheep and goats. Here, the meaning of all three parables becomes clear. To know Jesus and to be ready for his second coming, is to be seen in feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, and visiting prisoners.

In other words, the way to be ready for Jesus' return and to avoid God's judgement, is to give ourselves in service to a broken and needy world. We keep our spiritual lamps alight by shining as lights in the world, transforming it with the compassion and justice of Jesus. We multiply the talents God has given us as we pour ourselves out for his kingdom in costly service, rather than burying ourselves in church meetings waiting for Jesus to come back. We prove ourselves to be sheep of Jesus, the good Shepherd, by seeing and serving him in the outcast and vulnerable, the broken and hurting.

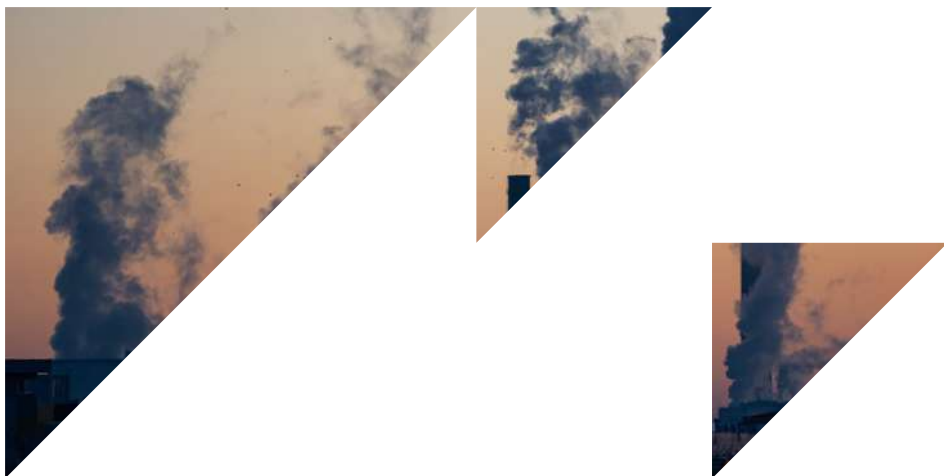
Thinking back to the time of Covid, God will not judge us by how well we kept our buildings open or by how slick our webcasts were, but by whether we spent ourselves in costly service to Jesus, shining his light into dark corners, loving and serving the doubting and the dying, caring for the broken, the bereaved and the beaten-down.

There are important lessons Christians can learn from the pandemic. Here are a few that believers around the world have discerned as they have read the

scriptures, prayed, and sought to understand the signs of the times:

We are not in control. Human beings today like to think we can control our own destiny. We want to believe that, with education, hard work, technology, medicine and science, we can prevent the problems that humanity has suffered in the past. We deceive ourselves into thinking that we understand the world enough to anticipate every problem and deal with it. This is fuelled by the myth of progress, that things will get better and better, that we can expect incomes and living standards to keep growing, and that a globalised economic system will ultimately be good news for all.

In reality, life is fragile and depends on God's grace. In James 4:13-15 we read: 'Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'" The Bible and coronavirus both challenge the myth of human control over nature. God created us to depend on him and also to depend on God's creation, where our thriving and even our survival depend on how well we care for the world.



OUR HEALTH DEPENDS ON NATURE'S HEALTH:

A tiny, invisible virus brought chaos to humanity, destroying economies, families and lives. For over 30 years, experts have been warning that our destruction of forests and over-exploitation of wildlife for food exposes us to 'viral reservoirs' in wild animal populations that can cross over and infect people, and that it is inevitable that we would see global pandemics.³ We should have seen earlier outbreaks of Ebola, SARS, West Nile Virus, Zika, MERS and even HIV as warnings of what would come. Now it is too late. We cannot blame God for this or see it as direct judgement. Rather, we should blame ourselves. It is we, not God, who have greedily exploited ecosystems and made ourselves vulnerable.

The Christian gospel is profoundly about relationships: with God, ourselves, each other, and also with creation. Ecology is the study of relationships between organisms and their surroundings. In that sense, Christianity is a profoundly ecological faith. When we damage any of our core relationships, through selfishness and greed, we suffer consequences, because those relationships are deeply interconnected in the web of life. Our relationships with God, with our neighbours all over the world, and with the soil, rainforests and creatures God has entrusted to our care, are all linked. As we destroy the fabric that all life depends on, we see ecological collapse: all our most important relationships breaking down. God is powerfully reminding us that we are not in control and that we depend on his creation.

³ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/experts-warned-pandemic-decades-ago-why-not-ready-for-coronavirus/>

WE ARE CALLED TO LAMENT:

The biblical response to disasters that overcome us and to the sin we are so deeply infected with, is to lament. Biblical worship always includes not only 'praise and worship' but also cries of lament, complaint and mourning (such as in over 30 per cent of the Psalms). We should lament as we remember the figures of Covid-19 infections and deaths, particularly amongst the poor and vulnerable. While there is still debate about the direct source of the Covid-19 pandemic, we do know that the original virus (whether or not it was mutated in a lab) came from wild animals. Scientists believe we are vulnerable to future virus outbreaks and pandemics as we continue to destroy wildlife habitats and exploit wild animal populations. We should lament our human destruction of God's good creation which we were asked to guard and protect, and the terrible consequences both for God's creatures and for human suffering.

Lament is not simply feeling upset or guilty. It is the cry of those who know they are part of the problem to an almighty, all-loving God who alone can change hearts. It is a groaning from our deepest core at the scale of problems we cannot solve. In Romans 8 we read of a triple 'groaning'. In verse 22, 'the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.' In the following verse we, as believers, 'groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.' Finally, in verse 26, God's Holy Spirit 'himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.' These three groans are intertwined because this groaning reveals the interconnection between creation, people and God's Spirit. Today we experience great pain and longing, but as the pain becomes more intense, the hope of deliverance and future joy is ever closer. As we lament so many deaths from Covid-19, so many avoidable extinctions, so much trauma from the climate crisis, so our hearts as Christians are intimately tied both to creation's suffering, and to God's Spirit, who breathes life into all creation, suffers alongside as comforter and intercessor, and yet also brings hope.

Lament is not an end in itself. It should lead to action, as God stirs us up to be the change we want to see in the world (Proverbs 3:6; 2 Chronicles 7:14). That brings us to the next point...



WE ARE CALLED TO BUILD A BETTER WORLD ON BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS:

After the pandemic, many people were desperate to return to 'normal', but it was normal life that led to the pandemic! A global economic system which encourages over-exploiting natural resources along with rapidly increasing international travel both allowed the virus to emerge and spread rapidly around the world. The pandemic revealed deep injustices and inequalities that already existed but that we should not allow to remain. Do we want a world where many work long hours, often separated from their families, to make money they cannot enjoy, alienated

from God's creation and from other people? Do we want a world where shopping malls and traffic jams have become the main things people look forward to? The Bible presents a very different vision of 'the good life' to that promised by politicians and advertising campaigns. Romans 12:2 says, 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will'. Much of the rest of this book will be about that vision, and what it means as God's people to seek to bring it to birth here and now.

'DO NOT CONFORM TO THE PATTERN OF THIS WORLD, BUT BE



BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND'



QUESTIONS



HOW DO YOU REACT TO THESE LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC?

ARE THERE SOME THAT CHALLENGE YOU PARTICULARLY?

HOW DO WE WORK TOGETHER AS THE BODY OF CHRIST, WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN CHURCHES, TO SEEK GOD'S WILL IN OUR SOCIETIES, OUR NATIONS, AND GOD'S WORLD?

5

ENVIRONMENTALLY CHAOTIC

Before we turn to the wonderful biblical vision that is central to this book, there is one more aspect of our context that we must examine. The world we live in and the ecological systems we depend on are changing rapidly. Most of the other challenges we face (social injustice, economic inequality, human migration, nationalism, the threat of future pandemics) also have roots in the massive environmental changes taking place in the way the planet supports human and non-human life.

Imagine that our planet, along with more than eight billion people who live on it and the millions of other species that share it, is a giant spaceship. Like the International Space Station (ISS), it is floating in space and contains all that is needed for life to exist and thrive: air, water, food, warmth, plants, minerals and more. It is, as God reminds us in Genesis 1, 'very good'. In fact, it is amazing! No other planet has yet been found that has the perfect, delicate balance of heat and cooling, plants to recycle carbon dioxide and turn it into oxygen, circulating currents in the oceans and atmosphere, and an astonishing

variety of simple and complex life forms.

Yet, today, spaceship earth is in trouble. Many of the planet's complex and delicate systems are showing signs of breakdown. We are running out of space for human beings, and particularly for the kind of lifestyle many people aspire to. We are putting pressure on our home's carrying capacity, scrambling for the limited amount of food and water, gasping for clean air, with some panicking, messing about with the controls and leading to danger for all on board.

What makes all of this so difficult is that, firstly, it is not just one problem but a whole series of interlocking problems, and secondly, these are global issues, and one country on its own cannot make things right. We have to work together. This book is not a science textbook⁴, so won't go into detail on the environmental problems we face, but instead attempts to outline what they are and why they matter as simply, clearly and accurately as possible.

⁴ *A Christian Guide to Environmental Issues*, by Martin & Margot Hodson (BRF, 2021) covers both science and faith; *Saving Us* by Katharine Hayhoe (One Signal, 2021) focuses on climate change and how to talk about it

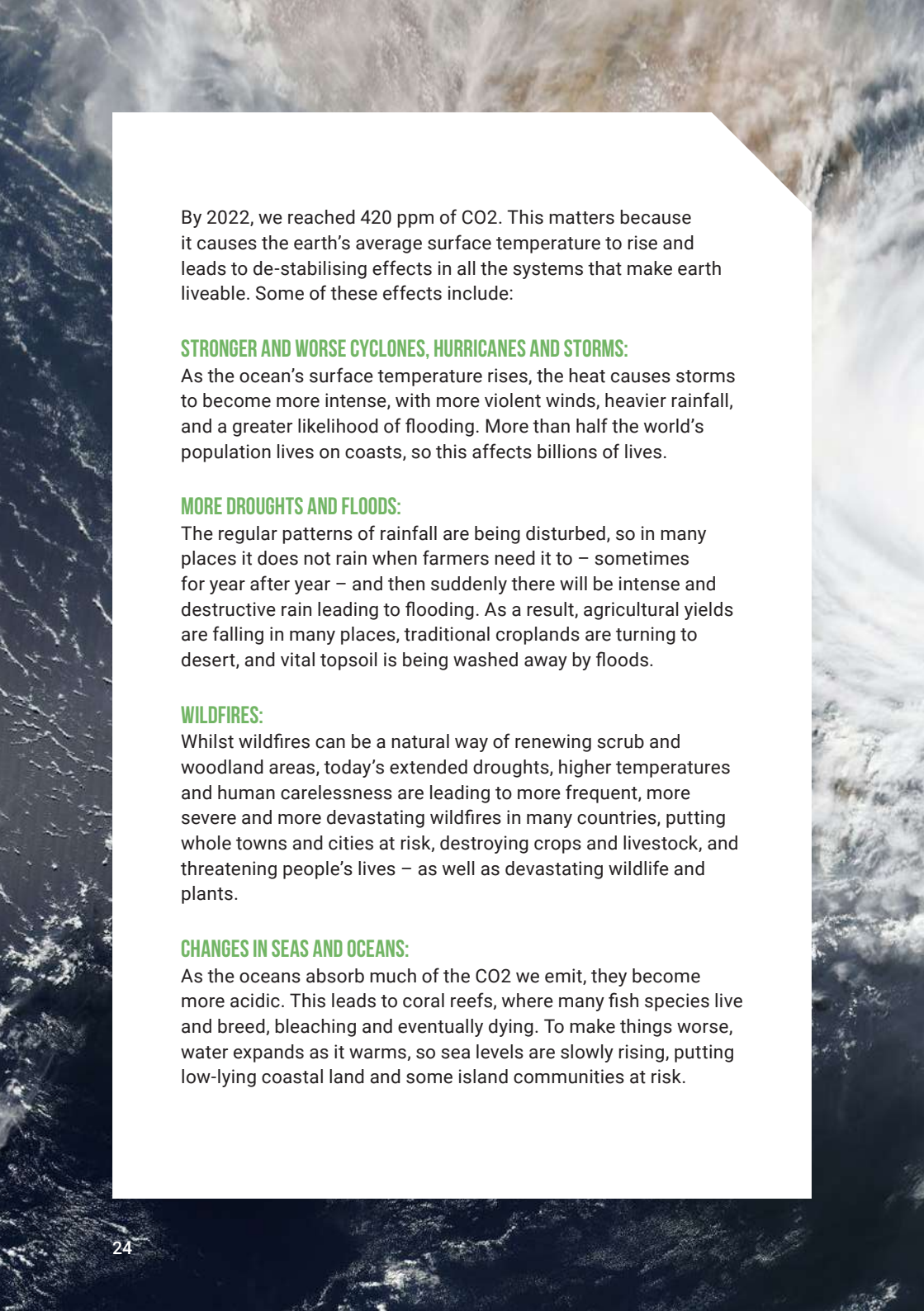
CLIMATE CRISIS:

Ever since humans discovered that burning coal, oil or gas provided a powerful and concentrated source of energy to fuel machines, we have been releasing extra greenhouse gases into the atmosphere at a rapid rate. The earth is surrounded by a blanket of gases that are vital for regulating its temperature: if they weren't there, we would freeze, and if they get too thick, we will overheat. As far back as we can measure, there have been around 280 ppm (parts per million) of carbon dioxide (CO2) in the upper atmosphere, and that has regulated the earth's temperature perfectly for life to exist. Since the industrial revolution, the ppm of CO2 has been climbing. If you were born in 1960 it had reached about 317 ppm and then it rocketed...



- 1970 = 326 PPM**
- 1980 = 339 PPM**
- 1990 = 354 PPM**
- 2000 = 370 PPM**
- 2010 = 390 PPM**
- 2022 = 420 PPM**





By 2022, we reached 420 ppm of CO₂. This matters because it causes the earth's average surface temperature to rise and leads to de-stabilising effects in all the systems that make earth liveable. Some of these effects include:

STRONGER AND WORSE CYCLONES, HURRICANES AND STORMS:

As the ocean's surface temperature rises, the heat causes storms to become more intense, with more violent winds, heavier rainfall, and a greater likelihood of flooding. More than half the world's population lives on coasts, so this affects billions of lives.

MORE DROUGHTS AND FLOODS:

The regular patterns of rainfall are being disturbed, so in many places it does not rain when farmers need it to – sometimes for year after year – and then suddenly there will be intense and destructive rain leading to flooding. As a result, agricultural yields are falling in many places, traditional croplands are turning to desert, and vital topsoil is being washed away by floods.

WILDFIRES:

Whilst wildfires can be a natural way of renewing scrub and woodland areas, today's extended droughts, higher temperatures and human carelessness are leading to more frequent, more severe and more devastating wildfires in many countries, putting whole towns and cities at risk, destroying crops and livestock, and threatening people's lives – as well as devastating wildlife and plants.

CHANGES IN SEAS AND OCEANS:

As the oceans absorb much of the CO₂ we emit, they become more acidic. This leads to coral reefs, where many fish species live and breed, bleaching and eventually dying. To make things worse, water expands as it warms, so sea levels are slowly rising, putting low-lying coastal land and some island communities at risk.

THREATS TO FOOD PRODUCTION:

One of the main ways communities experience the climate crisis is through changes to agriculture, fishing and food production in their areas. Unreliable rainfall (too much or too little), soil erosion, plagues of pest species (locusts, rats, beetles), chemical pollution (in soil and water), and rising temperatures (leading to desertification) are among the many symptoms of this. Whereas previous generations could predict when to plant and when to reap, today many feel helpless and confused.

MELTING GLACIERS AND ICE-CAPS:

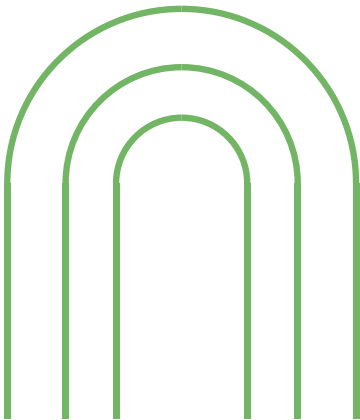
As the world warms up, the fresh water trapped in glaciers and ice-caps starts to melt. Many people depend for drinking water on rivers fed by glaciers in the Himalayas, the Andes and other mountain ranges. As these glaciers disappear, water shortages increase, and the threat of conflict between countries that share rivers or lakes grows. In addition, temperatures are rising fastest near the North and South poles, causing massive amounts of ice from Antarctica and Greenland to melt, adding further to rising sea levels, and changing the chemical balance of the oceans.

TIPPING POINTS:

When systems become overloaded, they can break down catastrophically, causing a domino effect where other things start to fall apart too. There are many examples of how climate change is starting to spiral out of control. For example, as warmer temperatures cause frozen soil (permafrost) to melt in the arctic, this releases methane gas, a far more potent greenhouse gas than CO₂, speeding up the warming process. Similarly, ice reflects the sun's heat back, but as it melts more solar heat energy is absorbed by oceans, warming them further. The chemical and temperature changes in the ocean caused by a warming climate may well lead to changes in the massive ocean currents, affecting weather and rainfall patterns all over the world.

Hosea 4 speaks about human sin and unfaithfulness to God, and verse three states:

**‘BECAUSE OF THIS
THE LAND DRIES UP,
AND ALL WHO LIVE
IN IT WASTE AWAY;
THE BEASTS OF THE
FIELD, THE BIRDS IN
THE SKY AND THE
FISH IN THE SEA
ARE SWEEP AWAY.’**



QUESTIONS



**WHICH EFFECTS OF
CLIMATE BREAKDOWN ARE
YOU SEEING IN YOUR LOCAL
OR NATIONAL CONTEXT?**

**DO PEOPLE LOCALLY LINK
THIS TO GLOBAL CLIMATE
CHANGE OR JUST SEE
THE LOCAL CHANGES?**

**IS THERE ANY
UNDERSTANDING OF HOW
BURNING FOSSIL FUELS IS
DRIVING THIS PROCESS?**

**HOW DO YOU FEEL, AND
HOW DO OTHERS IN YOUR
AREA FEEL, ABOUT THE
INJUSTICE THAT RICH
COUNTRIES ARE DOING
MOST OF THE POLLUTING,
WHILE POORER COUNTRIES
ARE SUFFERING MOST OF
THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS
OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS?**

BIODIVERSITY CRISIS:

If climate change was our only environmental problem, it would still be incredibly difficult and complex to tackle, but in fact it is just one of many. It receives most coverage because it leads to major weather-related disasters, and because it acts as a 'threat multiplier', making other existing problems much worse. However, many experts believe that the rapid decline in the world's wildlife populations is an even greater threat. The facts are shocking and deeply uncomfortable. Since 1970, about 70 per cent of the world's wildlife populations have disappeared. That is a massive amount in a very short time. It means that many species have declined so much that they are now in serious danger of becoming extinct in the next few decades. These include iconic species such as the tiger, polar bear, orangutan and rhinoceros. Many more everyday species have declined rapidly too.

The massive loss of biodiversity is happening in every part of the world. Intensive agriculture, with pesticides and fertilisers, leads to 'monocultures', where nothing grows except one crop. This brings quick profits, but it destroys the health of the ecosystem, leading to long-term soil infertility, the disappearance of insects, birds and animals that can naturally control pest species and help pollination, and often to erosion and eventual desertification. In the seas and oceans, which over one billion people depend on for their main source of protein, overfishing has led to catastrophic crashes in fish populations. Plastic waste – particularly microplastics – are found in even the most remote ocean depths. Climate change is leading to the oceans becoming more acidic, causing coral reefs to bleach and die. On land, deforestation, often driven by industrial-scale production of meat, palm-oil and soya, and by mining, leads to some of the most biodiverse and unique wildlife habitats being fragmented or destroyed, and adds to the climate crisis as trees naturally absorb carbon dioxide.

QUESTIONS



IN GENESIS 1, GOD LOOKS AT CREATION WITH LOVE AND WE READ REPEATEDLY: 'GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD.' CAN YOU THINK OF SPECIES THAT HAVE DECLINED OR DISAPPEARED IN YOUR AREA?

HOW DOES THAT MAKE YOU FEEL?

HOW DO YOU THINK GOD FEELS ABOUT THIS?

DO YOU SEE YOURSELF AS PART OF NATURE, OR SEPARATE FROM IT?

The decline in wildlife populations matters for many reasons. Our own food systems often depend on pollination and pest-control by wildlife. As pollinators decline and disappear, including insects, bats and birds, this could threaten some of the world's most important food crops. Also, all living things are interconnected, and as one disappears, it damages the whole. Think of an item of clothing with a loose thread – if you pull the thread and keep going, eventually the whole thing falls apart. Biodiversity (the variety of life) is a source of foods, medicines, clean air, shelter, raw materials for clothing and homes, pest-control, climate-regulation, soil fertility and erosion control, flood defences and much more.

Sometimes people say that caring for wildlife is a luxury for the wealthy, whereas the poor care only about where their next meal is coming from. Dr Stella Simiyu, a Kenyan botanist and committed Christian, sees it differently:

'THE RURAL POOR DEPEND DIRECTLY ON THE NATURAL RESOURCE BASE. THIS IS WHERE THEIR PHARMACY IS, THIS IS WHERE THEIR SUPERMARKET IS, THIS IS IN FACT THEIR FUEL STATION, THEIR POWER COMPANY, THEIR WATER COMPANY. WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO YOU IF THESE THINGS WERE REMOVED FROM YOUR LOCAL NEIGHBOURHOOD? THEREFORE, WE REALLY CANNOT AFFORD NOT TO INVEST IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION.'

As Dr. Simiyu explains, it is the poor who suffer first and worst when biodiversity is destroyed. Whereas those with savings can shop around or move elsewhere, the rural poor are directly affected when the rains fail and crops die, when rivers are polluted and fish poisoned, when trees are chopped down and landslides destroy communities. Desperation may lead to chopping down trees and hunting bushmeat to feed your family today, but you know that it destroys your source of fuel and food tomorrow, unless you are replanting trees and ensuring wildlife populations are not declining.

Jocabed Solano, an indigenous theologian from the Gunadule people in Panama, says, 'When we think about the role of the Gunadule church, we cannot see it isolated from the community, as it is part of it and we all work together facing any threat. We ask for prayers for the new generations of Gunadules that could continue the legacy of caring for Mother Earth, because from her we emerge, we feed ourselves and when we die we are cultivated in her. May the new generations of Gunadule continue to care for, live and love Grandmother Sea and Mother Earth, recognising themselves as grateful sons and daughters for what we receive from God in her.'⁵

QUESTIONS



DO WE HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN CARING FOR THE POOR AND CARING FOR WILDLIFE?

IS THAT HOW NATURE WORKS OR HOW TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES THINK ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE?

IS IT PERHAPS A MODERN, WESTERN WAY OF THINKING THAT DIVIDES HUMANS FROM NATURE, LINKED TO OUR INDUSTRIAL EXPLOITATION OF THE EARTH AND ITS RESOURCES?

⁵ Some Christians may feel uncomfortable with the words 'Mother Earth'. Jocabed Solano uses this term as, along with many indigenous communities around the world, it is how her culture speaks of God's creation. There is a long Christian history of such language. Francis of Assisi spoke about Brother Sun, Sister Moon and Mother Earth. The Bible also uses relational language to speak of the earth: creation groaning, the land mourning, the trees rejoicing. This language is not saying the earth is a living person but rather that God has created us to live in a close mutual relationship with the natural world.

RESOURCES, WASTE, AND POPULATION:

At the heart of all our environmental problems is the question 'What is enough?' How many possessions, or how much 'stuff', do we need to make our lives happy and healthy? Also, how and where is that stuff made, how long does it last, and what happens then? All of us are consumers. God made us with a need to eat, and we need clothing, housing, health, and fulfilling work, all of which consume resources. Our modern way of life demands lots of energy, usually electricity or gas, and transport has become a necessity for people who have to travel for work.

However, we live in a world with limits. As the global population grows towards ten billion people, we have to think seriously and biblically both about the number of humans there are on planet earth, and about the kind of lifestyles we aspire to. There is simply not enough space, and not enough raw materials, for everybody to have a large home, to eat lots of meat, wear the latest fashions, drive a car, fly for holidays, use air conditioning or heating, or keep replacing their electronic goods (TVs, computers, phones, fridges etc).

This is a sensitive subject. It is unfair for those in rich nations to say to the rest of the world, 'You cannot have what I have', especially when

their wealth has often been built on exploiting the raw materials and labour of the rest of the world. On the other hand, if we all buy into the consumer dream of constantly wanting more stuff, new stuff, bigger stuff, it will be the world's poorest who suffer most as resources become scarcer.

It is also deeply unjust when wealthy nations, which had population explosions when they became industrialised, lecture less affluent countries where populations are growing fast now. There is clear research showing that tackling extreme poverty and providing education for women and girls are the best ways of helping countries become more sustainable in their populations.⁶ As Christians from across the world, whatever our history, we are called both to value every human life as infinitely precious to God and also to avoid the love of money and to seek justice for all.

We need a new understanding of human development: one that is not tied to the false idols of 'more, bigger, newer', but is based on a biblically-inspired vision of what it takes for us to really flourish in God's world. We will turn to looking at that very soon. For now, we can probably all agree on a list of the basic needs that every human should have.

6 <https://blogs.worldbank.org/health/female-education-and-childbearing-closer-look-data> and <https://borgenproject.org/poverty-and-overpopulation>.

QUESTIONS



**WHAT ARE HUMANITY'S
BASIC NEEDS FOR LIFE?**

**ARE THERE ANY MISSING
FROM THIS LIST:
FOOD, CLEAN WATER,
HEALTHCARE, CLOTHING,
HOUSING, SAFETY,
EDUCATION, WORK, REST?**

**HOW ABOUT SAVINGS,
FUEL, ENERGY, LIGHTING,
INTERNET, LEISURE,
TRAVEL, EQUAL
OPPORTUNITIES, A
VOICE (VOTE), FREEDOM
OF WORSHIP?**

**ARE SOME OF THESE
'ESSENTIAL' AND SOME
'DESIRABLE' OR DOES
EVERYBODY HAVE A RIGHT
TO ALL OF THESE?**

Sometimes these basic needs are described as a 'social foundation'. They are what every society should provide for its citizens, and nobody should be denied them. However, there is plenty of evidence that after basic needs are met, more stuff does not equal more happiness or fulfilment. Surveys have shown that, as countries become richer, people want more and more stuff, and they also waste more and more stuff, yet they do not become happier. In fact, the more the gap widens between richer and poorer people in a society, the more unhappy both groups tend to become. In other words, I cannot be truly happy, however rich I am, if my neighbour is struggling for the basics of life.

In addition, as people get more stuff and waste more stuff, their lifestyles make the world more unstable for all. If we all need a 'social foundation' beneath us, we also need to avoid breaking through what some call an 'environmental ceiling' above us. That ceiling is made up of so-called 'planetary boundaries': the limits that, if we break them, will cause our world to become unstable, less able to provide for our basic needs, and more likely to lead to poverty and suffering for the poor and for future generations. Examples of planetary boundaries / the environmental ceiling, include overuse of fresh water,

damaging soil, loss of wildlife and forests, chemical pollution, ocean acidification (largely due to climate gases dissolving in seawater), and climate change.

Many of the biggest problems we are facing today go back to our breaking of planetary boundaries. The many parts of the world suffering from worse wildfires, floods, droughts, hurricanes, or cyclones than ever recorded before, are suffering the climate chaos mainly caused by our burning fossil fuels. Water shortages and famines are increasing as human enterprises over-exploit water, destroy soils with chemicals or erosion, and poison rivers and oceans.

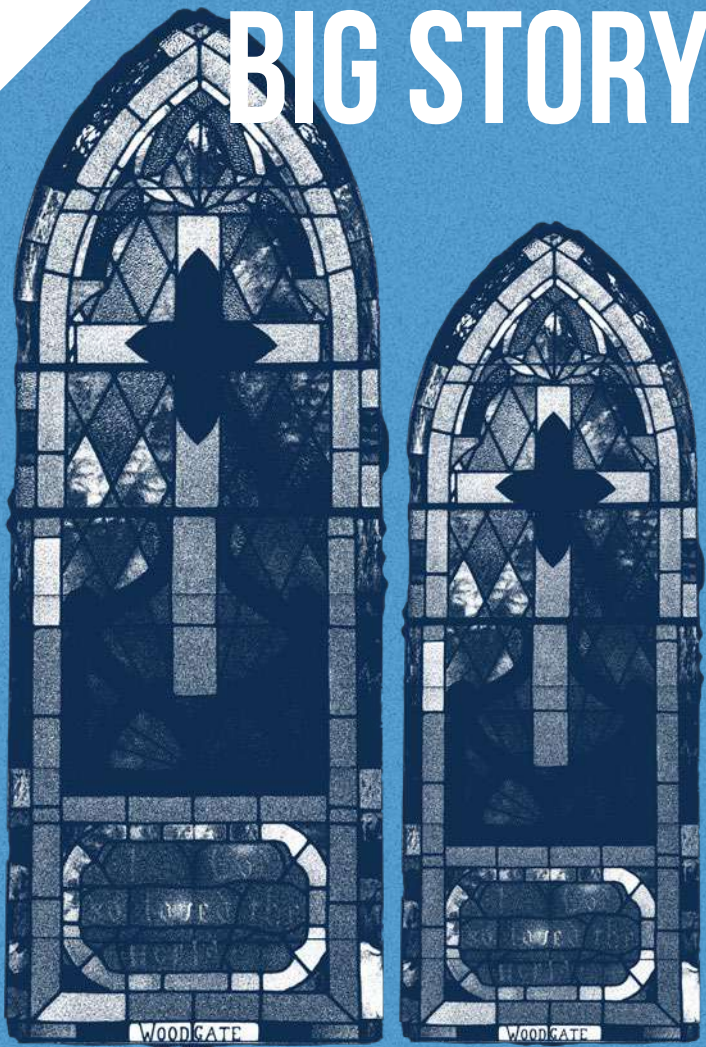
As we will see, there is hope! There are things we can do before it's too late, to make the world a better place for all today, and to leave behind a good world for tomorrow. However, before we look at what we can do, let's turn to the Bible, and see what it has to say to our situation.





SECTION TWO

THE BIBLE'S BIG STORY



QUESTIONS



**WHAT DO YOU THINK
THE BIBLE HAS TO SAY
ABOUT GOD'S PLANS
FOR PLANET EARTH?**

**IS THE BIBLE'S MESSAGE
OF HOPE ONLY FOR
BELIEVERS, OR IS THERE
HOPE FOR CREATION TOO?**

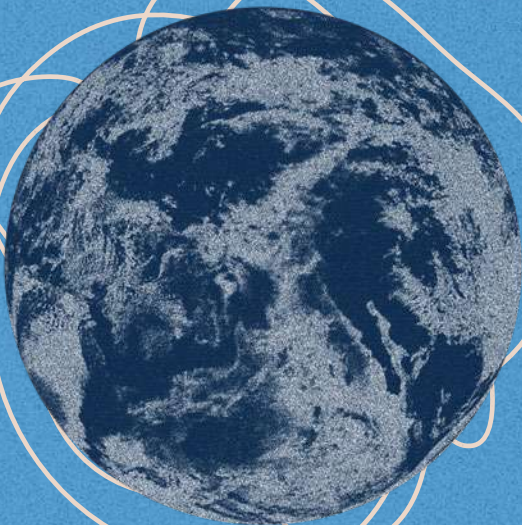
**IS OUR CALLING AS GOD'S
PEOPLE JUST TO SAVE
SOULS, OR SHOULD WE
BE SEEKING A BETTER
WORLD FOR ALL?**

**DO WILDLIFE AND
NATURE EXIST JUST FOR
OUR PLEASURE, OR DO
THEY HAVE VALUE TO
GOD, AND DO WE HAVE
A RESPONSIBILITY
TOWARDS CREATION?**

I grew up in a strong Christian family. My parents were pastors and missionaries with a passion for the Bible. At home, church, and school, I was taught that the most important thing in life was a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Getting people saved so they could spend eternity in heaven with Jesus was the number one priority. Everything else was secondary at best, and often a distraction from our primary task of evangelism.

The Bible verse I remember hearing more sermons about than any other was John 3:16.

‘FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONE AND ONLY SON, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHALL NOT PERISH BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.’



Many times, I heard John 3:16 explained as being about God's great love in sending Jesus to suffer and die on the cross, defeating sin and death, so that I and others could believe and be saved to eternal life.

Later, I had a real shock when I studied Greek, the language of the New Testament, and discovered that the word 'world' in John 3:16 was cosmos, then and now a word that means the whole physical creation. I had always been taught that it was people God loved, rather than 'the world'. I realised that every time I'd heard John 3:16 I'd understood 'world' as meaning 'people'. In fact, I thought the world was generally a fallen, broken and evil place which believers should keep themselves pure from, and from which we would eventually be saved to go to heaven. Yet, here was the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16, saying that God loved the cosmos. I checked all the Bible commentaries and spoke to wise scholars, and they all agreed that cosmos in New Testament Greek usually means the whole created order. Of course God loves people, but God also loves the whole world of creation. We know that from Genesis 1 where God delights in creation, declaring it 'good' again and again, before finally declaring all of it 'very good'. We see it in the Psalms, where trees and hills, rivers and birds, stars and sun all worship God and praise his holy name. We hear it in the teaching of Jesus, who repeatedly uses creation as a story book to illustrate God's kingdom.

So, how did we ever get to an understanding of the gospel where only people matter, and this world is seen as 'bad', and even as destined for destruction?

There are several reasons, but one key factor is the influence of Greek philosophy. The early church in Europe developed at a time when Greek philosophy was dominant and powerful. Some of its ideas fitted well with Christian thinking, but others were very different from a biblical worldview. Amongst these were a kind of 'dualism' which saw spiritual things as good and material things as bad. Much Greek philosophy saw our 'souls' as trapped in physical bodies from which they would escape after death, which the Bible never teaches. It saw nature and the earth as a distraction from eternal spiritual realities. This thinking has powerfully influenced Christianity but it is simply not biblical! The Bible is very clear that God made a good world, that Jesus blessed material creation by becoming part of it by being born as a man, and that Jesus' resurrection was physical and is the first hint of God's new creation, which will also, therefore, be physical. The biblical worldview in the Old Testament and carrying on into the New Testament is that we as human beings are a unity of body, mind and spirit, and not souls trapped in a disposable body.

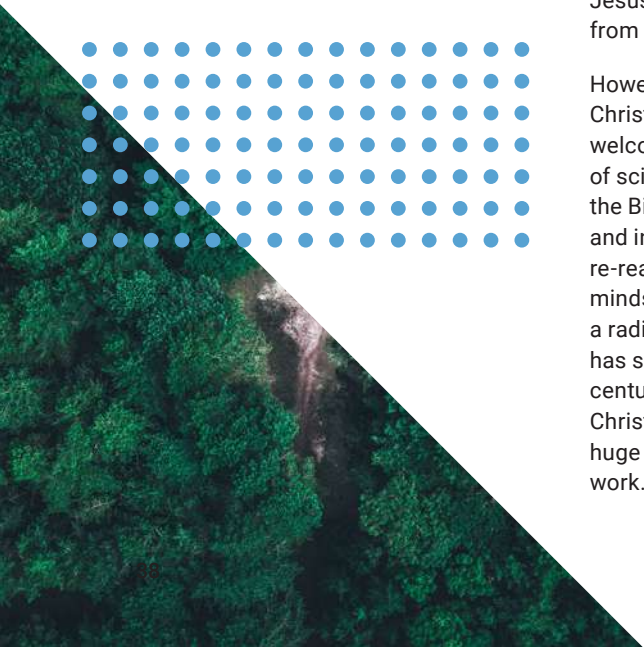
It's important to note that the Western Christian tradition, influenced by Greek thinking, was never the only stream of Christianity. From the

earliest times, there were strands in Asian, African and Middle Eastern Christianity that avoided this body-soul dualism. Much later, in the 1700s and 1800s, Christians in Europe and North America were also heavily influenced by the Age of Enlightenment, a movement that placed human reason and individual freedom as supreme. René Descartes' famous phrase, 'I think therefore I am' is classic Enlightenment thinking, putting individual rational thought rather than God's revelation in nature and scripture, at the heart of existence. While many key Enlightenment thinkers were Christians, they tended to separate church and state, religion and reason, and spiritual matters from scientific and political matters. The Bible, it was suggested, could tell us about how to know God and get to heaven, but we should turn to science and reason to tell us about the world.



Some Christians reacted to the Enlightenment by embracing its ideas, applying the Bible to their spiritual lives and private morality, but becoming more and more secular in their thinking about politics and society. Others rejected Enlightenment thinking along with science and reason, seeking to base their lives on the Bible alone, but often retreating into a spiritual ghetto, keeping pure from 'the world' until Jesus returned and rescued them from it.

However, some Bible-believing Christians found a third way, which welcomed the God-given insights of science and reason, but also saw the Bible as God's ultimate guide and inspiration. As they prayerfully re-read the Bible, applying their minds and hearts, they discovered a radical message that the church has so often forgotten through the centuries. These early evangelical Christians went on to be involved in a huge variety of Jesus-centred mission work. They founded evangelistic

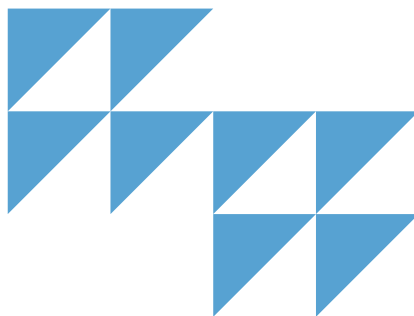


missions and sponsored Bible translation, but they also believed Jesus should be Lord of all human life. So, they led the movement to abolish slavery, campaigned against child labour, started schools for girls as well as boys, and reformed prisons, all in the name of Christ. That wasn't all, though. They understood that Jesus is Lord of creation, and so they founded the first organisations anywhere to outlaw cruelty to animals, they campaigned against animal experimentation, and some of them became vegetarians out of care for all God's creatures⁷.

Today, we still see these different responses among Christians around the world. At the risk of oversimplifying, some treat the Bible as a guide for personal moral and spiritual matters, and adopt secular views on economics, politics, the environment and other 'public' issues. They can be inclined to follow nationalist political leaders and may confuse 'Christian values' with their culture. They tend to adopt the individualism and consumerism of modern culture without asking whether this fits with the Bible. They may listen to preachers who promise God will bless believers with material prosperity and possessions if only they have enough faith.

Others see the world as an evil place from which we must seek to rescue sinful men and women. They tend to avoid involvement in political and environmental issues, and focus solely on evangelism and spiritual discipling. Often, they long for Jesus to return, and have a view of the end-times where believers are 'raptured' – suddenly taken away to heaven – and the earth is then judged and destroyed before God establishes a new creation.

As we will see, both of these approaches can find Bible verses to base their views on, but they also both fail to reflect the whole of the big picture of the Bible, and of the Gospel that Jesus proclaimed. We're now going to look at that in more detail, and then at examples of how Christians today are rediscovering the whole gospel, which can transform individual lives, but also work for God's transforming kingdom values in society and in creation too.



⁷ Examples of these early evangelicals included William Wilberforce, Lord Shaftesbury and other members of what was known as the 'Clapham Sect'. The hymn writer Isaac Watts and the 'father of the modern missionary movement' William Carey also shared this integrated view of mission.

QUESTIONS



**WHICH OF THESE VIEWS, DESCRIBED,
MOST CLOSELY REFLECTS WHAT I BELIEVE?**

**WHERE DO MY VIEWS COME FROM: DID I GROW UP
WITH THEM, READ THEM SOMEWHERE, OR HEAR
THEM FROM A PREACHER OR MISSIONARY?**

**CAN I SEE HOW IDEAS FROM SECULAR PHILOSOPHY
AND MODERN CULTURE HAVE AFFECTED THE
BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF MY CHURCH?**

**CAN I BEGIN TO SEE THAT THE BIBLE MIGHT
CHALLENGE SOME OF THE VIEWS I'VE ALWAYS HELD?**

THE BIBLE'S BIG STORY

When we read the Bible, it's important to ask, 'What questions am I asking as I read this?' Am I just looking for comfort and assurance? Am I looking for a personal message to help me spiritually? Or, am I seeking to understand God's purposes for the whole planet? Some years ago, I realised I had never read the Bible and asked what it said about 'the world', or 'creation'. I had only read it as spiritual guidance for individuals and churches. So, I re-read the whole Bible, and it was a wonderful and powerful experience! Suddenly, on almost every page, I started to see that God cared not only about me and other people, but also about all that he has made. I realised that the gospel I'd grown up with, and the Jesus I believed in, were too small. I began to move from a pocket-sized 'personal Saviour' view of Jesus, to really seeing him as Lord of the whole universe. To start with this was challenging and scary. It questioned some of my

priorities, my values, my lifestyle. Yet, more and more, it became an exciting journey into discovering God in a whole new way. I invite you to join that journey!

We don't have space here to go through every chapter or even each book of the Bible. At the same time, it's vital to build our understanding of God and the gospel, our theology, on more than a few favourite verses picked out of context. So, what we will do is take some big biblical themes that weave through the whole of scripture, and look at creation care in the light of those themes. Christians have done this since the days of the early church, and found it a helpful way of framing the Bible's big story. The themes I've chosen are based on God's great acts in the Bible – the ways in which God intervenes in clear and distinctive ways that influence the whole history of the world, and the content of the gospel.

There are five great themes:

1/ CREATION

in the beginning, and ongoing

2/ COVENANT

with Noah, and later with
Abraham, Moses and Israel

3/ JESUS CHRIST

God's pivotal, saving intervention

4/ CHURCH

from Pentecost to now

5/ RETURN AND COMPLETION

when Jesus comes back
as Judge and Saviour

If you had asked me, long ago, what the message of these great themes was, I would have said something like this:

'God made the world good, for us to enjoy. However, we messed it up, so God started again, choosing Israel as a people to be his own. They messed up too, so God sent Jesus to be our Saviour. His death and resurrection mean we can be forgiven and be born again. The church is called to witness and preach the good news, until Jesus returns to take us home to heaven.'

QUESTIONS



**HOW WOULD YOU SUM UP THE BIBLICAL GOSPEL
IN A FEW SENTENCES? BEFORE READING ON, WHY
NOT WRITE THIS DOWN IN YOUR OWN WORDS?**

**ASK YOURSELF, 'WHERE DID I GET
THIS UNDERSTANDING FROM?'**

**WAS IT FROM MY CHURCH, MY OWN
DISCIPLESHIP, FROM VIDEOS OR BOOKS?**

WHAT OR WHO HAS INFLUENCED MY THINKING?

I still believe that summary of the gospel with all my heart, but there's a lot that it leaves out too. If you asked me now, I would summarise the big story more like this:

'God made the whole world, including humans, very good, and for his own delight and pleasure. We chose our own selfish way, but God, in love, decided to give us and the whole world a new beginning. He broke in, to cleanse and renew, establishing a covenant relationship with humanity and with every living creature on earth. He chose individuals, a family, and then a nation to model His good purposes for how people should live within the land in a godly way. Despite humanity's repeated failures, God didn't give up, and kept loving the whole world. He sent Jesus, his only son, to save the world and die to make it possible for any person and all created things to be reconciled to God. When Jesus rose again, he showed how creation can be renewed in a perfect way. The church is called to be Jesus' body here on earth, sharing his good news in word and action, good news that extends to the whole of creation. When Jesus returns, he will complete his work as Judge and Saviour, removing all that displeases or rebels against God, but also renewing and restoring both people and planet, making all things new.'

QUESTIONS



**WHAT DO YOU THINK
OF THIS SUMMARY
OF THE GOSPEL?**

**DOES IT CONTAIN THINGS
THAT YOU DID NOT INCLUDE
IN YOUR OWN SUMMARY?**

**HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT
THE BIGGER PERSPECTIVE
HERE, BEYOND THE SAVING
OF INDIVIDUAL SOULS?**

Let's look at God's big story through those five great themes in a bit more detail, focussing on what they say about God's plans not only for us, but for all creation.

1

CREATION

God made everything that exists, and all creation reflects God's creativity, power and purpose. The apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 1:20 that God's invisible qualities are clearly seen 'through what has been made' – in other words, we can learn about what God is like from the created world in all its beauty, diversity and complexity. It's important to note that Paul writes this after the world was affected by sin and the fall. Creation is still good enough to tell us about God! Some Christians have said God wrote two books: nature and scripture. Both tell us about God, and we need to understand both to really understand God.

In Genesis 1, God keeps repeating that creation is 'good', and after it is complete, God says it is 'all very good'. Notice that the 'very good' applies to all creation, not only humans! God affirms material things – moon, stars, soil, water, trees, birds and animals – and shows his pleasure and delight in them. Later, in the Psalms, in the prophets, and in the way that Jesus constantly used nature to illustrate truths about God and about

how to live, we see clearly how God speaks to us about himself through creation. Of course, we need to avoid the temptation to worship creation instead of the Creator. There are some who see the signs of God in nature and start worshipping the natural world. That is a form of idolatry. But, in avoiding that mistake, we must never stop treating as 'very good' the world that God made, delights in, and continues to sustain.

The next thing to notice is that the world was not created for us, but for God. Preachers often suggest God made creation for humanity to enjoy, but Psalm 24:1 states clearly, 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it; the world, and all who live in it.' The New Testament goes further in telling us that all things were made *by and for* Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:15-16). If somebody lends us something beautiful and valuable that they own, it is our task to look after it and return it to them without damaging it. God wants us to enjoy this world and the good things it contains, but they are always God's, not ours, and we answer to God for how we use this world and

all that is in it. When the people of Israel were given the promised land to live in, God made it clear that the land was his, not theirs, and that they were only 'foreigners and strangers' within 'my land' (Leviticus 25:23). So, we must treat nature, wildlife, farm animals and the land with respect, remembering that they are God's.

Another important truth in the Bible's account of creation relates to our place as human beings within God's creation. Genesis 1:26-28 describes men and women as made in God's 'image' and is probably one of the most preached about texts in the Bible. People have suggested all kinds of ways to understand what it means to be God's image, but very few are rooted in the biblical text itself! In ancient times, an image of a god was meant to reflect that god's character and power. So, God places us within creation to reflect his desires and wishes towards 'the fish in the sea, the birds in the air

and every living creature'. It is not permission to exploit creation, but a calling to care for and protect it, so that nature can glorify God too. This is what it means to have 'dominion' or 'rule over' (Genesis 1:28). It's not about dominating selfishly but about showing God's just and gentle leadership towards creation.

This becomes clearer when we look at Genesis 2. In verse seven, God forms the first man from the dust of the ground. The name Adam is similar to the Hebrew *Adamah* which means earth or land. So, we are part of creation, not separate from it, and our leadership is from within, not from above. Similarly, in verse 15, God sends Adam into the garden 'to work it and take care of it', which can also be translated as to serve and preserve it. Our calling, or vocation, as men and women, is to reflect God's image by delighting in and caring for creation. This is the very first command in scripture: our first great commission.



QUESTIONS



**DO YOU SEE MATERIAL THINGS AS LESS GOOD, OR
LESS IMPORTANT THAN SPIRITUAL THINGS?**

WHERE DOES THAT IDEA COME FROM?

**DO YOU THINK OF THE WHOLE EARTH, INCLUDING
RIVERS, MINERALS, FORESTS, WILDLIFE, AS
BELONGING TO GOD, AND MADE BY AND FOR JESUS?**

**HOW DO YOU SEE OUR ROLE AS HUMANITY
WITHIN GOD'S CREATION?**

**WHICH OF THESE TERMS DO YOU FIND
HELPFUL, AND WHY: GARDENER, CARETAKER,
STEWARD, SERVANT, OVERSEER?**

COVENANT

After humanity turns to sin and selfishness, God does not abandon us or the rest of creation, but graciously offers a new basis for relationship and redemption. We see this first in the story of Noah, and later in the story of the people and land of Israel. Human sin causes a breakdown in relationships with God, each other, and all creation. God no longer walks with us in the garden of creation. Our relationships with each other are distorted and damaged, leading to multiple evils including greed, lust, unfaithfulness, racism, sexism, nationalism, and tribalism. And our relationship with creation is twisted and broken. Adam is told that the ground (*Adamah*) is now cursed because of him and will produce thorns and thistles. Later in the Bible, Hosea 4:1-3 describes how human sin leads to animals and birds dying and the land mourning.

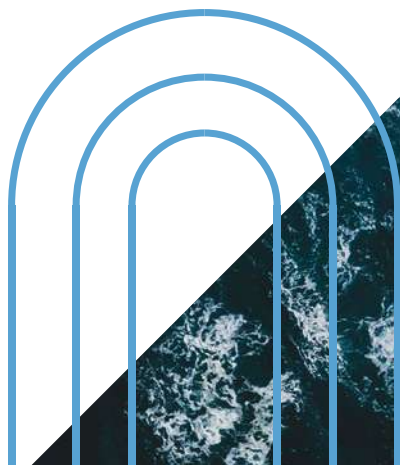
Covenant is God's answer to the mess we've gotten ourselves and our world into. In the story of Noah's ark, God reaches out in judgement, salvation and covenant. He will not stand by and allow what he has made so good to be abandoned. However, just who God saves is a surprise! Noah's ark contains only four pairs of humans, but seven pairs of most animals and birds, and even one pair of each kind that is unclean or inedible. God's

purpose is not so that these creatures might be useful to humans but simply 'to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth' (Genesis 7:3). In other words, God's priorities include not only saving humans but saving every kind of creature he has made.

Then, after the flood waters disappear, God makes a covenant with the sign of the rainbow. In Genesis 9 this is described repeatedly as a covenant not only with Noah and his descendants but also with 'every living creature on the earth', and in verse 13 even 'my covenant with the earth'. God has a saving covenant relationship that includes the whole of non-human creation. The later Old Testament covenants with Abraham and Moses build on this, seeing our relationship with God as deeply interwoven with how we relate to the land and its creatures. Notice how care for animals, both wild and domesticated, and rest for the land, are built into the law given to Moses, and how the rhythms of the seasons, of planting and harvesting, are at the heart of Israel's religious festivals.

Just as sin broke apart the core relationships between God, humanity and the rest of creation, so God's covenant love binds these three together again. In the story of Israel, we see God, people and land deeply

connected. It has been said that, in the Old Testament, you cannot have a relationship with God that is separate from your relationship with the land. Even when God's people are sent into exile in Babylon, God tells them to put down roots by planting gardens and eating their produce (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Although the New Covenant, through Jesus, is more personal, we will see that Jesus too includes creation in his ministry and saving work, and that our relationship with Jesus is deeply connected to our relationship with the places God plants us.



QUESTIONS



**WHAT IS YOUR
RELATIONSHIP WITH THE
PLACE WHERE YOU LIVE?**

**DO YOU SEE YOURSELF AS
PLANTED THERE BY GOD,
WITH A RESPONSIBILITY
TO CARE FOR IT?**

**DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU
BELONG THERE?**

**WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES
IT MAKE THAT GOD HAS A
SAVING COVENANT WITH
ALL OF CREATION?**

**DOES THAT MAKE YOU SEE
ANIMALS, BIRDS, FISH, AND
THE EARTH, OCEANS AND
FORESTS DIFFERENTLY?**

'THE WORD BECAME FLESH'

At the heart of the Bible's big story is God's central intervention, sending his only Son, to be born, live, teach and demonstrate Good News, and then to die and rise again, bringing salvation and rescue both for people and for creation. We have become so used to seeing Jesus as our personal Saviour, that we tend to miss his central importance for the whole of creation.

In Colossians 1:15-20, the apostle Paul describes Jesus as much more than humanity's redeemer. Jesus is creation's source ('all things are created through him and for him' verse 16), creation's sustainer ('in him all things hold together' verse 17), and creation's saviour ('God was pleased... through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross' verses 19-20). This is incredible stuff! Jesus, the small-town carpenter, born in poverty to an unmarried mother, is the same one who placed planets and stars in space, who made mountains and forests and coral reefs, who breathed life into whales and elephants and humans. More than that, everything holds together in him. Jesus continues to uphold the whole of creation, from the interplanetary to the sub-atomic levels. He is the sustainer, and in an age when there

is much fear about the sustainability of life on this planet, he is the one to whom we must turn. Finally, through his death and resurrection, he is the Saviour of 'all things' on earth and in heaven. In other words, Jesus' saving work on the cross restores all the relationships broken by sin and the fall. His sacrifice makes possible not only our personal salvation, but also society's transformation and creation's renewal. This is amazing stuff!

Once you start looking, the New Testament is full of hints of the scale and scope of Jesus' work. When he was born, John's gospel tells us, 'The Word became flesh' (1:14). The word 'flesh' is significant. John could have written 'the Word became man' (*anthropos* in Greek) but instead he chose to write 'flesh' (*sarx* in Greek). It is a word that includes not only human bodies, but all living creatures. In fact, it is the ancient Greek word for 'meat' as well, perhaps pointing to Jesus' sacrificial death as the Passover sacrifice, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. In terms of creation care, it tells us that God identifies in Jesus' incarnation not only with humanity but also with all creaturely life. Material creation matters to God because, in Jesus, God has stepped into creation.

There's much more we could explore. When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, we are told he was 'with the wild animals' (Mark 1:13). There's no hint of danger or threat here. Rather, there are echoes of those Old Testament visions of Eden's harmony restored. The curse is undone in Jesus, and once more people and wild creatures can live peacefully together, as the prophets envisaged would happen when the Messiah came (Isaiah 11:6-9, 65:17-25; Hosea 2:18-23). When Jesus teaches us about God's kingdom, he repeatedly uses images from nature and farming – showing that God's creation can teach us about God's purposes – and he commands us to look at and learn from birds and flowers (Matthew 6:26-34). When confronted with a dangerous storm on Lake Galilee, Jesus showed himself to be Lord of creation by ordering the wind and the waves to stop.

As the early Christians reflected on the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, they realised he was more than Israel's Messiah, but was Lord of all creation. In Ephesians, we're told God has 'placed all things under his feet' and that he 'fills everything in every way' (1:22-23). In Hebrews, we read that God has spoken to us through Jesus whom he 'appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe' (1:2). So, the challenge for us is simply 'How big is our Jesus?' Do we cut him down to our size to make him our personal Saviour, or do we allow him to be Lord of all creation?

QUESTIONS



HOW BIG IS YOUR JESUS?

WHEN YOU PRAY, DO YOU SEE HIM AS THE ONE WITH AUTHORITY AND POWER OVER ALL CREATION?

WHEN YOU LOOK AT BEAUTY, DESIGN AND POWER IN NATURE, CAN YOU SEE THE CHARACTER OF JESUS REFLECTED THERE?

WHEN YOU SPEAK ABOUT JESUS' SAVING WORK, DO YOU ONLY APPLY IT TO INDIVIDUAL PEOPLE, OR DO YOU TALK ABOUT HIM AS SAVIOUR LORD OF ALL CREATION?

CAN YOU THINK OF OTHER BIBLE PASSAGES THAT SHOW GOD'S CARE FOR THE WHOLE CREATION THROUGH JESUS?

4

CHURCH

On the day of Pentecost, God poured out the Holy Spirit on the disciples to bring a new community to birth. Today, we are still living in the age of the church. We often sum up the task of the church as [a] to worship God, [b] to preach the gospel, and [c] to baptise and disciple believers. All that is true but, once again, it's not the whole truth.

Firstly, worship is not just singing and praying. It is about living for Jesus in the whole of our lives. The prophets challenged those who thought worship was just about fasting, offering sacrifices, and singing psalms and hymns. In the book of Amos, God says 'I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me... Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!' (Amos 5:21-24). Similarly, Micah defines what God requires of us as 'To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8).

So, the task of the church is not only to worship God with our singing and meetings, but to stand up for justice and mercy – to live out and advocate for the values of the kingdom of God. Those values include caring for the poor and vulnerable, and also caring for creation. Psalm 145:8-9 says, 'The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.'



Note that God's compassion is not just for people, it's for all he has made. The next verse confirms this, noting that 'all your works praise you Lord' (verse 10). So, as we worship God, we both join in with the worship of all creation – the birds, trees and animals – but also, as we care for creation in Christ's name, we are still worshipping him, because we are proclaiming him as Lord of creation.

Next, preaching the gospel means preaching the Good News of the kingdom of God, as Jesus described it (Mark 1:15). This Good News includes forgiveness and salvation for sinful humanity, but it also includes God's message of hope and redemption for all creation. We often preach a cut-down version of the gospel. Its true beauty and scope include God's plans to renew and restore all things that are broken and separated from God, as we saw in looking at the work of Jesus. So, our calling is not just to save souls but to 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation' (Mark 16:15). We are to preach and demonstrate healing for broken people, divided communities, and a groaning creation. This is the task of the church.

Finally, as we baptise and disciple new believers, what do we teach them? Of course, prayer, Bible study, fellowship and witnessing should be part of our discipling. But so should compassion, justice and creation care. This is the whole gospel, and when we teach and practise it, it is so much more attractive. Churches that have begun

to include creation care in their ministries find that they are attracting new people who would never attend traditional meetings or church activities. When they find Jesus cares about wildlife, farming and the environment and that Christianity is more than just a spiritual message, something seems to happen, and the seed of the gospel takes root in their lives.

So, the worship and mission of the church should include creation care. The New Testament hints at this in several places. In Romans 8:19, Paul says: 'For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.' Who are the children of God? The church! In other words, creation is waiting expectantly for the church! Just as God asked people to reflect his image in caring for creation in Genesis 1, the first Great Commission, so here God's new community, in the power of the Spirit, is called and equipped to be good news for creation. Ephesians describes Jesus as 'head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way' (1:22-23). So, Jesus is both head of the church and Lord of creation, and these two are linked, meaning that the role of the church is to be Jesus' body, his hands and feet, in showing his lordship over all creation.

QUESTIONS



DOES YOUR CHURCH SEE ITS MISSION AS TO INDIVIDUALS ONLY, OR DOES IT RECOGNISE THAT TO PROCLAIM 'JESUS IS LORD' MEANS SEEKING HIS LORDSHIP IN SOCIETY AND IN CREATION TOO?

DO YOU EVER PREACH ABOUT CREATION CARE, INCLUDE IT IN DISCIPLESHIP TRAINING, OR HAVE PROGRAMMES THAT CARE FOR THE LAND, FOR ANIMALS AND WILDLIFE, PLANT TREES, ETC?

IF THE CHURCH IS THE 'BODY OF CHRIST', HOW DO WE SHOW JESUS' LORDSHIP OVER CREATION IN HOW WE USE NATURAL RESOURCES, ENERGY, AND CARE FOR ANY CHURCH LAND?

I grew up believing that when Jesus returns, this world would be completely burned up and destroyed. I looked forward to heaven, which I assumed was also what the Bible meant by 'new heaven and new earth' (Revelation 21:1). I read Christian paperbacks that vividly pictured terrible wars (Armageddon) with believers whisked off to heaven in the 'rapture', leaving others behind. Yet, I was puzzled. Why would God make the world so good, delight in sustaining and caring for it, command us to care for it, and send Jesus to be part of it, if he was going to destroy it all completely? What about all those Old Testament visions of creation cleansed and restored, of deserts coming to life, and of wild animals living peacefully with humanity? And, what about the Apostle Paul, in Romans 8 speaking of a hope that 'creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay' (verse 21)?


I gradually realised that my view of the end times simply did not fit with the Bible's big story. From beginning to end, God's purposes in creative love, in covenant commitment, in Jesus' saving work, and in the church's calling include creation as well as people. So, I looked again at the Bible and consulted a range of wise Bible scholars. Several things struck me powerfully. Firstly, I realised that

my eschatology (my view of the end times) had been built on a very few verses, often with vivid and complex imagery and difficult to understand on their own. Secondly, I discovered that this view, that the world would be totally burned up and destroyed, was not what most Christians believed throughout history. In fact, it was a fairly modern view that arose in the nineteenth century at the same time as some Christians were retreating from engaging with the modern world and its ideas, and at the same time as industry and commerce were destroying the planet in ways never seen before.

Thirdly, and most importantly, as I carefully re-read the scriptures, I discovered that there are two themes that always run side-by-side in passages about judgement. In the Old Testament, God uses violent and powerful imagery to talk about judgement on Israel and other nations, but there is always a second theme of 'If my people repent...' and of a remnant who will be kept safe and remain or return beyond judgement. We find this theme in the New Testament too, most clearly in the body of the risen Jesus. When Jesus rose from the dead his risen body was the 'firstfruits' of new creation (1 Corinthians 15:22-28), the guarantee that believers would also

have physical resurrection bodies in the new creation. Yet, what we see in the body of the risen Christ is both continuity and discontinuity. It was the same body. It even bore the marks of the nails and the spear. It was a physical body. Thomas could touch Jesus, and he cooked and ate fish. Yet the risen Christ was also somehow different. On occasions, people struggled to recognise him: Mary in the Garden of Gethsemane and the two friends on the road to Emmaus. He could appear and disappear, even through locked doors.

These themes of discontinuity and continuity are the only way to make sense of the biblical passages about Jesus' second coming and the final judgement. There will be radical, cleansing judgement to rid creation of all the infection of sin and evil. That's why there is the powerful image of fire. Yet, if we read closely, it is a purifying and cleansing fire, not the fire of total destruction. In 2 Peter 3:3-7, we're told the present earth and heavens will face the fire of judgement yet in the same verses this is compared to the judgement by water at the time of Noah. The word 'destroyed' is used to describe how the waters flooded the world at that time (verse 6). Yet, of course it was not a total destruction, as it led on to God's covenant with all creation



**'CREATION ITSELF
WILL BE LIBERATED FROM
ITS BONDAGE TO DECAY'**

through the rainbow. The chapter goes on to describe the destruction of the heavens and the elements, before the earth will be 'laid bare' (verse 10). Some older English translations had 'burned up' at this point, but scholars agree that 'laid bare' is more accurate. It is a farming term, with the picture of the stubble being burned away after the crop is harvested, and the land left bare, ready for new planting. What is destroyed is all that is evil, both people and principalities and powers (which is what 'elements' refers to). What is left behind, like after the flood, is a cleansed world ready for God's new beginning.

For me, the key piece of the jigsaw in understanding this was when I looked at the words for *new* creation, and *new* heaven and earth. I hadn't realised that the Bible uses two different words for new: *neos* and *kainos*. *Neos* means brand new, never seen before, whereas *kainos* is a subtler word that can mean renewed, repaired, redeemed, restored, or even recycled! Guess which word the New Testament always uses when speaking of new creation, new heavens, or new earth? It's *kainos* not *neos*! Just as we become new creations in Christ when

we are born again, yet we are the same physical bodies as before, so the new creation is a transformed and purified version of the creation that God made and cares for in love.

In conclusion, while both the Old and New Testaments use strong and destructive language to speak of God's end-time judgement, they also hold out hope for God's ongoing purposes for all creation. There will have to be violent change to this current world order if it is to be purified and cleansed, yet the body of the risen Jesus gives us hope for all creation. Paul writes in Romans that creation, rather than being utterly destroyed, 'will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:21). Peter, preaching in Jerusalem tells his hearers that Jesus will remain in heaven 'until the time comes for God to restore everything' (Acts 3:21). Jesus himself, seated in glory, states 'I am making everything new!' (Revelation 21:5), which suggests taking what already exists and remaking it (the word is *kainos* not *neos*).



NEOS

= BRAND NEW
NEVER SEEN BEFORE

KAINOS

= RENEWED
REPAIRED
REDEEMED
RESTORED
RECYCLED



QUESTIONS



HAVE YOU BEEN CHALLENGED BY THIS SECTION?

HOW DOES IT COMPARE WITH WHAT YOU
HAVE BEEN TAUGHT ABOUT THE ULTIMATE
DESTINY OF THIS CREATED WORLD?

WHAT QUESTIONS DO YOU STILL HAVE?

DOES IT EXCITE YOU THAT THERE IS
HOPE BEYOND JUDGEMENT IN THE BIBLE
FOR THE WHOLE OF CREATION?

WHAT DIFFERENCE SHOULD THIS MAKE TO YOUR
LIFE AND TO THE PRIORITIES OF YOUR CHURCH?

RETURNING ANEW TO THE BIBLE'S OLD STORY

Today we need a new story or, in fact, to return to the old story the scriptures narrate. We need to expose the dangerous belief that being made in God's image allows us to exploit, pollute and destroy the creation God declared very good. Instead, we need to recover the biblical vision summed up in two biblical terms: shalom and kingdom of God. They describe the same vision in different ways.

'Shalom' is far more than the absence of conflict. It is about restored, harmonious relationships in every dimension, reflecting the harmony within the Godhead. It includes the spiritual, societal, economic and ecological dimensions. The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated is similarly Good News in every dimension: it includes freedom from sin and death, sickness and suffering, exclusion and oppression, decay and fruitlessness. Shalom and the kingdom of God are comprehensive

and all-encompassing, bringing a vision of well-being for humans within a flourishing creation.

The passage I've turned to repeatedly is Jeremiah 29. Verse 11 has become the most-quoted Bible verse online: 'For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' Its positive, hope-filled message is wonderful, but in isolation, it could be read individualistically and materialistically. Its context is crucial. These words were given to exiles in Babylon when it seemed all God's promises had been broken and there was no future. Contextually, they follow verses 4-7 which give the fullest description of shalom / the kingdom of God to be found in scripture, and which sum up a Christian vision for a just and sustainable world.

**'BUILD HOUSES AND SETTLE
DOWN; PLANT GARDENS AND
EAT WHAT THEY PRODUCE.
MARRY AND HAVE SONS AND
DAUGHTERS... INCREASE
IN NUMBER THERE; DO NOT
DECREASE. ALSO, SEEK THE
PEACE AND PROSPERITY OF
THE CITY TO WHICH I HAVE
CARRIED YOU INTO EXILE.
PRAY TO THE LORD FOR IT,
BECAUSE IF IT PROSPERS,
YOU TOO WILL PROSPER.'**

Here is a Christian vision for the 21st century. It is urban, yet deeply connected to the soil and local food systems. It is about putting down roots where God has planted us, even in exile, and believing it's worth investing in the future by starting families. It seeks, and prays for, the 'peace and prosperity' of a pagan city that is now home. Peace and prosperity mean far more than a booming economy. Biblical prosperity is the shalom vision of restored relationships with God, myself, other people, and the created order. Only then can we truly thrive.

This vision thus includes everything from tackling injustice and racism, to church-planting and evangelism, to simpler, more joyful lifestyles and campaigning on climate change. What makes it radically different from a secular agenda is that it is always, biblically, focused on the lordship of Jesus Christ. If we say that 'Jesus is Lord', the most basic Christian confession, then all that his lordship includes becomes part of our vocation and mission. Biodiversity loss matters, first and foremost because all things were made 'by and for' Jesus Christ, 'hold together' in him, and are included in the 'all things' covered by his death and resurrection (Colossians 1:15-20). Climate change is a missional concern both because it affects the 'least of these' (Matthew 25:40-45) most severely, and because it prevents God's creation from flourishing and from worshipping its Creator.

QUESTIONS



WHERE DO WE SEE GOD AT WORK IN THIS CONTEXT?

ARE THESE SIGNS OF THE END TIMES?

IF PEOPLE ARE LEAVING MY RURAL AREA, IS THE DEVIL ATTACKING MY CHURCH, OR IS THIS SOMETHING ELSE?

HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH RESPOND – IS OUR CHIEF MISSION TO 'SAVE PEOPLE FROM A SINKING SHIP' AND CARE ABOUT HEAVEN, NOT EARTH?

IS THE GOSPEL ABOUT BEING BLESSED WITH HEALTH AND PROSPERITY TO RISE ABOVE PROBLEMS? IS THIS A TIME TO LOOK AGAIN TO THE BIBLE AND THE HOLY SPIRIT TO DISCERN GOD'S PURPOSES?



SECTION THREE

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE CHURCH

The Bible's big story of God's purposes for all creation, from Genesis to Revelation, should not just change our thinking. It should also transform our priorities as individuals, churches and Christian organisations. Christians and churches have been inspired to respond in practical action in many different ways and in different places.



In this next section we share some of their stories. We've arranged them to illustrate what it means to live out the Bible's big picture of cooperating with God's mission in the world today. Some of the themes they cover include:

- **how mission, worship and lifestyle can all fit together in practice**
- **lament with our brothers and sisters as a changing environment leads to famine**
- **loving our neighbours in responding to the Covid crisis**
- **churches resisting the 'prosperity gospel' of escapism and materialism**
- **tackling the frontline of climate change**
- **churches discipling members holistically**
- **churches encouraging biodiversity to flourish**
- **churches engaging with political advocacy**
- **discipleship seen in personal lifestyle changes**
- **churches challenging their members to think about economics biblically**
- **churches linking creation care and evangelism, leading to church growth**

QUESTIONS



AS YOU READ THESE STORIES, THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE READ EARLIER IN THIS BOOK. DOES THE BIG PICTURE OF GOD'S PLANS FOR ALL CREATION CHANGE THE TASK OF PASTORS AND MISSIONARIES?

WHAT WOULD THAT LOOK LIKE IN YOUR CHURCH?

WHAT SPEAKS TO YOU AND YOUR CHURCH OR ORGANISATION FROM THESE EXAMPLES?

HOW DO WE ENCOURAGE OUR MEMBERS TO BECOME WHOLE-LIFE DISCIPLES?



LIVING WITH DROUGHT AND FAMINE IN ETHIOPIA

Godana is from a long line of livestock farmers in rural Ethiopia. He had 100 goats and 50 sheep, as well as cattle and camels, but five years of drought have led to the death of every one of his animals. Now he and his family have had to move to a refugee camp. He said, 'We stayed until all our animals were dead and only then did we come. We're just existing here, waiting to be destroyed by sun and rain. It's only because of God's help and the support of the government that we are still alive.'

'If people want to pray for me,' Godana says, 'let them pray for me about this: if a person has peace, he will get through the difficulty. Peace comes first. So, let them pray for me about peace and being well. And let them pray for my family. God has the power to take us out of this situation in just one day. We hope we will overcome this problem. If God helps us, we know we can come through this.'⁸



CARING FOR REFUGEES IN CYPRUS

St. Paul's Anglican Cathedral in Nicosia is one of many Christian communities in Cyprus that help the refugees and asylum seekers who have been arriving there from the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, in growing numbers in recent years. Their hospitality included a monthly meal.

When the Covid-19 pandemic arrived and Cyprus went into lockdown, St. Paul's Cathedral expanded what they were already doing to provide meals twice a week – as many as 150 on some days – to asylum-seekers, refugees and others in need of food.

Many of the members of Anglican congregations on Cyprus are retired, but this didn't stop them from making a real difference, providing food, and other essential items like toilet paper, and providing pastoral care through phone calls. This attracted support from other people with no religious belief who wanted to give money to help the church do more.



COVID RELIEF IN INDIA

In Punjab, the Diocese of Amritsar in the Church of North India initiated a Covid-19 relief operation to support people who were hit particularly hard by the lockdown. Churches reached out to vulnerable and marginalised people. The Community Outreach Team prepared meals every day for around 500 migrant workers, stranded travellers, slum dwellers, the police and service-delivery workers in Amritsar City. Rice, lentils and other food were distributed to urban and rural families in need. Women's self-help groups started making face masks to help members generate a small income during the economic downturn, and also to provide much needed protection from Covid.⁹

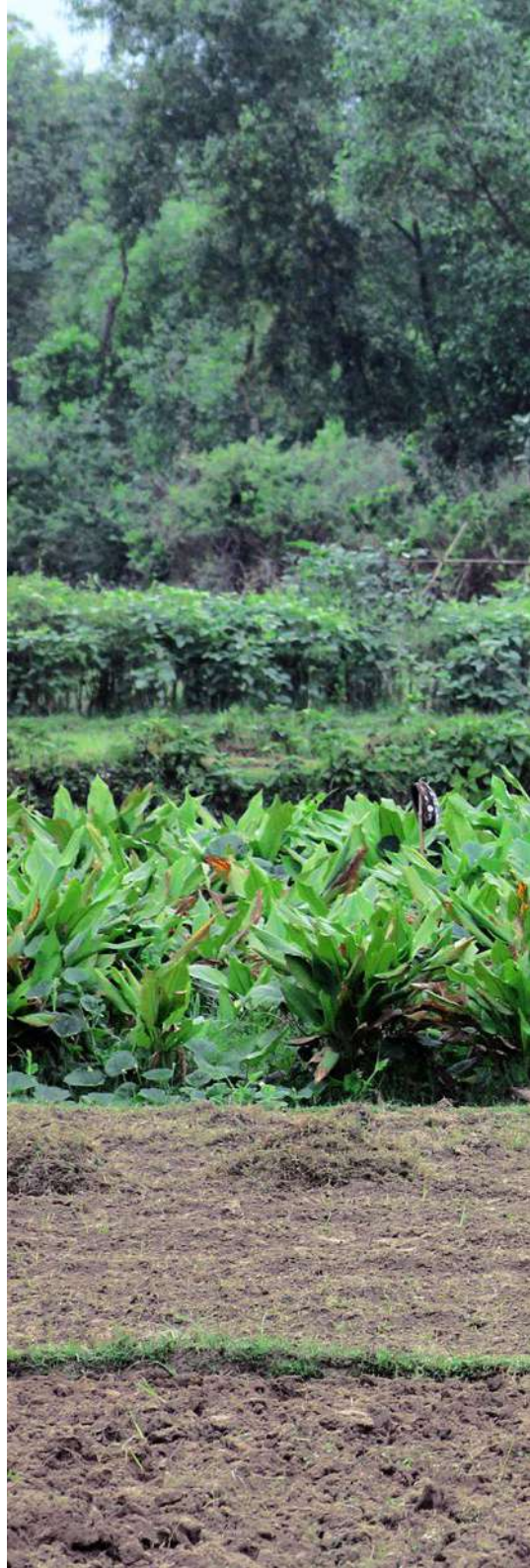
⁹ <https://anglicanalliance.org/examples-of-how-churches-across-the-anglican-communion-are-taking-action-to-support-improverished-vulnerable-and-marginalised-people-in-their-communities/#unique-identifier2>



LEARNING GOD'S BIGGER PLAN IN AUSTRALIA

Jo Knight is the CEO of Anglican Overseas Aid in Australia, and a co-founder of Renew Our World. Jo explains her journey of how God has taught her to deeply value all of his creation. 'He's pointed me beyond my sole focus on justice for human beings, to his broader plan for the renewal of all things. I have come to understand that my impact on the environment is connected with my love for the poor, for justice for this generation and future generations, and what it means to live a life that brings glory to God. It's all connected.'

Jo has worked for justice as a refugee lawyer, and advocacy leader at Tearfund Australia. Through this, God has revealed to Jo the importance of a whole of life response individually and the power of the church working together in advocacy. Jo acknowledges her own story is also full of tensions as she navigates what it means to be a follower of Jesus, a church planter's wife, a mum, working with partners in poverty, all the while living in a consumer culture. Jo continues, 'We can't be indifferent to the cries of the poor and the groans of our planet. We need to spread the message that we, the church, are called to play our part in caring for his world.'





FLOODS AND STORMS IN BANGLADESH

Pastor Martin's village on the coast of Bangladesh has been suffering from an increasing number of extreme storms. But Pastor Martin is helping his community take steps towards a better future.

'A simple storm can bring huge suffering and loss to this community,' says Pastor Martin. 'Every time disaster strikes, people lose their possessions and they need to evacuate to temporary shelters. The vulnerable, the elderly and children suffer the most. People also lose their crops, so they no longer have food to put on the table.'

Pastor Martin found training on how to prepare for disasters and lead disaster response efforts, with Tearfund and World Concern Bangladesh. Then he put his training into action by setting up a community group to practically prepare for and respond to disasters.

During recent floods, Pastor Martin and his community group pooled their resources to help the most vulnerable, delivering food and essential supplies to eight local villages and about 10,000 people. They have even renovated the church building to be strong enough to be a cyclone shelter.

'I am so thankful,' says Pastor Martin. 'Please pray for us so that we will be able to overcome all our problems.'¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://www.tearfund.org/stories/2021/12/feeding-the-thousands-the-pastor-who-became-a-li-feline-to-his-storm-battered-community>



CHANGING CLIMATE IN THE PHILIPPINES

Patricia Pagulayan from Luzon in the Philippines says, 'Our country has some of the world's most pristine beaches. However, we are also one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. Every year, cyclones cause catastrophic damages, destroying rice fields, livelihoods, homes and even lives. Because climate change makes the oceans warmer, we are already seeing more frequent and more violent typhoons. A majority of our farmers and fishermen are poor and they are heavily dependent on the environment. My own mother-in-law is a farmer and I've seen first-hand how typhoons flattened an entire season's worth of harvest, giving her a great sense of loss.

'But it's in these darkest moments that we see faith rise up. After a major typhoon hit in 2020, houses were wiped out by ten-foot waves, thousands of families were displaced, and fishing boats and equipment were damaged. Fishermen lost their only source of income. And even in the midst of the aftermath, there was a strong sense of faith. People told me how they still believed that God is good and God will help them.

'I met a mum who was carrying her infant inside her make-shift home, made of tarpaulin with only an empty sack to give her and her child privacy. She held onto the big sack of rice that the church had provided and she said she's been saving it to make sure it lasts them a few more weeks before her husband comes back from work in another town. I can still see the desperation and helplessness in her eyes, but at the end of our conversation, she told me that she has faith that God would help her – and her family would overcome.

'I'm a mum of two small kids – a nine-year-old and a five-year-old – and they barely know what carbon emissions are. Yet for them, climate change is fast becoming a reality. There are unpredictable weather patterns that cause rain in the middle of the dry season. They notice mango trees are not bearing fruits in summer: the rainy season lasts longer and summer days are excruciatingly hotter. My older son, who has asthma, experiences triggers because of the constant change of weather and he tells me how worried he is that it's becoming too hot. "Mama, why is the weather always changing?"¹¹

11 https://www.tearfund.org/stories/2023/05/standing-with-those-bearing-the-brunt-of-the-climate-crisis?utm_source=Tearfund+Action&utm_campaign=01c7f08413-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2023_05_03_08_31&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_01c7f08413-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D&mc_cid=01c7f08413&mc_eid=36ea09c42f



LEADING BIBLE STUDIES ON CREATION CARE IN BURKINA FASO

Pastor Traore lives with his wife and three children in a town in the west of Burkina Faso, West Africa. He's been leading a church for 11 years and is noticing the difference that the climate crisis is making on his community, where rivers are drying up, there are fewer plants and animals, land that used to be fertile is getting hard to farm, and more people are hungry. Pastor Traore is running Bible studies in his church to help his congregation understand God's purpose for creation and for themselves.

'As creator, when God created, he put everything in place before placing man in the garden,' explains Pastor Traore. 'And he even ordered man to cultivate the garden. What does cultivating mean? Maintain it. So, if we have forgotten that... we are going to do the opposite of what God asks of us. We have to be the ones to protect the environment... Even if the world ends tomorrow, I want to plant a tree today.'

Pastor Traore is also looking beyond the church, working to find people within the community most at risk from drought, and putting them forward for training with a local Christian organisation to learn new farming techniques that will increase their harvest in drier conditions.

'If we just come to church and leave without trying to impact the community... really it doesn't make sense,' Pastor Traore says. 'Really, I feel that there is hope... courage is being born in hearts.'¹²



CEDARS OF LEBANON

The last few years have been difficult for Christian conservation group A Rocha Lebanon, as the church has necessarily focused much of its effort on helping the huge numbers of Syrian refugees. Many have settled in the Bekaa Valley, where the mountains are largely bereft of their natural tree cover and erosion is increasing.

A Rocha worked with local schools and scout groups to plant cedars of Lebanon in the Bekaa, the famous biblical trees, which can live for 2,000 years.

This was part of the Qab Elias Environmental Project, designed with local residents to help counter the tree loss and provide a beautiful, shady place where children and adults can enjoy a picnic, play and learn about wildlife. It's about building community and appreciating God's creation. The Bekaa Valley is on one of the world's most important migratory bird flyways, so as well as being a welcoming place for Syrian refugees, the woodland is a place where migrating birds can feed and rest too.¹³





CHANGING THE LAW IN PERU

Communities in Peru are facing more droughts and floods. So Paz y Esperanza (Peace and Hope) joined Vida Abundante (Abundant Life) led by Pilar Vicentelo, alongside other Christian groups, to form Renew Our World Peru. They focussed on raising awareness of Christian theology about environmental responsibilities in churches throughout Peru.

They also joined a coalition of over 50 organisations, Movimiento Ciudadano Frente al Cambio Climático (MOCICC) or Citizen Movement Against Climate Change, to ask the government to take action. Vida Abundante worked with MOCICC on practical demonstrations of environmentally friendly agriculture techniques. They won a national environmental award for this work.

Vida Abundante also used media interviews to raise the profile of climate issues with politicians and the public. They arranged public forums for dialogue between politicians and members of the public. It was good to show the church has a contribution to make to the life of the nation, and it all helped persuade the Peruvian government to pass a climate change law that was the first of its kind in Latin America.¹⁴

¹⁴ This story was from Rolando Perez, a co-founder of Renew Our World.
<https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/case-studies/advocacy-in-peru-changing-climate-policy>



FROM CONGO TO LONDON — A LIFESTYLE JOURNEY

Rev Dora Jeje was born in Brazzaville, Congo of Ghanaian/ Ivorian and Nigerian heritage. She drifted away from the Christian faith in her teenage years, but returned later. Dora worked as an actor and youth worker before being ordained and serving at an Anglican church in London.



'Before I started thinking about activism, church was just something I did on a Sunday, so I didn't really make the connection between my faith and how I was living in my day to day. I didn't see that things in my everyday life that, to me, felt like lots of insignificant moments, were important to God in that way. Every choice that I make affects someone else, and I have to be aware of that. So I switched to an energy supplier that gets its energy from renewable sources. I only buy second hand clothes. And then over the last two years, I went pescetarian, then vegetarian, and now I'm vegan. The choices we make about the food that we eat or the clothes that we wear, then runs in parallel with making my Christian walk more relevant.'¹⁵



A FAITHFUL LIFESTYLE IN THE UK

More than just remembering her reusable shopping bags and coffee cup, Jo Herbert-James's approach to sustainability is considered in every facet of life – home, work, leisure, and travel. Jo and her husband even planned their wedding to be waste-free. In a culture that celebrates personal freedom and endless possibilities, living within self-imposed limits has been a challenging and awkward journey, but a deeply refining one too.

Jo says, 'I can tell you all the practicalities of living a zero-waste lifestyle, but I can also tell you that living zero-waste has been one of the most profound spiritual journeys I've ever been on. What it teaches me about my own heart in order to live like this is deeply uncomfortable. It exposes my heart, and the idols that sit within me, in a way that a lot of other things don't.

'If it were just me doing this, it makes no difference. However, it makes a massive difference to me and God, and it makes a massive difference to the eternal impact of my own decisions. First and foremost, I live this way out of faithfulness to Christ, and I hope that it makes a difference. And ultimately it does, because when you join in with others, it does.

'If the whole arc of history and God's story is bending towards justice and his kingdom coming, my faith is within the truth of that story. The courage to keep going and step into it is found in this being God's story: he will achieve his purposes, his kingdom will ultimately come. And I get to join in with it.'¹⁶



THE BOX OF IDEAS, FRANCE

The Box of Ideas is a craft workshop run by a diverse and determined group of women from an evangelical church in Blois, central France.

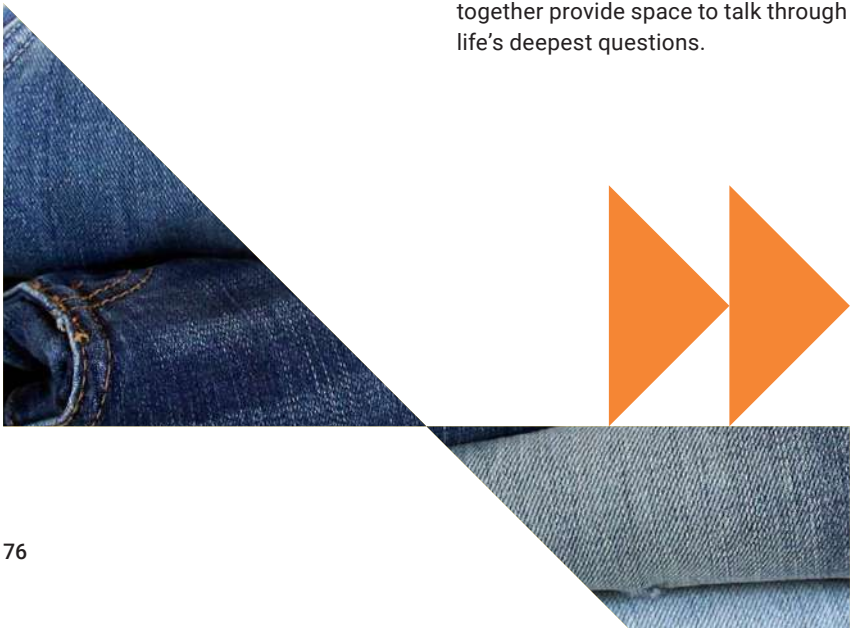
The church saw an increasing number of people in their local community suffering from solitude and isolation. And, at the same time, more and more of their neighbours, particularly newly arrived migrant families, were struggling to make ends meet. The Box of Ideas meets needs on several levels.

The economic dimension – the group makes craft items and sells them, then uses the profits for micro-loans for local families in need, and to help asylum seekers pay for their visas. The group also supports a school in Cambodia.

The ecological dimension – the women from The Box of Ideas use recycled jeans, milk cartons, and other used packaging to make useful and beautiful things. About 70 per cent of the materials used are recycled, a way of caring for God’s creation.

The social dimension – sewing together is a way to form deeper relationships, and the group has been a life-line of friendship and support for many of its members.

The spiritual dimension – France is a strongly secular society, and it can be difficult for people to find places where they feel safe to share their questions about ultimate meaning. The women who take part in The Box of Ideas are at different places on their spiritual journey. Some are committed followers of Jesus, others are not. But the hours shared working together provide space to talk through life’s deepest questions.





BOISE VINEYARD IN IDAHO, USA

Pastor Tri Robinson felt he'd been bottling up his love of God's creation and avoiding preaching about it for years. The trigger was his grown-up daughter, who didn't come to church much any more but cared very much for the environment; she challenged him about it over a meal one day. Tri knew it could be difficult and divisive to preach about caring for creation as so many US evangelicals mistrusted environmentalists and might leave the church he'd worked so hard to build up. But he couldn't stop writing that sermon in his head, thinking about all the Bible passages speaking to him – and his daughter's voice too.

Wearing his usual cowboy boots and jeans, Tri tells the story of how that nervous sermon was received. 'I see someone stand up and start clapping, then a dozen more and a dozen more until everyone that I can see in the room is standing and just clapping.

And I see at that moment that I have just delivered a message they've been longing to hear. I see tears in their eyes. I feel my emotions building. This doesn't happen to me often in church, and neither does a standing ovation. I'm relieved. I'm in awe. My tears just come up.

'The momentum from that morning continues. The message just carries on. We break into teams, and we have jobs for everybody. They are excited – not just because I have made it okay to be a Christian environmentalist, because they get to play.

'People from the community hear about our new work, and our church grows. Twenty years later, I'm still the guy that's known for this, and I don't know why, because I know there's many others now that are carrying the torch, but not as many as you'd think.'¹⁷



COQUEIRAL BAPTIST CHURCH TAKES ITS MANDATE TO SEEK AND SAVE THE LOST VERY LITERALLY

Every year, the plastic-choked River Tejipió that runs through this part of Recife in north-east Brazil floods. When the floodwaters rise to dangerous levels, the church's trained Flood Brigade takes to their boats and seeks out those whose lives are in danger. In May 2022, the Flood Brigade rescued 420 people from their homes. Pastor José Marcos and his team also sheltered 80 people on the church's upper floor, even though the ground floor was flooded. In the days that followed, they supported 2,000 families who had lost almost everything in the flood, providing food, clothes, cleaning materials, beds and mattresses. 'Without a doubt, if it

wasn't for the church, we would have had many more deaths', says Pastor José.

The choked River Tejipió is a symptom of poverty and poor urban planning, which means people build homes close to the river because there is nowhere else to go. There are no bin collections, and people have nowhere to dispose of their waste: the river is a dumping ground and clogged with plastics, so when the rains come, its banks soon burst.


Coqueiral Baptist Church has joined other local churches in the Clean River, Healthy City campaign with a petition to city officials and a list of community ideas for improvements. They've had some success: the authorities have begun a river cleaning and dredging programme and started creating a park to absorb floodwater safely. Clean River, Healthy City also works closely with local people to help them understand the need to protect the environment and their responsibility to care for the river too. Church and community members have cleaned the river themselves – and dumping has decreased. Pastor José is determined that one day he will be able to fish in the River Tejipió, just as earlier generations did.¹⁸



CONCLUSION

Now it's over to you! This booklet has looked at some of the huge problems we face globally today, and how the gospel speaks to these. Our calling as Christians is not to wait for God to come and rescue us from a dying planet. It is to seek the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Just imagine if the millions of local churches in every part of the world started to pray and act for God's kingdom in their local and national contexts. Why don't you make a start where you are... and let us know how you get on?!





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ABUNDANT AFRICA







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