

The Bible and Caring for the Earth

version 1.0 compiled by Steven Muir www.cyclingchurch.org.nz, cartoons by Michael Leunig

The Bible has a lot to say about caring for God's creation. Every major section of the Bible has significant insight to add and the whole picture shows that caring for the world is not an optional extra for a small percent of 'greenie' Christians, but is an inherent part of the gospel/kingdom of God that every Christian should hold as a core and foundational part of their faith.

Section 1 - Creation

Gen 1:31 "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good". God thinks all of nature is very good, as opposed to Greek and some Eastern traditions which devalue the physical world and over value the 'spiritual' world.

Gen 1:28 "Then God said let us make humans in our own image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish, the birds, the livestock, and over all creatures. So God created humans in his own image, male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them: Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Gen 2:15 "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." Our first task on Earth is to look after the planet, being caretakers/ stewards/ good managers of God's earth. God remains in ownership.



What does it mean to be made in God's Image?

Hebrew writing often repeats a phrase again with a different twist. To be made in God's image is defined by the phrase that follows – to rule over the rest of God's creation. Being made in God's image is a job description, not as many people understand, that humans are of a different substance to animals (e.g. humans have a spirit or can be moral, where animals do not). The Hebrew word for image is 'Tselem' meaning idol. It conveys this sense of delegated authority like an idol exercises the authority of the deity it represents, or like a king's signature ring (bearing his 'image') when used to seal wax on documents - the letter carries the delegated authority of the king. So we, being in God's image, have his delegated authority to care for / manage the earth. This is our first and most fundamental spiritual calling. If we take this seriously it is as 'spiritual' (important to God) being a conservation worker as being a typical pastor, and what you do with your rubbish is as important a moral issue as what you do with your money. Any act of caring for the Earth is a profound act of worship and most truly reflects who God created us to be.

Section 2 - The Fall & Flood

Gen 2:16-17 "And the Lord God commanded the man, You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." God places limits on the resources we can consume from the Earth, to sin is to overstep those limits.

Gen 3:17-19 "Cursed is the ground because of you (Adam& Eve), through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field." Our relationship with the earth is distorted by sin. We are no longer in harmony with the Earth as in the Garden of Eden.

Gen 4: 10-12 "The Lord said (to Cain after killing Abel), What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth." The major outworking of the first sin is a further distortion in our relationship with the Earth.



Gen 9:4-5 “But you must not eat meat that still has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood... I will demand an accounting from every animal.” Animals can be moral and held accountable.

Gen 9: 9-10 “Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth..." God goes to a lot of trouble to preserve the biodiversity of Earth in Noah’s Ark and enters in a covenant with all living creatures, not just humans, indicating God has a high view of animals value and their ability to relate to Him.



Section 3 - The Law

Ex 20:8 “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.”

Ex 23:10-12. “For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed.”

Lev 25:2-5 “When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the LORD. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest.

Lev 25:8-12 Jubilee year to prevent wealthy landowners from exploiting land

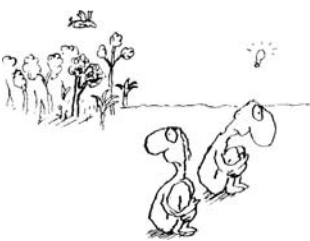
Lev 25:23 “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.” God retains ownership of the Earth.

Numbers 23:21-34. “The Lord opened the donkeys mouth and she said to Balaam, What have I done to make you beat me.... Am I not your own donkey which you have always ridden? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?” The donkey was aware of and obedient to God’s will, and showed more rationality than Balaam.

Dt 20:19-20. When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them?

Dt 22:6-7. If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go, so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life.

The mosaic law is full of rules attempting to restore our distorted relationship with the Earth. The Sabbath particularly, is a very powerful concept attempting to curb our greedy tendency to extract too many resources from the Earth. God judged the people of Israel when they did not obey these laws and a significant part of the reason for God allowing the Babylonian exile was to allow the land to catch up on its missed Sabbaths. 2Chron 36:20-21 “He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. The land enjoyed its Sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfilment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah”.



Section 4 – Wisdom Literature & Prophets

Job 12:7-9 “But ask the animals and they will teach you or the birds of the air and they will tell you; or speak to the earth and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.” Animals are aware of God, and can teach humans something about it.

Job 41:1-5 “Can you pull in the leviathan, can you make a pet of him like a bird or put him on a leash for your girls.” This verse implies God does treat the leviathan like a pet – it exists for God’s pleasure, not our benefit.

Psalm 19:1 “The heavens declare the glory of the Lord, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they display knowledge.” God is revealed through the beauty of his creation – if we destroy that beauty we reduce our ability to connect with God in this way.

Psalm 24:1 “The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” God is the owner of the Earth.

Psalm 65:5,9 “You answer us with awesome deeds O god our saviour, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. You care for the land and water it, you enrich it abundantly.”

Psalm 137:3-6 “for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, Sing us one of the songs of Zion! How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill . May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.” The Hebrew people and their relationship with God are deeply connected to their relationship with the land.

Psalm 147:8-9 “He covers the skies with clouds, he supplies the earth with rain and makes the grass grow on the hills. He provides food for the cattle and the young ravens when they call.” God is intimately involved in sustaining and caring for the Earth and wants us to join him in this work.

Eccles 3:18-21 As for humans God tests them so they may see they are like the animals. Their fate is like that of animals, the same fate awaits them both: as one dies so does the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. All go to the same place. Who knows if the spirit of a human rises up and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth. (animals definitely have spirits)

Isaiah 24:4 “The Earth dries up and withers the world languishes and withers, the exalted of the earth languish. The Earth is defiled by it’s people; they have disobeyed the laws and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse consumes the earth the new wine dries up and the vine withers.”

Jeremiah 12:4 “How long is the land to mourn and the vegetation wither for the wickedness of the dwellers in it. Animals and birds are snatched away...”

Ezekiel 36:4-9 “This is what the Sovereign LORD says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys, to the desolate ruins and the deserted towns that have been plundered and ridiculed by the rest of the nations around you- this is what the Sovereign LORD says: In my burning zeal I have spoken against the rest of the nations, and against all Edom, for with glee and with malice in their hearts they made my land their own possession so that they might plunder its pastureland. ... But you, O mountains of Israel... I am concerned for you and will look on you with favour;”

Hosea 4:1-6 “The Lord has a charge to bring against those who live in the land. There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery. Because of this the land mourns and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.”

The prophets recognise the strong connection between human sin and the detrimental effects on the health of the land. They also appreciate God’s concern for the damaged state of the land and desire to restore it to wholeness.



Section 5 - Jesus

While Jesus never commanded his disciples to go out and plant trees, he expressed the deep Hebrew connection to the land in many of his parables and stories. The western 21st century Christian often interprets the gospel as only being for humans which is distinct from the more holistic Hebrew way of thinking where the Kingdom of God was seen as a restoration of God's 'Shalom' (peace/wellbeing), to all of the planet & it's creatures which is clearly shown in several New Testament passages.

Matthew 6:26 "Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow or reap yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"

Matthew 10:29 "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father"

There is a ranking of "value" between humans and animals, but still God definitely values sparrows which may seem trivial to humans.

Matthew 21:28-44 "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted? The first," they answered.

Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, they replied, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

We often 'spiritualise' these type of parables concluding that God wants us to primarily be believers in Jesus, but it's very likely Jesus had a more literal meaning as well, wanting us to express our faith by being responsible tenants/workers in the vineyard of the Earth.

Matthew 25:1-3. Parable of the ten resource managers (virgins) – Five foolish virgins used up all their resources (is it co-incidence that the resource is oil?) thinking Jesus will return soon and only planning for the short term. They were judged severely. The five wise virgins planned for the long term and made their resources/oil last? Christians who don't care for the Earth & preserve it's resources, thinking Jesus is going to return any day, are the foolish virgins and will be judged accordingly.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world (cosmos – includes nature) that he gave his only Son..." Jesus was given so that the whole cosmos might know God's love and redemption.

Mark 16:15 "Go into all the world and preach good news to all creation." All creation experiences the good news of redemption from the effects of sin.

Rom 8:19-21 "The creation itself waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation itself was subject to frustration, not by it's own choice but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from it's bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." This verse very powerfully shows the Earth suffers from the effects of human sin and that God's ultimate intention for the Earth is to redeem it.

Rom 1:20 "For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that we are without excuse."



Col 1:15-20 “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and 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.” The whole Earth and its creatures were created with Jesus involvement and for his enjoyment, and he continues to hold everything together/sustain the Earth. All of the Earth, not just humans, share in being reconciled through Jesus death and resurrection.

Section 6 - The End Times

Many Christians have a passionate belief in the end-times, when the Anti-Christ shall rise, great tribulations shall occur, and environmental disasters will happen, such as a third of the trees being burned up, a third of the seas turning to blood, and a third of the rivers turning bitter (Rev 8:7-12). Somewhere in the midst of all this, (and just when exactly is open to great debate) Jesus shall rapture the Christians away off to heaven, to live happily ever after, while the naughty people suffer horrifically before the second coming of Jesus. The result of this very firm belief is, at best, one of ambivalence towards environmental disasters that are caused by human activity. If it's been prophesied, God has decreed it must happen, so what can we mere mortals do about it? At worst it results in a celebration of environmental destruction because it means that Jesus will return sooner (after he has checked off his 'to do' list of tribulations listed in Revelation). This is very poor interpretation of the book of Revelation and, while it sells millions of books & movies, it should be rejected as a very destructive heresy.



God will destroy those who destroy the Earth

A big mistake when reading Revelation is to think that God expects us to be innocent bystanders while the angels and demons slug it out. Revelation is a message to engage in the struggle against the evil that is occurring, not to tune it out or accept world events fatalistically. Revelation 11:18 records the following: “The time has come for judging the dead and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great – and for destroying those who destroy the earth.” If we do not engage in actively caring for the Earth, and blindly go along with our cultures destruction of the Earth, we risk being on the wrong end of this judgement.

Rapture is Rubbish

The concept of a 'rapture' is completely unbiblical, Christians believe in the second coming when Jesus returns for good (not a preliminary swoop as rapture theology suggests). History as we know it alters profoundly, and we change to a new heavens and a new earth. We will be on the new earth not in some disembodied 'heaven'.

Luke 17:26-35 “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife! Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever

loses his life will preserve it. I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left.” This passage is often thought to represent the rapture where good Christians will be ‘taken away’ out of the misery of Earth. Based on this passage, the opposite is true. In the days of Noah and Lot the good believers were left on the renewed/cleansed Earth and the baddies were taken away.

2 Pet 3:10-13 “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burnt up. Seeing then that all these things shall be **dissolved** what manner of persons ought you to be. Nevertheless we according to his promise, look for a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness (KJV).” The Earth is not ‘destroyed’ as many versions of the Bible translate this passage, but rather fully redeemed, transformed, dissolved and made new, like Jesus body when he died and was raised. It bore the scars of his old body but was renewed. The word ‘dissolve’ is similar to ‘found’ in the sense of melting and allowing to harden as in a foundry (i.e. purifying not destroying). A similar example is Malachi 3:2-3 “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiners fire or a launders soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver”.



2 Peter 3:5-7 “But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.” Again the word ‘destroy’ is used to indicate cleansing. The Earth was clearly not ‘destroyed’ (as in ceasing to exist) at the time of Noah but purified, washed clean from it’s sinful inhabitants.

Revelation 5:11-13 “Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise! Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!” All creatures share in worshipping God on the ‘renewed’ Earth. ‘Heaven’ is not just for humans.

Revelation 21:2-5 “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, I am making everything new!” Rather than Christians going ‘up’ to heaven, God brings his dwelling place ‘down’ to the renewed Earth.

Further resources

www.arochoa.org (look at the New Zealand link)

www.creationcare.org

Planetwise, by Dave Bookless.

For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care, by Steven Bouma-Prediger

The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action, by R. J. Berry.

The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth , by E.O.Wilson. An scientist who grew up Southern Baptist and is now agnostic, appeals to the religious community to join in conservation work based on their belief in God as the creator & sustainer of the world.

Further resources

Planetwise, by Dave Bookless.

For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care, by Steven Bouma-Prediger

Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope by Brian McLaren.

Serve God, Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action by J. Matthew, M.D. Sleeth

The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action, by R. J. Berry.

Connect - Thinking biblically about Climate Change, by Richard Bull (bible studies for home groups)

How many lightbulbs does it take to change a Christian, by David Shreeve & Claire Foster.

Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility (Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy), James A. Nash.

Earth-Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues by Calvin B. DeWitt.

Our Father's World: Mobilizing the Church to Care for Creation by Edward R Brown.

Saving God's Green Earth: Rediscovering the Church's Responsibility to Environmental Stewardship by Tri Robinson Jason Chatraw.

God Is Green: Ecology for Christians by Ian Brodley.

Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship by David C. Mahan Joseph K. Sheldon Raymond H. Brand.

Green Christianity by Tim Cooper.

Web pages

www.arocho.org (look at the New Zealand link)

www.creationcare.org

baptistcreationcare.org – Southern Baptist leaders (representing 16 million of the most conservative Evangelicals on the planet) have signed a declaration in March 2008 saying they need to care for God's creation, and that not to, is like ripping pages out of the Bible (because God reveals himself through creation).