

Creation care and salvation

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Rivers and trees. Rivers and trees. The Bible begins and ends with rivers and trees. Our holy scriptures are filled with ecological wisdom, if only we have the eyes to see. Creation care and salvation are very much interconnected. What follows is a short list of texts, with brief commentary, that illustrate this important connection.

All creatures great and small (Gen. 1:9–21)

The ocean wind smelled of salt and just about blew my hat off. Our eyes were keenly focused on the water. Then we spied them—a pod of pilot whales swimming, so effortlessly, a mere twenty yards off the starboard bow. Beautiful creatures they were—graceful, playful, winsome.

Salvation includes all manner of things earthy and earthly. The redemption of all things broken and bent. Salvation, Isaiah and Jesus remind us, is not about our souls going to heaven but about God's shalom coming to us here on earth.

I plopped down in the canoe and rinsed my muddy feet with lake water. Most of the mud from the mucky portage trail came off, but one patch between my toes did not. Slowly I realized that the “mud” was a rather large leech. With some force I gently pulled the creature from my toes and placed it on my canoe paddle for all to see.

All creatures great and small, God creates them all. So scripture teaches. The pilot whales and the leeches, the monsters of the deep and the minnows of the shallows. The sparrows and the swallows, the warblers and waxwings and woodpeckers. God sees them and says they're good. And so should we.

God's blanket of blessing (Gen. 1:22)

We are familiar with the text that speaks of God blessing humans and calling them to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28), but we

often forget that God also blesses our nonhuman neighbors—in the case of Genesis 1:22, the aquatic and avian creatures. On the second day of the Genesis 1 creation story, God creates habitats for water and air creatures, and on the fifth day God creates inhabitants to dwell in those habitats. And God spreads his blanket of blessing on these creatures—shrimp and suckers, kites and kingfishers—and commands that they be fruitful.

We humans are not the only creatures that God wishes to multiply and fill the earth. The earth is home not just for us; it's also home for sea creatures and land animals, creeping things down low and winged birds on high. We must share our home planet with these nonhuman neighbors.

The goodness of heaven and earth (Gen. 1:28–31)

God saw the humans whom he had made, and declared that they were very good. Right? True enough, but it wasn't only humans. Genesis 1:28–31 is quite clear. God saw everything that he had made, and it was very good.

Here in the first chapter of the Bible we read that the work of God's hands is good. Indeed, it is very good—a ringing judgment that suggests beauty and peace, as well as what we think of as goodness. And this affirmation includes everything. Marmots and muskrats and mountain lions. Goldfinches and barred owls and chickadees. Butterflies and cicadas and burying beetles. All these and so many more are included within God's "very good." Creation includes all things, and so, we shall see, does salvation.

To serve and protect (Gen. 2:15)

Chicago police cars carry the slogan "We serve and protect." According to Genesis 2:15, God took the human earth-creature and placed us in the garden to '*abad* ("serve") and *shamar* ("protect") it. That's our job: to serve and protect the garden that is the earth. Our calling is to be creation's cops, serving and protecting this place so that it and we may flourish. Our God-given vocation is to bring about shalom on this our earthly home—to foster the flourishing of all things. Made in God's image (Gen. 1:26–28) and from the dust of the earth (Gen. 2:5–7), we earth creatures are called to represent God and rule as God does, with justice and righteousness. To serve and protect.

Covenant with creation (Gen. 8:1–9:17)

In Genesis 8:1–9:17 it is clear that God remembers Noah and his human kinfolk. But God also remembers the animals—wild and domestic—with Noah in that floating species preserve of an ark. God’s remembrance includes more than humans. We should not be surprised, since Genesis 6:18–22 tells us that God commanded Noah to take two of every species of every living thing into the ark, male and female, with adequate food not only for the human but also for the nonhuman passengers. The Bible tells us again and again that God remembers. Because of God’s steadfast love, God’s

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memory is long and sure and true. God remembers us and all our nonhuman kin.

Furthermore, we are told that the bow in the clouds is a sign of the covenant between God and the earth. Yes, that’s right, God and the earth. Like a steady drumbeat, eight times in ten verses (9:8–17), scripture tells us that God’s covenant is with more than humans; indeed, it is with the earth itself. We tend to think that God is interested only in us humans. But the Bible tells us otherwise. And while we take comfort in seeing the rainbow, the passage tells us that it serves as a reminder

primarily to God. As Frederick Buechner puts it, the rainbow is like a string tied around God’s pinky, lest God forget his everlasting covenant. God sees the rainbow and remembers his covenant with creation.

Living sustainably (Deut. 22:1–7)

Deuteronomy 22:1–7, a text tucked into an obscure part of the case-law of the Torah, illustrates a principle for living wisely and well. If hungry, you may take the young or the eggs from a bird’s nest, but leave the mother. In other words, you may take the fruit, but leave the fruitfulness. Live sustainably.

Currently we are not living in sustainable ways in the world. Our present way of life in North America is like taking the mother along with the fledglings and the eggs. If everyone on the earth lived like us, we would need three planets. We have only one. So this pattern of overconsumption cannot last. It will not

last. What would it look like to take this text seriously? How could we live more in step with God's plan for living well?

All creatures praise the Lord (Psalm 148)

Can sea monsters and cedars, snakes and sandpipers give praise to God? Can trees and rivers clap their hands in praise to God? Is

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this talk in Psalm 148 about nonhuman creatures praising God just a figure of speech? Perhaps the psalmist just got carried away.

This joyous psalm is an invitation calling on all creatures—in heaven and on earth—to offer praise to God the Creator and Redeemer. Angels and shining stars. Mountains and fruit trees. Humans young and old, women and men, royalty and paupers. All creatures are called on to sing praise to God. This creational doxology is not commanded.

Praise is simply fitting for creatures who are given life and redeemed by a loving God. So, says the psalmist, let's sing. Each of us in our own creaturely way, let's join in the hymn of praise.

God's good future (Isa. 65:17–25)

The daily newspapers give sad testimony to the onslaught of distress we bear: war, famine, poverty, hunger, homelessness. We yearn for a time when things will be radically different, when life will be good and right and whole. In Isaiah 65:17–25, the prophet too yearns for that bright future, when delight abounds and the sounds of weeping will be heard no more. A time when infants grow to old age and the aged grow old with grace. When those who build houses inhabit them and those who plant vineyards eat their fruit. We long, in short, for shalom—the flourishing of all things, the coming together of God and us and our nonhuman neighbors in a rich tapestry of delight, a world no longer bent or broken or out of kilter.

We Christians proclaim that in Jesus this good future has broken into the not-so-good present. And we acknowledge that we are called to follow this Jesus—who made this good future real in his life, who brought heaven to earth. This salvation, as Isaiah

describes, includes all manner of things earthy and earthly. The redemption of all things broken and bent. Salvation, Isaiah and Jesus remind us, is not about our souls going to heaven but about God's shalom coming to us here on earth.

On earth (Matt. 6:9–13)

In the doxology we sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise him all creatures here below." In the Apostles Creed we pledge allegiance to God the maker of heaven and earth. In the Lord's Prayer we pray that God's will be done "on earth as it is in heaven." Our faith is earthy and earthly. God's will be done here on earth—in our homes, schools, workplaces. Today, right now, at this time, may God's will be done. We pray and work for that day when shalom will be fully realized in this present world.

Christian faith is not about going to heaven but about heaven coming to earth. It is about God's will fully realized—that's what heaven is—here on earth. May it be so.

Tutored by the earthly vision of the Old Testament, we should want to be left behind—for when Jesus returns, the earth will not be obliterated but transformed into the place God intended.

Left behind (Matt. 24:36–42)

The Left Behind novels are wildly popular. As a result many Christians fear being "left behind," for they equate that fate with suffering and damnation.

The biblical view of the future is quite different. "For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man," Jesus says in Matthew 24:37. Before the flood "they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage," and "they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away." So it will be, by analogy, when the Son of Man comes. Two will be in a field; one will be taken, one will be left. Two will be grinding grain; one will be taken, one will be left. In other words, those who are taken away go to their death.

Contrary to what many believe, those who are left behind are saved from destruction. God's good future is not about being raptured off the planet. Just as we should expect, tutored by the earthly vision of the Old Testament, we should want to be left behind—for when Jesus returns, the earth will not be obliterated

but transformed into the place God intended. Left behind—that is where we want to be.

Creation groaning and waiting (Rom. 8:18–25)

Creation is groaning, says Paul in Romans 8:22, like a laboring mother giving birth. Creation has been subjected to futility not of its own will but because of human sin. So the world God made is not able to achieve its potential. The goals for creation remain unrealized. But creation also waits with eager longing, like a child on tiptoe peeking through the keyhole to see what lies under the Christmas tree. Eagerly creation waits with bated breath for us to get our image-bearing act together and be who God calls us to be—divine image-bearers who serve and protect creation.

Though by the fall we became alienated from the natural world, in redemption our relationship with the earth is being restored. As the old Christmas hymn puts it, redemption extends “far as the curse is found.”

Cosmic reconciliation (Col. 1:15–20)

Colossians 1:15–20 tells us that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves; God brings about reconciliation. In Christ God reconciles all things to himself. So redemption does not mean the annihilation of creation but its renewal. Salvation is not escape from the earth but its reclamation.

But this peacemaking reconciliation is bloody. It costs the Messiah his life, on a torturous cross. Only in this way—by non-violently taking on the taint of sin and absorbing the power of evil—could relationships be restored: with God, with other people, with our true best selves, and with the earth. Cosmic reconciliation. The restoration of creation. All things renewed.

Meeting the King (1 Thess. 4:13–18)

The wedding guests rushed out to meet the bridegroom, to join his bridal party as he entered the wedding hall (Matt. 25:6). The Christians in Rome journeyed forty-three miles to meet Paul and become part of his entourage as he entered the capital city (Acts 28:15). Like Matthew 25:6 and Acts 28:15, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 is about going “to meet” (the same word in Greek in all three texts) a visiting dignitary, in order to escort him back to

where the greeters came from. This passage does not describe “the rapture”—believers being whisked off the earth. It describes just the opposite: the celebratory parade to earth of Christ the King and his followers. This text proclaims the joyous coming of Christ the King to the earth and the ecstatic response of his followers.

Christ is coming. And those believers who are alive will be caught up, with the dead, to meet Christ in the air, so they all might be part of Christ’s glorious parade back to earth. Paul’s picture here is not about escaping from the earth. It is about greeting the King as he returns to establish shalom on earth. The Christian view of the future, as we have seen already, is earthy and earthly.

The Day of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:8–10)

Scoffers ridicule those who hope for Christ’s second coming.

1 Peter 3:8–10 replies that God is not slow, but patiently forbearing, not wanting any to perish. The Day of the Lord will come, but it will come like a thief, when nobody expects it.

And on that day, after a purifying fire, the earth and all the works done on it will be disclosed. The heavens and the earth will not be destroyed. They won’t be burned to nothing. They will rather be found by God, pure like glistening silver cleansed by fire of all impurities. The Greek verb in the last clause of verse 10 indicates that God’s grand “Eureka!”—“I found it!”—will resound throughout the cosmos, as an earth that is good and right is disclosed. A Christian view of the future is earth affirming. God will not destroy what he so lovingly makes, faithfully sustains, and patiently redeems.

A new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1–5)

John’s vision in Revelation 21 of God’s good future staggers our imagination. He begins, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth.” It is important to realize that the Greek word for “new” used here does not mean absolutely new. It means new in quality, not existence. New means renewed, not brand new. John speaks of a renovated heaven and earth. God does not junk the world and start all over. God renews the earth and brings it to fulfillment.

Notice also that the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven to earth. We do not go to heaven. Heaven comes to us, just as we

should expect from a God who graciously takes the initiative to redeem us with his love. God comes to us when we are unable or unwilling to go to God.

In addition, notice where God is. “Behold,” says the voice from the throne, “the home of God is among humans.” As with the Israelites in the Judean wilderness, as with the Word made flesh, so also here God pitches his tent with the likes of us. Underlying

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these stories, like a common thread, is the same Greek word. God will make his home among us. And because of God’s homemaking presence, God will wipe every tear from our weeping eyes, death will be no more, and mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Shalom, at last, will reign.

“Behold,” the voice continues, “I am making all things new.” Not all new things, but all things new. There is, literally, a world

of difference between these two. Not all new things, but all things renewed, refurbished, renovated, redeemed. Salvation is not the replacement of a creation destroyed or abandoned by God but the renovation and renewal of what God has lovingly made and providentially sustained. All things new. God dwells with us. Heaven comes to earth.

The true wealth of nations (Rev. 21:22–27)

John describes no typical city. This city, the new Jerusalem, is in many ways unusual. It comes down out of heaven. It is a cube, symbolizing perfection. It is filled with God’s glory, so it needs no sun or moon for light. Its lamp is the Lamb that was slain, who now reigns as Lord. Its gates never close. This is a most unusual city.

And the rulers of the earth bring their glory into this city, as do people of all kinds: they bring the glory and honor of the nations. The great vision of Isaiah 60 comes to life in Revelation 21:22–27. All that is good and whole belongs to this luminous city. Vegetables grown with tender care. Canoes crafted with venerable skill. Tales laced with wit and wisdom. Swords shaped into peaceful plowshares. All this and more, cascading like a mountain stream into this marvelous city. The true wealth of nations.

Salvation is not about escaping to heaven, but about heaven on earth. Salvation is the redemption and fulfillment of creation.

Healing leaves (Rev. 22:1–5)

In Genesis 2 we read of four rivers and two trees. In Revelation 22 we find one river and one tree. And as in Ezekiel 47, the river of the water of life flows, bright as crystal, from the throne of God and the Lamb right through the middle of Main Street. On both sides is the tree of life, putting forth twelve kinds of fruit, one for each month, so there is always food to eat. And the leaves of this tree are for the healing of the nations. No more trees felled to make battering rams to lay siege to medieval cities. No more trees cut to make sailing masts for colonial warships. No more trees toppled to make paper for propaganda to fuel the fires of ethnic cleansing and human hate. These trees are for the healing of the nations. For shalom.

Much more could be written, but I trust enough has been said to demonstrate that in the biblical story creation care and salvation are intimately interconnected. Indeed, caring for the earth is part and parcel of the gospel of salvation. It is as false to claim that concern for the earth is not a legitimate feature of Christian discipleship as it is to claim that care for the earth is the sum total of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. As the Evangelical declaration on the care of creation puts it: “We resist both ideologies which would presume the Gospel has nothing to do with the care of non-human creation and also ideologies which would reduce the Gospel to nothing more than the care of creation.”¹ In sum, care for the earth is an integral feature of Christian discipleship. May God empower us through the Holy Spirit to walk the path of his Son Jesus in being faithful keepers of the earth.

Note

¹ “On the Care of Creation: An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation”; go to <http://www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php>. For more on creation care, see Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision of Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); and David Koetje, ed., *Living the Good Life on God's Good Earth* (Grand Rapids: FaithAlive Resources, 2006).

About the author

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