

Genesis 1:28-30

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[0 : 0 0] This past Monday, the 22nd of April, was Earth Day. Now, by those who are involved in organizing this day, it's claimed that over one billion people in 192 countries participated in events in celebration of the day. Now, even in the manner that I presented that statistic, it will be evident that the cynic in me does wonder whether that figure would bear any serious examination, over one billion people. Well, it may be true, I don't know. I imagine most of us, I may be wrong, but I imagine most of us spent the day blissfully unaware that it was Earth Day. I don't know if pupils at school have projects related to that or not. I haven't really researched the subject at all, I must confess. Apparently, the day goes back to the initiative of an American senator and environmental campaigner, Gaylor Nelson, who back in 1970 fixed the date for the first Earth Day.

There is apparently no great significance to the date other than it was deemed a day that, in the States where it originated, it wouldn't clash with other significant events or celebrations, didn't clash with college exam times because lots of the students were to be mobilized, and importantly, it would enjoy decent weather in the States. They obviously weren't thinking about Scotland. No day could be set that would guarantee decent weather in our own dear land.

Being America, and this isn't hugely important, but it's of anecdotal interest, being America, the date that was set apparently led to a number of conspiracy theories because apparently the date coincides with Lenin's birthday, and there were those who saw that as very significant and sinister.

But leaving aside that day that many celebrated in this past week, Earth Day, what do we as Christians make of environmental issues? The purpose of Earth Day is to focus people's attention on the planet, on the conservation of the planet, on issues that relate to the environment. We know that these are big issues. They are issues that occupy, and rightly so, many column inches in our newspapers, debates in parliament, and in general conversation. It is something that people do sometimes make reference to environmental issues. What about us as Christians? What attitude should we have? Are such concerns to be left to political parties like the Green Party, who we know on other issues are overtly hostile to a Christian worldview? Do we abandon this whole area of concern to such? We can applaud their concerns up to a point, but do we allow them to drive the agenda? Or perhaps concern for the environment is the domain of those partial to a new age spirituality, who busy themselves hugging trees and worshiping Mother Earth on a summer solstice. They're interested in these matters, but we don't concern ourselves with such matters.

I remember a few years ago speaking to a pastor of the Presbyterian Church USA. And the easiest way of more or less giving you a flavor of what that denomination is like is that it would be a little bit like a Church of Scotland equivalent in the United States. It's not an exact comparison, but it will give you an idea. And this pastor was bemoaning that the mission agency of his denomination, was more interested in saving trees than in saving people. I thought it was a rather clever way of getting across the point and the concern that he had. And as I heard his concerns, I of course, as a good card-carrying evangelical, was quick to share his indignation. What a terrible thing that a mission agency would be more concerned with saving trees than saving people. I still think it's a terrible thing that that would be the priority I should stress. But what should be our attitude to the planet that serves as our home in this big bad universe? Or is it a big good universe? I'll leave you to think about that one.

[5 : 03] I want to spend a little time outlining some basic biblical principles concerning the earth that I hope can provide some direction on these matters. Now, you'll be glad to hear, or maybe some of you will be disappointed to hear, that I'm not going to give an opinion on global warming or fracking or the ever-fraught matter of wind farms or any other hot potatoes in the area of environmental concerns.

Not that it's unimportant to have and to hold an opinion on these matters as Christians. It is important to have a considered opinion on these things. But while it is important, we also recognize that it's more important to establish in our own minds basic principles that can be drawn from the Word of God that will allow us to come to an opinion on these matters. And also, in humility, to recognize that even when we do share certain biblical principles, we won't necessarily always come to the same opinion on each and every one of these matters. But while recognizing that we won't always come to the same opinion, it is still important, if we're Christians, to reach those opinions on the basis of biblical principles. This evening, I just want to notice four big truths that impinge change on this matter of what our attitude as Christians should be to the created order, and very particularly, this planet, earth, where God has placed us. Four big truths. The first one is so basic that it might seem almost unnecessary to stress, but indeed, because it's so basic, it must be stressed, and it is this, that we recognize that this universe and this planet is created by God. That's the first big truth, created by God. Now, it's not my concern this evening to enter into the question of how and when and how long God created the universe.

But what I do want to do is simply to state this big and fundamental truth that the earth was created by God. And any biblical view of the environment must begin at this point. And we can make three further statements about what God has created that also have a bearing on the opinions we will hold concerning the earth or our environment. Just to clarify that, and what I'm going to say, I'll probably ordinarily just speak about the earth. Much of what I say will also apply to all of creation, the whole of the universe. But often, I'll simply speak of the earth, and for reasons that that is that part of the universe that we are particularly concerned with. Three things that we can say that flow from this reality that the earth is created by God, that impinge on this matter of what attitude we should have towards it. And the three things are this, and then I'll just comment on each briefly.

The earth is distinct from God, it's dependent on God, and it is delightful to God. These are three truths that we find in the Bible. We're going to be drawing from different parts of the Bible, though our particular focus will be in Genesis chapter 1, where our reading was. These three things then, distinct from God, dependent on God, and delightful to God. The earth, all of creation, is distinct from God. We reject, as Christians, all notions of Mother Earth, where the use of that language is intended to attribute some kind of deity status to the earth. We reject that. We recognize that God is God, that the earth is part of God's creation, and is distinct from God. Alongside this, this reality that God created the universe, that God created earth, would contradict and would remove from any possibility of being contemplated any pantheistic conception that God is everything.

That as we look around creation, God is everywhere and everything. God is distinct from His creation. But also, the earth is dependent on God. God sustains the earth. We don't hold to some deistic idea that God's creation. We don't hold to any pantheistic idea that God created the world.

[10 : 03] He created the universe, set it in motion, and then it takes nothing to do with it. The Bible is very clear that the earth is permanently dependent on God. God sustains the earth. Of Christ, it is said in Paul's letter to the Colossians, and we read from chapter 1 and verse 15, 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 then notice what it says, and in Him all things hold together. In Christ, all things hold together. This universe is held together by Christ. This universe and our planet is dependent on God. Distinct from God, but dependent on God and delightful to God. In the passage that we read in Genesis chapter 1, there in the final verse,

God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. It was very good. What God created was very good, and God delighted in it. And I think we can claim and we can state that God continues to delight in that which He has created. The earth is delightful to God. And of course, if God delights in the earth He has created, we can do no less. If God esteems planet earth as of great value, the earth is the product of His creative genius and is the object of His generous care. And we must reflect that divine opinion of the earth. So, that's the first thing, the first big truth and truths that follow from it, created by God, created by God. But also, we can say that the universe and the earth is created for God, created for God. Now, that could appear an odd thing to say depending on how it was understood. If it was misunderstood, it might sound a little pagan in the sense of God's inhabiting the created order. But of course, that's not the sense intended. Rather, we can return to the verses that we read in Colossians. What does it say there? Of all that was created. All things were created by Him and for Him.

All things were created by Him and for Him. All created for God to reveal His glory. We think of the words of the psalmist as we have them recorded in Psalm 19 and at the very beginning of the psalm. What does it say of the stars and of the heavens there in Psalm 19? The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of His hands. And the psalm continues. And if the purpose of the creation is to declare the glory of God, it would seem to reasonably follow that we should be concerned to preserve creation's capacity to declare the glory of God. Now, thankfully, man's capacity for destruction does not as yet extend to the stars and the heavens and the skies. But where we are on this planet, we are surely duty-bound to protect and conserve our planet that also in its own very particular and beautiful way declares the glory of God. Now, we'll come back in a moment to our duty of care as it's outlined for us in the scriptures and particularly in the passage that we've read. But that's the second truth that I think is fundamental in this matter as a basic principle, not only that the universe and our planet is created by God, but that it was created for God. But we can also say, and this of course accompanies what we've just said, is that the earth was created for man. Created for God principally, but also created for man.

The creation of man in the account that we've read, even in the few verses that we've read, we can see how the creation of man is presented as the crowning glory or apex of God's creative activity.

Now, this is evident in terms of the time of man's creation and the manner of man's creation. Regarding the time of our creation, we could say that God finished with a flourish when He created man and woman.

[15 : 21] We are the cherry on the cake. But more fundamentally, as regards the manner of our creation, there is a critical feature to the creation of men and women that distinguishes us from the rest of creation.

Of course, we're aware of that. We're aware of what God Himself says, as we have it recorded there in verse 27. So, God created man in His own image. In the image of God, He created him. Male and female, He created them.

And this reality concerning man must be central to our thinking in matters environmental. Man is worth more than trees. He's worth more than whales or even cuddly baby seals.

Now, cuddly baby seals might be and are often much more lovable than many men and women. We recognize that. But in terms of God's estimation of value, men and women are worth much more.

That is clear. And we must ever be conscious of that in this matter of our view of the environment and our care for it.

[16 : 38] But we can say, and we can rightly say, in the light of the manner in which God has created man, and the data that we're given concerning God's purposes, we can rightly say that there is a sense in which the earth was created for man.

And we can say that in two senses or in two ways that we can say that earth is for man. And I'll say what the two are and then we'll just think about each briefly.

First of all, it's a place to live. Earth is a place for man, for you and me, to live. But also a place to labor. Two things that are related but that we can look at separately.

First of all, a place to live. We're saying that the earth is created for man, and we're noticing how in two ways it's created for man. First of all, as a place to live. The whole of God's creative activity comes to its maximum expression when the garden is ready for its first occupants, Adam and Eve.

Everything God has created. Everything God has created. Not just the garden itself within the bounds to which it extended, but everything. The sun and the moon, the stars, the mountains and the seas for man. A place to live. A place where man could live and thrive and prosper.

[18 : 06] And not only a place to live, but also with the provisions required for such living. Notice what we read in verse 29 of Genesis chapter 1.

Then God said, I give you every seed-baiting plant on the face of the whole earth, and every tree that has fruit with seed in it, they will be yours for food. So a place provided for us to live and the provisions that we need in order to live.

And for any voracious carnivores among us, you'll be relieved to know that the provision of meat is also established, albeit after the fall.

And we won't even think about what the significance of that might be this evening. But in Genesis chapter 9 and verse 3, we read, So the earth created for man as a place to live.

The provisions required for us to live and to grow also provided by God. Indeed, we're told, everything provided for us as men and women.

[19 : 23] And of course, to appreciate that is fundamental in the view that we will take on matters environmental. If we think that we are just one other occupant of this planet, if we consider that we have no greater rights than any other occupants of this planet, then that will evidently have an impact on our view on matters environmental.

Of course, the reality is that many people who philosophically think that we're no more important when it comes to their own interests will consider that they are a lot more important than other occupants, but that's by the by.

But the principle is important. A place to live, but also the earth created for man as a place to labor. We're not intended just to exist on earth with our arms folded as God provides for our every need and whim.

The earth is a place to labor. And here our concern is with God's instructions to Adam and Eve in verse 28. There in Genesis chapter 1, 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 the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground. This verse, and particularly the fourth and fifth verbs in the verse, there are five verbs that together give a very broad picture of all that God is commending us to do in the area of our labor and responsibility, but particularly the fourth and fifth verbs, the verbs to subdue and to rule over, are sometimes spoken of as the cultural mandate, man's mandate received from God regarding this earth where He has placed us.

[21 : 14] Now, as I say, there are in that verse five verbs, and much is often made of all of them, each one developed very minutely by some.

I think maybe we should be a little bit careful or cautious in giving exaggerated significance to the first three, not that they're unimportant. The first three there in verse 28, Be fruitful, increase in number, fill the earth.

And I say we should be cautious about giving these verbs undue or exaggerated significance, if only for the rather curious reason that the very same verbs are used of the fish.

Notice in verse 22, we didn't read that, but in verse 22, God blessed them and said, Be fruitful and increase in number, and fill the water and the seas. And that's as far as we need to go in terms of the fish.

Be fruitful, increase in number, fill the water and the seas. Exactly the same three verbs that are found regarding God's instructions to Adam and Eve.

[22 : 22] Now, there is actually, even in comparing the fact that the same verbs are used, or these first three verbs are the same, there is a distinction that's significant that we're not going to dwell on, but the significant distinction is this, that of the fish it's simply stated that this will happen, that they will multiply and increase and fill the waters.

The distinction with man, with Adam and Eve, is that they are told to do that. And that's a very fundamental distinction, in that God is communicating to Adam and Eve. He is relating with them.

He is giving them an order, what they are to do. Whereas with the fish, He's simply describing what will happen. But we leave that to one side.

Of greater interest this evening are the fourth and the fifth verbs, to subdue and to rule over. I think we can identify man's labor or principle God-given responsibility in an understanding of these verbs.

And we can maybe focus on the word responsibility. And notice how this is twofold in regard to the earth. Or this is one way of expressing it. We have a responsibility over the earth, and we have a responsibility for the earth.

[23 : 38] Now, you could argue that the responsibility over the earth includes a responsibility for the earth. But for the purposes of presenting the material, I'll deal with them separately.

A responsibility over the earth, and a responsibility for the earth. What can we say of our responsibility over the earth? Adam and Eve, and by extension, humankind has been given by God the status of royalty over the created order.

We are to rule over the earth. That's what kings do. And that is what we are to do. We are to rule over the earth. We are creation's royal family.

We have responsibility over creation, and very particularly over this planet where God has placed us. And that responsibility does grant us the right to profit from and exploit the earth's resources.

They are there for us. God has so created this planet that there are resources, natural resources for us. And it is God's intention that we make use of these resources and profit from them.

[24 : 55] That is a good thing. That is God's intention. Such resources, in a delegated sense, we can say, belong to us.

And such resources ought to be identified, developed, improved, for the good of men and women. Indeed, for the good of all men and women, not simply for the favored few.

Now again, if we accept that to be the case, this has obvious implications as regards environmental thinking and policy. Now, I'm not going to go through the steps of what that might be or what those implications might be.

I leave that for you to do. But maybe if I could just give one example to illustrate the principle. As many of you will know, we used to live in Peru, and we lived on the edge, really, of the Amazon basin.

And the single biggest environmental issue where we lived was, and is to this day, the issue of deforestation. Now, the kind of deforestation that we witnessed and that continues apace, it was, without doubt, a bad thing in so many ways.

[26 : 07] That much is clear. And I'm not for a moment suggesting that it's not a bad thing. But what I am saying is that in our response to this problem, in the case of our concern, where we lived there in Moyabamba, of deforestation, in the response to it, it's critical that the needs of people, men and women, boys and girls, should be to the fore.

The subsistence farmers, who we can condemn from afar, from the comfort of our own living rooms, for cutting down the rainforest, how are they to provide for their families if they are to be denied the right to cultivate the land?

Now, I'm not setting out some policy of what should or should not be done. I'm simply raising the issues that must be raised if we do believe, as the Scriptures indicate, that men and women have been granted by God this responsibility over creation, and that God has granted the resources of creation for us.

That has implications. So, we have responsibility over a creation, but we can also speak of a responsibility for creation, and particularly our own planet.

To rule over the earth implies and requires that those who exercise such rule must care for their dominion, much in the same way as a wise king would care for his kingdom.

[27 : 40] I think we would be right to criticize a king who showed no concern for conserving his kingdom and for caring for the physical extension of his kingdom.

That's his duty as a king. And so, we too have that responsibility to care for the kingdom, if you wish, that God has entrusted us.

And this includes the duty to conserve what we have been given. Conservation is for us, as men and women, a God-given duty. We don't only conserve in some very static way.

We seek to develop what we have received, to improve on what we have received, but we also are to conserve that which we have been given. Indeed, when I speak of conserving and improving, that might be something that isn't altogether clear what I mean by that.

Maybe I could just explain what I mean by that by giving one example of that. These twin elements of conservation and improvement can be appreciated in the manner in which God directed Israel in the use of the land, the soil, where obviously for Israel, as largely an economy based on agriculture, this was the fundamental resource.

[28 : 55] There were other resources, but soil, the land, was fundamental. And God gives instructions to Israel as to their use of and care for the land.

The Israelites were to make the land produce, in that sense, improve on what they'd received. They're not improving on what God has made. They're simply exploiting the potential that exists in the land as God intended it to exist.

But they have to till the land. They have to cultivate the land. They have to do so in a way that it produces more than it was producing when they first received it. In that sense, improve on what they've received.

Secure the resources that they need to feed their families and to provide for others. But they were also to ensure the conservation of the land, the conservation of this rich soil that was so important to them.

And that principle of conservation is enshrined in the very fabric of the created earth in what we could call the Sabbath principle. The Sabbath was not only intended to secure rest, and we might say conservation, for men and women.

[30 : 11] If we respect God's principle of a Sabbath rest, that will serve, in a sense, to conserve us as human beings in terms of our health and our general well-being.

Well, that principle is applied in God's instructions to the land also. The land was to lay unplowed every seven years.

We find that in Exodus chapter 23. Now, I'm not suggesting that modern agriculture or even primitive agriculture must follow the Mosaic legislation to the letter, but what I am saying is that the principle of conservation as important to God and as a duty of man is, it seems to me, very clear.

Why are we to conserve? Well, if we establish that this is something that God requires of us, well, that would be reason enough. But maybe we can just notice a couple of specific reasons why it is a good thing to conserve that which God has given us as regards this planet where we live.

It's good in and of itself to care and conserve that which is very good. God has created that which in His estimation is very good. Well, we have a duty to, in as much as we are able, to keep it very good.

[31 : 35] It's a bit like a child who's given something of value. There is a duty there to keep that thing in the condition that it's received.

Well, that obviously wouldn't apply to some things, of course. As I think out loud, you could perhaps shoot some holes in that particular illustration. But in terms of the earth, it is a very good thing.

God considers it very good. And we have a duty of care for it. But also, we have a duty towards future generations. If we fail to conserve, what will be left for those who follow?

So, it's just plain selfish for one generation to hand down to the next generation a resource-ravaged planet. Now, how that applies across the range of resources will be different.

There are some resources that are finite by their very nature. Fossil fuels is one example. Whereas soil and the animal kingdom and our fish flocks and so on and so forth, vegetation, by its very nature, can be reproduced and conserved in that sense.

[32 : 45] And so, how you would apply this principle would vary from one resource to another. But a duty towards future generations, I think, is a reasonable one that we can accept.

Is it not the case that one of the great concerns of our generation in the area of financial resources is how, very selfishly, we've spent not only the wealth accumulated by past generations, but mortgaged the wealth of future generations.

And I think we would agree that that is not a responsible way to behave. So, created by God, created for God, created for man, and finally, we can say of this earth that it is to be created again.

We read in Revelation chapter 21, What do we mean by speaking of the earth created again? Thus far, we've said nothing of the fall.

And in one respect, the reality of the fall doesn't materially affect most of what we've said. It is still true that the earth was created by and for God. It's still the case that it was created for man as a place to live and labor.

[33 : 54] But of course, the fall has changed things. The fall has, in a measure, spoiled creation. It's not destroyed God's creation. It has not robbed God's creation of its beauty.

It is still beautiful. But it has introduced disharmony and conflict and decay. But it will not always be so. It will not always be so.

The Bible speaks clearly of a time when God will recreate His creation and that will include our little planet. We think of the words of the prophet Isaiah are recorded for us by the prophet Isaiah.

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. And then the words that we read in Revelation chapter 21, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and there was no longer any sea. One day, God will recreate the universe. He will bring into being a new universe, one that is a continuation of the old and yet is radically and splendidly different.

[35 : 01] What will this recreation be like? Well, we don't know in great measure. We simply don't know. But we can possibly imagine that there is a parallel with what God says of our physical bodies.

There's considerable instruction in the Bible concerning this matter that God will give His people resurrection bodies. And these resurrection bodies are bodies where there will be a real continuity with our current bodies but also some discontinuity.

Now again, exactly what that will involve or look like we don't know. But I think it's clear that there is this aspect of both continuity and discontinuity. I think it's reasonable to imagine that likewise with God's recreation of the universe and of earth.

An element of continuity but also a significant element of discontinuity. And that's an exciting prospect when God will create a new heavens and a new earth.

But though it's an exciting prospect to look forward to that, it isn't one that somehow frees us from our responsibility today to care for the creation in the here and now.

[36 : 25] We don't know when God will do what He has declared He will do. Maybe tomorrow, maybe in another millennia, we simply don't know. An important question for us even as we make reference to the new heavens and the new earth, and a question for us all to ask and ponder on is whether we will be there.

Will you be a citizen of the new heavens and the new earth? Eden was created for the first Adam. The new heavens and the new earth are the domain of the second Adam, and all those who are in Him, all those who know and love and follow Jesus.

So as we return to where we began and ask about Earth Day and whether we should celebrate a day such as Earth Day, well, certainly we would all do well to celebrate what God has made for us.

But let us do so as a celebration of our Creator God and in grateful recognition that this wonderful planet has been created for us and is to be ruled by us and cared for by us.

And let us also cast our eyes forward in eager expectation to the new heavens and the new earth where all of God's people will dwell in perfect harmony with our environment, with each other, and with our God.

[37 : 54] Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the instruction that we find in it that relates to all of life and every area and aspect of life.

And we do pray that You would help us to be careful and conscientious in seeking to establish for ourselves the principles we find in Your Word concerning this world and how we are to live in it and the attitudes that we are to have in so many matters.

We pray that in the matter that we've been considering this evening, You would continue to instruct us and shape our thinking, that we would be conscious of the privileges that we enjoy, but also of the responsibilities that come with those privileges.

Help us, then, we pray. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, let's close our service this evening by singing from Psalm 104. You'll find the verses we're going to sing on page 136.

Psalm 104, we'll sing verses 1 to 6, and then the closing verses from verse 31 to verse 36. Psalm 104 in Sing Psalms, verses 1 to 6, and then verses 31 to 36.

[39 : 17] And we'll sing these verses to the tune of Blaine Warren. Praise the Lord, my soul, O praise Him. Lord, my God, You are so great, wrapped in light as with a garment, clothed in majesty and state.

Let's stand to sing. praise the Lord, my soul, O praise Him, Lord, my God, You are so great, wrapped in light as with a garment, clothed in majesty and state.

Like a tent He spreads the heavens, and above the waters there, sets the framework of His He makes flames of fire, He makes flames of fire, making it an upper layer.

He makes waves of hand, His chariot on the wings of wind, He makes waves of fire, He makes flames of fire, His servants, winds obey what He decides.

He sets earth on His foundations, so that it should never move, Then let He submerge the mountain, till the waters stood above.

[41 : 38] May the Lord's majestic glory, always last and never fade.

May the Lord rejoice and triumph in the words that He has made.

When He gazes on creation, earth begins to shake in fear, earth in fear, At His dust the mountains tremble, Smoke and flames of fire appear.

To the Lord throughout my lifetime, To my God I will sing praise.

May my meditation please Him, As to Him my soul I raise.

[43 : 09] But may sinners flee before Him, And the wicked be no more.

Praise be to the Lord Almighty, O my soul the Lord adore.

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen.