**The earth’s environment – glorious, damaged and to be restored**

Text: Psalm 8

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**Scriptures:** Leviticus 25:1-7; Deuteronomy 20:19-20; Psalm 8; Romans 8:18-25

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 24, 131, PH13, 193, 179

**Series:** Caring for Creation (#1)

**Theme:** The glory of God is displayed in His Creation

**Proposition:** Christ restores the glory of God in Creation

**Introduction**

The Promised Land of Canaan was a good land – ‘flowing with milk and honey’. It was a fertile place where crops could be grown, harvested and the fruit enjoyed. There would be some environmental damage as a result of the conquest of the land – in the cities of the people groups collectively known as the Amorites, nothing that breathed was to be left alive (20:16). However, the productive capacity of the land was to be preserved. Fruit trees were not to be cut down so that there would continue to be food available to the people from them (20:19-20). Trees that did not produce edible fruit could be cut down to make ramps and ladders to scale the walls of enemy cities.

Fast forward about 3,400 years and we find a world in which many forests have been felled and not replanted. Deforestation is only one of a number of environmental degradations. Today land is cleared for the cultivation of cash-crops on land with a fragile soil structure. When large areas of land are modified in this way, there is a significant loss of biodiversity with the many complex inter-relationship between plant and animal species being damaged or destroyed. Economic pressures on farmers, together with the ready availability of chemical fertilisers, insecticides and pesticides have resulted in much reduced crop rotations. Land is often not being left ‘fallow’ to recover, as was the wise ‘Sabbath rest’ law revealed in Leviticus 25, but is cropped relentlessly to the detriment of soil structure and waterways.

What should our response, as Christians, be to environmental concerns? Should we join Christian environmental organisations such as A Rocha? Should we not bother about the natural environment, because this earth is going to come to an end and will be made new when Christ returns? Is there a connection between loving our neighbour as ourselves and caring for the natural environment that we all live within? This sermon, and also the next two ones, form a departure from the series in Deuteronomy to consider what Scripture teaches about the earth’s natural environment.

This morning our focus from Psalm 8 is on ‘the earth’s environment – glorious, damaged and to be restored’. This afternoon we look at ‘the earth’s environment – worked and kept by faithful stewards’. Next Lord’s Day morning we conclude with another look at the ‘earth’s environment – restored and perfected in Christ’. Let’s begin with the glorious earth.

1. **The glorious earth**

In Psalm 8, David bursts forth in praise to the covenant God of Israel, to the Lord- The Governor and Master of His people: v1b “*O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens*”. The glory of the Lord is reflected and revealed in what He has made. He is the One who set the moon and stars in place. He is the One who positioned the celestial bodies with his ‘fingers’ (symbolising that only the smallest part of His infinite power was needed to create the celestial bodies: the moon and stars.)

He is the One who fashioned the creatures of the land: “*sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field*”. Giraffes, anteaters, snow leopards, platypuses. He is the One who created the creatures of the air: “*The birds of the heavens*” – albatrosses, hummingbirds, eagles. He is the One who designed the creatures of the water: “*fish of the sea, whatever passes through the paths of the sea*” Whales, dolphins, marlin, snapper, cod.

The creation shows the greatness, the splendour, majesty, and vigour of the Creator Himself. How majestic He must be to have made such a majestic natural world! Have you ever looked up at the stars, at Milky Way at night, and thought about this earth spinning in space, suspended in the heavens at just the right distance from the sun to sustain life? The late American Astronaut Neil Armstrong, viewing our home planet from far away said: *“It suddenly struck me that that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth. I put up my thumb and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out the planet Earth. I didn't feel like a giant. I felt very, very small”.*

How puny is man. How insignificant in size, power, influence we really are. Just tiny fragile fragments living for a short time as animated dust in a giant universe. This is the awe David the psalmist had of this glorious creation. v4-5 “*What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour*”. Even though we (indicated here by ‘son of man’) are so small when compared to the vastness which God has made, even though we are so lacking in power and authority when compared to majesty and might of the God of the covenant, we have been made “a little lower” than ‘the heavenly beings’ – a reference to the angels or to God Himself.

We know that the gap, the chasm, between creature and Creator is immense. His ways and thoughts are far higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). Yet we have been made “a little lower than God” in that we are made in the image of our Creator. God has placed man at the **apex** (the top or highest part of something like the summit of a mountain) of His creation.

We are fundamentally different and distinct from all other creatures even though our anatomy and physiology is broadly similar to many other mammals. However, these similarities do not mean that our origin is to be found in earlier species from which we gradually evolved. The correspondences between our skeletal structures, organs and basic bodily processes just testify to the fact that the same Designer made animals and homo sapiens.

God created mankind in the form and with the functions that we have today. If you could have met Adam and Eve during their lives on this earth you would recognise them as human beings like us. We have all been crowned with glory and honour by God, being fearfully and wonderfully made in His image (Gen 1:27). Why has God has placed man at the pinnacle of His creation? To bring glory to Himself. In us human beings, all of creation experiences a reflection of the One who cares for all that He has made.

God blessed man by giving the human race an abiding task. He said to our ancestors Adam and Eve: (Gen 1:28) "*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth*." This is often termed the “cultural mandate” or “creation mandate”. We’ll look at the practical implications of this task for us in our second service today. This commission from God was reaffirmed after the global flood (Gen 9:2-3) and is recalled here in Psalm 8 verse 6: “*You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet*”.

God delegated mastery of this earth to human beings. Mankind was to exercise a glorious rule as vice-regents/stewards over God’s glorious creation with an authority and an ability which came from God. The purpose of this rule was to bring glory to God. Increasingly we see around us compelling evidence that the dominion of mankind over the earth’s natural environment has not glorified God but instead has resulted in a deeply damaged planet, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The damaged earth**

People say, ‘It doesn’t matter if you fall off the horse, as long as you get back on again’. The ability to rapidly recover from adverse events and circumstance is termed ‘resilience’. God has designed this earth to be highly resilient. Natural habitats do recover from devastating fires, clear-felling of forests and some forms of pollution. Species which have been brought almost to the point of extinction can rejuvenate and recover – as has been the case with humpback whales since commercial whaling was banned in 1986.

However, in a finite world, there are limits beyond which the natural environment cannot fully self-restore. Just as it was possible for Old Testament Israel in the spiritual realm to ‘sin beyond the point of no return’ under wicked King Manasseh’s dominion, so it seems highly likely that there are environmental ‘tipping points’. Once a species is extinct, it cannot recover. (Ironically, the ongoing reduction in species should not be so troubling to the mind of the evolutionist who believes that new species can be generated by random processes over long periods of time).

Microplastics in the oceans do not noticeably degrade over time, but find their way into the food chain and then into the bodies of creatures, including humans. Radioactive leakage, such as occurred in the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986 or in Fukushima in 2011, has an ongoing toxic effect on the surrounding environment.

The root cause of destructive damage to the environment is mankind’s failure to be obedient to the creation mandate. Having mistaken dominion for domination, humans have perverted their responsibility and polluted the earth. The Fall has affected all creation which now, in the words of Romans 8 ‘groans’. The ground has become cursed with weeds, making food production laborious (Gen 3:17). Human sin has resulted in damage to the natural world which endangers many creatures. The prophet Hosea puts it this way: “*The land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away*” (Hosea 4:3).

When Adam broke our whole race away from God, the ability for us to rule the creation wisely with God’s authority was lost. When we are not under authority, we cannot properly exercise authority. We either abdicate (‘under-rule’) or tyrannise (‘over-rule’). This principle applies to all God-ordained spheres of rule: in the home, in the church, in the state and in the environment.

Man’s dominion over God’s creation has become an inglorious rule. The Creation is not viewed by spiritual rebels as being an instrument to glorify God. Nature is seen by some merelyas a tool or a resource to serve mankind. Natural resources have been ruthlessly and unsustainably plundered through greed or ignorance. For example, the indiscriminate shooting of buffalo from trains in USA for sport, together with commercial hunting reduced the herd from more than 60 million in the late 18th century almost to extinction. Overfishing of the oceans has resulted in dramatically declining fish stocks where the breeding stock of many species appears to have become too depleted to recover in some areas.

The New Age movement has elevated the Creation to be a god (pantheistic). We have seen the rise of the “Green” movement in politics. This planet is referred to by many as “Mother Earth”. Man is seen as on an equal status with other creatures, some would say below: “*Human beings, as a species, have no more value than slugs*” – John Davis, editor of Earth First Journal. “*Phasing out the human race will solve every problem on earth, social and environmental*” – Dave Foreman, Founder of Earth First

Some Christians see care for our physical environment either as a low priority or a completely irrelevant subject to consider in light of Scripture – “It’s all going to pass away anyway” they’ll say. The purpose of creation is neither as man’s servant, nor man’s equal, nor is this current earth of no value. God still cares for this planet and has promised to faithfully sustain the ‘*seedtime and harvest, summer and winter, day and night*’ (Gen 8:22) until Christ returns, which brings us to our last point:

1. **The restored earth**

Thinking about the extent of current pollution in the environment can be quite depressing. Initiatives like eliminating single use plastic bags from supermarkets seem to be hugely inadequate, especially when we then need to go out any buy bags to put our rubbish in at home!

So many species have already become extinct and so many natural habitats have either become lost or are under pressure from urban development. Widely respected ecologist Sir David Attenborough has recently reflected on his life, and what he believes is the evolutionary history of the earth, grieving the loss of so much of the natural environment and offering a vision for the future. Despite the environmental degradation all around us, Sir David wants to motivate people like us with hope. Yet without a fundamental change in the hearts of people to desire the glory of God over and above their personal ambition, greed and our commitment to environmentally unsustainable lifestyles we cannot restore the earth to all its’ former beauty, splendour and glory. So, what should we do? I’ll aim to answer that question this afternoon!

Psalm 8 points to the ultimate solution to all environmental crises even though when composed author did not know this. Look in v4: “*what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?*” About 400 years after David wrote Psalm 8 and Israel was in captivity in Babylon, Daniel saw a vision of God ‘the Ancient of Days’ enthroned. “*And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a* ***Son of Man*** *was coming”. He wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit “His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14)*

Jesus frequently called himself the “Son of Man” to emphasise his humanity. He had taken on human flesh and becoming part of this world; the world of creatures who are made to give glory to God. Psalm 8 is quoted in Hebrews chapter 2 (5-9) and applied to Christ. Jesus is the perfect man who gloriously rules the works of God’s hands. Everything has been put under His feet. However, ‘*we do not yet see everything in subjection to him*’ (Heb 2:8). This earth is yet to be restored to be a place which will be a sustainable (and sustained) environment for eternity.

All of the biological systems which will support our resurrected human bodies in the New Heaves and New Earth will be perfectly functional. Will there be animals in the paradise to come? We cannot answer with certainty. Isaiah does prophesy a peace between species; the wolf and the lamb, the calf and the lion, the child and the cobra (Isa 11:6-8). Is this more than just symbolism? Quite possibly so. We know that the New Earth will be like the old, apart from sin and death. A place where God will dwell with His people, His image finally perfected in them.

Is this the restored natural environment that you hope and long for? Do you believe that Christ, the glorious Son of God who became part of this groaning creation was Himself damaged, polluted, desecrated and killed? Do you believe that this was so that you could be healed, cleansed, and have life that will continue beyond this groaning creation into the new creation yet to come?

God has chosen the most unlikely means to demonstrate His power. David puts it this way in Psalm 8: “*Out of the mouth of babes and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger*” (v2). God is pleased to use the weak and humble - making them powerful when they take His name upon their lips and willingly submit to His glorious rule in their lives. Christ is the prime example of great power exercised in weakness. God’s own son, was born as an ‘illegitimate child’ of a virgin, growing up in an obscure town to redeem not only all of God’s chosen people but this very creation of which He had become a part.

Though we are small and weak, in Christ, we are strong. We can have a significant godly impact in this world. We can make a difference to the natural environment in which we live, even though each one of us is so puny. We should aim to actively fulfil the ‘creation mandate’ in our lives, in addition to proclaim the gospel of the salvation of people’s souls to a dying world.

Many people around us are deeply concerned about the natural environment and are looking to mankind for ultimate solutions. We know the answer to the damaged natural environment: Christ, served now as we seek to be faithful to the creation mandate and

Christ, awaited for his future return when all things will be made new (Rev 21:5).

AMEN.