

# THE PLANET, IT'S PEOPLE, & THE FUTURE

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## *Ecclesiastes 12 & Romans 8*

Right at the end of last year, a film was released on Netflix called *Don't Look Up*. How many have heard of it or watched it? The movie followed the attempts of two astronomers who were trying to warn the world of a "planet-killing" comet that was hurtling towards the earth – and demanding the need for decisive action. Their desperate warnings, however, fell on deaf ears. Bitter political divisions, a toxic media, greedy tech billionaires, and shallow celebrity culture, all contributed to the whole world ignoring the threat. The tagline of the movie: "Based on Truly Possible Events" gets to the point. This was intended as a parable for our times, a warning in itself that a planet killing climate crisis is hurtling towards us, unless we take decisive action.

The response to the movie was predictable divisive. I know some people loved it. It captured their own fears for the future of our planet and accurately described their own desperation for decisive action. Many others, however, didn't like the movie at all! Some reviews described it as "blunt", "shrill", or one said it was "self-conscious and unrelaxed" – although to be fair it's hard to imagine a relaxing movie about a planet-killing comet. This response to the movie seems to be somewhat of a parable in itself. Around the issue of climate change there is despair, defensiveness, denial, disinterest, and everything in between. For many around us this is *the* issue that consumes their minds. And the question is, do we as Christians have anything to say?

What I want to suggest today is what evangelical leaders such as John Stott and Francis Schæffer were speaking about even 50 years ago: not only that Christians can speak into this issue and not only that Christians should speak into this issue. Rather, that the Christian faith has unique resources to make a unique and substantial contribution to this cultural conversation.

And that we can make that contribution in a way that is not “self-conscious and unrelaxed” but Christ-honouring and hopeful, and that flows from the very heart of the gospel.

Again today we will take the book of Ecclesiastes as our launching off point as we consider how its ancient wisdom speaks into our world today. And in particular we’re going to consider four questions relating to the planet, its people and the future:

*Why do we care?*

*How did we get here?*

*Where to from here?*

*What do I do now?*

Let’s consider each of these in turn.

## **WHY DO WE CARE? (OR: THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF THE PLANET)**

So firstly, why do we actually care about the planet at all? And I don't just mean Christians here, I mean all human people. Why do we *care* about what happens to the world around us? And why do we feel like it's our responsibility to *do something* when it appears that things are going wrong? At one level, of course, this is purely pragmatic. We live on this planet, and if the planet suffers, this will cause *people* to suffer too. But is that all? Is our own *self-interest* the only reason to show any interest? For it seems to me that the purely secular view of the planet and people does not exactly provide a firm foundation for a deep *love* of the world.

The secular view says that we are the outcome of a brutal evolutionary process, that we are basically clever chimpanzees, *and* that it is up to us to save the world.

The secular view says it's basically survival of the fittest, *and* that we should make sacrifices in order to protect all of nature.

The secular view says that we are clinging to an insignificant rock, hurtling through a meaningless universe towards eternal extinction, *and* you **must** recycle.

We come from nothing and are headed to nothing *and* we must do everything to care for this planet.

It's not entirely clear how this leads to that. And the same is true for more spiritual suggestions that we are all one with nature, or that we share in the one divine essence. That may seem to lift up nature, but it doesn't really leave us with any reason why we, as human beings, should take special responsibility to care for everything else.

In each of these cases, both the material and the mystical, the furthest you can go is to an issue of pragmatic importance. There is no *moral imperative* to care for the world around us.

And so what of the Christian view?

You get a hint in the first verse of Ecclesiastes Chapter 12 verse 1. The teacher concludes his wisdom with the exhortation to:

*Remember your Creator...*

The Christian view of nature is that it is *God's creation*. "In the beginning," we read in Genesis 1, "God *created* the heavens and the earth." Everything in all the universe was formed and filled by God, through his Word, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the God of *all things*, and throughout Ecclesiastes the teacher has recognised that *all things* come from the hand of God (see, for example, 2:24). The Teacher has also stressed that *we too* are creatures. Human beings are a part of this creation, formed from the dust and filled by the breath of God. Made in the image of God, he has placed us in creation, put eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11), and commanded us to exercise dominion.

Now, dominion, I think, is a bit of a dirty word – it brings to our mind ideas of plundering and pillaging – and some would even lay the blame at the feet of this Christian doctrine of human dominion over creation.

But plundering and pillaging are entirely the wrong picture. For God placed Adam and Eve in a *garden*. In the world he gave them keys to a wonderful *home*. And when you think of a garden – when you think home – do pillage and plunder come to mind? Surely not. You likely want to make the most of it, yes, but you do so by looking after it, by making it everything it can be. That's how you tend a garden, and treat your home.

In the beginning, nature was *home*. And in the beginning God gave humanity the responsibility to establish and extend the flourishing of their garden home. And so we read of Adam's careful attention in the naming of all the animals. And how God's law made provision for the rest of the land and of animals; that Sabbath rest should be extended to creation itself. Of how Jesus called his disciples to open their eyes, to consider the flowers of the field, and the birds of the air, to learn from even the smallest and seemingly insignificant parts of God's creation.

This is the Christian view: nature is a gift – a vast and varied inheritance – given to us from the generous hand of a loving and intentional Creator. And as those tasked with the stewardship of what God has made, humanity does bear a unique responsibility to exercise dominion without destruction, to bring rest and not ruin, to remember our Creator as we live in his creation.

As John Stott wrote, *“God intends ... our care of Creation to reflect our love for the Creator.”*

And yet, this is not the whole story. For we often experience the world not as home, but as a place hostile to humanity. Ecclesiastes 12 is a moving poem about the fragility of life in this world, that feeling that all of creation is unwinding, declining. The sense that the world is falling apart is nothing new. The apostle Paul picks up that same thread. He evocatively says that the creation is subjected to *frustration*, that all of creation is *groaning*. The apostle here gives us language that sounds so much like our contemporary experience. The Scriptures tell the story of the garden home of Eden, that is now a place of groaning. Where the flourishing of all creation is constantly frustrated. And I think so many around us care so much about this issue, because of a deep-seated intuition that somehow we have squandered our inheritance.

### **HOW DID WE GET HERE? (OR: THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF PEOPLE)**

And so how did we get here? And there are all sorts of technical answers that we might give to the environmental issues of our day. But *the Christian view of people* takes us deeper than any particular symptom, to the root of the disease. As the writer Wendell Berry reminds us, there is, at the heart of many modern crises, *“the mentality of greed and exploitation.”*

Berry says,

*The environmental crisis hits close to home. Every time we draw a breath, every time we drink a glass of water, every time we eat a bite of food we are suffering from it.*

*And more important, every time we indulge in, or depend on, the wastefulness of our economy ... we are causing the crisis. Nearly every one of us, nearly every day of his life, is contributing directly to the ruin of this planet. A protest meeting on the issue of environmental abuse is not a convocation of accusers, it is a convocation of the guilty.*

Francis Schæffer described the problem as the combination of greed and haste. The problem of wanting everything as cheaply and as quickly as possible without giving thought to the consequences. Now I think it's easy to resist those sweeping statements that we have all done wrong. But it seems to me that Berry and Schæffer are simply applying a very orthodox Christian doctrine of sin.

For before Paul speaks of the groaning creation, he says in Romans 3:23:

*For **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

All creation is frustrated because all people have turned their back on the creator. And this story, too, runs throughout all the Scriptures. In the garden Adam and Eve refused to wait to receive from the Lord; instead they grasped for themselves – they took the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because they wanted to *become like God, knowing for themselves what is good or evil.*

They saw the beauty of what God had made, but treated it as a thing, a resource, a mere means of getting what they wanted apart from God. Instead of depending on their creator, they wanted to take his place. And we see this, too, in Ecclesiastes. The Teacher shows us how foolish it is when we reject our limits as creatures and try to live independently of God. More than that, he urges us to see how damaging and destructive it is when we refuse to accept what we *have* and are driven instead by an insatiable appetite for *more* (see Ecclesiastes 6:7-9).

And I don't think the Teacher would be at all surprised by excesses of our own culture. For the modern world is so characterised by the desire for more. We have reduced what God has made to resources to be used for the accumulation of our own wealth, and the furthering of our own comfort. We have asserted our will over and against creation, rather than exercising our stewardship in and for creation. And when we choose to live for ourselves, to make ourselves the centre of existence, we set ourselves at odds not only with the natural order, but more importantly with the God who created that order. Here is the stinging conclusion of Martin Bucer, an early protestant pastor in Germany:

*With the loss of the knowledge of God we have lost also the knowledge of [creation]. As we no longer wish to serve God, his [creation] was rightly taken away from our service. If we ignore the Creator, it is fair that we are deprived also of the created. We have followed Satan and despised God. Hence our whole mind has been perverted to the point that it can no longer be useful to anyone. It has rather become so universally harmful that we have deserved for ourselves eternal condemnation. Thus the whole creation, which should have been used only to the praise and glory of its Creator and for the preservation and profit of humanity, has been disgraced, profaned, and depraved by our diabolic misuse and self-seeking.*

He wrote those words almost exactly 500 years ago. And I feel like they would make even the most strident climate activist squirm. This is the Christian view of people: we have turned away from God, we have uprooted our garden home, and plunged creation into ruin.

**WHERE TO FROM HERE?  
(OR: THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF THE FUTURE)**

And so where to from here? What does the future hold for fallen people, living in a frustrated and falling creation? Perhaps surprisingly, the Bible speaks of a bright future. The Christian doctrine of sin doesn't allow us to minimise the world's problems, or create a comfortable distance from them. But at the same time, the Christian vision of the future doesn't allow us to fall into despair, or to lose hope. Instead it holds out the possibility of substantial in creation, and finally the ultimate redemption of creation.

You can see hints of this hope throughout Ecclesiastes. The Teacher's unflinching realism is pervaded by an unwavering confidence that God has not abandoned his creation, and that he will not allow wickedness on the earth to go unpunished. Even the haunting poem of chapter 12 looks forward to an "eternal home" in verse 5; and a return to God in verse 7.

But these seeds of hope fully blossom in the apostles teaching in Romans 8. Consider again that the language he uses about creation. Yes, the creation is subject to frustration. But verse 20 tells us that this frustration is a part of God's purpose: "in the hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God."

Perhaps most helpful is the image of childbirth in verse 22. The groaning of creation is not pure purposeless pain. It is a very real pain that will nevertheless give way to the joy of new life. In fact, what Paul describes here is the whole cosmos caught up in the pattern of Christ: groaning and then glory, death and then new life, crucifixion and resurrection. Just as the sin of humanity has consequences for all of creation. So does the redemption of humanity through the finished work of Christ. The selfish greed of Adam and Eve at the tree in the garden plunged creation onto a path of death and destruction. But the selfless and loving sacrifice of Christ on the tree of the cross, set creation on a path to resurrection and restoration.

And so the final chapter of the Bible pictures a redeemed and renewed creation, where frustration gives way to flourishing, when the hostile world is made again to be a hospitable home, groaning is replaced by the glorious presence of God, and instead of our human selfishness it will be a place of humble service. Revelation 22 describes the restored Eden in this way:

*Then the angel showed me the river of water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face... (Revelation 22:1-4)*

Is it any wonder that Paul says in Romans 8 that “the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.” Doesn’t that picture fill you with eager expectation, too?! For the work of the Lord Jesus does not only secure our own full forgiveness for our own sin. He has won a salvation of cosmic proportions, that catches up all who trust in Christ, and indeed the entire creation.

### **WHAT DO I DO NOW? (OR: THE CHRISTIAN CALLING)**

And so then, the final question: in light of that future, what do I do now? And I think I want to change that question to what do we do now? For the Christian calling upon the church is to witness to that future reality in the present. It’s in the life of the church that the future hope breaks into the present, as God forms us into a people of faith, hope and love. Francis Schæffer describes the church as a “pilot plant” of the new creation.

Of course, this witness begins with our love of God, and in love for our neighbour. But it must also extend, surely, to our love for all that God has made, and the place where every single one of our neighbours lives.

God calls us to turn away from selfishness, greed and haste, and to embrace his way of dependance, contentment and patience. And so, as Schæffer says,

*...the Christian church ought to be this pilot plant, through individual attitudes and the Christian community's attitude, to exhibit that in this present life man can exercise dominion over nature without being destructive.*

Our calling as followers of Christ is to live in such a way that the world around us can see that a different way of life is possible. For what we have seen from the Scriptures today is that the chief problem in our posture towards the world is not simply technical. It is a deeply spiritual. We don't just need new structures and systems but new *imaginations*. We need our minds and hearts to be renewed in order to replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity. We need to learn how to give not just give up. Moving gradually away from what we want, to the needs of the people and places around us.

And I want to finish today by reminding us that this calling is primarily lived out as we invest in the particular people around us, in the particular place to which God has called us, at the particular time in which God has placed us. As Wendell Berry says, we can be so consumed by Thinking Big, we can forget to Think Little, and end up *doing* nothing at all. He puts it like this:

*A man who is willing to undertake the discipline and the difficulty of mending his own ways is worth more to the conservation movement than a hundred who are insisting merely that the government and the industries mend their ways.*

*If you are concerned about the proliferation of [rubbish], then by all means start an organisation in your community to do something about it. But before – and while you organise, pick up some cans and bottles yourself. That way, at least, you will assure yourself and others that you mean what you say. If you are concerned about air pollution, help push for government*

*controls, but drive your car less, use less fuel in your home. If you are worried about [\*insert issue here\*], write to the government; but turn off the lights you're not using, don't install an air conditioner, don't be a sucker for electrical gadgets, don't waste water. In other words, if you are fearful of the destruction of the environment, then learn to quit being an environmental parasite. We all are, in one way or another, and the remedies are not always obvious, though they certainly will always be difficult. They require a new kind of life – harder, more laborious, poorer in luxuries and gadgets, but also, I am certain, richer in meaning and more abundant in real pleasure.*

I've personally found preparing this sermon to be really challenging. I was reminded actually of the time at ALIVE when Lydia lamented our use of plastic cups and encouraged us to use the church glasses for water on Friday nights. My instinctive resistance to that idea was simply the *time* that it takes to wash up afterwards, and I'd rather get home earlier. I am a shocker at turning lights off around the house because I am just pre-occupied with what I am doing. I really am a sucker for the latest computer or phone, because I like getting new stuff. I could let myself off the hook by saying these "Little" things don't make a difference in the scheme of things. But then I would simply be ignoring expressions in my own life, of my own selfishness, greed and haste.

And perhaps if I was more attentive to those little things around me, I may also grow to be more attentive to the world around me. And perhaps if I was more mindful of my interactions with creation, I would also grow to be more mindful of my Creator.

And really that is the crucial thing. Maybe the real problem with the movie *Don't Look Up* was that it didn't call us to look high enough. Maybe we need to learn to look up to the heavens: to see the true extent of our problem, but also to the God who came down from the heavens to rescue us and to redeem his creation.

And maybe Thinking Little is not dodging the problem, but is an expression of our faith that God has always used what is Little to overcome what is Big. Maybe we need to trust that the God who uses a gnarled wooden cross to rescue the Cosmos, knows what he is doing when he calls us to love our neighbour, rather than save the world.

Because maybe the answer for our world today is the same as it was in the world of Ecclesiastes. And maybe God has called us to help our neighbours see it, too. Ecclesiastes 12:1 says,  
"Remember your Creator."

**A Prayer from John Stott:**

*"Almighty God, you created the planet earth, you make peace, and you love justice. Give your own concern for the environment to those who are destroying it, your peace to the violent places of the world, and your justice to the deprived and the oppressed. And show us what we can do to forward your purposes of love, through Jesus Christ our Lord."*

## **MAIN RESOURCES USED**

*Pollution and the Death of Man*, by Francis Schæffer

"Think Little" by Wendell Berry (<https://berrycenter.org/2017/03/26/think-little-wendell-berry/>)

*On Creation Care*, by John Stott

*What are Christians For?* By Jake Meador

"Climate Change: Why Christians Should Engage" by Gavin Ortlund (<https://youtu.be/XRDkBHUXNd0>)

Interestingly, the first three items on this list were all largely written in the 1970s (though Stott's work was only recently collated and published). Evangelical leaders expressed deep concern for care of creation as a key issue for 20th century discipleship. If we are wary of this issue, we ought to ask why gospel-centred people cared *then*, but not now...what has changed? I would suggest that the politicisation of climate, and a sense that this is a *progressive issue*, are the key reasons, rather than any substantial shift in theology. Definitely food for thought!