

Psalm 104 – Caring for Creation

Psalm 104 is a song of celebration about God and His creation, a glimpse and a taste of creation as it should be - and how it will one day be again. It isn't currently like this, and the Bible gives us a unique perspective on that, and motivation to change.

Climate change is an extremely complex issue, with weird paradoxes. Plastic, for example, is seen as bad but also really helpful; economic growth has improved the lives of millions of people but also causes environmental damage that threatens the lives of millions of people. The Bible helps us to understand why these things are so complex but does so by telling us the simple story of God and His creation. Similarly, very normal Christian behaviours are the key to making personal decisions about caring for creation.

The Story

Before creation, the Creator. God eternally existing in community, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and from this fullness, all life comes. The psalms have a lot to say about how creation can help us know and praise God the Creator (e.g. Psalm 19:1, see also Job 38-41), and Romans 1:19-20 makes this explicit (see also Acts 17:24-27). We see that God is the giver of life who loves abundance and diversity, whose Trinitarian existence is reflected in the interdependence of His creation. He is profoundly committed to what He has made, sustaining it at all times (Genesis 9:9-17, Hebrews 1:3). He does what nothing and no-one else can do.

The physical world is not inferior to the spirit world, despite there being a long history of this way of thinking in the church ("good" in Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; Job 38:7, Psalm 104:31b). He made it for His beloved Son as a gift (Colossians 1:16, Romans 11:36). So how it is treated matters to Him. Despite the vast array of riches in it, creation is not limitless. It is designed so life can flourish. It is not autonomous but depends on Him and those He calls to care for it – which is all of us.

All men and women are made by God in His image to be His representatives on earth (Genesis 1:26-30).

We are part of creation: made out of the dust (2:7), on the same day as all the beasts of the earth 1:25-26), but we are above the rest of it, with unique capabilities and responsibilities (Psalm 8). "We share in doing the things that God has done in creation – bringing order out of chaos, creatively building a civilisation out of the material of physical and human nature, caring for all that God has made" (Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavour*). The people in Psalm 104 do things with what God gives them (14-15, 23, 26).

The only note of disharmony in Psalm 104 is when sinners and the wicked are mentioned near the end.

When we turned away from God to go our own way, sin entered the world. Personified by the enemy who exists only to steal and destroy (John 10:10), it pollutes everything (Genesis 3:17, Romans 8:20-22,

Hosea 4:1-3). We are literally desecrators. Often God's judgement for this takes the form of de-creation, a return to chaos (Genesis 7, Isaiah 24). It also includes being left to our devices, reaping what we have sown (Romans 1:28-31).

This is the complexity of climate change: We live in a wonderful world that is infected with sin. We have unique and incredible potential, which is sometimes used for good, sometimes for wrong, and usually for both.

God's restoration begins with the people of Israel: their songs are full of praise to God the Creator, their laws cared for the poor, the vulnerable, and animals and the land itself – including a Sabbath rest for all creation once a week and a jubilee of restoration every 50 years.

When Jesus comes to earth, He isn't just blessing the material world with His presence, He is becoming part of it. He takes on flesh, takes on matter, and has not taken it off. When He dies on the cross, He is saving us from our sins but He's also reconciling "all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Colossians 1:20). He is winning His bride and claiming His inheritance. The Fall is being undone, the defeat of Sin and Death has begun. Everything will be brought back under God's perfect rule (Romans 8:21, Isaiah 65:17-25, Revelation 21:18-21, 22:2). Jesus is resurrected to a new physical body (Luke 24:30, John 20:27), and those who believe in Him will have a body like that too (1 Corinthians 15). The earth will be cleansed, renewed, and reunited with Heaven. The physical world will not be scrapped. God's plan for the "fullness of time, to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" will have been achieved (Ephesians 1:10).

The Response

There are lots of practical applications and decisions to be made but I want again to see these as very normal Christian behaviours: loving God and loving our neighbours (Matthew 22:36-40).

Psalm 104 gives God praise because of His work in creation, it encourages us to be inspired by creation to worship God. We should go out into creation and sing psalms of praise.

Moreover, you can't really say you love someone and then trash their stuff, can you? Caring for creation is honouring and loving God who made it and cares for it. We must treat everything we have as His, because it is.

Loving our neighbours follows this because they are part of God's possession too. Jesus refused to allow us to limit our definition of who our neighbour is (Luke 10:25-37). We might feel geographically detached from places where pollution is obviously happening, or climate change consequences are being seen, but we are called to care about this nevertheless because it impacts people. Loving people is costly, and we should expect to notice making choices that hurt if we're doing it properly.

It can be tempting to look at your own situation and see it as irrelevant in the global context but Christians believe that every one of us will one day stand before God to give account for all of our actions. This should be the defining criteria for our decisions.

What really helps is asking God to change our hearts: renouncing greed and growing in self-control...

The Bible says that greed is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). "An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, 'If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure'" (Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*). This is how most marketing works and we believe it so we are always consuming and never satisfied because God alone can do those things for us. Christians should be able to buy less stuff, fix things, share more because they aren't putting their hope and identity in this life and the things we can get here (Luke 12:15, 1 Timothy 6:8).

Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in your life that grows when you work with Him on it (Galatians 5:23). It enables us to deny ourselves things we want but don't need, which redefines "need"; it enables us to make sacrifices so that others can be blessed and flourished. God will give us His power to do this as we learn to work with Him on it.

Lots of people taking lots of small steps is often how things change –governments and businesses react to trends far more frequently than they set unpopular but good agendas. But there's more to this than sociology: God wants to work with us on this, and He loves using the weak things to shame the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27). Our personal decisions, even small ones, have significant consequences for us and for the world.

Books and articles that helped my preparation (* marks the three items I found most helpful)

["Jamaica Call to Action"](#), Lowell Bliss, Paul Cook, Sara Kaweesa, Lawrence Ko

* *Planetwise*, Dave Bookless

* ["Towards A Christian Approach to The Environment"](#), Martin Charlesworth

A Call To Act, Martin Charlesworth and Natalie Williams

Garden City, John Mark Comer

["An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation"](#), Evangelical Environmental Network

["The Restorative Economy"](#), Alex Evans and Richard Gower (available as full paper or * executive summary)

Every Good Endeavour, Timothy Keller

A Greedy Man in a Hungry World, Jay Rayner

["Why the UN's Dire Climate Change Report Is Dedicated to an Evangelical Christian"](#), Daniel Silliman

L is For Lifestyle, Ruth Valerio

Blog post I wrote about our decision to (mostly) remove meat from our diet: ["A Theology of Vegetarianism?"](#)

Books I would have liked to have read for a bit more breadth:

John Stott on Creation Care, Sam Berry and Laura Yoder (eds.)
The Re-enchantment of Nature, Alister McGrath
Christianity, Climate Change, and Sustainable Living, Robert White and Nick Spencer
Creation in Crisis, Robert White (ed.)
The Message of Creation, David Wilkinson
Old Testament Ethics and The People of God, Christopher Wright

Writing that has helped some people increase their awareness of and love for creation

The works of Wendell Berry
Romantic poets such as John Keats and William Wordsworth
The Overstory, Richard Powers
Heidi, Johanna Spyri
The Lord of The Rings, J.R.R. Tolkien

Christian organisations focused on creation care issues

[A Rocha](#)
[The John Ray Initiative](#)
[The Lausanne/WEA Creation Care Network](#)
[Tearfund](#)

Questions for small group discussion

What is one of the smallest things you currently do to reduce, reuse, or recycle?

Psalm 104 encourages us to be inspired by creation to worship God: do you ever do this, or how do you think you might do this?

We've never had a sermon on creation and climate change before; why do you think that is not unusual in churches like ours?

What are the obstacles in your thinking which prevent you from making creation care more of a priority in your life?

How can faith in God help us to avoid fatalism and/or despair about climate change?

Luke framed this entire issue within the standard biblical story and normal Christian behaviours. He mentioned loving God and our neighbours, renouncing greed and growing in self-control. Do you think that combating climate needs to be our sole focus in order to do those things? Or is it OK to do those things for their own good and find that we're blessing creation indirectly because of them?

Which of the five personal areas listed in Tearfund's publication "The Restorative Economy" are you most engaged with, and which would you like to think more about? (For further details on each, see the full report pp.33-36):

Live within our fair share of the world's resources and environmental limits – especially in four key areas: food (the diet we eat and the food we throw away), travel (whether we use a car or public transport, and how much we fly), our homes (where our power and heat comes from, and our home's energy efficiency), and finally stuff (where we need to refute the idea that 'we are what we buy' and instead just consume less).

Respond to poverty and inequality with radical generosity – Many people already tithe their income, but we believe that ultimately we should aspire to a higher standard, even giving away all income above the level that we actually need, as well as ensuring that we pay our taxes in full. With wealth comes responsibility: as Jesus said, 'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded' (Luke 12:48).

Speak out prophetically – Christians have often been adept at harnessing the power of positive protest, from anti-slavery campaigners in the 18th and 19th centuries, to the US civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, and Jubilee 2000 which helped force the issue of developing world debt relief onto the political agenda more recently. We can continue this tradition today in many ways, such as 'shareholder activism', boycotting companies or using worship as a form of witness against injustice.

Use our power as a voter, a citizen and a consumer – Politicians often assume that most of us vote on the basis of narrow self-interest. But if a critical mass of people are vocal and visible in demonstrating higher values, change will follow. At the same time, there's much that we can achieve through the power we exert when we make decisions about what to buy and how to invest.

Live restoratively and prioritise relationships – One of the deepest forms of poverty is a marred sense of identity (how we come to see ourselves), something that can be healed only through relationship. Each of us can use our time to huge restorative effect in this regard, whether as foster parents, mentors for young people, friends for older people or in thousands of other ways in which we can become the 'living sacrifices' that God wants us to be (Romans 12:1).