

SERMON:

This World Is Not My Home?

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Romans 8:18-27

Genesis 1:1-13, 31 (Psalm 19, Psalm 24)

“The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21 NIV).

Introduction

“This world is not my home; I'm just a-passing through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue”

This is one of the five or so songs I can play on my guitar. Sometimes I play and sing it. But I'm always a little troubled by it. The chorus ends, “. . . and I can't feel at home in this world anymore.”

Actually, I feel quite at home in this world. Yes, I know “there's a better world a-coming,” and I look forward to that. I know, as Paul says in Col. 3:20, that “our citizenship is in heaven.” But our home, for now, is on the earth.

Having a home in heaven doesn't mean we shouldn't have a home on earth. Or *be* at home on earth. Actually, I like the way the Free Methodist English scholar, Mary Alice Tenney, put it in the title of her book about the Methodist Revival in England: *We are Living in Two Worlds*.

Is this world our home, if we are Christians? In what sense? I want to answer that question by looking at some biblical passages. What does the Bible say about the earth, and about our relationship to it, as Christians?

Romans 8 talks about the earth—or, more broadly, about the whole creation. Note especially verses 19-22: The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

This is what Romans teaches. But it is part of a broader biblical picture. If we put together the whole range of biblical teaching — Old Testament and New — we find that there are *four great truths* about this earth that God has made. I simply want to emphasize these four great truths as we look at this important question.

Some of these truths may seem obvious at first glance. But I think we often forget them. We often talk and act as if the earth were of little concern to God—as if it were

merely property or raw material or a warehouse of resources for us to use as we see fit. This is not what the Bible teaches!

It is important that we have a biblical view of the earth, especially in these days of ecological concern and crisis.

I. The Earth is Good, Not Evil.

Many of the Psalms affirm this key teaching: The earth is good. “The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” Genesis 1:1-13, and 1:31 give us the basic biblical teaching here. God pronounced the first light of creation “good” (Gen. 1:4). And having created the earth and the whole universe, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen. 1:31).

Because the earth is good, it is proper to love the earth. *God* loves the earth! It is an expression of his goodness. We should love all that God has made, and rejoice in it. This is what the Psalmist David does over and over again in the Book of Psalms.

But here we face a problem. Are “the earth” and “the world” the same thing? Doesn't the Bible tell us, “Do not love the world or anything in the world” (1 John 2:15)? Yes, it does. And yet it also says, “God so loved the world . . .” So we have a little explaining to do.

This seeming contradiction goes away if we remember two points:

1. The Bible never says we should not love the earth. When it says not to love the world, it doesn't mean the creation—Nature—that which God has made. There is nothing wrong with loving the earth. There's nothing wrong, in fact, with loving all the beautiful things that are a part of earthly existence, including gardens, art, music, or even good, wholesome entertainment. This is why the Apostle Paul says,

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (Phil. 4:8).

It is all right to love the earth, to enjoy it, as long as we first of all, and deeply and continually, love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.

2. The Bible says we should not love the sinful world system—that is, the corrupted set of values that have become dominant in the world, and the twisted, tainted things that have come from these wrong values. We should not love the sinfulness of the world. Yet we should love the world as God does.

In the New Testament the word for “world” is usually the Greek word *cosmos*, which of course is the source of our English word “cosmos.” It can have several different meanings. In the Bible, when it refers to the world God has made, including all its peoples, the world is the proper object of our love. But when it refers to the corruption that is in the world because of sin, then in this sense we should not love the world.

But we need to be clear that the world, as the physical creation, is not evil. It is God's good work; the result of his wonderful creative genius. In this sense, we should *love the world*. We should *cherish the earth*.

This leads, however, to our second major point:

II. The Earth is Diseased and Disordered because of Sin.

Romans 8 puts this graphically. It says the *whole creation* has been "subjected to frustration," that it is in "bondage to decay." In fact, "the whole creation" *groans* "as in the pains of childbirth!"

Can you picture that? The earth *groans* in its bondage, like a pregnant woman groaning to deliver her baby. A painful image. And yet it also contains hints of hope.

The point is, the earth is not in its normal state. It is not as God created it. It suffers the effects of sin. Not its own sin, of course, because the earth cannot sin. But the whole earth suffers the effects of human sin.

How did this happen? We don't know for sure. There is a mystery here. In some way, the Fall of Adam and Eve disordered the whole creation. There are many hints of this in Genesis. The picture of the environment in the first few chapters of Genesis is much different from what we see following the Fall and the Flood. The dialogue of science and Scripture may someday help us to understand this better. But clearly after the judgments of Genesis 3 and 6 we see increasing disorder, shortened life spans, and a partially ruined yet still beautiful earth. We see a created order "in bondage to decay."

The point is, human sin spoils the earth. It makes it suffer. In the biblical picture, men and women sin not only against God. They sin also against one another and against the earth.

The Old Testament speaks about this in several different ways. Repeatedly God warns that if his people are unfaithful to his covenant, the land will suffer. Note, for example, the warnings in Leviticus 26 of what will happen to the land (the environment) if the people ignore God's gracious Jubilee provisions. The Bible pictures a profound spiritual-physical-moral-ecological interrelationship throughout the created order. This is pictured perhaps most graphically in Hosea 4:1-3:

Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying."

One would think the writer were living in the late twentieth century.

The biblical picture (as several scholars have shown in recent decades) is not only the story of God and his people. It is the story of God, the people, and *the land*. As you read the Bible, notice all the references to "land," and you begin to get a sense of this. And remember that in Scripture, in most cases "land" and "earth" translate the same original

word (in the New Testament, the Greek word *ge*, root of our words “geology” and “geography”).

Thus the Bible shows us that mistreating the earth is one of the clearest evidences of human sinfulness. We continue to sin against the earth—God's creation!—when we pollute the earth, or when we waste earth's resources, or when we fail to practice good ecological stewardship.

Recently I heard a vivid example of this. A friend of mine, Ezekiel, grew up in a small village in Zimbabwe. As a child he enjoyed the clear stream, the hills and trees, the birds and animals. As an adult, he moved away, and for political reasons was unable to return to his home town for many years. When he did finally return, he was shocked and saddened. The stream was polluted, some of the wildlife had disappeared, and the people were impoverished. What had happened? The government had introduced new farming techniques that depended on fertilizer. At first crop yields increased. But then an economic depression hit. People couldn't afford to buy fertilizer. Land that had been over-farmed eroded, and yields dropped. The whole village ecosystem was in shambles, decay. Instead of working harmoniously *with* nature, the new system ruined it.

As this example shows, these ecological issues are political as well as personal and social. If we believe we should support policies which are pro-life, we certainly should also support policies which are pro-earth. We need a pro-life ethic which considers the *life* of the earth, as well as human life — two reasons: First, because God made and loves the earth. Second, because all our life and health, physically speaking, depends on the health of the earth.

There is something beautiful and something sad about the earth. As God's handiwork, it is beautiful, wonderful. But as subject to the decay of sin, it is in bondage. And that makes us sad. We would like to see the liberation of the earth that Romans 8 talks about.

This, then, is the *second* key thing we should remember. The earth is *diseased and disordered because of sin*.

III. The Earth is Our Responsibility as God's Stewards.

The Bible teaches a third key lesson about the earth. It is not just God's responsibility; it is ours also. God has placed us on the earth to care for or take care of it.

This is clear from Genesis 1 and 2. Man and woman, *together*, are to care for the earth which God has made. This is the first great stewardship which God gave to us. And it has never been revoked. It wasn't canceled by sin. Rather, because of sin, humankind has massively failed to fulfill its earth stewardship. We have done to the earth what we have done to each other: Exploited, harmed, oppressed, raped, and ravaged the earth. The human race has disobeyed God in this matter.

Stewardship means taking proper care of, as those entrusted with this responsibility by someone in authority. This is a basic biblical theme. We see from Scripture that stewardship is not just about time and money. In fact, there are two great areas of stewardship, according to the Bible:

1) the stewardship of creation, of all the world God has made and given us, and

2) the stewardship of God's grace. 1 Peter 4:10 tells us that we should be “good stewards of the many-colored grace of God” (literal translation). Here is our great, fundamental stewardship: proper use and care of the material world, and faithful, responsible channels of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ.

As Christians, we often are lopsided here. We may fail to show as much concern for the earth as God does. Yet this is a fundamental part of our stewardship.

How shall we fulfill our earth stewardship? This concern has local, regional, national, and global dimensions. Ecology tells us to remember that all these dimensions are interrelated. So it becomes a part of our task as Christian congregations to ask what Christian faithfulness means in all these areas. Congregations, or small groups within congregations, can begin by taking inventory of the ways our lives already do touch all these dimensions, and what faithful stewardship would mean in each one.

The question is earth stewardship. I'm not talking here just about the *land*, the soil. I'm talking about the whole earth, the whole planet—in fact, the whole created order. How we treat the planet is of concern to God. It is part of our stewardship.

Our actions in this area can be real, genuine ministry. A biologist friend of mine teaches at a Christian college in the Midwest. He was given responsibility for a piece of woodland some miles from the college campus. Over the years he has been working to practice good ecological principles in managing this piece of God's creation, while using it as a learning center. Biblically, speaking, this is Christian ministry! He is working to show what reconciliation through Christ means for the created order. This woodland is a small demonstration plot of the Kingdom of God, a small sign of the “reconciliation of all things” that God is bringing.

This is not just a Christian concern, however. God gives all human beings—not just Christians—a stewardship responsibility for the whole earth. This responsibility comes from the beginning of creation (Gen. 1:28). This is one reason why Christians should gladly cooperate with non-Christians, secularists, or people of other faiths when it comes to caring for the earth. Whether they recognize it or not, non-Christians who work for ecological wholeness are, at least in this area, doing the work of God.

The third great truth, then, is that we all bear a stewardship responsibility toward the earth.

IV. The Earth will be Judged and Restored.

Here is the fourth and final truth: The earth will be judged and restored. There is an end of the story of earth and ecology, and it is in God's hands.

Notice the promise of Romans 8:21: The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. An amazing promise! Just as we will be saved, so also the earth is to be saved—that is, “liberated from its bondage to decay.” Just as we will be saved from all the effects of sin, so also the whole creation will be saved from the effects of sin. What a cause for wonder, meditation, and praise to God!

In the Bible we see two recurring themes with relation to the earth. One is judgment. The other is restoration. These are not contradictory, because both center in the work of Jesus Christ. They're part of the same story. Jesus is both the Judge and the Liberator or Savior. We know this, of course, with regard to our own sin. But the same thing is true with regard to the whole creation.

The New Testament teaches us that the “model” of what God is doing in the created order, as in our own lives, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What God has done in Jesus he is doing in us and in the whole created order: Judgment and restoration. So that even “the creation itself” will come to enjoy “the glorious freedom of the children of God”!

As Christians we confess our faith in the resurrection of the body, not just the survival of the soul. We believe that Jesus rose again physically and materially, not just spiritually or figuratively. Jesus' Resurrection body was renewed and glorious, but it was the same body. And we know the same thing will happen to all who have become “new creatures” through Jesus Christ.

The amazing thing here is what it says about material existence—things like hands and blood, cells and molecules, rocks and quarks and protons. Somehow these too will be “resurrected,” it seems — but each according to its kind, as Paul seems to suggest in 1 Cor. 15:35-44. Perhaps we can speak of the “death” and “resurrection” of the whole cosmos! But as with us as human beings, so with the cosmos: the death is not a destruction. Rather, it is a restoration.

John Wesley, two centuries ago in England, had a profound sense of this. One of his favorite phrases was “the restitution of all things,” the King James Version of Acts 3:21. In that passage the Apostle Peter tells us, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that the time is coming when God will “restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” And so Wesley wrote,

While 'the whole creation groans together' (whether men attend or not), their groans are not dispersed in idle air, but enter into the ears of him that made them. While his creatures 'travail together in pain,' he knows all their pain, and is bringing them nearer and nearer to the birth which shall be accomplished in its season. He sees 'the earnest expectation' wherewith the whole animated creation 'waits for' that final 'manifestation of the sons of God': in which 'they themselves also shall be delivered' (not by annihilation: annihilation is not deliverance) 'from the' present 'bondage of corruption, into' a measure of 'the glorious liberty of the children of God.'

Referring then to Revelation 21, Wesley notes that the promise of the destruction of death, evil, and pain is not restricted to humankind. Rather, we may expect that “the whole brute creation will then undoubtedly be restored, not only to the vigor, strength, and swiftness which they had at their creation, but to a far higher degree of each than they ever enjoyed.” Then will be fulfilled the great promise of Isaiah 11:6-9. (John Wesley, Sermon, “The General Deliverance.”)

Romans says the Creation was “subjected to frustration, in hope that it will be liberated from its bondage to decay.” *In hope!* There is hope for the earth.

As Christians, then, we can and should have hope *for the earth*, as well as our hope of heaven.

Whenever we plant a seed . . .

Whenever we see a fallen bird . . .

Whenever we gaze at a mountain . . .

Whenever we see a polluted river . . .

. . . we hope for the *liberation* of the whole creation, the great promise that Romans 8 speaks of.

The Book of Revelation presents a wonder picture of this. Judgment, but also liberation. Rev. 11:18 says, “The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great-- and for *destroying those who destroy the earth*.” Yet it also speaks of “a new heaven and a new earth.” The picture of the last chapters of Revelation is really a picture of God's creation liberated and restored.

Is this heaven or earth in Revelation? The point is, it seems to be both! It is the joining of heaven and earth. Read Rev. 21 and 22, where the Heavenly Jerusalem *descends* to earth. This is all part of the *new creation* that we await and eagerly hope for.

The earth will be *judged and restored* as part of God's great plan of salvation.

Conclusion

“The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1).

This is the deepest reason why we should care for the earth. Nothing in the New Testament suggests that the biblical concern for creation was canceled by the coming of Christ. Quite the opposite. In the risen Jesus Christ we see the firstfruits of a renewed creation, the promise of creation restored. So we seek God's help in being earthkeepers today.

This is God's world. It is *our* world, but only in the sense of our stewardship and our enjoyment as the good creation of God. We do not own the earth. There really is not such thing as private property in the biblical worldview, because God is the owner of everything.

So we see, then, these four great truths in the Bible:

1. The earth is good, not bad.
2. The earth is diseased and disordered because of sin.
3. The earth is our responsibility as God's stewards.
4. The earth will be judged and restored.

How should this make a difference in the way we, as Christians, live?

1. We may enjoy God's good creation, and praise God for it.

2. We may live before the world as good stewards of the earth. Christians should be at the forefront of modeling good earth stewardship, including ecological concern. Minimally, this certainly includes recycling, healthy eating, and supporting sound ecological policies in government and business.

3. We may honor and support those Christians whom God calls to a ministry to the earth.

4. We can teach earth stewardship to our children.

5. We can continue to study Scripture for what it says about the earth.

“The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in 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” (Rom. 8:19-21 TNIV).

Praise the Lord!

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