

Creation Care

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[0 : 0 0] Well, first of all, let me say that it is a very real pleasure to be at Brunsfield tonight, especially tonight, because this is the first time that I have spoken to a live audience for eight months.

The last time I was speaking was on the second Sunday of March. My wife and I got COVID the following week, but I hope the two things were not connected. But anyway, it's a real pleasure to be here tonight, and I applaud your ingenuity in opening the church.

I have felt sometimes a little uneasy that the churches have been closed down, and sometimes I just wonder if we are sufficiently keen to get back to meeting like this.

But thank you for having me tonight, and as I say, it is a particular pleasure to be here. Now, I was originally asked to speak to you on this subject. I think it was originally scheduled for the month of April or thereabouts, and then it was postponed a couple of times.

But I'm very happy to have the opportunity to speak to you tonight on the subject of creation care. And just before we begin the subject, I'm going to read to you just a couple of verses from Paul's letter to the Romans, just to supplement what we've already heard.

[1 : 2 7] This is a well-known verse in chapter 1, verse 19, which says, What may be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

And then in chapter 8, speaking again of creation, he says, And just further down that chapter, in verse 26, in the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness, we do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that cannot express.

And he who searches our hearts knows the minds of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes with the saints in accordance with God's will. Now may the reading of these passages be a blessing to us this evening as we consider together the subject of creation care.

Let me say by way of introduction that today is All Saints Day and has been celebrated as All Saints Day by the church since about the 8th century.

I was trying to find a link between All Saints Day and creation care. Been struggling a bit with that, but it did strike me when reflecting on it that many of the ancient saints were much interested in the messages of creation and in what they would have called creation care.

[3 : 2 4] So many of them were very committed to the animal and plant kingdom. And I think it was Sir Francis of Assisi who was not very keen about killing insects. And I occasionally try to follow that when we have a wasp in the front room by encouraging the creature to use the open window, but it doesn't always work out.

However, what's maybe more relevant for tonight, strangely, is that it was on this day in 1959 that the M1 was opened for the first time to traffic.

And of course, the spread of motorways has certainly been a feature of my lifetime. And it has a great deal to do with the environment. And it's something that the environmental movement focuses on.

So instead of M1, which was opened on this day in 1959, you might want to think about HS2, which I think is going to be built one of these days, but which has significant implications for the environment of the land through which it passes.

Now, I have been challenged in preparing for tonight's subject. First of all, because I've never been asked to speak on this before.

[4 : 39] Plenty of talks I've given on creation and design and creation, but never on the topic of creation care. And so I've had to think quite a lot about it. Thank you for all the extra time that I had to reflect on it.

But it also strikes me that across my life and my association with evangelical churches, it has not been a topic that has been in any way conspicuous.

In fact, I struggle to remember if I've ever heard anyone speaking about creation care and the significance of the environment, except in a rather cursory and passing way.

So I think as we come to our subject tonight, there is an issue about how much attention over the years we have given to this. And I'm not being critical about it.

I think there is something about creation care which is difficult for us. Just the sheer size of the created world is such that it's very hard for us to reflect on any personal impact that we might have in the very small piece of territory that we occupy.

[5 : 47] Of course, it has become recently a very prominent political issue with the rise of the Green Parties and the environmental movement thrusting itself now to our attention with environmental extinction movement.

And I think it's partly because we really are not quite sure how to handle this and how as Christians to react to it. Again, I'm not sure where I would find a definitive evangelical response to this matter.

But I do think as Christians who believe in God that we do sense that God is in control of the creation that he has made. And maybe we have just been content to leave it there.

And that's not altogether a bad thing to do. It is certainly an understandable reaction. I've also not found a great deal of material on the subject.

I've come across a series of booklets in a series entitled Grove Ethics. And these deal with various aspects of the environmental movement and what they would perceive as a crisis.

[6 : 59] And there is one book I've come across called Bible Theology for Life Creation Care by Douglas and Jonathan Moo. And this book gives a fairly complete treatment of modern evangelical thinking about environmentalism.

However, there have been some Christians that have involved themselves in this. And one of them in particular is Sir John Houghton. He passed away sadly in the 15th of April this year.

I think I'm right in saying he had a background amongst Christian brethren. He certainly was brought up in an evangelical home. He was professor of atmospheric physics at Oxford and was also the chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC.

A group which shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 with Al Gore. You remember Al Gore? He used to introduce himself by saying, I used to be the next president of the United States.

But it never quite happened for him. And then, of course, very much in the news is the young lady Greta Thunberg. The activist who has become an international personality about the urgency of environmental issues.

[8 : 16] And one of the times I heard her speak, she said, don't believe me, believe the science. And I must say that I thought there was something somewhat odd about a young 17-year-old who is motivated by something she hears from her teacher at school and becomes a world expert on environmental issues.

I thought there was a degree of desperation about that. And it leaves me wondering a little bit about the coherence of the current environmental movement.

No reflection on her. Just the fact that she became the focus of a movement that feels often frustrated, I found rather interesting. But there's an interesting phrase that we've become used to now.

It is the phrase, follow the science. And this implies, of course, that science has the answers. It has the answers on the origin of life. It has the answers on the origin of the universe, apparently, and how life got to be as it is.

It apparently has clear answers about the future of our planet and climate change. Although the follow the science school has been just a little dented over the science of COVID.

[9 : 30] Because I think we are beginning to see that following the science about COVID is not exactly straightforward. Because there are scientists who disagree about where we are and what's going to happen.

But it has become very much a matter now where scientists speak with great authority on the future of the planet and what ought to be done about it. Now, there's perhaps another level that we can come to in this.

And you may be surprised when I say to you to think for a moment or two about the Welsh village of Aberfan, where there was an appalling catastrophe in 1966, when around a coal mine on a hill behind the village, a landslide started that engulfed the school and claimed the lives of scores of innocent young children.

I remember my wife and I, we weren't long married at the time, visiting Aberfan and being profoundly moved by what we saw there. And it came back to me because I was reading recently John Humphrey's book, A Day Like Today, and he records that reporting on the Aberfan disaster was one of the first tasks he had as a young journalist.

And it made me think about the impact on the environment that individuals can have in a scale that you can understand, because this was a scale of the environment which was being handled, I think, at the time by the National Coal Board.

[11 : 05] And if I may just read to you a piece that John Humphreys wrote about this, he says, Never was anger more justified. The National Coal Board who ran the mines had, from a mixture of deceit and cowardice and fear of retribution, tried to claim that the tragedy was an act of God.

It was not. It was an act of negligence by man, criminal negligence. The politician responsible for the NCB, Lord Robbins, a blustering, lying bully of a man, had gone on television to say that the cause of the disaster was the water from a natural spring, which had been pouring into the centre of the tip and produced the water bomb that finally exploded with such devastating results.

The spring, said Robbins, was completely unknown, and that was just one of his lies. Not only was it known, its presence was marked on local maps, and older miners knew exactly where it was and what the danger was, and they had been saying so for years.

They were ignored. Mercifully, they had put their fears in writing, and the letters written by the miners and ignored by the NCB were eventually produced at the inquiry into the disaster so that the truth could be revealed for all the world to see.

And when I read that, and reflecting sadly on it, I thought of the terrible parable that Aberfan remains. You see, it is a parable, I suggest, about at least three things.

[12 : 33] It is, first of all, a parable about a legitimate activity. It is legitimate, and as Christians we would believe this, and our readings tonight bear this out, that it is a legitimate activity to make use of the resources of the earth, and that's what the coal mining industry had done for several hundred years.

Now, I'm not saying that the conditions in which miners worked were legitimate, but the activity was legitimate to use the vast coal resources of the earth.

They remained vast still, and may never be used if environmentalism continues in the way that it is going. But the second thing about it is the careless disposal of waste.

Now, when I was growing up as a child, I used to wonder about the coal bings that you could find around central Scotland. There used to be a spectacular one as you drove along as it was the A8 then, and saw the kind of reddish shale heaps along the motorway.

I think some of them have gone, but most of them are still there. And there was no sense of the importance of preserving the environment. You just disposed of these things in the quickest possible way, and not necessarily the safest possible way, as was discovered at Aberfan.

[13 : 53] And then there was the criminal negligence of not acting on the basis of what was known. It was known that there was a stream of water running through the waste from the pit in Aberfan.

People wrote about it. People asked for action, but nobody dealt with it. And of course, it was a huge water bomb just waiting to explode, which it did on one terrifying day.

So that was, for me, a kind of a parable about creation care. It is legitimate to exploit the resources of the earth, but we need to be careful in doing so.

We need to be careful in the way in which we dispose of some of the waste that this produces, because it can very easily scar the face of the earth, and it can be exceedingly dangerous.

Now let me try to broaden that just a little bit, and to say there are some clear current challenges in the management of the created order and in the environment.

[14 : 59] And in one of these books that I mentioned to you, I found that they had four particular matters that exercise our generation. The first is, and this is not one of the night like tonight when you've driven in a rainstorm along the M8 that you would fully appreciate, but the world has a severe problem with the shortage of water.

The changing climate in parts of the world leads to dry, barren land. And this is a basic problem about the amount of water, amount of water available for agriculture and for human communities.

And of course, it also subsumes the other problem of clean drinking water for the people of the earth, something that we take absolutely for granted, but which is a major problem. And then secondly, there is the problem of the population of the world.

The population of the world has increased dramatically. In my lifetime, it has gone from something like 3 billion people to 7 billion people in the course of my lifetime.

And so this is a huge challenge. It's not that the planet cannot sustain that number, but it has something to do with the way in which we manage the environment and the way in which the resources of the earth are shared.

[16 : 18] And then thirdly, something that I think most of us who are city dwellers are not much aware of is that the loss of biodiversity, the total number of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish on the planet has approximately halved in 40 years.

Plants are also in major decline. And since 1600, about 650 known species have become extinct. In 2016, it was estimated that 26% of mammals, 13% of birds, 42% of amphibians, and 40% of gymnosperms, plants which include the conifers, are threatened with extinction.

And the reasons for this rapid decline are the disappearance of suitable habitats and the fact that now 25% of the earth's land surface is now under agriculture.

So these are significant challenges. And maybe it brings me back to my first point that as Christians, it is hard to focus on what can we do about it?

What can I do about it? These problems are enormous. And the obvious way to deal with them, it would seem, is to have some political and international initiatives that can deal with them.

[17 : 44] So maybe our first thought is that that is something that we could pray for, and then it is something that if we have the skills and the background, like someone like Sir John Houghton, we might want to involve ourselves in it.

Just, I think I missed one last point. Yeah, the one I missed was actually perhaps the most important one. There is also the question of climate change, which is now assumed to be an unassailable truth of our time, and I'll come back to that in just a moment.

I thought I'd just put this picture on the screen tonight just to remind us of that awful moment in Aberfan, this is not an international tragedy.

This is a very local tragedy. This is something that might easily have been avoided. And you can see from that picture, that terrifying picture, the extent to which a heap of shale and waste was washed down over a village with devastating consequences.

Now maybe I could reduce these to three issues that we could perhaps get our head around. The first is the problem of pollution.

[18 : 58] And I'm alarmed when I read of, for example, the extent to which plastics have invaded the earth, and not just the obvious ones, what people throw away their Coke bottles and the like, but also that plastics on a micro scale have to be found in our oceans and living things, in our food.

I read a rather scary piece about child milk for babies having remnants of plastic in them. And this is clearly a major problem.

It is a problem about how we deal with materials that we require for our lifestyle. Now I would have thought that the problem of pollution is one of the problems that should be easier to solve.

Because it seems to me that a great deal of the problem of pollution is that people just throw things away. We have some beautiful countryside around the village of Eagles somewhere I live, but on the little single track roads that we drive on sometime, you'll find heaps of material dumped into a field at the wayside, everything from old baths to sofas.

And you wonder why people don't think it would be easier to drive them to the local authority dump than to release them in the countryside. I'm sure money will have something to do with it. But pollution is certainly a problem, and it's one that I think is easy enough to get our mind around.

[20 : 25] And so as Christians, I think we would want to be careful. I know you are. We'd want to be careful about the materials we use, about the reuse of materials where we can, and making sure that material that we're finished with is disposed of appropriately and recycled.

I'm beginning to sound like a health and safety officer, but it would seem to me that lurking behind that there is a clear Christian duty. The second is the destruction of the environment that I've said something about and mentioned.

Now, this is harder to deal with, but it is possible. The destruction of the environment in many ways is something that has to be managed by governmental authorities, and it is hard.

But it is something, I think, which human beings have a significant degree of control over. And so if you're inclined to study in the area and to work in it, or to get involved in some of this kind of activity, then that would be a holy Christian thing to do, because it would be a way of expressing our respect for the richness of the resources that the Lord has given us and the need not to use these in a way that destroys the beauty of the environment.

And then thirdly, let me come rather controversially to the matter of climate change. Now, as far as most people are concerned, this is an issue that is settled.

[21 : 58] And the very worst thing you could be, and I'm in danger of falling into the trap tonight, is to be a climate sceptic. If you don't agree with the majority position, then you're a sceptic.

But of course, scepticism is fundamental to the practice of science. The reason why we live in the scientific age that we do is because theories that were put forward were treated with a degree of scepticism until they were tried and established.

And it would be fair to say that science never arrives at an absolute position. It always arrives at a position that is most likely, but which might be overtaken by further evidence.

So when I hear people saying, don't listen to me, just follow the science, the science is settled, then one of my antennas says, well, hang on a minute.

I did study science. I worked as a scientist. That's not how I understand science. Science always leaves some questions open. And then, when I see people wanting to shut down debate about something, then I sense there's something wrong.

[23 : 12] So, you probably are aware that any sceptics of climate change, by that I mean scientific sceptics, well-qualified people who are sceptical of the present position, are silenced.

Some have been removed from committees, international committees, because they have voiced a doubt. I even saw one person that wanted to make climate scepticism illegal, that it was a criminal thing to have doubts about climate change.

And this is a very odd thing. And it generally indicates a degree of uncertainty about what is being proposed. Mind you, once you have convinced governments to spend billions of pounds dismantling the society in the interests of climate change, you wouldn't want to be the guy that has to go to the prime minister and say, actually, we might have got that bit of it wrong.

So, there comes a pressure to adopt a position, and we've now reached a stage where climate change is the basis of catastrophism. You know, we're all going to suffocate in about 20 years if we're lucky.

And this creates an atmosphere in which it is very hard to know what you and I can do about it. By the way, I don't want to be labelled a climate sceptic, but there are one or two things about it that I do wonder about.

[24 : 33] Why was it, for example, that the earth was warmer in the past than it is in the present? How did it get to be warmer before the Industrial Revolution?

That's a very strange question to which there isn't a very good answer. And then one day when somebody said to me, what is the most common greenhouse gas? Expecting the answer, CO₂.

The correct answer is H₂O, water. Water is the most common greenhouse gas. You'd have some job getting rid of the water. It is a combination of water and carbon dioxide that control the climate of our planet.

And certainly, we are putting carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. There is no question about that at a remarkable scale. But you see, it's hard to know whether that is the cause of warming or the result of warming because the oceans absorb vast quantities of carbon dioxide.

As they warm up, they release carbon dioxide. So, there is another mechanism involving carbon dioxide. And one of the questions that does arise about this is, are we heating the planet up?

[25 : 45] Or, does the planet heat and cool according to the phases of the sun over history? Now, there is an argument around that, but you're not allowed to make it.

I did read a book about the great climate change disaster by the late Christopher Booker, who was a bit of a controversialist. And he has written a book in which he maintains that the present catastrophic, catastrophic picture of the future is misplaced.

And if you're interested, it's worth reading his book. However, having said all of that and managed to not have anybody walk out on me, what I would say is that there is a case for saying that the level at which we are producing carbon dioxide is alarming.

It may very well be having a significant effect on our climate and it is wise to take precautionary action. So, I'm not arguing against what is being suggested.

I think it is also sensible for us to think about alternatives to the fossil fuels that we use. I noticed recently the first hydrogen train and there is a whole world of energy and hydrogen that could replace petrol and diesel and gas.

[27 : 01] I used to teach chemistry and one of the experiments I loved to do was fill a bottle with hydrogen and then put a taper into it and listen to the bang as it can, behind the safety screen of course, as the hydrogen combined with oxygen to form water with explosive force.

And of course, you could run the modern world on hydrogen. you could run it, a large part of it on electricity and in so doing you would improve atmospheric quality because you would expel water vapour rather than carbon dioxide and some methane.

So, there are things that could be done. Now, this is drifting away from the reality of a Sunday night in Brunfield and what you and I are likely to do before supper but these are the kind of issues of the scale of the issues and so I would say what we need to do is to try and find a way in which as individuals we can respond to some of these challenges.

I keep wondering if we need two cows in our family and we've actually moved to three cows and two families well that's a modest reduction but it doesn't quite solve the problem.

However, I would urge us as Christians just to be careful that we don't assume that the catastrophic future prophesied by climate change is beyond question.

[28 : 26] Just to be a little theological for a moment let me just mention two verses that occurred to me when I was thinking about this. When God destroyed the world with a flood what he said was I will never again destroy the earth with a flood.

Now I don't want to read too much into that but there's a rainbow in the sky every other day just to remind us of that and of course if the climate change view is correct then one of the things we're going to do is flood large parts of the earth.

The Lord said I'm not going to do that again. And secondly there's a verse in 2 Peter 3 verse 12 which talks about the future in which it says the elements will melt with fervent heat.

Now as a chemist I know the elements don't melt unless you are dealing with a nuclear reaction and a nuclear explosion.

So when Peter says the elements will melt with fervent heat I don't want to press the point too much but it would not be unreasonable to suggest that maybe he got a glimpse of the end of the earth which was a nuclear event and not a carbon dioxide event.

[29 : 48] Maybe don't quote me on that one but do think about it. So let me come thirdly to the half of what I wanted to say tonight and this is to ask ourselves what are the biblical considerations that apply to this?

Clearly we are part of the created order and God has given us the creation to enjoy. I don't know if you watch Songs of Praise my wife and I do it most Sunday afternoons in fact we've found Songs of Praise a particularly uplifting experience in the course of this lockdown and there was a very interesting program today from Dundee just across the Tay and it was a beautiful program and one of the features in the program was the Compass Christian Center where young people were encouraged to engage in outdoor pursuits and it was most heartening to listen to young people talking about their experience of the beauty of the world around them and of finding themselves closer to God because they were closer to creation.

So we are part of creation but the created order around us which we are expected to take care of is there for a number of reasons and I'm going to try if I can and summarize these in three under three headings and the first is I suggest to you that creation is given us to explore to explore the wonders and the beauty and the diversity of plants and animals and you think of the ages of history from Adam until now in which people have enjoyed exploring the world in whatever way it was possible on the micro scale to just look at its beauty to explore it to try and understand it and to be able to live within it in a way that gives us a sense of purpose and a sense of peace and then when you come to the 16th and 17th century in Europe you have a group of Christian theists called scientists

Christian theists who began to explore the world in greater depth Sir Isaac Newton perhaps the greatest scientist of all time begins to wonder about falling apples and falling anything and uncovers the law of gravity and the sense in which all bodies of whatever size are attracted to one another and uncovers the principle that holds not just apples on the branch of a tree but holds planets in their position in space one of the forgotten things about modern science is that the pioneers of modern science like Newton and Kepler and Galileo and Kelvin these were individuals who were theists committed Christians who believed that the natural order was made by an almighty hand and that verse in Romans 121 that God has made it plain to us is to see that in the natural world whether we look at it on the micro scale or on the macro scale and we are the beneficiaries of the advances of modern science it is there for us to enjoy and who would argue but that our lives are not infinitely more comfortable than most generations of human beings that have lived before us but secondly it is there to

I hope that says enjoy my third point is that it's there to exploit so in case I haven't changed these around on my power point it is there for us to enjoy to enjoy its scenery to enjoy its sustenance and in return to work it and care for it there is something about the beauty of the earth that helps us psychologically just to be out in the open is a wonderful experience it's something that city dwellers like me and probably like most of you can miss very easily the cities are about pressure and tension and limited time the countryside is about beauty and calm and all of this was given us to enjoy John Stott in one of his books has a very interesting story about a vicar or a bishop perhaps who was walking in the garden of the bishop's palace with a friend and showing him the garden and said said to his friend you know isn't God's creation wonderful and the old gardener who overheard this muttered under his breath tie but it was a bit of a mess when he had it to his cell in other words making the point that we have to work

[34 : 52] God's creation we have to care for it we have to manage it in order to draw out of it some of its beauty and the third point I wanted to make was that the creation is there for us to exploit now exploit is a bad word these days everybody's exploiting others filthy capitalists are exploiting the poor we're exploiting the planet but actually I looked up Chambers dictionary and the word exploit though it does sometimes bear that meaning one of the meanings of it is to make the best use of natural resources so I'm using it in that sense the best use of natural resources and it is interesting that throughout the scriptures there is a clear sense of the importance of looking after the created order by all means exploiting it and using it but also making sure that we do not abuse it a couple of weeks ago I was speaking on an equally challenging subject for Crescent Church in Belfast which was about the morality of the Canaanite invasion which is not the easiest subject to deal with and I was using

John Lennox's book Gunning for God and he's got a chapter in which he talks about is the God of the Bible a despot and he talks about the rules of war that were established in the Old Testament I hadn't been particularly familiar with this but in Deuteronomy 20 there's a series of rules that govern the way in which the Israelites went to war and some of these were very stringent indeed in fact they were not permitted to go to war at all until they had exhausted every possibility of peace but one of the things that I noticed was that when they went to war they were and this is specifically mentioned they were not permitted to engage in the wanton destruction of trees now you can imagine why you'd want to hack down trees if you're going into battle not permitted to engage in the wanton destruction of trees and you think about the commandments of Leviticus 25 for example about every seventh year the ground had to be left fallow every 50th year everything had to be returned to its original owners and the land left fallow for two years and John Luddix points out that Lord Jonathan

Sachs the chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth points out that the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy contain the world's first environmental legislation let me read that to you again the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy contain the world's first environmental legislation so God gave us the earth to explore to enjoy certainly to exploit in the sense of deriving from it what we need and what will make our life better but at the same time he sets boundaries to the extent to which we can use the resources of the earth and the extent to which we should be aware that we're handling a precious resource so my final question as we think about the big picture and the small picture is just ask yourself who will decide the end of the world will we do it with our motor cars will we do it with carbon dioxide or is the future of our planet in higher hands

I think I know what the Christian answer to that is though it doesn't in any sense excuse us from being good stewards of what the Lord has given to us and so let me finish with four very simple exhortations one how should we regard this subject which is no doubt troubling and controversial well the first I would suggest is be confident God is in control of his world man has tried on many occasions to rip it apart and blow it to bits but it constantly renews itself and it recovers God is in control of the planet that's not an excuse for doing nothing but it is something to guide our thinking secondly be frugal now frugal is not a great one for 21st century people in the west but don't waste things don't have more of things than you need by all means use what is available to you but don't waste it don't overdo it don't indulge in ways that are unnecessary thirdly be active one of the slogans that I think the environmental movement has given us is think globally but act locally that's a very good motto for a church incidentally in ecclesiastical matters but even in environmental matters there's wisdom in that and I live in a little village and I have to say that in this little village there's a group of people that spend a great deal of time making the village look good they go around sorting little flower beds and they get some support from the council but most of it is done voluntarily

I'm ashamed to tell you I'm not part of it I'm too busy making up sermons on creation care but there's a group of people that do these kind of things and so we should try and find a way in which in expressing our love and care of creation we play our part I try to keep my garden under control that's a start but if there are ways in which we can involve ourselves voluntarily or professionally we should do so and let me finish with the thought that we should be thankful we should be thankful because God knows the end from the beginning and while we need to be cautious about the great problems facing us including climate change we need to understand that the world ultimately is in the hands of its creator and he knows best how to determine the future thank you for listening so well let me just pray briefly Lord thank you for such a beautiful world that you have made us part of thank you for the beauty of the summer and the autumn thank you also for the rugged beauty of storm and sea and wind and winter and we thank you for everything that speaks of your powerful hand make us thankful for the creation we have inherited and make us diligent in our use of it we ask for Jesus' sake

[41 : 37] Amen amen Thank you.