

Living in God's world, God's way

6 small group studies on creation care.

To the group leader.

Welcome to these small group studies on the theme of 'Living in God's world, God's way.' They aim to explore the issues of creation care and ecology from a biblical and practical perspective. I pray that they will be a blessing and a challenge to all who participate.

Variety of content. I have aimed to keep the material varied in terms of the depth and challenge of questions and content. Of course the onus for choosing the questions and directing the conversation will fall on the group leader. For groups or individuals who would like to pursue matters more deeply, I've included additional questions for discussion, clearly marked.

Recommended book. In the preparation of this material, I have extensively used 'The Earth Will Teach You' by Kevin Durrant. I highly recommend this thoughtful and constructive book to any who would like to think deeper about the matters raised. You can buy it, in electronic or paperback form, here:

http://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1908860073/ref=cm_sw_r_fa_dp_yGcLub0VHT96H

Advance planning. You will find that there are multiple links in each study to on-line resources. Some of these are written (blogs etc), and some are videos. This may require some forward planning in terms of making sure they can be streamed or have been downloaded in advance, and that the group is seated in a position to see the screen. *Please do not skip these because it is too much trouble— the studies will be severely impoverished if you leave them out.* The aim is to bring biblical thought and contemporary issues into dialogue, and we can only do that if both are allowed to speak! In addition, one or two of the studies require other forms of forward planning—the group leader needs to look through them at least a few days in advance.

May God bless you as you talk and pray together, and may he teach us all to live well in the glorious world he has made.

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Week 1. Delight and awe

Starter: Do the group know much of the universe have we explored? What about how much of the earth we have explored?

The amount of the universe we have actually explored is a tiny, tiny fraction of 1%. But more mind-blowing still, we haven't got a clue what 96% of the matter in the universe is made of (dark matter). Not because it's too far away—we may be able to travel further in the future—but because it's *invisible* to our eyes and telescopes.

There are even large parts of the earth that we haven't discovered. We've only explored 5% of the ocean floor. We've recently discovered algae in the upper stratosphere* and we have no idea how many more species there might be to find up there.

* The stratosphere is the very top level of the atmosphere

There may be many unknown species still to be discovered in the polar ice.

If you want to read more about this, go to:

<http://mysteriousuniverse.org/2014/09/earth-is-still-an-alien-planet-5-habitats-we-havent-explored/>

<http://www.space.com/11642-dark-matter-dark-energy-4-percent-universe-panek.html>

➔ Why do you think God made so much more universe than we can ever discover?

Read: Colossians 1:16, Ephesians 1:10, Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21,25.

➔ What do these verses tell us about why and for whom God made the universe?

➔ Does this surprise you? Why, or why not?

At the beginning of our study on creation and ecology, it is good to stop and wonder, and to reflect on God's delight in all that he has made.

Reflect: Someone once said to me, 'Babies are a wonderful waste of time.' What do you think she meant by this? How far do you think the way many of us watch babies reflects the delight God has over his creation?

Read: Job 41.

➔ First, listen to it being read aloud, slowly. Enjoy it as a poetic description of a crocodile. Can you hear the delight of God?

➔ Look at verses 1,7,26-29. What do they remind us about human technology and the created world? Can you think of modern examples?

➔ What does this poem say to us about the posture that humans should adopt before God's creation? How successful are we at this—as a race? —as individual Christians?

For those who want to think harder:

In a now-classic paper written in 1967, Lynn White blamed much of the ecological crisis on the Christian roots of society, saying that the biblical teaching of anthropocentrism (man as the purpose and centre of creation) had combined with technology to permit and encourage an abuse of the world.

‘Modern technology is at least partly to be explained as a... realization of the Christian dogma of man’s transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature.’

‘Despite Darwin, we are not, in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.’

‘We shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.’

What do today’s Bible readings have to say to this?

(You can find White’s paper here <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>)

Respond: Choose one or more of the following.

- ➔ Listen to and watch this beautiful setting of Psalm 8. (Music from Hayden’s *Creation*.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRor5Uf6iM4> You can listen to it in English, but without the images, here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-Jkktp9QI>
- ➔ Take a walk together somewhere beautiful. Ask God to direct your eyes to something that delights him. Point these out to one another. Stop and read Psalm 8 together.
- ➔ Take some silent time looking at a selection of natural objects that have been gathered. Perhaps a daffodil, a sea-shell, some rock samples, your own finger-tips. Look at them from an unusual angle. Feel their texture. Appreciate them, and listen to what they say to you about their Creator.

Take home

What will you do differently this week? Will it be an action, a different way of thinking, something you will be asking or saying to God?

Week 2. Godly rule

Starter. What pets did group members have as children? How good were they at looking after them? Who in the group is good with house plants and who kills their plants through neglect?

→ Why are some people bad at caring for animals and plants?

Read Genesis 2:4-17.

→ What do you notice about Adam's role?

→ The word 'till' or 'work' in verses 5 and 15 can also be translated 'serve'. How would it change our attitude to creation care if we understood that Adam's main responsibility was to *serve* the earth?

→ Modern ecologists sometimes blame the ecological crisis on Jews and Christians who have taught human dominance over the earth. Does this Genesis account support a belief system of human dominance?

For those who want to think harder:

The two words used in Genesis 2:15 (commonly translated 'till' and 'guard' are used of the role of the priests in Num 3:7-8; 4:23-24, 26. What do you think this tells us?

But the role of Adam is described in different terms in the previous chapter.

Read Genesis 1:26-31.

→ How is Adam's status described here?

→ Does this give permission to humans to use the earth as they please? Why, or why not?

→ How have Adam and his descendants responded to these words from God?

For those who want to think harder:

Romans 5:12-21 teaches us that Jesus is the 'second Adam'—in other words, he comes to fulfil all that Adam failed to do. What might this mean in terms of creation care? If the role of the church is to continue the work of Christ, and to model ourselves on him, what might it mean for us?

Reflect. The use of the word 'dominion' or 'rule' in verse 26 follows immediately from the words 'let us make mankind in our image'. How does this affect our understanding of what it means to have dominion, or to rule?

How might we 'rule' as God rules? Kevin Durrant suggests that the creation accounts show God ruling with **hospitality, honour and hope**.

1. **Hospitality.**

John of Damascus described the act of creation as God ‘making room’ for things to exist alongside him. Note the words of creation each time, ‘Let there be...’ It is as if God is giving permission for plants and animals to live alongside him. Not only does he permit them, but he welcomes them with a banquet – see Genesis 1:30.

2. **Honour.**

At the end of each day, God looks at what he has made and declares it ‘good’. The very act of God becoming human in Jesus dignifies and honours our creatureliness.

3. **Hope.**

God creates light in darkness and order out of chaos (Genesis 1:1-3). His creating-recreating work continues in the resurrection of Jesus, and its final fulfilment is still expected (Rom 8:19-22).

Reflect. Watch this timelapse video of urban expansion, deforestation and lake shrinkage. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIYHGkSb-fU>

- ➔ Do these images represent ruling like God does? Is the answer the same for each of them?
- ➔ What things make us tend towards ‘dominating’ rather than ‘serving’ the earth?

Respond.

- ➔ How could we, as nations, care for the earth with hospitality, honour and hope? What factors make that more difficult?
- ➔ How could we, as individuals and small groups, care for the earth in this way?

Take home

What will you do differently this week? Will it be an action, a different way of thinking, something you will be asking or saying to God?

3. Land rights?

Starter. Who owns the land your house is built on? Is it rented? If you are the houseowner, is it leasehold or freehold?... How long have you been there?... Do you know who was there before you?... And before them?... And before them?... Who will be there after you?...

➔ Does anyone *really* own ‘their’ land?

If, as we have seen, the earth is created, not for humans, but for God’s delight; and if we are given the earth to govern in a godly way so that we might be described as ‘serving’ the earth, we can’t really be said to own it. Today we will explore this idea further.

Read: Exodus 23:12

➔ Who gets to rest on the Sabbath? Does this surprise you?

This idea of Sabbath rest for people and animals is extended in Leviticus.

Read: Leviticus 25:1-13, 23

➔ First re-read verses 1-7. We are counting in years now, not days—who and what gets to rest every 7th year?

➔ Is there any practical benefit in allowing land to lie fallow?

➔ What do farmers do nowadays to get around the problem of soil nutrient depletion?

➔ What principle can we learn from this? Might it apply to more than just farmland?

➔ Now re-read verses 8-13 and 23. Who really owns the land?

➔ What is the benefit of understanding land ownership in this way?

Although there are probably practical reasons why we cannot copy these practices exactly, there are some important principles that we can and should learn from them: treat the land gently, hold the land lightly.

1. Treat the earth gently

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysa5OBhXz-Q>

➔ How has the land in the film been treated ungenerally in the past? What problems has this caused?

➔ Can you think of other examples of treating the land ‘ungently’?

2. Hold the land lightly

Recently, Nestle has been criticised for draining groundwater in Pakistan to use in its bottling plant, and then selling bottled water back to the same communities. In 2002 the company successfully campaigned at the World Water Forum to have water classified as a ‘need’, rather than a ‘right’. You can read more about it here https://urbantimes.co/2013/06/nestle-the-global-search-for-liquid-gold/?ak_proof=1

Giant companies like Monsanto sell genetically modified seed to farmers, then charge them for the right to replant their own seeds their own year. This is because Monsanto

has taken out a patent on the seed. You can read more about this here
<http://seedfreedom.info/who-owns-the-seed/>

→ Are there ‘natural’ resources that we have no right to claim ownership over?

For those who want to think harder:

There is an excellent resource on fracking here.

http://newint.org/blog/the_fracking_files.pdf

What are the issues at stake in this discussion? How might the principles of (a) treating the earth gently, and (b) holding the land lightly, apply to this?

Respond.

- How might applying the principle of treating the earth gently change the way I live?
- ‘The very breath in our lungs is borrowed.’ If we can’t say we really own anything, how might that change the way that we live?
- Might living out these two principles give *us* rest, too?

Take home

What will you do differently this week? Will it be an action, a different way of thinking, something you will be asking or saying to God?

Week 4. Thinking outside the box.

Starter. The myth of the Gordian knot. Legend has it that Alexander the Great, towards the beginning of his military career, came across an ox-cart tied to a stake with a very intricate knot. It was said that whoever untied the knot would conquer the whole of Asia. After looking at it for a moment, Alexander took his sword and cut the knot in two.

- Are you someone who approaches a problem creatively, or do you tend to do it the same way you (and other people) have always done it?

Read: Luke 12:13-15.

- Why do you think Jesus refused to be drawn into the inheritance dispute?
- What motives were driving the man?
- How much are we, as a society, driven by these same values? What factors accentuate this?

In response to this question, Jesus tells a story.

Read. Luke 12:16-21. Note three things that the farmer is lacking:

1. He lacks imagination.

In response to the bumper harvest, the farmer says, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?... I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones.’

- What alternatives were there for the farmer to consider? How else could he have used his surplus? Are there more noble options?
- Why do you think he failed to consider these other possibilities?
- Thinking about the environment, in particular, in what ways are we, like the farmer, ‘locked into’ thinking only one way about our lifestyle? Does this matter?
- How could we be more creative in our approach to the impact we have on the environment? What would be the cost to us of doing so?
- Is creativity and imagination a characteristic of God? Why, or why not?

Watch: https://www.ted.com/talks/pam_warhurst_how_we_can_eat_our_landscapes (you could stop it after 3 minutes if you wish—depending on time)

- What is your reaction to this woman’s very creative response to the challenge of improving her local environment?
- What were the essential ingredients to making this work?
- Can you think of other creative projects that you have heard of or been involved in?
- What are the barriers to this sort of creativity?
- What, if anything does the legend of Alexander and the Gordian knot say to this issue?

2. Altruism.

The farmer is motivated solely by his own desires. ‘I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’

- What sort of legacy is the farmer creating?

- What sort of legacy are we, as a global community, creating? What could be done to improve this?
- How can we help the younger generations in our churches to take the long view as they make their own lifestyle choices?

For those who want to think harder:

Read this blog post written by local arboriculturists.

<https://treecreeperarborists.wordpress.com/2012/07/13/tree-planting-an-act-of-altruism/>

Can you identify ways in which the processes of tree-planting and tree-care are a metaphor for living well in God's world?

Read Isaiah 60:13, and Deut 20:19. How do these verses add to your thoughts?

3. Wisdom.

God says to the farmer, 'You fool!'. Compare this with Psalm 14:1 (also in Psalm 53:1) 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God"'.

→ Can you see how the farmer is acting as though God were irrelevant? Do you agree that this is, effectively, saying in his heart, 'There is no God'?

→ How strong is the temptation for us—as society, and as individuals—to do the same?

→ How can we personally combat this temptation?

→ If the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, how can we allow this quality to shape our attitudes and conduct?

Respond.

It is said that planting a tree is an act of altruism, 'Walnuts and pears, you plant for your heirs.' Can you, as a group or as individuals, agree on an act of altruism which will leave a positive legacy for the next generation(s)?

Take home

What will you do differently this week? Will it be an action, a different way of thinking, something you will be asking or saying to God?

Week 5. Little people: enormous problem

Starter: One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean. Approaching the boy, he asked, 'What are you doing?' The youth replied, 'Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die.' 'Son,' the man said, 'don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can't make a difference!' After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, he said, 'I made a difference for that one.'

➔ Are members of the group familiar with this story? How do they react to it?

The size of the climate change problem is enormous. Here are just a few figures.

➔ In 2009 there were 351 natural disasters, killing 10,551 people. Of these disasters, 325 of these 8,700 (deaths) were climate-related. (Source: Red Cross¹)

➔ In 2011 we globally released around 35 billion metric tonnes of CO₂. This is about 7 times greater than the figure for 1940. The figure is set to rise further. (Source: Centre for Climate and Energy Solutions²)

➔ By comparison, in 2003, the average US household produced 12.4 tonnes of carbon dioxide from its household operations and approximately 11.7 tonnes from its car use. (Source: Hinkle Charitable Foundation³) The UK figures are probably a little lower.

In the face of statistics like this, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. What should we do? What can we do?

Read: John 6:1-15.

➔ Note verse 7. 200 denarii is about 8 months' wages. What is Philip really saying?

➔ V.9 How do you think the disciples, or the boy himself, viewed his offering?

➔ This familiar story is often used to show the value of even seemingly insignificant actions to God. Do you think it addresses the climate change problem we raised above? Why, or why not?

Read: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/oct/29/greenpolitics.economy1>

➔ How valuable are the suggested steps for reducing our individual carbon footprint?

Now read <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2012/nov/20/coal-plants-world-resources-institute>

➔ What difference are these steps likely to make, ultimately, to the global problem of climate change?

➔ Does your answer to the second question affect your answer to the first?

¹ <http://www.climatecentre.org/downloads/File/conferences/COP-16/Fact%20and%20Figures.pdf>

² <http://www.c2es.org/facts-figures/international-emissions>

³ <http://www.thehcf.org/emaila5.html>

For those who want to think harder:

Is the 'right' thing to do always clear-cut?

For example, should we press for an increase in nuclear fuel to reduce carbon dioxide emissions? Or not?

What about the dilemma of reducing food miles compared to the need to support farmers in the developing world whose livelihood depends on these exports?

Are there 'least worst' ways to live? If so, what are they?

But the account of the feeding of the 5000 gives us a perhaps more compelling reason for not giving up on our little actions.

Take another look at John's account of the feeding of the 5000.

- ➔ What Old Testament story does 'bread in the desert' remind you of? (Hint, take a look at John 6:31, also v14, comparing it with Deut 18:15)
- ➔ Note verse 4 in the John passage. The Passover was very closely connected with the Old Testament story you identified in the previous question.
- ➔ Now look at verse 11. What does it remind you of? (Hint, take a look at verse 51)
- ➔ So John is linking this story of the Feeding of the 5000 with (1) the story of God saving his people out of Egypt and (2) the Lord's Supper, where we remember Jesus' saving action. It is all about *who God's people are: their identity, grounded in what God has already done for them.*

With these links running through our minds, Jesus' words in verse 5, effectively 'What are you going to do about this problem?' offer a surprising idea. The disciples are to tackle the enormous need *as a response to who they are.*

This is known as virtue ethics. It could be summarised like this: It's not that we shouldn't be spurred on by the hope of making a difference, but even when making a difference seems impossible, we still live out who we are.

- ➔ Virtue ethics comes into play in all sorts of situations. For example, German Christians who resisted Hitler often acted with little hope of making a difference, but because it was the right thing to do. Can you think of other examples?
- ➔ How might this idea play out for us as individuals, families and churches, as we consider the problem of climate change or other environmental issues?

Take home

What will you do differently this week? Will it be an action, a different way of thinking, something you will be asking or saying to God?

Week 6. Living in the rhythm of creation

Starter: try to imagine, as a group, what it would be like to live in a village in the pre-industrialised Middle East. What time would you go to bed? When would you get up? What would you eat? Would it be the same all the year round? How would the weather and the seasons control your life?

- ➔ Now compare these answers with your life today. How is it different? Do you think this is a good or a bad thing?

Read: Genesis 1:1-2:3 (if you prefer, you can read the following selection: Genesis 1 v1-9, 13-14, 19-20, 24-25, and ch1v31-ch 2v3)

- ➔ Can you hear the rhythm of creation?
- ➔ Notice what happens on the seventh day.

Now read Exodus 20:8-11

- ➔ Do you notice the reason that is given for this fourth commandment?
- ➔ Why do you think these two are linked?

In the fourth commandment the rhythm that is given is a seven-day cycle. But within nature we also have yearly and daily cycles.

- ➔ In what ways do we fail to live by these rhythms?
- ➔ In what ways might we try to re-instate them? (Hint – there are some ideas in the ‘Thinking Deeper’ section below)
- ➔ What are the difficulties in observing these rhythms in today’s society?
- ➔ What are the benefits and disadvantages of trying to live in these rhythms?

For those who want to think harder:

Below are three very different articles about living by the rhythms God has given us. What do you learn from them? Where do you agree or disagree?

http://www.sustainweb.org/sustainablefood/eat_the_seasons/

<http://sleepdisorders.about.com/od/top10waystosleepbetter/a/getbettersleep.htm>

<http://wesleybaker.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/why-use-liturgical-calendar.html>

Psalms 3 and 4 are morning and evening prayers. Using these might help us enter the rhythm of a daily walk with God.

Read Psalm 3

The blessings of the morning

1. **Fresh life** – v.5

- ➔ We will all be familiar with the saying, ‘It’ll all feel better in the morning.’ Have you ever considered that the pattern of rising every morning is a mini-resurrection? What difference would it make to you to understand it in these terms?

2. **Fresh glory** – v.3

- ➔ ‘You, O LORD... are my glory.’ How about declaring this in the light of the rising sun?
- ➔ The morning is an opportunity to ask God to reveal his glory during the day. Ask him to help you spot the signs of his Spirit at work. Take note, and be sure to review these in the evening.
- 3. **Fresh faith and hope** – v.6-8
 - ➔ How easy is it to trust God for something new, at the beginning of the day?
 - ➔ What difference will fresh faith and hope bring to a working day? To a routine, stay-at-home day? To a day of child-caring?

Read Psalm 4.

The blessings of night-fall:

1. **Reflection** – v.4.
 - ➔ Do we observe the discipline of examining our day at its close, considering where we have done good or ill, what we need to learn, who needs our prayers?
 - ➔ Do you think that the fall of darkness enables us to disconnect ourselves from our surroundings and attend more to our spiritual needs?
 - ➔ What is the role of silence in this reflection?
2. **Reconciliation** – v.5
 - ➔ The Psalmist is probably thinking of the evening sacrifice made by the Jewish priests. The evening provides an opportunity to make peace with God
 - ➔ Read Eph 4:6. How hard is it to live this way?
3. **Thanksgiving** – v.6-7
 - ➔ Do we use evening-time to thank God for the blessings of the day?
4. **Relaxation** – v.8.
 - ➔ Do we give thanks for the feeling of well-earned rest at the end of the day?
 - ➔ What are the enemies of this relaxation? What can we do about them?

Respond. The group might like to try a silent meditation for a few minutes. Listen to the pattern of your own breathing. Rhythm is built into who we are. In the silence, listen for the heartbeat of God.

Take home

What will you do differently this week? Will it be an action, a different way of thinking, something you will be asking or saying to God?

How has God been speaking to you during these studies? Note these things, and perhaps share them with the group, or someone else that you trust. Ask them to hold you accountable for your response to them.