

Living wisely in God's world

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Preacher: Martin Paterson

[0 : 0 0] Leanna is imagining Harry Potter without its creator. So reads the most recent marketing campaign of the New York Times and in billboards across New York, DC and in many other major cities across the United States. There is this big bold statement that Leanna wishes to imagine Harry Potter without its creator. Why do I start there? Why do I use this as the intro to what we're thinking about this afternoon? Well it presents to us the possibility of coming to a book, to something like Harry Potter for example, without even taking into consideration the fact that someone has written this book. J.K. Rowling, the author from Scotland, a very famous author, has been castigated in public for being a radical feminist, for taking particular positions about, someone can get my bible, taking particular positions about what it means to be male and female. And for J.K. Rowling, that's okay, I'll get it. Thank you very much. For J.K. Rowling, she's taken a bit of a hit for this. So much so that Leanna wants to imagine her work without her as the author.

I think that is the headline for our times. I think that it captures the cultural moment in which we exist in West Europe and in North America, where we can genuinely come to a text, where we can come to a work that has been written and been made by someone and say, let's imagine this as if this person has nothing to do with it whatsoever. And the thing is, by extension, we can make that the tune of our understanding of reality. That we can genuinely go through life with our preferences, our perspectives, becoming the all-encompassing foundation of reality and not what's actually truly presented to us.

Something that we've been looking at as a church is origins over the last few weeks, looking at the book of Genesis and what it means for us to be created, because being created really matters. As much as we would like to think that we can live in a world where we can throw the shackles off, live as we please, do as we want to, it's not quite as simple as that. One particular window which highlights this for us is the way in which we live in relationship with God's creation, because humanity, humanity has an impact on the world which God has made. Recently, our own city of Glasgow hosted conferences, the COP26 conference, where world leaders gathered together to bring together proposals about how we would change the way we live in this world to avert the climate disaster which is set out in front of us. As we speak today, there are people drawing battle lines in the cities of Kharkiv and Kiev and other areas of the Ukraine. War rips creation that God has made good and it rips it to pieces, marring people who are made in the image of God, destroying the land around about, and bringing countless amounts of terror and pain to life. A pressing question, therefore, for Christians at this juncture in the 21st century has to be something like this. How is it that we live in God's creation in a way which pleases him? Not just satisfies my needs, not simply goes along with what the culture says we should be doing, but actually pleases God above all things. And I want us to see this this afternoon, that the cross of Jesus Christ stands at the very center of our response to this, because only in the cross do we have a solution and a hope for the situation of global human confusion when it comes to living out life in this world, which is crumbling. Only in the cross of Christ do we truly learn how to walk wisely in God's world. Now, as we've noted, there's going to be two places that we think about that today. It's not my normal practice, but in order for us to get a bit of a breadth about what this means, we have to look at something from the Old Testament in Psalm 24, and then also halfway through, we'll skip on to looking at Romans chapter 8. And so when we do that, I'll give you a bit of time so you can flick there, but if you could turn to Psalm 24, that would be super, particularly verses 1 to 2.

We're going to have three things that we draw out from these two different passages so that we can put together a bit more of a worldview of how we respond and live in God's world. So first of all, the earth is the Lord's. The earth is the Lord's. We hear that so clearly proclaimed out of Psalm 24.

Now, whether you are setting up a tower block, whether in lockdown you decided you would have a

home office in the garden, whether you are a little person who is about to take first steps into nursery, primary school, secondary school, or whether you're about to take some first steps into marriage, having foundations is a very good thing. It is pretty good to know that the garden shed that you put up to work in is actually going to be there by the end of the day. Otherwise, you're going to waste the whole day trying to put together the thing that's supposed to provide some sort of shelter and security.

[5 : 51] And this is true for us as we seek to live wisely in the Lord's world. Throughout the Bible, there are countless references to God as the creator. And we've seen that in Genesis chapters one through three. And in Psalm 24, the same note is picked up by the songwriter. And they claim, and they clearly state that the earth is the Lord's and everything that is in it, all who live in it, because God has founded the seas, established the rivers, put the stars in the sky. It's all his.

Everything belongs to him. How we think about creation and our interaction with creation must begin with this perspective, that the earth is the Lord's and everything that is in it. It is so wide, so encompassing, so holistic, that nothing exists outside of his control and authority. Because this fundamentally alters how we engage with debates and arguments about what is happening in the world that we live in. The earth and the cosmos are not something which are divine. They're part of creation.

They're therefore not something that we bow down in worship of, which much of our contemporary culture would suggest we have to. And what much of our contemporary culture's arguments about engaging and looking after creation are based and founded on. We do not worship the earth. But because the universe was made by the word of God, and it's something that the Lord cherishes, we do recognize its worth.

We do not worship the earth. We do not worship creation, but we do recognize its worth. The title deletes of the Horsehead Nebula, Mount Everest, the Great Barrier Reef, all belong to God. The ground that we walk on, the air that you breathe in this very moment, and the stars that we marvel at are all the property of the Lord. So if creation is God's property, and it's something that he cares about, we as his people ought to care about it as well. I think that makes clear sense. I think that seems to follow as we read through the Bible. And that has an implication to us. It means that indifference towards creation and challenges which we find in the world around about us, indifference is therefore an inappropriate response for those who are Christians. To be indifferent to the challenges, struggles, and problems that our world faces is not the appropriate response for Christians. How can we say that we are fulfilling the first and great commandment to love God with all our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength if we turn around and say, well, not really that bothered about what you've made, God, to be honest. Kind of don't really care. Doesn't cross my mind too often. Not really too concerned. Imagine that attitude worked out in your life. Imagine that was the attitude you took to your child who ran through with a little picture that they've made for you and you went, I mean, not that bothered, to be honest. Not great. Put that into your marriage, into your friend group, into your work colleagues. Why therefore would we think that that's an appropriate response to the one who's made us and who's made everything that exists around us? Now take one more step with me because the world that we live in is also the stage on which we live out what we know to be true about God. We have been given a stage by the maker to demonstrate to the peoples around about us what we know of the one who has made all that we interact with. So how we live in this world and what we think about creation is of fundamental importance because it communicates to a watching world what we think about the maker. What you think of the world around about you and what inhabits the world around about you tells people around about us what we think of the Lord. Put another way, God has provided the earth and all of the resources that exist as a stage for his people to display what we think of him and whether we truly do value things which are eternal. And if this is the case, then it's important that we walk wisely in the world that the Lord has given to us. Not only does this align with the directive that we're given in the Garden of Eden that we're supposed to tend, to keep, to look after, to do well by the resources that God has given to us in chapters 1 and 2. We're supposed to look after those things that God has given to us. But it also fulfills an apologetic role for our own generation.

[11 : 00] What does that mean? It's a big word, isn't it? It's a way that we get to answer questions, show people, tell them how great and wonderful God is. As people in this most beautiful nation throughout all of the world, which I will happily say, and don't really care if you disagree with me, the most beautiful nation in all of the world with the locks and the glens and the snow and the

mountains, the hills, and all of the creatures within it, as people stand in awe of those things which have been made, they function as a means to say, look at the maker.

Look at the one who created and formed the hills, who thought about water and gave existence to the deer. Surely, therefore, as God's people, one of our great desires is that that voice implicit in nature, which speaks of the Lord's glory, would be something that is preserved so that the fuller revelation of God's king who saves all who trust in him would be retained, so that people would have that opportunity to see something of his glory, and then in hearing the word of God, would come face to face with the king. That's where the song Psalm 24 ends up, isn't it? It talks about the fact that the gates and the doors are to open up. You might read that section or sing that section and think, well, what on earth is that talking about? Because it is the sort of thing that we don't normally see.

But what the songwriter is saying is there is coming a day when the true king of glory, God himself, will come as king. He will enter in and all will see him in his splendor and his majesty, and they will recognize and worship him. He has lordship over all things, and we don't need to wait to find out who that is, like the songwriter back then did. We know who that king is, Jesus Christ, the one who died on a cross, the one who shed his blood so that we would become God's, the righteousness of God, so that we would be changed, so that we could know him. As Jesus gets ready to leave the earth, leave his disciples and promises to give his spirit, he says and declares Psalm 24 once again to an extent, he says all authority in heaven and on earth is mine. Sounds a lot like that, doesn't it? It echoes something of that language. There is therefore no realm in all of creation where Jesus Christ is not the king and the lord of it. So the first point then from Psalm 24 is that the earth is the lord's, and that should give us the foundation that we have for thinking about how we walk wisely in God's world. Now if you could turn with me over to Romans chapter 8, and we'll spend the rest of our time there, that would be super. So Romans chapter 8 is where we're going to look at now, and verses 18 to 25.

Now there are many things happening here, and like I said, remember the two pots of paint. We're not going to be able to deal with everything taking place, but we can see something of the beautiful picture that Paul is speaking about. So if the earth is the lord's, we see in Romans chapter 8 that the problem of the decay of creation is fundamentally spiritual. The problem that we face is spiritual. On the eve of the first Earth Day in 1970, the cartoonist Walt Kelly produced a striking piece with a young boy standing with a litter picker looking out over a forest of rubbish in front of him in the little comic strip with a strapline, we have met the enemy and he is us.

[15 : 04] Now if contemporary media or dystopian sci-fi, which I have a bit of a bent to watching and Jennifer gets really depressed about it, if they were the only streams of input for forming our worldview, we could quickly come to the conclusion that we are the big problem and we just need to be dealt with and done away with. Humanity is a parasite on planet Earth, consuming, destroying, and wreaking havoc.

You see, if humans are a plague that need to be dealt with, then it makes complete sense for us to adopt policies which embrace a couple of things, particularly euthanasia, the termination of the unborn. At the end of the day, this is just more human life which is going to cause chaos, but also use up resources in a world which is increasingly limited in its resources and the way that we can deploy them. Stop people from being born, terminate them before they've got to the end of their life. Population control ultimately leads to less resource consumption.

That is so sad, so bleak, so not the gospel of Jesus. And the sad irony is that in seeking solutions, we often return to the same poisonous wells that produce the mess that we have in front of us in the first place. We have come to a point of over-consumption and abuse of the natural world that God has given to us based on incorrect conclusions which flow out of the modernist project which has seen the western world particularly travel along for the last 200 years.

We return to the same place and think that we're going to come up with better solutions and better answers and actually it leads us to more and more dangerous and deadly things. It inevitably leads us to the same place where like someone like Liana, we begin to view God's world without any reference to God himself. We try to understand creation without the creator.

Thankfully, you can pick your heads up and have something a little bit more positive because the Bible storyline is altogether different. It is a better story, a more wonderful story which says, do you know what? We are all mess-ups, but we are not parasites in God's world. We are actually the crowning jewel of God's creation. That's what we saw last week in Genesis chapter 1.

[17 : 37] Humans have been made with dignity, with worth, with value, and it's inerrant to our being. We are fundamentally flawed, but we are not parasites in God's world. We may rebel against God, but he has a solution to this rebellious problem. That relationship which we have rebelled against God in is the relationship that Paul tackles in Romans chapter 8. The relationship between God, humanity, and creation is something which just doesn't work. And you see in verse 20 of chapter 8 that creation was subjected to futility. It's not willingly subjected to this futility, but it's been subjected because of the one who has chosen to do that. Not willingly subjected, but because of him who subjected it.

What does that mean? When I read through that section, that's the sort of question I ask. Maybe I'm just a little bit silly, but that's what I want to understand. What are you trying to say, Paul? What does that mean? Principally, it means that all environmental problems, all challenges that we face in creation, whether that's contemporary, right now and into the next century, or whether that's historically, they are all fundamentally spiritual problems. They fundamentally have at their base a spiritual reality. God's response to human rebellion in the garden is what initiates this breakdown. And human rebellion advances this breakdown in different ways. From Eden onwards, we see the destructive effect of human self-glorification. It affects our relationship with God, and it also affects our relationship with other people. But potentially what can be overlooked is the destruction of our relationship with the community of creation. We live in a world as part of a community of other things which have been made. We are not animals in the same sense as other living beings. We see that in the Bible, and it's communicated quite clearly. But we do live in relationship to other things which have been made by God's word. Where humans are supposed to rule and walk wisely in the Lord's world, they don't. Instead, they are like a drunken team captain who kind of just staggers around the park, shouting some stuff out, sometimes maybe good, maybe bad. They're like a military commander who really doesn't care much for tactics, but says, right, you could do that maybe, and you kind of do this at some point potentially. An orchestra conductor who stands at the front with a baton and just kind of waves her about in the air and doesn't really know what they're doing. That's what humanity becomes when they have rejected the relationship with God. It then filters into the responsibilities that we have in his world. Perhaps you have never paused to think about it, but creation is creaking because of human sin and rebellion. It is, first of all, a spiritual problem. Now, I'm not taking away from the fact that there are other things that are going on in the background, but what we see in the Bible and in this chapter is that underneath all of these things is this foundational principle that there is a spiritual problem where humans have rejected their roles of responsibility in search of self-glorification. Why should I care? It's probably a great question to ask after that. Well, it reminds us that sin is serious. That's what it reminds us.

[21 : 27] When we think that sin is something we can just play with, we are reminded from this chapter in Romans 8 that sin is actually very serious. It has long-lasting, penetrating consequences which touch every area, every aspect, every dimension of human existence, including the creation that we live in. Part of the reason for creation's decay is to help us recognize our need for a savior.

The fact that things don't work in the world around about us is to drive us to that point where we say, who's in charge out there? How's this going to be changed?

My body creaks and aches. The world doesn't work. Places get flooded. Typhoons appear out of nowhere, it seems. Things just get thrown up into the air. What happens with all of this?

Maybe you're listening in online or you're here and you're not yet someone who knows and loves Jesus. Maybe you have seen the majesty of the creation around about you. You're that person who looks at the locks and the glens and the skies and the mountains in the country that we are in just now. You think, this is marvelous. My invite to you today is to come and meet the maker of the mountains, the former of the stars, the shaper of your body. Because the majesty and splendor you see in the mountains is nothing like the incomparable grandeur of the one who has made them. Why should I care? Because it influences our response. That's a second point of application. It influences our response. It is important to pursue wise public policy, absolutely, and to hold our leaders accountable for how our resources and how our nations react and respond to challenges which come as a result of ecology, absolutely. However, Christians should be the most gracious people towards the leaders on issues which surround ecology breakdown. Do you know why?

[23 : 46] Because expecting any human to liberate creation from decay is unrealistic, it is unfair, and it is unbiblical. Why can we say that with confidence? If it is God who has subjected creation to

decay, it is God's prerogative to release creation from decay. There is not one person in this room who can stop that process. That's not up to us in one sense. That is what God has done to creation. And although we are to live wisely in creation, part of our wise living is to lovingly pray for leaders, yes, keep them accountable, but not to whack them over the head as if they are the ones who will liberate creation when it says so clearly in the Bible that it is God who has subjected creation to decay. Finally then, if the earth is the Lord's, the problem is spiritual, then we need to have an answer. And that answer is the hope of restoration because that is the hope of Christian life. That is the hope of the gospel of

Jesus is restoration. And the surrounding area of Romans chapter 8 verses 18 through 25 has this huge theme which comes out time and again that there is a hopeful restoration that we are heading towards.

Perhaps one of the greatest points of gospel connection that we have with our culture is our shared desire that the world would work, that things would just work, that death wouldn't be here, that problems wouldn't exist. And in his great wisdom, God has placed a wonderful bridge before us to our culture so that people can hear a far greater and more compelling story, the story of God's great purposes in Christ to bring restoration. Rather than dystopia or cynicism, the gospel of Jesus Christ speaks a word of hope to a generation which sometimes seems hopeless. That's what Paul seems to understand, isn't it?

He notes the frustration of creation. He says it groans and creaks, but this is not to be understood as the writhing of death. Verse 28. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of what? Not death, but the pains of childbirth. These are signs of new life on the horizon. Something wonderful is about to come to fruition. That's why you have a picture of childbirth. creation waits in hope for the day where God's redeemed people will finally be freed from sin and rule as they're supposed to rule. The Christian hope is not about being liberated from the physical world. It is about seeing God bringing restoration to his creation in light of all that Christ has done on the cross. If you've been at an event which is crowded, probably not a great illustration from the past couple of years, but I'm sure in pre-COVID days you were at events which were relatively crowded and the view is blocked. You might have seen yourself do something like this, getting up your tiptoes and stretching your neck to try and see what is happening around about you. This is what Paul is describing creation is doing. It is stretching its neck out in chapter 8 verse 19. It is waiting with eager longing.

[27 : 21] That's what that word really has underneath it. This stretching its neck out to see what's about to happen, to watch the unveiling of God's promises and purposes. And it's not only the creation that does that.

God's people also long because we ourselves, verse 23 of chapter 8, who have the first fruits of God's spirit, we inwardly groan as we eagerly wait for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

The gospel of God is this big that the world is creaking its neck out to say, when is the day coming when hope-filled restoration will come? And those of us who know and love Jesus Christ also have a similar longing. When, oh Lord, will you bring hope-filled restoration in its fullness? You see, by God's grace, the cross of Jesus Christ is powerful to deal with every avenue, every aspect which sin's cancerous spread has touched.

That's why we get excited about the gospel of Jesus, because there is not one area where his cross and resurrection does not have impact power. Because of his death and resurrection, there is real hope for all of us there is real hope for you.