

The Environment

How can the Bible help us think differently about the planet?

When we talk about caring for the environment, the context for people in higher-income countries is almost always our own wellbeing. Generally speaking, the environment is a means to an ends for us, and we protect it for the same reasons we treat any of our possessions well. Whether it's carbon emissions, pollution or rapid use of natural resources, the message is that we need to look after the planet because one way or another, it's in our own interests.

At first glance, the Bible apparently doesn't have much to say about the environment – and certainly not about our typical 21st century concerns about carbon footprints and sustainability. However, the Bible looks at the environment (and everything else) in a very different way to our consumerist-conditioned, self-focused mind-sets. In that respect, the Bible offers a completely different way of understanding our relationship with the environment, and the reasons we should look after our planet.



Thinking Biblically About...

What's the problem?

The world of the Israelites was very different from the setting in which we live today. The planet was inhabited by perhaps one percent of our current population. There was no easy way to travel long distances. Oil and fossil fuels were barely used. Lifestyles were generally based around agriculture and the local community. There was no industrial-scale manufacturing, no large-scale harvesting of natural resources and no mass consumption.






By contrast, today's population is well over 7 billion, and the majority of us live in industrialised or industrialising countries. Eighty percent of our energy use is provided for by fossil fuels. There are 1.2 billion vehicles on the roads. Commercial flights carry 3 billion passengers annually.

We want cheap food, convenient travel, a wide range of consumer goods – but we ignore the effect our consumer-driven lifestyles have on the planet. The focus on our own needs and desires creates a series of injustices, whether that is the depletion of natural resources, decreasing biodiversity, the

displacement of local populations, the use of slave and child labour or the broader effect on the environment.

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These are not simply legal and ethical questions for big corporations to address. They are a result of our personal choices and behaviour. Complicating matters further, these personal decisions are made within the setting of what we, as a culture, consider normal and acceptable – and the framework of the laws and regulations that govern what we can and can't do. Addressing environmental issues means changing all of these.

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|---|---|
|  | 7 BILLION people on the planet |
|  | 1.2 BILLION vehicles on the roads |
|  | 36 BILLION tonnes of CO ₂ per year |
|  | 33 BILLION barrels of oil consumed per year |
|  | 400 MILLION tonnes of toxic waste produced per year |

Q: To what extent do you view environmental issues as your responsibility?

A question of justice

Discussion about the environment is usually framed in impersonal terms. We quantify the problems facing us in terms like parts per million of CO₂, millimetres of sea-level, dollars per barrel of oil, miles per gallon of fuel, kilowatt hours, degrees Centigrade per century...

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We often see the issues as something to be dealt with almost exclusively by scientists or politicians, rather than ones that are our

responsibility. However, questions about the environment are ultimately ones of justice. How we treat the environment has profound impacts on others. Those in low-income countries are disproportionately affected by the decisions we take in the comparatively wealthy West. What we do now will have a huge impact on future generations, too.

Climate change, pollution, the use of non-renewable resources, decreasing biodiversity and other environmental issues are the result of a consumerist mind-set that puts our own desires ahead of other people's, or responsibility for the planet as a whole. Environmental problems are, at their heart, theological and relational issues.



What does the Bible say?

Unsurprisingly, the Bible says little about climate change, the effects of burning fossil fuels or pollution, but it does draw a link between injustice and ecological disaster.



'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 dries up, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away.'

(Hosea 4:1-3)

Similar ideas are expressed in Isaiah 24:4-6 and Jeremiah 12:11-12. In these cases, the effect on the land is a judgment from God, rather than a direct consequence of their actions.

One of the reasons for this link between human sin and environmental harm is that God created the world and created us to be stewards over it – 'to work it and take care of it,' as Genesis 2:15 says. We are made in God's image and are his representatives on earth. The earth is the only physical home we have, and as God's creation we owe it due respect – for both his sake and our own.

Ultimately, our broken relationship with the environment stems from the Fall: 'Cursed is the ground because of you.' (Genesis 3:17) But the real problem is not the earth, it is our hearts.

"We are made in God's image and are his representatives on earth. The earth is the only physical home we have."



Two mistakes

Considering our role as stewards of Creation, there are two mistakes it is easy for Christians to make.

The first is the 'ecocentric': to maintain an undue emphasis on the environment, idolising God's creation instead of worshipping the Creator.

"God does not do away with his original Creation, he redeems it."

The second and more common mistake is the 'anthropocentric': believing that the environment is only here to serve human interests. Christians may assume that the environment

is ultimately unimportant, because it is part of the temporary created order and will one day pass away. This misunderstanding was common amongst members of the Corinthian church, who believed that their bodies were part of the corrupt physical world and that they could therefore do anything they wanted with them – all that mattered was the soul.

This was a Gnostic belief that had influenced them, and Paul vehemently refutes it.



"I have the right to do anything," you say – but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything" – but I will not be mastered by anything. You say, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both." The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.'
(1 Corinthians 6:12-14)

But the created order matters to God. The Book of Revelation describes the redemption of Creation with the new heaven and the new earth that God will bring about.



"Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea."

(Revelation 21:1)

This does not mean that the old order will be destroyed. There are two words for 'new' in New Testament Greek: *neos* and *kainos*. *Neos* means something brand new that did not previously exist. *Kainos*, the word used here, means 'renewed' or 'restored'. God does not do away with his original Creation, he redeems it.

Instead of an environment-centred (ecocentric) or human-centred (anthropocentric) approach, we need a God-centred (theocentric) approach to the environment. God has instructed humans to look after the earth – not simply for its own good, or for our own ends, but as an intrinsic part of our relationship with and service to him.

Q: How does the principle of stewarding creation as worship inform your approach to the environment?

Rich and Poor

In the Bible, the injustices highlighted by the prophets often reflect the inequalities between rich and poor. It is those who are already wealthy and prosperous who can afford to gain more by oppressing others – further increasing the gap between rich and poor.

“Runaway consumption turns a blind eye to *how* we get the products we want. Pollution, deforestation, displacement, child labour and climate change all affect the global poor more than the rich.”

Harm to the environment is one of many injustices that result from our wealthy lifestyles. One of the serious issues for the near future is what happens as low-income and industrialising nations catch up with levels of consumption we are used to and view as our right in the West. China's levels of CO₂ emissions per capita are still only half that of the US,

and the country's population is four times as large. Brazil and India's per capita emissions are a fraction of those of the US and Europe.

The limits the Bible places on the financial system – including the ban on interest, the cancellation of debts every seven years and the return of land to its ancestral owners every 50 years – were designed to prevent spiralling inequality and ensured that no one was allowed to grow wealthy by oppressing others. (Leaving the ground fallow in the Sabbatical year was also a form of care for the land.)

Our economy is driven by consumption, and our approach to the environment is partly informed by the global inequalities that enable us (in the West) to enjoy a lifestyle that few others can. Runaway consumption turns a blind eye to *how* we get the products we want. Pollution, deforestation, displacement, child labour and more indiscriminate mechanisms like climate change are some of the different forms of collateral damage. All of these affect the global poor more than the rich.

Examples of typical energy use



| 1 kWh | 5 kWh | 25 kWh |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| 40W light bulb left on for full day | One full hot bath | Weekly energy used by turning heating up 1°C (UK) |
| 1 dishwasher cycle at 55°C | Desktop computer left on for full day | 2 days energy consumption for average UK household |
| 5 full kettles boiled | Two tumble dryer cycles | 2 weeks energy consumption for average Nigerian household |

Where do we go from here?

Environmental issues are not simple ones. They affect all of us, and they are created by all of us. Faced with such seemingly intractable and international problems as climate change and air pollution, our default position is to look to experts to find solutions and government to enforce change. Whilst there is a role for policymakers to limit our worst excesses, we need to move away from thinking about the environment in narrowly economic, technological or political terms. As well as holding government to account for the promises they make on our behalves, we need to take greater responsibility and look at care for the environment in terms of our own choices, behaviour and relationships.

Fundamentally this involves a change of mindset. Instead of the me-focused consumerism that is our culture's chief ideology, we need to regain the sense that we are part of a network of relationships, and that what we do has effects on other people – whether or not we know them or can see them.

More specifically, Christians could not only change their own behaviour but challenge the personal and collective norms that lie behind environmental issues. We throw away around a fifth of the food and drink we buy. We have an endless and insatiable obsession with electronic gadgets, household appliances, central heating and power showers. We view foreign holidays as our right, and flying the easiest way to get to our destinations.

We need to regain the idea of simplicity as a Christian virtue.



'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.'

(Matthew 6:19-20)

“One-person householders are the biggest consumers of energy, land and household goods. They consume 38% more products, 42% more packaging, 55% more electricity and 61% more gas per person than an individual in a four-person household.”

The Guardian

We prefer the convenience of driving alone rather than car-sharing or taking public transport – and at the level of national policy, we don't prioritise public transport enough to make it attractive to those who might otherwise use it. As a society we are becoming more and more fragmented, living alone before and after marriage, with all the implications that has for our consumption and energy use. This is largely to do with wider relational factors such as a high divorce rate and marrying much later in life than we used to.

Environmental issues are primarily relational issues, and there are relational solutions to them, too. Individualistic lifestyles – solo living, solo travel, solo eating and the consumption that provides much of our identity in such a fragmented culture – have an environmental impact.

Q: How can you and your church care for the environment through your care of each other?

What does the **Bible** have to say about **the Environment?**



- We view environmental problems as ones of science and politics – issues for experts to deal with rather than matters to address ourselves.
- The Bible sees harm to the environment as an issue of justice, caused by our sin.
- Ultimately how we treat the environment reflects how we treat other people, and the solutions are relational more than technical or political.

Thinking Biblically About... is a series of 2,000-word guides that unpack modern-day issues from a biblical perspective. The **TBA** series aims to give Christians a firm foundation for engaging with some of the most difficult questions of our times: money and debt, sex and marriage, how we spend our time, how we treat the environment and what the role of government ought to be.

You can also read our **Long Distance Christian** series, a collection of 10,000-word booklets looking at key issues in more depth.

The Jubilee Centre is a Christian social reform charity based in Cambridge, UK. We are convinced that the Bible's teaching applies to every area of modern life and has enduring relevance for Britain and the world in the 21st century. At the heart of this social vision is a concern for right relationships, expressed by Jesus in his summary of the Old Testament, *'Love the Lord with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-40)

Find out more at www.jubilee-centre.org/environment