

eco- congregation



an environmental toolkit for churches

Module 6

exploring God's green word

*Eco-congregation (England & Wales) is a project of
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Module 6 - **exploring God's green word**

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Additional eco- or green- theological thoughts, plus details of useful books and other resources, may be found in **Module 3 'Creation and Christianity'**.

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Story from All Saint's

Although All Saint's has a number of existing house groups doing various Bible studies it was decided to set up a new one specifically to study the Eco-Congregation Module 6. The Rector offered the use of his garden and provided a glass of Pimms/orange juice and nibbles, we also ran a quiz as an ice-breaker. Those present then heard about the proposed Bible study and a number of people who had not previously been part of a House Group signed up.

Two of our other House Groups intend to use this module but a third, after studying it carefully have decided not to do so, making us aware in our enthusiasm that it may not appeal to all members of the congregation.

So far, between the different Bible studies, we find ourselves discussing the global eco-problems and how we can make changes in our lives to become more aware of God's beautiful creation. We all enjoy singing a hymn when appropriate and some lovely opening prayers have come from the group, one of which is included below.

Joan Watts – All Saint's Wokingham

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for enabling us to come together this evening. Please guide us in our thoughts and help us to appreciate the wonders of your creation. Help and guide us to be worthy guardians of the wonderful world you have given us. It is our true intention to nurture all of your creation and not to destroy it purposefully or otherwise so that our inheritors will appreciate the same gifts that you have bestowed on us. Amen

Margaret Hawkings – All Saint's Wokingham

Setting the scene: studying the Bible in an age of seeking

We live in an age of seeking. A visit to a local bookshop may reveal the growing interest in environmental issues and also the rapid extension of bookshelves weighed down with tomes covering a variety of so-called 'alternative' or 'new-age' topics. These trends reveal people's concern over the state of the planet together with a desire to seek 'solutions' and new-lifestyles. This Module is offered primarily for House Groups/Group Work/Workshops/Bible Study to help churches and individuals explore environmental perspectives from a Christian perspective.

The aim of the studies is to help people engage with God's word:

- to make connections between Christian beliefs and environmental issues
- to make connections between the material and the spiritual
- to make connections between the way we live our lives and the purpose God has for them.

Biblical images of creation have led to people holding a variety of understandings of the relationship between God, humanity and the environment. For some, the story of creation is perceived as an inadequate truth with a 'Sunday School' picture book image of God. For others, there is a suspicion that in the area of creation, science has won and the Bible has become an irrelevance. Placed alongside the 19th century theory of evolution and the 20th century theory of the 'Big Bang', a literal understanding of the creation stories can leave people with a sense that the Bible and Christianity have little to contribute to environmental issues in the 21st century. This Module, which contains a key address on Caring for Creation by John Stott and two sets of Bible Studies, is intended as an antidote to such views.

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Introducing the Address

'Caring for God's World - the Biblical imperative for conservation' was prepared as an address by John Stott as part of a programme run by the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity. It is included within this Module to provide a Biblical view of creation to accompany the Bible studies. We are grateful for the kind permission given to reproduce the address.

Introducing the Bible studies

This module contains two different and complementary sets of Bible Studies, both of which have five individual studies prepared for group work.

Set 1 was prepared by Rev Dr David Pickering, who was responsible for developing the Eco-Congregation Programme. The set, which was previously published in the United Reformed Church 'Roots and Branches' environmental pack, contains five studies designed for group discussion drawn from the Old and New Testament.

Set 2 which was prepared by Dr John Biggs, also comprises five studies. Four of these studies are a revision of studies written by Dr Biggs for his period in office as President of the Baptist Union of Great Britain (1989-1990), as first published by the Baptist Times. He has added a further study. Dr Biggs represents the Baptist Union on the Environmental Issues Network of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and helped steer the development and implementation of Eco-Congregation.

The two sets of studies are intended to provide a contrast in style and content.

Each study in **Set 1** begins and ends with a task drawn from the context of our life at home or in church. In each study the group is also invited to reflect on some key texts, drawn from different parts of the Bible.

Each study in **Set 2** examines a different psalm. This set includes a full set of notes relating to the passage under discussion and offers a greater depth of Biblical exploration than Set 1.

The two sets are complimentary, so Study Groups might choose to use either or both of the sets, depending on their personal preference.

Notes to aid the smooth running of each Bible study session

- Appoint a leader to prepare the study and guide the group through it
- Arrange a date, time and location
- Publicise the event in print and give personal invitations too
- Arrange a host for the evening (preferably not the leader)
- At the start of the meeting, ensure that everyone knows each other – refreshments often get a gathering off to a good start
- Nominate someone to offer a prayer at the beginning and end of each session – the closing prayer to draw on the thoughts and concerns that arose from the session
- Try to ensure that no one dominates the meeting and that everyone is invited to contribute

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Abbreviations used in Bible study Set 2

AV	Authorised Version
DSB	The Daily Study Bible (Vols I & II) G A F Knight, St Andrews Press, 1982
GNB	Good News Bible (Today's English Version), The Bible Societies & Collins 1976
MP	Mission Praise, Marshall Pickering, 1983, 1987, 1990
REB	Revised English Bible, Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1989
NIV	New International Version, Hodder & Stroughton, 1979
RSV	Revised Standard Version, The Common Bible, Collins, 1973

CARING FOR GOD'S WORLD

- the Biblical imperative for conservation

From an address by John Stott

The title **Caring for God's World** neatly captures the twin truths that the world belongs to God (he is its Creator) and that he has committed it to us (we are its caretakers).

1. The Creation by God

As in redemption, so in creation, we need to develop a Trinitarian understanding of God's work.

God the Father created all things in the beginning by his "great power and outstretched arm" (Jeremiah 32:17). In contrast to the grotesque polytheism of the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*, Genesis 1 attributes the creation to the bare word of the one true God.

The New Testament also speaks of the creative activity of the Son. The world exists **through him** (he is its agent), **for him** (he is its heir), **in him** (he is its integrating principle) and **under him** (he is its Lord): see Colossians 1:15 –17; John 1:3; Hebrews 1:2,3. Indeed, it is in the man Christ Jesus that the cultural mandate to subdue the earth is fulfilled. Reflecting on Genesis 1, the psalmist wrote of man (male and female) that God had "put everything under his feet" (Psalm 8:6). Then, reflecting on Psalm 8, the writer to the Hebrews wrote that "at present we do not see everything subject to him (man). **But we see Jesus...** "crowned with glory and honour" (Hebrews 2:8,9), with everything under his feet (Ephesians 1:22). So, even while human beings fail adequately to obey the mandate to care for the environment, Jesus Christ is the environment's creator, heir, sustainer and lord. As the second Adam, the head of the new creation, he exercises sovereignty over it.

In addition to the creative initiative of God the Father and the agency of his Word through whom all things were made and are sustained, "the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:1-3); "As a hen sits upon her eggs, that she may hatch her young, so the Holy Spirit was brooding as it were upon the waters" (Luther); "When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (Psalm 104:30).

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It is a wonderful truth that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were together involved in the creation of the world and are together involved in its conservation and control. They brought it into being. They hold it in being. One day they will liberate it from its present bondage to decay and invest it with the freedom of God's glory.

2. The Delegation to us

Scripture tells us both that "earth is the Lord's" (Psalm 24:1) and that he "has given it to man" (Psalm 115:16). These assertions do not contradict each other. The earth belongs to God by creation and us by delegation. This does not mean that he has handed it over to us in such a way as to relinquish his own rights over it, but that he has delegated to us the responsibility to preserve and develop the earth on his behalf.

How, then, should we relate to the earth? If we remember both its creation by God and its delegation to us, we will avoid two opposite extremes and instead develop a third and better relationship to nature.

First, we will avoid the **deification** of nature. This is the mistake of pantheists, who identify the Creator with his creation, of animists who populate the natural world with spirits and of the New Age's Gaia movement which attributes to nature its own self-contained, self-regulating, self-perpetuating mechanisms. But all such confusions are derogatory to the creator. The Christian de-sacrilizing of nature (the recognition that it is creation, not creator) was an indispensable prelude to the whole scientific enterprise and is essential to the development of the earth's resources today. We **respect** nature because God made it; we do not **revere** nature as if it were God and inviolable.

Secondly, we must avoid the **exploitation** of nature, which is the opposite extreme. This is not to treat nature obsequiously as if it were God, but to behave towards it arrogantly as if we were God. Genesis 1 has been unjustly blamed for environmental irresponsibility. It is true that God commissioned the human race to "have dominion" over the earth and "subdue" it (Genesis 1:26-28) and that these two Hebrew verbs are forceful. But it would be absurd to imagine that he who **created** the earth, then handed it over to us to be **destroyed**. No, the dominion God has given us is a responsible stewardship, not a destructive domination.

The third and correct relationship between human beings and nature is that of **co-operation**. God has deliberately humbled himself to make this divine-human partnership necessary. He created the earth but told us to subdue it. He planted the garden but put Adam in it "to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). This is often called the cultural mandate. For what God has give us is **nature**; what we do it is **culture**. We are not only to conserve the environment, but develop its resources for the common good.

It is a noble calling to co-operate with God for the fulfilment of his purposes, to transform the created order for the pleasure and profit of all. In this way our work is to be an expression of our worship, since our care of the creation will reflect our love for the creator.

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Set 1 Bible study 1 Gardening stories – a look at the creation stories in Genesis

Step 1 An introduction

The increasing number of programmes dedicated to gardening on television and the ringing tills at garden centres are signs of the growing interest in gardening. There is growing interest in learning how to grow and nurture flowers and vegetables through the seasons and redesign gardens- it is as if we are becoming a nation of Capability Browns! Share stories or dreams about planning a garden or part of a garden from scratch. Discuss experiences of planning the garden, doing the work, the feelings that people have as the garden takes shape and when it is finished. Consider what is necessary to keep the garden in good order.

Step 2 Looking at the first creation story

There are two different stories of creation given in the opening chapters of Genesis. We might understand these as planning a garden on a planetary scale! In the same ways as two biographies of the same person can complement each other and give us a greater insight into the person, so these two stories of creation, if not literally understood as truth, reflect complementary pictures of God the creator. Through the accounts we can discern pictures of our relationship to both God and creation. The first account, which describes the six days of creation is laid out rather like a responsive reading that might be used in church. Read Genesis 1: 11-23. Can the group imagine it being read in worship with the congregation replying with the refrain: And God saw that it was good. Evening came and morning came the... day?

For discussion:

- What does this refrain tell us about how God looks at creation?
- Does this refrain have any implications for those who use the garden?
- Does this give us any insight into the relationship between God and God's people?

Step 3 Looking at the second creation story

If the first gardening story is laid out like a responsive reading in worship, the second version reads more like a story. The whole story runs from Genesis 2:4b to 3:24 and includes both the account of creation and the fall. We are going to concentrate on the account of creation. Read Genesis 2:4b - Genesis 2:25.

For discussion:

- Are there any similarities with the stories that your group shared in step 1?
- What does the story say about God?
- What does the story say about creation?
- What does the story say about our relationship to God and responsibility for creation?

Step 4 A challenge

Church buildings are often designed so that people know they are a place where God is worshipped. Steeples, towers and crosses all act as symbols of a gathered church. If you have a patch of land, however small, outside your church, brainstorm how your church patch might be redesigned to witness to the glory of God the creator and express the sense of care that God's people are called to exercise with the environment.

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Set 1 Bible study 2 Teaching creation - drawing some lessons from the Pentateuch

Step 1 An Introduction

The first five books of the Bible are known as the Pentateuch. They contain stories and teachings whose aim is to encourage people to live faithfully according to God's will and purpose. This section will explore some of the Biblical attitudes to land in the Pentateuch and aims to discover some wisdom that can be applied to land use today.

We view and use land in many different ways. Discuss why we value the different types of land listed below and what responsibility we feel we have for their care

1. A freehold garden
2. A rented allotment.
3. A local park
4. Wilderness land e.g. National Park
5. A tropical forest

Step 2 Exploring the Pentateuch

Passages in the Pentateuch reveal how the crucial issue of land is related to ethics and God. Some of the ideas may be theological ideals, but they represent a significant challenge to God's people, yesterday and today, in their struggles with land issues. Consider the following two Biblical perspectives on land.

a) Land as a divine gift

Read Deuteronomy 26:1-12. For the People of God, the Promised Land was the fulfilment of the process of salvation that began with the exodus from Egypt. Whilst in the wilderness they were given guidance as to how they should treat the land that they had been promised. Stories in the Bible and from current affairs reveal that this gift of God has been the subject of dispute and violence. Discuss:

- What do you think the people of God gained from their wilderness experience?
- How might we develop relationships that respect land, people and God?

b) Resting land

Read Leviticus 25:1-5 & 8-15. In Genesis 1 we read how God values the Sabbath as a time to rest. In these verses from Leviticus we understand that the land is ordained a time of rest too, a common practice in many traditional societies.

- What are the advantages of allowing land under production to rest?
- In our growth-orientated world, does the concept of 'Sabbath' or having limits on production, have anything to contribute to the way in which we view land today?

c) Whose land?

Leviticus informs us that land belongs to God, and we, as tenants, may only lease it.

- What can an understanding of God as the Earth's freeholder, contribute to our society?
- If 'the earth belongs to the Lord' what implications are there for our use of land?
- Do any of these thoughts have something relevant to contribute to our understanding of the care and use of the land discussed in step 1 above?

Step 3 A task

Deuteronomy 26:5-10 reads as a creed recited by the people of God in worship. Write a creed telling the story of a piece of land, or the whole earth, including our responsibility for it.

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Set 1 Bible study 3 Singing creation- Psalms as a source of praise of creation

Step 1 Introduction

The collection of psalms is the hymn book of the people of God in the Old Testament. The psalms express many aspects of faith and life including a sense of awe, wonder and understanding of God's creation and the human place within it. Start by considering some well-known hymns that mention creation - what do they tell us about the created order?

Step 2 Continuing creation

Read Psalm 104. This Psalm appears to interweave the creation story from Genesis 1 with the contemporary surroundings of the people of Israel. In doing so the psalm gives a dynamic quality to creation as bearing witness to God's continuing activity rather than a one-off act. Thinking of parts of creation that you have visited, have you ever sensed that God's creating activity continues? Share your thoughts.

The story of God's creation is told in many different ways in the Bible. Whilst some accounts have a more historical feel, this psalm is written as a song to sing and affirm God's continuing creative activity. It is a song that the people of God together with the rest of creation including the sun and moon, storks and lions sing in praise of God. This approach can be a challenge to the human-centred attitude which people can have of creation. If we sense that the rest of creation is singing in praise to God, does that alter our view of and relationship towards creation?

Step 3 Creation and salvation

Look up Psalm 74. It may be helpful to read this Psalm aloud in three sections, pausing in between. Before reading the psalm introduce the verses as follows:

- 1-11 A lament of a national catastrophe
- 12-17 Remembering the saving acts of God in the past
- 18-23 Restating the continuing activity of God before the people in worship

This psalm seems to allude to the destruction of the Temple of Solomon by the Babylonians. It may help to relate to the psalm if you recall a national catastrophe, and how, after the event, it could be perceived that people sought out God who had helped in the past, and placed their hope in God to guide them into the future.

Look again at verses 12-17. What is the particular saving activity that is remembered by the people of Israel to give them confidence that God will see them through the current crisis?

It is interesting to note that this psalm records God's purpose of bringing about salvation through creation itself. In the Christian Church we particularly identify God's gift of redemption through Christ.

- Does creation take on a new value because it speaks of God's saving love?
- Does this make any difference to our attitude towards creation?
- Does this make any difference to our Church life?

Step 4 Reprise

Return to one or two of those hymns that were considered in step 1. Do you have any more to add about their understanding of creation following the Bible study? If you were to introduce one of these hymns in church on Sunday, what would you say about it to the congregation? Close by singing some favourite creation hymns.

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Set 1 Bible study 4 Good news for creation – some insights from the Gospels

Step 1- Discussing lifestyle

Lifestyle is a buzzword of the 21st century. Bible Study 1 drew on the growing popularity of garden design, but this is only one aspect of our increasingly lifestyle orientated world. Week by week magazine articles and television programmes bombard us with lifestyle 'musts' from the latest look in fashionable clothes to designer kitchens, from the colour of our eggs to the design of a room. Sunday supplements include articles about so-called media personalities under such titles as 'A day in the life of...' or 'My favourite room by...'. Discuss how the group feels about our increasingly 'lifestyle' orientated world.

Step 2 WWJD?

An acronym has entered the Christian vocabulary from America - WWJD? It stands for What Would Jesus Do?

- Imagine that you have to compile a Sunday Supplement article under the title 'A Kingdom Lifestyle by Jesus of Nazareth'. Discuss key features of the lifestyle of Jesus that you would include. Some suggested texts for reference include: Matthew: 6:19-21, 24-31, 7:4-27, 8:20, 10:29-31. Consider writing your thoughts as an article for your church magazine and an appropriate location for a contemporary photo-shoot!

Step 3 Impact

Different lifestyles are said to give us particular benefits: a beer and chips diet might enhance our girth and it is said that our choice of clothing or a car can make a statement about who we are. Lifestyle choices impact on the environment too!

- Consider one or two lifestyles, including your own, and the Jesus 'Kingdom style' above, and for each one discuss the impact of it on the environment and our personal well-being.

Step 4 Change

We know that Jesus lived in a very different world to our own. 2000 years ago there were no mobile phones and e-mail was as fast as the nearest donkey. But there are some similarities - people are still concerned about relationships and issues including healing, forgiveness, debt, food, isolation and poverty.

- What environmentally-beneficial features (i.e. good news!) of the lifestyle of Jesus are you attracted to? How is it possible to translate them into life in the 21st century?

Step 5 Church lifestyle - more good news for creation

The Gospel according to John opens by mirroring the first verses of Genesis: 'In the beginning...'. In doing so John links the person of Jesus with God from the beginning of time and then reveals how God begins a new relationship with people through Jesus. For example, in John 15 there is the account of the teaching of Jesus on the vine and the branches. The passage builds on the Old Testament understanding of God as the vine keeper and Israel as the vine, but it can also be interpreted as an intimate picture of the Church and Christ. Read John 15:1-5.

- Building on the gardening imagery, what parts of Church life would you prune and what parts would you encourage to fruit, that creation might bloom?

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Set 1 Bible study 5 Dear Creation – exploring New Testament letters

Step 1 Paul's letter to the Romans

A typical newspaper letters page will include correspondence with a variety of topics and styles. There may be letters dealing with issues over which there are sharp differences of opinion, letters of encouragement, letters asking questions and letters stating a viewpoint. The letter of Paul to the Church at Rome contains some of these approaches and styles. It opens with a greeting, then deals with his understanding of the way that God offers to redeem people through belief in Jesus Christ in supportive and challenging ways. Read Paul's letter to the Romans 8: 1-25.

Step 2 Causes and consequences

'For we know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth.'
Romans 8:22

In the style of the 'Consequences' party game, invite each person to write in the centre of a strip of paper an environmental issue that might cause creation to 'groan'. Next, invite each person to consider a cause of the environmental problem identified, then to identify one cause of the cause. These are to be written above the issue. Then, invite each person to write down one possible consequence of the environmental issue and then a consequence of the consequence stated. Write the consequences below the issue. Share your analysis.

- Have you identified any common or similar causes of the various environmental problems identified?
- Do the potential consequences of the issue heighten the need to make changes?

Example:

My choosing to live far from my workplace

Motorised transport

Carbon dioxide emissions

Climate Change

Sea-level rise

Some pacific islands disappearing

People losing their homeland and livelihoods

Step 3 Hope for the future

Christian hope is based on transformation rather than escapism and is symbolised in baptism, by dying to an old way of life and rising to a new way. Such hope is invaluable because it frees people from fatalism and despair in the face of difficulty. Read Romans 8: 19-21. This passage affirms that God was present in the past, is with us in the present and goes before us into the future.

- Identify measures that tackle the causes and the consequences and environmental issues that you identified in step 2.

Step 4 Dear Creation...

Write a letter to a person, organisation or publication of your choice and suggest one positive step that could be taken to bring a little more hope to our environmental concerns.

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Set 2 Bible study 1 Psalm 145 - Praise for all creation

The setting

We begin with a hymn of adoration. A copy of Psalm 145 was found in the psalms scroll in the Qumran caves above the Dead Sea. In this version after each verse is a chorus: "Blessed be the Lord, and blessed be his name for ever and ever".

"For ever and ever" is a refrain that appears in verses one, two and twenty-one. So this psalm was almost certainly used in worship, the people responding in the chorus.

In outline

At first reading this psalm appears to be a spontaneous outpouring of thanks and praise. But it is an acrostic psalm, and is carefully constructed. Each verse begins with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, taken in turn. There are, however, only 21 verses in our older Bible translations: the verse beginning with the Hebrew 'nun' - our letter 'n' - was missing. But it was discovered in the ancient Greek translations of the Old Testament and in the Qumran scrolls, so it appears in all modern translations between verses 13 and 14.

The psalmist takes hold of his great theme of God's goodness to all creation - his greatness, his mighty deeds, his marvellous works, his boundless goodness.

First see how many times the key words are used in the four sections:

- **God's greatness** (verses 1-3)
Do use all translations available: the answers will sometimes be different. For example, the GNB has 'greatness' three times, the NIV only twice.
- **What God has done** (verses 4-9)
List the qualities of the Lord expressed by his acts.
- **The majesty of God** (verses 10-13)
What various words here convey the majesty of God?
- **The faithfulness of God** (verses 14-20)
Again, list the words that express God's constancy and care.

A closer look

Praise

The Lord deserves constant praise (verse 2a) that will stretch across the years.

Proclaim

'They will tell of your mighty acts' (verse 4, NIV). This hymn of praise does not just say who God is and what he is like: look through it and see how often we are to tell of what he has done.

Mercy

Verses 8 and 9 summarise the whole of the Old Testament faith in what God is like, and come from Exodus 34:6. These words are repeatedly used in slightly different forms: look up Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Joel 2:13 and Jonah 4:2.

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Glory

'They (all created things) *speak of the glory of your royal power and tell of your might, so that everyone will know your mighty deeds and the ... majesty of your kingdom*' (verse 12, GNB). Does creation speak to us of God's power, might and majesty? The mighty deeds of our creator are sung in Psalm 65:6-13 and creation is described in Psalm 104:1-32.

Provision

Verses 15 and 16 claim that God has made provision for all his creation (see Psalm 104:27-28). It is not part of the purposes of God that people should starve or be refugees, or suffer from polluted water and eroded land. The psalm ends (verse 21) in a note of praise: it is *individual* ('I will praise') and it is from *all creation* ('let all his creatures praise').

For discussion

- How often do we thank God (verses 1b, 2a)? How do we do it? This psalmist not only sets down who God is and what he has done. He is speaking of what God has done for him and his people. His praise becomes personal testimony. Share together what God has done for you.
- How would you describe God's greatness in modern terms? Verse 5b says 'I will meditate on your wonderful works' (NIV). How do we commend God to others?
- 'His greatness is beyond all searching out' (verse 3b, REB) and 'People will declare your mighty and terrible acts' (verse 6a, REB). In our services of worship, particularly when we meet together in a congregation on Sunday, what do we do to extol the majesty and greatness of God? Do we look for a sense of reverence and awe? Are there ways in which we should alter our pattern of worship to enhance this?
- The psalmist listed what God had done. What would be the events that we could chronicle, set down in time, of what God has done in Christ? How do we commend the works of God from one generation to the next (verse 4a)?
- Preaching during a flower festival at the City Temple, Dr Howard Williams said you would never find God in nature unless you had first found him in history*. Do you agree with that statement?
- Look again at verses 15 and 16 and the comment made by Dr Williams. As mankind is steadily destroying the environment, using up its limited resources and reducing the Earth's ability to supply nourishment not only for humankind but for all creation, should we expect God to intervene to re-establish his just purposes? [You will find DSB on verses 13b-20 helpful.]

Prayer

Give thanks together for what God means to you and what he has done in your own lives, in the fellowship of the local church and in the world.

Ending

This psalm is a hymn of praise to God who is majestic in his creation, mighty in his works and constant in his caring. Say together Psalm 93:1-4.

*Cited in "New Light on Old Songs", Kenneth Slack, SCM 1975, p.61

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Set 2 Bible study 2 Psalm 8 - The glory of God and the dignity of mankind

The setting

This is a hymn of joy, of praise and wonder. It is about creation (verses 1-3) and then how mankind has been made God's king on earth (verses 5-8). Whereas the writer of this psalm talks of man fulfilling his destiny by playing his rightful role in having dominion over creation, man is not always worthy of his high calling: the writer to the Hebrews saw Jesus as worthy and fulfilling it (Hebrews 2: 6-8).

In outline

Notice that the first and last verses are the same: they act as prologue and epilogue. But there is a subtle difference as we shall see. The key verse is verse 4 and is the central line of the psalm. The writers of the psalms often used a literary device of putting the line on which they wanted to put emphasis at the very centre: it served as a pivot on which the whole poem turned. Other examples of this can be found in Psalms 6:6, 42:8, 47:5-6, 54:4, 71:14, 74:12, 92:8 and 113:5. [This is not an exclusive list!]

Hebrew poetry did not rhyme or have a metre as we expect it in English verse, but that doesn't mean the poetry was not carefully constructed. This psalm uses another very common literary device called parallelism - one statement is immediately balanced by another. Sometimes the second statement effectively echoes the first (as in verses 3 and 4 - look for other examples in this psalm). Further examples of this method can be found in Psalm 104:10, 11, 13, 18, 19. Sometimes the second statement is a contrast (see Psalms 1:6, 37:21,22).

- Verse 1: God is addressed as king and spoken of in terms of majesty, setting the tone for what is to follow.
- Verse 3: Standing in Jerusalem the psalmist looks into the clear night sky and marvels at the vastness of creation and then ...
- Verse 4: realises how insignificant mankind is.
- Verse 5: Here is the paradox: man, so puny compared to the rest of creation, is unique in God's purpose. He is also alone in being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) but cannot now attain divine status (Genesis 3:22-24).
- Verses 6-8: Mankind is given dominion over all creation. These are critical verses as they repeat the covenant with mankind in Genesis 1:26, 28.
- Verse 9: The psalm comes full circle, from the sovereignty of God, to man's insignificance, and to his majesty before God.

A closer look

Simplicity

Verse 2 is obscure in the original. Compare the modern translations. There is a contrast here between the innocent and the mighty, the song of babes and the songs of the angels in heaven, the child-like quality that puts the mighty ones, the enemies of God, to shame. Compare Matthew 21:15-16.

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Creator

The NIV translation of verse 3 is 'Your heavens, the work of your fingers'. Compare it with the translation of the REB. It is a very personal view of God - a God to whom you can speak, who not only has fingers, he has a hand and an arm (Psalm 98:1) and can have a punch-up to defend man (Psalm 3:7). It is an intimate way of saying that the heavens are God's personal creation: that is why 'the heavens declare his glory' (Psalm 19:1).

Mankind

'Mortal man' - in verse 4 (the GNB calls him 'mere man') is literally 'son of man' (RSV, NIV) - not in any sense divine. Compare Psalm 144:3 and see how Job complains that God pays man too much attention, and parodies this passage (Job 7:17-21). But man is called to stand before God (Ezekiel 2:1) and the son of man is to be given authority (Daniel 7:13-15).

Responsibility

Verse 5 follows very logically - man is to be God's king on earth: 'glory and honour' are kingly titles (Psalm 21:5) and he is crowned. This verse gives difficulty to translators. The REB has 'you have made him little less than a god'; the NIV 'a little lower than the heavenly beings'; the GNB 'inferior only to yourself'. The word used can also mean being a vice-regent, acting on behalf of the sovereign, or even co-creator.

Dominion

'You put everything under his feet' (verse 6, NIV) is perhaps a reference to the king's footstool which had representations around it of bound men who were his subjects (compare Psalm 110:1). God's command is that we should 'subdue' the earth (Genesis 1:28) - but that is a gift, not a right.

For discussion

- What is it about mortal man that God should care for us (verse 4)? Is the answer in verse 5? If so, why?
- At a time when concern about our environment is heightened, this psalm is significant. What is mankind's responsibility towards all living creatures as defined by verse 6-8? Compare the wording of the various versions of these verses, and of Genesis 1:26, 28 and Genesis 9:2. These last two passages from Genesis give us the wording of a command of God or a covenant with God. Genesis 1:26,28 is a covenant between God and humankind, but Genesis 9, from verse 9, details a covenant that is not only with humankind but with 'every living creature' - a marked change that is emphasised by being repeated in verses 10, 12, 15, 16 and 17.
- The Earth is teeming with a variety of species: 1.4 million are catalogued, but the total number is estimated to be up to 30 million*. It is because of this 'best guess' that it is estimated we are losing a species every 30 minutes. What does this say to us about conservation? Would the biblical texts support or oppose a conservationist stand? Should the Christian church be involved in conservation?

*For further details, see *The Diversity of Life*, Edward O Wilson, Penguin, 1992

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For **discussion** cont.

- In what ways are we co-creators with God (verse 5)? In modifying genes through genetic engineering and developing GM crops, are we 'playing at being God', and does this mean that this is something we should be doing - or not doing?
- When viewing the sky at night the psalmist felt insignificant (verses 3, 4). Preachers often appeal to the vastness of the universe as showing forth the glory of God. With all the impersonality of the vast empty spaces, does this help us to convince the non-believer that God cares for him, so insignificant a speck?
- There is not a word in this psalm about mankind's fall or mankind's sin and failure. Does this not flaw the argument that God has made man a 'little less than a god', crowning his head with glory and honour (verse 5, REB)?
- When we meet together we can claim that we are in the presence of God (Matthew 18:20). Does the reading of Psalm 8 affect your attitude to what it is like to be in the presence of God?

Prayer

Share together in adoration of God, creator of the universe; confess before him our poor stewardship of our responsibility towards all his creatures; rejoice in that he visited us in his Son Jesus Christ.

Ending

Sing together 'O Lord my God!' (How great Thou art - Mission Praise 173/506).

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Set 2 Bible study 3

Psalm 104 - A hymn to the Creator

The setting

Psalms 103 and 104 are twin peaks among the poems in praise of God, first as Redeemer (Psalm 103) and then as Creator (Psalm 104). Both begin and end with the same phrase: "Praise the Lord, O my soul" (NIV, GNB) or "Bless the Lord, my soul" (REB, RSV). The next two psalms also have similar beginnings and endings, so we may presume that these are part of a greater whole: indeed some commentators regard Psalms 100 to 110 as a mini-psalter encompassing the range of themes we find in the psalter as a whole. This psalm is clearly constructed so that it can be used in worship.

In outline

This is a hymn to the Creator, almost certainly written before the exile in Babylon. It reflects the story of creation that we have in Genesis 1, but does not attempt to encompass it all, or even to keep to the same order.

Its main theme is that of dependence on God, not only of mankind but of the whole of creation. The psalm acknowledges that we are not only dependent upon God as our creator, but for our day-to-day existence. Part of that background is that God has created a framework to order our lives: verses 5 to 9 speak of a regularity in nature, of God setting boundaries, and verses 19 to 23 of a regularity in days and seasons.

Throughout the emphasis is on what God has done and still does. Mankind gets only a brief mention in verses 14, 15 and 23, putting us properly in our place!

Elsewhere we have seen the literary device of putting the key verse of a psalm at its centre (see study on Psalm 8). Whether intentionally or not, we can see a pattern in this psalm too. If we regard the first half of verse 1 as an opening, and verses 27 onwards as a final commentary, there is an arching pattern that betrays a symmetry of thought:

verses 1b-4	[3½ verses]	God displays his majesty through creation
verses 5-9	[5 verses]	The creation of the earth
verses 10-18	[9 verses]	God's provision for all creation
verses 19-23	[5 verses]	Earth's orderly cycles
verses 24-26	[3 verses]	The sea and its creatures

A closer look

The awesomeness of God

In the opening four verses the writer sees the majesty of God displayed in creation. It is not that God is *in* creation, but he uses it to convey a sense of awe. So the storm-clouds become God's 'chariot, riding on the wings of the wind' (verse 3, REB), and tempests and lightning are used to convey his commands (Hebrews 1:7 quotes verse 4; see also Psalm 148:8). Note that in verse 4, because the word for 'spirit' can equally be 'wind', and that for 'angel' can be 'messenger', whereas the AV had the former pair, all the modern translations have the latter, keeping within the theme of the physical world.

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The Hebrew cosmology

If you have a picture of the old Hebrew cosmology, it will be helpful here, for the psalm reflects this.

Above the earth there was the hemispherical firmament (verse 2b, compare Psalm 19:4b-6; Genesis 1:7) whose edges were supported by the pillars of the sky above the abyss of waters. Above the firmament were the storehouses for the rain (verse 3a: 'upper chambers' in NIV), and through windows in the firmament the rain poured (verse 13a; Psalm 33:7). The earth was supported above the abyss on pillars (verse 5): the sustaining hand of God kept earth from descending into the abyss of chaos again (see Psalm 24:2). The waters above the heavens were separated from the waters below (verses 6 and 9; Genesis 1:7).

Provision for mankind

The central section (verses 10-18) gives thanks to God for making provision for the needs of all his creation, but in verses 14 and 15 there is special mention of that for mankind. Grass is given for cattle (Genesis 1:30), and plants for man to cultivate for food (Genesis 1:29, 2:15), but then the three staple parts of Palestinian diet are mentioned - corn, oil and wine (verse 15). In times of drought and famine these are the most important: the cereal crops may be affected first, but olive trees and vines, with deeper roots, may survive (see Rev 6:6). Corn, oil and wine are not only our needs: they are also to gladden the heart and bring joy.

Provision for all creatures

Make a list of what the psalmist sees as being provided for different creatures in verses 10-18. The cedars of Lebanon get a special mention among 'the trees of the Lord' (verse 16): they were such giants they may have been viewed as being so long-lived as to have been planted by God in the very beginning of the world. In verse 17 the REB has 'in their tops' as a possible alternative translation to 'in the fir trees'.

Regularity

A significant part of the creation is its orderliness. The moon was seen by the Hebrews as regulating the lunar calendar and the seasons by which they lived (verse 19). Although light had been created (Genesis 1:3) the 'lights in the vault of the heavens' (Genesis 1:14, REB) were there 'to separate day from night, and .. as signs both for festivals and for seasons and years'. This small section (verses 19-23) is therefore a thanksgiving for the earthly clocks: sufficient time is set aside for work, but not such that we should be over-stretched (verse 23).

Leviathan

Just as one of the largest of trees was singled out for special mention in verse 16, so the largest of the sea-creatures is mentioned in verse 26. What is Leviathan? This is probably not the sinister Leviathan of Psalm 74:14 which itself reflected a Babylonian creation myth in which the monster Tiamat was destroyed, its carcass used to make the earth. This is a giant aquatic animal akin to that of Job 41:1, a crocodile, whale or sea-serpent: 'which you have made to sport there' (REB) could equally mean 'which you have made to play with' as in Job 41:5.

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Dependence

Verses 27-30 summarise what has gone before and emphasise the total dependence of all living creatures on God. And when God 'takes away their breath, they die' (verse 29, RSV, GNB, NIV, a clearer translation than REB 'spirit'): every creature breathes with the same life that was first given it by God (Genesis 2:7), a breath that can be taken back by God at any time (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Death may come to one creature, but God's creative power is still at work bringing other life into being (verse 30). The cycle of life is completed.

For discussion

- At the end of this psalm in verse 32 we are reminded that the supremacy of God is not always benign: he can destroy in earthquake and volcanic eruption. That thought is also reflected in Psalm 18:7-15, 97:3-5, 144:5-6 where these are seen as proof of God's righteousness and glory (Psalm 97:6, 144:7-8). Would you view them in that light? As the insurance industry believes, are earthquakes 'acts of God'?
- In the work of God one creature is made to serve another (verses 16-18): even rugged and barren terrain provides home and shelter for wild goats and rock-badgers. That is behind much of our conception of the science of ecology: the dependence of every living thing upon another. Does this affect our attitudes to the way we exploit creation for our own food and well being, and our patterns of agriculture?
- Creation is 'teeming with creatures beyond number' (verse 25, NIV; see Genesis 1:20-21). One specially mentioned is the stork (Hebrew *hasidah*) which flies away to South Africa but returns each spring to the same perch where it had nested before. That may have been a symbol for God's unfailing loving-kindness and reliability (Hebrew *hesed*), and humankind is called upon to work in the same regular pattern of order in harmony with all God's creatures. Do we work in harmony with nature? Where do we fail?
- When we talk with many people, they think that a Christian believes that creation happened once, long ago. The psalmist believed that creation is continuous (verse 29); we shall see this again when we study Psalm 139. What evidence do we have that God continues to be creator and is at work in his creation? There is little reference to God being Creator in the New Testament. Why?

Prayer

Offer prayer to God in adoration: not only on our sense of awe before him, but also of joy and delight as we view the world and all its creatures around us.

Ending

Read Psalm 19:1-11.

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Set 2 Bible study 4 Psalm 46 - Confidence in God

The setting

Here is a hymn which could have been sung at the break of day (verse 5, REB, NIV; 'early dawn' GNB). For the ancients, creation came about because God took control of chaotic forces and refashioned them: without his sustaining hand all will revert to chaos again. Both natural and political disasters raise the question: what if chaos should come again?

At a time when nuclear devastation is possible, when the environment could collapse within a generation bringing havoc and hunger, it is a question for us too. The psalmist supplies the answer. This is a hymn that brims over with confidence and trust in God, and was the inspiration for Martin Luther's hymn 'A safe stronghold our God is still'.

In outline

The psalm falls neatly into three stanzas: the refrain or chorus at verses 7 and 11 probably also followed verse 3.

For discussion

- Verse 1: A marvellous assertion with which to begin.
- Verses 2-3: The magnificent language (do enjoy the many versions!) depicts an earthquake or volcanic eruption, and the people declare their trust in the face of any trouble that may come.
- Verses 4-7: A sense of peace is secured by the knowledge that God is Lord of all history.
- Verses 8-11: A picture of peace still to be achieved: a view of the end of time.

A closer look

Upheaval

There are two ways of interpreting verses 2 and 3. They can be taken at their face value as a marvellous description of an earthquake or volcanic eruption with the forces of destruction rampant. In the words of the Jerusalem Bible:

'...when the earth gives way, when mountains tumble into the depths of the sea, and its waters roar and seethe, the mountains tottering as it heaves.'

Or they can be taken metaphorically as the assault of the nation's surrounding enemies, attempting to overwhelm them.

Chaos

Behind them is the belief that in creation God subdued the forces of chaos (Genesis 1:2); the world now stands firm above those waters (Psalm 24:2; and also Psalm 65:6-7). For the Hebrews, the sea was always associated with evil (Psalm 32:6, 74:13-14; compare Revelation 13:1). That is why when God's kingdom comes there will be no more sea (Revelation 21:1).

City

At first the city described looks like Jerusalem, but Jerusalem has no river -- only the spring of Gihon at the foot of the mount. *This* river has many tributaries (verse 4) and flows out of the city bringing tranquillity because the Lord dwells there (see Isaiah 33:20-21; Revelation 22:1-2 reflecting Ezekiel 47:1-12).

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Security

Even at times of political destruction, when the world is destroying itself (first part of verse 6) God is in control (second part of verse 6), even of the universe ('Lord of Hosts', verse 7, REB). 'God of Jacob' (verse 7) reminds Israel of their unique covenant.

Peace

The hymn concludes with a picture of the end of time. The victory over evil brings an end to wars and a destruction of all weapons (verses 8-9). The word 'shield' in recent translations of verse 9 is more probable than 'chariot' (AV, RSV): shields were wooden frames covered with leather and were burned after victory, destroying the booty (Joshua 11:6-9).

Quiet

In our age of noise and activity we can best realise the powerful presence of God by being still (verse 10; see also Mark 4:39). 'Be still' could equally be translated 'stop fighting': look at this alternative translation in its context and see what it does for the meaning of verses 8-10.

Majesty

The hymn ends with a reminder that God is with us (verse 11), 'Emmanuel' (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23), and renews the vision of the Lord ruling over all the earth.

For discussion

- The river of God flows quietly, cleansing and quickening life (verse 4). When we ask God to be active in our lives and the lives of others, how much do we expect dramatic action? What is the significance of the river flowing out of the Temple (Ezekiel 47) or the City of God (verse 4; Revelation 22:1)?
- What opportunities do we give ourselves for being quiet with God (verse 11)? Is it helpful to go to special places to find this quietness, and if so, where?
- 'We are not afraid though the earth shakes' (verse 2, REB). The young Isaiah also knew a time when the foundations shook (Isaiah 6:4 REB). Share together any experience when the foundations of your own life were shaken, and of God as strength and shelter at that time.
- 'In every part of the wide world (God) puts an end to war': verse 9, REB. Do you think that it is realistic to foresee a time when there will be no more wars on the Earth? What are the causes of war in the times in which we live? What can be done to prevent them?
- Are you hopeful about the future? Can you give a reason for your attitude? This psalmist celebrates the certain triumph of God's kingdom even at times when all around is falling. Is this a reality for you?

Prayer

If possible, begin by singing quietly 'Be still and know that I am God' (MP 16/48). Remember that when life falls apart and the times are out of joint, God is there. Pray for all who work for peace, who tend those who suffer from earthquake, flood, hurricane or other disaster. Pray for tranquillity and assurance. Finally, remember that whatever we think, God rules: and give him thanks and praise.

Ending

Sing 'Majesty, worship his Majesty' (MP 151/454), 'Glorious things of thee are spoken' (MP 59/173), or 'God is our strength and refuge' (MP 372/188).

Module 6 - **exploring God's green word**

Set 2 Bible study 5 Psalm 139 - Our wonderful God

The setting

We end where we began in this series - a psalm which expresses adoration and sheer wonderment that the God of creation is intimately concerned about every individual one of us. That intimate relationship is described here in some of the greatest and most percipient poetry of the whole Psalter.

In outline

The psalm is best seen as being made up of four sections, each of six verses and each ending with a couplet that sums up the stage in the psalmist's reflections.

- Verses 1-6: God knows all: he is omniscient, but not in any distant sense; rather, this is an account of how God knows each of us intimately.
- Verses 7-12: God is everywhere: he is omnipresent.
- Verses 13-18: God made and makes everything: he is omnifacient. The psalmist doesn't use these long words - he uses simple images, contrasting the magnificence of God with his own humility.
- Verses 19-24: Now comes an explosion of fury - or so it first seems. But there is a logical step here: if God is so all-powerful and all-knowing, and at the same time is a God of justice, what is he going to do about those who consciously oppose him and are evil?

The psalmist says that he has done his best to be obedient to God's laws; so this becomes a declaration of his loyalty. Re-read this section so that you can appreciate it in this context.

A closer look

Examine

The probing of God (verse 1) does not produce fear, but an outpouring of love: check how many references there are to intimate, personal private acts. Rising, sitting, walking, lying down cover a whole day (verses 2-3: compare Proverbs 3:23-24, Deuteronomy 6:5-7).

Prayer

The Lord has the answer to our requests before we make them (verse 4). Jesus thanked his Father for the raising of Lazarus before it happened (John 11:41-43). Can you think of other examples of the same confidence in God?

Foreknowledge

The first six verses acknowledge God's foreknowledge: the prophets were also aware of it - see Isaiah 49:1,5, and Jeremiah 1:5.

Presence

Verses 8-9 are poetic ways of measuring God's sovereignty: its heights and depths (verse 8), the farthest east and west (verse 9). Compare the extent of the love of God (Ephesians 3:18). In the Jerusalem Bible verse 9 reads:

'If I flew to the point of sunrise or westward across the sea'

- the sea is the Mediterranean beyond whose western portals was a vast unknown. Jonah thought he could get away from God's territory (Jonah 1:3).

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Sheol

'The depths' (verse 8, NIV) can also be Sheol (RSV, REB), the world of departed spirits (see GNB), unclean and normally thought of as remote from God (Psalm 88:5), but God's search would find him there (Amos 9:2).

Light

Space holds no hiding place: nor does the darkness (John 1:5). There is no hiding place from God (Jeremiah 23:23-24).

Created

God *is* creator, not just *was* creator (verses 13-16). God, the creator of the universe, is still involved in creating and redeeming mankind (Psalm 119:73, Isaiah 44:24). The 'secret place' (verse 15, NIV, RSV) is the womb (GNB); 'inmost being' (verse 13, NIV, compare with RSV, REB) is literally 'kidneys', regarded as the centre of emotions - so God knows all our emotional and physical state.

'Depths of the earth' (verse 15) because man first came from earth (Genesis 2:7, 3:19).

Destiny

Verse 16 is a difficult verse - but our destiny is written in a book, a common concept (Psalm 69:28, Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 20:15).

Evil

Is it right to hate evil (verses 19-22)? Note that it is for God - not mankind - to slay the wicked (verse 19). How can he do that?

Pardon

The psalm ends where it began: a plea for pardon, but now in confidence that God had pardoned him already (verses 23-24).

For discussion

- God knows all our ups and downs (verse 2). From the context of this psalm, that can mean the ups and downs of the whole of our lives. What would you set down as one of the high points and one of the low points of your life? When we are 'up' and when we are 'down', do we share our feelings with God? Are we aware of him then?
- 'If I make my bed in hell' could be a modern version of the second part of verse 8. How can we do that? How are people rescued from their private hells? Is the church involved?
- Talk together about incidents that you have read or heard about in the news where violence has gone unchallenged, either in our own country or abroad. Ought we to hate evil, and the evildoer (verses 21-22)? Is God just if he 'lets them get away with it'?
- Does a belief in God's foreknowledge give you a sense of freedom, or a sense of confidence about the future?

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Prayer

Share together in prayers of adoration, using the first three sections of this psalm: God is all-knowing, ever present, and creator of all things.

Ending

Sing 'Do not be afraid' (MP 41/115) or 'Search me, O God' (MP 200/587).

End by sensing the sheer wonder and awe of God, who is the God of creation, and yet still concerned with *us*. A member of the group could read aloud Job 38:1-18, and another respond with Job 42:2-6.

About Eco-Congregation

Eco-Congregation is an ecumenical environmental project for churches in Britain and Ireland. It provides free resources, support and an Award scheme to help churches to consider environmental issues in the context of their Christian life and mission and to take positive action. Eco-Congregation was originally developed by the environmental charity ENCAMS on behalf of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI). It is now overseen by CTBI and delivered by a partnership of organisations.

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