

If Jesus is Coming Back, Why Be Concerned About the Earth?

Jill Smith was my third grade sweetheart. I'm not sure she ever knew that. I was too shy to tell her and she certainly didn't confess any longing for me. What about her captured my heart in Miss Walters third grade class at Orrum Elementary School outside of Lumberton, NC? I think it might have started when she sang a gospel song in the front of the classroom one morning. In the sweetest, very Eastern NC twang she sang:

*Jesus is coming soon, morning or night or noon
Many will meet their doom, trumpets will sound.
All of the dead shall rise, righteous meet in the skies,
Going where no one dies, heaven-ward bound.*

Jill's eschatology was not nearly as compelling as her smile, but what does a third grader know about eschatology? But she did get something right. Jesus is coming soon, morning or night or noon. We just don't know what "soon" means. So we are stuck with our theology of Jesus' return and our faithful waiting in the meantime.

The return of Jesus is a common theme in the New Testament. It's included in all the gospels, the history of the church in Acts, Paul's letters to the church and of course, the final book of Revelation.

* Jesus said to his disciples the night before his crucifixion: *"My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am"* (John 14:2-3)

* Jesus also warned us that we don't know when he will return so he says words recorded in Matthew, *"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only"* (Mt 24:36).

* Paul encouraged the church in Colossae by telling them they would one day share in Jesus' glory, saying, *"When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."* (Col 3:4)

A few months ago, I preached a series of sermons on the Apostles' Creed which includes a line about the return of Jesus: *"From there he will come to judge the living and the dead."* So you can see that the return of Jesus has been a part of the church's belief system from the get go.

Unfortunately, this belief about the return of Jesus, damaged the church as well. It has morphed into an excuse to neglect the current world we live in, especially among the evangelical community. I'm amazed and distraught that so many Baptists take some kind of pride in not caring about the earth, as if Jesus would give them a pat on the back for polluting the earth. It's especially disturbing that Gallup Poll surveys show that atheists, agnostics, Jews,

Buddhists are more interested in taking care of the earth than Christians, especially evangelical Christians. This is a major reason teenagers and young adults have abandoned the Christian church. In fact, it's the second biggest reason young people are leaving the church, the biggest reason being the hypocrisy they see in the church. I hear it again and again from young people, "If the church isn't going to care about my future, why should I care about her?" As the father of three millennials and grandfather to six, I want to chart a better course. And it's built upon a better, a more faithful theology. I tell people all the time, the key to a better environment is a better theology. Theology drives ecology

The non-biblical notion which holds that since Jesus is coming soon it doesn't matter what we do on the earth or with the earth, is a relatively modern. It's only 200 years old. It wasn't like that for much of the first 1800 years of the church's existence. Obsession with end times coupled with non-care for the earth was never a core value in the older church. There used to be a much greater emphasis on holy living, not just securing your spot in heaven. But today, there's a vast neglect over Christian behavior, especially when it comes to being a good steward of the earth. Some ask: Why should this ol' world matter? If Jesus is coming soon, why protect the rain forests? Why care about endangered species? Why recycle? Why lower carbon emissions? Shouldn't we try to hasten God's return by letting the earth implode—especially since the Bible seems to indicate that the earth will burn up at the end of time and God will re-create it? By destroying it now, aren't we simply helping God out?

These sentiments have two major flaws. First, they completely neglect what it means to live faithfully for Jesus Christ. And second, they misinterpret what actually will happen when Jesus returns.

Let me begin with the idea of living faithfully for Jesus Christ. Do we really think neglecting or abusing things because God is going to return and renew them anyway when the end comes is pleasing to God. We could say the same thing for our neglecting or abusing our bodies, couldn't we? If we're going to be given new bodies after we die, then why care about our bodies today?

* Shouldn't we drink all the alcohol we want because we're going to be given a new liver when Jesus returns?

* Shouldn't we eat a whole pack of Oreo cookies and drink a 6 pack of Mountain Dew's every day because Jesus will give us a diabetes free body when he returns.

* Shouldn't we just lie on the couch and let our bodies atrophy week after week because Jesus is going to make all things new, including our hearts, lungs and cholesterol levels?

No, we don't think like that. Even if we drink a little too much or eat too many Oreo cookies or lie around all day watching television, we feel a little guilty about it. Biblically, we don't think like that because we all know what Paul said to the church in Corinth about our bodies: *"Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies"* (1 Cor 6:19-20).

Our bodies are not our own. They have been bought with a price. And who bought them? Jesus bought them when he gave his life for us on the cross. So our bodies do not

belong to us, they belong to the Lord. Therefore, we are to honor our bodies. We are to take care of them. We are stewards of our bodies, commissioned to take care of them so the Lord might use them for his purposes and his glory.

We can take this same logic and apply it to the whole earth and everything in it. This is why taking care of the earth matters even though Jesus is coming back.

So with that in mind, I want to share 3 biblical reasons **why we should care for the earth, even though Jesus is coming back.**

Reason One: Why we should care for the earth, even though Jesus is coming back.

God loves and cares for the earth and all creatures on it.

The Bible verse Baptists know more than any other is John 3:16 which begins, *“For God so loved the world.”* The Greek word for world is *cosmos*, which means the entire physical world, the heavens and the earth, everything above and below. Yes, the verse makes a pivot to reveal that everlasting life will come to those who believe in Jesus, but the context for the verse is the love of God for all that he created, all the cosmos.

And why does God love the whole world? Because God made it. God created it and what God created he loves.

Remember what God said at the end of the 6th day of creation in Genesis 1? *“And God saw all that he made and it was very good.”* God was pleased with all of it- the humans and the animals. God was proud of all it,
the sun and the sea turtles,
the mountains and the maple trees,
the rivers and the radishes.

Not just with man and woman, but all living things and those we consider non-living.

The rest of the Bible affirms this love God has for all his creation. The Psalmist wrote, *“He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call”* (Ps 147:9).

Jesus echoed this when he used sparrows as an illustration of God’s care for animals and humans. He said, *“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.”* (Mt 6:26). The birds didn’t have to fend for themselves. They didn’t exist outside of God’s loving oversight. God knew each of them and provided for them, like he provides for humans- because he loved them.

Isn’t that how we feel when we create something? If you’re an artist you know the care you have for what you have crafted with your hands,
or written down in words,

or painted with your brush,
or sculpted with your tools.

It's even more pronounced when you think of your children. I used to say, "I can put up with a lot of mess chicanery, tomfoolery in a church as long as they love my children." I loved the church and I wanted my 3 daughters to grow to love the church. But I knew, if they saw their father mistreated, it would sour them on the church. I knew too many preachers' kids who left the church as soon as they graduated from high school, because they had seen their father or mother mistreated in the church. I'm very happy to look back on my life and know, despite some conflicts that I have witnessed in the church, my children were always loved.

So our basic theological premise is that God loves all his creation. And it just makes sense that if God loves it and cares for it, we should to.

Reason Two: Why we should care for the earth, even though Jesus is coming back.

God instructs humans to care for the earth.

- this God who made and owns everything has taken a great risk.
- he has empowered us with his image
- he has made us stewards of it all !!!
- You know about stewardship, because you have identified a certain number of people in this church to be your stewards. They are to combine wisdom and caring to manage the church's finances and property.
- all of this comes from the poem of creation found in Gen 1, where God says,
"Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Gen 1:26)
- the word used in the first story of creation is *radah* = rule, have dominion
- we have creative power

- **but how do we rule**, what does it mean to exercise dominion over the earth
- that's where the second creation story becomes helpful
- we are to rule and have dominion like Adam before the fall
 - he was to *"work it and take care of it" (Gen 2:15)*
 - dominion doesn't mean dominate. It means "to take care of"
 - God was the original gardener, and he made Adam a gardener.
 - Adam did what farmers did. He took care of the soil and plants.
 - the soil was already good. The plants were already good.

- There is the constant refrain in Gen 1, at the end of each day, "*God saw everything that he had made and it was good.*"

-the soil was good. He was to make sure it stayed that way.

- soil is like people in that it must rest to produce well.

-you can't just take and take from the soil and expect it to be fruitful

-that's why the 4th Commandment given to Moses is the Sabbath law, calling not only for man to rest, but for man to allow the animals to rest. Later, in Leviticus, the Sabbath law is expanded to allow for the land to rest. God knew his creation, and knew the land needed rest just like people and animals need rest.

Jared Diamond, a Pulitzer Prize winning sociologist wrote a fascinating book a few years ago entitled, "Collapse." If you're interested in how societies collapse, you might get a copy. His basis thesis is very in line with the Bible though he makes no biblical argument. He argues that societies collapse primarily because of ecological degradation. They came to the point where they could no longer sustain themselves with the land they were on. And they couldn't do this because they have exploited the land, demanded too much from it, and didn't allow it to rest and recover. One of the compelling examples he offers is Haiti's collapse, even while its neighbor, Dominican Republic, living on the same island, continues to thrive. The land of Haiti was raped by the French, while the Spainards nurtured the land of the DR.

Could the answer to the earth's environmental crisis come from a better reading of the Bible? Does salvation for all lie within—people and the earth itself? I say, "Yes." Perhaps we should put more weight into the "second coming" teachings of Jesus such as the Parable of the Talents (Mt 25:14-30), where Jesus warns us about abusing or ignoring the gifts we've been given. You remember this parable is about a nobleman who gave three of his servants a certain number of talents. The first two servants invested their talents. They were good stewards of their talents and were rewarded for it. The 3rd servant didn't use his talent well and simply hid it in the ground. When the master returned, he commended the first two servants and called the third servant "wicked" and took the talent he had and gave it to another.

Can we not see that the earth is greatest gift we have been given as humans with the exception of our Lord himself. The earth is our gift. Our command is to take care of it. And we will be judged based on how we do with that fundamental command. If we ignore it, exploit it, use it only to satisfy our short-term interests, we will have missed the boat and missed our calling as stewards of the earth.

Reason Three: Why we should care for the earth, even though Jesus is coming back.

God will cleanse and restore the earth at the end of time.

Today there is the mistaken notion that when Jesus comes back he is going to completely destroy the earth. Some of that comes from a misreading of 2 Peter 3 which we read earlier in the service. In 2 Peter 3, Peter is comparing the second coming of Jesus to the coming of the flood in the days of Noah. Just as the water destroyed the earth in the days of Noah, fire will be

used to “*destroy the elements*” of the earth. This will bring about the destruction of the ungodly and ungodliness.

Think about this for a moment, before you get in your mind the earth will be like a piece of burnt toast, thrown out, and a new piece put into the toaster. The text doesn't say that. The comparison to the days of Noah brings to mind an earth that was cleansed of evil. The Flood did not utterly destroy the earth; it only cleansed it of ungodliness. In fact, fish lived through the Flood, as did plants and seeds, evidenced by the raven returning a green leaf to Noah and the fact that no mention is made of fish on the ark. What we see in the days of Noah was a ***refining destruction***, just as the final one clearly seems to be. The fire at the day of judgment is a purifying fire, not an annihilating one. The point was to purge the world of ungodliness, so that righteousness can dwell in the newly cleansed heaven and earth.

So how should we live in the meantime? Notice how Peter framed and answered the question: “*What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives*” (2 Peter 3:11). And what is a holy life? it is a life where we live in obedience to the commands of God. And the original command of God to humans was to take care of his earth, to tend his garden, to be a good steward of everything on the earth from the grass beneath our feet, to the cows in our pastures, to the trees in our forests, to the air that we breath and the water that we drink. This is what we are to do until Christ returns.

Summary:

1. God loves the world, therefore, so should we.
2. We've been commissioned to be stewards of the earth.
3. When Jesus returns, he will purge the world of ungodliness, but not totally destroy it.

Conclusion

There's a large portion of the evangelical world that believes that since Jesus is coming back, we don't need to bother about taking care of the earth. They are not only wrong, they are actually doing harm to future generations and people already living on the margins. Scientists and sociologists agree, those who have the least to do with harming the earth, are the ones most impacted by our environmental crises of our times. That's why this is so crucial. Waiting faithfully for Jesus' return does not negate our responsibility to care for the earth; rather, it presupposes and urges it. We shouldn't dismiss care for creation on biblical grounds by reasoning that the earth will eventually burn anyway. The Bible holds all humankind responsible for the preservation of the earth and the care of all living creatures. Followers of God should be at the forefront of care for the poor and vulnerable, including animals and all life on earth. This is not a political or ideological issue. It is a biblical one. Our care of creation is an offering of thankfulness for our redemption by God, looking forward to the redemption of the whole world.

So here's my best advice for preparation of the second coming of Jesus. Go plant a tree!

