

Being at Home in God's World

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One of the many problems we see in the world today is the loss of a sense of purpose and direction in life. Many people seem to think that living for the moment, making the most of the opportunities that come our way, experiencing all that we can of life, is the way to find fulfilment and satisfaction. And particularly among young people we find extreme risk-taking, experimentation with sex, drugs, extreme sports, and many other such activities. But underneath and through much of this activity is an apparent loss of any sense of purpose or significance in life. And this is I believe at the root cause of many problems with youth - loss of a sense of purpose in life.

The Christian faith, I believe, offers the sense of purpose and direction which is lacking, but this sense of purpose and direction is not that evident even among those who do believe. And young people in the churches are no more immune from risk-taking, involvement in various forms of experimentation, and seeking a sense of purpose, than those outside the church. But if we were to ask, what is the point of being a Christian, would the answers we have to offer be of any help in this situation? In many instances, I believe they would not, not because the Christian gospel does not provide answers, but because we as Christians often either do not know the answers we should offer, or else we do not carefully listen to the question being asked. When I was much younger, evangelism tended to focus on convincing people that God existed and that they needed to deal with their sin. These days, the questions are more likely to revolve around the best way to experience God, and the forms of spirituality that fit with our "personal growth." It's not just that the questions have changed, the entire context in which the questions are asked is different. So we need to be sure that the questions we are asked are given appropriate answers.

In this context of a focus on "personal growth" and "spirituality," then, to answer the question, what is the point of being a Christian, runs the risk of offering only another form of experiencing God, another form of spirituality, another option in the smorgasbord of religion that surrounds us in forms we

could never have imagined twenty or thirty years ago. As Christians, then, we need to be careful that the answers we give are not simply another option among many, but address the real needs of people today.

So then, to answer the question, what is the point of being a Christian, we need to press behind that and ask a question, which is being asked at a deeper and more fundamental level in many ways that we are often not aware of. That question is: what is the point of being a human being? In other words, what is the point of being alive? Why are we even here in the first place, and does it even matter? When you have young people grappling with questions like these, and being offered a smorgasbord of spirituality, a rampant commercial exploitation of their desires and concerns, and a cynical attitude from politicians and leaders in society in which their action focuses more on their own power and status than on the benefit for society as a whole, it is no wonder we have problems among youth, let alone loss of purpose, direction, community belonging, and all the other ailments we see around us.

Not only unbelievers, but even many Christians do not feel at home in God's world. There is a disconnection between what we experience in our spiritual life and the messy, sometimes painful or embarrassing reality of daily life. This sense of disconnection is sometimes expressed in our worship, prayer and song alike.

This world is not my home I'm just passing through
my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue
the angels beckon me from Heaven's open door
and I can't feel at home in this world anymore. (Albert E. Brumley)

This song is not alone in expressing such ideas.

One of these mornings
I'm going away
Any day now
I'm going to heaven to stay

There'll be no sorrow, no sadness
Just only complete gladness

But any day now, I know that I
Know that I am going home. (Aaron Neville)

And another one

It won't be long
Till we'll be leavin' here
It won't be long
We'll be goin' home

It won't be long
Till we'll be leavin' here
It won't be long
We'll be goin' home

Count the years as months
Count the months as weeks
Count the weeks as days
Any day now
We'll be goin' home (Andrae Crouch)

These songs are not unique: they are representative of a general approach to life held by many Christians. It is not, however, the approach taken by the Bible. Contrast those songs with this one which some of you may know:

This is my Father's world
O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father's world
The battle is not done
Jesus who died shall be satisfied
And earth and heav'n be one. M D Babcock

When we look at the gospel of John, we have a very powerful counterpoint to this approach in the life of Jesus Christ. We read in John 1:14,

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

When the verse says that Jesus "lived among us," the Greek uses the term for "tabernacle." In other words, he came and "pitched his tent among us." Now that is not a reference to a camping trip from heaven, it is a resonance from the Old Testament, where God's presence descended from heaven and God dwelt with Israel firstly in the tabernacle in the wilderness and in the early years of the kingdom of Israel, and then in the temple of Solomon. And from this basis, we can then begin to answer the question, as we must, as to what the point is of being a human being, of being alive, of being placed in this world. To understand this we must turn to the beginning, the start of the long story of human life, in Genesis 1. Listen then as we read the Word of God.

Genesis 1

1. First of all, God originated the heavens and the earth.
2. However, the earth was uninhabitable and empty, and it was totally dark all over the surface of the water covering the earth, but the Spirit of God was swooping over the water.
3. Then God said, Light, be! And the light was.
4. And God looked on the light as something good, so he separated the light from the darkness.
5. God called the light "day," and he called the darkness "night," so then there was evening, followed by morning, one day.
6. Then God said, Let there be a boundary for the water to distinguish one lot of water from another.
7. In this way God made a boundary for the water to mark off the water which was below from the water which was above. And so it happened.

8. God called the boundary "heaven," and then there was evening, followed by morning, a second day.
9. Then God said, The water under the heaven should all be in one place, so there can be some dry land. And so it happened.
10. Then God called the dry land "earth," and the enormous pool of water he called the "seas," and God looked on this as good.
11. Then God said, Green things with seeds in them should sprout from the earth, and there should be trees of different types all over the earth with fruit on them, with seeds in the fruit. And so it happened.
12. Out of the ground came all the green things, with seeds in them, and trees of different types making fruit which had seeds in it, and God looked on this as good.
13. There was evening, followed by morning, a third day.
14. Then God said, There should be lights in the bounds of heaven, to mark off day from night, and they can be signs of seasons and days and years,
15. and they can be lights in the bounds of heaven, to shine on the earth. And so it happened,
16. as God made two lights, a great big one to light up the day, and a small one to shine at night, as well as making the stars.
17. Then God put them in the bounds of heaven to shine down on the earth,
18. to guide the day and the night, and to mark off light from dark. And God looked on this as good.
19. So there was evening, followed by morning, a fourth day.
20. Then God said, The water should swarm with living, breathing swarming things, and birds should fly about over the earth up against the bounds of heaven.

21. So God originated enormous creatures and all living things of different types which move about swarming through the water, and all the winged birds of different types, and God looked on this as good.
22. Then God empowered them when he said, Reproduce and increase and fill the waters of the seas; and birds, multiply on the earth.
23. So there was evening, followed by morning, a fifth day.
24. Then God said, The earth should produce living things of different types, animals and creeping things and wild animals of different types. And so it happened,
25. as God made wild animals of different types, and the domestic animals of different types, and all the things of different types creeping along the ground. And God looked on this as good.
26. Then God said, We should make people to represent us, as our reflection, to watch over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and the animals and all the earth and all creeping things creeping on the ground.
27. So God originated people as his representative, originating them as representing God; as male and as female God originated them.
28. So God empowered them when he said to them, Reproduce and multiply and fill the earth and govern the earth, the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and all living things creeping over the ground.
29. And God said, Look, I give to you all plants bearing seed which are on the face of all the earth, and the fruit of all the trees which bear seeds in their fruit will be food for you.
30. And to all the living things on the earth and to all the birds of the air and to all the creeping things on the earth, everything which has the breath of life in it, all the green plants will be food for them.
31. And God looked on all that he had made and it was indeed very good. Then there was evening, followed by morning, a sixth day.

Genesis 2

1. So the heavens and the earth and all their multitudes were completed.
 2. God completed by the seventh day everything he had made, and so he rested in the seventh day from his work of making things.
 3. So God gave his approval to the seventh day, and declared the seventh day special for himself, because on that day he ceased from all his activity through which God created by making these things.
 4. This is the history of the heavens and the earth, when they were created on the day when Yahweh God made the earth and the heavens.
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In this passage from Genesis, we notice a number of things if we look carefully not just at what is said, but the order and the structure in which they are said. For Genesis 1 is not just a straight narrative, it is a narrative with a definite structure, that can be examined and used to deepen our understanding of this text. And as we look at that structure, we need to consider some of the themes that are prominent in the passage. Those themes are:

- separation and distinction
- formation of habitats
- emptiness and filling
- expanding and developing
- representing and reflecting
- blessing (empowering) and provision

The first of the themes we find in Genesis 1 is separation and distinction between things that are different. The first and most significant separation and distinction is that between God and the creation. All that is not God is

created, all that is not created is God. There is nothing in common between them; no shared qualities, no shared nature, no common origin or controlling forces. Before God created there was nothing else at all other than God. Many of the attempts to understand the nature of creation, even those posited by Christians, propose that there was something else alongside God before he created everything, such as the laws of physics, the laws of logic, necessity, and so on. Thus God used the laws of physics to create the universe. But that is not the case: any laws that exist came into being because God created them. To say otherwise is to fall into idolatry, since it presupposes that such things exist alongside of God and even independent of God.

There is a clear and distinct boundary between God and the creation that can never be breached. Any merging or blending of God and creation produces idolatry - creatures are then seen as possessing divine power or qualities, or God (the gods) are seen as possessing creaturely frailness and qualities. Human beings especially are not partly divine, do not possess a “spark” of the divine, and are wholly creaturely and will always remain so. To have Christ indwelling us by the power of the Spirit of God does not change our creatureliness or make us in any way partly divine, and nor is this principle violated when Christ took on humanity and lived as one of us. His humanity was real creaturely humanity, while he remained fully divine as the eternal Son of God. That God took on humanity did not cause a blending of the creaturely and the divine, as these remained and still remain distinct - Christ was and is still fully human, even though he is fully the embodiment of the Son of God.

The distinction between creatures and Creator is most evident in the fact that all creatures of whatever kind have their origin in the creative act of God. Creatureliness means to be brought into being and to be fully and completely dependent on the Creator. As we see from Genesis 1, all things came into being in obedience to God’s command, and for them to continue to have being they must continue to be dependent on the Creator, and still need to be obedient to God’s command. That human beings have made it their business

to disobey God's commands does not lessen their dependence on God, no matter how much they deny it.

The Creator, in contrast, is not dependent on, or subject to, anything at else at all. He is not subject to any laws, or forces, or powers outside himself. There is nothing whatever that can constrain or limit God, as all that exists, all laws, all powers, all beings of any kind, are brought into being by God and are dependent on him continually. There is nothing whatsoever that is not God that was not created by God.

So the first theme we encounter in Genesis 1 is the radical distinction between God and the creation. To start with, there was only God, and it was only after he commenced his work of creation that anything else at all came into being. There are other aspects of the theme of separation and distinction that we will encounter in the text, and will become apparent as we come to them.

The second theme is that of formation of habitats. Genesis 1:1 tells of the creation of the heavens and the earth. Following that we have the detailed description of a number of creation acts. The earth is described by the Hebrew term "***tohu wa-bohu***." There has been much discussion of this phrase, and the traditional interpretation from the very early centuries has treated this as a description of the "formlessness" of the matter created "in the beginning." Hence it has been translated as "without form and void," or in similar terms. But this approach is heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and is inconsistent with a Biblical view of the creation. We can find a more appropriate translation if we look at the other places in the Old Testament where these words are used.

Isaiah 45:18. ***Tohu*** is contrasted with ***lesheveth***, which means 'to be inhabited.'

Elsewhere ***tohu*** refers to that which is empty – literally, uninhabitable places. Deuteronomy 32:10, Job 6:18, 12:24, 26:7, Psalm 107:40, Isaiah 24:10, 34:11.

Figuratively, things which are empty or have no effect, idols, prayers, work, or appeals in court. 1 Samuel 12:21, Isaiah 29:21, 41:29, 44:9, 45:19, 49:4.

The idea of that in Genesis 1:1 we have some sort of "chaos" is not a biblical one. This chaos must be understood either dualistically, as confused formless matter which must be given form, or monistically, as an undifferentiated condition out of which everything would develop. The biblical confession that God created the heavens and the earth is incompatible with the idea of a "chaos." Everything which God creates is subject to his law-order, which comes into being along with the creatures subject to it. God does not bring confusion into existence, but order and structure. God has brought the orderly creation into existence, and faithfully sustains it by his Word.

We can then take the meaning of Genesis 1:2 to be that the world created in the beginning was "empty and uninhabitable." It was still the good creation of God: all that we can take from Genesis 1 is that the world in this state is incomplete. It is not chaotic or disorderly, just unfinished. The activities of God in the rest of Genesis 1 can be seen then as his work to populate and fill the earth and make it inhabitable for living things.

I think there is merit in the approach that sees a framework in Genesis 1, with the activities of the first three days being to create the environments, the spaces, for various creatures including living things, while the second set of three days describes the population of those spaces. (See chart of framework for Genesis 1).

God made the creation as a place where his presence could be made known to humankind. We were placed here in God's world to care for it on his behalf, as his stewards. Genesis 1:28.

The creation story of Genesis continues by describing the preparation of the earth as a habitation for living things. The world is in a very real sense our home, and one purpose of the story of Genesis is to make that known to us. The tragedy of the Fall is that we are alienated from the world in which we live. Because of the curse, it brings forth thistles and thorns, we are

endangered by storm and flood, afflicted by wild beasts and disease. We are no longer at home in the world which was made to be our home.

The sin of humankind is that we have rejected the landlord and as the tenant usurped ownership of the earth and have taken control of what happens to its riches and bounties. Luke 20:9-19.

So then, the world when it was first created was uninhabitable. The rest of Genesis 1 is built around the theme of making the world habitable for living things, to be precise: it is the preparation of the world as a home for living creatures. And this is an important point for us to bear in mind: this world is our home, it was created for us to be our home, and it was given to us as a home. We should learn then to be at home in the world that God has made, because this is where he intended us to be. And not only that, it is a home for many other living things that God has made. It is their home too, and we must learn to share it with them. God created a huge variety of habitats as part of making the world habitable.

The world as God's building project

The Old Testament speaks of the world God made as a great building project. The imagery of the various creation accounts frequently recalls this idea. The creation is made as a "tent" (Psalm 19:4, 104:2, Isaiah 40:22), the Scriptures speak of its "door-posts, pillars, foundations, cornerstone" and many other expressions taken from domestic architecture in describing the creation. The creation then is a habitation created by God for the benefit and use of the creatures he made and placed there.

We can take an important idea from this theme of the creation as a building project. The story of Genesis tells us how God gave shape and structure to the world we live in, to make it suitable as a home. It is something fit for habitation by living things, adapted to their use, appropriate for them to live in.

Our own building projects should take the same approach: by creating buildings of various kinds we are giving shape and structure to our environment to make it suitable for various human activities (including provision of shelter for animals in barns and so forth). A major theme in

architectural work is how building projects give shape to spaces for human activity. If you are inside a grand building such as a cathedral, a football stadium, an art gallery, or similar large public space, the scale and shaping of the space it encloses can be very dramatic. If you were standing in an open field the same size as that building, you don't get anything like the same effect. Consider this comment on the impact of space:

I recall my first encounter with the British Library, formerly located within the British Museum, Great Russell Street, in central London. The 42 metre diameter of the magnificently domed reading room constituted an immense physical indoor space the like of which I had never previously encountered. My already vertically challenged state teetered on near terminal challenge: such space in the crowded heart of one of the world's largest cities.¹

So shaping our spaces, structuring the world we are given to live in, is an important facet of the calling to care for and tend to the world, and gives expression to the gifts God has given us when we construct buildings that make dramatic use of space to define their character, significance and purpose. Thus building projects should be suitable for human beings, give shape and structure to their lives in sensitive and appropriate ways, and reflect the calling to be stewards of the earth, not exploiting and abusing its riches for personal gain or glorification.

Destruction of natural habitats is then an unmaking of God's world, a reversal of his work, and an anti-God activity. Extinction of species as a result of human activity reduces the diversity of creation, which God created to **fill** the earth. Extinction is emptying, either through direct killing of creatures or by destruction of habitat (making earth uninhabitable again) in contrast to God's work of making it habitable. It is a paradox that New Agers and nature-worshipping Greenies have more concern for the earth, given their pagan and mistaken perspective on the world, than many Christians, who claim to worship the God who made it all for his own glory. How can we claim to worship and serve God while trashing the planet he carefully made? Is that

¹ Jennie Coleman. Professional encounters: voicing the researcher experience. *Archifacts* April 2011, p. 40.

credible? God will not sit idly by while the creatures and the habitats of the world which he has made are destroyed. He has called us to care for this earth, as we will see later, and we must care for it.

The third theme is that of emptiness and filling. Within this great habitation for living things, there are many diverse and specialised habitats prepared for different kinds of creatures. These habitats were still empty, so then God set about filling them with living things and other creatures to take their place in these habitats. That which is empty is filled, and not only filled, but the creatures filling them are given a command to carry on filling. The uninhabited earth was filled with inhabitants, and the inhabitants themselves were told to continue on to fill the earth and the waters and air around it. God is not interested in paucity and scarcity - God is a God of fullness and wants to see the world teeming with life. In this connection, we also see filling in conjunction with separation and distinction. God did not make a few different types of creatures; he made myriads of different types. And the distinctions (and separations) between those myriads of different types of creatures are demonstrated in their separate acts of originating: plants and trees, water creatures, fish, birds, wild animals, livestock, insects, and human beings: all are distinct and separate, to show that the diversity and variety of creatures in God's creation is intended, and desired. God's intention is that the world will be full of a huge diversity of different kinds of creatures, because his creative imagination cannot be exhausted in a few basic varieties of animals, fish, birds, insects and plants. We serve a God of variety, who has infinite imagination and inventiveness, who has brought into being such a huge diversity of different types of creatures that we will probably never discover each and every last one, with all the sub-types and variations so many of them have. And again, those who worship the God who made all these things should be ashamed if they lack interest in protecting, preserving and maintaining the richness and diversity of creation, not just for the potential use they may have for us, but for their own sake. These many creatures were created to show the richness and variety of the power of God; who are we then to either allow or actively seek the extinction of any one of them?

The fourth theme is that of expanding and developing. God's creation is not static: it is teeming with possibilities, with life, with variety and diversity. The possibilities he has placed in creation are there to be explored and discovered by us, and put to a variety of uses and purposes. The creation was not meant to stay the way it was when God finished it. He made it so rich in possibilities that it was almost inevitable that these possibilities come into fruition. One of the themes in the Scriptures is that idolatry suppresses and confines the creation by fixing it and seeking to keep it the way it is. The creation will develop and expand **unless** we by our sinfulness prevent it from doing so. God's Spirit is still at work within the creation, seeking to unfold it and develop it to bring all the possibilities placed within it by God into fruition. This is the great work of God which we can participate in, or else we can be carried along by it without really knowing what is going on, or worse, actively seek to stop it and suppress it.

God's work of creation was not simply to bring actual creatures into being, such as the specific birds, trees, insects, fish and animals. He made all the possibilities for all things, regardless of what they are. This includes such things as music, art, fashion, politics, science, mathematics, cooking, gardening, motor vehicles, computers, cell phones, novels, sports, in fact anything at all that you can think of. It only exists, it is only possible for us to be active in doing these things, because God has created the possibilities for them within the creation that he has made. We cannot create, in the sense of bringing into being what did not already exist. Our work of creation is limited to exploring, discovering, and fashioning the possibilities that God has created in his world. These things that we can discover and invent using the possibilities in creation are not to be considered as **potential** within the creation, as that assumes that they already exist in some form waiting for us to identify and locate them, and bring them to fruition. No, they are there as genuine possibilities - that is, we have the opportunity to bring about genuinely new things that are not simply waiting for us to stumble across and use, but by us bringing about things that would not exist if we did not engage in exploring the possibilities and making something of them. I believe that God himself is waiting to see what we can and will do with all the possibilities and opportunities with which he has enriched the world, and that there is no

pre-determined way in which things will be developed and used by us. We are free agents, able to make what we will of the world God has placed us in.

But this then brings us to the fifth theme in this passage: representing and reflecting. The creation itself reflects God - we can see his character and his personality in the things he has made. Who can not look at some of the animals and insects and not consider that God has both a sense of order, of beauty, of charm, of humour and wit, when we see what he has brought into being. As Paul says in Romans 1, the creation reveals the power and divine nature of God, but we must be careful not to see more than that in the creation - Paul does not say we can learn everything, or even a lot about God, from the creation, but we certainly can learn something, especially when guided by the Scriptures. What Paul says here is to limit what can be known of God **without** the Scriptures, and that is merely the power and divine nature of the God who brought creation into being, not even who he is but only that he exists and something about what he is like. However, to those who do know God and have learned about him from the Scriptures, it is evident that the God whom we know and worship is reflected in what he has made.

And this then brings us to the climax of Genesis 1. God decided after preparing the various habitats, and filling them with all kinds of animals and plants, to create his own personal representative. Human beings were the final work of God, and as such are the pinnacle of his achievement and reflection - imaging God and representing him within creation to the creation. In the ancient East the various kings and rulers put statues of themselves around their domains to remind the people who it was who governed them and who would hold them accountable if they broke his laws. God himself, as king and ruler over all creation, as done the same. He has placed images of himself throughout the creation as reminders of who he is and the laws that he has put in place. **We are those images!** What greater task and responsibility can there be than to be the representatives, the ambassadors, the appointees of God himself. This is the reason why Israel was commanded never to make an image or likeness of God of any kind - there could be only one image, and that was the one God had already made for himself - human beings.

What is our task and role then, as images of God? This is spelled out further, when it states that we are to be his reflection. Just as a mirror reflects the one standing in front of it, when we stand before God and behold him in his glory, we reflect God to the rest of creation as we are changed through faith in Christ to be like him. Our task then is to be God's representatives within the creation, to serve and care for all the creatures he has made on his behalf. In verses 26-28 we read that God gave human beings the commission to care for the earth, to rule over it, to guide it, to guard it, and to protect and nurture the creatures within it. This great commission has never been revoked, and it is given to all human beings alike. That is because to be the caretakers of the creation, as God's representatives and his reflection, is not something that we may or may not decide to do. No, it is not an option that we can take up if we like. To be the caretakers of the creation is **what we are**. What does it mean to be human? It is to be the representative of God, created for the purpose of caring for the creation he has made. What does it mean to be a Christian? It is to be the representative of God as God wishes himself to be represented - in holiness, in righteousness, in justice, in compassion, renewed in Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit's power to carry out this task; and to be created for the purpose of caring for the creation he has made as he has commanded us to care for it on his behalf. To be a Christian is not to be different from other human beings; it is not to have a different task in life to other human beings. No, it is to have recognised why we are here, and what we are called to do, and how we are called to carry that commission out, and to thereby perform that task in faith, in obedience, and in love towards God.

Those who do not acknowledge God, turning away from him in rebellion and unbelief, still carry out the task of caring for the creation, for that is what they are created as and that cannot be changed regardless of the depth and persistence of their rebellion. But instead of caring for the creation as they should, as the stewards of God, accountable to him for all that they do with the things he has made, those who are in rebellion against God, having charge of the creation still, exploit the creation for their own ends; consume more than their fair share of the resources it provides; tolerate or even endorse the destruction of habitats and the extinction of living things; and treat the creation as either something to be despised as beneath us and

distinct and separate from us, or else worship it and treat it as something above us and having power over us. Idolatry, then, is turning away from the God we were called to serve; denying our own being as his appointed representatives and stewards; and using the creation for our own ends, and in so doing seeking to find within the creation the significance and meaning for our lives that can in reality come only from God.

This then brings us back to the point I made at the beginning. How can we point those around us to significance and meaning in life, to replace the emptiness and despair they experience when confronting the hollow promises of New Age spirituality, rampant commercialism, narcissism and self-absorption, and all the other misdirections our society is taking? By calling them back to who they are and what they have been given to do: to represent God as he would wish to be represented, and to care for the creation as God's stewards, exploring, discovering, developing and unfolding all its rich possibilities in whatever way we can, to show forth the glory of the God who made all these things possible. What more fulfilling or more satisfying life can be had than this! We too were called to multiply and increase, to fill the earth with all the rich diversity and variety of human beings, so that all the many possibilities that the creation holds have every chance of being brought to fruition through our efforts. None of us can do this alone, and so God created us as a great community of people to share in this task together, and in so doing support, encourage and enable each other to become the best we can be at whatever part of the task we have in caring for the whole of the creation. And the blessing God gave us is more than we need to be able to carry out this work.

So then, having made the people to care for the creation, as the climax of his working, God took his rest, and pronounced all that he had made very good, and granted his blessing to it; promising that the creation would always be cared for and provided for, looked after and guided in the way it should be. For after all, had he not made human beings for this purpose, and entrusted his world to them in full confidence that they would carry out his wishes? What more could God have done that he had not done? Unfortunately, as we all know, it did not go according to plan. So where did the fault lie? With us,

turning away from God and deciding to go our own way. And so in response God had to initiate a plan to bring redemption to bear, to recover the creation from the hands of its rebellious stewards and to bring them back to their responsibilities before him. And this God is doing, with every intention that even in and through these rebellious people, his glory is being revealed and the possibilities of creation are being explored and developed, even though he is not given credit, nor is he acknowledged or respected in the way we carry out this task. And of course Psalm 8 spells out our stewardly task but in the context of the sin of humanity.

Now we have seen that the earth was prepared as a habitation suitable for us and for other living things. The earth we now see is changed from what God originally created, as a result of human sin and rebellion against God. The earth will not stay like this, and the way of redemption for all God's creatures (not just human beings) has been provided in Christ.

The hope of the resurrection

God has given us the world to live in, and we are creatures who have a part in that world. We were intended to be inhabitants of the earth. We were not intended to be inhabitants of heaven. Psalm 115:16. The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings.

Many Christians still hold the view that the goal for the Christian is to get to heaven to live there with God. This is problematic for a number of reasons.

Firstly, there is no text of Scripture that says explicitly that Christians will live in heaven with God as disembodied spirits. It is an inference people have drawn from various texts, largely under the influence of Greek religious ideas perpetuated through philosophies such as Platonism.

Secondly, there are many passages which speak about the hope of the Christian being the resurrection of the dead. These passages become problematic to understand if the goal is for eternal life in heaven as a disembodied spirit. For centuries many theologians have puzzled over why the Scriptures speak about the resurrection of the body, as it seems to be contradictory to the expectation of eternal life in heaven. It is interesting that

the resurrection, which is clearly taught in Scripture, was seen as contradictory to eternal life in heaven, which is not taught in Scripture at all. There are strong spiritual forces at work which distort our understanding of Scripture and which need to be examined carefully so we can have a sound understanding of what Scripture is teaching us. One of the consequences of the focus on eternal life in heaven is that putting effort into conservation, stewardship of the earth, and similar activities, is seen as redundant, low priority or even wasteful of human effort. A healthy appreciation of the hope of the resurrection as the future for human life, with a clear understanding of the coming renewal of the earth as our eternal home, will address many of those concerns.

What we see then from these themes in Scripture is that God has made this earth to be our home; he has made us stewards of this home, and has dealt with the sin which results in us trashing our home. Christ has shown us in his life, death and resurrection how God has dealt with sin, and points us to renewal of our creational task as stewards, serving God with faith and joy, with the hope of resurrection to new life forever with God on this earth, which will be freed from its bondage to sin, death and decay.

The essence of Christianity can perhaps be summed up in this way: God created us to be stewards of the earth, faithful to him, caring for each other and for the other creatures inhabiting the earth. However, we have sinned against God and the stewards are in rebellion against the land-owner, thinking they themselves own the creation and can treat it how they wish. The end result of alienation from the God of life is to be subject to the power of death. God has redeemed us from alienation, from the distortion of our humanity, by sending his Son to live among us as one of us, but without sin, showing us what it means to be a faithful steward. He has passed through death and rose again to eternal life. He lives in heaven as one of us, a transformed human being, empowered fully by the Holy Spirit and no longer subject to death, but instead has subjected death to himself. All those who are his will also pass through death but will come through death and in the resurrection will be transformed and receive immortality and incorruptibility for ever.

God will then fulfil his original intention of dwelling with us on the earth, an intention indicated from his walks in the garden of Eden with Adam and Eve prior to their alienation from God, from his dwelling with Israel in the tabernacle and in the temple, and supremely in Christ who came from heaven to dwell with us as one of us. After the judgement of the living and the dead, the allotment of rewards and punishments, and the destruction of death and all things evil, when all things are put to right, God will descend from heaven to dwell with us forever on the new earth.

The new earth will be a continuation of the present earth, but having passed through judgement, cleansing and purification, so that all traces of evil have been purged away. We will continue to live on this earth, but with heaven and earth having become one: the barrier between heaven and earth caused by sin will be done away with. God will dwell with us forever on the new earth, and there we will see righteousness, peace and justice for all.

This is our present task and our glorious future.

Revelation 21:3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the **home** of God is among mortals, He will **dwell** with them and their God and they will be his peoples.