

The Mission of God's People – Work and Worship in Creation

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[0:00] We'll switch on my mic. So, we have read of creation, and we've seen the fall. And now, here towards the end of the Old Testament, we discover this vision from Isaiah of restoration.

Of the new heavens and the new earth. Now, we're going to be thinking about the mission of God's people to work and worship in creation. And I hope we'll see that theme throughout. But here we are in Isaiah 65 and at verse 17. Let's hear God's Word again. See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create. For I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people. The sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years. The one who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere child. The one who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them. They will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people. My chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune. For they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. Before they call, I will answer. While they are still speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord. Amen.

[2:23] So, we're thinking about the mission of God's people, and here we're going to see how we are to relate to creation. Perhaps we studied Shakespeare at school, perhaps we read it for pleasure. You might remember the quote from *As You Like It*, all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.

They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts. Well, if Shakespeare is right, if all the world is a stage, how do we play our part as God's people? How do we live out our days within God's creation, and how do we relate to God in His creation? So, tonight what we're going to do is we're going to sort of fly through creation history, beginning at the beginning, ending at the ends. We're going to see how we can find the gospel, big picture of the gospel in the Old Testament, from creation to restoration, but also to see where God's creation fits within each point, to help us to think how should we, as God's people, relate to the world that we enjoy as God's gift. So, let's begin in the beginning. Let's go back to Genesis 1 and think about creation, and to think about work and worship in the garden. So, Bob read for us from three chapters. I'm going to focus on chapter 1 and 2, and just three words or phrases in particular. So, in chapter 1, and at verse 26 and verse 27, there is the idea of image, isn't there? God said, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. Verse 27, God created mankind in His own image. In the image of God, He created them, male and female, He created them. So, bearing in mind, Moses was writing the book of Genesis, and Moses was writing at a time when, in that part of the world, ancient Near East, if a king had an extensive territory, one way to ensure that people knew who was ruling is that that king would fashion a statue, an icon of himself, and place it within and throughout his territory, as if to say, this king rules here. And Moses takes that idea, and what he is saying is that when God created Adam and Eve, they were created to be living icons, placed in God's world,

God's kingdom, to represent God's rule. So, right from the beginning, when we think about how that impacts us as the people of God, we should share and reflect the values of God the king.

So, we just sang Psalm 145, or a section of it, and within that psalm, we discover many of God the king's qualities, His compassion, His kindness, His goodness, His righteousness, His protection.

And those teach us how we are to live within our creation. In verse 27, did you notice that there is an emphasis three times? You know how in the Old Testament, you'll find if a point wants to be emphasized, it's emphasized by repetition. Isaiah 6, God is holy, holy, holy. What about people?

[6:01] We are created by God, created by God, created by God. That should define and shape our understanding of ourselves. In the first place, it's intended to show that we are the high point, we are the climax of creation, that we are above all by God's design, but also it's enforcing the fact that all of life is in relation to our Creator. And of course, when we get to the fall, we see how things begin to go wrong.

From verse 27, let's move to verse 28, and the idea of subduing and ruling. So, verse 28, God blessed them, Adam and Eve, and said to them, be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish, the birds, every living creature.

So, this is because they are image bearers, and as those made in God's image, they are then enabled, as are we, to rule for God. And we begin to see in Genesis chapter 2 especially what that looks like, you know, cultivating the ground, naming the animals, exploring natural resources, and using those resources are all part of this subduing and ruling, but always under God the King.

Meredith Klein, an Old Testament scholar, has an image I find helpful anyway. It's the idea, well, if the world is God's royal estate, if God is the King and the world is His royal estate, where does that leave us? What's our role? We are to be keepers of the estate. That is our function, to worship God in the way that we care. And to build on that, in chapter 2 and verse 15, there is a significant phrasing. Chapter 2, verse 15, the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. Now, this is a significant word choice because this is Greg Beal who points this out. In the rest of the Old Testament, when those Hebrew words come together, they're used either of God's people being called to serve God and to keep God's Word, or more frequently, it's used of God's priests who are to keep service for God in the tabernacle and the temple. And we'll think about what that has to do with Adam and Eve and life in creation. But verse 16 and 17, as we have the prohibition from God, that command that they are free to eat from any tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, here is a reminder again that human life is not a life lived by animal instinct. Rather, it's a yes-no relationship to life. We are making moral choices. We are commanded to obey. It's not instinct. It's command. God's law dictates how to live, and we are to respond positively to that law within His creation. So, when we put together Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, we think about what does this say about Adam in the Garden of Eden? I think it tells us that Adam was made to be a priest king. He is called to work and worship in Eden, which functions in the same way as the tabernacle in the temple. Because for Adam and Eve, they enjoy God's presence in the garden.

They are to live by God's limits within the garden. They are to tend it as an act of worship, and as they do so, they know God's blessing. So, Adam is the first priest king. Jesus is the final and the great priest king. But when we read Genesis 1 and 2, and I'm sure for most of us, they're very familiar words, we get a beautiful picture, don't we, of a world in harmony, of creation when it's being cared for as God's gift, when everyday life involved work and worship as Adam and Eve lived for the glory of God. And that speaks to why we are here and how we are to relate to the world. This is my father's world, to use the title from that old hymn. So, when we think about discussions on carbon footprints and recycling and care for habitats and species, we need to think about it as Christians within that context. It matters because this is God's world.

[11:08] Well, that's creation. But then, of course, we come to chapter 3, and we come to fall, and we come to life under the curse, and we come to those thorns and thistles.

That harmony, that peace that we find in Genesis 1 and 2 seems such a distant dream for us today in many ways. In a world of global warming, of disappearing habitats and species becoming extinct, where we see the exploitation of the natural world and the effects on the environment and ecology, air and water pollution and natural disasters and rising water levels. And we think, how did we get here? How did the world end up like this? Genesis 1 and 2, creation is good. Indeed, it's very good.

Creation is blessed by God. But Genesis 3, what do we discover? We discover sin, and sin brings curse. Adam and Eve fall into sin. They don't trust God. They don't trust His Word. They reject His Word, not content to be God's image, not content to be players on the stage. They want to be God. They want to be directors of the whole show. And that's the great disaster that came upon the world.

When sin came, there was disruption, and everything begins to come undone. And we see how relationships are impacted. Previously, Adam and Eve, they know relationship with God. God, as it were, came and walked and talked with them, but now they hear God's voice, and they're hiding. And there's that sense of shame because of sin. Their relationship with one another, gone is joy and being naked and unashamed. Now they're blaming one another, and they're covering up.

[12:57] And what of the relationship between Adam and Eve and creation? Well, that's why we read in chapter 3 and verse 17, because of Adam's sin, the ground is cursed. Through painful toil, you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you. Picture of frustration and difficulty. To borrow for a moment from the New Testament image, Romans 8, creation is groaning under the curse, and human sin is the cause. Now we're told that creation is longing to be redeemed from that curse. And the hope of creation lies in a renewed people of God and a restored heaven and earth. And we'll get there shortly. But it's important for us to recognize there are things that we, as Christians, we share with environmental campaigners. We share with organizations that care for birds and nature and want protection of habitats and good practices. We recognize there is a human cause to the environmental crisis. It's there from the beginning, but that sin continues. We recognize that it's people who are exploiting the natural world. We recognize that greed and selfishness is having such an impact on our environment. And we recognize the need for responsible action. Now, we share that as people. But the difference is, I guess, as Christians, that we recognize that the root problem goes far deeper. So, no government legislation is going to fix it. No new environmental campaign is going to deal with it, because ultimately, we have a worship problem. We have a heart problem. That's where the curses come from. That's where the thorns and thistles have emerged from. So, that's creation.

Then that's fall. And what I want to do is we recognize there's such a huge leap from Genesis 1 and 2 to Genesis 3, isn't there? The tone shifts. The environment changes. But then let's take another huge leap from the beginning of creation history to the end of history, which is here in the Old Testament.

We often, I guess, think of Revelation 21 and Revelation 22. But John in the New Testament borrows some of the imagery that we find in Isaiah 65. So, you will, if you've paid attention, notice that I am deliberately going to jump past in the gospel. We're going to jump past stage three. We're going to look at stage four and restoration just now to think about the new heavens and the new earth in Isaiah 65 to understand that as God's people, we will be redeemed with creation.

That's so important for us to recognize where our future lies. So, Isaiah 65, 17 to 25, two things that we can helpfully see is that the future for God's people is in renewed bodies. And there's pictures of that bearing in mind that the resurrection of Jesus hasn't happened yet. So, it's hard for the Old Testament worshiper to imagine what eternal life can be like. But there is the idea of renewed bodies living in a renewed world. One of the things I think we're probably fighting against as Christians is the caricature or the stereotype of heaven that people have in popular culture. You know, chubby cherubs and fluffy clouds and plucking of harps. And it doesn't sound very exciting because it's not what the Bible teaches. So, we need to understand that the future for God's people at the return of

Christ is a glorious return to the world we all want. There is nobody on this planet who would read Isaiah 65 and say, you know what, that's not a future for me. That's not the kind of life I want.

[17:23] That's not the kind of hope that I want to have. And it's crucial in the way that we communicate the gospel that we recognize that Jesus

doesn't just give us hope for today, and He does, but He gives us hope for eternity as well. Hope for a life beyond death and hope for a renewed and eternal life.

So, we come to Isaiah 65, and this is really the highest view of the new heavens and the new earth that you're going to find in the Old Testament before Jesus is resurrected in the New Testament. That brings more revelation from God. So, what I want to do is to just look at this as a catalog of beautiful images, hopeful images for us. You know, sometimes life is hard. Often life is hard. There is suffering. There is trial. There is busyness. There is exhaustion. And sometimes we need to lift our eyes above and beyond to see what waits for the people of God. So, let's do that. If you have your Bible, let's begin by noticing the promise of renewal in verse 17.

See, I'll create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. The former things of sin, of curse, long gone, renewal. There is joy in the new creation. Be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create. Not just a little joy, but eternal joy. For I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. So, there's joy for God's people. But there's also the joy of God here as well. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people. Heaven is a place of joy, and that joy isn't just for us. It's the joy of God at being with his people in the new heavens and the new earth. And there is life. Continuing verse 19 into verse 20, the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years. No pain, no tears, long life. By the time of revelation and after Jesus, this becomes a picture of eternal life. There is security in the new creation. They will build houses and dwell in them. They will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. There is no external threat. There is nothing that will rob God's people of their joy. They are free to enjoy the fruit of their labors. There is blessing too. Verse 23, they will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune, for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. Here is satisfaction. Here is an end to the thorns and thistles that we experience in family life and work life, our life with God, all the thorns and thistles removed and blessing forever. And there is peace. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain. There is no threat within the new creation. Here is an environment once again at peace, a place where God's people will flourish and flourish eternally. It's a glorious picture.

[21:36] And this is part of God's plan of redemption for His people, to bring blessing, to bring the end of curse to creation. I came across a quote from Anthony Hukma, that might be the way his name is said, which is worth sharing, and it's up there on the screen. The total work of Christ is nothing less than to redeem the entire creation from the effects of sin. That purpose will not be accomplished until God has ushered in the newer, until paradise lost has become paradise regained.

So our eternal future as the people of God should be a reminder to us that we should be life-affirming and creation enjoying, because this is going to be our home for eternity, to the glory of God, to enjoy this world. Why should Christians care for the earth now? Why should we be concerned about recycling and fast fashion and ecology, because the world that we call home now is going to be our home for all eternity, when heaven comes down to earth, when we will perfectly enjoy God's good gifts forever in God's perfectly good world? So this is our hope. That sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

It's a huge jump from the fall to that promise of restoration, and it's better than Eden, because this is never going to be lost. But the question is, how do we get there? How do we get from the thorns and thistles to the blessing and this hope and this future? So we need to go back to stage three in the gospel, to see the work of Christ anticipated. We need to see redemption, and we need to see Jesus our priest king. Genesis 3 makes plain that the biggest problem facing the world today, it's not environmental, it's not ecological, it's spiritual. The biggest problem is sin that brought the curse, that brings separation from God. The Old Testament story of salvation is set against those images, isn't it, of human sin and rebellion and slavery and idolatry. And again, we see God's mercy, we see God's saving grace of entering into that darkness and drawing people out and drawing his people to himself.

The answer to that rebellion, we go to a passage like 2 Samuel 7, the covenant promise made to David. The hope there is that one day there will come a king who will perfectly reign for God, who will reign eternally as God's king. And so from that point on, God's people were looking for, when's this king going to come? And their hope for a Messiah becomes bound up with this promised future king. And then Isaiah comes along, Isaiah 53, and he introduces this other idea that this king that this king that is promised will also be the suffering servant.

This king that is promised and hoped for will be despised and rejected. This king will also be a priest, a priest who offers the ultimate sacrifice when he offers himself as the sacrifice for sin, recognizing in the end that only man can substitute for a man.

[25:11] So it's here in Isaiah 53. If you've got your Bible, you can turn to Isaiah 53. This is what happens. The Lord's king enters into his creation, and how is he treated?

Verse 3, he was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. King's the suffering servant. And we see him offer himself as our sacrifice. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering. We considered him punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. The idea of substitution is here. The idea of sin being transferred onto a sacrifice is here. And it's here in Jesus, the priest king who offers himself as sacrifice. But because of Jesus' obedience, what do we discover? Verse 10, Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer. And though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, Jesus is God's intended sacrifice to deal with sin. He will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. Here's the promise that this one who gives himself a sacrifice will be raised to honor. God is accepting of this sacrifice. Eternal life belongs to Jesus, and it belongs to his people too. That promise of Isaiah 65 can only be because Jesus has come to be the suffering servant.

Your hope and mine rests entirely in the reality that our Creator is also our Redeemer. Our hope lies in the fact that where we fail, Jesus succeeds. Our hope rests in that great exchange that was carried out on the cross. He takes our sin and he gives to us his record of perfect righteousness. It's how we get to that glorious future, by trusting in Jesus, by turning from sin and believing in him. So the mission of God's people, what is it? It's that we would work and that we would worship and all to the glory of God.

[28:03] We are to steward the world and its resources. We are to care for creation to the glory of God who created us and who created it. We are to worship and give God glory in his creation.

And yes, that happens in church Sunday by Sunday, but it also happens in our homes and workplaces with our leisure time in our communities, all of life to the glory of God. And so we work and we worship, but we do so with hope, don't we? We do so with the hope that one day Christ will return, that he will complete that work of redemption. He will bring restoration of all things, including us, if we're trusting in him.

So that in Christ we know that we will enjoy resurrection life and a restored creation, enjoying all good's gift and enjoying God himself forever.

In the new heavens and the new earth, there will be work to the glory of God. There will be worship, but there'll be no thorns and thistles. There'll be no sin that destroys. And all because of Jesus.

Let's pray together. Father God, thank you.