

Theology of Nature

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[0 : 00] So, I apologize for my head cold this morning.

I did everything that Sheila advised me to do last week, and it continues to be a strong head cold. Let us turn to prayer.

Our Father, we are grateful for this created order within which we sit.

We are grateful for the beauty of your creation. We are grateful for all the extraordinary intricacies of that creation which speak of your power and your love and your grace and your forethought for each one of us.

And as we come to think about this topic, we ask for your guidance, for your Holy Spirit's presence, and we ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 20] Amen. So, this is a huge topic, and what I've tried to do is simply to address two parts of the big question of the nature of God's created order, which in my view are less controversial than many of the issues surrounding the contemporary debate about environment.

It seems to me these are two aspects of God's created order which are fundamental, but in quite different ways.

A theology of nature is something which we all have to have, whether we know it or not. And I say it as a non-theologian, but I realize in preparing this material that a theology of nature is central to every Christian's, every religious person's view of the world.

And the theology of nature is repeated by us each Sunday as we go to the Holy Communion service.

Hidden away in the heart of that service is the statement, Holy, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts.

[2 : 54] Heaven and earth are full of his glory. Now that's in the middle of a service in which we are celebrating the most intimate of worship with our Lord, recalling his death and resurrection for us.

And yet, right in the core of it, we are reminded that everywhere we look, there is evidence of God in creation.

The whole world is filled with the evidence of his glory. And what I want to ask of us today and next time is whether we really have taken that thought seriously.

Is it a line that we slip over very automatically as being something that's obvious and something we don't need to think about? Is it an item that we haven't really registered in our thinking at all?

Or is it really quite central to the life of any thinking Christian? So I think the theology of nature is wonderfully summarized in those words.

[4 : 24] Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of thy glory. Glory be to thee, O Lord Most High. Certainly, as I was saying it this morning, just to remind you of the 7.30 service that takes place here every Sunday.

As I was saying it this morning, it took on new meaning yet again. As I had been thinking about how profound this is. And, I must say, I regret how little we hear about it.

Either in our conversations with each other or from the pulpit. And so I see this as something that we do need to take very seriously and look at more carefully than we have at times done.

So, as the hymn sheet says, the three main topics for the two days are, first of all, the theology of nature and natural theology defined and compared very briefly.

Then, a more direct discussion of a theology of nature. And then, a more direct discussion of natural theology. Today, we will spend most of our time getting the definitions sorted out.

[5 : 51] Noting the relations between the two topics. And dealing with the first part of the topic, theology of nature. And then, next time, because there are occasional miscreants, like Dr. Packer, who are not here today.

We have to recap part of the introduction. And then, move on finishing off the theology of nature and doing the natural theology as effectively as we can.

So, the first point is the definition of these two terms. First of all, the theology of nature.

It's an aid in celebrating God's creation. It is not a way of trying to prove something. It describes and interprets nature as one of the two primary sources of information about God.

The book of the Word and the book of creation were a popular way of thinking about revelation a few centuries ago.

[7 : 06] So, we have lost the initiative, unfortunately, in the context of our understanding of nature.

Our secular society has taken on nature and produces the most beautiful works of film and of TV. Many of you are familiar with the radical views of David Suzuki with respect to lack of religious faith. But, nevertheless, one who produces the most beautiful and most magnificent statements about nature. And, one can learn so much as a Christian from observing these things without having to accept the secular framework within which he operates.

But, we don't need, as Christians, to prove the existence of God. We have, from our own experience, met with his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

[8 : 22] We have no need to go into a great deal of argumentation as to the creation that God has given us.

It leads us, this theology of nature, to rejoice in the wonder of God. Love and the power of God in his creation. Natural theology, by contrast, can best be described as an optional extra for most Christians today.

And, I say advisedly, as an optional extra, because there are those who still feel it is obligatory for Christians to have a natural theology.

But, I'll say more about this next time, of course. But, natural theology is, in the first instance, an attempt to prove both God's existence and his attributes from the evidence of his creation.

It is really a kind of apologetic for the Christian faith. And, it was historically directed, in the first instance, towards unbelievers. I am personally attracted to a form of natural theology, which is very much in discussion at the moment, and symbolized most prominently for me in the writings of John Polkinghorne.

[9 : 55] But, that is not the form in which natural theology came to us. Indeed, it came to us, probably, first of all, from Aquinas, in his discussions long before the lectures and so on, that I'm going to talk about next time.

So, the basic point is that the theology of nature is our sense of the presence of God in all of creation.

It's our sense of the way in which God revealed himself to folks in the Old Testament in a primary sort of way.

And, that's why, for the discussion today, I'm going to start off with looking at the experience of Job, and the way in which God interacted with Job, with respect to the nature of the created order.

But, before I go any further, I want to make sure that I've got the distinction clear for us. But, the theology of nature is our response, as Christians, to all of the evidence of God's work in creation.

[11 : 23] Our sense of excitement, our sense of wonder, the beautiful sunset, the marvelous sunrise.

In my own experience, curious experience of living on glaciers for weeks at a time, totally cut off from other people, able to appreciate God's world in a most unusual kind of experience. seeking out interesting places, very often far away from other people, although always with a small number of assistants and so on.

But, nevertheless, in a context where one has to think, how would one find out about God without the book of the word?

What are the elements that God has left for us to interpret? And, all of us, because we have the privilege of having the book of the word, can interpret it in far more detail than those who did not have the book of the word.

[12 : 38] But, nevertheless, as Paul said in the address to the Areopagites, you know, you worship, you know not who, but I've come here to tell you who he is.

But, you've seen a lot of the evidence, and you haven't given him a name, but here we are. We've actually found out who he is in great detail.

And, here is the person who recently was crucified, and of whom I am a witness.

So, the whole question of the theology of nature seems to me to be central to every Christian. Most of us don't work it out in any elaborate detail, and they don't work it out enough, I think.

I'm obviously a biased party here, as I spend so much of my time thinking about and looking at nature, particularly landscapes, ways in which landscapes are both beautiful, and intricate, and evolving, sustained, and displaying an order and an orderliness which tells us that God is a God of order, and that there's a moral purpose behind the universe.

[14:12] So, this theology of nature is not one that we need to fight about, it's not one that we need to debate about, and we don't use it normally as part of an apologetic.

But, we are thrilled to accept it, and to experience it, and to thank God for this evidence of all his attributes. By contrast, the whole natural theology scene is one in which there is debate, in which there is, and there are different kinds of natural theology, natural theology of the past, before Charles Darwin, was one kind of natural theology, and since Charles Darwin, people have been thinking, how can we rephrase that, and reconstitute that debate?

You will know of the whole question of intelligent design as one way of getting at that natural theology. My own perspective is that there are so many ways in which we can use natural theology without demanding proof, because the word proof in our society depends very much on a particular kind of thinking with respect to testability, replication, and the like, and it's, in my view, somewhat unwise to talk about proof, but nevertheless, we will talk about that next time.

So, these are two things, and we'll talk about the first one today, theology of nature, and we'll talk about natural theology next time. Am I making myself clear?

So far? Thank you. Then I would like us to turn, if you will, to Job chapter 38, and I know everyone here is an expert on the Bible, and everyone here is an expert on the life of Job, but it's probably not a bad idea just to recap briefly the main highlights of his life.

[16:35] He was a, we're told, a blameless and upright and God-fearing man who lost his farm, his family, and his physical well-being.

friends of his offered him cold comfort, and at the end of this rather excruciating experience of loss, he questions God.

He doesn't deny God, he never, he never denied God, but he questions God of what's going on here. And God gives a rather curious answer.

I asked Dr. Packer about this, and he said, well, you mean the zoo chapter. In fact, it's not only a zoo chapter, it's a meteorology chapter, and a hydrology chapter, and even a geomorphology chapter.

in fact, it's two chapters concerned with an expression of the magnificence of God and his central position in creation.

[18:01] So, although he was deprived of all his wealth and posterity and health, Job refused to follow his wife's advice that he cursed God and died, he continues to insist that he's a blameless man.

And the response that God gives in his final address to Job, there are two parts to it, in chapters 38, 39, 40, and 41, is a recitation of the beauty and wonder of nature, and who are you, Job, to question my sovereignty and my power and my care for you.

Chapter 38, verses 1 to 7 give the beginnings of God's answer to Job. Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you and you shall declare to me, Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements, surely you know, or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk?

[19:43] Or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? What a strange-seeming answer to a man who is obviously in distress.

get your act together, Job. I know that you are good measurers of the earth, but is man really the measure of all things?

the word about measuring, I think, is interesting because we pride ourselves on our ability to measure, at least I do, and others in the scientific context, think what a remarkable achievement.

And indeed, it is a remarkable achievement, but let's look at it in perspective, Job. You know, people can measure things, what does it add up to? Well, it adds up to a lot of measurements.

who is the measure of things? Not who is the measure of things, says God.

[21 : 05] It's a very important point, I think. It emphasizes that theological truth has to do with purpose, theological truth has to do with why we are here, and natural truth has to do with immediate causation, measurement, and hypothesis.

So just in that very brief extract, which goes on to become the meteorological and hydrological and zoological discussion, God sets the scene, and we can go right over to chapter 42, to the end of this exercise.

Then Job answered the Lord, this is verse 1 of chapter 42, then Job answered the Lord, I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know.

Hear and I will speak, I will question you, and you declare to me. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes, my eye sees you.

[22 : 36] Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes. Now, that's again a remarkable response.

I hope you'll read the intervening passage on your own at some convenient time in the next week, because it doesn't look really like the sort of message that we commonly would give to a person in distress. And it suggests to me that there is a resource here which we don't use enough, namely to identify the evidence of God in creation as a source of strength and as a source of encouragement.

there are all kinds of ways in which one can think about the main points that are raised here.

But I suppose the first thing is that God is the measure of all things. the second is that the created order is there in order to not only instruct us but to encourage us.

[24 : 14] And the third of many points that one might think of is that even in distress to be aware of the care with which God has provided for us is a central attribute of this book of Job.

I think that the book of common prayer, which again I know everybody knows off by heart in this congregation but this remarkable section under the canticles called the benedicti omnia opera it's not an opera it's a call to the works of the Lord to bless the Lord you'll recall oh oh oh all you works of the Lord bless you the Lord praise him and magnify him forever oh ye angels of the Lord bless ye the Lord praise him and magnify him forever oh ye heavens bless thee the Lord praise him and magnify him forever oh ye waters that be above the firmament bless ye the Lord praise him and magnify him forever and we can go on through that remarkable canticle and get a repetition of the kind of worship that is implied by the section in the book of

Job and so I think that again we don't often say it I guess I have heard it once at St. John's maybe some of you have heard it more often I remember as a youngster thinking that it would be nice to cut out some of the praise him and magnify him forever but when you think about it how remarkable and how we need to be reminded over and over again and so it's a impressive canticle when you actually hear the full range and in this canticle of course there are the references to the fowls of the air the whales the beasts the cattle more interesting for some of us the frost and the cold the ice and the snow the nights and the days the light and the darkness all these are here to bless the lord and to praise him and to magnify him forever so i think we we just don't spend enough time thinking about the theology of nature i'd like to read one other section if i may which is psalm 148 there are a couple of other references on the sheet that you have but psalm 148 expresses this theology of nature so remarkably in my view psalm 148 goes praise the lord praise the lord from the heavens praise him in the heights praise him all his angels praise him all his host praise him sun and moon praise him all you shining stars praise him you highest heavens and you waters above the heavens let them praise the name of the lord for he commanded and they were created he established them forever and ever he fixed their bounds which cannot be passed praise the lord from the earth you sea monsters and all deeps fire and hail snow and frost stormy wind fulfilling his command mountains and all hills fruit trees and all cedars wild animals and all cattle creeping things and flying birds kings of the earth and all peoples princes and all rulers of the earth young men and women alike old and young together let them praise the name of the lord for his name alone is exalted his glory is above earth and heaven he has raised up a horn for his people praise for all his faithful for the people of

Israel who are close to him praise the lord now I want to sort of comment on the job account and then on this psalm in the job account we have an account of a world without people the created order has a significance even when there are no people we have to be careful not to become

pantheists in talking about the created order but in trying to avoid being pantheists we miss out on this extraordinary revelation that the created order has its own way of magnifying the lord that we are set in a context where even if there had been no other people the glory of God would be revealed in creation that's the most interesting thought that has occurred to me in looking at Job because it is an extraordinary panoply of phenomena that are discussed without any presence of people and whilst I'm not recommending that we all hive off to places where there are no people I think it's worth considering what is the value of nature in itself this is where the secular mind very quickly moves over into a pantheistic kind of view of nature but it's not we're not bound to go into pantheism because we have this in the context where God is at the center of things so [31 : 16] God is there and he is using the evidence of his created order in the absence of people to comfort and to bring Job through to a position of repentance and a sense of his own insignificance I think this is again something we need to think about in terms of how we use the resource within which we are set namely the created order now Psalm 148 moves on of course and it has a more comprehensive view of not any nature but also all the inhabitants of nature including people and ends up with the people of

Israel as the high point of the evidence of God's care and so that's a kind of an elaboration of Job but it certainly includes the majority of the psalm includes the intrinsic importance and value of nature as evidence of God's care so this theology of nature is reflected not only in the passages that I've mentioned here but really throughout the Bible and it's a concern to me that I do all my learning about this from the secular world it's a concern to me that as Christians we do not help each other to grow in an understanding of God's created order we are rightly focused upon the salvation story we are rightly focused on repentance before

God in the light of the extraordinary sacrifice of his son on the cross for us I wouldn't want to see that emphasis in any way reduced but it does not seem to me to imply that one has to go soft on the creation and the extent to which we are inspired by and led to deeper worship and a deeper sense of our own personal insignificance in the salvation story we are very much raised in significance because God cares for each of us and Christ died for every one of us which makes us extraordinarily important and privileged but unless we counter that with a sense of our tininess and our total insignificance in the context of the created order there is a definite possibility that we become too arrogant so I think that the essential point which I shall also try to make in the context of discussing natural theology is that we seem to have developed a one-sided kind of Christian message it itself is absolutely central and has no ambiguity about it but the theology of nature I would argue and I would claim as having a need to be given greater emphasis so that's a point for discussion you may feel that my own prejudices as a scientist are influencing my emphasis here and I'm sure they are but I'd be interested to find out how many have heard a discussion from the pulpit within the last two or three years about God and his creation maybe we should have a poll at the end of this session we don't do things by polls do we so who is at the center of things is Job Job was rather parochial gentleman he was rightly concerned about his family and his farm and his ill health as we all are but he really sort of lost sight of the fact that God was at the center of things and started questioning him he's a pretty remarkable man even so I'm not trying to run him down but he'd lost sight under the pathetic advice he got from his friends he just lost courage and lost a sense of focus a theology of nature should tell us God is at the center of things but not just that and then say okay we move on to the next story God is at the center of things with an inspiration here to look more carefully at the intricacies and the wonder of his creation so I say that [38 : 14] I think the secular world has taken the initiative on this largely taking advantage of the Darwinian bandwagon but it should not be thought to be an area that is lost to Christian reflection and to inspiration for Christian living and even more if we get discouraged to bring us out of that discouragement by pointing to the center of things namely God himself those are my thoughts on this little early by Dr.

Packer's standards but I think we could benefit from some discussion on this