

# Exploring God's Green Word



*A set of four bible studies exploring humankind's relationship with all of God's creation, and caring for God's World - the Biblical imperative for conservation*

- Study 1: Gardening stories - A look at the creation stories in Genesis
- Study 2: Teaching creation - Drawing some lessons from the Pentateuch
- Study 3: Singing creation - Psalms as a source of praise for creation
- Study 4: Good news for creation - Some insights from the gospels

These studies are offered primarily for small groups to explore environmental issues from a Christian perspective.

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

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

Biblical images of creation have led to people holding a variety of understandings about the relationship between God, humanity and the environment. For some, the story of creation is perceived as an inadequate truth with a 'Sunday School' picture book image of God. For others, there is a suspicion that in the area of creation, science has won and the Bible has become irrelevant.

Placed alongside the 19<sup>th</sup> century theory of evolution and the 20<sup>th</sup> century theory of the 'Big Bang', a literal understanding of the creation stories can leave people with a sense that the Bible and Christianity have little to contribute to environmental issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

These studies are intended as an antidote to such views.

## Bible study 1

### Gardening stories

#### *A look at the creation stories in Genesis*

#### Step 1 An introduction

The increasing number of programmes dedicated to gardening on television and the ringing tills at garden centres are signs of the growing interest in gardening. There is continuing interest in learning how to grow and nurture flowers and vegetables through the seasons and redesign gardens - it is as if we are becoming a nation of Josh Byrnes, Sabrina Hans and Jamie Duries!

- Share stories or dreams about planning a garden or part of a garden from scratch.
- Discuss experiences of planning the garden, doing the work, the feelings that people have as the garden takes shape and when it is finished.
- Consider what is necessary to keep the garden in good order.

#### Step 2 Looking at the first creation story

There are two different stories of creation given in the opening chapters of Genesis. We might understand these as planning a garden on a planetary scale!

In the same ways as two biographies of the same person can complement each other and give us a greater insight into the person, so these two stories of creation, reflect complementary pictures of God the creator.

Through the accounts we can discern pictures of our relationship to both God and creation. The first account, which describes the six days of creation, is laid out rather like a responsive reading that might be used in church.

Read Genesis 1: 11-23. Can the group imagine it being read in worship with the congregation replying with the refrain: And God saw that it was good? Evening came and morning came the... day?

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

#### Step 3 Looking at the second creation story

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

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

#### Step 4      A challenge

Church buildings are often designed so that people know they are a place where God is worshipped. Steeples, towers interesting architecture and crosses all act as symbols of a gathered church.

- If you have a patch of land, however small, outside your church, brainstorm how your church patch might be redesigned to witness to the glory of God the creator and express the sense of care that God's people are called to exercise with the environment.

## Bible study 2

### Teaching creation *Drawing some lessons from the Pentateuch*

#### Step 1 An Introduction

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

- We view and use land in many different ways. Discuss why we value the different types of land listed below and what responsibility we feel we have for their care:
  1. A garden
  2. Rented farmland
  3. A local park
  4. Wilderness land e.g. National Park
  5. A tropical forest

#### Step 2 Exploring the Pentateuch

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

Consider the following two Biblical perspectives on land:

##### **a) Land as a divine gift**

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

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

##### **b) Resting land**

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

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

### c) Whose land?

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

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

### Step 3      A task

Deuteronomy 26:5-10 reads as a creed recited by the people of God in worship.

- Write a creed telling the story of a piece of land, or the whole earth, including our responsibility for it.

## Bible study 3

### Singing creation *Psalms as a source of praise of creation*

#### Step 1 Introduction

The collection of psalms is the hymn book of the people of God in the Old Testament. The psalms express many aspects of faith and life including a sense of awe, wonder and understanding of God's creation and the human place within it.

- Start by considering some well-known songs and hymns that mention creation - what do they tell us about the created order?

#### Step 2 Continuing creation

Read Psalm 104. This Psalm appears to interweave the creation story from Genesis 1 with the contemporary surroundings of the people of Israel. In doing so the psalm gives a dynamic quality to creation as bearing witness to God's continuing activity rather than a one-off act. It is a song that the people of God together with the rest of creation including the sun and moon, storks and lions sing in praise of God. This approach can be a challenge to the human-centred attitude which people can have of creation. An Australian version of Psalm 104 can be found in Bruce D Prewer's book *Australian Psalms*, published by Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide 1980. This psalm may help us in the southern hemisphere identify with the imagery.

- Thinking of parts of creation that you have visited, have you ever sensed that God's creating continues? Share your thoughts.

The story of God's creation is told in many different ways in the Bible. Whilst some accounts have a more historical feel, this psalm is written as a song to sing and affirm God's continuing creative activity.

- If we sense that the rest of creation is singing in praise to God, does that alter our view of and relationship towards creation?

#### Step 3 Creation and salvation

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

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

This psalm seems to allude to the destruction of the Temple of Solomon by the Babylonians.

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

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

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

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

#### Step 4      Reprise

Return to one or two of those songs and hymns that were considered in step 1:

- Do you have any more to add about their understanding of creation following the Bible study?
- If you were to introduce one of these songs or hymns in church on Sunday, what would you say about it to the congregation?

Close by singing some favourite creation songs.

## Bible study 4

### Good news for creation *Some insights from the Gospels*

#### Step 1      Discussing lifestyle

Lifestyle is a buzzword of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The first Bible Study drew on the growing popularity of garden design, but this is only one aspect of our increasingly lifestyle orientated world.

Week by week magazine articles and television programmes bombard us with lifestyle 'musts' from the latest look in fashionable clothes to designer kitchens, from the colour of our eggs to the layout of a room.

Sunday supplements include articles about so-called media personalities under such titles as 'A day in the life of...' or 'My favourite room by...'

- Discuss how the group feels about our increasingly 'lifestyle' orientated world.

#### Step 2      Writing for the media

Imagine that you have to compile a Sunday Supplement article under the title 'A Commonwealth Lifestyle by Jesus of Nazareth'. Discuss key features of the lifestyle of Jesus that you would include. Some suggested texts for reference include: Matthew: 6:19-21, 24-31, 7:4-27, 8:20, 10:29-31.

Consider writing your thoughts as an article for your church magazine and find an appropriate location for a contemporary photo-shoot!

#### Step 3      Impact

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

- Consider one or two lifestyles, including your own, and the Jesus 'Common-Wealth Style' above, and for each one discuss the impact of it on the environment and our personal well-being.
- Watch 'Carbon Cops' on ABC TV or look on the website [www.abc.net.au/carboncops](http://www.abc.net.au/carboncops) and consider how our choice of lifestyle can be continually evolving.

#### Step 4      Change

We know that Jesus lived in a very different world to our own. 2000 years ago there were no mobile phones and e-mail was as fast as the nearest donkey.

But there are some similarities - people are still concerned about relationships and issues including healing, forgiveness, debt, food, isolation and poverty.

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

### Step 5 Church lifestyle - more good news for creation

The Gospel according to John opens by mirroring the first verses of Genesis: 'In the beginning...'. In doing so John links the person of Jesus with God from the beginning of time and then reveals how God begins a new relationship with people through Jesus.

For example, in John 15 there is the account of the teaching of Jesus on the vine and the branches. The passage builds on the Old Testament understanding of God as the vine keeper and Israel as the vine, but it can also be interpreted as an intimate picture of the Church and Christ. Read John 15:1-5.

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

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**Eco-Congregation Ireland** is an environmental project for churches. It provides free resources, advice and an award scheme to help churches consider environmental issues in the context of their Christian life and mission, and to take positive action.

Web: [www.ecocongregationireland.org](http://www.ecocongregationireland.org)

This bible study is designed as an additional resource  
to the Green Church Handbook



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