



## All Things

*A Bible study from Young Evangelicals for Climate Action*

**How many times have you heard a sermon or Bible study on creation? How many of those times did you ever venture outside Genesis?**

Most conversations in our churches and classrooms about the created world and our relationship to it tend to revolve around one or two well-known passages. But the truth is, God's love for the created world is not confined to only a couple of well-worn verses. It courses through the very center of the Gospel story from creation to new creation. In this study, we will explore six of these passages—from Genesis to Revelation—and what they can teach us about our call to love and take care of the good world that God loves.

### Session 1: Bearing the Image of the Creator

**Scripture: Genesis 1:26-28**

*"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'*

*So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

*God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'"*

In Genesis 1, we see a God who cannot help but create; who cannot help but pour his love outward and to make order out of chaos. We see a God who revels in the goodness of the created world well before humans are ever on the scene, recognizing it as good over and over again—"and he saw all that he had made, and it was good, and it was good, and it was good..."

And then we come on the scene. In one of the most beautiful, theologically rich passages in all of Scripture, we find this creative, order-out-of-chaos God fashioning a unique kind of creature: bearers of his own divine image.

Now in the ancient world, a king fashioning images of himself was rather common. Well before television or the internet or digital cameras, new rulers and kings of large empires would often erect statues of themselves throughout their territory after their coronation. The purpose was to communicate their power and authority to the subjects of their far-flung provinces—many of them thousands of miles away from the capital city. It was a way to both announce the coronation of a new ruler to help his subjects learn to recognize their new king.

Obviously, the statues of these rulers were not the rulers themselves but were intended to point to the ruler; to remind the subjects who their true king was.

Genesis tells us that this is one aspect of our image-bearing role: to bear the likeness of—and to point toward—creation’s true king; to mirror the image and nature of our loving, order-out-of-chaos God to the rest of creation. Not to usurp the authority of the true king; not to use our status as a license to abuse and exploit, but to remind the created world—and ourselves—who its true ruler is.

Many throughout church history have taken words like “dominion” and “rule” in Genesis 1:26-28 as license to do whatever we want with creation; to usurp the authority of the true king. This perspective, though, forgets the lesson of Genesis 2. More on that to come.

**Next Step:** Want to learn more about how you and your church can become better images of the Creator? [Check out our website](#) to find resources and programs to help you and your community take the next step!

## **Session 2: To Serve and Protect**

**Scripture: Genesis 2:15**

*“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to serve it and protect it.”*

As we saw in our first session, Genesis 1 calls humankind to “have dominion” and “to rule” over that which God has made. Many have taken this to mean that we must have *carte blanche* to do with creation as we like. But this perspective forgets that Genesis 2 tells us exactly how we are supposed to rule over the works of God’s hands.

In Genesis 2:15, we find two Hebrew words that are crucial in understanding the full meaning of the passage: *avad* and *shamar*. These words are often translated as “to till” and “to keep” respectively, but the true Hebrew meaning goes well beyond this limited rendering.

*Avad* is used all over the Old Testament and is most often used in the context of service or even slavery. This is precisely how it is used in another familiar passage, Joshua 24:15: “As for me and my household, we will serve [*avad*] the Lord.”

*Shamar* is also used a lot in the Old Testament, and it means to actively guard; to proactively and preemptively protect from harm. It’s used six times in the eight verses of Psalm 121 to describe the God who guards Israel so closely that their foot will not slip without his knowledge, that sun will not harm them by day nor the moon by night. This is the kind of obsessive, active protection described by the word *shamar*.

Taken together then, these two Hebrew words in Genesis 2 are much closer to something like, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden to **serve and to protect it; to serve**

and to protect creation.” This is the proper shape of our relationship to the rest of creation, this is what it means to rule over the fish in the sea and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground: to be in a special relationship of service with the earth and all its creatures, and to actively and jealously protect it with the same tenacity that God protects his people.

### **Reflection Questions**

- What difference do the words “serve” and “protect” make to how you read this passage?
- What could it look like for you and your community to “serve” and “protect” the created world around you?

### **Session 3: The Word Became Flesh**

#### **Scripture: John 1:1-14**

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

*He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*

*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.”*

As you read the passage for this session, did you notice how similar it sounded to the story of creation back in Genesis? It’s almost as if the author goes out of his way to evoke Genesis 1 and 2. I mean, he even starts with the same words: “in the beginning.” It’s no mere accident that this passage sounds so similar to Genesis because that is precisely part of the author’s point. That this Jesus who lived and breathed and walked around; who taught and slept and lost his temper—this Jesus was not merely a significant teacher or an extra pious individual. He is the very capital-O One who hovered over the darkness and made order out of chaos that first day. He is the capital-O One through whom all things came to be—the very God who created the good world in which he takes such delight.

And this God who created all things loves his whole world so much that the thought of losing it to the power of sin and evil was simply unbearable. Rather than consign it to death and decay, the Creator God chose to enter into his creation himself in order to wrench it around from the inside. And he chose to do so by taking on the very stuff of the created world; the flesh and blood of God’s own image bearers.

Many of us in the American evangelical tradition grew up with a theology that was always vaguely anti-matter; anti-physicality. This famous C.S. Lewis quote sums it up pretty nicely: “We don’t have a soul. We are a soul. We happen to have a body.” And for all of the other things that Lewis gets beautifully right, this quote misses the central point of John 1—namely, why it was necessary that Jesus take on flesh at all in order to achieve his saving purposes.

It is precisely because of God’s deep love for the created world that he becomes a part of it himself—taking on matter in order to redeem it; taking on a body so that our whole selves—body and soul—can be reconciled back to him. I can’t imagine a stronger affirmation of the goodness and inherent dignity of the stuff of creation than for the Creator to take it on, making it a part of himself, in order to rescue it from destruction.

### **Reflection Questions**

- Christian orthodoxy has fought tooth and nail down the centuries to maintain the centrality of Jesus’ bodily incarnation to the meaning of salvation. Why might this matter so much?
- Orthodox Christian theology has maintained that Jesus continues to be incarnate. What significance might we conclude from this reality?

### **Session 4: The Earth is Full of God’s Creatures**

**Scripture: Psalm 104: 24; 31-34**

*“O Lord, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all;  
the earth is full of your creatures.*

...

*May the glory of the Lord endure forever;  
may the Lord rejoice in his works—  
who looks on the earth and it trembles,  
who touches the mountains and they smoke.  
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;  
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.  
May my meditation be pleasing to him,  
for I rejoice in the Lord.”*

The Psalms are bursting at the seams with God’s sheer delight in the world that he has made. Perhaps no more so than in Psalm 104.

The first 23 verses of the psalm, the verses that we won’t read today, are bursting with joy at the dizzying diversity with which God has fashioned the world. To read these verses is to imagine a psalmist abuzz with the energy of her praise, unable to stand still as she names yet another reason to praise the Creator God: gushing springs, the fruit of the earth, cattle, wine, bread, trees, wild goats, young lions—all are cause afresh for her to leap from her seat and laugh out loud at the sheer goodness of it all.

Old Testament scholar James Mays notes that Psalm 104 reads as a poetic version of God’s own self-appraisal in Genesis 1 when he looked over and over again at what he had made

and saw that it was good. Our psalmist clearly agrees with God's self-assessment and aches to add her own poetic affirmation to God's creative goodness. Psalm 104 is her project of praise, and its climax is reached in the first verse of our reading for today. After running the gamut of God's creative excellence—from mighty mountains to minute mountain mice—she exclaims with joy, "Oh Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures."

And if we thought the beginning of the Psalm was the picture of profound praise, the final four verses of our passage kick it up another notch. After extoling all of God's creative works, the psalmist breaks into new rounds of heightened praise. We can almost see her welling up with tears as the sheer goodness of it all threatens to overwhelm her as she jumps up and down in gratitude.

Does considering God's creation elicit the same praise from us? Do we find ourselves bursting with joy as we consider the goodness of God's world?

**Next Step:** Read the passage again, and this time join your heart with the psalmist's. Remember the care and delight with which God cares for his creation, and delight in the sheer goodness of it all.

### Session 5: All Things

**Scripture: Colossians 1:15-20**

*"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."*

When you read the passage for today, did you notice how often Paul uses the phrase "all things". Modern English writing disdains repetition. It's sloppy and unimaginative. Much better to find synonyms in order to drive home a single point than to repeat the same word over and over again.

Not so in the ancient world.

In ancient writing, repetition was how you signaled to your reader that you were making an especially important point. A good rule of thumb when it comes to repetition in the Bible: if something is being repeated, pay attention.

Paul's egregious repetition of the Greek *ta panta* in this passage is screaming out to us to wake up and to pay attention, because a crucial point is being made. Paul is trying to tell us something about the extent of God's saving work in the world, and it's this: that the scope of God's saving purposes in Christ have the entire created world in view.

Now don't get Paul wrong. The saving power of Christ's redeeming death and resurrection is for you and it is for me. But it is not *only* for you and it is not *only* for me. The truth of the

gospel is even more scandalous than we often give it credit for. Not only does God stoop down to rescue his sinful image bearers, but also his entire wayward creation!

But should we be surprised? We've seen throughout this study a God who creates a good world in which he takes great delight, and who tasks his image bearers to care for and delight in it as well. We've seen a God who is so enamored with his creation that he freely chose to empty himself of privilege and to take on the stuff of the world in order to offer himself up on its behalf. This act of redemption was done for you and me, no doubt, but it was done for much more than *only* you and me. God has *all things* in God's redemptive sights, and the reconciling and saving work of Christ extends to *all things*.

Thanks be to God!

**Next Step:** Ready to go all in? [Sign our Faithful Action Pledge](#) to commit to respond to the degradation of God's world with hope and action!

### **Session 6: Everything New!**

**Scripture: Revelation 21:1-5**

*"Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

*He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

And here we are in the second to last chapter of Revelation. We've followed the thread of God's love and concern for God's creation and our call to care for it from Genesis through the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Epistles and have found ourselves smack dab in the middle of Scripture's final word. If we had more time, we could have stopped in Leviticus, Amos, Joel, Micah, Job, Song of Songs, Romans, Ephesians, and more (maybe in another Bible Study!). Such is the extent of Scripture's call to us to care for God's good world!

In the final chapters of Revelation, John the Revelator is pulling back the curtain and giving his first-century Jewish audience suffering under Roman rule a lifeline. "Though you are suffering now," says John, "just look at what God has in store!" And what exactly does God have in store? What is the hope that John holds out, both to the first-century Jewish community and to us today?

That God's final, culminating act of salvation will be to join heaven and earth—God's space and our space—once and for all. And he will do so not by sucking up disembodied human souls into an ethereal heaven where we will float on clouds, grow wings, and play harps (which is much more Plato than John the Revelator). Instead, God will come to us, just as he's been doing from the very beginning. Remember that Jerusalem was the city of God's holy

temple, the dwelling place of his very presence on earth. At the time John penned his revelation, the Temple in Jerusalem lay in ruins, razed to the ground by the Roman occupying force. By seeing the New Jerusalem come down out of heaven to earth, John is effectively saying, "God's presence will come back and this time, he will never leave us again."

The significance of earth as the final theater for God's good future cannot be overstated. God intends to live and reign here on a new earth infused in every corner with his heavenly presence.

So what about that word "new"? Doesn't it prove that this world is passing away and God will start over? Not if you take the Greek seriously. In the original Greek in which Revelation is written, there are two words for "new": *neos*, which means brand new, never been seen, fresh out of the box, from scratch; and *kainos*, which means renewed, taking that which is and bringing it to its full intended purpose and potential. Any guesses which Greek word John uses in Rev. 21? It's *kainos* every single time. In other words, John is saying that God's not starting over, God's restoring his masterpiece.

God is not making all new things, he is making all things new. All things have a destiny, a place in God's coming good future. And by living like we believe this truth, we participate in and bear witness to this coming good future, however imperfectly. By working to stop pollution, to preserve biodiversity, to slow climate change, we join our voice with that emanating from the throne. We proclaim that this world matters, that God has a good future for it, and that even now, God is making everything new!

**Next Step:** Think about one of the pieces of God's creation that holds the most meaningful you (i.e. a local forest or beach). Now consider one concrete action you can take to bear witness to God's ongoing work of restoration in that place (i.e. pick up litter on your next hike, urge your local decisionmakers to protect the beach from erosion or the body of water from pollution).