

CHAPTER 6

Lessons from Genesis 1

There is much that is hinted at in the opening chapters of Genesis that is expounded more fully in the rest of the Bible. Where appropriate I will relate what is suggested there to later passages.

This universe is God's creation

The first and most obvious truth revealed in the first chapter of Genesis is that this universe and everything in it is God's creation. The words 'created' or 'made' occur 14 times in chapter one and the first four verses of chapter two. This distinction between God and his creation is essential to all biblical thought and to a Christian worldview. It distinguishes Christianity from *monism*, the belief that all reality is ultimately singular — all is One, with no differentiation — a view that is common to Eastern religions. It also distinguishes Christianity from *pantheism*, the belief that God is somehow identical with the totality of the universe — everything is God.

As a created universe, everything is dependent on God for its existence. It is equally true that everything is dependant on its relationship to our creator and redeemer God for its *meaning* and *purpose*. What Paul said of humans in Acts 17:28, '**In him we live and move and have our being**,' could also be said of all creation.

The universe is not divine, nor to be worshipped as such, as in some pagan religions, popular Hinduism and recent New Age borrowings from both. It is true that the Bible sometimes speaks of nature *as a person* (e.g. Leviticus 18:28, Deuteronomy 30:19; 32:1; Psalms 19:1–4; 96:11–13; 98:7–9; Isaiah 1:2). However, these are all figures of speech, *personifying*, not *personalising*, nature. The use of the word 'saw' rather than 'said' in

the repeated phrase, ‘**God saw that it was good**’ in Genesis 1, implies a certain separation between God and his creation.

This does not mean that there is not a definite *sacredness* about nature, simply because of its relationship to God. Christopher Wright, in *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, summarises this well:

The Old Testament constantly treats creation *in relation to God*. The created order obeys God, submits to God’s commands, reveals God’s glory, benefits from God’s sustaining and providing, and serves God’s purposes — including (but not confined to) the purpose of providing for human beings, or functioning as the vehicle of God’s judgment upon them. So there is a sacredness about the non-human created order that we are called upon to honour — as the laws, worship and prophecy of Israel undoubtedly did. But to *worship* nature in any of its manifestations is to exchange the Creator for the created. And that is a form of idolatry against which Israel was repeatedly warned (e.g. Deuteronomy 4:15–20; cf. Job 31:26–28), and which Paul links to the whole tragic litany of humanity’s wilful rebellion and social evil (Romans 1:25 and the surrounding context). The radical monotheism of Israel that set itself against all other gods of, or in, nature did not rob nature itself of its God-related sacredness and significance.

As later scriptures explain, God not only brought the universe into being; he is actively sustaining its existence and functions at macro and micro levels. As Elihu rightly said to Job, ‘**If it were his intention and he withdrew his spirit and breath, all people would perish together and would return to the dust**’ (Job 34:14,15; see also Psalm 33:6–9; 36:6; 65:9–13; 104). This world is not a *self*-sustaining biosystem as in some New Age ideas. That is not to say that God has not built into the earth an incredible capacity for renewal, recovery, balance and adaptation.

It is significant that Genesis does not state the process by which God made the earth. In my booklet, *The Complementary Nature of Science and Christianity*,* I explore the question of evolution. Here, however, I would point out that there is a hint that God gives to his creation a built-in creative ability of its own. In Genesis 1:11, 20 and 24, the land and the

* This can be read at my website, www.christianity.co.nz

waters are invited to participate in creation by producing vegetation and living creatures, all, of course, under God's direction. Plants and animals are also given the ability to reproduce their own kind. God also invited the fish, birds and humans to *fill* the waters and the earth in imitation of God's own creative acts of filling. Charles Kingsley, in *The Water Babies*, has the mother of creation say: 'Know child, that any one can make things if they take time and trouble enough; but it is not everyone who, like me, can make things make themselves.'

However, the contribution of creatures, which God not only allows, but positively encourages, is clearest and most decisive in the case of humans, created in his image. The fact that there is no conclusion to the seventh day of rest may indicate that, having completed the initial conditions for a meaningful world, at least some of the responsibility now rests with humans. As Henri Blocher comments in *In the Beginning: The opening chapters of Genesis*: 'God's Sabbath, which marks the end of creation, but does not tie God's hands, is therefore coextensive with history.' Richard Middleton adds the suggestive comment:

God in Genesis 1 is like no one as much as a mother, who gives life to her children, blesses them, enhances their power and agency, and then takes the parental risk of allowing her progeny to take their first steps, to attempt to use their power, to develop toward maturity.

It is also worth noting that the Hebrew *bara*, which is used in the Bible only to refer to God's creation, is used in verse 1 of the creation of matter, verse 21 of the creation of life and three times in verse 27 of the creation of humans. Here we have God's three greatest acts of creation. Though not necessarily meaning to 'create out of nothing', it has the concept of 'initiating something new'. This word is used of God's creative powers 18 times in the book of Isaiah.

There is plenty throughout scripture to indicate that God didn't finish his work with the initial creation, but continues to be active at all levels. This is nowhere plainer than in the Psalms (e.g. 104; 147) passages in Job (e.g. 38:12, 25–27, 41; 39) and in the teaching of Jesus (e.g. Matthew 6:26–30). It is in Christ that '**all things hold together**' (Colossians 1:17).

It is significant also that God's authority over creation provides the foundation for his redemption of his people. This is illustrated in the

deliverance of his people from Egypt. Whereas in his acts of creation in Genesis 1, God brings order out of chaos, here he actually *uses* his power over creation for the deliverance from Egypt. This is the central theme of the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15. In Psalm 74 the author appeals to the God whose power split the sea, crushed Leviathan, created the sun and moon, and established the seasons, for his hope of deliverance from the devastating effects of the destruction of Jerusalem and its aftermath. Israel's redemption is to be part of God's new creation.

John Woolman wrote in *Journal*, 'It is not possible to love an unseen God while mistreating God's visible creation.'

What motivates our love of nature? For the Christian, maybe it is because it is not really 'nature' at all. It is God's creation. It bears the stamp of his glory.

God is revealed as the master craftsman

God begins with an earth that is described as 'formless and empty' (Genesis 1:2) and proceeds to fashion it to sustain life. This is not the 'chaos' of parallel Babylonian creation myths, chaos being the antithesis of 'cosmos'. There is no distortion of God's creation here. It is 'unformed', not 'deformed'. Many texts combine the idea of artisan, with that of God as ruler (e.g. Psalm 119:89–91). The writer of Hebrews tells us that '**the universe was formed at God's command**' ('fashioned by the word of God' — NEB, Hebrews 11:3). The word translated 'formed' is the same word used elsewhere of the potter's activity in making a lump of clay into an earthenware vessel (cf. Romans 9:21). Paul tells us that the nature of God is understood '**from what has been made**' (Romans 1:20 — *ta poiemata*: 'the works of the craftsman's art'). In commenting on the superb literary artistry of the creation story, Middleton, in *The Liberating Image*, says:

Superimposed on and integrated with the picture of God speaking creation into being is the metaphor of God as designer and artificer, constructing with care, attention, obvious pleasure, and self-investment (as a good artist), a coherent, harmoniously functioning cosmos, according to a well-thought-out plan.

The Hebrew word for 'good' (*tob*), which occurs six times in Genesis 1, has in this context a twofold connotation: aesthetic and ethical. As

Aristotle recognised over two millennia ago, ‘In all things of nature there is something of the marvelous.’

Proverbs 14:31 declares, ‘**Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their maker**’ (cf. 17:5). If we are to respect the skill of the one who created humans by the way we treat them, should we not equally respect him who created the universe by similar care of his creation? If a man was to trash something his wife had created with great attention and loving care, what would this say about his regard for her? Maybe we should treat the loss of each species as we would treat the loss of a great work of art, because that is what it is. Calvin DeWitt expresses this most clearly in *Caring for Creation*:

Jesus Christ is Creator, Integrator, and Reconciler; yet many who call on his name abuse, neglect, and do not give a care about creation. That irony is there for all to see. Honouring the Creator in word, they destroy God’s works in deed. Praising God from whom all blessings flow, they diminish and destroy God’s creatures here below. The pieces of this puzzle do not fit! One piece says, ‘We honour the Great Master!’ The other piece says, ‘We despise his great masterpieces!’

Contrastingly, we can show our respect for God’s creation both by seeking to preserve it, and also in our own creative use of it. Wendell Berry has a significant comment in this respect:

If we understand that no artist — no maker — can work except by reworking the works of Creation, then we see that by our work we reveal what we think of the works of God. How we take our lives from this world, how we work, what work we do, how well we use the materials we use, and what we do with them after we have used them — all these are questions of the highest and gravest religious significance. In answering them, we practice, or do not practice, our religion.

He is God of all the earth

Genesis 1 also rules out *polytheism*, which was so prevalent in Israel’s day. The Bible states that God is ‘**God over all the kingdoms of the earth**’ (2 Kings 19:15), ‘**God of the whole human race**’ (Jeremiah 32:27), ‘**the God of all the earth**’ (Isaiah 54:5), ‘**the Judge of all the earth**’

(Genesis 18:25), ‘the King of all the earth’ (Psalm 47:7). ‘The Lord is God; besides him there is no other’ (Deuteronomy 4:35; cf. 39; see also 1 Samuel 2:2; 1 Kings 8:60; Joel 2:27; Isaiah 45:5,6,18). Referring to the uniqueness of the first commandment, ‘You shall have no other gods before me’ (Exodus 20:3), Werner Schmidt, in *The Faith of the Old Testament*, comments:

There is no real model for it, and it cannot be derived from the neighbouring religions, but is opposed to their essential nature. History looks for analogies for all phenomena, but so far as we know at present it is impossible to show that the first and second commandments were borrowed from elsewhere. Exclusiveness of creed is unique to Israel.

James Nash, in *Loving Nature: Ecological integrity and Christian responsibility*, fills out the implications of this in some detail:

From the perspective of radical monotheism in the doctrine of creation, there are no lesser divinities — not the sun and moon (against the worship of which Genesis 1:14–18 was a reaction), not golden calves and other ‘graven images’, not sacred groves or ancient trees, not mighty mountains or volcanoes, not fearsome beasts or demons, not caesars or pharaohs or heroes, and not even Gaia or Mother Earth. In this view, polytheism, animism, astrology, totemism, and other forms of nature worship are not only idolatry, but also, as the prophets regularly suggested, vanity and stupidity (cf. Isaiah 40:12–28; 44:9–20; 46:1–11; Acts 14:15). The Creator alone is worthy of worship ... Nevertheless, though only the Creator is worthy of worship, all God’s creatures are worthy of moral consideration, as a sign of the worthiness imparted by God and, in fact, as an expression of the worship of God. The monotheistic doctrine of creation does not desacralise nature. Nature is still sacred by virtue of having been created by God, declared to be good, and placed under ultimate divine sovereignty.

The earth belongs to God

By virtue of the fact that he created it, the earth and all that is in it belongs to God. ‘To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it’ (Deuteronomy 10:14). ‘The earth

is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters' (Psalm 24:1,2; cf. Psalm 50:12).^{*} All that we are and all God has provided for our wellbeing is provided from his abundant store. In Genesis 1:29, God gives humankind plants for food. After Noah's flood, God extends this to 'everything that lives and moves' (Genesis 9:3). As Christopher Wright declares:

God is the earth's landlord and we are God's tenants. God has given the earth into our resident *possession* (Psalm 115:16), but we do not hold the title deed of ultimate ownership. So, as in any landlord-tenant relationship, God holds us accountable to himself for how we treat his property.

We have a responsibility to pass it on in the condition we found it. Margaret Thatcher got it right when she stated at a Conservative Party Conference, 'No generation has a freehold on this earth. All we have is a life tenancy — with a full repairing lease.' Or, in the words of Crocodile Dundee, humans 'arguing over who owns [land] is like two fleas arguing about who owns the dog they live on.'

The relationality of God and creation

God exists in relationships of Father, Son and Spirit. Though this is not spelt out in any detail until we get to the New Testament, there are hints of it in Genesis 1.^{**} God's spoken word occurs repeatedly in this chapter, the word which John identifies as the One who '**became flesh and made his dwelling among us**' (John 1:1,14). The '**Spirit of God**' is active in creation, '**hovering over the waters**' (Genesis 1:2), bringing order and fullness out of what was formless and empty. The Hebrew word translated 'hovering' is the same word used in Deuteronomy 32:11 of an eagle hovering over her young. Father, Son and Spirit are all active in creation. Many see inklings of the Trinity in the plural '**us**' in Genesis 1:26. If God himself exists in relationships, it is natural to think that this may be true of his creation.

^{*} See also 1 Chronicles 29:11; Job 41:11.

^{**} For a detailed explanation of biblical teaching on the Trinity, see my booklet, *Understanding the Trinity*, which is available at www.christianity.co.nz

The more we learn about creation, particularly from modern physics, genetics, and biology, the more this is seen to be the case, even in the physical realm. The theory of relativity and quantum physics have revealed the interconnectedness of all creation, and that even matter at the opposite ends of the universe can have a permanent relationship. As Larry Rasmussen put it delightfully in *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, ‘All the createds are related.’ Joseph Sittler, in *Gravity and Grace*, likens it to a fine piece of cloth: ‘You pull a thread here, and it vibrates throughout the whole fabric.’ The eminent naturalist John Muir, in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, said, ‘When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.’ The Gaia hypothesis, that the earth and its living creatures form one interconnected system, has positive value for scientific research — though, as Christians, we reject the concept that it is any kind of divine being.

There is plenty of evidence for a certain cooperation between ecosystems in order to produce sustainability and diversity. As Michael Northcott points out:

Eugene Odum’s theory of ecosystems argued for a directedness within all life communities whose goal is the achievement of a stable biomass in any particular system, which can sustain the greatest species diversity. Ecological order is characterised by species diversity, by a stable biomass and by the preservation of nutrients in ecosystems by recycling processes. These processes are reliable and repetitive: they are mostly threatened, not by natural competition or predation, but by humanly originated intervention.

There are ways in which we humans have strong links with the rest of creation. As we shall see, there are significant differences between us and the rest of creation. However, we are all created beings, wholly dependent on God for our existence. It is significant that animals and humans are created on the same day in Genesis 1. As Ken Gnanakan puts it in *Responsible Stewardship of God’s Creation*, ‘Man did not create the tapestry of life, he is only a thread in it.’ We contain clay, minerals and water, and are powered by sunshine through plant life.

On my website, in the booklet *The Complementary Nature of Science and Christianity*, I have given a summary of up-to-date genetic evidence, which I believe is as near as you can get to proof in scientific terms for

the fact that humans and the great apes have common ancestry. We share 99 percent of our DNA with them. Biologically we are similar. We eat and reproduce like animals. We breathe the same oxygen molecules breathed by every type of creature ever to have lived on earth. Both animals and humans are described as ‘living souls’ in both Old and New Testaments (e.g. Genesis 1:21; 2:7; Revelation 16:3 — Hebrew *nephesh*, Greek *psyche*). Humans are not body + soul. When God breathed into the body he had formed from dust (Genesis 2:7), he did not plant a soul within the body. He breathed into the dust and man *became* a living soul. Soul = dust + breath. We are equally mortal with the rest of creatures (1 Timothy 6:15,16). Though the writer of Ecclesiastes was uncertain about a lot of things, he got this one right. **‘Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath’** (Ecclesiastes 3:19). It is only through the gospel that one day we may be ‘clothed’ with immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53,54).

Our link with the rest of creation is powerfully reflected in the statement that God made man (Hebrew: *adam*) out of the ‘**dust of the earth**’ (Genesis 2:7 — Hebrew: *adamah*). No translation catches the richness of the Hebrew pun here. Perhaps a good suggestion would be that God made ‘humans out of humus’. ‘Humans’ and ‘humus’ have a common derivation, as does the word ‘humble’. **‘Dust you are and to dust you will return’** (Genesis 3:19). As somebody has said, this is really the story of Dusty and Eve! We are creatures of the earth with feet of clay. The animals and birds were also ‘formed out of the ground’ using the same words (Genesis 2:19). In Genesis 2 the term for humans (*adam*), whether one regards it as a generic term for humans generally or as a personal name, occurs 18 times. The number of occurrences of words that tell us what humans were either formed from, or where they were placed, are as follows: ground (*adamah*) — five, earth — three, field — three, land — two, garden — five, dust — one. Wendell Berry dislikes the word ‘environment’ as it puts too much distance between us and where we live. The creation is not something apart from us, the created. It is part of us and we are part of it. Perhaps the best evidence of all that we are unavoidably linked with the rest of creation is given by Paul Hawken:

One quadrillion cells make up a human being, and 90 percent of them are bacteria, fungi, yeasts, and other microbes, without which we could not survive. Therein lies the paradox; what makes us fully human is, well, not human.

In Genesis 9:12,16 and Hosea 2:18 God speaks of his covenant that encompasses all living creatures in addition to humans. The Hebrew word here for covenant, *berit*, shares a root with the word *bara*, used in Genesis to describe divine creativity. This root conveys the sense of binding. God, humans and all living creatures are bound to each other in a web of interrelationship.

In Psalm 104:30 we are told that it is the Spirit that creates life and renews the face of the earth. It is the same Spirit that is operative in our own lives. He is the Spirit of unity (Ephesians 4:3) who unites us with the Father, Jesus, and God's people, and provides a link with all creation. In *God in Creation: An ecological doctrine of creation*, Jürgen Moltmann says:

If the Holy Spirit is 'poured out' on the whole creation, then he creates the community of all created things with God and with each other, making it that fellowship of creation in which all created things communicate with one another and with God, each in its own way.

However, this is very different from the idea that nature has some kind of spiritual personality with whom we can merge through meditation and psychic surrender. That kind of unity is part of pagan religions and advocated by some New Age gurus, and is also a major emphasis of Eastern religions. Only humans are created in the image of God. As we have greater responsibility than the animals, we can also do greater harm. We are accountable; other creatures are not.

God loves fruitfulness and diversity

This is certainly the impression given from Genesis 1:11–25. It is sometimes overlooked that the command to be fruitful and increase in number is given to living creatures as well as humans (Genesis 1:22). Modern biology and zoology has greatly reinforced this fact. There are something like 250,000 species of known flowering plants, perhaps 10,000 species of birds, and 30,000 species of epiphytes in the tropics. In

a Peruvian rainforest, Harvard biologist E O Wilson counted 43 species of ant on a single tree. A typical four-mile-square patch of rainforest contains 125 mammal species, 400 bird species, 100 reptile species, 60 amphibian species and 150 butterfly species. It is believed that there may be anything from 5 to 40 million species of living creatures altogether, most still undiscovered. In a thimbleful of earth can be found algae, protozoa, millipedes, beetles, fungi, nematodes, mites, springtails, enchytraeid worms and thousands of species of bacteria — around two billion creatures. It is this biodiversity that provides our own needs for air, light, water, food and shelter. It is unlikely that we could ever provide these needs artificially. 150 of the prescription drugs used in the United States have their origin in plants, fungi or bacteria. Many of these are found in the rainforests. The World Health Organisation estimate that 60 percent of the world's population relies on plants for primary healthcare.

One translation of Genesis 1:20 is, '**Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures.**' This was certainly true of the oceans before human intervention and is particularly significant, because the ancient Israelites never got a good look at the underwater world. E O Wilson, who consistently denies the existence of any purposeful order of nature is willing to admit in *The Diversity of Life* that 'the most wonderful mystery of life may well be the means by which it created so much diversity from so little physical matter.' Those of us who believe in the trinitarian nature of the creator, and the kind of relationship that exists between the Father, Son and Spirit, should not be surprised at this. It demonstrates how the deepest community is that which embraces diversity rather than uniformity. Calvin DeWitt reminds us in *Take Good Care: It's God's earth*:

It is God's will that the *whole of creation* be fruitful, not just people. And thus human fruitfulness may *not* be at the expense of God's blessing of fruitfulness to other creatures.

From the scientist's perspective, as François Jacob put it, 'Every cell's dream is to become two cells.'

The full value of this diversity has still to be realised by most of us in the Western world, and it is important that we do so before it is too late. The eminent biologist, Sir Ghillean Prance, reporting on South American tribes, says the least efficient tribe utilises 56 percent of all the trees for such products as medicine, clothing, food and shelter. The most

efficient uses every last species of tree. In one detailed study, his associates determined that one hectare of tropical forest could yield a net value of US\$6820 a year if managed correctly. When the jungle is bulldozed and planted with a single crop, it yields US\$3184. If cleared for cattle pasture, as in Brazil, it yields just US\$2960.

It is the ‘fullness’ of the earth that demonstrates God’s wisdom and merits praise.

**How many are your works, Lord!
in wisdom you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
There is the sea, vast and spacious,
teeming with creatures beyond number —
living things both large and small.**

PSALM 104:24–25

The phrase ‘**the earth and its fullness**’ is a characteristic way of talking about the whole environment — sometimes local, sometimes universal (e.g. Deuteronomy 33:16; Psalm 89:12; Isaiah 34:1; Jeremiah 47:2; Ezekiel 30:12; Micah 1:2). Creation not only *declares* the glory of God (Psalm 19:1); creation’s fullness is also an *essential part* of it.

And maybe something of this fullness is not limited to this planet. When there was a report of bacteria-like life forms found in a rock from Mars, a newspaper reporter asked Fuller Seminary President Richard Mouw for his reaction. Perhaps he was expecting him to be flummoxed by this development. Mouw simply quoted from the hymn ‘How Great Thou Art.’ ‘O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds thy hands have made!’ Scott Hoezee, in *Remember Creation: God’s world of wonder and delight*, comments:

In other words, if there is life on Mars, we Christians will not be surprised! It would simply be so typical of God to pepper the rest of the universe with creatures even as he has done on this planet.

E O Wilson expresses well the importance of this diversity and the danger of destroying it:

Biological diversity ... is the key to the maintenance of the world as we know it. Life in a local site struck down by a passing storm springs back quickly because enough diversity still exists.

Opportunistic species evolved for just such an occasion rush in to fill the spaces. They entrain the succession that circles back to something resembling the original state of the environment.

But the restorative power of the fauna and flora of the world as a whole depends on the existence of enough species to play that special role. They too can slide into the red zone of endangered species.

Hildegard of Bingen stated, ‘God has made all things in the world in consideration of everything else.’ And as Peter Illyn, executive director of Christians for Environmental Stewardship, put it, ‘When species go extinct, we’re bouncing checks in the trust fund that God called us to manage.’

The goodness of creation

Six times God tells us that what he had made was good and finally that it was ‘very good’ (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The declaration that it is good is made at every stage of creation — from the initial creation of light through to the creation of life on land. This contrasts with early Gnosticism, which taught that the world was an evil place from which people had to be rescued. Gnosticism was a threat to the early church and was fiercely attacked by early Church Fathers such as Irenaeus. Much ancient Greek philosophy tended to downgrade created matter and had an unfortunate influence on some Christian thinking. Such views have lingered in Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Paul reaffirms the goodness of creation in the New Testament in the context of marriage and food: **‘For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer’** (1 Timothy 4:4,5).

This goodness is enhanced by God’s blessings on his creation. God blesses the sea creatures and the birds on day five, the humans on day six, and the Sabbath on day seven, when all could rest and enjoy the abundance of creation in relationship with the creator. Christopher Wright expands on this as follows:

As we read on in Genesis, the creational content of blessings predominates. In fact, the root *brk*, as verb or noun, occurs eighty-eight times in Genesis, which is just over a fifth of all its

occurrences in the whole Old Testament. When God blesses someone, it normally includes increase of family, flocks, wealth or all three. God's blessings means enjoying the good gifts of God's creation in abundance.

And as Hoezee points out, 'It is highly significant that long before God created human beings in his own image, he gave out his very first benedictory blessings to our fellow creatures on this planet.'

God's blessings are relational. They concern his protection and guidance as well as his provision of our needs (e.g. Genesis 48:15,16; 49:24-26). And as Wright explains: 'It is the blessings of God that links creation and redemption, for redemption is the restoration of the original blessing inherent in creation.'

The question inevitably arises as to why there is so much apparent suffering in creation, with so many creatures preying on lesser species. It has been common in biblical circles to associate this with the Fall, the rebellion of humans against their creator, imagining that originally all creatures fed on plants, not other creatures. However, modern knowledge has made it plain that this was going on millions of years before God brought humans onto the scene. Others have associated it with an initial rebellion of Satan in the heavenly realm. But as Christopher Wright states, in *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 'Predation seems built in and there is no evidence that it was ever otherwise in the planet's past.' If it were not so we would certainly have some problems. A lone aphid, without a partner, breeding unmolested for one year, would produce enough offspring that if extended in line, they would stretch several thousand light years into space. It is interesting that ten percent of all the world's species are parasitic insects. In Psalm 104:27-29 God opens his hand to satisfy his creatures, but also hides his face and takes away their breath so that they die and return to the dust, and this seems to be all part of God's goodness and delight in his creation. I certainly don't profess to know all the answers to this, but my own view is that the goodness God describes takes into account the ultimate purpose for which the universe was made, to reveal the glory of God, and anticipates the time when it will do so in every detail. I believe this is supported by Paul's statement in Romans 8:22 that '**the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.**' The pains of childbirth

are bearable in view of the ultimate purpose and are a necessary part of the process. What may not seem good to us at present will turn out to be good in God's ultimate plans. This is spelt out in some detail by Nash in *Loving Nature*:

Thus the ecosphere (indeed, the universe) is valued by the Source of value in all its moral ambiguity — including the predation and prodigality that are inherent parts of the dynamics of evolution and ecology, including the inseparable intertwinings of beauty and ugliness, including the combinations of destruction and construction in floods and quakes, including the ordered chaos in the structure of ecosystems, and including the 'purposive randomness' with elements of creative chance structured into generally predictable processes. But God has a mysterious purpose, and God values the creation in its ambiguous state because it contributes to that purpose.

Another important point is expressed by Steven Bouma-Prediger in *For the Beauty of the Earth*:

Good does not necessarily mean, as many readers assume, perfect. Creation is good but not perfect, at least not (as is commonly understood) in the Platonic sense of perfect as unchanging or static. Though good, the earth still needs to be developed, worked, cared for — the responsibility and the privilege of the human earth-creature.

Loren Wilkinson of Regent College, writer and teacher on environmental issues, makes a relevant point in an article in *Christianity Today*:

Ecology has been described as the study of who is eating whom, a definition that makes plain that some forms of death are integral to the created order that God called good. Perhaps our repugnance at a biosphere in which creatures eat each other may be a bit like Uzziah's steadying the ark of the covenant. The ark of creation is a rough place, and God's idea of goodness is apparently much wilder than our own.

It is also possible to exaggerate the suffering of creation. Though we must not deny the pain experienced by animals, Charles Raven, theologian and naturalist, makes a relevant point in *Natural Religion and Theology*:

The cruelty of nature, red in tooth and claw, has been exaggerated. In the absence of a highly developed frontal cortex, the chief ingredients of suffering — memory, imagination and anticipation — may not be there at all. Pain does not take a major part in the experience of any organisms below the human level; and ... the life of wild creatures, far from being spent in constant fear is active, rhythmic and, if such a word be allowed, joyous.

Walter Brueggemann, in *Genesis*, says that this goodness is not primarily to be thought of as a moral quality but rather as an aesthetic one. God delighted in how beautiful the creation turned out to be. '[the word good] might better be translated, "lovely, pleasing, beautiful."' It is easy to gloss over the first part of Genesis 2:9: **'The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground — trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.'**

The Bible takes the reality of evil very seriously, not as *maya*, an illusion, as in some religious thought. However, in biblical thinking it is an intrusion, whatever and whenever its source, and will have no part in God's ultimate plan.

This goodness of creation is something quite independent of its benefit to or appreciation by humans. It was declared long before humans were around. It has intrinsic goodness, which comes from the God who made it. Walter Harrelson, in a beautiful meditation on Psalm 104:14–15,* notes how the poet's celebration goes far beyond the earth's provision for human needs:

Storks and goats and badgers do not serve mankind. They do what is appropriate to them, and God provided a place that is itself fulfilling its function when it ministers to the needs of its special creatures. I know of no more direct word from the Bible about the independent significance of things and creatures on which man does not depend for life. The creative and powerful anthropocentrism of biblical religion is here beautifully qualified: God has interest in badgers and wild goats and storks for their own sakes. He has interest in trees and mountains and rock-cairns that simply serve non-human purposes.

* 'On God's care for the earth: Psalm 104,' *Currents in Theology and Mission* 2.

On verses 21–26 he observes:

Man's work is significant, but so is lion's work. Ships doing commerce on the high seas are doing significant work, but so is Leviathan, trailing behind the ships, blowing and cavorting.

See also Job 38:26,27 where God 'water[s] a land where no one lives, an uninhabited desert, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass.'

CS Lewis pointed out that this emphasis, found again and again in the Bible, of praising God for creatures unconnected to human beings, is something found almost nowhere else in world literature.

The most positive statement of creation's goodness is that God, in the person of Jesus, was willing to become part of it, 'Son of Man' (or 'Son of Adam' — 'son of the soil'). And, as the Bible declares, was willing to die for it, in order that it might reach its ultimate perfection. In his risen body, creation has become part of God's nature for eternity.

Lord God, we praise you for those riches of your creation which
we shall never see:
for the stars whose light will never reach the earth;
for species of living things that were born,
that flourished and perished
before mankind appeared in the world;
for patterns and colour in the flowers,
which only insect eyes are able to see;
for strange, high music
that human ears can never hear:
Lord God, you see everything that you have made,
and behold it is
very good.

DAVID JENKINS, *FURTHER EVERYDAY PRAYERS*

The goodness of creation reveals the goodness of its creator

In other Near Eastern accounts, the powers and gods are portrayed in various degrees of malevolence. Aspects of the natural order are explained as the outcome of that malevolence, thus legitimising violence between humans, and the violent conquest of nature, as it was from violence between the gods that humans and nature were born. In contrast, in the

Old Testament the goodness of creation is presented as the work of the single good God (e.g. Psalm 19; 29; 50:6; 65; 104; Acts 14:17; 17:26,27; Romans 1:20). Nash has this to say:

The affirmation of the goodness of creation is also an expression of ultimate confidence in the goodness of God. The world now has an interim goodness. It is not to be despised or rejected or transcended; it is to be appreciated and valued as an expression of the goodness of God. It overflows with marvels and sustains diverse forms of life, for a time. Yet, it is also a world of systematic alienation, in which all life is temporary and destructive of other life. The creation needs liberation and reconciliation. To say with the Nicene Creed that ‘all things were made’ though Christ is to affirm that the creation as a whole has a redemptive purpose from the beginning. The creation is going on to perfection, ultimately. It is very good because it is being brought to fulfilment by a good God.

Simone Weil once wrote, ‘God is good because he delights in the existence of something other than himself.’

God’s love for and delight in his creation

It is natural for anyone involved in a creative work, whether artist, engineer or even a child at play, to have some love for and delight in the thing they create. This is surely true of an artist as amazing as God. Though this is not spelt out in Genesis 1, it is clearly stated elsewhere. ‘**The Lord ... has compassion on all he has made**’ (Psalm 145:9). Probably the best known verse in the Bible is John 3:16, ‘**God so loved the world ...**’. The Greek word for ‘world’ is *kosmos*, the natural meaning of which is ‘the sum total of everything here and now, *the universe*’ as stated in the *Arndt, Gingrich Greek-English Lexicon*. This is in contrast to *oikoumene*, which is merely the world of people. God’s care for animals is often mentioned together with his care for humans (e.g. Psalm 36:6; 104; Matthew 10:28–31). The servant God who is ‘**deeply troubled**’ by violence on the earth (Genesis 6:6) and burdened with our sins (Isaiah 43:24) to the extent that he himself was ‘**crushed for our iniquities**’ (Isaiah 53:5), surely includes within that concern the despoiling of his creation, a concern that is such that its renewal is included in the purpose for which Jesus died.

I have no doubt that the reason for the Sabbath rest of Genesis 2:2,3 was to rejoice in all he had made, the same reason for which he has given us the Sabbath. Hoezee speaks of Genesis 1 as a presentation of a 'theology of delight'. Theologian Daniel Migliore writes in *Faith Seeking Understanding: An introduction to Christian theology*:

We often speak of creation as the work of God. It may be more helpful to think of the creation of the world as the 'play' of God, as a kind of free artistic expression whose origin must be sought ultimately in God's good pleasure.

When God **'laid the earth's foundation ... the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy'** (Job 38:4,7).

God's magnificent description of his creation for Job's benefit, in Job chapters 38 to 41, surely indicates his delight in all he has made. In Job 41:1-5 he teases Job by asking if he can keep crocodiles as pets, as no doubt he does himself. Significantly, he speaks of the hippopotamus as **'first among the works of God'** (Job 40:19, italics mine). I can imagine God's delight in the 'frolic' of whales (Psalm 104:26). This is one of the two places in the Bible where the word 'frolic' appears, the other being Jeremiah 50:11, which speaks of the heifer that frolics as it threshes the grain. The whole of Psalm 104 indicates God's delight in his creation as well as that of the author of the psalm.

As mentioned above, the Hebrew word for 'good' could equally be rendered 'beautiful'. The trees of Eden were **'pleasing to the eye'** as well as **'good for food'** (Genesis 3:6). There is an African proverb that states, 'When you plant a tree, never plant only one. Plant three — one for shade, one for fruit, one for beauty'. Some of the most dazzling beautiful fish in the world live so deep in the ocean that even if we could get down there we would not be able to see them. But God sees them. **'The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths'** (Psalm 135:6). **'May the Lord rejoice in his works'** (Psalm 104:31).

When God saved Noah during the flood, he also ensured the continuation of local animal species. When the blood was sprinkled on the Israelite doorposts in Egypt, it was not only the firstborn humans who were spared but the firstborn of their animals also. He spared Nineveh not only for the humans that lived there, but also for the **'many animals'** (Jonah 4:11). Jesus did indicate that humans are of more value than

sparrows, but that does not mean that sparrows do not have value, as God cares for each of them too. **‘Not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care’** (Matthew 10:29). As Christopher Wright says:

It would be an utter distortion of Scripture to argue that because God cares for us more than for the sparrows, we need not care for sparrows at all or that because we are of greater value than they are, they have no value at all.

James Nash, in *Loving Nature*, sums it up: ‘All creatures, human and otherkind, and their habitats, are not only gifts of love but also products of love and recipients of ongoing love.’

God is not unconcerned about those who spoil his creation. The time will come **‘for destroying those who destroy the earth’** (Revelation 11:18).

The purpose of creation, the glory of God

The goodness of creation extends to the *purpose* for which God created the universe. Though this is not spelt out in Genesis 1, it is made plain through the rest of scripture. The ultimate purpose is to reveal the goodness and glory of God. Paul tells us that it is God’s invisible qualities, specifically **‘his eternal power and divine nature’**, that **‘have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse’** (Romans 1:20). Old Testament scholar John Stek refers to the cosmos as **‘the glory robe of God’**, a phrase nicely suggested by the opening verses of Psalm 104.

One of the ways in which scripture expresses this ability of nature to reveal God’s character is how nature is pictured as worshipping God. **‘Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth’** (Psalm 98:8,9; see also Psalm 96:12,13; 145:10,21; 148; 150:6). Psalm 104:31 puts God’s glory and God’s works of creation in parallel. Psalm 95 invites us to make a joyful noise to God, not only because God is our Saviour but pre-eminently because **‘in his hand are the depths of the earth and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.’** When the Psalmist begins or ends a Psalm with the phrase **‘Praise the Lord’** (e.g. Psalm 148) he is inviting all creation to praise with him. The original Hebrew *hallelu yah* is neither a simple indicative statement nor

an exclamatory outburst, but an imperative that invites others to join the chorus of praise to God.

This notion that creation exists for the glory of God is reinforced by the manner in which the Bible appears to speak of creation as God's temple. In Isaiah 66:1,2 God declares, **'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being.'** Thrones and footstools are found in palace-temples. It is as if God is saying, 'Why build a temple when I have already created one for myself — the cosmos?' The Bible also uses metaphors such as foundations, pillars, canopy, windows and storehouses when speaking of the earth. Verbs of building are often used for the act of creation, especially *yasad* and *kun*, which are rendered variously 'to establish, found, secure, make firm' (e.g. Job 38:4–7; Proverbs 3:19,20). Perhaps there is a connection here with the use of 'image' when referring to humans and Jesus. When you build a temple you place an image in it. In this sense, the whole of creation is a sacred place.

Psalm 29 is significant in this regard. The Psalmist describes the power and majesty of the **'Lord' of glory, 'the God of Glory'**, the Lord **'who sits enthroned over the flood'** (vv. 2,3,10) as they are revealed in creation. This world of nature is his **'temple'** in which **'all cry "Glory"'** (v. 9). Hoezee tells of an ornithologist who observed a single red-eyed vireo singing its song 22,197 times in a single day! **'Day after day they pour forth speech'** (Psalm 19:2). Indeed they do, and God is listening. This truth is vividly portrayed in the two great chapters on worship, Revelation 4 and 5. In chapter 4, living creatures surround the throne of God with the faces of a lion, an ox, a man and a flying eagle. Maybe they represent all of creation. **'Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was, and is and is to come"'** (v.8). Surrounding them are the 24 elders, representing the redeemed of the Old and New Covenants. The living creatures, joined by the elders, **'give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever'** and say: **'You are worthy, our Lord God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being'** (vv. 9,11). In chapter 5, Jesus appears as **'a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain'** (v. 6). He is then praised by the redeemed for their salvation.

The next circle encompassing the throne is comprised of angels numbering ‘**thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand**’ (v. 11). Especially significant for our purpose is to note that these angels are yet surrounded by another circle comprised of ‘**every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!**’ (v.13).

Note the following points about this passage:

- The worship begins with who God is in his holy and eternal character.
- Before any mention of redemption, God is worshipped because of his power and glory as revealed in creation.
- All creation, including all living creatures, is involved in this worship. As we shall see, it is the responsibility of humans, as God’s priestly representatives, to enhance and give voice to creation’s worship.

The Westminster Confession states that, ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.’ It would be equally biblical to make the same affirmation about the whole of creation. Jürgen Moltmann, in *God in Creation*, says, ‘The creatures of the natural world are not there for the sake of human beings. Human beings are there for the sake of the glory of God, which the whole community of creation extols.’

I think I shall never see
 A poem lovely as a tree:
 A tree that looks at God all day
 And lifts her leafy arms to pray.

JOYCE KILMER

Christopher Wright says:

We may not be able to explain *how* it is that creation praises its Maker — since we know only the reality of our human personhood ‘from the inside’, and what it means for *us* to praise him. But just because we cannot articulate the *how* of creation’s inarticulate praise or indeed the *how* of God’s receiving it, we should not therefore deny *that* creation praises God — since it is affirmed throughout the Bible with overwhelming conviction.

Michael Northcott adds:

In the Hebrew perspective humanity and the cosmos have moral significance, and both are required to make a moral response to the creator, a response to God, which reflects his glory and offers the return of gratitude, praise and worship.

Bouma-Prediger, in *The Greening of Theology*, says we need to take seriously this responsiveness of creation. ‘All creation is a place of grace. And all creatures respond to the call of God to be and become, each in their own creature-specific way.’

Worship and the glory of God are the ultimate purpose of creation. ‘**May the whole earth be filled with his glory**’ (Psalm 72:19). For those who have eyes to see ‘**the whole earth is full of his glory**’ (Isaiah 6:3). The day will come when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of this glory ‘**as the waters cover the sea**’ (Habakkuk 2:14). How much of the sea is covered by water? NT Wright has an insightful comment about this verse:

How can the waters cover the sea? They *are* the sea. It looks as though God intends to flood the universe with his love. We might even suggest, as part of a Christian aesthetic, that the world is beautiful, not just because it hauntingly reminds us of its creator, but because it is pointing forwards: it is designed to be filled, flooded, drenched in God; as a chalice is beautiful not least because of what we know it is designed to contain, or as a violin is beautiful not least because we know the music of which it is capable.

It is the lack of worship that makes evangelism and discipleship necessary. John Calvin occasionally pointed out that one of the reasons God created human beings to stand upright is precisely so we can lift our gaze to the heavens, praising God for the celestial wonders we see in the night sky.

In view of this purpose of creation, there can be few things that delight Satan more than to see God’s work destroyed. The devil hates nature’s praises. The devil’s delight in wrecking creation has been a recurring theme in literature, such as in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and the film version of John Updike’s novel, *The Witches of Eastwick*. His dwelling is pictured as an abode devoid of the beauty found in nature, as in Dante’s *Inferno* and the land of Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings*.

God's revelation of himself in creation

The Belgic Confession of 1561, in answering the question, 'By what means is God made known to us?', states in its first part:

By creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God.

Genesis 1 enables us to glimpse his extraordinary power, creativity and artistry. The goodness revealed in creation must come from one who is himself the essence of goodness. The beauty seen everywhere in creation is surely designed by One who is himself glorious. Psalm 19 speaks of two ways in which God makes himself known — his created universe and his written word:

The heavens declare the glory of God:
 the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
 Day after day they pour forth speech;
 night after night they display knowledge.
 They have no speech, they use no words;
 no sound is heard from them.
 Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
 their words to the ends of the world ...
 The law of the Lord is perfect,
 refreshing the soul.
 The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
 making wise the simple.
 The precepts of the Lord are right,
 giving joy to the heart.
 The commands of the Lord are radiant,
 giving light to the eyes.

PSALM 19:1–4,7,8

God's work of creation stirs up our feelings of wonder and praise. God's word, the Bible, makes sense of those feelings.

Larry Rasmussen notes that in the Old Testament redemptive events constantly centre on the creation. God shows up in a bush, in a spring, in an earthquake, on a mountaintop, in the wind (e.g. Exodus 3; 17:1–7; 19:16–19; Job 38:1; 40:6).

Scripture uses nature to teach spiritual truths. God himself used numerous examples from nature to impress Job with his power (Job 38–41). The writings of the prophets contain many illustrations from nature. The Psalms repeatedly use analogies from nature. Jesus constantly illustrated his teaching with lessons from nature. Consider the following aspects of nature that Jesus referred to in illustrating his teaching: lilies, grass, thistles, thorn bushes, mint and rue, wheat, kernels of wheat, mustard seeds, fruit trees, figs, fig trees (dead and living), olive trees and olive oil, mulberry trees, green and dry trees, grapes, wineskins, vines and vineyards, reeds, weeds, manure, bread, flour and dough, birds, sparrows, ravens, vultures, snakes, wolves, foxes, sheep, goats, roosters, worms, puppies, camels, hens and chickens, calves, oxen and donkeys, gnats, moths, flesh and blood, salt, yeast, eggs, millstones, pearls, sea, dust, rust, fire, stones, rocks, sand, storms, rain, heat, famine, earthquakes, pestilences, red sky, clouds, wind, lightning, sun, moon, stars, light and darkness, mountains and hills, springs, running water; and human activities such as shepherding, ploughing, sowing, fishing and milling. He prepared for his ministry by spending 40 days ‘with the wild animals’ (Mark 1:13). And Jesus regarded his father’s concern for creation as so well accepted that he could build other teaching upon it (Matthew 6:25–34; 10:29–31).

Jesus said we were to ‘look at’ the birds of the air (Matthew 6:26). The *Expositor’s Greek Testament* gives the emphasis of the Greek here as ‘fix your eyes on, so as to take a good look at’. He says we are to ‘see’ how the flowers grow. Again, the *Expositor’s Greek Testament* gives the emphasis as ‘observe well that you may learn thoroughly the lesson they teach.’ Jesus would like us to be bird watchers and botanists! Worthy of mentions here is John Stott’s delightful book, *The Birds Our Teachers*. Obviously, we have much to learn from nature if only we have eyes to see.

**But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you;
or speak to the earth and it will teach you,
or let the fish of the sea inform you.**

JOB 12:7,8

And Peter reminds us that it is scoffers who forget lessons from creation (2 Peter 3:3–7).

Humans have been given the responsibility of *naming* the animals (Genesis 2:19). Naming has a deep personal significance in Hebrew thought. That Adam was called upon to name the creatures implies some knowledge of them so as to get it right. Adam was the first naturalist. It is significant that the first use of human language mentioned in the Bible has to do with our relationship with creation. The second has to do with intimate human relationships (Genesis 2:23).

The book of Proverbs also speaks of the wisdom of God revealed in creation and lessons to be learned from it (e.g. Proverbs 3:19–21; 8:1,22–36; 30:24–28).

St Bonaventure wrote in *The Mind's Road to God*:

He therefore, who is not illuminated by such great splendour of created things is blind; he who is not awakened by such great clamour is deaf; he who does not praise God because of all these effects is dumb; he who does not note the first principles from such signs is foolish. Open your eyes, therefore, prick up your spiritual ears, open your lips and apply your heart, that you may see our God in all creatures.

I will make rivers flow on barren heights,
and springs within the valleys.
I will turn the desert into pools of water,
and the parched ground into springs;
I will put in the desert the cedar
and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive.
I will set junipers in the wasteland,
the fir and the cypress together,
so that people may see and know,
may consider and understand,
that the hand of the Lord has done this,
that the Holy One of Israel has created it.

ISAIAH 41:18–20

I wonder if it is something of this truth, God revealed in his creation, that Paul has in mind in his puzzling statement to the Colossians: ‘**This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven**’ (Colossians 1:23). He is very specific concerning the responsibility of those who fail to recognise the revelation of God in creation: ‘**The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against**

all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse' (Romans 1:18–20). As Philip Sherrard has written in *Human Image: World Image*, 'Creation is nothing less than the manifestation of God's hidden Being.' If we have eyes to see, his fingerprints are everywhere.

Obviously there are some things we cannot learn from nature. But let's be open to what we can. Job had many questions for which he received no answer. However, when confronted with God's description of his creative powers (Job 38–41), the evidence of which surrounded him, and convinced of his goodness, he knew that God was in control and that ultimately things would work out, and with that he was content. He has met God through his creation and has begun to see the bigger picture. No doubt one of the reasons for the incredible vastness of the cosmos is to remind us constantly of who we are in relation to God, lest we should distrust his wisdom or even think we need to know all the answers. As Bill McKibben argues in *The Comforting Whirlwind; God, Job, and the Scale of Creation*:

God is describing a world without people — a world that existed long before people, and that seems to have its own independent meaning. Most of the action takes place long before the appearance of humans, and on a scale so powerful and vast that we are small indeed in the picture of things.

Maybe we need to ask God to give us the kind of mind expressed by Joseph Sittler in 'Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility': 'I have never been able to entertain a God-idea which was not integrally related to the fact of chipmunks, squirrels, hippopotamuses, galaxies, and light years.'

Albert Wolters, in *Creation Regained*, uses a useful analogy of the difference between the revelation of God in creation and that in scripture. Creation is like the blueprint of a building. It can tell us many things about the nature of the creator and give us inklings of his purpose and care for us if we have a heart open to learn. But we have forgotten how to read the blueprint. It is non-verbal. **'They have no speech, they use no**

words' (Psalm 19:3). We need more specific guidance as to how to read the blueprint. This the Bible provides in much detail. If we are open to all we can learn from both sources, then God can give us the wisdom as to how to make the best use of nature, as Isaiah tells us so expressively (Isaiah 28:23–29).

The beauty and sustaining power of nature is God's gift to us

As we have seen, the creation has independent value apart from its benefit to us, simply because of its value to God himself. However, he has also provided it for our benefit. **'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food'** (Genesis 1:29). The permission to eat of *every* tree in the garden comes before the prohibition to eat of one tree (Genesis 2:16,17). God lovingly provides the rains and cycles of water, provides food for creatures, fills people's hearts with joy and satisfies the earth (Psalms 65:5–13; 104:10–18; Acts 14:17). Jesus gave us an example of how to enjoy creation without abusing it. He lived very simply, yet he made gallons of excellent wine at a wedding. He allowed his followers to pick and enjoy food on the Sabbath. He described God's kingdom in terms of food and drink and feasting.

The value of these gifts is beautifully expressed by Sittler:

Man is not alone in this world, not even when his aloneness is unalleviated by the companionship of his fellowman. The creation is a community of abounding life — from the invisible microbes to the highly visible elephants, the vastness of mountains, the sweep of the seas, the expanse of land. These companions of our creaturehood are not only *there*: they are there as things without which I cannot be at all! They surround, support, nourish, delight, allure, challenge, and talk back to us.*

* This responsiveness of creation has been explored by others besides Sittler. For example, in an article in *Cross Currents* 44, no 2 ('Trees, forestry, and the responsiveness of creation'), Brian Walsh, Marianne Karsh, and Nik Ansell claim that both a careful reading of the Bible and a creational listening to the earth lead to the conclusion that trees, for example, have their own peculiar kind of responsiveness.

In ancient Mesopotamia the primary purpose of the cultic system was to obtain divine blessing by providing offerings to the gods. Genesis 1 stands the Mesopotamian worldview on its head. It is God who graciously provides for both humans and animals.

We shall see this more clearly in the chapter on Israel. When we accept the benefits that come to us in nature yet do not recognise the hand of the One who provides them, we act like the Prodigal Son — taking his share of the inheritance and then turning his back on the father who provides it. Encouragingly, this story, in Luke 15, offers a way back.

It is because of the value that his creation holds for God, and his gracious gift of its benefits to us that, Wendell Berry can say, in *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*:

Our destruction of nature is not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility, it is the most horrid blasphemy. It is flinging God's gifts into His face, as if they were of no worth beyond that assigned to them by our destruction of them.