

## ESSENTIALS - Luke Knight

*Creation (Pt.2)* | Psalm 24. 1-2, 7-10 | February 7, 2021

### FROM PART ONE

This is the second week in our *Essentials* series where we're looking at what shapes a Christian worldview. We're taking two weeks to look at each *Essential*, last week beginning with *Creation*, and we're following today with our second look at *Creation*. Still to come: *Jesus, Grace, Spirit, Body and Future*.

Let's first touch on some of what we heard last week which was that central theme in scripture of the *inherent goodness* of creation. *In the beginning* we're given a picture of a generous God who designs a world by way of his character and says *it is good*. This is not unlike how we make or shape the spaces or people around us. These spaces or people are to some degree reflections us, of our character. In fact, that language of *reflection* is helpful in seeing human beings through a scriptural lens. Humans are reflections of God, made to inhabit the space God makes with the purpose of *cultivating* it as part of our worship of God.

So when speaking about creation (or what some call the natural world) we *first* recognize God's calling creation "good" as seen in Genesis 1 and 2; and then let that *truth about goodness* shape how we relate to God, to creation itself and to ourselves within creation.

What we'll do today is to grow outward from that starting point of creation's *inherent goodness* and make some further connections. We'll do that by identifying three ways we can relate to creation that are unfruitful, and then towards the end try to articulate what a fruitful way of relating to creation might be (though that's a rather ambitious task, so maybe more of a comma not a full stop). So what would be three ways that we go wrong when relating to creation? We'll use three words to explore: *escaping, abusing, worshiping*.

### Escaping

Let's begin with *escaping*. A lot of thinking about creation (Christian and otherwise) has been that the ultimate goal for humans is to escape the material world. Though they

are varied, these views say that *this* space is inherently *not good* or is *irredeemably damaged*, and therefore our objective should be to leave this physical reality to a kind of sterile non-physical place. That thinking is not so convinced of the goodness of creation, but instead that our physical nature is something we should aim to transcend. But when we look at the big story of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, that doesn't seem to be the story we're told.

We just heard Psalm 24 the language about *opening up and welcoming the King of glory in*. That Psalm connects to Jerusalem and a Temple, and Israel's particular history. But what we hear in Psalm 24 and throughout the Bible is not so much the language of escaping the world, but the longing for God who resides in, rules and renews the spaces we inhabit. We hear elsewhere that the heavens and the earth will come together in a final renewal under Christ (Ephesians 1, Revelation 21). And so for scripture the solution to the problems we face is not the abandonment of the project of creation, as some have put it, but the recognition of God's presence within the world, and a longing for God's restoration.

And really, that's the story we tell at Christmas and Easter, the story of Jesus, a story of God inhabiting his creation and renewing it from the inside out. It's why Christians have no problem talking about Jesus being laid in a manger, or being nailed to a cross, or eating some fish after his resurrection. The first Christians were very clear that Jesus had a physical body, died, and was raised in a physical body. Jesus wasn't a *non-physical presence* destined for a *non-physical space*. And, said the first Christians, neither are human beings. So it doesn't seem that within scripture that God is trying to get away from the world, or from us for that matter. Instead we see that God is involved in and renewing our world, most pointedly through Jesus, and then through his followers, who house his Spirit. *God's not done*.

So merely relating to creation as something we're meant to escape from, is problematic when it comes to scripture. *How does heaven "work", now and later? What exactly happens when we die? What happens at the end of time?* - these are valid and huge questions.

But they're not helped by a simplistic view of the abandonment of a creation which God calls good and deeply loves. "For God so loved *the world* he sent Jesus" we hear famously in John 3.

To make a connection to everyday life, a question. Does simply viewing creation as something to *get away from* have detrimental implications for how we relate to our *physical bodies* as bits of creation? Every year we're discovering more about our minds and bodies and the complex interconnection which makes up a human person. We can't simply divide ourselves up, to body over here, mind over here, Spirit over here, and so on. I'm a complete being who can't be chopped up into different bits. So if we relate to creation as something that's unrepairable, something to distance ourselves from, even something inherently dirty or evil, how does that effect my relationship with my own body, or other people's bodies for that matter? How do I, as Paul instructs the Romans, "*offer my body as a living sacrifice wholly and pleasing to God*" if my body isn't something God's really interested in to begin with?

And I think today we have many examples of the unhealthy ways in which we relate to ourselves as bodies, and the bodies of others, which perhaps stem from the thinking that I am something *other* than my body, rather than an interconnected view of what a human person is as made by God. What if instead, creation is something God called good, God wants to inhabit and renew – including my body? What if Jesus' resurrection informed how I thought about my body and about creation at large? But now I'm getting ahead of myself, so let's move on to the next word somewhat connected to *escaping* which is *abusing*.

## **Abusing**

It's easy to draw a line from viewing creation as something we're meant to *escape from* to viewing creation as something we can *un-thoughtfully use or abuse*, because it's bad or destined for the landfill. And it's also easy to see why that could be problematic for how we relate to our bodies or others' bodies. But before we go there, let's turn again to Psalm 24 where we hear, "*The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him.*" What we hear in Psalm 24, as elsewhere, is the language of ownership. So very quickly then comes the question of how we *treat creation* if God holds the title, so to speak, and we don't.

That would take us again back to Genesis 1 and 2, where human beings are placed within creation and are given charge to manage it. This is where we begin to see some of the challenges emerge which we're facing today as a global community. Have we, as human beings, understood our role as managers of creation? Or, have we believed

that humans are *sole proprietors* and can do with creation whatever we like? Well, we can draw our own conclusions there, but one thing we could say is that when we think in terms of human *ownership or mere objectification* of creation, we arrive at unthoughtful use or abuse soon after. But even if we were to say that creation has been given solely to sustain human beings, that we are the “top of the pyramid” so to speak, we'd still have to wrestle with that question of respect and roles. That question of God's ownership of creation and our stewardship of it, and how we relate to the world if it's not simply *ours* to do with what we like. Putting it simply, do we see ourselves owners or *managers*?

Now, we might say that the use of the natural world (which can easily turn to *abuse*) isn't that big a problem because it's not like we're using or abusing human beings. What does the unthoughtful use of the natural world have to do with human dignity? But that I think is again to miss the connection between human beings and the created order. Just like the interconnection we see in our bodies, we're learning more every year about the incredible interconnection within creation. Deforestation here, makes a dramatic impact on the salmon run over there. Pollution in the South China sea has adverse effects on poverty concerns elsewhere. So, if we relate to creation with unthoughtful exploitation, we are learning that this has significantly negative ramifications for human life and dignity.

We do live in a time where we're asking ourselves, as groups and persons, if our relationship to creation is simply unthoughtful exploitation, or if there is another way. And that discussion is happening all around us. But I think as Christians we have plenty of motivation to join in that discussion and to contribute. There is plenty of ground to share. And of course an obvious scriptural mandate to accept our role as managers when it comes to our curating and enjoying the world, both now, and excitingly in eternity.

So, to make another everyday life connection: if I find myself at the recycling bins with my neighbour, could I sort my recycling with the conviction that we are both doing blessed human work? Are we not both working to respect and manage what God calls *good*? Are we not, in a way fulfilling a human vocation? And maybe I could even build some bridges to my neighbour by affirming their concern for the natural world and the responsibly they're taking to care. If I know my neighbour well enough, I might even thank them for joining me in worship at the recycling bins, or gardening, or

on the trail by the river as we steward our bodies, and who knows where the conversation could take us from there – maybe we'd end up talking about Jesus! Speaking of worship, let's move on to that final way in which we unfruitfully relate to creation.

## **Worship**

I described that scene at the recycling bins with my neighbour in terms of management / stewardship and therefor worship. But it's important to point out the difference between *worship through* and *worship to*. That's the other end of the spectrum in how we unfruitfully relate to creation. If on one hand, creation is merely something to *escape from* or *abuse*, we have on the other hand the problem of relating to creation as something to be worshiped in and of itself. This is a worldview outside of a Christian one, as present today as it was thousands of years ago. So we do need to say that scripture is clear that creation is *not to be worshiped* because even though God *inhabits* creation, God does not *belong to* creation. Instead, as we heard in Psalm 24, *creation belongs to God*. So God can be within creation, but as maker, God is also *differentiated from* it. Maybe a little like I can be within my house, but am obviously different from my house. The problems that arise with the worship of creation (places, things, people), rather than the worship of God, are very evident in the story of scripture. That's why we hear "*You shall have no other gods besides me.*" (Exodus 23).

Again, that might have connections to ourselves as persons and bodies. Could the unhealthy obsession with body image in our society today have something to do with worship? If I am obsessed with my body image, a slave to an outcome I think I should see, who or what am I worshipping or serving? That might be a question about worship before it's a question about health. What if we began to see that central question of worship going in the right direction, and to be helpful in facing the pressures we face around things like body image?

What if our young people, could talk in our churches about how worshipping Jesus could lead to a healthy relationship, not only with the physical universe, but with your own body as part of a wonderfully diverse creation? And I'm happy to say that our *Youth Network* has those kinds of conversations! What if as we got older we could have more honest conversations about the breakdown of our bodies and minds, and face the reality of limitation and death rather than avoid it? And then have honest conversations

about the hope to be found not in the mere prolonging of life as we know it or the mitigation of pain, but instead about hope that Jesus will in fact “make all things new” (Revelation 21), and how that promise shapes how we live today?

So when creation itself becomes the object of worship, we begin to turn inwards on ourselves, and we place on creation, ourselves as part of it, a burden it can't sustain – out of that comes all kinds of anxiety and un-health. That's where the importance of Jesus' centrality comes in again. If Jesus ceases to be our definitive picture of God, the sustainer of creation, if we begin to think we can look at the created order alone to know God, we can start to believe some very strange things. We miss the forest for the trees. Because as we also hear in the Christian story, creation is called good, but is also in need of *renewal* because it is tangled up with sin and death. If we miss *that part of the story*, of creation's need for redemption and renewal, we cease to be Christian. Jesus as central to creation and its renewal is vital in understanding our relationship to creation.

That to me is the beauty of trusting Jesus and the hope of Christian story. We can enjoy and worship through creation without worshiping creation itself. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, which initiated the renewal of *all of creation*, humanity included, we have hope! We needn't despair about the unrepairable damage we may have done, but trust in a bigger picture. That's a final thought on creation and worship. Jesus gives us hope when facing the world's overwhelming ecological and biological challenges. And if we want to talk about *sustainability*, maybe that could be helped by the question about who or what we worship. What if we thought about things like sustainability and worship together, relating to creation not as worshipers of it, but as stewards of it? What if we trusted that Jesus truly was the *sustainer* of all creation, who will bring about ultimate healing, but who also invites us to join in now, with the confidence it doesn't all rest on our shoulders?

And that leads to our final ambitious task, which is to try and articulate how we could better relate to creation if we're not *escaping from it, abusing it, or worshiping it*. Very simply, what are some other words?

## **FRUITFUL RELATIONSHIPS**

Instead of *escaping*, what about the exploring the word *presence*? The presence of God within his beloved creation, including you and me? Instead of abusing, what

about *enjoying or caring* for what God calls good, again, you and me included. Instead of worshipping, what about *praying for* and *joining in* with God's in renewing work (Romans 8)? And another word to add might be *inheritance*. Do we not have some kind of responsibility of passing something on to our children that is a blessing to them? What is our responsibility to our neighbour not yet born?

Encouragingly, I think this church is trying to relate to creation in those very ways (being present, being caring, being prayerful, being mindful about inheritance). We see this happening through our involvement in local and global work, our social justice concern, and the various smaller communities that form our Life Groups and Networks that meet needs and make healthy space. I know that many in this community are doing wonderful work in these areas, both with the people around them for world beyond, from scientists to school children. This is a community that wants to be involved and be generous, not disinterested, unthoughtful or greedy. And as involved and generous people, I think we're on the right path to "reflecting" Jesus well. So as I said earlier, maybe this discussion is more of a comma than a full stop; more to explore, pray through and work out as a community together. In closing let's turn to Psalm 24.

*The earth is the Lord's and everything in it,  
the world and all it's people belong to him...  
Open up, ancient gates!  
Open up, ancient doors,  
and let the King of glory enter.*

"Welcome, Lord Jesus! Bring your renewal to us, through us, and into the world beyond, now and forever! Amen."

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What comes to mind when thinking of yourself as an interconnected being, rather than a number of disconnected bits?
2. Why might it be important keep in mind a human place within the created order?
3. What questions did you emerge with from this teaching that you want to explore further?
4. Why is Jesus' centrality within creation itself and creation's renewal a hopeful and important Christian *essential*?