



Film transcript: Douglas Moo

Thank you for that introduction and thank you to Tearfund, especially for your generous offer to invite me and my wife Jenny, to be here with you.

I'm grateful to speak about a topic like this that I am somewhat passionate about, but I'm also grateful for the opportunity to visit Scotland again. My wife and I spent a year and a half in St Andrews 47 years ago as I was studying for my PhD. She has not been back since and so we are very grateful also for the opportunity to renew our acquaintance with that wonderful small town and to rekindle some memories of those really good days that we experienced there.

So I don't need to say anything more about what I'm going to be talking about, but let me give you an outline specifically of what I hope to be looking at. I want to focus on three pretty simple things. I want to talk about a renewed mind, and that will be the focus of this first talk. I want to talk about wisdom and how that might apply to this issue of creation care. And finally, I want to introduce the key biblical theme of love as it applies to creation care.

So a pretty simple outline, you might already be deciding to head for the exits. If things are this simple, why bother? But I hope to show how some of these very fundamental biblical ideas do play a significant role in reminding us of our obligation to care for the creation God has given us.

The idea of a renewed mind is something that has, for some reason, occupied my attention significantly over the last 10 to 20 years. Paul talks about this, as you will well know, in the famous Romans 12:1-2 text that it's by the renewing of our minds that we'll be able to test and approve what God's will is. So the mandate to have a renewed mind, to be in the process of renewing the mind is, I think, an important idea that Paul expresses here, but also talks about in various ways throughout the letters he writes.

Note the wording here. Paul does not say by the renewed mind as if it were an accomplished fact. He talks about an ongoing process: by the renewing of your mind. I think reading scripture faithfully reminds us how central this notion is to what it means to be

a biblical Christian, to be someone constantly in the process of renewing the mind.

Developing that a little bit further then, we could say that a renewed mind means to align all of our values in keeping with the sweep of the biblical story. I think it demands a more broader and more imaginative approach to scripture than we have sometimes taken.

I suspect most of us in this room have a high commitment to the Bible, to its authority, to its significance in directing our lives. And I think that leads us sometimes to fall into a GPS way of thinking about the Bible. We want God to give us a turn-by-turn map of how our lives should unfold, guiding us to the decisions we need to make. We plumb the scripture for texts that speak directly to situations that we're involved in.

And I find, at least in my context in the US, that faithful Christians are indeed quite faithful in putting into practice the things they specifically and explicitly find scripture talking about. But in the US, I lament the fact that over the last 10 to 20 years, for various reasons I won't go into here, many Christians have not applied what I think are pretty clear biblical values to many broader issues of their decision-making. And so Christians tend to end up with a very schizophrenic approach to their lives: faithful to God on things that they've been told by their pastor or read in scripture, but wildly unconcerned about Christian values in so many other areas of life that are nevertheless so significant in our lives, sometimes. We end up then with a Talmud approach. Famously, Jewish teachers seeking to help Jews be faithful to the teaching of scripture took basic commands of scripture and attempted to elaborate them in great detail.

So the Talmud, for instance, has about 150 pages on the Sabbath. Okay, do not work on the Sabbath, but what does that mean? What is work? How much work? How often? Can I lift a baby out of a crib on the Sabbath? Is that work? So on and so on and so forth. And 21 volumes of the Talmud still don't come close to covering all the exigencies of life. But again, that's the approach we sometimes fall into. God has not given us a GPS. He doesn't want us to write a Talmud. He's given us the Bible, and of course, the NIV especially. (A little commercial thrown in there along the way for those of you who are in the know.) He's given us a Bible, he has given us a Bible that's full of a story about what God is doing in the world.

Remember, most of the Bible is narrative, it's story. What are we to do with those stories? Well, we're to inhabit the stories so that they form our basic way of thinking. We read and we read and we read, so that becomes the world in a sense that we adopt and live in and the values that we live our lives by. Creation care then requires us to look back at this biblical story again with a view towards the created world which sometimes gets lost in the shuffle of other things we're looking at in scripture. But I think when we look at the Bible fairly and objectively, we find that the created world plays a significant role in what God is doing and, by implication therefore, what we need to be doing.

So let's quickly run through that story, if we can, in a series of acts, as it were, thinking about a play that God has put on for us, and see where the natural world plays a role. Well, we begin, as we naturally would expect to, with the world of creation, where one of the things that goes on is God appointing us as God's stewards of a good world. Now, the word steward is not used in Genesis 1, but I think it's a fair summary of what God appoints humans to be doing, as we look at Genesis 1 and 2 together. We begin, of course, by noticing, as we all know, that when God creates this world, he declares it good. It's a good world he is making, a valuable world, a precious world. And in appointing us as stewards then we come to this famous passage about God creating humans in his image.

There's been a lot of study by biblical scholars about this language of image and what it might mean in the context of Genesis 1, ancient Near Eastern thought at that time and so forth. But without trying to reduce it only to this, pretty clearly included in the idea of being in God's image is to be, in a sense, his sub-regents, to be appointed to have authority over this world derived from God, the ultimate authority over the world. And the language of steward, I think, captures this notion quite well. We're given the responsibility to care for this world that God has created.

So in Genesis 2 then, we read that the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. Work could also be translated serve, that Hebrew word could be translated either way here. But again, it suggests the image here of

taking care of some property that's been handed over to us for our responsibility. We are to be wise and loving stewards accountable to the ruler whose whole earth is his.

That's how God envisaged human beings. That's what he appointed them to be and to do from the beginning. Well, we all know things did not move along quite as we would have hoped.

So we come to Act 2, where we are fallen stewards of God's good world. Note how the law itself is concerned about what we might call sustainability. That's a matter that is very much to the fore of recent people, of recent studies, from scientists and others, looking at what's going on in our natural world today, that we are using up the earth's resources at a rapid rate, where they can't be added to, they can't be sustained over time.

We're going to look at a couple of things about that in my second talk. But you note how again, in Deuteronomy, God gives instructions to the Israelites to act towards the natural world in a way that provides for its sustainability. Don't come across the mother with the young. Why? Because you want to allow the mother to continue to produce so that there is a continuing provision that is part of what God intends. And it's interesting, if you read through the law that God gave to the people of Israel, how often there is reference to animals and the earth itself. It's not just human beings that God is concerned about. But, because of sin, the benevolent stewardship God

intended for us easily becomes selfish exploitation. Isaiah criticises the people of Israel just for this. He says the earth is defiled by its people. They have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant. In that whole context Isaiah goes on to talk about how the natural world itself is suffering because of the sin and selfishness of the Israelites.

Paul alludes to a similar idea in Romans 8. We know the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And I don't think it's any stretch of the imagination to think that that groaning Paul talks about is, to some extent at least, due to human sinfulness. The earth groans

because humans are selfishly exploiting it rather than taking good care of it.

Psalm 104 is a psalm I would urge you just to take some time to read and meditate on. It's a wonderful psalm celebrating the goodness of the world God has made.

So here we are, after the fall into sin, God still sees his created world as something good, marvellous, diverse. The trees of the Lord are well watered, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. There the birds make their nests; the stork has its home in the junipers. The high mountains belong to the wild goats; the crags are a refuge for the hyrax... The lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God... How many are your works, Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. You see here the affirmation of the created world itself as important in God's eyes, as something wonderfully diverse and worth certainly preserving.

Here the story begins to turn, of course, with Act 3: Restoration inaugurated, or new creation, to use a phrase we're going to look at in a moment. That moment is a short one, here we are.

New creation, this is a phrase Paul uses only twice, so it's the only two times it appears in the scriptures. Galatians 6:14: Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. Remember, Paul is addressing Christians who are being pressured to adopt circumcision in the law. Paul's saying, no, you don't need to do that.

2 Corinthians 5:17: If therefore anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! Paul does not elaborate this phrase anywhere. He doesn't go into any detail in terms of what exactly he's talking about. But I think when we look at the way in which this phrase is used in context, we see that it is a very broad way of describing God's restoration project.

It encompasses three elements at least.

Primary, of course, is the reconciliation of humans to God. I'm concerned that Christians and churches adopt a robust creation care policy, but please don't misunderstand me: I'm not suggesting for a

moment that this should replace the church's primary mission of evangelism and discipleship. Please hear that, it is not an either/or, it is a both/and. So God working to reconcile humans to God. God working to reconcile humans to humans, to bring peace among warring people. And of course, we have so many sad reminders of the nature of humans in their hostility to one another all around us. God is working to reconcile humans. The church is called to be a place where all kinds of different people come together in peace and love, trying to show just the kind of community God is trying to create.

For our purposes, let me add this third one, which we sometimes forget about: reconciling humans to the creation world itself, helping us to be restored to the image of God where we can be the stewards God intended us to be in the image of Christ himself who is the image of God, you remember. A 'new creation' background, just to show you where I'm getting some of these ideas.

I think new creation is Paul's summary of what Isaiah talks about at the climax of his prophecy, where he talks about the new heaven and the new earth that God is involved in bringing into being. The Jewish world of Paul's day used the language this way: Jubilees, a book written just before Paul was writing, talks about the day of the new creation when the heaven and the earth and all their creatures shall be renewed. My point is this language was in the air. It was a phrase that Paul could adapt from his environment, summarising an Old Testament theme and bringing it into the New Testament world.

Colossians 1:19-20 I think comes into play here as well. God was pleased to have all this fullness dwell in him, (Christ), and through him, (that is Christ again) to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

You see what I'm suggesting is that there are places in the New Testament scripture that we have sometimes overlooked that seem to me to carry on pretty clearly a great theme of the Old Testament: the earth, God's good earth that he has entrusted to human beings to care for. That continues in the New Testament scripture as these texts indicate.

All things are being reconciled. Now that reconciliation takes place in two stages and many of you will be familiar with this kind of a diagram. We New Testament nerds like to use it all the time and talk about the already/not yet framework of New Testament teaching and theology. That God has been doing some things, but is waiting to do other things and we live in the in-between time. We rejoice in being reconciled; we rejoice in being justified, adopted as the children of God; but we still wait for the resurrection; we still wait for the glorification of the body; we still wait for that completion of God's work.

So it is in the created world itself, I would argue: God is working in his new creation plan to bring some of those things into being, but yes, some of those still await the future when God's restoration plan will be finally accomplished. Let's talk about that phase then. Act 4: Restoration consummated. What do we think as we look towards the future about the created world?

Revelation 21:5: I am making everything new! Pretty well known verse, I think it's very important though, that we see the way it's worded. God does not say I am making all new things. In other words, there is a continuity in God's creation work that moves right into the eternal realm.

Romans 8 is a very important passage that reminds us of this continuity. We talked about one of these verses earlier: let me read the whole text. The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed, and the creation here is clearly broadly the creation as a whole. The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, God pronouncing, in a sense, a judgment on the earth because of human sin. But, the hope here was not by its own choice in terms of a permanent thing, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

Creation, Paul is saying here, has a destiny. God is not throwing it away, he is renewing it, he is liberating it, he is setting it free for a glorious future. Now, those of you who know your Bibles well will undoubtedly be raising a question at this point, or you should be. How about 2

Peter 3? 2 Peter 3 is a text that indeed seems to present a different picture, a picture of an earth annihilated and replaced with a new and different earth.

You can see the text here, The heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, the earth and everything done in it laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? Peter's concerned about the way we live. You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.

This is a difficult text and we could spend a couple of hours trying to unpack it in detail, which none of us are interested in doing. But let me just make a couple of comments that might mitigate what seems to be the extreme force of this passage at first sight. It's all going to burn, right? We've all heard that, haven't we? Why bother with the created world? It's all going to burn. I've heard many Christians respond to me that way when I talk about creation care. 2 Peter 3 is a key text for this idea. But again, when we look closer, there's maybe some other things going on here.

First of all, we need to recognise the metaphors that the scripture is often using, when the metaphor is not trying to communicate the exact reality of what happens, but is using language in a way to talk about something else. Isaiah: The Lord is coming with fire, his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, his rebuke with flames of fire. For with fire and with his sword the Lord will execute judgment on all people, and many will be those slain by the Lord.

There's metaphor here as the prophet is trying to communicate the significance and the seriousness of God's judgment. And the language we saw in 2 Peter is often used exactly that way to talk about God's judgment in a very, very, sort of, vivid manner.

Something else here is worth noting. We saw the language of destruction in the passage we just read. Here it occurs again in the same context, verse 6 of 2 Peter 3: By these waters the world of that time, of course, the days of Noah is what the author has in view here, was deluged and destroyed.

Now we know very well that the world of Noah's day was not annihilated: there was judgment, there was destruction, yes, but not full and total destruction by any means. There is a renewal of that earth after it was thoroughly cleansed.

So I think there are clues even within 2 Peter 3 that will allow us to harmonise what Peter is saying here with what we've seen Paul saying in Romans 8, namely that, yes, God is going to intervene to judge this world and its people when he sends Christ back in glory, but this is not going to entail the annihilation of the world we live in now.

Let me draw some implications from this. It's helpful here, I think, to see Jesus' resurrection as a useful parallel to think about when we're looking at this matter of the future of creation. Jesus' body exhibits discontinuity: people on the Emmaus road don't recognise him. There's something different about this resurrection body of Jesus. And yet, of course, there is continuity as well: Stick your hand into my side, Jesus tells Thomas.

A combination of continuity and discontinuity, I think, is what the scriptures teach about the future of creation. And sometimes I think a parallel with our own bodies is useful here. I know very well that this body I now inhabit is not going to be around for ever. Every day I feel more and more that it's not going to be here that much longer. I know what its destiny is. It's going to be raised by God himself one day. I look forward to that day, as many of you do, I'm sure. Does this mean I don't take care of my body in the meantime? Does this mean that I eat whatever I want? (Don't answer that, Jenny!) Does this mean I don't bother to exercise? (Another one not to answer!)

No. We take care of our bodies for the time that we have them as good stewards of those bodies.

So whatever the destination of the created world might be, even if it is destruction, I think the implication about being good stewards of that created world in the meantime is still a mandate that we have to live under.

What is our ultimate destiny, then? Well, for some of you, perhaps you look forward to having wings, playing on a harp up in the ethereal atmosphere somewhere? Bless you, I hope you enjoy it. This is where I'm going to spend eternity: in a renewed created world, and for me that's going to be the Rocky Mountains of the United States.

So again, our destiny, I think, as scripture portrays it, is this destiny of living in resurrected bodies, which, after all, require, don't they, a material world to inhabit? We have physical bodies, we're going to have to live in some kind of quasi-physical space, and that is the future that God has for us: a new heaven and new earth, not simply living in heaven.

Once we appreciate this shape of the biblical story and the way creation plays a significant role in that story from beginning to end, I think, again, we need to have our consciousness raised that scripture when we approach it with renewed minds, is calling us to have a respect for, and involvement in, the care of the created world God has made, given to us to steward, and is intending for us to live in, indeed, for ever. Thank you.

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