



## Film transcript: Ian Watson

My name is Ian Watson, and I'm the minister of Hope Church Blackwood and Kirkmuirhill. We are part of the Free Church of Scotland. My study looks at the future of planet earth and what the Bible tells us. Is there a future? Well, the Bible tells us there is hope.

From the New International Version. Colossians chapter 1, verses 19 and 20.

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Let me tell you a story. It's a true story.

A few years ago, a church in America was forced to demolish its education block, even though it'd only been standing for 35 years. Toxins from the building had begun to leak into the groundwater. And therefore, the congregation had no option but to destroy the building and build something new.

The demolition took place on a warm spring afternoon. As he watched the process the assistant pastor was astonished at the poor quality of the materials that had been used, and he expressed his surprise to the senior pastor who was standing beside him. 'Well,' said his boss, 'They needed more space. But back then, they didn't have much money.' And then over the sound of the bulldozer, he shouted, half jokingly, 'And they thought Jesus would return in the next ten years.'

What a powerful illustration of how what we believe shapes how we behave.

If you think Christ is going to return in the next ten years, what's the point in spending a whole lot of money on an expensive building? Indeed, throughout history there have been various movements within the church where people were convinced that Christ would return within the next few weeks or months and sold their homes and businesses only to be left with nothing when their misguided expectations failed to materialise.

Belief shapes behaviour, and that is particularly true when it comes to what we believe about the future of planet earth.

During the course of these studies, we've been thinking through what the Bible says about creation care. Concern for the environment is at the top of the agenda for world leaders, and we are constantly being warned that if we do not act and act now, then the damage human beings have done to the planet will be irreversible.

What's your attitude to these warnings? Are you one of those cynics who believes that the green movement has hoodwinked us all? Or are your sympathies more with the protesters like Climate Extinction? Or are you simply baffled by it all?

Whatever your attitude, if you are a Christian, then you are obliged to take seriously what the Bible says.

And what does the Bible say? It says that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. It says that when God created all things, he declared it to be good. Very good indeed. It says that the creator God has entrusted his world to humanity to care for creation.

It also says that because of human sin, we have, in effect, vandalised creation. In Romans, chapter 8, the apostle Paul graphically describes creation as being in bondage to decay. So apples left unharvested on the tree don't grow bigger and juicier. They rot. They rot on the branch. More to the point, the time comes and comes all too soon when the decaying process catches up with us.

What does the future hold for planet earth? Is there a future? The Bible says yes. Yes, there is a future. A future for planet earth. And it is a glorious future. It is summed up in one word: hope. There is hope. There is hope because of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Colossians chapter 1, verses 19 and 20, the apostle Paul speaks in cosmic terms about the death of our Lord Jesus. He says, For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

Now, the key phrase there is: to reconcile to himself all things. You know that when a couple have been going through a difficult time in their marriage, perhaps they've even separated, if they manage to resolve their differences and get back together, what do we say? We say there has been a reconciliation. They have reconciled.

Reconciliation refers to an end to hostilities. And in biblical terms, that refers to the establishing of peaceful relations between God and human beings. Actually, it's a benefit of our salvation. Usually we talk about salvation in individualistic terms, don't we? We might ask somebody, 'when were you saved?' meaning, 'when did you first become a Christian?' But here in Colossians, Paul refers to God reconciling all things, all things to himself.

Bible scholar Douglas Moo says: Nothing in the universe falls outside the scope of God's creative and redemptive work in Christ. Nothing in the universe.

In the gospels, often when our English translations talk about Jesus healing someone, the Greek actually uses the word saved. So, for example, Jesus says to the woman who reached out and touched the hand of his outer clothing, 'Daughter, your faith has saved you.' Saved you. And so in the same way, we can talk in terms of creation being saved, being healed and restored. Or, to use Paul's word, liberated. In one breath, then, we can talk about the salvation of souls and the salvation of soils.

But how can we be sure this is not just wishful thinking? Because of the resurrection of Christ. Christ's resurrection changes everything. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15, the apostle Paul calls Christ's resurrection as of first importance and he goes on to explain why: if Christ had not been raised from the dead, then our faith is futile and our sins remain unforgiven. And he says in verse 20: But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as in Adam, all die, so in Christ, all will be made alive.

Our Lord's resurrection guarantees our resurrection, our physical resurrection from the dead. Think about those resurrection stories in the gospels. It's clear that the resurrected Jesus was recognisably Jesus.

As soon as Jesus spoke Mary Magdalene's name, she knew for certain it was him. And John tells us that when the disciples were back fishing on the Lake of Galilee, Jesus called out to them from the shore. 'It's the Lord,' said John to Peter. So there was continuity between the pre-resurrected body of Jesus and the post-resurrected body of Jesus. In some ways, yes, it was different, but in many ways it was the same.

Paul explains this in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verses 42 to 49. He says that though our bodies are buried perishable, they will be raised imperishable. Though our bodies are buried in weakness, they will be raised in power. The body is sown, he says, a natural body, but raised a spiritual body. We will recognisably be us. And at the same time, wonderfully different.

Now, that begs the question: Where will our resurrected bodies live? In heaven? After all, Christ said to the thief who was crucified at his side, Today you will be with me in paradise. But heaven is not our final destination. For the Bible talks about a new heaven and a new earth. That's a phrase used by Isaiah in chapter 65, and it is picked up in Revelation chapter 21, verse 1. Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

This is nothing less than the union of heaven and earth where God declares, Revelation 21, verse 5, I am making everything new. Does this mean that planet earth, as it is presently constituted, will be destroyed and replaced with something completely new? There are some within the church who believe this and they refer to 2 Peter, chapter 3, verse 10. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

Some have used this text as an excuse for human abuse of the planet, even arguing that it will hasten the return of the Lord Jesus.

However, the best commentators interpret Peter to be warning us of the certainty of judgment. The purifying fire will lay everything bare so that no one will escape scrutiny for how they have lived.

A better, and by that I mean a more biblical interpretation, is to understand that rather than replacing planet earth, the redeeming God will transform this fallen world, setting it free from its enslavement to decay and bringing it to a final state of glory. In other words, it will be heaven on earth.

Now, if all this is in the future, what are the implications for us now, today?

One of the things I enjoy about staying in a hotel room for a night or two is that I don't have to make up the bed. I don't have to tidy up. Somebody else is paid to do that. But I wonder if we sometimes treat planet earth like a hotel room. The old song says, 'This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through.' But this world is our home. Indeed, as Christians, we have more of a stake in this world than anybody else.

In 2 Corinthians 5, verse 17, Paul says, If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come. And a literal translation of what he writes would be this: if anyone is in Christ, new creation. In other words, there is something of the renewed, liberated creation already in the Christian. And just as we have an obligation to live out the principles of

the kingdom of God, which has yet to come in all its fullness, we have an obligation to treat the present creation with a view to the new creation.

One of my university teachers and someone who has written extensively about the Bible and ecology, is a theologian, Richard Bauckham. He writes, If we accept the diagnosis that human wrongdoing is response for ecological degradations, it follows that those who are concerned to live according to God's will for his world must be concerned to avoid and repair damage to God's creation as far as possible. Like the coming kingdom of God, we cannot achieve the liberation of creation, but we can anticipate it.

TS Eliot's bleak poem, 'The hollow men', ends with a famous line: This is the way the world will end, not with a bang, but a whimper. Scripture would disagree. Rather, there will be no end to the praising of creation's God and Saviour. Revelation 5, verse 13: Then I had every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them singing 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, forever and ever!' The four living creatures said, 'Amen,' and the elders fell down and worshipped.

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Tearfund, Suite 529-534, Baltic Chambers, 50 Wellington St, Glasgow, G2 6HJ, Scotland  
☎ +44 (0)141 332 3621 ✉ scotland@tearfund.org 🐦 @TearfundScot 🌐 @/TearfundScotland

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Film transcript / Ian Watson

Page 3

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