

Introduction

What is your favorite animal? Mine is possums, one of which lives in the woods behind my house and I feed. Paradoxically, they're so hideously ugly that they're cute. Anyway, I talk a lot about the finished work of Jesus. He came to earth in the flesh, lived a sinless life, died on the cross for our sins, and rose from the dead. He did that to redeem human beings. But he didn't do it to redeem just human beings. He did it to redeem possums as well. The Bible, in Romans 8:18-25, tells us so.

Nature Corrupted

Look first of all at the word "**creation**" in verses 19, 20, 21, and 22. It refers to the universe and everything in it. It includes human beings, animals like possums, stars, planets, asteroids, beaches, rivers, oceans, flowers, trees, and everything else that exists.

The Book of Genesis teaches that God made creation utterly good. But then an unspeakable tragedy befell it. As Paul describes it in verse 20, it was "**subjected to futility.**" He says it differently in verse 21 but the meaning is the same. It was placed in "**slavery to corruption.**" Those verses reveal that when Adam and Eve "**fell**" in the garden, so did the rest of creation, also called "**nature.**" There is a spiritual link between human beings and nature. That link is so defined that nature's destiny, from the beginning in Genesis 1:1, was tied up with the destiny of human beings – and still is. When human beings sinned and were cursed, so was nature. The result is that as beautiful and joy producing as it is, there's something wrong with it. It is futile and corrupt.

That's evident in non-living things and the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Left to itself, our sun, for instance, will eventually "**grow cold and die.**" But it's most evident in animals and two things about them that God never intended. One is their brutality. So, hawks swoop down and rip open the necks of mice and squirrels or adorable lion cubs with bloody faces chew at the carcass of a Zebra their mother killed.

The other thing God never intended is their fear: the rabbit frozen in its tracks, the wildcat with its back hunched, the rattlesnake poised to strike, or our dogs slinking to the ground. Those are postures of fear.

We know from observation that Paul's description of nature in verses 20-21 isn't exaggerated. It's in a fallen state God didn't intend when He made it. It's futile and corrupt.

Nature Redeemed

But it won't always be. At the Second Coming of Jesus, Father God is going to **"redeem"** it. That's the word, in its noun form, that Paul uses in verse 23. The Greek word translated **"redemption"** means to be set free from the control of something. In this case, that something is the futility or corruption that sin brought on nature. At the Second Coming, according to verse 21, Father God will set it free from that.

That means that He will transform it into the ultimate state He intended when He made it. Think of its state before the Fall, when the lion and lamb laid down together. Qualitatively, its redeemed state will be dramatically better than that. That's why Revelation 21:1 calls it what it does, **"a new heaven and a new earth."**

Now, according to verse 23, we as followers of Jesus wait eagerly for our final redemption. But according to verse 19, so does nature. Personifying it, Paul says that it **"waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God."** That's because when they're redeemed, it will be too. Acclaimed commentator Andrew Nygren explains verse 19 this way: **"The redemption of mankind is also to be the redemption of creation."**

Do you realize what that implies? God has an eternal destiny for the stars, planets, animals, vegetation, and everything else in the universe. And that eternal destiny is linked with ours. Simply put, nature will be part of the eternal life we live with God in heaven.

It will be in two ways. First, the universe will be our habitation. Heaven will be a material world and that world will be the redeemed universe. All the solar systems and galaxies that comprise it will be

accessible to us and we'll be able to act upon and interact with them. Nature will be part of the eternal life we live in a second way. As I've taught before, God will resurrect animals who will live in heaven with us. Brighter people than I have believed and taught that, including John Wesley, C.S. Lewis, and R.C. Sproul. Listen to what Wesley wrote in his book *Sermons on Several Occasions*. At the Second Coming, animals **"will be restored, not only to that measure of understanding which they had in Paradise, but to a degree of it as much higher than that They will be delivered from all irregular appetites, from all unruly passions, from every disposition that is either evil in itself or has a tendency to evil."**

The bottom line is that the eternal destinies of human beings and nature are linked. Through the finished work of Jesus, Father God, according to our text, is going to finally redeem not just human beings but nature as well. There will be possums in heaven, in my part at least.

Evangelists and Ecologists

What I've just explained has profound implications to us, one of which is this. True evangelists are true ecologists.

When I say evangelists I'm not talking about preachers who hold revival services. I'm talking about those who want to **"save souls,"** as we used to say it, and act to do so – those who seek to bring the people they know and meet into a saving relationship with Jesus.

When I say ecologists I'm talking about those who want to save nature and act to do so. **"To save nature"** means to preserve, nurture, or restore it. Ecologists are those who seek to do that.

When most of us think of evangelists, we think of Bible-believing people like we are. We know that God wants each of us to save souls. But when most of us think of ecologists, we think of theological liberals like the National Council of Churches, new agers like Shirley Maclaine, and naturalists like Daniel Janzen. There's a dichotomy in our minds, in other words, between evangelists and ecologists.

But there shouldn't be. On the contrary, Bible-believing Christians like us should be the most fervent ecologists of all. That's because we know and believe about nature what theological liberals, new agers, and naturalists don't. God has an eternal destiny for it that's linked to ours. Because He does, it deserves to be saved, that is, preserved, nurtured, and restored. As followers of His, therefore, we want and act to do that.

Denton Lotz, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, champions this point of view: **"There seems to be a conflict between those who emphasize saving souls and those who emphasize saving trees. This is a ridiculous conflict. Let's not confuse evangelism with ecology, but let's also show that true evangelists are true ecologists."** He's absolutely right. True evangelists are true ecologists. God wants us to save souls first of all and nature second of all.

So, let's save nature. We do so in two ways.

Care for Animals

First, we care for animals. The Bible has a theology of animals and calls us to do just that, care for them, in verses like Exodus 23:12, Deuteronomy 14:21, Deuteronomy 22:6-7; Proverbs 12:10, and Jonah 4:11. Those verses teach that God loves all animals, including the possum I feed, and we should too.

It's a matter of character that we do. In his *Lecture on Ethics*, the celebrated German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote that **"We can judge the heart of man by his treatment of animals."** He was partially right. We can correctly judge those who disregard or mistreat animals as unrighteous. The wise man concurs in Proverbs 12:10, **"A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast."** If a person is righteous, he or she will regard animals highly and treat them kindly.

William Wilberforce was one of the finest friends of Jesus who ever lived. He's best known for abolishing first the slave trade and then slavery itself in 19th century England. But he was also one of the founders of the first animal welfare charity in the world, the Royal

Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (1824). Notice that the same kingdom heart that cared for people cared for animals as well.

It's clear. Righteous people, kingdom people, care for animals. They regard them highly and treat them kindly. God made each species of animals for a specific kind of good life. Righteous people do their best to give them that on the one hand and not to take it away on the other. The practical implications are countless. Hunters, for instance, shouldn't revel in the actual killing of the animal or be cavalier about it. They should kill it sadly with regret. Or people shouldn't direct anger toward their pets that's laced with malice. Or people shouldn't participate in entertainments that inflict suffering on animals. Those samplings are enough to make the point. God created each species of animals for a specific kind of good life. Righteous people do their best to give them that and not to take it away.

Care for the Environment

There's a second way that we save nature. We care for the environment. The Bible makes clear that God created not just animals but soil, beaches, rivers, streams, oceans, mountains, trees, flowers, plants, and so on to enjoy and to express His glory. But He enjoys them and they express His glory only when they're beautiful and clean. Righteous people, therefore, do their part in making them that.

But what is that part? Let's face it. The world's environmental problems are staggering. So what can we do that can possibly matter? I saw a newspaper cartoon that depicted a huge mass of people that stretched out as far as the eye could see. And over each person was one of those little balloons that cartoonists use to designate speaking, which said, **"What can one person do?"** The cartoon's point is that a majority of **"one's"** can in fact change the world. Maybe one of us as followers of Jesus can't change the world. But millions of us **"ones"** together can.

A pastor was driving through Camden, New Jersey, one of the worst and dirtiest inner cities in America. As he was, he spotted a little boy,

not more than eight years old, pulling behind him a huge plastic bag filled with trash. **“What are you doing?”** the pastor called out from his car window. Whereupon the little boy looked up with pride and called back, **“Mister, I’m cleaning up America.”**

That’s the kind of attitude followers of Jesus need to have, one that recognizes the significance of individual acts. Certainly, what we can’t do is give up. God disallows it. So let’s commit ourselves to learning and doing whatever we can, no matter how small it may seem, to make the environment beautiful and clean for God.

In their book *50 Ways You Can Help Save the Planet*, Tony Campolo and Gordon Aeschliman suggest practical things we can do in that regard – like make sure our lawns are safe, save water in the name of Jesus, buy products whose packaging is made with recyclable or biodegradable materials, cut down on junk mail, make sure our tires are properly inflated, cut down on the use of batteries, and more.

I’d suggest one more thing. Cut back on our standard of living. Most of us, including me first of all, need to consume less. I think that almost every Tuesday evening when I put our trash out. How can two people, my wife and I, possibly generate so much trash? It makes me realize that I need to do two things. First, consume less than I do. And second, consume more wisely than I do. I need to cut back on my standard of living.

Those then are the two ways that we save nature. We care for the animals and the environment that comprise it.

Conclusion

I realize in closing that many, if not most Christians, aren’t interested in what I’ve preached about today. Studies show that the more theologically conservative church members are, the less likely they are to show interest in saving nature. But I hope that changes for us today as a result of understanding what Romans 8 teaches. God will one day finally redeem all of nature, including possums.