



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Whole Creation Has  
Been Groaning  
(*Apocalyptic Vision*,  
pp. 19-28)

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### Christian Reflection

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# The Whole Creation Has Been Groaning

In apocalyptic language, the Apostle Paul describes the corruption of nature and expresses the cosmic scope of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. If God plans to redeem the damaged material creation at the end of the age, God's redeemed children should care for nature now. God's plan for what we will be in the future in glory is the moral pattern for how we should live today.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:19-23

### Meditation†

The apocalyptic literature...rejects the widespread perception that salvation is individual and spiritual, focused on the fate of individual souls after death. Countering this narrow and spiritualizing view, it insists that God's saving goals encompass global society, worldwide ecology, and even space/time reality....

The apocalyptic vision of salvation claims to be relevant for the here and now, as well as for the end times. It gives readers a "sense of an ending" to existence and history, assuring them that the life of faith has a satisfying conclusion despite appearances to the contrary.

*Stephen L. Cook*

### Reflection

"One of the most profound New Testament expressions of God's plan for the natural world is in Romans 8:19-23," Harry Hahne writes. "It powerfully depicts the apocalyptic expectation that at the end of history God will reverse the damage from the Fall not only to humanity, but even to nature itself."

Too often the biblical apocalyptic tradition has been misinterpreted as narrowly focused on the salvation of human souls and, therefore, as world-denying and pessimistic about nature. But the apocalyptic writings, which began in post-exilic Judaism, "often express an ecological concern for nature by stressing that the natural world was created by God and is under God's control," Hahne notes. "God holds humans and fallen angels accountable for their sins against the earth and animals. Nature is a victim of human and angelic sin and cries out in suffering, and in the coming new age, the natural world will be redeemed and transformed to a state of great glory."

The Apostle Paul vividly depicts the natural world – the "creation" (*ktisis*) – as "subjected to futility" and in "bondage to decay" in the present age due to human sin (Romans 8:20-21). Yet the "suffering of creation is like birth pangs leading to a glorious new world, rather than the death pangs of a dying creation," writes Hahne. It longs to be transformed to share in "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (8:21).

In the biblical apocalyptic worldview Hahne discovers these "profound implications for ecological ethics":

- ▶ *God's plan for redemption is not just for individual human souls or even the corporate redemption of a new community. God intends "to*



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reconcile to himself all things" (Colossians 1:20). "God's priority is on human redemption," Hahne notes, "but since humanity is God's agent in caring for nature, when humanity is restored to a right relationship with God, the rest of creation will also be restored to God's intended operation."

- ▶ *Human beings have an essential solidarity with nature.* We groan together with nature as we long to be set free from the consequences of sin (Romans 8:22-23). Furthermore, as *embodied* spirits, we are physical beings as well as spiritual beings. "The eternal destiny of God's redeemed people is to dwell in perfect resurrected bodies in a perfected earth, full of glory and freed from bondage to decay (Romans 8:21; Revelation 21-22), not as disembodied spirits floating about in some immaterial emptiness (2 Corinthians 5:1-4)," writes Hahne.
- ▶ *God's redeemed children ought to show a strong concern for the care of nature.* In the biblical apocalyptic imagination, the material world suffers because it is a victim of sin, not because it is inherently evil (as in a world-denying Gnostic worldview). Since God plans to redeem the damaged material creation (8:19, 21), we should begin to act now in ways that anticipate the new creation. Nature "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (8:19), Hahne suggests, "because when believers are glorified and freed from sin, they will assume their proper relationship to the rest of creation so that nature itself will share in that glory (8:21)." "Far from avoiding involvement in the environmental movement, Christians should be leaders in it," Hahne concludes. "Christians should not care for the earth merely from enlightened self-interest that is only concerned for how it affects their quality of life and that of their children (an anthropocentric approach to ecological ethics). Neither should they care for the earth because they see humans as merely a part of nature (the view of evolutionary science and many religions). Rather Christians should see their responsibility to care for the earth as a stewardship given by God, which obedience to the Lord Jesus demands (a theocentric approach)."

### Study Questions

1. The word "creation" (*ktisis*) has a variety of meanings in the New Testament. According to Harry Hahne, what clues indicate that the Apostle Paul is using "creation" in Romans 8:19-23 to refer to the natural world?
2. How, according to Hahne, does Paul allude in Romans 8:20-22 to Adam's sin and the Fall? Discuss how the suffering of the natural world could result from human sin.
3. In the biblical apocalyptic imagination, how does God's plan for redemption extend beyond the salvation of individuals and even the corporate redemption of a new community?
4. What practical implications for Christian commitment and actions to protect the natural environment does Hahne draw from the biblical apocalyptic imagination?

Departing Hymn: "A Searing, Blazing Hope is Found" (vv. 1, 5, and 6)

# The Whole Creation Has Been Groaning

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 3 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To understand Paul's apocalyptic description of the corruption and consequent suffering of nature.
2. To clarify how the biblical apocalyptic tradition highlights the cosmic goal and consequence of God's redemptive activity through Jesus Christ.
3. To consider the implications of the biblical apocalyptic imagination for Christians' commitment and actions to protect the natural environment today.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Apocalyptic Vision (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Comment

What explains our abuse (or, at least, neglect) of the natural world over the last few centuries? Are there just too many of us for the planet to sustain, or have we become increasingly crass and negligent toward the environment? "The historical roots of our ecological crisis," Lynn White, Jr. wrote in his now-famous essay by that title, can be traced to religious "beliefs about nature and destiny." The culprit, he thought, is a misuse of modern science based on the Judeo-Christian view of human beings as "not simply part of nature, ... [but] made in God's image." He might also have mentioned the long tradition of interpreting the biblical apocalyptic writings as world-denying and pessimistic about nature.

Does the biblical apocalyptic imagination really undermine concern for the natural world? Or have we missed its true meaning?

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to open the "eyes of your heart" to the cosmic scope of salvation in Jesus Christ, which is "the hope to which he has called you" (Ephesians 1:18).

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 8:19-23 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

The previous study "The Church as a Company of Nomads" addressed the proper interpretation of the biblical apocalyptic writings and warned against their abuse. This discussion focuses on one of the widespread misinterpretations of the biblical apocalyptic tradition—the idea that the natural world is coming to an end (rather than being redeemed), so we may neglect the environment. Harry Hahne responds to this misunderstanding by

providing a close reading of the view of nature in a representative apocalyptic passage, Romans 8:19-23, and then offering some implications for how we should participate in God's plan for nature. "Although the Apostle Paul does not work out all of these implications [for ecological ethics], they are the logical fruit of adopting the view of nature in this passage," Hahne suggests.

### Study Questions

1. Harry Hahne thinks "creation" (*ktisis*) refers to the natural world. This is a "pivotal interpretive question," he admits, because *ktisis* does not have just one meaning. *Ktisis* can mean "everything created by God (Colossians 1:15); an individual creature, either humans and animals (Romans 1:25), or any created thing (Romans 8:39; Hebrews 4:13); humankind collectively (Mark 16:15); humans transformed by God through the new birth, which is like a second creation (2 Corinthians 5:17); 'the act of creation' (Romans 1:20); or, an authoritative institution or government (1 Peter 2:13)."

Following the lead of numerous commentators, Hahne shows how the passage rules out other aspects of the created order from the meaning of *ktisis*. Though Romans 8:22 refers to "the whole creation," Paul must not be thinking of *heaven* or the *angels*, for these were not subjected to futility or decay due to angelic sin or human sin (8:20-21); nor *demons*, for they will not be redeemed (8:21) and do not eagerly await the revealing of the children of God when Christ returns (8:19); nor *unbelievers*, since they do not eagerly await the revealing of the children of God (8:19), nor will all be delivered from the consequences of sin (8:21); nor *believers*, because Paul distinguishes them from "the creation" in 8:23. Hahne concludes, "When angels, demons, heaven, unbelievers, and Christians are excluded from the meaning of *ktisis*, the part of creation that remains is the subhuman material creation or nature."

2. Hahne interprets Romans 8:20-22 in light of Genesis 3:17-19. He writes, "When God pronounced the curse [on the ground] after the Fall, God subjected creation to futility and simultaneously gave hope of its eventual redemption through a descendant of Eve (v. 20, "in hope"; cf. Genesis 3:15). The Greek word translated 'was subjected' (*hupotassō*) suggests an authoritative action, in this case the curse that God pronounced after Adam fell." Just as Paul says in Romans 5:12-19 that Adam's Fall brought sin and death to human beings, in Romans 8:20-22 he indicates the impact of the Fall on the natural world. Hahne suggests, "Since Adam was accountable to God to rule the earth and to tend the garden as a vice-regent under God, his sin affected the natural world for which he was responsible. Thus, nature became frustrated in its purposes and can no longer be all it was created to be."

Encourage members to discuss some ways in which human sin, both individual and corporate, can either directly damage or cause the neglect of caring for species of animals and plants, ecosystems, and resources in the natural world.

3. "Romans 8:19-23 suggests that the Western church needs to broaden its understanding of redemption in Christ," Hahne writes. As human beings are restored to right relationship with God and with one another through the new redeemed community which is the Body of Christ, they can once again exercise their stewardship as God's agents in caring for nature.

Discuss how your congregation cares for the natural world. Does it practice good stewardship over its natural resources? Does it inspire and teach members to care for creation?

4. "God will hold people accountable for their interaction with and management of the natural world," Hahne concludes, because God has entrusted stewardship of the earth's natural resources to the human race. "Negatively, this means that Christians should not act in ways that contribute to the decay of nature and increase its groaning. This includes avoiding such behaviors as polluting the air, water and earth, squandering limited natural resources, and abusing animals. It also suggests that there is a place for a society to have legislation to restrain the selfish actions of fallen human nature that result in environmental harm. Positively, it means that Christians should act in ways that anticipate the new creation. Far from avoiding involvement in the environmental movement, Christians should be leaders in it."

### Departing Hymn

"A Searing, Blazing Hope" can be found on pp. 60-61 of *Apocalyptic Vision*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.