

from this earth but a *renewal* of this earth. Heaven will be a relevant resolution of the story of creation. Sin and its patterns of perversion will be bleached out of the original creation once and for all. *Shalom* will again flourish on the earth.

The purpose of heaven is not to make us happy but to make things right, to win back *shalom* and usher in the return of rightness and wholeness. Once again, God, creation, creatures, and their mutually nourishing relationships will combine to form such a delightful conglomeration that they will, as Plantinga puts it enticingly, “keep building like waves of a passion that is never spent.”

Bondage to Decay

In the meantime, the earth groans. The rupture of *shalom*, and the wait for its restoration, is taking its toll on the earth—not just on human beings but the physical planet. “The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth,” Paul says in Romans 8. The groans will not subside until “creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay.”

Those groans can be seen and heard in nature around us, as *Time* described in a cover story on global warming.

Glaciers, including the legendary snows of Kilimanjaro, are disappearing from mountaintops around the globe. Coral reefs are dying off as the seas get too warm for comfort. Drought is the norm in parts of Asia and Africa. El Niño events, which trigger devastating weather in the eastern Pacific, are more frequent. The Arctic permafrost is starting to melt. Lakes and rivers in colder climates are freezing later and thawing earlier each year. Plants and animals are shifting their ranges poleward and to higher altitudes, and migration patterns for animals as

diverse as polar bears, butterflies and beluga whales are being disrupted.

Human beings bear some responsibility for this. We were entrusted, in Genesis 1, with the stewardship of the earth. Instead, human beings turned the earth into something to conquer and plunder, disrupting its rhythms and wasting its resources. We have lost sight of the earth as God's sanctuary. Today, "land is pure commodity to be bought and sold without regard to the deep connections of land and occupant," writes Walter Brueggemann. "At the present time, the tilt in public posture and policy is all toward economics at the expense of the environment."

Because humans were charged to care for the earth, humans are responsible for the current mess that it is in. But we are also meant to be part of the solution. God will one day restore the earth and make it a new earth, and is already working to undo nature's "bondage to decay." And so we should be too. "The human creature is called to work with God . . . both with and on behalf of the rest of creation," writes William Dyrness before introducing this intriguing idea: "For it is only in relation to God's presence and work in creation that the creature finds its meaning."

Our duty is to help heal the natural creation, in anticipation of its final, glorious rebirth. We are to keep our charge as responsible managers, as stewards, and strive to live in a way that refrains from extending humanity's abuse of nature and instead looks for ways to reverse it. This may sound grandiose and idealistic, but as Garret Keizer writes in the *Christian Century*, "The devil has two horns: the horn of pride that says there is noth-

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ing we *ought* to do, and the horn of despair that says there is nothing we *can* do.”

Some Christians scorn environmentalists for their excesses and their methods, and sometimes with good cause. The political rhetoric of some environmentalists can be hostile and risks worshiping creation instead of the Creator. Keizer warns of environmental “idolatry” and warns of “making environmentalism into an identity,” which happens when “the little group to which I belong becomes my sole basis for self-understanding and the farthest boundary of my love.”

Environmentalists also tend to be eschatologically numb, with no sense of the big picture, of an earth destined for eternal purification by God. Instead, many concern themselves with minimal gains and goals and remain blind to the widespread, deep-seated human folly that led to the abuse of the earth in the first place. As surely as land-hungry and material-greedy human beings plundered the earth before, humans will do it again. Keizer wisely asks, “What good would it do to clean up the whole earth tomorrow, only to foul it up the day after?”

But say this for environmentalists, however disagreeable you may find their methods: they have the awe-for-creation part right. They have a sense of the sacredness of our natural surroundings and a sense of shame in the fouling of those surroundings. They have a sense of wonder at creation, even if their wonder seldom extends to the Creator—as though they are delighting in a delicious meal without giving a thought to the cook.

To be consistent with the message of the new earth given in the first verse of Revelation 21, Christians must recover awe for creation and be fervent in our efforts to be stewards of it and prevent its further injury. We need to see the earth not just as a keepsake worth protecting but as God-trod territory worth

our wonder. “The issues to be faced cannot be dealt with by ideological sloganeering,” says Brueggemann. “What is required, rather, is a reengagement with *environment as creation*.”

Scott Hoezee puts this idea in provocative terms in *Remember Creation*. He speaks of the renewal of creation as something the devil detests.

What God loves, the devil hates. . . . Given that the Son of God died to redeem the entire universe from its bondage to decay, is it any surprise that the devil even now seeks to undermine and sully the created splendors of this world? Given that one day soon God will renew everything from primroses to quasars, is it any surprise that the devil is furiously seeking to block that re-creation?

What the devil seeks to block, we must advance.

The future of the earth determines how we view the present earth, and how we respond to urgent environmental crises. If we believe what is portrayed in popular prophecy—that earth is destined to perish and that humans will flee to a remote state of spiritual bliss with God—then current environmental problems are of minimal concern. If earth is going to perish anyway, what is the big deal about pollution? If anything, pollution is only speeding up the inevitable and bringing us closer to the return of Christ. This escapist brand of Christianity turns faith into a get-out-of-earth-free card.

To people who believe this interpretation of biblical prophecy, environmental issues are a lost cause. To such Christians, the importance of driving cars that do not waste fuel and protecting wildlife reserves is remote. To them, environmentalism will seem like an especially foolish idea. They would not be the least

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bit amused to get a flyer on their windshield that resembles a parking ticket, like the one I once found on the sidewalk. Intended for sport utility vehicles and other gas-guzzling cars, the fake ticket read, “This form of transport incurs costs . . . which have not been included in the retail price. Your operation of this vehicle makes you personally liable for the following: . . . depletion of non-renewable resources, smog-related health problems, climate change.”

To Christians who read the words of 2 Peter 3 and Revelation 21, however, and hear the prophecy of the coming of a new earth—a renewed earth, a purified earth, this same earth after a spell in the refiner’s fire—stewardship of the current planet is a matter of hearing and obeying the biblical message. It is a call to action, a call to responsible living, careful use of natural resources, minimal production of waste. The authors of *Redeeming Creation* call for the church to shape a new generation of stewards who are “biblically informed, morally responsible and passionately devoted,” conscious of and committed to their duty to care for the earth. “It is their voices and their lives that will shape the future of ethics, policy and management of God’s creation.”

Caring for the earth now is an act of witness to the coming of the new earth, when creation’s groans are ended and nature again flourishes to the glory of God. Caring for the earth now shows that we expect this to happen. We are stewards now because we expect to continue in the role for eternity, responsibly managing the natural world. This is why Keizer sees nature “both as an objective, biological reality, and as a vivid interior hope.”

The Bible enforces this hope in the one place it talks about the rapture, the time when believers are seized into the clouds

to meet the returning Christ. “The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first,” Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4. “After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”

The Greek word for “meet” here, *apantēsin*, is rarely used in the New Testament, but when it is, it means to receive and escort a dignitary. This is the same word used in Matthew 25: “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to *meet* the bridegroom.” The women waiting outside the wedding banquet intended to go and greet the bridegroom when he arrived and escort him inside. The other instance of *apantēsin* in the Bible is similar. In Acts 28, Luke writes that he and Paul were invited by some brothers to stay with them. “The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to *meet* us.” Then they all traveled to the initial destination together.

In the same way, Paul suggests, we will be caught up into the air to meet the Lord and escort him as he returns to earth, his destination. The common portrayal of the rapture, in which saints are scooped up off the earth never to return, blatantly ignores the meaning of *apantēsin*; it suggests saints will keep on going all the way into the skies and never look back. But *apantēsin* does not mean meeting and leaving; it means meeting and escorting, the way the virgins planned to escort the bridegroom into the wedding banquet and the believers escorted Paul and Luke back to their home. *Apantēsin* means picking someone up at the airport; it doesn’t mean getting on a plane and taking off. Paul is saying that we will rise to welcome Christ and escort him back to earth.

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So the question is, What kind of earth will we escort Christ back to? How are we preparing for his arrival, when we form his welcoming party? Will we bring him back to an earth that we have abused and neglected? Will we show him a place that we have made a mess of while we called it our home? Will it seem that we didn't give much thought to the state of our natural surroundings and thought only about our inner spiritual lives? Or will we escort Christ back to an earth that we clearly treasured, that we cared for and managed as responsibly as we could, for his glory? Will it look like we were getting ready for him to come back?

"This planet is more than just a stopover on your way to heaven," says Michael Wittmer in *Heaven Is a Place on Earth*. "It is your final destination." No matter what popular prophecy says, we are preparing the earth for eternity, not idling here before we leave. We're not waiting to depart; we've arrived. We must not make the mistake of the tribe Paton told to dig a well, the tribe that was bewildered because they were looking for water from the skies and ignoring the heaven at their feet. Instead, we must actively anticipate the final removal of the curse of sin by working now, in our small and flawed ways, for the restoration of creation. We must show the world that we are expecting what Revelation says: that heaven will come down to earth forever. God is not giving up on the planet. Neither should we.