

climate change & health

Amy McIntosh explores what the Bible has to say





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The climate crisis is arguably one of the greatest threats to human health this century.¹ In our future practice, we are likely to be dealing with the consequences to health in the UK, mainly from heatwaves and flooding (based on current evidence and if we do not take sufficient preventative measures). Globally, healthcare professionals will be treating patients whose health is threatened by natural disasters; conflict and displacement; vector-borne disease; famine and drought – in locations and quantities never seen before. The public health ramifications are huge.²

But how do we respond as Christians?

Where does climate change fit in with God's plan for the world? Should we continue to live as we do or throw ourselves into climate change activism?

man, earth & God – a relationship in restoration

In Genesis 1-3, we read how God created the earth with great biodiversity of plants and animals and saw that it was 'very good'

(Genesis 1:31). Creation was full of life, with plans for humanity to increase and fill all the earth. God sustained all living creatures and man through his creation. Humans had a balanced relationship with the earth, where resources were plentiful.

God gave man the privilege of naming and classifying this great diversity. But with it came great responsibility – to rule over it in God's likeness. This meant emulating God's grace, justice, kindness, mercy and love. God retained overall control, instructing Adam and Eve what they should and should not eat.⁴ (Not everything was given to man to use.) This initial relationship with the earth was harmonious – if man followed the order God had created.

Then the curse of sin broke the ordered relationship with creation. In taking the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve took from nature, what was not theirs to take, for the sake of gaining knowledge.⁵ This broke the order of creation – and God's relationship with man.

The earth is cursed because of this first sin.⁶ The harmonious, sustaining relationship between earth and man was broken. Where food had been plentiful and readily available through God's bountiful provision, it was now dependent on man's work. Earth no longer automatically sustained man – humans had to battle against the earth to sustain themselves.

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Today, humans still battle against the earth's seasons, diseases, floods and droughts to feed ourselves and sustain life. With a growing population and fluctuating climate, we struggle to produce enough and to distribute it fairly, so that all of humanity's need is met. Years of toiling against the earth have only worsened the problem, with food production being one of the biggest greenhouse gas emitters. The curse of sin is inescapable!

The earth is used again by God to demonstrate his wrath against sin, when it is flooded in the time of Noah.⁷ The flood is used as punishment for humanity's sin, with all of God's good creation destroyed because of the action of man. It reminds us that human actions taint all of creation. Our sin is so great that God is willing to destroy all the earth in response and is justified in doing so. We imagine the flood to be a 'clean slate', with humans given a new



opportunity to be good. However, God did not look on the earth after the flood and see a sinless world. He still saw that 'every inclination of the human heart is evil' (Genesis 8:21). Once he had smelt the aroma of Noah's burnt animal sacrifice, God made a covenant never again to destroy man. It was not Noah's resolution to never sin again that preserved the earth and the life it sustains, but God's grace and mercy.⁸ Climate change may alter life as we know it, but God's promise to never again destroy humanity through environmental disaster stands firm. Jesus fulfils the promise, as a greater sacrifice than Noah's, and has taken God's wrath on our behalf.⁹

Jesus taught us what will happen to earth and humanity in the future. We await the day of his return, when this old earth will pass away and a new heaven and a new earth will be seen.¹⁰ He warned us

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that the period between his ascension and his return will not be an easy time, with natural disasters that cause 'great distress' (Matthew 24:21) with loss of light, stars falling, famine and earthquakes, elements destroyed by fire, and the earth laid bare.¹¹ Climate change will contribute to natural disasters and distress for humanity. While we cannot predict when Jesus will return, we should heed his warning to 'keep watch' (Matthew 24:42) as he will 'come like a thief' (2 Peter 3:10) in the night.

We should not be surprised that climate change is occurring. The earth is cursed because of our sin. Sins such as greed and oppression of the poor directly contribute to climate change. The rising temperatures, environmental destruction and natural disasters we see with climate change is creation groaning in childbirth.¹² We eagerly await a new heaven and a new earth, and with it our new

lives.¹³ Creation will finally be liberated from the curse that our sin has placed on it. The relationship of humanity with God will be restored and the order that God created made right. No longer will we toil to sustain ourselves – we will live in a new heavenly city,¹⁴ where resources are plentiful and we live alongside our Creator once again.¹⁵

why should we act?

With the hope of a new earth, some may ask if there is any point in doing anything about climate change because it reflects humanity's broken relationship with the earth and instructs us to be ready for Jesus' return. Should we bother to try and reduce greenhouse emissions, understand more about it, or prepare for the consequences? I will focus on the 'why' (rather than 'how').

1. Local medical mission: 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart' (Colossians 3:23)

Some actions that reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the UK will have immediate benefits for our patients: cutting air pollution in the UK reduces respiratory and cardiovascular disease,^{16, 17} using active transport (such as walking) and diets with less meat and dairy reduces mortality and morbidity; the list goes on.^{18, 19, 20, 21} We can serve the Lord in our work by reducing our own personal carbon footprint and advocating for policies which will lead to these benefits for our patients.

2. Global medical mission: 'whatever you did for one of the least of these ... you did for me' (Matthew 25:40)

The climate crisis will affect the world's poorest communities the most. They usually live in areas more prone to natural disasters and have fewer resources to cope with the consequences. This is a great injustice. Most of the world's greenhouse gas emissions are produced by the wealthy, yet the consequences of these emissions primarily affect those who have done the least to cause them.²² If we are to serve the poor and loosen the chains of

injustice through global medical mission, we will increasingly encounter the consequences of climate change. We must obey Jesus' command to serve the poor and demonstrate justice, and therefore need to consider our response to climate change as we do this.

3. 'In the image of God he created them ... (to) rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'
(Genesis 1:27-28)

We were first created as part of God's good creation. He then gave that creation to man to rule over and sustain us. When God destroyed the whole earth with the flood, he was grieved. While we will never be able to take care of creation as God does without Jesus' help, we should not forget that this is a gift lovingly given to us by God. God longs for us to be like him – let us strive to act like him as we take care of his good creation.

4. A remedy for those who are anxious or suffering: 'See, I will create new heavens and a new earth.' (Isaiah 65:17)

Eco-anxiety is a new term coined by climate

activists to describe the fear, anxiety and distress induced by a changing climate.²³ There is little data on the prevalence or severity of this new 'diagnosis'. We may encounter this among our peers, patients, or even ourselves. The Bible acknowledges that as creation 'groan[s] as in the pains of childbirth' (Romans 8:22), there will be 'great distress' (Matthew 24:21). When we recognise the distress that climate change may bring to humanity, and that it is a result of our sin, we can stand alongside those experiencing eco-anxiety or suffering and point them to our only hope – Jesus.

5. The only cure: Jesus

The climate crisis has in recent months generated a surge in action from campaigning groups, internationally and in the UK. Their hope is that with human effort, we can curtail climate change. While we might be able to reduce the impact, it is easy to be caught up in the belief that we can fix the world by ourselves if we try hard enough. But the Bible tells us that the earth and man will never be able to escape sin's curse by human effort. We must remember that Jesus is restoring the world through his death and resurrection – and we cannot save the earth without him. ■

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