

If the universe could talk...

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Date: 10 November 2019

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight I'd like us to turn back to the passage that we read from in Romans chapter 8. Today, as you know, there's an awful lot of concern about the world around us.

The environment's a big issue in the news. And with a general election coming up, if it wasn't for all the bonkersness of Brexit, I think in many ways this election would be in many ways defined by policies and concerns to do with the environment and climate change.

Many people are very concerned about the state of the world. And as a result, lots of people are speaking out on behalf of the world.

People are speaking out on behalf of the universe, trying to call for action and attention and care. And in many ways that's a great thing.

And as we'll see, there are so many reasons why we should look after the world around us. But with all this concern, and with this being such a live topic in the world around us, I want us to do something maybe ever so slightly different tonight.

[1 : 13] I want us to ask a question that we probably wouldn't normally ask in church, but it's one that I think is worth thinking about. And our question is, if the universe could talk, what would it say?

And it's with this question in mind, I want us to turn back to Romans 8, and especially to verses 19 to 22, where it says, for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. Romans 8, as you know, is one of the most amazing chapters in the Bible.

It's just bursting full of remarkable teaching concerning all the blessings that are ours through faith in Jesus Christ. So if someone ever asked you the question, well, what difference does it make to be a Christian?

[2 : 24] A great place to go is Romans 8, because it just lists blessing after blessing after blessing that are ours in Jesus Christ. We're free from condemnation.

We have God the Holy Spirit dwelling with us. We can come to God as our own Father, and we are promised that we will never, ever be separated from him. The sufferings that we have now are nothing compared to the future blessing that God has for us.

Paul is describing the astonishing difference it makes for us to be united to Jesus as Christians. But then all of a sudden, in these three verses, three or four verses, Paul just, he just, as he often does, chucks in some incredibly profound and fascinating teaching.

He dives off on this little tangent and breaks from talking about the blessings that we have in Christ, and he starts talking about creation.

He starts talking about the fact that the Gospel is not just good news for people. The Gospel is actually good news for the whole universe.

[3 : 39] And in these little verses here, we're giving a remarkable insight into the implications of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the created universe.

And as Paul does that, he personifies the universe. In other words, he writes as if the universe was able to behave and communicate like a person.

That's why I think Paul is basically saying, if the universe could actually talk, what would it say?

So what would it say? What does Paul tell us? What are the implications of the Gospel for the universe? Well, that's what I want us to think about together tonight.

And I want us to structure our thoughts around two very simple questions. Question one, what has happened to the universe? And question two is, what's going to happen to the universe?

[4 : 38] So question one is, what's happened to the universe? In these verses, Paul is getting us to think about the universe's story.

Notice in verse 19, you can see there that Paul talks about the universe now. The creation is waiting. There's a present tense waiting.

Then the next verse, Paul talks about the universe's past. The creation was subjected. And then in verse 21, it says creation will be, and Paul is talking about the future.

Here in these verses, just these few sentences, our minds have been drawn towards the whole history of the universe, past, present, and future.

So what is that story? What has happened to the universe? Well, one of the really interesting things is that the story of the universe is actually the very first history that the Bible gives to us.

[5 : 42] If you go all the way back to the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, you'll discover that that book is divided into 10 sections. They're all of different lengths, they're not all the same lengths, but there's 10 clear sections in the book of Genesis.

And each of these sections is introduced by more or less the same phrase, which says something like these are the generations of. So for example, you have, this is the book of the generations of Adam in Genesis 5.1.

Then 6.9. These are the generations of Noah. In verse 37, these are the generations of Jacob. And there's 10 of these in Genesis dividing the book up.

Do you know what the first one is? Whose story comes first in Genesis? Well, the answers in Genesis 2 forward.

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth. The first story we're told is the story of the universe.

[6 : 45] That story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning is revealed to us in the very first two chapters of Genesis. The start is wonderful.

Genesis 2, the second chapter of the Bible, gives us this beautiful description of the perfect world that God has created. If you haven't read it for a while, go and read it when you get home, it's just a beautiful description.

And here we see the beauty and wonder of what God has created. God is bringing life and order and beauty and coherence into the world.

The beginning is wonderful. And the high point of that beginning, the crown, if you like, of that created realm is the creation of humanity, man and woman together, God's family being established, and them as the people of God, as the family of God, dwelling in the creation that He's made to serve Him, glorify Him, bear God's image together.

It's a brilliant beginning. But the middle is a disaster. In Genesis 3, as I'm sure you know, humanity created as the high point of creation falls and rebels against the Creator.

[8 : 08] And that fall of humanity, when we sinned against God, that didn't just change our history, it changed the history of the universe as well.

The result is that the universe is now under a curse. Genesis 3 says that to Adam, he said, because you've listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it, cursed is the ground because of you.

And if you carry on reading into Genesis 4, 5 and 6, you'll discover that the order and beauty of chapters 1 and 2 disintegrates into horrible chaos.

You find murder, domination, arrogance, fear, hostility. The world that was created very good is now very broken.

And that shift from order to chaos is still very evident around us today. We can still see that the universe was created as a thing of beauty and there are many aspects of the world that are absolutely beautiful still.

[9 : 20] From the stars in the galaxy to the flowers in the field to the beautiful hills of Scotland, to the farmland around us here in Edinburgh, there's so much that's stunning around us, but at the same time the world around us is broken.

And that can hurt us and hurt the people around us. And for most people in the world, life is a toil in order to survive.

And alongside that brokenness we see around us, we see that our relationship to the creation has shifted from order to chaos.

Back in Genesis 1.28, where it describes how God created men and women in his image, in these verses, humanity was given a special role to have dominion and rule over the created realm. And that dominion is an exercise of responsibility. The idea in which we as the high point of creation are to look after the world that God has given us.

[10:29] It's not an excuse to abuse the world, it's a privileged place of responsibility where we are to care for the world that God has given to us.

But we've done the opposite of that, haven't we? Christy has abused the world that God has made. Through our sin we've rejected God's command to care for the creation that we've been given. And instead we've thought that our sense of authority and status over the creation means that we can use it and abuse it for our own gain. And that's why history is so full of massive environmental damage that continues to this day.

And it's a really interesting question. Why do humans destroy the world? It seems so foolish because this is where we live, this is where we get our food, this is where we get our air, this is where we get everything that we need to survive.

There is nothing for us to gain from wrecking the world around us. But we do it. Now a lot of people are seeing the folly of that and are working hard to stop it, but the reason they have to do that is because humanity at large keeps making that same mistake.

[11:49] And you think, why? Why would we do that? And the biblical answer is that sin has brought chaos into the world and it's distorted our thinking.

And within our sinful hearts is a desire to rebel against the responsibility that God has given us to look after the world. Today it's really interesting.

Today it's the environmentalists who have to be the rebellion, don't they? They have to speak in terms of being a rebellion because abusing the environment is almost seen as normal.

The Bible tells us that the real truth is the other way around. Looking after our environment is the norm that God expects and abusing creation is part of the whole rebellion of sin.

And it's a great reminder that laying aside any political thoughts or anything like that, just from a purely biblical point of view, caring for the environment is honoring to God.

[12:53] And it's a great thing for us to remember and for us to try to do. If you're on a community cleanup, if you're careful to avoid dropping litter, if you are curious about your electricity consumption, you are not just doing that to satisfy the activists, you're actually doing that to honor God.

He's given us a world that we are to look after. So creation is descended from chaos, from order into chaos.

The beautiful world made by God is broken. Creation, as Genesis 3 says, is under a curse. And Paul in Romans 8 uses three phrases to describe the condition that the world, the universe, is now in.

We can see that in these verses. He says, creation is subjected to futility. Creation is in bondage to corruption and creation is in the pains of childbirth.

Now, these three phrases are fascinating. Could you ever choose any of these phrases to describe the universe if you were asked to talk about it?

[14:07] Imagine a politician stood up and they were asked, what do you think about climate change? Well, I think the creation is in the pains of childbirth. Nobody speaks like that.

Nobody even really thinks like that. So why is Paul choosing these phrases? And what does he mean by them? Well, first of all, he says that creation was subjected to futility.

Now that word futility is very interesting. It basically means vanity. You'll remember that there's a famous phrase that runs through the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

And in the Greek Old Testament, it's the same word that Paul uses here that's been translated futility. It's conveying the idea of emptiness or nothingness or pointlessness.

In other words, Paul is telling us that the creation has become so broken, it's no longer fit for purpose.

[15:10] This world that was originally created to be a wonderful habitat where we could live as God's people, bearing God's image, has been ruined. It's no longer fulfilling its purpose.

It's no longer fulfilling the role that it was meant to have. As Paul says, it's been subjected to futility. The curse imposed in the aftermath of the fall has brought a frustration and a hindrance and an

emptiness into the great purpose that the universe originally had.

And our experience of life backs this up every day. Because how often, as you live in this universe, do things happen that seem to make no sense?

How often is life frustrating? How often do you find people looking around and thinking, I just can't make sense of the world.

I can't make sense of life. There's a futility all around us. And that futility comes from the fact that we have rejected God.

[16 : 21] And that's why the people who reject God, the people who ultimately say there's no God, the people who really think that through and who take that to its logical conclusion, what do they end up thinking?

You take the atheist who rejects God and who moves logically towards the conclusion of that presupposition. Where does it take them?

You find them saying everything's meaningless. Everything's futile.

Without God, we are simply tiny specks on a tiny planet who live for a tiny period and who ultimately don't matter.

And so instead of humanity looking at the universe thinking, wow, what an incredible environment God has made for us. People look at the universe and they say, is there any meaning to this at all?

[17 : 27] Paul is recognizing that the curse of creation has meant that the world around us has lost a key aspect of its purpose. It's subjected to futility.

And that loss of purpose manifests itself every day in terms of the next thing that Paul says about the world. He says it's in bondage to corruption.

This phrase is highlighting the fact that the world is rotting. That's what we mean when we talk about corruption. The world is rotting and it cannot escape.

As Paul says, creation was subjected to futility not willingly. It wasn't what the world wanted, the beautiful world that God made to thrive is now being spoiled.

It's rotting. It's decaying. And that manifests itself in lots of ways. We see it in the environment. The thriving nature that God created is actually constantly battling against decay and disease and ruin.

[18 : 24] So animals become extinct. Diseases continue to spread. New ones emerge and seem to be harder and harder to overcome. Interpayable damage is being done to the world around us.

It also happens in terms of behavior. The animal world is hostile. It's brutal sometimes when you see what animals do to each other. But humanity is not much better.

And you look after it over the ages of history and we can only hang our heads in shame in terms of how humans have treated one another.

I suppose all you really need to do is take your phone out and look at the news headlines and ask the question, is the world rotten?

That corruption, that rotting is dominating nature at this present time. The creation is a slave to that corruption.

[19 : 35] It's in bondage. It's an illness from which creation cannot recover itself. And that corruption is bringing sorrow and pain and hardship and suffering into our lives as well.

And all of this is because creation is not now how it was made to be. And it is not now how it wants to be.

And that's brought forth before us in the third phrase that Paul uses to describe the universe. You can see it at the bottom. He says, the whole creation has been growing together in the pains of childbirth.

Paul uses the remarkable image of childbirth to describe the world around us just now. And that's teaching us two very important things.

Number one, childbirth is sore. And so the current state of creation is not one of peace or harmony or tranquility.

[20 : 36] It is one of agony. It's being likened to the severe pain of a woman in labor. Childbirth is sore.

And secondly, childbirth is a precursor to something wonderful. And so although the pain of labor is immense, it leads to great joy, amazing joy when a precious baby is born.

So while the image of childbirth is conveying present agony and distress, it's also expressing the fact that something really good is coming.

And that brings us to the second big question we want to ask. We've asked what's happened to the universe. Now we need to ask what's going to happen to the universe. Remember what we said. We're talking about the story of the universe.

The universe had a wonderful beginning. It's got a tragic middle. But there's also an end.

[21 : 39] And interestingly, even back in Genesis, there are hints of this. In Genesis chapter 3, immediately after humanity fell, God spoke to the serpent, the means through which the devil brought this tragedy to pass.

And God spoke to the serpent saying, you are going to be crushed, pointing to the fact that ultimately the kingdom of God will have victory over the kingdom of evil. And then a few verses after that, Adam names his wife.

And what did he call her? He called her Eve. And the reason he called her that is because the meaning of that name conveys the fact that she is the mother of the living.

And that's incredibly significant because the fall meant that humanity was dead. But God says, Adam says, my wife is going to be called Eve because she's mother of the living, expressing the fact that through the generations of humanity that were to be born, there was hope of life and hope of restoration.

And Paul reinforces this point when he says that creation was subjected to futility as part of God's righteous judgment in the aftermath of the fall. But that subjection was in hope.

[23 : 01] So that means that even within the brokenness of the universe now, there's an end in view and there is a hope of something better. And the Bible tells us that God's great plan is to recreate the universe so that the world we live in now is going to be restored and renewed to what it was meant to be.

You'll remember that way back in the beginning we said we're told the stories of the heaven and the earth as Genesis' first history. If you then jump to the very end of the Bible and read verses 21 and 22 of Revelation, you hear the story of the new heavens and the new earth where God's new creation is being inaugurated and the universe is restored to everything that God wants it to be.

That's the great hope of Christianity that for every single one of us who trusts in Jesus, we can look forward to the hope, to the peace, the joy, the beauty, the wonder, the paradise of the new creation. That's the great hope that God has for us. That's the great end point of the story of the universe. But in these verses on the screen, Paul tells us something absolutely remarkable about what the creation is hoping for.

It says, the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God, for creation was subjected to futility not willingly but because of him who subjected it in hope, that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption, obtain the freedom of the children of God.

[24 : 44] So if the universe could talk and you said to the universe, what are you hoping for? What would you say? Well, you think, well, it's hoping for Jesus to return, isn't it?

That's of course what it would say. The universe is longing for the return of Jesus, longing for the restoring work of God, longing with anticipation for all that God is going to do.

Now no doubt that's true, but it's not what Paul says. If the universe could talk and you could ask, what are you hoping for?

It would say, I'm hoping for the revealing of the sons of God and I'm waiting to obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Now that's, there's something really, really important there. The universe's focus is not on God directly, the focus is on you as Christians, sons of God, children of God, that's you as Christians.

[26 : 02] If you are one, that will be you if you become one. Why is that? Why does Paul make such a direct link between the restoration of creation and the family of God?

Why is there such a clear link between the universe and you in these verses? Why does the universe long for the day when your salvation is fully completed at the return of Jesus?

Well I think the answer is as follows. We just said a moment ago that creation has lost its sense of purpose. As we said, it's subjected to futility.

In other words, right now the universe is not what it was meant to be. So that means we have to ask the question, what was the universe meant to be?

What do you think? The answer is that the universe was made to be your home.

[27 : 19] The universe was made to be a wonderful environment where humanity could live as the family of God. Therefore the reason that creation is longing for the future is because the universe

longs to be a perfect home for you.

The whole purpose of creation is to be a perfect environment for you to live in as God's people. And so creation longs for the full salvation of the people of God.

It longs for the resurrection on the last day when our bodies are reunited with our souls and we are eternally free from the decay of sin and from the effect of the curse. On that day the universe, the creation, will finally be able to fulfill its purpose and be what it was always meant to be.

It will be a perfect home for the people of God. It all makes perfect sense. That was, you remember the created work, God created the world and the crown of that creation was humanity who was made to live there.

And creation is longing to return to that role. No wonder creation is longing for the revealing of the sons of God because that will be the day when the curse is gone and order will return.

[28 : 39] The universe longs for your salvation because the universe was made for you. It was made to be a home for you and it longs for the day when that purpose will finally be fulfilled.

And I think that is utterly amazing. The universe is longing for you. I'm not making any of this up, it's saying it there.

Romans writes it, the universe is longing for you. Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of and put your name in there. It's longing for you because you are its purpose.

Creation was made for you. Now, surely that tells you how special you are in the sight of God.

If you go back to Genesis, one thing that's abundantly clear is that humanity is special. Humanity is different.

[29 : 46] It's not just another part of creation. Humanity is the occupant of creation. God made this universe so we could live in it as His family and we could know Him and serve Him and love Him.

There's a sense in which the whole universe is an extraordinary gift from God to us. It was made for us as a place where we could live.

And there's a crucial point that arises out of all of this that I want us to notice as we close. All of this is reminding us of the fact that a non-biblical worldview, an understanding of the universe that's not based on the Bible, will always ultimately devalue humanity.

A non-biblical worldview will devalue humanity. Now, what do I mean by that? Well, just think about it together. So some people reject God and they look at the universe and they basically conclude that everything is pretty much pointless, including us.

We're just another cog in this massive machine that originates from who knows where and is going who knows where and it's just a big, big machine.

[31 : 00] We are pointless. Ultimately we are nothing more than a thing. Now a lot of people hold that view, but if you think about it too much, it will lead you to a horrible depression.

And we've seen that. We look at the great thinkers, the great philosophers of the 20th century, they took that to their logical conclusion and they couldn't bear it.

Other people hold that view, but they try their best to forget about it and pretend that it's not like that and seek to create some kind of illusion of meaning in life.

They avoid the question of what life's purpose is because they can't bear the answer. So some people do that, they just reject God and everything is pretty much pointless.

Other people are different. Other people will try to find some kind of meaning in the universe. So some people will go so far as to treat the universe itself as some kind of God.

[32 : 06] So nature or faith is something that has authority over us. But our great role is to try and live in harmony with that.

Others wouldn't necessarily explicitly call the created realm a God. They wouldn't call the universe a God. They're not pantheists in that sense. But they would still regard nature as something that we should serve.

So nature is more important than humanity. And today there are many people who are incredibly sincere and incredibly well meaning, who are passionate about caring for the environment or looking after animals or trying to do good to the world around us and in so many ways that's a great thing.

But the crucial point is that all of these approaches are devaluing humanity. The view that says the universe is ultimately pointless is effectively saying that humanity is of no more value than a stone or a rat or a germ.

The view that makes a God of the universe devalues humanity because it says that we are subordinate to nature and ultimately the universe is more important than us.

[33 : 19] The view that says we must care for the environment, for the sake of the environment also devalues humanity because it makes us servants of the universe. All these views are devaluing humanity.

The Bible says something very, very different because the best that the world can say is that we can find purpose looking after the universe.

The Bible says the universe finds its purpose in looking after you.

The Bible tells us that we are not pointless objects in a pointless universe. Nor are we subordinate creatures under the rule of the universe. Nor are we servants who need to try and find purpose and meaning in this universe.

The Bible tells us that you are far, far, far more special than any of that. You have been created to be a child of God and the universe was created to be the place where you can all live.

[34 : 30] And sin ruined that. But Jesus came to fix it and creation is longing, longing for the day when finally it can be the perfect home for God's perfect family.

And this is where we see that it is in the message of the Gospel that the whole universe fits together. The whole of creation is centered on God's plan to make a perfect place for his family to live together where he himself could dwell with them.

That's God's great plan for you. And that's why when the Bible speaks about hell, what word does it often use?

It uses the word outside because hell is outside all of that and separated from it.

But the new creation will be a perfectly restored universe where the universe is everything that God wants it to be for us and we will be everything that God wants us to be for him.

[36 : 02] Isn't that amazing? Think about all the amazing stuff that God has made. He's made massive galaxies to reflect His glory.

He's made stunning flowers to show His creativity. He's made fruit and food that tastes amazing.

He's made the warmth of the sun that feels incredible. He's made beautiful rolling hills for us to walk on. He's made the amazing sound of birds for us to listen to.

It's the dream home and it's for you. And God wants every one of you to be part of that.

And all he asks is that you trust him. And I think if the universe could talk tonight, it would say, I'm trusting Jesus and all my hope is in Him.

[37 : 18] And I think the universe would say, I seriously hope you're trusting Him too. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, we realize that your plans for us are far bigger, far more amazing, and far more beautiful than we have ever really imagined or understood.

And all we can say, Lord, is thank you. Thank you for this universe.

Thank you for your great plans for it. Thank you that we can look forward to an amazing home where we will be forever with you, our amazing God.

Amen.