

De-Creation and Creation: A Worship Service Based on Isaiah 34 and 35

Call to Worship from Psalm 148

Leader: Praise the LORD!

People: Praise the LORD from the heavens!

Leader: Praise God, sun and moon, and shining stars!

**People: Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for God commanded and they were created.**

Leader: Praise the LORD from the earth,
fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling God's command!

**People: Praise the LORD, mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!**

Leader: Praise the LORD, rulers and all people of the earth.

All: Let all creation praise the name of the LORD!

Song (choose 1-2)	All creatures of our God and King, vs. 1-4, 7 Praise the Lord, sing hallelujah Sing praise to God who reigns Let all creation bless the Lord	<i>Hymnal: A Worship Book 48</i> <i>Hymnal: A Worship Book 50</i> <i>Hymnal: A Worship Book 59</i> <i>Hymnal: A Worship Book 61</i>
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Introductory Words

Scripture Reading: Excerpts from Isaiah 34 and a Contemporary Interpretation

Meditation

Silent Reflection

Prayer of Confession (based on "Beauty for Brokenness" by Graham Kendrick, *Sing the Story* 115)

God our Creator, we confess that humanity has ravaged the earth,
its soil, water, air, plants, and animals.

We have plundered and poisoned your creation,
threatening our own future and dreams.

Lord, end our madness, carelessness, and greed.
Forgive us, and turn us toward your way. Amen.

Song (choose one)	O healing river Holy Spirit, come with power	<i>Hymnal: A Worship Book 372</i> <i>Hymnal: A Worship Book 26</i>
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Scripture Reading: Isaiah 35 and a Contemporary Interpretation

Meditation

Silent Reflection

Song (choose one)	Joy to the world Open now thy gates of beauty Praise, my soul, the God of heaven! vs. 1-3	<i>Hymnal: A Worship Book 318</i> <i>Hymnal: A Worship Book 19</i> <i>Hymnal: A Worship Book 63</i>
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Prayer for Restoration

God our Sustainer, we pray for your healing power to wash over this broken earth.
Restore the elements of creation: soil, water, air.
Renew the life and balance of the ecosystems you created.
And restore our hearts and lives as well.
Help us to remember your purposes, your dreams for the world.
Teach us to live lightly on this earth, sustaining the gifts of your creation.
May your kingdom come, and your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Benediction Song (choose 1) The peace of the earth be with you
New earth, heavens new
You shall go out with joy

Sing the Journey 77
Hymnal: A Worship Book 299
Hymnal: A Worship Book 427

Please include this note in your bulletin if you use the meditations as provided:

This worship service, the contemporary interpretations of Isaiah 34 and 35, and the meditations were written by Hannah Johnson while she was a student in the Sustainability Semester at Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College in fall 2012. In 2014-15, Hannah is a senior Environmental Interpretation major at Bluffton (Ohio) University. A form of this service was used at the Rooted and Grounded Conference on Land and Christian Discipleship in September 2014, held at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

Please include this note in your bulletin if you create sermons based on these materials:

This worship service and the contemporary interpretations of Isaiah 34 and 35 were written by Hannah Johnson while she was a student in the Sustainability Semester at Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College in fall 2012. In 2014-15, Hannah is a senior Environmental Interpretation major at Bluffton (Ohio) University. A form of this service was used at the Rooted and Grounded Conference on Land and Christian Discipleship in September 2014, held at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

Please include this note in your bulletin if you use the Powerpoint:

The visuals for Isaiah 34 and 35 were compiled by Melissa Kinsey, an environmental educator from Elkhart, Indiana.

Excerpts from Isaiah 34 and a Contemporary Interpretation

¹ Draw near, O nations, to hear; O peoples, give heed!

Let the earth hear, and all that fills it; the world, and all that comes from it.

² For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their hordes;
he has doomed them, has given them over for slaughter.

All the nations, come together and listen! Let the earth hear, and all that is within it.

God is furious about the ways the nations have polluted creation;

God is letting them destroy themselves along with the earth.

⁸ For the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of vindication by Zion's cause.

⁹ And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulphur;
her land shall become burning pitch.

¹⁰ Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up for ever.

From generation to generation it shall lie waste; no one shall pass through it for ever and ever.

The day of judgment is coming, and signs are already visible!

Rivers are polluted with toxic metals and e coli bacteria.

The soil is poisoned with pesticides, and blown away by erosion.

They are destroying my mountains for cheap coal,

clear-cutting the rainforests to graze fast-food cattle,

and devastating my oceans with their oil spills.

As fossil fuels burn night and day, acid rains fall, icebergs melt, deserts spread, and species disappear.

¹¹ But the hawk and the hedgehog shall possess [the land]; the owl and the raven shall live in it.

¹³ Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses.

It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches.

¹⁴ Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other;

¹⁵ There shall the owl nest and lay and hatch and brood in its shadow;

there too the buzzards shall gather, each one with its mate.

For the mouth of the LORD has commanded, and his spirit has gathered them.

¹⁷ He has cast the lot for them, his hand has portioned it out to them with the line;

they shall possess it for ever, from generation to generation they shall live in it.

In future generations, the ruins of creation will stand in judgment against our greed.

The wastelands will lie polluted, and will not support human life.

The former grasslands will be choked with autumn olive and Asian honeysuckle,

and the remnants of lakes will be filled with algae blooms, purple loosestrife,

canary grass, and zebra mussels.

Only the Asian long-horned beetles, Canada geese, coyotes, and vultures will flourish.

The earth will be emptied of the richness of biodiversity, and will return to chaos.

Isaiah 35 and a Contemporary Interpretation

¹The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus² it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.

The wastelands of Earth will rejoice; the toxic dumps will bloom with trillium!
The Gulf of Mexico will sing with regenerated life;
the Appalachian mountains will rise up again with a shout!
The wastelands will be as green as the hills of Ireland, as glorious as Sequoia National Park.
They will see the wonderful restoration of God the Creator.

³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.'
⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Strengthen the hands of the organic farmers, and make firm the knees of the bicyclers.
Say to everyone who lives with dread of climate change and extinction,
"Don't give up! Don't be afraid! God is coming to save you, to save creation."
Then the people who have been blind to global warming will see evidence, and the people
who have been deaf to the cries of the environmentalists will finally understand.
Those who have been victims of cancers due to toxins in the air and water will dance,
and those who have been silenced by polluting corporations will sing and shout.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

For crystal-clear waters will spring up out of the brownfields, and flow through the sluiceways.
The landfills will become swimming holes, and eroded fields will become lush wetlands.

⁸ A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.
¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

A pervious pavement road will stretch across the land,
and will lead people to the places where God is restoring creation.
Everyone will live in sustainable ways, and no one will stray from God's way.
No oil wells, or strip mines, or military bases, or belching factories will be there,
but people will share the road with the endangered species God is saving.
All of creation will be restored, all reasons for discouragement will disappear,
and people will live in joyous harmony with each other and with the earth.

Introductory Words

Isaiah 34 and 35 are a unit, with two contrasting prophetic messages. The first chapter is a message of judgment against Israel's enemies, and the second chapter reverses the judgment that had earlier been announced against Israel (Lim 147). Isaiah 34 describes paradise lost and Isaiah 35 describes paradise recovered. Isaiah 34 is a description of "de-creation," when the earth returns to the chaos (without form) and emptiness (void) of the time before God's creative work began, and Isaiah 35 is a description of "re-creation," when the earth and its people are restored (Beisner 120-121). There are several environmental images in each passage, such as soil and land, water, plant life, and animal life. Listen for those as you hear the scripture and the contemporary interpretation of it read.

Meditation on Isaiah 34 (or a short sermon could be created based on this and the study notes)

Isaiah 34 sees environmental devastation as the judgment of God, something that God apparently causes to happen (Friesen 210). This is a judgment against all the nations that have oppressed Israel, but Edom is representative of the nations (Lim 145). In the vision of Isaiah 34, Edom will become a wasteland fit for only wild animals, especially predatory birds and beasts. Edom's waters and soil will be ruined and unusable, and the only thing that will grow there is thorns and weeds (Friesen 210, Widyapranawa 218).

In our day, we see some of the same devastation happening—deforestation, desertification, contamination of water and soil—but in our situation it is due to human abuse of the earth. Environmental crises may still be judgments against humans, but they are brought on by our own actions.

In the Isaiah 34 passage, the wasteland is only inhabited by wild animals, and the author seems to have a very negative view of the wildlife that is named. Today, we know that wild animals are dependent on clean water and fertile soil just as people are, and more people recognize the importance of predators and scavengers in the ecosystem. Ironically, what Isaiah 34 "treats as a curse is the romantic dream of much of the environmentalist movement" (Beisner, p. 120).

I invite us to a time of silent lament for the devastation which many parts of our earth experience.

Meditation on Isaiah 35 (or a short sermon could be created based on this and the study notes)

Isaiah 35 is a promise for the future; all of the verbs are future tense, and "shall" or "will" are repeated in almost every line. This is a text about restoration. Arid lands will be watered and will bloom with new life. Wetlands will be restored. Wildlife will not harm people (and hopefully people won't harm wildlife). There will be healing for creation and also for people. Exiles will be able to return home, and sorrow will disappear. All of creation will see God's glory and will give praise to God (Friesen 211-213, Howell 77-80, Simkins 149-150)

Isaiah 35 reminds Christians that God sees the world's potential for wholeness and peace. It gives us a vision of what ecological healing looks like. The command to the exiles, and to us, is "Do not fear" (Howell 76). We are to trust God, look for signs of God's healing in the world, and hold on to hope.

I invite us to another time of silent reflection, in which we name our own prayers and thanks for places where the earth is being restored.

Sources

Beisner, Calvin. *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate*. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997.

Brown, William and Dean McBride Jr. *God Who Creates*. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000.

Brueggeman, Walter. "Second Isaiah: An Evangelical Rereading of Communal Experience," in *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, pp. 71-90. Fortress Press, 1988.

Friesen, Ivan. *Isaiah*. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Herald Press, 2009.

Howell, Maribeth. "A Closer Look: Isaiah 35:1-10," in Boadt, Lawrence and Mark Smith, eds. *Imagery and Imagination in Biblical Literature*, pp. 72-80. The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2001.

Lim, Bo H. *The 'Way of the Lord' in the Book of Isaiah*. T & T Clark Intl., 2010.

Propp, William Henry. *Water in the Wilderness: A Biblical Motif and its Mythological Background*. Scholars Press, 1987.

Simkins, Ronald. *Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel*. Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994.

Toly, Noah J. and Block, Daniel I. *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective*. Intervarsity Press, 2010.

Van der Kooij, A. "Rejoice, O Thirsty Desert!" in van Wieringen, Archibald and Annemarieke van der Woude, *'Enlarge the Site of Your Tent,'* pp. 11-20. Brill, 2011.

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Young, Richard. *Healing the Earth: A Theocentric Perspective on Environmental Problems and Their Solutions*. Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994.

NOTES FOR PREPARATION OF SERMONS

Friesen, Ivan. *Isaiah. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Herald Press, 2009.*

210: in Is. 34, vengeance on Edom comes by return of land to wilderness—chaos and desolation; land is abandoned by people and will be occupied by wildlife, esp. predatory birds and beasts

211: Is. 35 is a contrast: complete devastation of Edom is contrasted with complete restoration of Zion and its people

-wilderness bursts with life; “rebirth of wilderness and wasteland”

-land will become as productive as the coastal plain (Sharon) and the northern mountains (Carmel and Lebanon)

212: two images of salvation in vs. 5-7:

-healing for blind, deaf, lame, and mute;

-healing for earth through life-giving surface water

212: highway is safe, no wild animals there (contrast to Edom)

213: those delivered from physical and spiritual bondage (redeemed) come home

214: Edom became wasteland because of war; similar to wastelands today

Beisner, Calvin. *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997.*

55: ch. 34 is a description of how nature is affected by the wrath of God

117: ch. 34 is vision of God’s judgment on the nations, focused on Edom, using “language of de-creation”; brings about slaughter through wild beasts

118: civilized land turned into chaotic wilderness

120: ch. 34 describes catastrophic judgment through God “de-creating” the land, “returning it to a state ‘without form and void,’ making it a formless, empty wilderness under the dominion of the birds of the air and the beasts of the field instead of under the dominion of man.” “Yet what scripture . . . treats as a curse is the romantic dream of much of the environmentalist movement.”

121: the language of re-creation includes the transformation of the wilderness into the garden; in Psalm 107-33-38, “among the signs of God’s blessing on people are the transformation and development of their land and the growth of their population—and with it, their food supply. When God curses a land, he empties it of human population and domestic animals, returning it to the wild beasts. But when he blesses it, he multiplies its human population and builds up its herds.”

Toly, Noah J. and Block, Daniel I. *Keeping God’s Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective. Intersity Press, 2010.*

83: Isaiah 34 uses metaphor of hostile wilderness chaos (wild animals, predators, thorns) to represent judgment for a nation’s sin

173: “water is often a symbol of prosperity in human life.”

175: Bible describes Canaan as land of water like garden of Eden; God gives fertility through water

179: drought is a way that sinners are punished by God

Lim, Bo H. *The ‘Way of the Lord’ in the Book of Isaiah. T & T Clark Intl., 2010.*

7, 14: In Is. 35, “way” refers to holy path, processional route, used by exiles returning to Israel who are pure in heart

15: Ch. 35 is pivotal, reverses judgment against Israel; Israel’s punishment had been “desolation of the earth” and “reduction to a desert.”

29: “the transformation of the desert into paradise theme . . . became a formative paradigm in Israel’s interpretation and proclamation.”

-pilgrimage paradigm included travel of God's people through the wilderness on a way to Zion, Yahweh leading and becoming known as savior and shepherd, comfort, rejoicing and singing, and the transformation of desert into a watered garden

118: God removes the obstacles that keep people from returning (weakness)

126: this is a homecoming text

140: sight and hearing are signs that God's salvation is coming and judgment is ending

143: in Isaiah 35 and Psalm 84, the highway is a pilgrimage route, and the gift of water symbolizes God's blessing for the journey

144: "Whereas judgment involved the destruction of the land of Israel and Judah, salvation involves the renewal of all creation."

145: "Just as the healing of blindness and deafness signifies that judgment is replaced with salvation, similarly the transformation of the desert represents the new dispensation of salvation." The judgment against Edom in ch. 34 represents the judgment against all nations who abandon God.

146: signs of end of judgment and coming of salvation: transformation of wilderness, healing to the infirm, re-establishment of highway

147: commentators agree that ch. 35 is a reversal of the judgment of ch. 34; use similar imagery, language, and themes

Ch. 34

Wrath/judgment (2-8)

Fall of nature (4, 9-15)

Sword upon Edom (5-6)

Fall of the strong (7)

Water disappears (9)

Thorns, nettles, thistles, jackals (13)

Land unclean and dangerous (10-15)

No travel through Edom (10)

Enduring destruction (10, 17)

Ch. 35

Joy/deliverance (1-4)

Blossoming of nature (1,7)

Way to Zion (8-10)

Restoration of the weak (3-6)

Water appears (6f)

Reeds, papyrus, no jackals (7)

Way without uncleanness and danger (8-9)

Open travel to Zion (8)

Enduring joy (10)

147: "a transformation takes place from life to death in ch. 34 and from death to life in ch. 35. In ch. 34 the world degenerates into a wilderness overrun by hostile creatures, and in ch. 35 the world is transformed into a garden suitable for the habitation of God's redeemed people."

151: by paring the image of the wilderness with the pilgrims, the wilderness symbolizes the spiritual condition of the people; the people respond to God the same way the land responds: rejoicing, singing

152: ch. 35 has images of re-creation; Proverbs 3:20 describes the ancient waters breaking forth at the time of creation with same word as in 35:6

Lim, Bo H. *The 'Way of the Lord' in the Book of Isaiah*. T & T Clark Intl., 2010 (continued)

152: also has images of a second exodus; the reeds and rushes in 35:7 are typical of the Nile delta; travel on a way

-"The poetic images of chs. 34-35 function to describe the removal of Israel's arch-enemy Edom and the glorious return to Zion as another act by which Yahweh takes that which is 'unformed and unfilled' and makes it 'good.'"

-the highway is for the people, for the holy pilgrims

153: the highway is for those who walk in the way of God (behave ethically)

154: other places in Is. 40-55 where the wilderness is transformed with waters: 41:17-20; 43:14-21; 44:1-5; 48:20-21; 51:1-3; 55:12-13

Brown, William and Dean McBride Jr. *God Who Creates*. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000.

40: "God who created continues to create—not abandoning the primal cosmic design . . . but renewing, adjusting, and amplifying it."

146: God provides water in the wilderness, an explicit reminder of the wilderness wanderings of Exodus
147: "The former activity of God (i.e., exodus liberation, wilderness sustenance) provides the paradigm for discerning the current activity of God.
147: "without memory hope is impossible, but memory without hope leads to despair."
148: "God is the one who is always at work, "sprouting" new things, no matter how unlikely the situation, no matter how dead the things. Sprouting is a metaphor for divine creativity."
148: Yahweh provided water in the wilderness during the exodus (Ex. 15:22-25, 17:1-7; Numbers 20:2-13) and will do so again, but this time through the form of rivers, pools, and springs, so that what has been barren will become a garden (meaning of "Carmel")

Howell, Maribeth. "A Closer Look: Isaiah 35:1-10," in Boadt, Lawrence and Mark Smith, eds. *Imagery and Imagination in Biblical Literature*, pp. 72-80. The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2001.

75: wilderness, dry land, and desert (3 different words) will break forth in abundant blooms
76: 3 different words for rejoicing; will become like lush green growth of Lebanon and Carmel
76: vs. 3-4 address frightened people with heavy hands, knocking knees, and pounding hearts: Do not fear; commands people to take an active role in the transformation that God is doing; 4 imperatives: strengthen, make firm, say, be strong
77: vs. 5-7 are about reversal of current conditions; both people and land will be dramatically transformed
78: 4 changes: Eyes of blind opened, ears of deaf unstopped, lame leap like deer, speechless tongue cry out with joy
79: wilderness and desert are now rich with water; unusual event described with rarely used words
79: highway free of predators; transformation will be fulfilled in Zion; people will have joy and gladness; grief and groaning will vanish
80: this is passage about changed world order, healing, abundant growth, and homecoming

Propp, William Henry. *Water in the Wilderness: A Biblical Motif and its Mythological Background*. Scholars Press, 1987.

99: Second Isaiah uses the water in the wilderness tradition, linking restoration both to the garden of Creation and the march through the desert of the Exodus
102: desert becomes paradise; road is made through the desert; contrast between drying of the Red Sea and the watering of the desert
102: jackals and ostriches are symbols of desolation, sterility (also found in Is. 43 where waters are produced in desert)
103: "Yahweh's response to the thirst of the desert wanderers is not just to provide drinking water, but to perform an act of creation, planting a garden in the desert."
104: desert converted to paradise, including absence of wild animals; people are healed as they journey to Zion
105: writer was trying to encourage exiles to return to Israel; they would have feared traveling through the desert and wondered whether the land of Israel could be healed

Simkins, Ronald. *Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel*. Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994.

148: in ch. 34, Yahweh is battling the nations because they oppressed Israel, and therefore were working against God's intention for creation; their punishment is "the disintegration of creation"
149: in ch. 35, Yahweh recreates the world, reverses the conditions of the nations and of Israel; when the wilderness is transformed, the exiles will be able to return home, because the desert won't be a barrier
150: creation as well as humans praises God; "The creation as it is designed by the creator is a vehicle of praise." (Ps. 148)

246: Is. 34 describes catastrophe coming on all the nations (Edom is representative); "Because the nations have violated the order of creation by assaulting the people of God," Yahweh will destroy them and creation

Widyapranawa, S. H. *The Lord is Savior: Faith in National Crisis*. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990.

218: in ch. 34, "the two most fundamental elements needed for human life, water and soil, are to be turned into pitch and burning sulfur."

221: Lebanon covered with forests of tall cedars; Carmel famous for agriculture, fertility; Sharon is a plain along the Mediterranean coast, known for flowers

222: at the time of final judgment, when God's enemies have been destroyed, God's creation will be restored to God's initial purpose; there will be total renewal and re-creation

223: 35:6b-7 "describes the radical transformation of nature;" image of 35:7b is of fertile land around Jordan or Nile rivers

Van der Kooij, A. "Rejoice, O Thirsty Desert!" in van Wieringen, Archibald and Annemarieke van der Woude, *Enlarge the Site of Your Tent*, pp. 11-20. Brill, 2011.

11: The transformation of the desert into a garden symbolizes the restoration of Zion to be a place of life

19: "The 'thirsty' place of Zion will be changed into a place of salvation and glory."

Brueggeman, Walter. "Second Isaiah: An Evangelical Rereading of Communal Experience," in *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, pp. 71-90. Fortress Press, 1988.

75: "The *homecoming* metaphor makes sense only where the metaphor of *exile* has been accepted as true."

80: "The interaction of remembered text and present pain form the matrix out of which comes new speech."

83: "When we have completely forgotten our past, we will absolutize the present and we will . . . want nothing more than the best of today. People like that can never remember who they are, cannot remember their status as exiles or that home is somewhere else. It takes a powerful articulation of memory to maintain a sense of identity in the midst of exile."

Young, Richard. *Healing the Earth: A Theocentric Perspective on Environmental Problems and Their Solutions*. Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994.

153: Scripture shows us a God who is "redeeming the land, lifting the curse, and bringing renewal"

153: first stage of renewal makes creation like Eden, like a garden

154: Water, deserts blossoming; lifting of curse shown by absence of thorns

156: the kingdom of God includes restoration of created order; kingdom was initiated by Jesus and will be fulfilled in the future

157: God "expects the subjects of the present kingdom to submit to his rule and to cooperate in restoring creation from the adverse effects of the fall in their own lives, in society, and in nature." As much as possible, we should work to restore the creation to its original state. "The only life worth living for the redeemed is a redeeming life." If the kingdom is seen as only future or only spiritual, then "the ecological implications of a theology of creation would collapse, and the idea of a restored Eden would lose all meaning."