

“WHAT A WILDLY WONDERFUL WORLD, GOD!”

Psalm 104:24 (The Message)

A BIBLE STUDY ON BIODIVERSITY

“Biodiversity” is not a biblical term but it is a deeply biblical concept. Scripture repeatedly celebrates the variety, beauty and complexity of creation: from affirming “God saw that it was good” in Genesis 1 through to the book of Revelation where four creatures representing nature’s diversity - birds, humans, wild and domestic animals - worship the risen, enthroned Jesus. Nowhere is biodiversity celebrated more than in Psalm 104. Based on an article in the A Rocha UK Magazine June 2010, this contains ideas for reflection and, below, practical suggestions for a group bible study.

PERSPECTIVE

The main question Psalm 104 makes us ask is: who is this all for? Everything - trees, birds, mountains, humans, lions and sea monsters, is completely dependent on God, and draws its value from relationship with God. Today’s dominant ideologies: either that biodiversity is a random meaningless valueless process, or that humanity is the pinnacle of biodiversity and entitled to exploit and mould it as we wish – are seen as deeply flawed. God is the source, sustainer and supreme purpose of life’s variety. Psalm 104 realigns our perspective, encouraging us to put God back at the centre, to enjoy his world and worship him alone.

GOD’S POWER

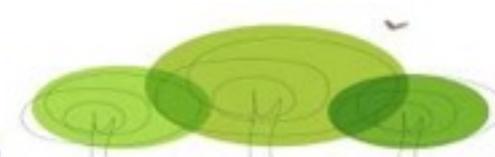
God’s greatness, splendour and majesty are shown in the oversight, design and shaping of a huge, complex, and endlessly varied universe. (vs. 1-9, 31-35). The creatures God makes express his ‘wisdom’ (v.24).

- **Think about some of your favourite species and what aspects of God’s wisdom and character they display.**

GOD’S PRESENCE

God is not remote but active in sending his Spirit and renewing the face of the earth (v.30), providing for all of life including humanity. The vision is profoundly relational – creation living in sustainable balance because of God’s creating, caring, sending and rejoicing.

- **What hints can you see in Psalm 104 of a relational, Trinitarian God?**
- **How does God’s active involvement here fit with humanity’s task to rule over and care for creation (Genesis 1:26-28)?**



GOD'S PRIORITIES

God's purpose for this biodiverse world is primarily his own pleasure: "May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works" (vs.31). Within this, God's overarching priority in Psalm 104 is to create the conditions for all creation's flourishing. He does this by designing the architecture of the earth – its foundations and boundaries (vs.2-9), and then by providing life's essentials – water, food and shelter (vs.10-21).

- **How do God's priorities compare to our culture's?**
- **How can the people of God live in a way that reflects God's desire for all creation to flourish?**

OUR PLACE

Humanity is part of a biodiverse world, not separate from it. We are amongst the 'creatures' the earth is full of (vs.11-24). Our welfare and that of other species are tightly bound together. Our primary role is to worship God (vs.33-34) as we stand in awe at creation, and our secondary role (cf. Psalm 8 and Genesis 1.26-28) is to enable creation to worship God too. Yet, alone amongst the creatures in Psalm 104 we can have a damaging role (v.35).

- **How can we either assist or hinder God's purposes for creation by our treatment of other species?**

SUGGESTIONS FOR A GROUP BIBLE STUDY

Resources Needed:

- Large sheets of paper
- Felt-tip / marker pens
- Old magazines / newspapers with pictures
- Scissors
- Glue sticks
- "The Message" version of the Bible (ideally with printed copies of Psalm 104 for each person)
- Data projector / laptop / screen (if using PowerPoint of Psalm 104)
- CD player (for music to accompany Psalm 104)
- CD of creation music (see below for suggestions)
- Candle (large if possible) and matches



PSALM 104

1. LISTEN & WATCH:

- Give everybody a copy of Psalm 104:1-31, ideally from 'The Message' (Eugene Peterson) which puts it in fresh contemporary language.
- If you have access to a data projector, use the PowerPoint presentation in this pack along with one or more readers – reading quite slowly.
- To create atmosphere have some background instrumental music playing (Haydn's 'Creation', Debussy's 'The Sunken Cathedral' or Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons - Spring' would all be appropriate).

2. DISCUSS: (there are probably too many questions for most groups here, so try and pick from each section rather than only covering the first section)

a. First Impressions

- Choose your favourite verse or phrase describing an aspect of God's creation and share it with the group.
- Why do you like it so much?
- What aspects of God's character can you find in this passage?
- What is the reaction of the Psalmist to the wonders of nature (verses 33 ff)?
- How can we encourage a movement from 'wonder' to 'worship'? How does our worship in church reflect the wonder of God's creation – how can we either bring creation into church more or take church out into God's creation?

b. What's it all about?

- What is the primary focus of this passage? Humanity? Nature? God?
- Look through Psalm 104 and see who the words 'great' and 'wonderful' are applied to.
- Who looks after creation in this passage?
- Who is it all for? Read verses 14-18 and see what is described as made for people – and what is made for God, or home to other creatures. What does this tell us about God's creation as a whole?
- v.31 "Let the Lord rejoice in his works." Or in the Message "Let God enjoy his creation!" How do we prevent God being able to enjoy his creation? How can we enable creation to be something God rejoices in?
- In an era where biodiversity is under great threat, what hope does this Psalm give us? Where should our trust lie?

c. What about us?

- How does God's command to humanity to 'rule over' the earth (Genesis 1:26-28) fit together with the balance of nature Psalm 104 envisages?
- What if anything does v.35 tell us about the place of humanity? Is there anywhere else in this Psalm that talks about dis-harmony or conflict within nature?
- In a consumer culture which often fails to value nature, how can we restore the balance that this Psalm pictures?
- Verses 14-15 give a picture of human life flourishing. Can humans truly flourish unless nature is flourishing too? What myths - false messages - that our culture gives about human flourishing (e.g. from advertising, media, politics, education) are different from the vision in Psalm 104? (If people are stuck you could start off



with a couple of examples such as 'shopping makes you happy', 'happiness depends on having a flat-screen digital TV / this seasons fashions', 'if it feels good to you then it's OK')

- What are the practical implications for how we live today of the vision of ecological balance this Psalm gives, in a context where human overconsumption and overpopulation is squeezing out the global space for other creatures?

3. ACTION

The vision of Psalm 104 is one of God's 'shalom' harmony within all the relationships of creation – between people, wildlife, the land and God. It's a long way from where we are today and yet we're called to be a people who hold together in tension the reality of a broken world and a vision of God's plans for creation's renewal – the day when 'creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay' (Romans 8:21).

Using a large & long sheet of paper (e.g. the back of some wallpaper or lining paper), list at one end:

'HOW THINGS ARE NOW'

- make a list both of negatives and some positives regarding the state of the world today, and in particular the relationship between humanity and the environment – ensure everyone in the group has an opportunity to suggest ideas.

And at the other end:

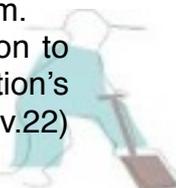
'A VISION OF HOW THINGS SHOULD BE'

- based largely on ideas from Psalm 104 and other biblical visions of harmony in creation.

- Then draw some lines to link up ideas that connect (e.g. you might link 'deforestation' to 'everybody sitting under their own vine' or 'the birds singing in the branches').
- Now write or draw on these lines (or in the middle space between the two lists) some ideas of how we can begin to get from how things are to how things should be. Allow people to contribute all kinds of ideas from the small-scale to the global – but encourage them to be as practical as possible, not just 'airy fairy ideas'! For instance somebody might say 'every child learning how to grow vegetables' or 'people sharing cars', or 'smaller families'. At every point encourage the group to relate their suggestions to their own lives.

4. PRAYER

- Read / listen to Psalm 104 again.
- Respond firstly in brief prayers of praise to God for the wonders of nature – naming particular species that give delight and joy.
- Place the two pictures of the world made in the opening activity, and the sheet of 'How things are' and 'How things should be' in the middle of the group.
- Have a time of silence (with background music if desired) listening to God, seeking both how God feels about the current state of biodiversity, and what God wants us to do about it. Encourage people to share what God has shown them.
- Use the sheets / pictures to spark off prayers of repentance and intercession to God for how we have mistreated creation, and of longing / yearning for creation's healing. If you wish, refer to Romans 8 with its picture of creation's groaning (v.22)



and also the groaning of Christians (v.23) and of God's Holy Spirit (v.26). Encourage people to sense the heart of God groaning at what we have done to creation.

- Conclude with an act of witness. Place the 'good world' picture from the opening activity on top of the other pictures / sheets of paper, and place a large lit candle in the middle of it (making sure you have a safe candle-holder under it!). Join together in the following responsive prayer:

The Light of Christ has come into the world

To shine on all creation.

The Light of Christ has come

To shame the shadows and dispel the darkness.

The Light of Christ has come into the world

To shine on all creation.

The Light of Christ has come

To bring life to all that has been held back.

The Light of Christ has come into the world

To shine on all creation.

The Light of Christ has come

To release the captives and set creation free.

The Light of Christ has come into the world

To shine on all creation

The Light of Christ has come

To shine in our hearts, our homes, our lifestyles.

The Light of Christ has come into the world

To shine on all creation.

The light of Christ has come

To call us to live for the life of the world.

The Light of Christ has come into the world

To shine on all creation.

The Light of Christ has come

To show us the way and lead us in hope.

Let us praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

The light of Christ has shone in our hearts.

We commit ourselves to live in the light of God's future,

And to seek God's peace for all creation. Amen.

