



Worshipping Biblically in the context of the climate emergency

Climate change is the “defining issue of our time”¹ and needs to be acknowledged and addressed in worship (at least annually for [Eco church registration](#)). The technical and political issues are complex, and preachers and worship leaders may feel insufficiently knowledgeable to make this their focus. A Biblical approach may feel more welcoming.

Climate change is however a modern phenomenon and is not directly addressed by any Biblical passage. Contextual Bible reading focuses on the context in which the passage is being read (rather than the more usual concern for the context within which it was written). This can often lead to new insights and inspiration for worship. Given that the passage has been read out of its original context, however, it is necessary to reflect on those insights and inspiration in the light of other Bible passages and our wider understanding of Christian theology. This session aims to guide preachers and worship leaders to plan an act of worship using this approach.

As set out, this session takes about an hour and explores the use of one Bible passage. As such it might be used in a Leaders of Worship and Preachers' Meeting as CLPD². If more time is available, at a study day for example, it might be useful to divide into groups exploring different Bible passages. Worksheets are included as appendices to facilitate this. In this case it might be useful for a concluding plenary session during which the groups can share and compare their experiences.

The sessions has been written by Dr Richard Baker, a Local Preacher in the Macclesfield Circuit. Having had a successful scientific career in an unrelated field he has become more and more concerned, passionate and educated about climate justice in recent years. In 2021, as Lay Pastor, he led a *Climate Year* at Bramhall Methodist church. He now blogs on climate issues at www.largeblue.co.uk.

Outline

1. **Setting the context**
2. **Reading and reflecting on the passage**
3. **Checking your answers**
4. **Preparing for worship**
5. **Sharing experiences from different groups (if relevant)**

¹ António Guterres, UN Secretary General [speaking in September 2018](#)

² Continuing Local Preacher Development.

Note to facilitators:

The technical and political issues surrounding the climate emergency are complex. Within the group there may be individuals who are quite knowledgeable, but there will almost certainly be those who are not. The broader themes, and particularly those that emerge from the Bible passages, do not necessarily require specialist knowledge and it is suggest that discussion focusses on these. Apart from anything else it is these that a congregation being led in worship are most likely to relate to.

0. PREPARING FOR THE SESSION (Optional – 10 minutes)

You might like to invite people to prepare for the session in advance by reading [this document](#)³ which outlines a range of Biblical themes that are relevant in the context of the climate emergency.

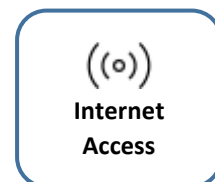
1. ESTABLISHING THE CONTEXT (10 minutes – 15 with podcast):**Living as God Requires**

Averting the climate emergency will require us all to live differently. This study focusses on encouraging and supporting a congregation to engage with the available lifestyle choices:

- List the lifestyle choices that are available to us to reduce our carbon emissions?
-

Discuss in pairs / groups as appropriate and report back

If you have time, listen [to this podcast](#) in which Rachel Mander talks about how her faith has led her to make decisions about her lifestyle [3¼ mins].



³ Theology and the Climate Emergency by Richard Baker, available to download from www.largeblue.co.uk.

2. READING AND REFLECTING ON THE PASSAGE (20 minutes)

Read **2 Kings 5:2-3 & 9-14** (NRSV):

¹Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

⁵ ... He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments... ⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹² Are not ... the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" ¹⁴So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.



Spend a few moments thinking through your answers to the following questions, then discuss them in twos or threes:

- What does Naaman expect will need to happen for him to be healed?
- How do Elisha's actions and instructions confront this?
- Why did Naaman get angry?
- Who has Naaman had to listen to in order to be healed?
- What do we expect will need to happen to avert the climate emergency?
- What should we expect?
- How might our answers be guided by the insights from our answers to the earlier questions?

3. CHECKING OUR CONCLUSIONS (10 minutes)

In reading a passage outside its original context there are always dangers that the insight and inspiration we have drawn from it might differ from wider Biblical and theological themes.



Discuss (either in twos/threes or all together):

- Which other Bible passages might be relevant? Do they confirm or question what you have taken out of the passage?
- Which broader theological principles are relevant? Do they confirm or question what you have taken out of the passage?

4. PLANNING FOR WORSHIP (20 minutes)

How might you use some of the insights and inspirations you have gained from this study to plan an act of worship?

- What is your key message?
- How might you explore this in the sermon and/or through other components of worship?
- How do you hope the congregation will respond?

5. Sharing with other groups (if relevant)

If several groups have been working with different Bible passages, then you might want to report back on how you've got on. It might also be useful to reflect on the on the strengths and weaknesses of contextual Bible reading more generally.

Appendices

The next pages contain similar instructions based on different Bible passages which can be used if there is a little more time and a number of groups want to work in parallel.

1. ESTABLISHING THE CONTEXT (10 minutes – 15 with podcast):

The cosmic powers of the present darkness

Averting the climate emergency will require us to identify the powers in the present world that have led us to our present predicament in order that we can take action to resist them. This study aims to help Christians can advocate for change either personally or by supporting others.

- List the different ways can we communicate our concerns about the climate emergency to those in power and demand change?

If you have time watch [this video](#) about a Christian climate activist called Holly [5½ mins].



Flipchart or
whiteboard
& pens



Internet
Access

2. READING AND REFLECTING ON THE PASSAGE (20 minutes)

Read Ephesians 6:12-17 (NRSV)

¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.



Spend a few moments thinking through your answers to the following questions, then discuss them in twos or threes:

- The author assumes that our struggle is against powers of supernatural origin. With a more modern mindset, we are likely to think in more worldly terms. What are dark powers that we need to struggle against in addressing the climate emergency?
- Is there a spiritual dimension to our present struggle as well? If so, what is it?

- What armour might be required in our current struggle? (If it helps you might want to answer this question in general terms at first and then think of equivalents to the five items of armour and one weapon that are listed in the passage).
- How can we each engage with the struggle against climate change?
- How can we support other Christians who feel a specific calling to activism?

3. Checking your answers (10 minutes)

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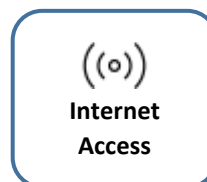
Acknowledging how we feel about the climate emergency

Climate change is already having a devastating effect on vulnerable communities around the world and all the projections are that this is going to get worse. This study explores how can we allow congregations to acknowledge and even express the negative feelings associated with climate change.



- Rank the five feelings from the list below that resonate most strongly with you and then discuss your answers with the group. Discuss what feelings may be felt by the members of a congregation.

I'm trying to ignore it	I'm angry	I don't believe it's real	I feel sad
I want to do something	I feel guilty	I'm confused	It's nothing to do with me
I don't know much about it	I feel optimistic	I feel powerless	I'm anxious



If you have time watch [this video](#) in which Aubrey Sampson talks about lament [2 mins].

2. READING AND REFLECTING ON THE PASSAGE (20 minutes)

Read Isaiah 24:4-7

*⁴ The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers;
the heavens languish together with the earth.
⁵ The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant.
⁶ Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer
for their guilt;
therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few
people are left.
⁷ The wine dries up, the vine languishes,
all the merry-hearted sigh.*



Spend a few moments thinking through your answers to the following questions, then discuss them in twos or threes:

- How do the images in the text correspond to images you have seen on your screens or in your newspapers?
- How do you respond emotionally to these words?

- What does the passage say about guilt?
- Notice that the passage assumes that the people's guilt is corporate and not individual. How is this relevant to the climate emergency?
- How do we deal emotionally with this balance between corporate and individual responsibility?

3. Checking your answers (10 minutes)

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Discuss:

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