



## **Famed Primatologist Jane Goodall Dead at 91**

*The Wired Word for the Week of October 12, 2025*

### **In the News**

The Jane Goodall Institute announced its founder, Jane Goodall, the world's foremost expert on chimpanzees, died of natural causes on October 1 while in California for one of the 300 speeches she gave most years even into her ninth decade. The 91-year-old animal welfare advocate is survived by her son, Hugo, and three grandchildren.

In 1957, paleoanthropologist Louis Leakey recruited Goodall to conduct the first intensive study of wild chimpanzees in their natural habitat in Gombe, Tanzania.

Goodall noted the complex structure of the primate world, noting their distinct personalities, intelligence, sense of humor and wide range of emotions, from happiness, love, empathy, kindness and tenderness, to anger, sorrow, fear, depression and hostility. The primatologist witnessed the chimps hunting, grooming, playing, fighting, showing affection, adopting other chimpanzees, and comforting each other.

Her reports of a chimpanzee she named David Greybeard making a tool from twigs to fish termites from a nest mesmerized the scientific community, which had previously held the view that tool-making was a skill only humans possessed.

When Leakey learned of her discovery, he responded with this telegram:

NOW WE MUST REDEFINE TOOL STOP

REDEFINE MAN STOP

OR ACCEPT CHIMPANZEES AS HUMAN

"What the chimps have taught me over the years is they're so like us. They've blurred the line between humans and animals," Goodall said. Her discoveries nudged the public, including the scientific community, to reexamine how we understand who we are as a species.

In 1986, Goodall attended a conference of chimpanzee researchers where she was devastated by reports of how wild habitat destruction was negatively impacting chimpanzee populations.

"I arrived at the conference as a scientist. I left as an activist," she remarked. Determined to do everything in her power to protect and preserve the environment, she became a kind of "global educator-at-large."

"The least I can do is speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves," the zoologist said.

"In the rainforest [is] ... where I felt that deep, spiritual connection to the natural world, and also came to understand the interconnectedness of all living things in this tapestry of life where each species, no matter how insignificant, plays a probably vital role in the whole pattern."

Goodall remarked that indigenous people and those who practice various religions often see animals as our brothers and sisters, as those who should be cared for by humans, and who provide humans with various benefits as well. She realized that working for animal welfare went hand in hand with addressing human needs as well.

In a 2020 interview with Krista Tippett, Goodall remarked about our ability "to ask questions like, Who am I? Why am I here? What is the purpose of it all? Is there a purpose? Is there a spiritual guiding force out there? ... there is no way that what's happened is just chance. What that intelligence behind the universe is -- what it is, who it is; probably what it is -- I haven't the faintest idea, but I'm absolutely sure that there is something. And seeking for that something is part of being human."

In a video interview recorded shortly before Goodall's death, released only after her passing, she shared the final message she felt compelled to give the world, which included these words: "each and every one of you has a role to play. ... your life matters, and you are here for a reason, ... every single day you live, you make a difference in the world, and you get to choose the difference that you make. ... Don't lose hope. ... And if you want to save what is still beautiful in this world, if you want to save the planet for the future generations, your grandchildren, their grandchildren, then think about the actions you take each day, because multiplied a million, a billion times, even small actions will make for great change."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Jane Goodall Dies at 91 While on Speaking Tour: She Was a 'Tireless Advocate' for Nature. \*People\*](#)

[Jane Goodall, the Celebrated Primatologist and Conservationist, Has Died. \*AP News\*](#)

[Jane Goodall, In Memoriam -- What It Means to Be Human \(51 minutes\). \*On Being Podcast\*](#)

[Famous Last Words: Dr. Jane Goodall \(Video 55:03\). \*Netflix\*](#)

[Jane Goodall: An Inside Look \(Full Documentary\) \(Video 1:30:09\). \*National Geographic\*](#)

## **Applying the News Story**

As Goodall's celebrity increased, she sometimes had to gently correct fans who idolized her. One woman once greeted her, shrieking, "Oh my God!" to which she wryly replied, "I'm not your God. I'm just Jane."

The incident is reminiscent of the time when crowds of people wanted to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas as though they were gods, after Paul healed a lame man, when Paul insisted, "We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them" ([Acts 14:8-18](#)).

Use the news to consider what nature and our faith have to teach us about what it means to be human and how we fit into God's design for creation.

## **The Big Questions**

1. What is your earliest memory of some aspect of the natural world?
2. How are humans and other creatures alike? How are humans different from other creatures?
3. How would you describe the relationship between faith and science?
4. Goodall seemed to delight in the knowledge that humans are part of the natural world. But some theorize that humans are superior to or separate from the rest of creation. How do you see your own relationship to nature, and what role does your faith play in how you understand that relationship?

5. Where in the Bible do you find indications of high regard and care for animals, and what does that suggest to you about how we should interact with other creatures on Earth?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Genesis 2:18-20**

*Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle and to the birds of the air and to every animal of the field, but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. (For context, read [Genesis 2:18-24](#).)*

Goodall was criticized by some scientists for giving the chimps with whom she lived names like David Greybeard, Flo, Flint and Fifi, because the prevailing practice was to give animals numbers rather than names. Eventually, Goodall's unconventional method became more accepted, because it helped people view chimps as unique individuals.

**Questions:** Why do you think God gave the man the task of naming the animals? In what contexts might humans be given a number rather than a name? What difference does it make whether an animal or a human is given a number rather than a name?

#### **Genesis 6:19-21**

*And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds and of the animals according to their kinds, of*

*every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up, and it shall serve as food for you and for them."* (For context, read [Genesis 6:11-22](#).)

This flood narrative begins with an explanation for the coming destruction: that the earth was filled with violence and corruption (vv. 11-13). God gave Noah instructions for the building of an ark, to save him and his family, as well as representatives of all the animals on the earth, "to keep them alive with you" (vv. 14-21). He was also to take provisions to sustain them and the animals, so that they would not suffer extinction.

**Questions:** Whether you interpret the flood narrative literally or figuratively, what impresses you about God's instructions to Noah, with regard to the animals? Why not exclude certain creatures that might be troublesome or dangerous at times?

### **Job 12:7-10**

*[Job said,] "But ask the animals, and they will teach you, the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you, and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being."* (For context, read [Job 12:7-16](#).)

Job was frustrated by the sanctimonious attitude of his friends, who suggested that his adversities were probably due to some moral failure on his part. But Job claimed that they needed to learn a lesson from the animals, birds, plants and fish, who were all aware that the life of every living thing is in the hand of the Lord. What is true for every aspect of creation, from whether it thrives, survives, or perishes, to what kind of

weather happens on any given day, is also true of humans: All of this depends on God's sovereign will.

**Questions:** How does one go about "asking animals, birds, plants and fish" questions? Goodall said Leakey chose her to research wild chimps because she had an "open mind." How can we open our minds to learn what God's creatures might have to teach us -- about God? About creation? About ourselves? About our relationships with other humans and with God?

### **Colossians 1:15-16**

*[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers -- all things have been created through him and for him. (For context, read [Colossians 1:15-20](#).)*

John of Patmos echoes the sentiment in this text when he writes that in his vision of heaven, the four living creatures worship God and the 24 elders cast their crowns before the throne of God, declaring, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" ([Revelation 4:11](#)). Elsewhere Paul writes that "there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." ([1 Corinthians 8:5-6](#)).

Goodall often spoke of a "Great Spirit in Whom 'we live and move and have our being.'"

**Questions:** In what sense are all things created for God and for Christ? If it is true that we exist for God and for Christ, how will we fulfill the purpose for which we were created?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. "According to my calculations, reality is this very second," wrote Barbara Johnson, in "A Hearty Ha, Ha, Ha!" in the anthology, *She Who Laughs, Lasts!* "You see, yesterday is only a memory, and tomorrow is merely a dream. Today is an illusion. That leaves this one second. Every day you have 86,400 seconds. But they come only one at a time. In your bank account of time, no balance is carried over until the next day. You use those seconds or lose them. There is no chance to reinvest. Make your investment wisely ..."

How can we ensure that we are using our 86,400 seconds wisely, so that at the end of our lives, we can be confident that we have fulfilled the role for which God put us on the Earth?

2. Comment on this, from Pope Francis, in his encyclical *On Care for Our Common Home [Laudato Si']*: "A true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. ... Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society."

3. In a 2020 interview, Goodall said: "I think probably, my very favorite individual tree has to be Beech, in my garden. And when Beech began to grow, over 100 years ago, actually, it was from a pretty tiny seed. And if I had picked it up at that time, it would've seemed so small and weak, a little growing shoot and a few little roots.

"And yet, there is what I call magic. It's a life force in that little seed, so powerful that to reach the water that the tree will need, those little roots can work through rocks and eventually, push them aside. And that little shoot, to reach the sunlight which the tree will need for photosynthesis, can work its way through cracks in a brick wall, and eventually, knock it down.



"And so we see the bricks and the walls as all the problems, social and environmental, that we have inflicted on the planet. So it's a message of hope: hundreds and thousands of young people around the world can break through and can make this a better world."

What message does the Parable of the Beech Seed convey to you today?

4. Discuss this: Educator Rachel Klinger Cain distinguishes between what she calls vertical morality ("the idea that morality comes from authority above") and horizontal morality (which "prioritizes the well-being of our neighbors, communities and personal relationships," according to author April Ajoy).

"We act in ways that cause the least amount of harm to those around us, regardless of beliefs," explains Ajoy. "Someone with vertical morality may help someone in need because they believe that's what God wants them to do, ... [while] someone with horizontal morality may help that same person for the benefit of the person that needs help."

People who practice horizontal morality, Ajoy says, actually come closest to a Christ-like approach, because doing so also acknowledges vertical morality. She points to Matthew 25, where Jesus says those who met the needs of the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the sick and the prisoner (horizontal morality) were showing love to him (vertical morality).

"There's a quote I heard often growing up ... that says, 'Some Christians are so heavenly-minded that they're no earthly good.' And I think that perfectly sums up the risks of holding solely to a vertical morality," Ajoy

says. "Our history is full of instances of Christians causing human suffering because they believed they were obeying God. And God's will can be manipulated and weaponized for all sorts of harm."

## **Responding to the News**

Brainstorm how you and your church can encourage greater connection with the natural world, as a way to worship the Creator and learn how to more effectively care for the world God made.

**Prayer** suggested by [Psalm 104:10-31](#); [Genesis 1:24-31](#); [Genesis 2:15](#); [1 Chronicles 29:11-13](#); [Psalm 24:1-2](#); [Matthew 6:25-34](#)

O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. You provided plants for humans and animals to eat, and gave humans the responsibility to care for the natural world, and that design was very good. All that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; we all belong to you. Teach us to care for your creation just as you care for the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, the lowliest earthworm and the grass which is here today and gone tomorrow, so that you may rejoice in your human children just as you rejoice in all the rest of your creation. For your glory, we pray. Amen.