

The Bible And The Environment

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In listening to the American media, a person could be led to believe that God and Christianity are enemies of nature. Thrown in among the epithets mouthed by environmentalists against their adversaries are "Christian," "right-wing" and "conservative," as if they believe that these words describe the same group and all people within them. So it is not a great leap of thought to conclude that since Christians follow the teachings of the Bible, God must be anti-environment!

It is not uncommon to hear liberal, non-Christian, radical environmentalists quoting parts of Genesis 1:26, 28 as their proof that Bible-believing Christians seek nothing more than total devastation of the earth:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; *let them have dominion* over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." . . . Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and *subdue it*; *have dominion* over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

To environmentalists, this means that God gives man free rein to do anything he wants to the planet—bend it to his uses and abuses, rape it of all its beauty and diversity—for his own benefit. "Does not the land have any rights?" they cry. "What about the plants and animals, birds and fish? What gives us the right to mine and burn and kill without care for nature?"

Certainly, God did not give man the authority to degrade and destroy His earth. Environmentalists are correct in saying that mankind should consider and address environmental concerns. They are quite wrong, however, to blame God for the earth's ecological problems; He is not responsible for *man's* destruction of the natural world.

God Is Creator!

To think that God gave man carte blanche to plunder and destroy the earth is simply ludicrous. He is its Creator! Why would He immediately command Adam to ruin it? Would any woodworker, upon just finishing a beautifully stained piece of furniture, tell his son to break it up for firewood? No! Just as God desires for His creation, the woodworker would put his handiwork to use and also care for it by keeping it waxed and dusted to prolong its life.

This is exactly what God told Adam. Genesis 2 contains a parallel account of creation, adding detail to certain parts of the narrative of the first chapter. Notice God's expanded instruction: "Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden *to tend [dress, KJV] and keep it*" (verse 15). This greatly modifies the force of "have dominion" and "subdue it" from Genesis 1:26, 28!

Tend (Hebrew *'abad*) means "to work or serve," and thus referring to the ground or a garden, it can be defined as "to till or cultivate." It possesses the nuance seen in the KJV's choice in its translation: "dress," implying adornment, embellishment and improvement.

Keep (Hebrew *shamar*) means "to exercise great care over." In the context of Genesis 2:15, it expresses God's wish that mankind, in the person of Adam, "take care of," "guard" or "watch over" the garden. A caretaker maintains and protects his charge so that he can return it to its owner in as good or better condition than when he received it.

To Noah, God gives a similar command after the Flood:

So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move on the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand. (Genesis 9:1-2)

Once again God gives man dominion over all other life on the earth, and with this renewed authority comes the implicit responsibility to tend and keep what was explicitly given to Adam. In this post-Flood world, God gives mankind a second chance to use and preserve the resources He had so abundantly provided. To that end Noah, after 120 years as a preacher and shipwright, took up farming and planted a vineyard (verse 20). We can assume, from what we know of human nature, that this attitude of stewardship did not pass to very many of his descendants.

Eco-Friendly Laws

Most people would be hard-pressed to think of any biblical laws that are "environmentally friendly." In fact, a great many of them would scoff at the idea that any ancient document could contain positive admonitions about the treatment of nature. Modern environmentalists hold the arrogant notion that such "enlightened" concepts never occurred to anyone else but themselves down through the long march of Western civilization.

But God has been and is way ahead of them! His Word teaches the proper balance between man and nature, frequently tipping the scales toward the environment. Our Creator is also the Sustainer of the universe. Who knows any better than He how the billions of living and nonliving parts of His creation work together?

The books of Moses, among the most ancient biblical writings, contain the bulk of the environmentally friendly passages, showing God's attitude toward the land and the plants and animals that inhabit it. All of these laws provide specific examples to expand the "tend and keep" principle He gave to Adam.

In Leviticus 25, God outlines a vital provision for the land, particularly cultivated lands:

Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them, "When you come into the land which I give you, then the land shall keep a sabbath to the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in its fruit; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath to the LORD. You shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard. What grows of its own accord of your harvest you shall not reap, nor gather the grapes of your untended vine, for it is a year of rest for the land." (verses 2-5)

The land sabbath gives cultivated fields a chance both to rest and return vital nutrients to the soil, allowing it to produce bountifully for an indefinite time. This law enhances the quality of the produce, which leads to healthier people and livestock. Everybody benefits!

Exodus 21:33-34, part of the Old Covenant, attempts to protect animals from human-produced hazards:

And if a man opens a pit, or if a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls in it, the owner of the pit shall make it good; he shall give money to their owner, but the dead beast shall be his.

As Creator, God knows that the intelligence level of these beasts is not so high that they can avoid pitfalls beyond what He has "programmed" into their instinct. This law, then, pressures men to take precautions around animals for their sake.

The same principle is true for plants: "If fire breaks out and catches in thorns, so that stacked grain, standing grain, or the field is consumed, he who kindled the fires shall surely make restitution" (Exodus 22:6). Obviously, these laws have economic and criminal implications, but the ecological benefits are clear. They forestall people from taking a careless approach to their living environment, and their principles apply to all sorts of ecological abuses.

God gives us laws regarding the growth and producing of fruit trees (Leviticus 19:23-25) designed for the mutual benefit of man and tree. He does not even allow His armies to cut down all the trees around a city when they need to besiege it (Deuteronomy 20:19-20). They must leave the fruit and nut trees intact! His law also proscribes the use of differing varieties of seed in a field, which more often than not "defiles" or weakens the resultant produce (Deuteronomy 22:9).

God provides a law to handle finding a bird's nest with eggs or chicks in it (Deuteronomy 22:6-7)! He makes sure our beasts of burden receive their "wages" for their work (Deuteronomy 25:4). Solomon adds as a general admonition, "A righteous man regards the life of his animal, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel" (Proverbs 12:10).

It is very clear that God's Word is very friendly to the non-human inhabitants of planet earth!

New Testament Promises

The New Testament contains three prophetic passages regarding the state of the earth's environment before Christ's return, and all agree that it will be very poor. God knew that human nature would eventually lead men to rape the land and kill the animals with abandon, and that during the last days this attitude would reach its pinnacle. And such will be the earth's state *before* the devastation wrought by the Great Tribulation and the Day of the Lord!

The first passage, Acts 3:19-21, never mentions the environment directly, but the implication of the earth being in need of repair, rest and rehabilitation is definitely present:

Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of

restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.

The time is coming when God will restore to the earth its beauty and productivity that man has selfishly stripped from it. Water will be purified, soil will get its rest and be revitalized, animal and plant populations will return to their natural rates and rhythms, and blighted and desert areas will be healed. Only when God's government rules and administers God's law will this restoration occur.

The apostle Paul provides the second "environmentally prophetic passage" in Romans 8:19-22:

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits 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; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.

God's whole creation is enslaved in grievous bondage! This slavery, called by Paul "the bondage of corruption," is subjection to decay, devastation, disease, destruction and degradation because of sin—mankind's sin. The earth and all its creatures are expectantly waiting for the time when God's sinless children will take over the rule of this world and deliver creation from the curse of sin! And like a human birth, the worst pains—in this case, the worst ecological devastation—will occur just before and at the delivery of the new life. This explains the earth's groaning and laboring as the end nears.

We find the third passage in Revelation 11:17-18, as part of the explanation of the Seventh Trumpet, ushering in the seven last plagues. In these verses the 24 elders tell John what is about to happen:

We give you thanks, O Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was and who is to come, because You have taken Your great power and reigned. The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, and the time of the [nations], that they should be judged, and that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear Your name, small and great, and *should destroy those who destroy the earth*.

According to these angels, part of the reason for Christ's return is to pass judgment on those who have polluted, defiled and marred God's creation! God has great patience, but by that time He will have seen enough of man's blatant disregard for the work of His hands. He will strike with a vengeance that mankind has never before even imagined (Matthew 24:21-22), and the guilty will pay with their lives.

Individual Efforts

Most of us need not go very far to see ecological problems and abuses. Even with the attention environmentalism receives nowadays, many polluters and pollutants remain to do their dirty work. From what we have seen in Scripture, we cannot expect it to get any better. This world's consumer-driven cultures will demand even greater and more diverse resources, space and energy, and the earth has only so much to give.

As individuals we can do little about it overall, but we can help out in small ways. Though it takes a little more time and effort, we can recycle scores of items and materials, either through local trash collection or regional recycling centers. We can try to use renewable commodities and energy, and make the most efficient use of those that are not. Even small efforts at conservation help.

On balance, however, we should not take the approach of today's environmentalists who have made a religion of their cause. Some go so far as to worship an earth goddess called Gaia, a kind of Mother Nature. This, of course, is idolatry, which God hates. We must be careful that our concern for the environment does not overtake our God-given priorities of putting Him and His righteousness first (Matthew 6:33).

Perhaps the best we can do is to appraise our lives with regard to the "tend and keep" principle God gave to Adam. Whatever domain we have, we need to ask ourselves how well we are doing in caring for what God has provided. Are we good stewards of our possessions—home, yard, vehicle, furniture, clothes, equipment, etc.—or do we leave something to be desired? If God asked for them back, would He be pleased with their condition?

Spiritually, this evaluation has long-reaching ramifications. In Luke 16:10, our Judge reminds us that "he who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much." Our reward and position in God's Kingdom may rest on our faithful "tending and keeping" of our blessings right now. A little effort today to make our environment better may earn us great reward in the world to come!