

Environmentalism and the Environment: A Biblical View

The Bible contains a surprising wealth of material pertaining to the environment and its relationship to us and to God. A genuinely biblical perspective on environmental issues must take into account these basic scriptural principles. The following is an excerpt from an article by Layton Talbert, "Environmentalism: The Myth of Impending Disaster," *Frontline Magazine*, (fall 1993).

1. **Divine Creation and Ownership: God created the earth and all things on it** (Gen. 1-2; Neh. 9:6; Ps. 8:3-5; 102:25; Isa. 42:5; 45:18; John 1:1-3; Acts 14:15; Col. 1:16-18; II Pet. 3:5; Rev. 4:11). It has been said, "The earth does not belong to man." This is true and biblical. The saying continues, however, "Man belongs to the earth." This is false and pagan. The biblical declaration of ownership is this: "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof" (Ps. 24:1; see also Ps. 50:10-12; Deut. 10:14; I Cor. 10:26). God explicitly created all things for Himself (Prov. 16:4; Col. 1:16). Our view of the environment must be grounded in the truth of Creation and its implications of divine ownership.

2. **Human Dominion and Stewardship: God has declared man's dominion and appointed man as steward over His creation** (Gen. 1:26-28; 9:1-7; Ps. 8:6-9). At the same time we consider God's creative ownership of the earth, we must take full account of His decree placing us as stewards of the earth He created. Man was divinely granted "dominion over" God's creation and charged with the privilege and responsibility of ruling over that creation; man exercised benevolent dominion. The Fall and the Flood did not alter that position and charge; though the relationship was altered to an adversarial dominion, the animal and plant creation was, nonetheless, given into man's hand for his use (Gen. 9:2-3). A steward does not actually possess the objects under his stewardship, but responsibly manages that which belongs to the owner. The twin realities of divine ownership and human stewardship must keep each other in check.

3. **Creation's Purpose and Function: God designed the diversity of the earth and its environment to magnify His glory.** As the chief end of man is to glorify God, so the chief end of creation is to glorify the Creator by testifying to His "eternal power and Godhead" (Rom. 1:20). Psalm 19 affirms that the celestial creation is intended to "declare the glory of God" and to

"show His handywork." Likewise, the enormous diversity and complexity of the terrestrial creation reflects the incomparable wisdom and power of God (Neh. 9:6; Ps. 104:24; Jer. 10:12; 32:17). This fact has ramifications for the idea of preserving and wisely managing natural environments. Modern man loses much of his sense of God's glory and power when he looks up into the night sky and can barely make out a handful of stars. It is important, not only aesthetically but spiritually, for man to have access to those aspects of nature by which God Himself intends to magnify His presence and glory. God's charge to Adam in the garden is instructive as well (Gen. 2:15); he was to cultivate it and to *keep* it (the Hebrew denotes "to guard or protect"). Stewardship duties involve a balance between management and preservation, cultivation and protection, not only for the benefit of man but for the glory of God.

4. **Divine Hierarchical Priorities: God has a structured hierarchy of priorities which values man more highly than animals or plants.** A number of factors verify this principle. Genesis 1:26-28; 9:1-7; and Psalm 8 make it clear that plants and animals are part of the creation over which God has assigned man responsible stewardship. Even when God sovereignly exercises His right to destroy large portions of His creation, His purpose either to judge or to bless *man* is invariably at the center of the action (as in the universal Flood, the Egyptian plagues, and the captivity). In addition, the entire Old Testament sacrificial system is structured on the premise of the substitutionary death of "innocent" animals for the spiritual welfare of *man* (Lev. 17). The Psalmist notes that whereas God often permits animals to suffer need, *people who seek the Lord will not lack any good thing* (Ps. 34:10). Jesus Himself plainly indicated that mankind is worth more in God's eyes than animals are (Matt. 6:26), and He did not hesitate to permit the harming of animal or plant life for the spiritual welfare and instruction of man (Matt. 8:28-32; 21:18-19). God's primary concern throughout Scripture is invariably for man over beast and plant, and we must model that priority in our value system.

5. **Divine Regard for Creation: God cares for His creation with intimate delight and concern.** Despite the priority God places upon man, Scripture graphically portrays God's care for and great pleasure in His own creation (Job 38:26-27; Ps. 104:10-14, 25-28; Jon. 4:11; Matt. 6:26, 30; 10:29). God's covenant with Noah not to destroy the earth again by flood contains a fascinating

and often overlooked detail. God repeatedly specifies that the parties with whom He has entered into this covenant include not only man but “every living creature (of all flesh)” and with “the earth” itself (Gen. 9:10, 12, 15, 16, 17). Just as we model God’s priorities, as stewards we should also model the Creator’s care for His creation (Prov. 12:10).

6. Divine Disapproval of Exploitation: God takes human exploitation of His creation very seriously.

This may make us uncomfortable, but there can be no mincing of the blunt statements of Scripture. God pronounced judgment upon conquering nations explicitly for needless devastation of the natural environment (Isa. 14:7-8, 20; Jer. 51:25; Hab. 2:17). Intentional exploitation and thoughtless despoliation of the environment does not constitute dominion but **vandalism**. While it is true that God’s curse is on those who worship and serve “the creature more than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25), Scripture equally affirms that God will “destroy them which destroy the earth” (Rev. 11:18). The overall context of Revelation clarifies why. He will do so upon His Second Advent because He is returning specifically to lay claim to the earth and its inhabitants as His rightful possession and inheritance (Ps. 2:8; Luke 19:12; Rev. 11:15-18). Man “destroys” the earth not only through his misuse of it, but by the very fact of his depravity as it is played out in acts of sin which bring God’s judgment on him and the earth on which he lives (Rev. 6, 8-9, 16-19). Romans 8:18-23 hints at the liberating ramifications that Christ’s redemptive work will have for the subhuman creation itself when that redemption is fully realized. The Creator will one day emancipate the creation from its bondage to “corruption” or decay (a noun form of the verb *destroy* in Revelation 11:18 above)—a bondage induced by man’s Fall and depravity.

7. Divine Principles of Wise Use and Management: God expects man to be prudent and frugal in his use of environmental resources.

Amidst a growing antihunting sentiment in this country, the implications of Scripture are clear: man retains the right to manage and harvest the environment, including animals, for his benefit and use (Gen. 9:2-3). At the same time, God requires that what man takes be well-used. Scriptural principle censures the wasting of resources (Prov. 12:27). Interestingly, God also gave to Israel positive principles of wise resource management of flora and fauna (Deut. 20:19-20; 22:6-7).

8. Human Impotence: God will not allow man to destroy the earth. *Destroy* is used here in the absolute sense of total or final destruction (as distinct from the word discussed in point 5 above). To the environmentalist notion that man can in a few short years virtually destroy this vast and stable planet, someone has tersely retorted: “What intoxicating vanity!” Our view of history is so arrogantly short-sighted. The **alarmist threat of global warming** that warns of an impending unstable environment in which distinct seasons are virtually nonexistent is **patently impossible**. God Himself has sworn that the continuous cycle of distinctive seasons will persist as long as the earth itself exists (Gen. 8:22). Despite the cynical and clichéd observation that man will someday destroy himself and his world, the theological and prophetic affirmation of Scripture is that God simply **will not permit man to destroy His creation**—*He* reserves the right to do that in His time and His way. Contrary to the popular environmentalist propaganda that the earth is an extremely “fragile” planet whose delicate balance we threaten to capsize, the earth is not “fragile” at all; it is, in fact, ancient and far bigger than we are, self-cleansing (Lev. 18:25, 28; 20:22), self-rejuvenating (Ps. 104:30), and quite stable (Ps. 96:10; 104:5).

9. Divine Prerogative: God alone reserves and exercises the right to destroy the environment He has created.

He did so universally in the Flood (Gen. 6-8). He did so locally in Egypt (Exod. 7-12). He does so today through natural disasters of various magnitudes. He will do so on an unprecedented scale in what the book of Revelation describes as the (Great) Tribulation (Rev. 5-16). Perhaps the most astonishing aspect—from an environmental perspective—of the devastating seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments described in the pages of the Apocalypse is the fact that *the earth still survives in spite of it all!* The planet even goes on not merely to survive but to blossom globally into unparalleled fruitfulness and abundance for another millennium.