

Biblical Worldview of the Environment

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Date: 28 August 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Today, we will consider what the Bible has to say about the environment. Now, upon hearing that, many of us will immediately think of things like climate change and global warming and, I don't know, veganism and deforestation and whatever else comes to mind, any one of the many politically charged issues surrounding humanity's relationship to natural creation.

And because these things are so politicized and, frankly, complicated, many of us probably avoid them. We don't necessarily like to talk about them and we may not even think about them.

The environment, however, is a worldview issue. It may be politicized, but we're not interested today in the conservative worldview or the liberal worldview.

As the Lord's Church, our primary concern is the biblical worldview. What does the Bible have to say? And the Bible does have something to say about it. Scripture does have something to offer us regarding this relationship we have and the responsibility we have to God's creation.

Now, I fear that many in the church allow politics to shape their worldview. In this area, in particular, more than the Bible.

[1 : 3 1] I've been thinking back to a conversation I had years ago with a Christian brother. He stopped by the church one afternoon and he was clearly irritated by something he had been listening to on talk radio.

And he went into a rant for several minutes about what he called the conspiracy of global warming. And he talked about how it was destroying the livelihoods of hardworking Americans.

It was raising gas prices and really putting major obstacles in the way of progress. Well, right or wrong, I really tried to add some brevity to the situation.

And I said to him, brother, you cannot possibly deny global warming. That's what the Bible teaches. And he looked at me and he says, where does the Bible teach that?

So I cited 2 Peter 3.10 from the King James Version, which says, the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night in the which the heavens will pass away with a great noise and the elements will melt with fervent heat and the earth and the works that are therein will be burned up.

[2 : 4 7] Now, my joke did lighten the mood a little bit, but he wasn't quite ready to move on to other subjects. In fact, he went on to say that 2 Peter 3.10 actually makes his point.

And what was his point? Well, he expressed to me what I would call a quasi-Gnostic view of the earth. And in case you're not familiar with ancient Gnosticism, a significant part of Gnostic belief was that everything material is inherently evil and consequently worthless.

Frankly, there is just enough truth in that worldview that it did influence some of the members of the early church. And we see even proto-Gnosticism addressed in some of the letters in Scripture in the New Testament.

The material world is corrupted. It is corrupted. The earth is under the curse of sin, but I don't think it's accurate or appropriate to go as far as to say the earth is worthless.

This gentleman, however, came pretty close. Obviously, he believed there are limits to how we use the earth. I don't think he would want someone dumping chemicals into his drinking water, for instance.

[4 : 08] But when confronted with this polarizing subject of global warming, his response was to adopt somewhat extreme rhetoric from the other end of the spectrum, to push back by going all the way into the ditch on the other side of the road.

He hears people saying, man is destroying the earth. And he reacted by essentially saying, so what if we are? God plans to destroy the earth anyhow.

So we might as well get as much use out of it as we can, while we can. Now, I suppose that's the dilemma we face. No one questions whether we should make use of the earth and its resources.

The question is, where do we draw the line between using the earth and abusing it? What exactly is our relationship and responsibility to natural creation?

And since we are trying to develop a biblical worldview regarding the environment, I want to begin by considering not so much the relationship between humanity and the earth, but first, the relationship between earth and heaven.

[5 : 24] Believe it or not, the relationship between earth and heaven is a theme that runs through the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

In some respects, it is the story of the Bible. It is at least a fundamental part of the story of redemption. So imagine heaven and earth as two circles, two distinct circles.

One circle represents heaven, the domain of God, if you will, while the other circle represents the earth, the domain of man. Now, typically, we think of these circles as being completely separate and distinct, but that's not how it was in the beginning.

When God created the heavens and the earth, the circles overlapped one another. As far as Adam and Eve were concerned, they were one circle, one and the same.

God was with man, and man was with God. The two domains were one and the same. Adam's sin, however, changed all that. His disobedience caused a complete and utter separation between heaven and earth.

[6 : 36] Sin can have no place in heaven, so the two were divided. And God went as far as to place cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the entrance back into the garden, which is to say a sinful man would not be permitted to enter paradise ever again on his own.

In Genesis 12, God chooses a seemingly random man by the name of Abraham and promises to bless all the families of the earth through him and through his descendants.

And what that meant at the time wasn't abundantly clear, but as Old Testament history progressed, the promise really began to gain some clarity. In fact, before we even reach the end of Genesis, Abraham's grandson, Jacob, he sees a ladder that connects heaven and earth.

And he sees angels moving up and down that ladder. He sees God at the top of that ladder. And really, for the first time, as you follow the story in chronological order, for the first time, Abraham's family is given a sneak preview of what's to come.

Now, it would seem that heaven and earth won't be divided forever. There won't be a separation between the two. Now, that prospect of heaven and earth being reunited is brought into even greater focus when God instructs Israel to build the tabernacle.

[8 : 09] The tabernacle, later replaced by Solomon's temple, of course, would be a place where God promised to dwell with the people. And that was the most significant aspect of it.

God would be with the people in that place. His presence would live in the tabernacle, creating what we might call this tiny overlap between heaven and earth.

It may have been in only one place for only some people, but it was undeniable progress. The relationship between heaven and earth was one step closer to reconciliation.

Sadly, sinners are good at only one thing, which is making a mess of things. Eventually, Israel broke their covenant with God.

He left the temple. In fact, he let the Babylonians come in and destroy the temple. And so that small overlap between heaven and earth were gone. Thankfully, though, God is faithful.

[9 : 10] He keeps his promises. So even before the destruction of the temple, he sends prophets to speak about a coming day. For instance, in Isaiah 65, when he will create a new heavens and a new earth.

Just as he created the heavens and the earth in the beginning, he promises to essentially recreate, remake the heavens and the earth. Now, jumping ahead in the Bible, consider the first advent of Christ.

In Colossians 1, verses 19 and 20, this is what Paul says about Jesus. Now, you'll notice two significant points Paul makes in that passage.

First, he describes God as dwelling in Jesus. That's the same language the Old Testament uses when it talks about the tabernacle and the construction of the temple.

What made the tabernacle and the temple so extraordinary was that God's presence would take up residence in these places.

[10 : 37] He would dwell inside. So, though heaven and earth remain separated, God would live on the earth among sinners in those distinct places.

And I guess you understand the point that God is everywhere present, yet at the same time, he makes his presence known very particularly in specific locations and places and times for certain people.

So, God would live on this earth among sinners in those distinct places. And here in Colossians, God, Paul describes God doing the same thing by taking up residence not in a building, but in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, essentially, wherever Jesus went, God was there. Now, second point that Paul makes here is he describes God's purpose, and he describes it this way.

Though Jesus, or through Jesus, God will reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven. So, what is God, through Jesus, reconciling or reuniting, if you will?

[11 : 51] The short answer is all things. More to the point, he's reconciling all things on earth and in heaven. And I'll go even as far as to say he was reconciling earth and heaven, which are now separated by sin.

Through Christ his Son, he's bringing them back together. With the incarnation of Jesus, heaven was breaking through onto the earth in a massive way.

It was heaven invading the earth through Christ, which is a substantial turning point in redemptive history. Jesus not only restores that little overlap that used to exist, but he also promises to finally bring reconciliation to heaven and earth.

He's not just here to create a small overlap. He will bring the two together as one. Now, jumping ahead again, Ephesians 2 describes the church this way.

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into, listen to this language, a holy temple in the Lord.

[13 : 19] In him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. What are God's people becoming?

According to Paul, God's people are growing into a holy temple, a dwelling place for God. Suddenly, the circle that represents earth now has a multitude of tiny little pieces of heaven all over it.

Anywhere on earth we find believers, we see little pieces of heaven permeating this sinful world. The kingdom's growing with every new conversion. Heaven is permeating the world. Light is breaking through the darkness all over the place.

Little by little, heaven is coming down and God's dwelling place on this earth is expanding. Now, you can probably guess where all of this is eventually leading.

Listen as I read another passage from Romans 8. Paul writes, For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

[14 : 34] For the creation waits with eager longing 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 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

for we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. Now, typically, when we think about salvation, we think about the salvation of people, right?

We think about God redeeming his children. According to Paul, however, God's plan of redemption doesn't stop with people. Paul personifies natural creation in Romans 8 to show that creation also longs to be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

In other words, creation itself will be saved, if you will. It will be redeemed. It will be perfected in the end.

Let's look now at Revelation 21. You know this passage. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.

[16 : 11] And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away. So we've come to the end of the story.

Christ has returned to finish salvation. He has raised the dead. He's judged the wicked. He's gathered up all of his disciples and he's transformed their bodies into glorified bodies just like his own.

And notice what's happening here in Revelation 21. God's people aren't leaving the earth at the end of time. Instead, the earth is remade just as Isaiah and other Old Testament prophets said it would be and then heaven appears to be coming down.

[17 : 28] We don't go up. Heaven comes down. Yes, we do go up. There's a passage that reflects that as well but it almost reads as though we take off into the sky and then when everything's done we come right back down. heaven comes down.

Better yet, the earth once again becomes what? The dwelling place of God. Not in just one little sliver of it but the whole earth becomes the dwelling place of God.

As heaven descends so does God. He will dwell with mankind and they will be his people. In an instant, heaven and earth are reunited once again.

Now we don't have time to read through it all but if we were to continue reading this chapter and the next you could also go back to places in the Old Testament like Isaiah 65. We would see a series of physical descriptions of the new earth.

I'm not convinced this is spiritualized language if you will. I think this new earth will be a real earth just as it was in the beginning.

[18 : 35] We'd read about a new Jerusalem and we are even given exact dimensions of the city. We'd read about the river of the water of life bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God and from the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city also on either side of the river the tree of life.

Does that sound familiar? It sounds just like the Garden of Eden except now it's got a city in the middle of it. God designed and created human beings to live on the earth.

That was always his plan and I believe it is still his plan. Sin may have ruined the earth for what seems like a really long time now but a day is coming when God will finish fixing the mess we've made.

Things will go back to the way he intended. The earth will be perfect we will be without sand we will live on this earth and God will live with us.

Heaven and earth will be one in the same those two distinct circles one. So now even before we've read the first commandment in scripture regarding our responsibilities for the environment for the earth we can see that the material world is by no means worthless.

[20 : 05] In fact it has eternal significance by God's design he made this place for us better yet he made this place for us and him which he intends to share with his redeemed people for all eternity.

Yes Peter does say the elements will be burned up and dissolved that's true but that doesn't mean complete annihilation in fact that sounds a lot like the process of refinements and purification melting away the dross if you will again Paul says the creation itself longs to be set free from its bondage to corruption not to be destroyed and replaced but to be set free from corruption the earth is looking forward to a day not of annihilation but of freedom it's similar to the child of God who hopes for a day when he will no longer have to struggle and wrestle with his sinful flesh anymore the earth longs for a day when it will be free from the curse of sin which has plagued it for so long now with this foundation in mind let's consider what God explicitly says regarding our relationship to the rest of creation starting at the very beginning in Genesis 1 starting with verse 26 we read then God said let us make man in our own image after our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth so God created man in his own image in the image of God he created him male and female he created them and God blessed them and God said to them be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth and God said behold

I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth and every tree with seed and its fruit you shall have them for food and every beast of the earth and every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth everything that has the breath of life I have given every green plant for food and it was so by the way have you noticed how many of these worldview issues we've discussed that have taken us back to the very beginning back to the book of Genesis it actually makes a lot of sense when you think about it if we want to understand the world it certainly helps to understand its origins where it all comes from and that's what Genesis 1 and 2 provide us while Genesis 3 of course explains its fallen condition here God creates man in his own image and as his image bearers he delegates to us a level of authority over his creation let them have dominion he says let them rule over the rest of creation from the animals to the plants and of course authority implies responsibility which we'll come to in just a moment this authority also implies that natural creation which is subject to us as its authority is for our use this is ours in a sense food for example is one of its uses according to this text even the earth supplies us with sustenance and we have the authority to use it for that purpose let me also point out something that's easy to overlook here in his abundant wisdom and gracious provision

God made this earth with our well-being in mind from the beginning notice he expresses his plan to give us dominion before he even creates the first man this isn't an afterthought in other words this is why he made the earth the way he made it he made it for the distinct purpose of benefiting humanity he made this world for us to use and enjoy and furthermore he made exceedingly more than what was necessary for that first man and woman for Adam and Eve which is why he says be fruitful and multiply fill the earth and subdue it getting back to the matter of responsibility I think this command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth implies a level of responsibility doesn't it here's what I mean even if it were obvious to Adam and

Eve that they needed to take care of the garden for their own well-being this command to be fruitful and multiply suggests they're also responsible for ensuring the benefits of future generations keep in mind families can multiply very very quickly I just read of a 99 year old woman who has welcomed her 100th great grandchild into the world she had 11 children who I think had 56 children who then had 100 children three generations now to be clear God did not merely imply responsibility the very next chapter says in verse 15 the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it

[26 : 21] I believe the NIV says something along the lines of to work it and to take care of it to work of course means precisely what we think it means it refers to labor and anyone who has ever kept a garden knows exactly what kind of work goes into keeping a garden but what does it mean to keep the garden it means to watch over it it means to guard it to protect it on the one hand God's creation is quite resilient I think of its resilience every time I see a flower growing through concrete you know it's resilient on the other hand it can also be very fragile in some respects so God says protect it you've got to protect it again if you've ever kept a garden you can think of probably several ways in which a garden needs to be protected even from the beginning we see a kind of tension here between using the earth and abusing it clearly God gives us the earth to use but with this authority comes a level of responsibility we are responsible for working his creation we are responsible for guarding his creation we are responsible for preserving his creation to the benefit of our posterity now briefly let me address how sin has changed things so far we've been talking about life before the fall how are things different now that sin has entered the world along with its curse well working keeping and preserving the earth is significantly more difficult now but our responsibilities remain the same we are still obligated to be fruitful and multiply but according to God's judgment in Genesis 3 what happens now women will experience multiplied pain in childbearing we still have to work and keep

God's creation but now we do so by the sweat of our faces again according to the curse in Genesis 3 and this curse is quite appropriate when you think about it God has authority over man but man rebelled against him man has authority over the earth and now the earth is doing what rebelling against us whereas God's creation once served us with total devotion it now works against us in many ways making everything tremendously more difficult so to summarize things up to this point the earth is not meaningless it has eternal significance because it is the place God has always meant for us to dwell and to dwell with him when he created humanity he placed us here perhaps

I should say he placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden for the distinct purpose of working and keeping the environment in other words he made us to labor that we might reap benefits from his creation while also being careful to never abuse it to take responsibility for it and our responsibilities have not changed because of sin our responsibilities remain the same in this fallen world and while I want to show you some practical instructions we find in scripture let me briefly address one more I guess you could call it an underlying principle that helps us to think about our relationship to the environment God may have given us authority over the earth but this world still belongs to him we are stewards of the earth which means we are taking care of our master's property he's given us a land grant if you will which he retains the right to revoke we see this principle even in the garden of Eden

Adam's disobedience to God caused God to banish him from the garden when God gave the land of Canaan to the Israelites he says through Moses in Deuteronomy 4 you shall keep his statutes and his commandments which I command you today that it may go well with you and with your children after you and that you may prolong your days in the land that the Lord your God is giving you God gave them the land and if they wanted to stay in the land they must obey him they must listen to him follow his commandments now granted his commandments were not about taking care of the environment not exclusively anyhow even so he asserts his sovereign ownership of the land it's his lands and in case I haven't made this point clear already God cares about his land he cares about the earth he cares enough to redeem it at the end of time he cares enough to make a covenant with it after the flood have you ever noticed the wording of God's covenant with Noah in Genesis 9 he promises starting in verse 9 behold I establish my covenant with you that is

Noah and your offspring after you and with every living creature that is with you the birds the livestock and every beast of the earth with you as many as have come out of the ark it is for every beast of the earth I establish my covenant with you that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth who does he make the covenant with Noah his offspring and all the animals when I say God cares about the earth that includes the animals what is true of the earth is true of the animals like the land God asserts sovereign ownership of them as well they belong to him which is why God instructs the Israelites in

[33 : 29] Deuteronomy 15 19 all the firstborn males that are born of your herd and flock you shall dedicate to the Lord your God you shall do no work with the firstborn of your herd nor shear the firstborn of your flock God required the Israelites to sacrifice any personal benefits these firstborn males would have provided them in part as a reminder I think to that every animal and their benefits are gifts from him they come from him we are merely stewards of his property his gifts to us we also see in that an example of God restricting man's use of creation that much has been implied already but it's obvious from this that he has given he's not given us authority or liberty

I should say to use the earth however we want whatever we want to do with it it's fine there are limitations and to be clear these limitations are not arbitrary they are actually designed for our own good not to mention the good of future generations keep in mind the Bible God's law in particular contains a lot of commandments that provide very practical benefits when followed but those benefits may not always be immediately evident to us does that make sense I'm always interested when I hear modern experts in one field or another point to some law in the Old Testament and say though the Bible doesn't expressly tell us why that's a good idea we now know from science or research or this or that that it actually is a good idea it has benefits in other words

God issues these various commandments according to his infinite wisdom knowing they are good for us consider Exodus 23 verses 10 and 11 God says for six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield but the seventh year you shall let it rest and life follow or uncultivated that the poor of your people may eat and that they and what they leave the beast of the field may eat you shall do likewise with your vineyard and with your olive orchard now obviously this particular commandment is a benefit to the poor as well as to the animals I believe God also intended for the Israelites to learn to trust his provision during that seventh and Sabbath year but we also know that this practice had additional benefits that the commandment itself doesn't specifically say which is that giving the land rest has a renewing effect nutrients in the soil are restored and so on so by sacrificing short term gains farmers would get even greater long term yields all by

God's wisdom let me give you another practical commandment in the law Deuteronomy 25 says you shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain that's fairly straightforward I mean if you want your animals to be useful you have to feed them but this commandment is more than feed your animals enough to keep them alive and working it's a bit more than that I've read that an ox can eat somewhere between 5 and 30 pounds of grain in a single day that's a lot of grain that's a significant sacrifice for a relatively poor farmer in Israel so God's wisdom not to mention his love for the animals we need to show an abundance of care for his creation and

I think common sense agrees with that the better let's say you take care of your car you maintain it properly and you fix something when it goes wrong it's likely to run longer when you take abundant care of it the better care of it you take the longer it may run I think that's true with creation let me provide one more practical example I think if there is ever a time to disregard the rules and not worry about trees and plants and whatever else it's during a time of war right yet listen to Deuteronomy 20 verses 19 and 20 when you besiege a city for a long time making war against it in order to take it you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them you may eat from them but you shall not cut them down are the trees in the field human that they should be besieged by you only the trees that you know that are not trees good for food you may destroy and cut down that you may build siege works against the city that makes war with you until it falls why is

[39 : 29] God concerned with preserving trees that are good for food first of all during and after the war people will need that food second it would just be reckless and wasteful terrible stewardship to destroy perfectly good fruit trees now we could examine several more examples but we're running out of time but in the end we would still be left to make judgment calls in an infinite number of situations is it right or wrong to throw trash out of a car window is it right or wrong to buy chicken from a company that pumps them full of hormones and maybe raises them in very harsh conditions is it right or wrong to support the coal industry and on and on it goes now if we're honest with ourselves about what the

Bible teaches some of the answers may be fairly obvious even if they are challenging other answers however may be quite elusive some issues are just not as black or white as we would like them to be perhaps the best we can do is take some of these basic principles that I've tried to outline and pray that God gives us the wisdom as we strive to be good stewards of his creation meanwhile and this has become an increasingly important point in our time God did give us the earth to use and enjoy it is not to be worshipped it is not to be worshipped and its preservation is not to be elevated above the welfare of humanity either some have espoused ideas that suggest we need to protect elements of the earth even to the detriment of mankind even if we have to suffer and do without and I don't know that that's what the

Bible teaches but there are limits we do have responsibilities so best we can do is pray that God gives us wisdom to be good stewards of his creation