

A Devotional
Study Guide to



Creation Care

We sing the mighty power of God
that made the mountains rise,
that spread the flowing seas abroad
and built the lofty skies.

We sing the wisdom that ordained
the sun to rule the day;
the moon shines full at his command,
and all the stars obey.

We sing the goodness of the Lord
that filled the earth with food;
he formed the creatures with his word
and then pronounced them good.
Lord, how your wonders are displayed,
where'er we turn our eyes,
if we survey the ground we tread
or gaze upon the skies.

There's not a plant or flower below
but makes your glories known,
and clouds arise and tempests blow
by order from your throne;
while all that borrows life from you
is ever in your care,
and everywhere that we can be,
you, God, are present there.

Day 1: Stewarding the Garden

Scripture: Genesis 2:15

Wendell Berry has a book of essays entitled “What Are People For?” I’ve always like the title. Simple. To the point.

When we turn to the Bible to ask ‘What are people for?’, we find several places in Genesis where God gives human beings things to do. For instance, upon the conclusion of God’s creative work in Genesis 1 -- where God declares creation ‘very good’ -- God places human beings in a garden with gardening responsibilities. In a personal sense, God gave Adam and Eve specific responsibility for one part of God’s creation. In a broader sense, it gave humans a basic task in this world. We are, in Hebrew terms, to *‘abad’* and *‘shamar’* the Garden.

These two verbs from Genesis 2:15 – *abad* and *shamar* – are wonderfully common words. There is nothing mysterious about them. They describe common activities. ‘Abad’ is the root of words related to service. As a noun it refers to a servant and as a verb it means ‘to serve’. ‘Shamar’, on the other hand, means ‘to protect’ or ‘to keep’. The famous blessing that the descendants of Aaron were to pronounce over the people of Israel (and which ends many Christian worship services) uses the word ‘shamar’: the Lord bless you and *keep* you. Think of those two words and the couplets that resonantly describe their meaning: Serve and preserve. Enhance and protect. Tend and keep. Our God-given task in the world is to serve and preserve God’s Garden.

Think of what a difference in the way Christians live in the world. Rather than seeing the whole world as created for our use, we are here as caretakers to serve the creation – to enhance and protect its capacity to glorify God.

There are times when this makes so much sense. When walking through field or forest or even the local park in the early morning or the descending dusk, there’s a sweetness to the sky, air, and land that calls for nurture and protection. Or on hands and knees tending a backyard garden, working the soil and prayer become closely connected. *Ora et labora* (Latin: prayer and work) are the mainstays of every gardener. They often become one and the same thing.

But what about the times when we are disconnected from the creation? So much of our life is lived in offices, warehouses, and malls, surrounded by concrete and asphalt. The natural world simply provides the raw stuff with which we live our ‘real’ lives. Some of us spend more time in the virtual world of cyberspace than in the real world of God’s creatures.

Sadly enough, some Christians justify exploiting the creation without tending it or serving it by saying that we humans are the center and crown of creation. After all, aren’t we made in God’s image and doesn’t Psalm 8 indicate that we were

created just a little less than God, with all things placed under our feet? Weren't we given dominion over the Earth? Isn't creation 'for us'?

This, it seems to me, is one of the geniuses of the Christian faith and a fundamental meaning of Christian stewardship. The earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1), and our nobility is not to be found in the fact that everything else exists for us. As Jesus noted when to his disciples, the one who would be great must be a servant. Our greatness is to be found in our special place as caretakers of God's glorious creation and our task to be for the rest of creation. Our greatness is to serve God by serving the creation and enhancing its capacity to praise and glorify its creator.

God's world. So beautiful. So full of potential. So rich in possibilities. For whom and for what purposes do we tend it?

For Further Thought

1. The Bible is full of references to the richness of the creation and its relationship to the spiritual life. Psalm 1 compares the righteous to stream-fed trees. Psalm 65 speaks of meadows and fields shouting and singing. What other Psalms can you think of that connect creation's goodness with God?
2. What are the consequences if we fail to serve and preserve the earth? Can you think of examples from your own community of a failure of stewardship for the earth?
3. Does the Sabbath have anything to do with our care of the earth? Read Leviticus 25-26, especially the last verses of chapter 26, for a helpful perspective.

In Other Words

If humans are to claim a lordship over creation, then it can only be a lordship of service. There can be no lordship without service.

-- Andrew Linzey

Living It Out

Go to your local newspaper (if you don't subscribe to it, look it up online) and look for articles that talk about your local environment. What is being done to protect the creation? To enhance it? Is your community being good stewards of the earth?

Day 2: All God's Creatures

Scripture: Psalm 50:10-11; Genesis 2:19

In Psalm 50, God asserts an undeniable claim to everything in creation, in this case every animal that moves on the face of the Earth. An often overlooked aspect to this passage is that God lays claim to both wild and domestic animals, showing preference for neither one or the other. God is the God of wild things as well as tame, just as God is the God of wild and civilized places.

We have a strange relationship with animals. We lavish attention on our pets and treat them better than we treat other humans, then we turn around and dispose of them like property. We show fascination at exotic creatures from other parts of the globe, but find wild animals nearby to be a nuisance, only good if we can turn them to our amusement.

When dealing with animals, wild or domesticated, we should remember that they are God's, not ours. They deserve respect, including a place to live and move and have their being. Even hunting should be done respectfully. It shouldn't be done out of simple bloodlust or a desire to assert human domination over creatures.

With domesticated animals, the danger is that we turn them into property like any other inanimate object. They receive kindness or cruelty according to our moods, and have their lives extended or ended according to our convenience. Often 'companion animals' such as dogs and cats are treated as fashion accessories or extensions of our own personality. Psalm 50 is a helpful reminder that all animals, wild and domestic, have the stamp of God's ownership, not ours.

Another aspect of stewardship of animals is worth considering. In Genesis 2, God brings all the animals to Adam to be named. At first reading, it sounds like God parades the animals in front of Adam, giving him an opportunity to come up with names like 'giraffe', 'orangutan', 'puffin', 'stork', and so on. Names are mere ID tags that we put on things for convenience sake.

In Hebrew tradition, names identified the essence of the thing named, similar to the ancient Greek notion that to understand something you need to know its purpose and place. To truly know something, you need to know how it fits with everything else and its place in God's grand scheme of things.

Which makes me suspect that Adam's task in naming the animals was more than thinking up words for identification. I also suspect that just as the command to serve and preserve the garden was intended for all human beings, not just Adam and Eve, so, too, the command to name the animals is something given to humanity. If we are to tend the garden well, we need to know what is in the garden -- each thing's purpose and place.

I also suspect that Adam came nowhere near finishing the task. If, as scientists believe, there are upwards of 10 million species of plants and animals in this world of which only a fifth have been identified and named, we still have a long way to go in the task of naming the animals by understanding their purpose and place. One of the tragedies of species extinction is that species go extinct without ever having been named. We never understood their purpose and place. Never understood how God intended them to fit in this marvelous creation.

In order to be good stewards, we need a bit more of the wisdom of King Solomon. In I Kings 4, we are told that Solomon's wisdom included his ability to "describe plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish." King Solomon should be the patron saint of every Christian biologist and ecologist, and for us normal folks, it should be a reminder that God calls us to care for His creatures and to appreciate their place in God's world.

For Further Thought

1. Does God love animals, whether wild or tame? Are there some animals that even God has difficulty loving? Or are all creatures fitting 'in their place'?
2. What do you think of the idea that Adam's naming of the creatures is an on-going task for which human beings have responsibility?
3. Do we have responsibility to make sure that animals raised for food are treated respectfully and that they have opportunity to glorify God in their lives?

In Other Words

O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, for our brothers and sisters, the inarticulate beasts, to whom Thou gave the earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of humanity with ruthless cruelty so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to thee in song has become a groan of anguish and a cry of torment. May we realize that they live not for us alone, but for themselves and for Thee, and that they too love the sweetness of life. Amen.

-- Prayer of St. Basil (4th Century)

Living It Out

To be steward of the animals around you, you need to notice them. Making a list of your pets is not very difficult, so make a list of the other creatures that intersect your life in the next week. Make a list of these categories:

Animals that share your house/yard as their home or territory.

Food animals that become a part of your meals.

Animals that are a part of your neighborhood community.

Reflect on what it means to be steward of these creatures. Pray for God's blessing on them.

Day 3: Stewarding Resources

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:18

The questions posed in Ezekiel 34 seem like such a small matter. A little trampled pasture? Some muddied water? Regrettable, but muddied water and trampled pasture hardly merit the notice of one of Israel's great prophets. Human slavery. Idol worship. Political sell-outs. Now these are matters worth taking on.

Our perspective is skewed by our culture. For most of us, clean water is no more than a twist of the tap away. Our food doesn't rely on green, local pastures; it comes from the grocery store (or so we think) in seemingly endless supply.

Imagine, though, that you did have to get your drinking water from a stream. What would be your reaction if, stooping to collect water, you looked upstream to see your neighbor leading his cows into the stream to cool off?

Ezekiel 34 makes us think about the way we steward the earth as a resource for life, particularly human life. It isn't just about clean water and fresh pasture, although these are part of a larger picture. It's about any resource that humans find valuable, yet are inclined to hoard or squander.

It's oil, stockpiled underground over millennia upon millennia. We're on pace to consume almost all of it in a flash of energy extravagance. Gone, burned in a flash of heat and energy, the stored carbon deposits from ancient forests and swamps incinerated in a few hundred years.

Or it's pristine forests of white pine and hardwood such as were found here in Michigan. Expected to provide timber for five hundred years, it was all clearcut in eighty years (1840-1920). When hiking in northern Michigan, you still come across open fields with hundreds of stumps, weathered and worn, gravestones of the great white pine forests that covered some 13 million acres in northern Michigan. Less than 40 acres still survive, or 0.000003% of the original.

Make no mistake about it, the logging era made some people very rich. Timber barons built mansions and amassed impressive fortunes. Immigrants from northern Europe, living and working in abominable conditions, earned their first paychecks in the northern woods and got a toehold on this continent. Michigan's economy had a timber base until the automobile era dawned.

The logging era devastated the Michigan landscape. Clearcutting unleashed erosion and spawned wildfires. Spring log drives destroyed rivers and streams. Fish, birds, and animals native to Michigan were driven out as the pines disappeared. Pictures of northern Michigan taken in the 1920's show a wasteland looking much like a war zone blasted by bombs.

Ezekiel's warning points to two all-too-human traits that undermine stewardship: greed and self-centeredness. What drove the frantic harvest of Michigan trees that laid waste a landscape in less than a century? There was legitimate human needs for homes and buildings. The Chicago Fire of 1871 required rebuilding of much of the city. But the way it was done displayed a lust for wealth and a disregard for long term effects. What drove the timber barons was a desire to amass great fortunes and an inclination to measure success in life by one's capital accumulation. There was an attitude that said we can treat the earth any way we wish and it won't matter. Only humans count.

God is still healing the earth. Slowly, but it is healing. The prophet Ezekiel reminds us that actions have consequences and we have a stewardly duty towards others. Does our taste for beef lead to clearcutting of the Brazilian rain forest? Do our petro-addictions result in oil spills half way around the globe? Does demand for cheap food lead to overuse of fertilizers and pesticides? The Gulf of Mexico has a 7,000-square mile dead zone that says we do.

It's not just on a global scale. Lawn fertilizers find their way to nearby streams and rivers. Oil and salt residues from our roads poison soils and streams. What would the prophet Ezekiel say to us about the things we do?

Think It Over

1. What is the nearest river/stream to your house? In what condition is it? Has misuse of it in the past left it dangerous for use today? Would it be safe to drink from provided it was filtered?
2. Are we only concerned about other people living today, or do we have to protect resources for future generations? What do you think future generations will think about the rate at which we have burned up fossil fuels?

In Other Words

Let us therefore, both poor and rich, cease from taking the property of others. For my present discourse is not only to the rich, but to the poor also. For they too rob those who are poorer than themselves. And artisans who are better off, and more powerful, outsell the poorer and more distressed, tradesmen outsell tradesmen, and so all who are engaged in the market-place. So that I wish from every side to take away injustice.

-- St. John Chrysostom, 4th Century

Live It Out

Go to the nearest stream/river to your house and spend a half hour watching it flow by. Consider all the things that rely on the stream/river for life and how people nearby treat it. What things that you do end up affecting the river? What communities are downstream? How has the use of the stream/river changed over the years?

Day 4: A Letter of Regrets

Leviticus 26:2-6; 14-20; 33-35

To my children, a letter of deepest regret:

There are many things that your mother and I have tried to bequeath you. A financial fortune is not one of them, but we've tried to pass on other things: a legacy of faith, of love of God and neighbor, of responsibility, of enjoyment of this world and other people. We are delighted at the people that you are becoming.

One thing, however, for which I have profound regret is that the world which my generation will pass on to you is significantly impoverished from the one we inherited. It is a world with fewer species, fewer wild and beautiful places, fewer natural habitats. It is, in short, a creation significantly diminished.

We have taught you, I hope, to love this world and to be amazed by it. Some of our best times as family involved traveling through the United States and Canada: hiking in Glacier National Park; whitewater rafting near Durango, Colorado; rock climbing in New Mexico; watching the Perseid meteor shower against a backdrop of the *aurora borealis* (the Northern Lights) in northern Michigan. Those were splendiferous times and I am glad that we have been able to pass on to you a wonder, an amazement, and an eye for the bizarre in nature. The thought "Only God could have made that!" is very close cousin to the thought "What was God thinking when God made that!" Both are statements of faith. We are glad to hear you ask such questions, because it shows that you pay attention. Attention is exactly what God's Creation deserves.

But my generation and the generations which came before have not paid close enough attention to how our lives and our lifestyles affect the world around us. Our love affair with the internal combustion engine dumps tons of carbon dioxide and other pollutants into the atmosphere. Our race to spread across the face of the Earth leaves too little habitat for others of God's creatures to survive. Some of God's most majestic creatures have disappeared because we either hunted them to extinction or cut them down to serve our ends.

I hope that your generation will be the one to reverse these trends, or at least slow their momentum. One doesn't halt climate change in a day. Species, once extinct, are gone forever. There will still be sadness and loss as we go further down the road of development and as population continues to rise. You, too, may end up writing a letter to your children that sounds a similar note of sadness.

Of the many things that we've tried to teach you about the Creation, remember the idea of Sabbath. Sabbath, which is God's invitation to delight in Creation, requires that Creation participate in Sabbath. Land, waters, animals, plants – each needs an opportunity to participate in the festive rest of Sabbath.

When the people of Israel were about to enter the promised land of Canaan, God sat them down for last minute instructions. Upon leaving Egypt, God had given them rules for respecting God and each other. Now, when it was time to enter the promised land, they needed to know how to respect it properly.

How to respect the land? One word: Sabbath. If Israel would serve the land, the land would serve Israel. Key to protecting that wealth was giving the land its rest, not turning it into a slave, allowing it an opportunity to be rejuvenated. So one out of every seven years, the land was to have its rest.

God was REALLY serious about this. In fact, at the end of two chapters of instructions, God warned Israel what would happen if they worked the land too hard and treated it harshly. God said that he would turn the sky to iron and the ground to copper. The land would refuse to give up its food. Invaders would come and drive the Israelites out. And when the Israelites were gone, then God would give the land the Sabbath rest that the people of Israel had neglected.

This passage haunts me. I fear that we have denied Creation its Sabbath. That's not surprising, since we're inclined to be poor stewards of the Sabbath ourselves. Our neglect demands a steep price, and I wonder sometimes if God will decide to take matters into God's own hands to give the land and its creatures a Sabbath.

This passage also, though, gives me hope, as it should you. God intends us to live in harmony with creatures and land. So it is possible. Come to love a vision of people, creatures, land, and God delighting in Sabbath rest.

For Further Thought

1. What aspects of our treatment of the Creation cause you the most regret?
2. Do you agree that to ask 'What was God thinking when God made that?' is a statement of faith? What creatures are you inclined to say that about?
3. What would Creation enjoying Sabbath look like to you?

In Other Words

Unless one learns how to relish the taste of Sabbath while still in this world, unless one is initiated in the appreciation of eternal life, one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity in the world to come. Sad is the lot of him who arrives inexperienced and when led to heaven has no power to perceive the beauty of the Sabbath.
-- Abraham Heschel

Living It Out

Make a list of things in creation that have disappeared or gotten worse since you were born. You might need to search online a bit, but you'll come up with some things. Also make a list of things that have gotten better.

Day 5: Stewarding Creation's Praise

Scripture: Psalm 148

In a famous J.S. Bach's organ piece, there is a part where the organist plays a sustained bass note on the pedals, adds another pedal note, then adds note after note after note from the keyboards until an incredibly elaborate, dissonant chord resounds. After a few seconds, it resolves into a lush, powerful, major chord.

Psalm 148 reminds me of that lush chord. In one sense, the Psalm is a straightforward list of things in creation, calling on each to praise its maker. Couplets (mountains and hills, rivers and streams) and the occasional triplet (sun, moon, and stars) are used to indicate the whole of creation. The Psalm moves through the elements of earth and sky to the plant and animal realms, calling on each to 'praise the Lord!' Nothing is left out. Cultivated plants (fruit trees) get equal billing with wild forests (cedars); wild animals share the limelight with domesticated. Fish, fowl, birds, insects – all are included.

In a delightful riff on this Psalm, the early American composer William Billings interpreted the "sea monster" reference in Psalm 148 as "ye dragons whose contagious breath people the dark abodes of death, change your dire hissings into heavenly song and praise your Maker with your forked tongues." What an image!

Sometimes I wonder if our imaginations can keep up with Psalm 148. It is hard enough to imagine dogs and cats praising God, but how do rocks and trees praise God? Wouldn't it be safer just to say that the Psalmist is using hyperbole to highlight the need for humans to always praise God?

If this is just a manner of speaking, there is a lot of it in the Bible. Trees clapped their hands. Valleys shout for joy and sing. Mountains and hills leap. Through this language of animation, the Bible indicates that creation responds to its Maker, and in responding to God gives praise to God.

How might this work? It may be simpler and more direct than we think. Thomas Merton once wrote, "a tree gives praise to God by being a tree." In responding to God's call to be, stars and flowers and redwood trees and water buffalo praise their Maker. The God who cares for the sparrow on the housetop receives delight and praise when God's creatures flourish.

Could it be that we are to steward creation's capacity for praise? It really isn't so far-fetched. In Psalm 19, we are told that the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. If, in the course of human events, we obscure the heavens and make it difficult to see God's handiwork, haven't we muted creation's ability to testify to God's Glory? And when we tend creation lovingly, doesn't the symphony of praise grow even louder?

A few years ago, on a cool August night, I awoke to my alarm at 2:30 a.m. That night was the peak of the Perseid meteor show and a three-quarter moon was setting at 2:15 a.m. It was my task to check if the night sky was clear enough to view the shooting stars before waking my family to join me in an middle-of-the-night excursion.

Not only was the sky perfectly clear, but the *Aurora borealis* (the northern lights) were out in full force. I quickly woke the rest of the family and we headed out to an open field, where for the next two hours we lay on our back and counted shooting stars through the spectacle of horizon-to-horizon northern lights. Psalm 19. Psalm 148. What beautiful sense they made!

For Further Thought

1. Does the patch of God's earth closest to you praise its Creator? How do you, by your actions, harm or help Creation's capacity for praise?
2. What praises God more: the desert Southwest or the Olympic rain forest? The Snake River in Washington State or the Cuyahoga River that runs through Cleveland? The Florida Keys or the Antarctic ice shelf?
3. There is a hymn with a line that goes "there's not a plant or flower below, but makes your glories known." What do you think of this idea?

In Other Words

Dance and sing, all the earth! Gracious is the hand that tends you.
Love and care, everywhere, God in mercy sends you.

Shooting star and sunset shape the drama of creation;
Lightning flash and moonbeam share a common derivation.

Deserts stretch and torrents roar in contrast and confusion;
Treetops shake and mountains roar and nothing in illusion.

Kiss of life and touch of death suggest our imperfection:
Crib and womb and cross and tomb cry out for resurrection.

Dance and sing, all the earth! Gracious is the hand that tends you.
Love and care, everywhere, God in mercy sends you.

-- John Bell, "Dance and Sing"

Living It Out

Recite Psalm 148 as connected to nature as possible. If you are able to be outside, do so and visually connect with as many elements of Psalm 148 as are visible. Or stand at a window and look carefully. Reflect on how the creation praises God.

For Group or Family Discussion

Creation care has filtered its way into Christian thought and practice over the past twenty years. Some churches are leading recycling efforts. Some get involved in watershed protection or neighborhood cleanup. A group of evangelical Christian leaders in 200 produced an Evangelical Climate Initiative calling on people to limit carbon emissions to protect the earth and the poor who will be most affected by climate change.

What motivates Christians to do these things? For years we associated environmental concern with guilt. How could we be so insensitive and greedy so as to take more than our fair share and to do such damage? But for the Christian, the motivation is love of God and God's creation. We have a vision of a redeemed earth that pulls us forward into God's plan for his creation.

It is impossible in the space of a brief study like this to discuss completely how our lifestyles affect the earth and how we can live differently. But we can make a beginning. Aldo Leopold once wrote that to be ecologically conscious is to be constantly aware of "a world of wounds." Christians who care for the creation and who pay attention to it are also aware of the woundedness of earth. But we are also aware that the Spirit of God is incessantly active, bringing life out of death and working the magic of transformation.

For Starters (5 minutes)

Have each person recall their most vivid experience with nature in the past year. Encourage people to think of specific instances. Some may be bird watchers, others may travel to National Parks, others participate in outdoor recreation, still others love to garden. Let them speak of the things that animated them.

Let's Focus (10 minutes)

Have each person select one plant or animal (insects are animals, too) about which they know something and have them identify:

- 1) how it 'fits' with its surroundings;
- 2) the purpose and place that God has for that plant or animal;
- 3) the way in which it praises God.

Scripture (30 minutes)

Psalm 104:24-35 "In wisdom you have made them all," says Psalm 104. Really? Are there any creatures which lead you to question God's wisdom? What is the weirdest creature of which you are aware?

Jeremiah 4:22-28. Read this passage slowly. Does it remind you of Genesis 1, only in reverse, a sort of 'de-creation' of the world? What is the cause of God's 'de-creation' of the world? How does human folly figure into the de-creation of the world?

Luke 12:22-28

Jesus says that we are to consider the ravens and the lilies and by considering them appreciate that God cares for us. Jesus says that we are of greater value than ravens and lilies. In God's eyes, what possible value do ravens and lilies have?

Bring It Home (20 Minutes)

Option 1: Have each person identify the nearest tract of land to their home or apartment which would be considered 'open space.' What is the history of that space? Of what good is it?

Option 2: Identify two environmental issues that directly affect your town or community. Spend some time sharing perspectives on what is the best way Christians can care for creation and encourage creation's praise in these issues.

Pray It Through (10 Minutes)

Using Psalm 148 as a template, pray for the different elements of creation. Here are some hints:

Sun and moon – remember from Genesis 1 that these are to “rule” the day and night! Is this a good thing? Do we interfere with their ability to rule by our lifestyles

Stars – the earth, we are told, is the collected dust of the stars and the stars have provided guidance for millennia.

Weather -- wind and water currents help distribute heat and cold across the face of the globe, keeping the equator cooler and the poles warmer than otherwise would be the case.

Live It Out (each day for upcoming week)

Check your local newspaper (if you don't subscribe to it, look it up online) and look for articles that talk about your local environment. Follow this for an entire week. What are the issues affecting your community? What is being done to protect the creation? To enhance it? Is your community being good stewards of the earth?

For Further Reading:

Bouma-Prediger, Steven. *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision of Creation Care*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010.

Sleeth, J. Matthew and Joel Hunter. *Serve God, Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2006.

Pope Francis. 2015. *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* [Encyclical].

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