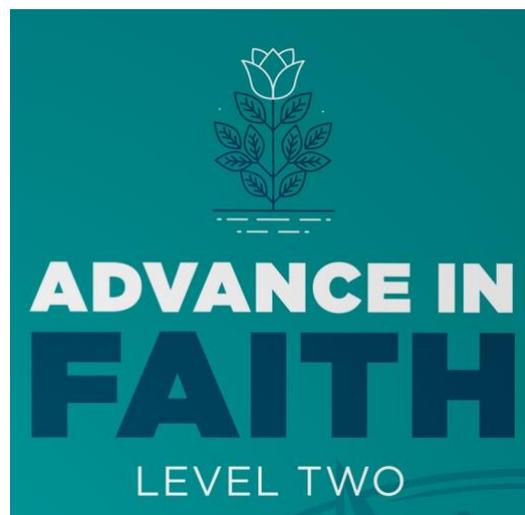


Earth Matters

Christian Faith and the Future of the Planet

Week 1 Planet Earth



Introduction

Welcome! Thank you for joining the conversation. I hope that our time together over the next 6 weeks will spark your curiosity, alleviate your concerns and inspire your commitment to learn more about how our faith in Jesus intersects with our mandate to care for creation.

The purpose of this course is to explore the concept of creation care as an essential part of Christian discipleship and a basic human vocation. It also attempts to provide an appropriate Christian response to the environmental challenges of the twenty-first century on the grounds that:

1. These issues are of concern to God whose compassion and care extends to all of creation and not merely humankind.
2. These issues are reshaping the ethical landscape of contemporary society and redefining morality for the new millennium.

The purpose of this session is:

- *To establish the biblical notion of earth as an essential part of creation;*
- *To differentiate between the concepts of nature and creation;*
- *To help believers recognise the value of earthly things;*
- *To encourage believers to embrace their place and purpose on the earth;*

Caring for the Earth – why bother?

When the subjects of environmental concern, ecology or creation care come up in conversation in the context of Christian faith, there is often a mixed response. While some people are enthusiastic about a faith-fuelled care of the earth, others are suspicious, cynical and cautious and there is good reason for both responses.

Those who object to Christians being involved in environmentalism usually offer one of four protests:

- **It's Depressing** – who wants to spend time thinking and worrying about pollution, global warming, food shortage and desertification. Often this sentiment is compounded by the angry rhetoric and the judgmental outrage that often accompanies environmental protest.
- **It's Demeaning** – are we not reducing humanity to the same level as other living creatures by affording them rights reserved for human beings? Are we robbing vulnerable human beings of vital aid and assistance when we spend money on rainforests and animals?
- **It's Dangerous** – many Christians associate 'environmentalism' with radical left-wing politics, paganism and elements of New Age philosophy that are thought to be a threat to the faith. Are we going to end up worshipping the creation rather than the Creator?
- **It's Distracting** – some argue that by allocating time and energy to caring for the earth we are diverting much needed resource away from our primary task i.e. the 'proclamation of the gospel' and / or 'saving souls for eternity'.

Earth Matters: Christian Faith and the Future of the Planet

Our hope is that through this course we will be able to dispel some of the myths that give rise to these objections and show you, from the scriptures, that care for the earth and all its creatures is motivated by nothing less than love for God and others and therefore lies firmly at the heart of what it means to be both human and Christian.

Planet Earth

Earth. This is our home. We have no other. For as long as humankind has been in existence our place has been here, on earth. Surrounded by an innumerable company of stars and planets, this magnificent celestial island floats timelessly in a cosmic sea of unimaginable proportions and we, its inhabitants, get to live out our days beneath its beauty and majesty. Vast oceans of deep blue mystery, towering pillars of shifting cloud, ancient granite monuments carved out over centuries by persistent waters and enormous burnt ochre deserts, stirred and sifted by patient winds. All these provide the setting for a richness of fauna and flora that remains unmatched in a universe of a hundred billion of points of light. To say that earth is unique and special is to understate the fact. Earth is incredible.

For centuries scientists have studied the cosmos in search of answers to the question of origin and in a bold attempt to understand the complexities of our universe. Through out their quest they have been confounded, surprised, perplexed and elated by the sheer scope and scale of it all. The balance, symmetry, diversity and intricacy of the world in which we live have occupied some of the greatest minds of all time, but for all their efforts, few have conceded to the basic truth and profound reality that earth is simply our home – a place desired and designed by a loving God for those He created, a God who wants nothing more than to be with those He loves.

Our convictions about the environment are largely informed by our beliefs about God and what we perceive His thoughts to be toward the earth, in other words, our theology. A Christian expression of environmentalism should arise from an informed, thoughtful and faithful consideration of environmental concerns from the perspective of Christian Faith and the revelation of Scripture.

So, what does the Bible say about the earth?

Earth as Creation

It is imperative that we understand that for the Christian, *nature* is in fact *creation*, i.e. the planned and purposely executed design of the Creator, whom we identify as Yahweh, the God of the Old and New Testaments.

‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... God saw all that he had made, and it was very good’. - Genesis 1:1, 31

‘You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you’. - Nehemiah 9:6

‘He spreads out the northern skies over empty space; he suspends the earth over nothing. He wraps up the waters in his clouds, yet the clouds do not burst under their weight. He covers the face of the full moon, spreading his clouds over it’. - Job 26:7-9

'How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number-living things both large and small'. - Psalm 104:24-25

'Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him'. - Colossians 1:15-16

'In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe'. - Hebrews 1:2

There is no concept of mere nature in the Bible. Nature, derived from a Greek worldview, is by scientific definition a self-sustaining system complete with its own internal laws. The notion of creation, however, recognises that the universe is not self-sustaining, but is in fact continually dependent on the presence and power of God, the Creator, who is distinct from His creation, but intimately connected to its existence. Renowned Christian philosopher and author Francis Schaeffer evidently held the same conviction:

'The beginning of the Christian view of nature is the concept of creation: that God was there before the beginning and God created everything out of nothing. From this, we understand that creation is not an extension of the essence of God. Created things have an existence in themselves'.¹

The notion of nature as creation and creation as separate from the creator is foundational to biblical creation theology and is the cornerstone of a Christian Environmental Ethic.

While there are multiple theories regarding how and when God created (theistic evolution, intelligent design, old earth / young earth theory, literal creationism, etc.) the underlying assumption of this course is that regardless of the means of creation, God is the source. It is not our intention to explore the various theories regarding the means of creation simply because from a stewardship perspective *why* God created the earth is infinitely more important than *when* or *how*.

Creation as Revelation

As a conscious and deliberate act of God, the creation serves as a revelation of God. Both the Old and New Testament Scriptures attest to the fact that creation contains a general revelation of the Creator and therefore has something to communicate regarding His essential self. The Psalmist, David, celebrates the universality of that revelation:

'The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork. Day to day utters speech and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their sound has gone out throughout the earth and their words to the end of the world'. - Psalm 19:1-4

For the apostle Paul, writing in the New Testament, the revelation of God within the creation goes beyond merely indicating the existence of a Creator.

¹ Schaeffer, F. 1973, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House), pg. 47

He points out that the very character or 'divine attributes' of that Creator are also made known through the things created:

'For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and deity, so that they are without excuse'. - Romans 1:20

Here Paul indicates that it is not only possible to know that a Creator exists through the revelation contained in the creation, but that it is also possible for us to know what kind of a Creator He is. If you consider for a moment the intricate detail of the microcosm, the awesome grandeur of the macrocosm, the infinite diversity, the inexhaustible creativity, the perfect balance and finely tuned symmetry contained in creation, you can easily see why it is possible to deduce a great deal about the nature and character of God from it.

It is also apparent from Paul's writings that creation contains a disclosure of Divine pattern and principle. As Christ-followers (and as human beings) we have a responsibility to bring our lives into alignment with these patterns and principles, some of which are intrinsically embedded in the natural order of things. The apostle Paul uses this 'natural order', or more specifically the violation thereof, as the basis for his scathing reprimand of those guilty of idolatry and suppressing the knowledge of God and Truth, claiming that they gave themselves to what is 'against nature'.

'... (those) who exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator... For this reason, God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise, the men also, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned 'in their lust for one another, men with men, committing what is shameful and received in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.' - Romans 1:25-27

Clearly for Paul the violation of the natural order constitutes a violation of the original pattern and intent of God and therefore a violation of His will. Paul again appeals to 'nature' as a guide when it comes to the matter of personal appearance and demeanour:

'Does not even nature itself teach us that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonour to him?' - Corinthians 11:14

While a thorough historical-grammatical analysis of Paul's statements within their immediate context may produce varying interpretations of both his theology and intent in making the statements, it is sufficiently evident that Paul appealed to the natural created order as revelation of divine pattern and principle, as well as a guide for appropriate Christian conduct². Christian geneticist and naturalist Robert Berry concluded:

'God has written two books: a book of words, which we call the Bible; and a book of works, which is creation. He is the author of both. They are written in very different languages, but we have no excuse if we fail to read them both because of difficulty or (worse) laziness in interpretation. Those who read only one of Gods books will necessarily discover only a part of God's nature and purposes'.³

² The purpose of a reference to these scriptural statements is neither to endorse or excuse any particular theological position on the matters of sexual orientation and personal demeanor but simply to highlight the Apostle Paul's readiness to look to the natural created order as a revelation of divine pattern and principle.

³ Berry, R.J. 2003, *God's Book of Works* (London : T & T Clark)

Earth as God's Possession (ownership)

God claims the earth (and everything in it) as His possession.

'To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it'. - Deuteronomy 10:14

'Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours'. - 1 Chronicles 29:11

'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters'. - Psalm 24:1-2; cf. Psalm 89:11; 1 Corinthians 10:26

'For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land'. - Psalm 95:3-5

As 'creator', 'owner' and 'possessor' of the earth God loves, sustains and redeems it

'He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth'. - Psalm 33:5-6

'The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.... The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made'. - Psalm 145:9, 13; cf. Psalm 145:17

'In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind'. - Job 12:10

'You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it. You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its crops. You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance. The grasslands of the desert overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness. The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing'. - Psalm 65:9-13

'He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. They give water to all the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. The birds of the air nest by the waters; they sing among the branches. He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; the earth is satisfied by the fruit of his work. He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate-bringing forth food from the earth.' - Psalm 104:10-14

'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word'. - Hebrews 1:3

'When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth'. - Psalm 104:29-30

'The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God'. - Romans 8:19-21

'Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross'. - Colossians 1:20; cf. Ephesians 1:10

Earth as our Habitation (Stewardship)

Earth is the place of our habitation, the place where we live and the context on which we depend for our very existence. As such, we have a relationship with it and a responsibility to it.

'The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it'. - Genesis 2:15

'You must keep my decrees and my laws.... And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you'. - Leviticus 18:26, 28

'The land itself must observe a Sabbath to the Lord. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and garner their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a Sabbath of rest, a Sabbath to the Lord.... The land is to have a year of rest'. - Leviticus 25:2-5; cf. Exodus 23:10-11

'If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit'. - Leviticus 26:3-4

'You shall not pollute the land in which you live.... You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the LORD dwell among the Israelites'. - Numbers 35:33-34

'If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?' - Deuteronomy 20:19

As creatures created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) we have a unique role to play in relationship to the rest of creation, one that is characterised by representation and responsible and sustainable stewardship (management).

Conclusion

From the above we can summarise the following and so begin our journey toward understanding why Earth Matters:

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- The Earth is good because it is the handiwork of God. It is an essential part of the creation that serves a valuable purpose in the plan and economy of God.
- The Earth is sacred (not divine) because it contains a revelation of God and has a relationship to God. Both the existence and personal characteristics of God are made known through what He has made.
- The Earth is home to both human and non-human life forms that require our sustainable stewardship. We depend on the earth for our very survival.
- The Earth should matter to us because it matters to God. Humanity holds a special place in the heart of God but not an exclusive place. His compassion is over all He has made (Psalm 145:9-10)

Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever felt 'at home' while in nature or sensed the Presence of God while immersed in Creation? Describe where and when you experienced this.
2. What does creation reveal to you about God? What character traits are evident in the way God has made the Universe?
3. What do you love most about life on Planet Earth?
4. Have you ever thought of yourself as 'responsible' for the condition of the earth?

Memory Verse

Psalm 95:3-5

'For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. In His hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is His, for he made it, and His hands formed the dry land'.