

## **Love God, Love your Neighbor, Care for Creation Our Human Vocation according to the Bible**

**By David Rhoads**

These reflections seek to identify some major ways to read the Bible so as to address our current ecological crisis. Please know that the Bible has nothing to say about “ecology” or the “environment” as we think about it in the contemporary world. However, it turns out that the Bible has a great deal to say about God’s creation. From the opening stories of creation in Genesis to the final vision of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation, the Bible is filled with descriptions and insights about the larger natural world, the value placed on the natural world, God’s relationship to nature, and nature’s relationship with God. Perhaps even more important, the Bible has a lot to say about our human relationship with the rest of creation and our human responsibility to care for creation. Unless we see that creation as a whole has a central role in the biblical story, we will not have understood the full dynamics of that story.

The central role of all creation has been in the Bible all along. However, in our interpretations of the Bible throughout the history of Christianity, we have tended to focus on human issues to the neglect of the rest of creation. The current ecological crisis has brought to the fore the critical role that the whole Earth ecosystem plays in the condition of humanity and our future. It has also made us aware of the ways in which the state of the environment impacts issues of human peace and justice. In addition, the ecological crisis has made us humans acutely aware of the importance of valuing all of nature as precious and wonderful in its own right—and not just for what it can do for humans. Furthermore, the degradation of nature at human hands has led us to reevaluate the role humans play in relation to the rest of creation and to reconsider our God-given human responsibility to care for creation. The ecological crisis has brought this to the fore. And it has given us new eyes to read the Bible. Nevertheless, what we are finding in the Bible has been there all along. Just as Luther discovered justification by grace in the Bible in the time of the Reformation, so we also can now read the Bible with new eyes in relation to this signal issue of our time.

When we read the Bible with new eyes, we realize that care for creation is a religious issue. We discover that care for creation is not one social issue among many for which we are seeking support. In fact, it is not even a social issue at all. Rather, care for creation is foundational to what it means to be human. Humans are but one part of creation, albeit a critical part. God has created all of life, calls it good, and values it in its own right. This means that our love of creation and our care for it is a matter of faith. Some may see it only as a social or political issue, which in some sense it surely is, but in our hearts and in our motivations and in our relationship with God we see it as a profoundly spiritual issue. God has a relationship with all of creation. We are called to care for creation. We cannot have a full and complete relationship with God apart from our relationship with creation.

There is an important relationship between what we know of creation by reading the Bible and what we know of the world through contemporary science. In this regard, the Bible can be read in many ways. For example, some will read the creation stories and challenge or deny what critical science tells us about how the universe came into being and how life on Earth evolved. Others will seek to re-interpret the creation stories to accommodate what we know from science, so that, for example, the concept of a “day” in the creation stories is seen to be a metaphor for millions or billions of years in God’s time. Others will view the creation stories as stories of origin for ancient Israel, stories that were never intended to be science. Such a concept as science was unknown to ancient Israelites. Those who adhere to this view learn much from the creation stories in Genesis, and at the same time they honor what we have learned and continue to learn from scientific investigations. I will be making some comments about contemporary science in relation to the reflections on the Bible here.

The point I wish to make is this: whatever our approach to reading the Bible might be, we can learn much of value from the Bible about God and creation, about the world around us, and about our human role in creation. Evangelicals and Roman Catholics and Protestants and independent churches—as well as other faiths—have been united in their efforts to recover what the Bible says about creation and to fulfill our human responsibility to care for it. What follows, then are some reflections about the Bible that may help us in our time and out of our faith to address the ecological crises we face.

### **How We See the Bible**

Here are three ways we have mistakenly viewed the concept of creation in the Bible and how we might see these matters differently.

First, we have mistakenly read the Bible in ways that disregard, disrespect, and degrade the rest of creation. We have read it in ways that are human-centered, as if God’s only concern in creation were human beings. In biblical studies, for example, we have said that the ancient Hebrews rejected nature religion of any kind in favor of an exclusive focus on God’s people. As a result, scholars have traced “salvation history” as the history of God saving humans alone. The assumption is that God made the world for humans.

In the last few decades, biblical students have read the Bible with new eyes and have seen what is really there. So when we remove the blinders that screened out the rest of creation, we see that God is concerned with *all creation*—humans, animals, plants, land, seas, and wilderness. God called all creation “good,” even before creating humans. And God created humans to tend the garden Earth and preserve it. As such, there is not a separation between humans and the rest of creation. It is all one world of God’s love and caring. So, we are now understanding in new ways that salvation history in the Bible is to be broadened into the story of “creation history”—humans, of course, very much included.

Second, we have inappropriately read the Bible as if humans are given authority to dominate nature for human use. We have interpreted the phrase in the creation story meaning “to have dominion” as if it meant “to dominate and exploit for human use.”

Recent studies have shown that this mandate from God means that humans are “to take responsibility for” the arena of creation. And we learn in the second creation story that this means “to serve and to preserve” the earth. God created other animals and plants for their own sake; and God loves them for their own sake. So their value does not fundamentally reside in what they can do for humans. To call humans the “crown of creation,” then, is not to grant humans the right to dominate but to show that being created in God’s image means that humans are to care for all creation as God does.

Third, we have read the Bible incorrectly to say that humans are only pilgrims on Earth and that our real home is in heaven. God will save humans for heaven. We are on Earth but we do not belong to it. This life is a pilgrimage in a land we pass through on the way to heaven.

By reading the Bible with new eyes, we now see that God has invested God’s self in the present and in the future of this world that God has created. Almost all of the Old Testament was written without a belief in life after death. When Jesus announced the arrival of the kingdom of God, he was not talking about an other-worldly kingdom. The kingdom of God has arrived *here* in this life. As expressions of that kingdom, Jesus healed the sick, forgave sins, exorcised demons, welcomed outcasts, preached good news to the poor, and blessed the children. Furthermore, Jesus prophesied that the son of man would return to earth for the consummation of time. Paul speaks of all creation groaning in birth pains as it awaits the revelation of the children of God. The author of Colossians says that Jesus died to reconcile all things in heaven and on Earth. The author of Revelation has a vision of a renewed heaven and a renewed Earth with God dwelling in a New Jerusalem among the people. Yes, absolutely, in the Bible, there is a clear promise of eternal life after death, *and* there is an affirmation of the restoration and redemption of all creation. This world is not just a passage to another. In fact, the assurance of life after death is promised in Scripture as a springboard for action and commitment *in this world*, here and now.

Having rediscovered these truths, we can now read the Bible in new ways, with lenses that enable us to see the value of all God’s creation, to see how God loves creation, and to discern how God calls humans to a vocation of caring for creation.

### **Reading the Bible Out of Care for Creation: Seven Principles**

1. Notice the extraordinary number of passages that refer to nature. *The Green Bible* is an edition of the NRSV translation that highlights all references to nature in green print. To help you see how pervasive these references are, get a copy of this Bible and read it as a spiritual discipline.

2. Read *all* passages of scripture with creation as an integral part of the scene, whether it is explicitly mentioned or not. Even when not mentioned, creation is always assumed to be there in the worldview of the writers. See what a difference it makes in your understanding to be aware of this assumption. This will change the way you read the Bible as a whole.
3. Notice how much God values all of nature throughout all parts of the Bible—in the creation stories, in the Sabbath regulations, in the Psalms (e. g. 104), in the prophets (such as Isaiah and Jeremiah), in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, in the teachings of Jesus, in Paul’s letter to the Romans, and in the Book of Revelation.
4. Read carefully the creation stories and other passages of the Bible that show ways in which humans are to care for creation—take responsibility, serve earth, and preserve it. The Bible presents care for creation as our foundational human vocation.
5. Observe how integral the state of nature is tied up with human justice: in the story of Noah, in the Sabbath regulations, in the prophets, and in the Book of Revelation. When there is injustice among the people, the land and the crops wither.
6. When you read, give a voice to the aspects of nature present there. Identify with nature, empathize with nature, and celebrate with nature.
7. In passages where the rest of nature is ill-treated in the biblical stories, read against the grain of these stories in light of other, more foundational biblical passages that show a deep commitment to care for creation—just as we put biblical passages of violence in context by critiquing them in light of the overarching biblical principles of love and justice.

### **Seventeen Biblical Themes related to God’s Good Creation:**

What follows is a profile of some of the main themes of the Bible related to creation. They are accompanied by key Bible passages that illustrate these themes. There are many more points to be made and many more passages to consider. However, this profile will provide a good overall picture of the importance, role, and status of all creation in the biblical materials.

#### ***Theme One: Humans belong to the Earth.***

The creation materials make it quite clear that human beings arise from Earth and are embedded in this world.

*“ a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground . . . Then the Lord God formed a human (adam) from the dust of the ground (adamah) and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being. ” . . . . Out of the ground the lord God made to grow every tree. . . . ” (Genesis 2:6-9).*

*“Then the lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Genesis 4:7)*

We are rooted in the earth like trees are rooted in the earth. And we are dependent upon earth every bit as much as animals are dependent upon the earth. Adam was made from the dust of the earth. The name Adam (adam) is the masculine form of the Hebrew word *adamah*, which literally means “soil” or “arable [farmable] earth.” So Adam is an “earth man” who belongs to the land and who is responsible to the land. Dust we are and to dust we shall return. If we had traditionally translated the name of the first man literally as “Earthman” or “Soilman” or even “Farmer,” our common understanding of human beings and their relationship to Earth might be quite different than it is.

Not only that, the earth was instrumental in bringing forth other creatures as well, as when God said, *“Let the earth bring forth vegetation . . . . And so it was.”* And *“Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind . . . . And so it was”* (Genesis 1:11-12). As such, Earth is a co-creator with God in bringing forth plants and animals. Like plants and animals, Adam came from the dust of the ground. In the biblical understanding, there is a common source of life—the good earth and God’s breath.

We humans have a spiritual problem in our relationship to Earth. We tend to think that we live *on* Earth rather than that we are embedded in it. With our civilization and human-made world, we are artificially separated from land and from so much of nature, and from the sources of our food. Consider how we might go for months in the winter from house to sidewalk to driveway to street to parking lot to work or stores—without setting foot directly on soil. In fact, however, we are dependent on Earth in ways we seldom think about—sun, air, trees, beetles, fields, crops, fresh water, and on and on. It actually takes the whole of Earth to raise one human. Spiritually, we need to re-root ourselves in Earth and return to our sense of kinship with animals and plants, all of which, in the biblical picture, have commonly arisen from Earth.

Also, from a modern scientific point of view, we are kin to other creatures of nature, sharing commonalities of mind and body, DNA, and the environment. Humans are mammals, higher primates, and more. We have evolved with all plants and animals. We are embedded in Earth and its systems. This is what we know of God’s incredible creation in our time. And it is consistent with what the Bible has told us about the understanding that the ancients had about the relationship of humans to Earth.

***Theme Two: Creation was not formed for human beings alone.***

We tend to think that God created life for the benefit of humans. We think of everything else in life as *our* environment, there to serve us. But why not think of ourselves as part of the environment, interrelated with all the plants and animals? How would we act if we knew that the well-being of other species depended on how *we* functioned as part of *their* environment?

In the biblical stories, God called creation “good.” even before humans were created. After the third day, God called plants and trees “good.” After the fourth day, God called the sun and the moon “good.” After the fifth day and sixth days, God called the animal creatures of air, sea, and land “good.” Finally,

*“God saw everything that God had made and, indeed, it was good.” (Genesis 1:1-31).*

From a scientific point of view, life emerged over a period of billions of years. God was creating and loving all the plants and animals for billions of years before humans evolved. God delighted in life and considered it to be “good” long before *homo sapiens* emerged. Nevertheless, we humans show up in the last few minutes and we think it’s all about us! In addition, there are species of plants and animals in the depth of the sea and the interior of the forest and in vast desert areas about which we humans know absolutely nothing. Think about how God has related to all these creatures of nature for so long and often in such “hidden” ways—totally apart from humans. Can we come to see all of life as good, to value it, to delight in it, and to love it—as God does? That is what the Bible calls us to do.

***Theme Three: God wants all creatures to thrive.***

We tend to read Genesis as if God said only to people: “*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.*” (Genesis 1:22; 8:17). No, God said it to the fish and to the birds. God wants all creatures to thrive.

To the fish and the birds, God said, “*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth.*” (Genesis 1:22; compare after the flood 8:17). And yto the humans, God said, “*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.*” (1:28). God gave to humans “*every tree with seed in its fruit*” for food. To the animals and birds God gave “*every green plant for food.*” (1:29-30).

As for humans, we have already multiplied and filled the Earth—to the point where human population is putting stress on almost every species of plant and animal and every eco-system. In many places, at least from the point of view of animals and plants, we humans are akin to an invasive species that takes over and threatens every other life form. Our proper role as humans is to see ourselves as part of the larger eco-systems in which we find ourselves and to behave in ways that enable all of life to thrive around us—so that other elements of God’s creation can multiple and fill the earth, can thrive and teem as God wants them to flourish.

One problem is that we humans have little sense of limits on ourselves, our activity, and our human products. We consider that Earth has unlimited resources, that there is unlimited space in the land and sea for garbage, and unlimited space in the air for pollution. We are called to put limits on human activities so as to minimize our impact on Earth, an impact that prevents plants and animals from thriving, or even surviving.

***Theme Four: Hence, God loves creatures for their own sake.***

Far from creating the rest of the world to serve humans, God created humans in God's image to serve and care for the Earth. God loves all creation for its own sake. The Psalms (e. g. Psalms 104 and 148) show God delighting in all creatures. Notice how God made many parts of creation for the benefit of other creatures! For example, God made the springs of water for the wild animals. God made the grass for the cattle. God made the trees for the birds to nest. God made rain to water the forests and the mountains. God made the mountain crags for the goats. (Ps 104:10-30). God delights in all creatures and provides for them. God calls humans to honor their right to life and to foster their well-being.

*“O Lord! How manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures . . . These all look to you to give them their food in due season.”*  
(Psalm 104:10-30).

We have come to recognize not only human rights but animal rights, the rights of other parts of creation to survive and thrive. As we claim for humans, animals also have a right to food, and animals have a right to be treated humanely. When we make decisions about human activity, we need to consider our impact on the rest of creation. We need to give voice to those plants and animals and eco-systems that are affected by our actions. We cannot disregard them. We are called to value them for their own sake, as God does, and not to deprive other creatures of their God-given right to have “their food in due season.”

***Theme Five: Human beings were created so that they could take care of the garden Earth that God had created, so that they serve and preserve it.***

This is the critical part. According to the Bible, what is the role of humans in creation? The key word is “dominion.” We have misinterpreted this word to mean that humans have a right to dominate and therefore use, abuse, and exploit the rest of creation for our own use. This understanding has had a tragic impact on our common life in the West. It has given us authorization to do just about anything we want to do to nature, without limits, for human benefit and for human pleasure.

*“Have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth”* (Genesis 1:26).

The biblical mandate for humans is that we are to have dominion not domination. The command to “subdue” the earth (Genesis 1:28) relates to a time when human life was especially fragile in the face of threats from snakes and wild animals. As such, God was giving directions for humans to “subdue,” that is, to be able to restrain that which would bring them harm. The Hebrew word for “dominion” does not mean domination or exploitation. Rather, it means to “take

responsibility for” and “to protect” Earth as a domain for which humans are responsible. A ruler who had dominion over Israel would be expected to be like a shepherd caring for and protecting the sheep—expected to take responsibility for the people in his realm, not to tyrannize or exploit them but to see that the people were protected and that justice was done for the poor, the widows, and the orphans. As such, “to have dominion over all the creatures” means that humans are to care for God’s good creation.

The words of the second creation story make this understanding of “dominion” abundantly clear.

“The Lord God took the human and put him in the Garden of Eden to till [serve] it and to keep [preserve] it.” (Genesis 2:15).

Here the human vocation is rooted in the command (traditionally translated) “to till and to keep” (Genesis 2:15). We now know that the words for “till” and “keep” are more faithfully rendered “serve and “preserve.” The word for “serve” here is the word used for servants of a master, of a king, or of a priest. Humans are to serve the land, not dominate over it. This completely reverses and upends the misunderstanding of “dominion” as “domination.” Instead of being in a hierarchical position “over” Earth, we are placed in a position of subservience so as to use our power to care for the well-being of all that God has created. And we are to preserve creatures and plants so that they survive and thrive. In a sense we are all to be like farmers, called to care for the land so that we preserve it in a sustainable way for future generations. As we are called by Scripture to be our brother’s keeper and our sister’s keeper, so we are called by Scripture to be Earth keepers. We are called to cultivate the land—to help the land fulfill *its* God given role to bring forth plants and animals. That is why God created humans in God’s image, to care for creation as agents of God so that the land, all plants, and all animals can flourish!

We see the nature of these responsibilities to care for creation in Bible stories that follow, such as the story of Noah preserving all species from the flood. And we see it in subsequent biblical traditions, such as the Sabbath laws that give rest to cattle on the seventh day and direct that the land should lie fallow on the seventh year. This mandate to serve Earth is reinforced by the teaching of Jesus who says that our whole ethical posture in life is to be one of service.

*“Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant. Whoever wants to be most important must be everyone’s slave. For even the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life . . .”* (Mark 10:43-45).

Although this teaching focuses on relations between humans, it echoes the command “to serve and to preserve” and thereby equally represents the approach that humans are to take in relation to all of life. This vocation to care for Earth is foundational for what it means to be human beings. We have lost this sense of relationship to Earth. As humans—individually and collectively—we are called now to renew this vocation and to discover what this vocation means for the twenty-first century.



***Theme Six: We see the vocational responsibility for creation in the Noah story, when Noah was commanded to rescue all the creatures from extinction by flood.***

*“As for me I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendents after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you . . . .”* (Genesis 9:9-10; see also Hosea 2:18).

At that time, God made a covenant not only with humans but also with all the animals! We often focus so much on the covenants of Abraham and Moses that God made with humans, and we neglect the covenant of Noah. Here God has a covenantal relationship not just with humans but with all creation! The rainbow was a sign of the covenant:

*“This [rainbow] is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature.”* (Genesis 9:12).

In this covenant, God promised not again to destroy the Earth. However, all bets are off for humans! We humans seem to be threatening to destroy Earth, not in one cataclysmic event like the flood but bit by bit as we erode the life systems that support our very existence. Due to human activity, we are losing species of plants and animals to extinction at an unusually high and alarming way. The story of Noah has been called the first “endangered species act.” Like Noah, we too are called to preserve the diversity of plant and animal species that God has created. Can we embrace our God-given vocation to restore Earth and live with all creation in ways that are sustainable? Can we fulfill *our* part of God’s covenant with Noah—with us and with all living creatures?

***Theme Seven: We see the human responsibility to care for creation in the Sabbath laws of the land of Israel***

*“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the resident alien in your land.”* (Exodus 20:8-10)

*But in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for the Lord.”* (Leviticus 25:4)

Just as the laws of Israel seek to bring justice and humaneness to relationships between humans by giving rest and forgiveness of debts and restoration of appropriated lands, so also animals are to rest on the Sabbath—oxen, cattle, and donkeys. Furthermore, the land itself is to lie fallow every seventh year so that it may be renewed. The point is that the animals and the land are to observe a “Sabbath for the Lord!” They have their own distinctive relationship with God. And

humans are to make sure that their Sabbath day is observed. Humans are not to overwork the land, nor are we to exploit animals or treat them inhumanely.

***Theme Eight: All of life is sacramental.***

*“The whole earth is filled with God’s glory”* (Isaiah 6:3).

The Scriptures make it clear that God did not create the world and then withdraw from it. Just as God continues to live and move and be manifest in humans, so God is present in all of life (“in, with, and under,” as Luther put it). The *whole Earth* is filled with God’s glory! That is to say, all of life is sacramental.

The point is that all of life should be treated with reverence. Reverence is not a trait we have cultivated in the West. We look at the rest of nature and we see resources to be tapped, materials to be used, places to exploit, and opportunities for human development. The rest of life is treated as if it were made up of lifeless things without mystery and devoid of God’s glory. What if we began with reverence for all things and then made use only of what we needed, treated animals, plants, and land with respect, and sought to delight in all of it. Reverence is the right basis for use. If we have the eyes to see God’s glory everywhere, perhaps our appreciation for the sanctity of life will lead us to live in ways that are sustainable for all creation.

***Theme Nine: As with humans, all creation is called to praise God.***

Our solidarity with the rest of creation does not stop with a sense of kinship with creation or even with our reverence for life. We humans are called not just to thank God for creation but to praise God *with* creation. We are to behold creation and know that it is praising God. Imagine how our worship might change if we praised God with creation!

*“Let them [all creation] praise the Lord.”* (Psalm 148:13).

*“Let everything that breathes praise the Lord”* (Psalm 150:6).

One of the most striking things about the biblical understanding of nature is that all creation is commanded to worship God. This does not mean that each animal and plant and land and sea have special sounds to do that, although that may be part of it. No, it means that these created things praise God by doing what they were created to be and to do. You can see this in many passages in the Bible, including this one from I Chronicles.

*“Worship the lord in holy splendor: tremble before him all the earth. Let the heavens be glad and the Earth rejoice. And let them say among the nations, ‘The Lord is king.’ Let the sea roar and all that fills it; Let the field exalt and everything in it. Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy before the lord”* (I Chronicles 16:29-34; Psalm 148).

One of the ways to understand the impact of our degradation of Earth and its systems, our pollution of land, sea, and air, and our threat to species of animals and plants is to realize that we are thereby diminishing their capacity to praise God. As we seek to restore Earth and rescue endangered species, we are enhancing their collective worship of their creator—as they are able to thrive and teem and relish being alive.

*“May the Lord rejoice in all his works” (104:31).*

We may not only diminish the capacity of Earth to praise God, but also, by degrading creation, we may be diminishing God’s capacity to delight in creation. If we have a God who suffers with us, as indeed the crucifixion shows that we do, then we may be increasing God’s suffering empathy with Earth by our recklessness and wantonly destructive ways. When we delight in creation and care for it, we magnify God’s joy at the flourishing of life.

***Theme Ten: The biblical books of wisdom show us that humans learn from creation:***

The ancients learned much about life and about God by studying nature. In this passage, the animals will teach the presence of God in all creation.

*“But ask the animals and they will teach you; the birds of the air and they will tell you. Ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you. Ask the fish of the sea and they will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the lord has created this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.” (Job 12:7-10).*

Consider the nature imagery throughout Genesis, the Psalms , Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, the prophets, the Sermon on the Mount, the letter of James, the Book of Revelation. The writers of Scripture were people who lived close to nature and who knew that it belonged to God and had lessons to teach us.

Many native groups who live close to the land discern much wisdom by noticing the ways of the animals and by learning the healing powers of the plants. We can learn from animals how to be more human and how to be more humane. If we would stop thinking of ourselves as so superior and stop thinking we could not possibly learn anything of value from other creatures of God, perhaps we would in our humility find the wisdom to live better, healthier, and richer lives.

The wisdom literature— Proverbs, the Psalms, and Job especially—show us that nature reveals to us God’s ways in the world. We have lost a connection with nature, a loss that prevents us from being students. Fortunately, there are contemporary poets and writers who help us to see life in ways that transform our relationship to the rest of creation.

***Theme Eleven: Justice for humans is related to justice toward Earth.***

For the Bible, creation is one world. Humans and the rest of nature are inextricably tied together as part of one reality with a common relationship with God. Therefore, when humans flourish in peace and justice, also the land flourishes with grapes and grain. On the other hand, when there is violence and injustice, the land languishes.

*“I brought you into a land to eat its fruits and its good things, but when you entered you defiled the land and made my heritage an abomination. “ (Jeremiah 2:7).*

*“The earth dries up and withers. The world languishes and withers. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the land.” (Is 24:4-7; compare Joel 2:2-20.).*

Today we speak of “ecological justice,” the relationship between the way we treat nature and the impact that our ill-treatment of nature has on humans, especially the vulnerable and underdeveloped countries. We speak of “environmental racism” to depict the ways in which the consequences of our environmental degradation fall inordinately on people of color. We see the way governments and industries will exploit both people and land. This is why it is important to have the choice to purchase fair trade products, products grown under conditions that respect humans and the environment. Given the nature of the biblical vocation and the interrelation of human justice and Earth care, it is appropriate to see our role this way:” love God, love the neighbor, care for creation.”

***Theme Twelve: The kingdom of God restores all creation.***

When Jesus announces that the kingdom of God had arrived, we see restoration of life—the sick healed, sinners forgiven, demoniacs freed of possession, the lame walk, the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, and the poor with good news preached to them. We see people restored to the wholeness and freedom with which they were created. But the kingdom of God also includes the capacity for Jesus to lie with the wild animals without fear, to calm a threatening storm, and to bring forth food in the desert. All creation is being restored. Furthermore, the image of the future when the kingdom will arrive fully is that the trees will be bearing fruit throughout the year, the water will be crystal clear and abundantly available, and the leaves of the trees will be a healing for the nations.

*“The kingdom of God has arrived.” (Mark 1:14)*

*“Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).*

*“And he was with the wild animals and the angels were serving him.” (Mark 1:13)*

Jesus’ vision of the kingdom recalls the OT vision of a time when . . . .

*“The wolf shall lie with the lambs, and the lion will lie down with the kid.”* (Isaiah 11:6-9)

All of this suggests that redemption is the restoration of all creation—a “new creation.” (Galatians 6:16). And it implies a reconstitution of the foundational human vocation proffered in the creation stories to serve and to preserve all of life.

***Theme Thirteen: Our motivation is love.***

The biblical materials make it amply clear that our motivation for creation-care is rooted in God’s love. We are not to act out of guilt or shame or fear or anger. These are not appropriate motivations for our work of restoration, and they will not sustain us. Rather we are to act out of grace in response to God’s grace, out of love in response to God’s love, out of gratitude in response to God’s gift of life.

*“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous”* (Matthew 5:44-45).

*“We love because God first loved us”* (1 John 4:19)

Furthermore, we are to act not out of a duty to the law or a desire to justify ourselves before God. That approach only turns us into the environmental police, trying to see who outdoes the other in environmental commitment, resulting in a kind of “environmental correctness.” By contrast, we are called to act in freedom and grace and joy.

*“You who want to be justified by law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace”* (Galatians 5:4).

*“I appeal to you . . . that you live a life worthy of God.”* (Thessalonians 2:12).

*“Give thanks in all circumstances”* (Thessalonians 5:18)

*“Therefore [in response to God’s work of redemption] . . . , present your bodies a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”* (Romans 12:1)

When we act out of love, our love for creation will mirror the love that God has for creation. If we are to act as agents of God in caring for creation, we will reflect the love and joy that God has for creation. We will not save what we do not love.

***Theme Fourteen: Kingdom restoration involves rescuing the least.***

We see the implications of the love that God has for humans when it is extended to all creatures—especially given the threat to so many species in our day. God had always expressed

in Israel a concern for the most vulnerable, for widows and orphans, for the poor, and for strangers. Likewise, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom comes especially for the poor in spirit and the humble of heart. It is these to whom the kingdom belongs: the least, the outcasts, the defiled, the oppressed, the lost, the children, among other vulnerable people.

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).*

*"For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10)*

*"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40).*

These testimonies to the way God works and to the nature of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed extend to all of life. God is concerned about the most vulnerable people as well as the most vulnerable plants and animals and the most fragile eco-systems. Self-centered human wisdom tends to secure the strong and disregard the weak, to let them languish and expire. But God's wisdom claims that the strength of a society lies in how well that society tends to their weaker members. If we wish to restore creation we too must attend to endangered species of plants and animals and to the eco-systems that support them. By saving the most vulnerable, we will secure the whole. This is God's way to bring in the kingdom.

***Theme Fifteen: Jesus died for all creation.***

Not just Jesus' life and message but also his death was for the restoration of all creation. The author of Colossians writes.

*"For in him all the fullness of the Godhead was pleased to dwell and 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 1:19-20).*

The story is told of a congregation in Africa that has the following call and response. The leader says: What did we used to believe? And the people say, "That Jesus died for our sins!" and "And what do we believe now?" the leader continues. And the people say, "That Jesus died for all creation!" This is the ringing affirmation from the biblical materials that we need to acclaim so that we can rise to the challenges of our time. We need the affirmation to see that God and Jesus are committed to this life, that they seek to reconcile all of life, and that they call us to live in ways that restore rather than destroy creation.

***Theme Sixteen: All creation is groaning.***

Paul recognized the cry of nature in response to the human crimes against it—made obvious by human injustice and by the ravages heaped on the natural world, in Paul’s time by the conquests and exploits of the Roman Empire. All of nature, he declares, longs for the revealing of children of God who will care for creation and free it from degradation and decay.

*“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God . . . . We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we await the adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”* (Romans 8:19-23).

Read the Bible with new eyes and see all the places where creation/nature is present and where it is suffering and groaning. Seek to respond with the empathy of Paul and the compassion of God for this suffering creation. Become the children of God who will bring hope and restoration to creation.

***Theme Seventeen: The Book of Revelation portrays the most amazing vision of the future unity of all creation.***

John recounts an overwhelming experience of all creation giving glory to God.

*“Then I heard the whole creation, everything in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and in the sea, say, ‘Blessing and honor and glory and might be to our God who sits upon the throne and to the lamb, forever and ever.’”* (Revelation 5:13).

Furthermore, John condemned the treatment of earth—humans and the rest of nature—by the Roman Empire. He prophesied:

*“The time has come for God to destroy the destroyers of the earth.”* (Rev. 18:11)

John envisions a time when the old destructive/oppressive order is gone and there is a renewed heaven and a renewed Earth—a city in which nature and human life are fully integrated, in which the “the river of the water of life” will be “free of charge” for the poor, when the tree of life will yield ample fruit all year around, and when the leaves of the trees are a healing for the nations.” (Rev 21). John calls people to live in that vision in the present.

*“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb, through the middle of the city streets. On either side of the river is the tree of life, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations”* (Revelation 22:1-2)

John calls people to live in that vision in the present.

## **Conclusion**

When we see the full thrust of the biblical mandate to care for Earth, we can see even more clearly that care for creation is not just one contemporary issue among others. Rather, it is part of our fundamental purpose as human beings and it should affect the way we do everything. As the Bible shows, creation-care is an integral dimension of our calling as humans. We are to love God, love our neighbor, and care for creation. Consider this quotation from the American poet and essayist Wendell Berry in a book called *What Are People For?*:

“The ecological teaching of the Bible is inescapable. God made the world because God wanted it made. God thinks the world is good and God loves it. It is God’s world; God has never relinquished title to it. God has never revoked the conditions . . . that oblige us to care for it. If God loves the world, then how might any person of faith be excused for not loving it or caring for it? If God loves the world, then how might any person of faith be . . . justified in destroying it?”

Let us hear the biblical call from God and make a profound commitment to fulfill our human vocation to be Earth-keepers who serve and preserve the Earth. Let us be motivated by grace in all things to change our spirit as well as our actions. Let us be different so that we can make a difference, for God’s sake.

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The most ambitious project for reading the Bible with ecology in mind is the *Earth Bible*, a series of volumes edited by Norman Habel and comprised of articles on different parts of the Bible that deal with issues bearing ecological implications. For further information, see [www.webofcreation.org/earthbible/earthbible.html](http://www.webofcreation.org/earthbible/earthbible.html). Note there also the aims and principles of The Earth Bible Project. This site also contains an extensive bibliography of books and articles on the Bible that are of ecological interest.

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