

Have You Forgotten This Ancient Biblical Mandate?

The environment, climate change and sustainability have all become political buzzwords. Politicians argue about how we can produce the material goods we have become accustomed to while reducing the negative impact producing those items has on the earth. The problem is that they make little progress, because taking care of God's creation is not a political issue. It is a biblical and spiritual issue each of us should be taking to heart.

The creation account in Genesis 1 is only 31 verses long, but that chapter should have a profound impact on our lives. In those verses, we not only see each step of creation, but we see God's joy and satisfaction as each stage is completed. Understanding what God did in creation is something that still challenges humans today. We are constantly discovering new species of plants and animals, both living and extinct. We strive to understand how the ecosystem works, and we are just starting to realize how our lifestyles can impact that fragile system.

Genesis 2 goes into more detail about the garden, and it looks at Adam and Eve's role in taking care of their surroundings. God expected Adam and Eve and their children to serve and keep the garden He had made. They were His original stewards who were given authority over the earth. Their authority was not just to rule; it was to care for, protect, nourish and honor God by taking care of what He created for their enjoyment and good.

What it means to be a steward has largely been lost in our culture. Most of us only have a superficial understanding of stewardship. A steward manages the resources of his or her master, ensuring that all of the elements work together in

harmony. The steward is the ultimate responsible party. But a steward is more than an employee. Every decision is made in the master's name.

This is the authority God gave Adam and Eve in the garden. He gave them the power to act in His name as they cared for all He created. This is the crown of honor He bestows on you and me (Ps. 8:5). He gives us the authority to care for His creation in His name. The question is: Are we caring for it?

Creation Covenant

God trusts us to represent Him on this earth, which is both an honor and a burden. He made us stewards of His creation, and we are required to fulfill our duties as stewards as part of our relationship with Him. Unfortunately, many are not fulfilling the duties of that role. Rick Warren said, "We cannot be all that God wants us to be without caring about the earth."

We cannot properly read the Word of God and not conclude that taking care of creation was a mandate for mankind from the beginning. Nor can we conclude that God does not care about the environment. In fact, there are over a thousand references to the earth and caring for creation in the Bible. Genesis 2:15 (NIV) says, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." The Hebrew word translated "work" in this verse is *abad*, which means "to serve." Adam and his family were placed in the garden to serve God's creation. The phrase "take care of it" comes from the word *shamar*, which "indicates a loving, caring, sustaining type of keeping."

This means the major responsibilities of the humans in the garden were twofold: communion with God (honoring Him through their relationship with Him) and taking care of (honoring) His creation. Those responsibilities were never removed from Adam and Eve's descendants, even though they lost their place in

the garden. Their work became more physical; they no longer had easy access to food; and pain and suffering entered their lives. But they were still called to honor the land and the creatures around them.

Over time, however, humans started to forget their responsibility, turning instead to sin and thus angering God (Gen. 6:5-7). Thankfully, God found one righteous man on the earth, and so He decided to give humanity a second chance.

Noah's story includes the promise of a covenant between God and all of creation. In Genesis 9:9, God granted a promise of a continued relationship with humanity. But then He went one step further, reminding Noah of his responsibilities and of God's bond with creation. God said His covenant was "with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth" (Gen. 9:10).

Restored Creation

Though God has given us authority over creation—the authority of stewards who serve—we don't actually own the earth. For that matter, we could make a case that we don't really own anything at all. God owns all of creation, which is a fact found throughout Scripture.

Psalms 24:1 tells us, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." Psalm 104 is full of beautiful imagery showing God's provision for creation. God states in Job 41:11b, "Everything under heaven belongs to me." And the apostle Paul tells us in Colossians 1:15–16 that everything was created through Christ and for Him.

Paul speaks further about creation in Romans 1:19–20 (ESV), saying that what can be known about God has been made plain to all humans "because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation

of the world, in the things that have been made.”

God’s glory revealed through creation is woven throughout Scripture. God’s original plan for creation was one of complete harmony, and that harmony will be finally restored one day. The harmony was lost with Adam and Eve’s fall. Prophecies throughout Scripture, however, show that God’s plan is to restore that harmony. Isaiah 11:1-9 speaks of God restoring the interdependence and harmony He intended for all creation.

Some believe that when Jesus returns, the old earth will be destroyed and a new earth created in its place. However, I believe Isaiah 65:17-25 makes it clear that the new earth mentioned in Scripture is not a replacement for the old earth—it is a renewal of the present earth. In Joel 2:18-27, we read of the restoration of all of creation, which is proof of God’s compassion for humanity and for all of creation, revealing how we can be redeemed and restored as well.

The prophecies continue into Revelation. John’s vision includes God dwelling with us in a restored and redeemed creation (Rev. 21:1–5). He will completely remove the curse from the land, restoring it to its original design and us to our place in the garden.

We need to understand that creation is a vital part of God’s mission. When we care for all God has created, we are truly living as He desires. We are living with honor.

Honoring Creation

Honoring creation is not just about recycling and not littering. It cannot be relegated to participating in a single project each year. Rather, we must act deliberately to protect our world and leave it healthy and flourishing for the next generation.

As the late Billy Graham said, “The growing possibility of our

destroying ourselves and the world with our own neglect and excess is tragic and very real.” The only way we can stop the destruction and conserve what we have is if more followers of Jesus take an active role in honoring creation.

Paul de Vries, president of New York Divinity School, said, “However we treat the world, that’s how we are treating Jesus, because He is the cosmic glue.”

This idea adds a whole new dimension to honoring creation. By honoring creation, we are honoring the Lord. If we can reduce the impact of culture on our lives and focus more on honoring the Lord, then honoring creation should become a part of that process.

This is certain: We can no longer ignore the damage being done to our planet. Habitats are disappearing due to deforestation and growing cities. Pollution is dangerous for wildlife and for us. J. Matthew Sleeth, author of *Serve God, Save the Planet*, said, “A problem exists, one as meaningful and real as a sinking ship with billions of passengers aboard. The earth is our ship, an ark for everything that lives. It is the only vessel available to carry humans through the ocean of space, and it is rapidly becoming unseaworthy.”

A large part of the problem is the increased consumption our culture advocates. More and more resources are used to manufacture goods. As those goods are produced, the factories and transportation of the goods contribute to pollution. Once the products are used and consumed, they contribute to the growing waste problem.

When we honor creation by caring for it, we allow the unbelievers of the world to see God’s handiwork. God’s kindness is what leads us to repentance, and the earth and everything on it are examples of His kindness. How can anyone look at the soaring mountains, hear the heart-shaking crashing of the ocean or hold a giggling baby and not be in awe of

God's handiwork? According to Paul, the ability to see God in everything leaves us without an excuse for our sin (Rom. 1:20). Everywhere we look, we are reminded of God's compassion and kindness.

We must protect what God has given us to care for. If we are acting in His name, then we must act responsibly, with great love and care. We may have lost access to that wonderful Garden of Eden for now, but each of us is still responsible for honoring God's creation through our stewardship.

So how do we live an honor lifestyle and become effective stewards for God? First, we need to truly understand what our stewardship is protecting. Taken as a whole, the beauty and complexity of our world is awe-inspiring and overwhelming. So let's look at just one part. Let's look at flowers.

If you can, take a moment to go look at a flower. Really study the details—the silky softness of the petals, the small bits of pollen on the stamen, the healthy green of the stem and leaves. Note that each part serves a purpose. The green leaves and stem provide food for the flower. The colorful petals and the nectar attract pollinators that take the pollen from flower to flower, ensuring more flowers for the future. Now think about the various kinds of flowers on the earth. Scientists estimate there are about 400,000 different species. And flowers are only a small portion of the plant and animal life God has created.

The sheer scale of God's creation is difficult to comprehend. The oceans cover 70.8 percent of the earth and hold 97 percent of the water. The depth of the water averages 2.4 miles, but at its deepest point it is around 6.2 miles. Mount Everest, the highest peak in the world, is only around 5.5 miles tall. That means if it were rooted in the deepest part of the ocean, it wouldn't even reach the surface.

Looking at creation as Jesus would have us do is a humbling

experience indeed. It brings home the power of our God.

The second step to living an honor lifestyle as stewards of God's creation is to understand what is holding us back. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and allowed sin to become part of their existence and thus ours. One of those sins is selfishness, which creates an attitude of self-gratification regardless of the consequences. Sin affects every part of our lives. Since Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden, humans have started using the earth in new ways. Not once in Scripture do we see God condemning us for our use of the earth, but over time the godly stewardship we are called to has drifted away.

In order to live an honor lifestyle, we must take active steps to care for God's creation. We need to be mindful of our consumption and the impact we have on our surroundings. We must look around us with an eye to the complex system God built. We must begin to care more for those around us, including the animals, the environment, our communities and our own front yards. Individually, we cannot solve complex issues such as climate change, air pollution or extinction, but we can make a difference as stewards of creation if we just perform one honorable act at a time.

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