

PART III – THE DESIRED RESPONSE

CHAPTER 15 WE ARE THE POLLUTION

*"nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean' ...
What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'.
For ... out of men's hearts come evil" - Luke 7:18, 20 & 21*

WE CONTAMINATE THE CREATION AND OURSELVES

If you are looking for biblical instruction on the proper management of the environment, there is no shortage of passages which apply. Discussions about our relationship to the creation are typically based on verses like: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it"¹; "Be fruitful and multiply, ... subdue [the earth] ... and have dominion ... over every living thing"²; and "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you."³ While understanding our place within the creation is important, these verses are outnumbered by references in the Bible to the destruction that comes upon the creation as a result of our behavior.

You are probably now thinking, yes, the greed of man has spoiled the land through our careless taking of profit. The prophet Nahum wrote, "You have increased the number of your merchants till they are more than the stars of the sky, but like locusts they strip the land and then fly away."⁴ Surely this greed is what has caused the environmental degradation that we see today.

That prophet does speak a word of truth for today. It is all too common for us to take from the land without a thought of what impact we might be having. Too often we look at nature as a resource that is endless and free for the taking. God has certainly not endorsed our irresponsible wastefulness which is defacing his creation. Anyone seeking to walk in his ways should do what they can to not be a party to such ungrateful behavior. As the caretakers of God's creation, we need to honor the command of Jesus to "Let nothing be wasted."⁵

I am sure that you have all heard listings of the wasteful habits that our culture participates in, so they will not be repeated here. But as important as our conscientious stewardship may be, we must not forget that even these things which will improve our habits will not "save the planet". In fact, the main source of pollution in the world is not even the result of our wasteful use of resources or our careless disposal of hazardous chemicals. We have lost track of the fact that we are the pollution which defiles this world, not something outside of us.

When we are trying to identify the source of our environmental problems, it is easy for people to point out the speck in someone else's eye. Some people will blame the capitalists for taking profit from the land and not leaving anything for future generations to use. Some accuse the Christians of being too other-worldly to be good stewards with the resources we have. Others fault the education in impoverished countries for failing to equip people to know how to feed themselves and to care for the land, or blame the weather for depriving whole regions of rain and blowing away the top soil. The blame for the troubled state of the environment is also placed on war, hunger, disease or political corruption. So where does the responsibility for our ecological problems rest?

A theme presented throughout Scripture is that man's impact on nature is more serious than we have acknowledged. The Bible teaches that our ecological problems are not just a temporal issue which is distracting our attention from things of eternal value. If you want to get to the root of the it, it is a spiritual issue. According to Scripture, the earth is being polluted by what is flowing out of our corrupted hearts.

Our culture sees the impacts on nature which are brought on by things like indifference, greed, over-population and changes in climate. But the Bible speaks of the actual defiling of the creation, not just the damage to its resources. We forget that everything was fine in Eden until we decided we wanted to do things our way. This rebellion against God was the beginning of the environmental crisis.

What were some of the effects that being involved in this mutiny had on mankind? One of the first things that the Bible records on this matter is the fact that Adam and Eve felt ashamed. In response to this, literally and symbolically, God provided them with animal skins to "cover" their sense of shame before him. In a similar manner the nation of Israel presented sin offerings to God, sacrificing a lamb or a bull to "*cover over*" their sins. This is the meaning of "*atonement*."

The same concept is applied today in the confessional used by some branches of the church. Sins are said to be covered over by an outward act of repentance. But to one who understands the legal system, it becomes apparent that soon after the atonement is made for past sins, we begin to fail again. How many days or hours or minutes before we again become soiled and unfit to approach God based on our own merit? This was the internal struggle which Martin Luther faced. He knew he was unacceptable to God more than 99% of the time. For years he lived in fear of God's wrath coming upon him at any moment. God's instructions to Adam in Eden make it clear that the disobedience of mankind is a crime deserving capital punishment.

RC Sproul describes how Martin Luther struggled with this concept as follows:

"He had a superior understanding of law. Once he applied his astute legal mind to the law of God he saw things that most mortals miss. ... We all fall short of perfect love for God, so why worry about it? ... If God punished everyone who failed to keep the Great Commandment, He would have to punish everyone in the world. The test is too great, too demanding; it is not fair. God will have to judge us all on a curve. ... Luther didn't see it that way. Luther's legal mind was haunted by the question: how can an unjust man survive in the presence of a just God?"⁶

So when we finally come to the point of realizing that we are guilty, what are we to do? Like children who have broken something they should not have touched, we are waiting to be found out and punished. How are we to deal with our failure? The world is polluted. It is cursed and fallen, and it is our fault! It has gotten far beyond what we could ever repair. From the day we were thrown out of the Garden, the creation has been cursed. Our stewardship is now faulty. That is compounded by the entropy brought on by the curse which causes things to decay even when we are doing the right things.

Martin Luther saw himself as having fallen short of the requirements of God's law in the Bible. Like the Philippian jailer, he wrestled with the question of "what must I do to be saved?"⁷ Today's culture is not asking that question. We do not seek forgiveness, we seek wholeness and fulfillment. We "*like*" ourselves. We no longer disdain ourselves as wicked. Whatever might be wrong in the universe, we have decided that it is certainly not us. We are victims of cruel parents, economic deprivation and distorted social teachings. We take pride in the fact that we are finally learning to like ourselves.

So then, if we are concerned about protecting nature, what should our priorities be? Paul provides some guidance

concerning how God expects us to conduct ourselves:

"we instructed you how to live in order to please God ... It is God's will that you should be holy; that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable. ... For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life."⁸

Paul goes on to say that we are to love each other as brothers and work in order to not be dependent on others for support.

Notice what is necessary to please God. "*Be holy*", that is keep the letter and the spirit of the commandments. It is interesting that in teaching us how to please God, Paul stresses our responsible use of our own bodies, rather than our responsible use of the creation. This man-centered priority that the Bible teaches is the opposite of the conventional wisdom of recent years. Let's look closer at what Paul was saying:

"God did not call us to be impure ... each of you should learn to control his own body ... not in passionate lust."⁹

Paul is telling us that one of our primary responsibilities is to be responsible caretakers of our own bodies. The principle impurity (i.e. pollution) that we bring the world is not our wasteful use of resources or our careless disposal of hazardous chemicals. It is our defiling of that part of the creation for which we are personally most accountable, ourselves.

Jesus was commenting on this pollution, when he spoke about our uncleanness:

"things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean'. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what makes a man unclean; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean'".¹⁰

This point is reinforced by the repeated warnings against wickedness and immorality throughout the Scriptures. God has delivered judgments upon the excesses of evil, even to the point of bringing great ecological damage to the place where the immoral culture lived. The creation, which is essentially an innocent bystander, suffers the consequences when men are being disciplined by God. Consider the magnitude of the environmental destruction done by the judgments upon the immoral cultures of the pre-Flood world or Sodom. From this perspective, it becomes apparent that the environmental issues we stress today, although important, are side issues in relation to the real harm we do to the environment.

RECEIVING GOD'S BLESSING BUT YIELDING NO FRUIT

"they parade their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it. Woe to them! They have brought disaster upon themselves."¹¹

What was the sin for which Sodom received such a judgment? The obvious thing that comes to mind is the unrestrained lust and violence among its people that is characterized in Genesis 19. But was Sodom judged for the homosexuality which has made that place infamous, or was that simply a manifestation of a deeper issue?

Speaking of Sodom, the prophet Ezekiel observed, "She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy".¹² Their physical blessings were described in Genesis chapter 13:

"the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, ... Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord."¹³

As Scripture often implies, those who are physically well-off are prone to deny their dependence upon God. This ungratefulness was clearly the case in Sodom. Yet God did not rain down one of the great judgments of Scripture in some fit of anger. First, he caused Sodom to lose their independence and live in subjection to the king of Elam.¹⁴ This allowed them to stay on their land, but required them to give part of their wealth to foreigners. God was showing them they were not independent and endlessly prosperous.

Rather than repenting of their behavior and turning to God, after twelve years of being subject to the Elamites, they attempted to take matters in their own hands.¹⁵ The men of Sodom went to fight against Elam, but were defeated. The undefended people who had remained in the city of Sodom were then taken captive. Still God's patience with these people continued. God allowed the people of Sodom to be rescued by Abraham and the men of his household when he defeated the Elamites to rescue his nephew Lot.

The people of Sodom had been rebuked for their wickedness, but they still did not recognize God's hand at work. They had been given a warning, but did not repent and change their behavior. The only gratefulness they showed was to offer Abraham their possessions which had been recovered in the battle. Their mind was focused on possessions. They were able to be generous in their gratefulness, because they knew they could get more.

As noted above, the prophet Ezekiel discerned that the root of Sodom's sin was that its people were "arrogant, over-fed and unconcerned". These are all self-focused, self-indulgent traits. The logical implication of this is they misused the resources they had been given. Because of the ease with which they could provide for themselves, living in this fruitful valley, their time was used in idleness and amusements. The greatest gifts which God had given them, their own bodies and minds, were devoted to lustful passions and perversions of nature.

What were they judged for? Quite literally, they had no "*redeeming value*" and so God no longer sought to restore them. He pulled out Lot, his missionary to that culture, and like the fig tree in Jesus' parable, after having given the unfruitful tree special attention it was still unfruitful and was to be cut down.¹⁶

This is what the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews referred to when he wrote,

"Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned."¹⁷

The people of Sodom were like that land which received the blessing of God, but produced only thorns and thistles. They were the tree which bore no fruit. Unfortunately, these descriptions also fit many nations and peoples today.

Though these passages were written in the context of people turning away from God, they also provide useful illustrations of God's views toward nature. It paints a picture of God removing his blessings from the land that he had once caused to flourish. Though from our point of view this may not seem fair, Scripture includes it as a trustworthy example. God does not spare nature as he is passing his judgment on men. The environment is God's provision, his blessing upon people, and this blessing is withheld during periods when God is disciplining men.

"The Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and storm, ... He rebukes the sea and dries it up; he makes rivers run dry. ... the blossoms of Lebanon fade."¹⁸

This is an image of changing weather patterns. The type that are spoken of by those who fear that cutting the rain forest will change our weather patterns or that global warming will cause the American heartland to turn to a dust bowl as the rainfall goes somewhere else and soil blows away.

THE DISTORTED AND ABUSED CREATION

What was once the well-watered land of Sodom remains desolate and uninhabited today. The land was cursed for having been home to such a fruitless people. Why curse the land for the wickedness of men? The spiritual pollution, the infestation of evil, which they had caused in that land was so great that God chose not only to remove them from it, but to cause the land to become uninhabitable. It was as though if others were to later inhabit that area, they might too become infected. This makes it clear that the effects of our "sin" on the world around us go far beyond what is apparent to us.

As noted above, Jesus indicated that we are polluted. This uncleanness comes out of our hearts and defiles the world, preventing nature from being fruitful. It is because of our rebelliousness that God withholds the blessing of his provisions from us.

We have regulations for the discharge of wastewaters from industrial processes. By law, wastewaters must be treated to reduce impurities to an acceptable level before being released into a river. This protects the quality of the river, the ecology in and along the river and those downstream who are dependent on the river. At the same time, it acknowledges that in our culture wastes are created as a by-product of the things we use to maintain our 20th Century standard of living.

Since the early 1970s, a significant effort has been made to create regulations to prevent the land, water and air from becoming polluted by industrial discharges. We have generally accepted the idea of conservation. We are willing to restrict our individual liberty by giving up the right to be careless or wasteful in our use of natural resources. Isn't it odd that at the same time we have fought to have fewer restrictions on the uncleanness within ourselves as though it had no impact on the environment.

We are a people preoccupied with eating healthy, reducing our exposure to chemicals and keeping our bodies in the best physical condition possible. But in all this we miss this basic principle of stewardship which Jesus taught

about ourselves and our bodies. The pollution that we should be concerned with is not what we allow to enter our bodies. That is like simply cleaning the outside of a cup. It is the immorality that flows out of our hearts that pollutes the world.

We demand the right to put most anything into our minds and so pollute that small part of nature that we are most responsible for. While one part of nature is now considered sacred to us, another part is still free to be defiled at our every whim. Describing this problem Paul wrote: "they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity".¹⁹ We are not being stewards of our most basic responsibility. We are not being faithful with little things.

If you want to get serious about helping to protect the environment, it is God's will that you should be *holy*.

THE DAMAGED CREATION SHOWS THE COST OF OUR REBELLION

These things seem so unrelated to us. How could someone's personal ethics concerning something like drug use, sexual conduct and reproductive rights effect the weather, the health of the economy or the insects infesting our crops? It sounds like I'm being preoccupied with other people's freedom of choice and want to make them feel guilty.

Many cause and effect relationships are not apparent at first glance. Let me use some over-simplified examples to make this point. Picture a child at play unplugging a cord so he can plug in a toy in its place. Now picture that child sitting in front of the television to watch something while playing with that toy. If the television does not work it may take the child some time to figure out that it does not work because he just unplugged it. To a child's mind the two events seem unrelated.

Or suppose you want to take a shower, but you find there is not enough hot water because the laundry is running. It takes some common sense and planning to remind yourself ahead of time that these two events can effect each other. Once you have the shower go cold on you, you are not likely to forget the inter-relationship soon.

These things seem obvious to us. So then are we being naive to assume that the degradation that we see in the world around us is unrelated to what the Bible calls the evils that come out of our hearts? Is it so hard to apply to our world today the cause and effect relationships which God warns us of in the Bible? Do we expect that there are no consequences to our behavior?

Leviticus chapter 26 describes a portion of the covenant between God and his people Israel. This covenant was a formal contract stating what was expected from each party. Look at it as a lease for the use of the planet. Although this passage is referring to the covenant God made with Israel, the basic principles of man's relationship to God and to the land still remain true today. There are not only rewards promised to us for obedience, but also punishment promised for disobedience.

"If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands ... I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid. I will remove savage beasts from the land, and the sword will not pass through your country. ... I will look on you with favor and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you. ... But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws ... and so violate my covenant, ... I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting

diseases and fever ... I will punish you for your sins ... make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze. Your strength will be spent in vain, because your soil will not yield its crop, nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit ... I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, [and] destroy your cattle".²⁰

A similar passage is found in Deuteronomy where God warns that he will send blight and drought, illness and confusion, locusts, worms and dropping fruit.²¹ They will face these harsh and prolonged disasters, "Because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity."²²

God is speaking through Moses of his use of punishment to discipline and correct a defiant and ungrateful people. The disease, failing crops and attacks by wild animals are described as warnings of the harsher punishment which would follow if the people did not change their ways. He also tells them that his patience has a limit and the punishments that have just been described will not always be tempered with mercy.

"If in spite of these things you do not accept my correction but continue to be hostile toward me, then in my anger I will be hostile toward you, and I myself will punish you ... I will turn your cities into ruins ... I will lay waste the land ... Then ... all the time that it lies desolate ... the land will rest and enjoy its Sabbaths".²³

It is worth noting that the land, which has been laid to waste and lies desolate as a result of God's anger, will in fact "enjoy" this "rest". The implication of this statement is that our opinion of what is best for the creation seems seriously flawed.

Centuries later, recognizing that these things had been fulfilled, Daniel confessed his sins to God during Israel's captivity in Babylon:

"All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you. Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you. You have fulfilled the words spoken against us and against our rulers by bringing upon us great disaster. ... all this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth."²⁴

IS NATURE OUT OF GOD'S HANDS?

Consider the environmental degradation that is occurring around us. We tend to be fearful that the things being done to the earth will impair God's ability to provide our daily needs. The evil and the neglect done directly or indirectly by the hands of men may take away your prosperity, your health or the beauty of nature around you. Yet nature's bounty is given to us as part of God's provisions. They are his to give and his to take away. God's arm is not too short to rescue you or his creation. When it becomes his desire to stop a specific environmental degradation, it will be stopped in any of a thousand different ways. If he does not choose to stop it, nothing you or any man can do will be able to stop it.

All of the creation, man and beast, plant and earth, are tools, created and used for God's purposes. The Bible compares us to clay in the hands of the potter to be shaped and used as he sees fit. "Does not the potter have the

right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?"²⁵

The Book of Job is about person trying to come to grips with the idea that we and all creation are just tools in God's hands. In the end, God gave Job no explanation for the storm that killed his children, the thieves who stole his wealth and the disease that plagued his body. Job and his friends wrestled with thoughts about punishment for guilt and challenged God for having treated Job wrongly. Finally, God's response was not to explain his purposes, but to point out he has the right to deal with his creation as he sees fit. It is God and not man that gives food to endangered species. It is God who makes a path for each storm, sending rain to one place and not to another. He is the one who sees that justice is done.

We are not a people who associate the forces of nature with acts of God. In our minds, many of the forces in nature are beyond control, even for God. In general, we take the blows from "nature" like a dazed fighter in the ring. We do our best to anticipate when we will be hit by the next storm or earthquake and make meager attempts to get out of the way. We no longer perceive that God could be trying to get our attention, expressing his displeasure and urging us to change our ways.

We wonder why God does not shelter us from the things that we feel are doing us harm. We do not comprehend that we are being disciplined in order to correct our behavior. This is how God coaxes us to turn our hearts back toward him. Not only do we fail to ask what behavior we are being corrected for, we fail to understand that nature is God's tool to correct us.

WE DENY THAT WE ARE BEING CORRECTED

Today, in our confusion and our denial of God, we have turned to science to provide us with an understanding of our world. Science itself is not wrong. It is the study of God's creation. But we have used it to replace, rather than build upon, our knowledge of God. We have put our faith in these other "gods," for our deliverance from our physical trials.

We have sought the blessing from the land without observing God's decrees and joyfully serving the Lord in our prosperity. As a result, nature resists us. Our soil is eroding away. We have become dependent upon our technology to sustain us. We develop genetically resistant crops. We irrigate against drought. We have fences to keep out wildlife, and poisons for insect pests and blights.

Moses' warning in Deuteronomy tells us why so many in the world continue to lose ground in the struggle to feed themselves. But we have chosen to do battle with the curses, rather than to turn to God as his covenant requires. Is it any wonder that God allows the desolation of the world's farmland to advance? He has told us that we are receiving this punishment to discipline us for our turning away from him. He has promised that when we are humbled he will not destroy us completely, but will remember the covenant that he has made with us.²⁶

This presents a concept that has fallen out of favor in modern culture. How could God have used the Fall to draw men back to him in repentance, so that they can receive his forgiveness? In Romans 7:13, the Apostle Paul elaborates on this concept by making the following points: In order that our disobedience might be recognized as sin, for our own good it produced a frailty in our flesh and mind. This was to make the consequences of our rebelliousness apparent, so it would no longer be deceptively appealing. We can then recognize that our rejection of God's standards are the cause of pain and suffering for not only ourselves, but also for all of creation.

Billy Graham describes it this way:

"Man seems to have lost sight of the ever-present law of cause and effect that operates on every level of this universe. The effects are plain enough, but the deep-seated, all-prevailing cause seems to be less distinct. ... [man] clings to the belief that the [human] race is advancing slowly but surely toward ultimate perfection."

"Many philosophers will even argue that the present world tragedy is but an incident in the upward march, ... That men are still children groping and stumbling along in the kindergarten of existence, still a long, long way from the mature and sensible beings that they will become ..."

"But the Bible makes plain what natural science seems so unwilling to admit - that nature reveals both a Creator and a corrupter. Man blames the Creator for the work of the corrupter. Man forgets that our world is not as God made it."²⁷

CHAPTER 16

HOW TO RESTORE WHAT WAS LOST?

*"there are some who are ignorant of God -
I say this to your shame." - 1 Corinthians 14:34*

WE FORGET WHAT GOD HAS TOLD US

Before we can realistically begin to conserve our environment and restore the damage to it, we must have a proper understanding of it. However, most of those involved in these efforts consider the idea of God forming the creation out of nothing is preposterous. Matter and energy in the universe are theorized to have existed from eternity and extend into eternity. The idea that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth",²⁸ space and matter, are unworkable to them. Such historic acts of divine intervention cannot be proven or measured with any of the tools that modern man has at his disposal. It requires faith that what God has said is true. Because of this modern science has assumed God does not exist, or at least that he is unable to act in any way to influence the universe.

Remember, a theory is only as good as its initial assumptions. If the living God were an active force in the universe, any theory used to reconstruct what occurred in the past based on scientific observations made today could be legitimately questioned. There would be no technical basis for saying that nature has always behaved in the very same manner that we measure it today. Faced with that choice, many have attempted to construct a world view based on the assumption that even the concept of God is incompatible with scientific thought.

However, if we assume that what we see today is all that ever existed, we will have a false confidence that we understand more than we do. Was the universe really "created" in the Big Bang? Is the earth really billions of years old? Is nature progressively advancing or is it in decline from its original advanced state because of the curse? Has "survival of the fittest" always been a part of nature? Have people always lived for less than a century?

Late in the First Century, the Apostle Peter was already warning about such logic. Knowing he was soon to die, he expressed this concern to those who had been under his care as a teacher:

"I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them ... I think it is right to refresh your memory ... I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things."²⁹

What things was he so concerned we would forget?

"We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses."³⁰

But in the future when these eyewitnesses are gone:

"there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign God ... Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. ... these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up."³¹

Many people are trying to live a life on the fence. They recognize that God created the world, but rather than

accepting God's explanation of how he created it, they accept whatever people tell them and imagine the hand of God was somehow involved in it. What these well-meaning people consider to be merely differences of perspective concerning the origins of man, Peter warned against here with strong language. These are "destructive heresies" that will allow people to "exploit you".

What heresies does he foresee which will be “*denying the sovereign God*” and undermine belief in “*the way of truth*”? Peter cautions us that these teachers will tell people that God did not accurately tell Moses the manner that He created the world. Neither will they teach that Jesus will return to judge his creation. Instead these facts would be replaced by imaginative theories about the past. Peter continued:

"you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come ... They will say, '... Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.' But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed".³²

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter warned that people would voluntarily choose to ignore God's version of how the universe was created. Instead, by using what they can see with their own eyes, men would disregard such a historical record and instead trust their own logic, "*scoffing and following their own evil desires*".³³

Here we have Peter, a man who was a handpicked student of Jesus, now writing one last letter to his own students to remind them about the dangers ahead. What single issue does he focus on? He tells them to remember that God created the world just as the Scriptures declare, and to not believe those who will ridicule that point of view. Peter was looking ahead to the mind-set of our day and sending a warning which the Bible has preserved for us.

WE DEMAND A SIGN

In their daily lives, people don't act as though they believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible. This even includes many whose lives have been changed as a result of their calling “on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”³⁴ As a people, we generally refuse to believe the testimony of others concerning what God has done to prove himself in the past. We do not want to hear the first-hand accounts that the prophets and apostles have recorded for us. We each want to see the parting of the Red Sea and the wounds in his hands and feet for ourselves before we will trust him. Yet, if we continually demand that God prove himself, then there would be no need for faith. We forget that the prophet Habakkuk said, "The righteous will live by faith"³⁵ and Jesus said, "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."³⁶

Paul made an observation about human nature while trying to communicate God's plan of redemption through Jesus. Some people "demand miraculous signs and ... [others] look for wisdom."³⁷ Instead of these things, Paul was offering the interpretation of reality which God had revealed and preserved for us in Scripture. This was an affront to those who wanted a personal sign. It was foolishness to those who felt they had the right to personally approve of God's commands before deciding whether to obey them.

We are no different than the Israelites who insisted that God prove himself in the desert. When they became dissatisfied with the manna that God had provided for them:

"they soon forgot what he had done and did not wait for his counsel. In the desert they gave in to their cravings; in the wasteland they put God to the test."³⁸

In the same way, we place conditions on God, telling him what we expect of him before we will consider him to be God. We too are undergoing a time of trial in the desert. Like Israel, we struggle with our

cravings, our desire for a life of ease with the things that we feel we have coming to us.

FOLLOWING THE WISDOM OF MEN

Few of us picture ourselves as putting God to the test. Yet we doubt him and place our confidence in other things. Consider how we look at the world. We are made in such a way that we are curious about the things around us. Mankind has studied the creation to understand how it works. Out of the understanding derived from the physical properties of nature have come the industrial revolution and the electronic information age.

Humanity is also driven to understand itself. Some of the best minds in science have been working to understand the origins of man for the past two centuries. These technically skilled scientists took their successes in investigation and invention, and applied it to philosophical and ethical questions. They studied how the earth was changed by erosion, sedimentation and volcanics. They studied how different kinds of creatures were each specialized in a discrete ecological niche for their food and shelter. From these observations they set out to determine where we came from and why we are here. With probing minds they sought to find the truth for themselves, rather than accepting what they had been told by those who came before them.

Unfortunately, it was these same people that Peter was warning us about. In their science, they purposely left out the possibility of a sovereign God, because he is unmeasurable. His existence cannot be "*proven*" by science and so the concept of being made "*in the image of God*" was replaced by being made in the image of animals. The theory they decided upon to explain our origins, is that we came not from God, but from nature. This was just as Peter cautioned us, "Although they claimed to be wise, they ... exchanged ... God for images made to look like ... animals".³⁹

In light of Peter's clear warning, how could so many God-fearing people embrace these stories over the Word of God which they would consider to be true in every other aspect? It is simply because they have been lead to believe in the "infallibility" of our science. Rather than questioning technical ideas that are supposedly too complex for the common people to understand, people are accepting "*scientific*" pronouncements as accurate. Since we have come to trust science to interpret so many aspects of the physical world for us, we have also embraced much of its non-technical philosophy. We tend to focus our energy on the priorities of our own lives and fail to check to see if what we are being told is true. Such diligence in seeking the truth is what the Bible commended the Bereans for doing.⁴⁰

We are too easily persuaded by the wisdom of our age and too quick to forget what God has said and done in the past. Consider what is recorded in Proverbs:

[Wisdom says,] "I was appointed from eternity, ... before the world began. ... I was the craftsman at his side. ... rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind. ... whoever finds me finds life ... But whoever fails to find me harms himself; ... The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding".⁴¹

We have God's promise that whoever finds wisdom finds life. This "Wisdom" is the architect of nature before the beginning of the creation. We observe God's handiwork in the intricate design of our bodies or the magnitude of the number of stars in the universe. We recognize that what is present in nature is highly ordered and interconnected, as though it had been thought out and directed. Those things are all the work of the architect.

Scripture is telling us that the knowledge we gather should be viewed in the framework of a universe that has God as its point of origin. Then we will have the basic wisdom to begin to understand how our

physical observations relate to the workings of nature. Understanding is promised to those who seek God's wisdom, implying that there are some things that those who refuse to look to God will be unable to comprehend. Research that is simply technical will obviously miss out on the implications inherent to the fact that the creation was made through the direct intervention of God. Attempts to apply technical knowledge to fields of study, such as medical research or environmental protection, without this understanding are likely to be misdirected. In Proverbs, the voice of Wisdom reminds us, "For through me your days will be many, and years will be added to your life."⁴²

WE ARE BEING SCOLDED

If you feel the beauty, productivity and health of the land is being taken away, that is exactly what we were warned would happen. Even as we try with one hand to repair the damage we cause to the environment, with the other hand we continue to tear it down. The judgments brought upon men in the days of Noah, in the days of Sodom and in our present day, have not stopped us from further desecrating the land.

To once again live in the fruitful land God gave us, rather than in a place that is becoming increasingly barren, we must take to heart the words of the prophets God sent to instruct us. God, the Creator and Sustainer, knows the cause of the curse upon the land and what needs to be done to correct it. He has provided for the restoration of his broken and decaying creation, but his perspective concerning the problems and solutions is different than ours. As Jeremiah warned, we must change our ways:

"these people have not obeyed me. ... I called to them, but they did not answer."⁴³

God's solution is known by nature as well. The Bible says, "creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed."⁴⁴ The perspective of the human heart has been distorted. Without first restoring the communication between the land's caretaker-tenant, mankind, and the landowner, God, the proper management of the land cannot be restored.

Those who are working for the "salvation" of the planet have misplaced priorities. In their desire to protect and restore the good creation to its original splendor, they have failed to recognize the central place of man in that creation. Instead of seeking to restore man in his rightful place as caretaker in God's image, they seek to keep mankind separate from the creation so he will not do it harm.

Paul was pointing out that we believe things which contradict the Bible when he wrote:

"Come back to your senses ... and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God - I say this to your shame."⁴⁵

"Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'"⁴⁶

Paul warns that as a result of their ignorance about what God has said, some people will depart from what they once believed. He indicates that there are those within the Church who have lost their desire to know God. They have been corrupted by the philosophies of their neighbors. Jesus has a stern warning for such people.

"Wake up! ... Remember ... what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief".⁴⁷

If we have so trivialized the truth that has been revealed to us, how can we assume God will bless the work of our hands? Why should we think that God will give us wisdom to find the solutions to our problems, when we do not respond to what he has already told us? In the Book of Revelation, Jesus warns his

Church, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline."⁴⁸

WHAT CAN WE DO TO SAVE THE PLANET?

Do you feel frustration that people have not been able to make the changes necessary to protect nature? If you are worried about the health of the planet; if you are doing what you can to recycle, be thrifty and be fuel efficient; if you are trying to be "green" as a good steward of our resources; do you feel that all you can do is just a drop in the bucket?

Consider how government appears to have none of the answers to our problems and no apparent understanding of the real causes of the issues it faces. The air we breath threatens our health. Our society has lost its moral consensus. Our economy seems more frail than ever before. The violence of war and terrorism in dozens of places across the globe seems to have no solution. Isn't it obvious that we are being rebuked and disciplined? God is trying to get our attention. We have been scolded, grounded and sent to our room and we don't even know it! This is what Jesus was referring to when he warned: "you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked."⁴⁹ Don't expect that the condition of the environment will get much better when even those claiming to be God's people are being scolded.

We need to understand the purpose behind this scolding. When Jesus said "I did not come to judge the world, but to save it",⁵⁰ what did he mean? Consider how he instructed his disciples concerning why the Father had sent the Son. Jesus had just finished telling the disciples that he would suffer, die and then be raised again. They were confused by what he was telling them. They assumed that he must be speaking symbolically again. After all, for generations the teachers of the people had been saying that the Messiah would restore the kingdom of David and Solomon, Israel's "*Golden Years*". But Jesus had not come to provide a political solution to their problems. His goal was something bigger than restoring a political kingdom. He had come to make hearts that had been corrupted pure and to save what had been lost.

To illustrate his priorities, Jesus asked them this question:

"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul? ... For whoever loses his life for me will find it. ... [God] will reward each person according to what he has done."⁵¹

The New English Bible words this passage, "Whoever cares for his own safety is lost". A similar question might be:

What do you gain in zealously protecting our home and planet from degradation, if in the process you lose your eternal life?

Jesus warns us that there is no lasting value to gaining (or saving) the world, if we have not first assured ourselves that we will not forfeit our future opportunity to have a place in the "*new creation*". He places a greater priority on the eternal individual than the short-term place where that individual dwells.

Does the Bible really consider environmental protection to be only a short-term gain? Isn't limiting our own standard of living in order to preserve the beauty of nature for future generations a way to deny myself, take up my cross and following Jesus?⁵² If we are working to protect and restore his creation, should we not reasonably expect that this will have a reward from the Creator? After all, he promised that if we are faithful in taking care of little things we will share in his happiness.⁵³

We think we are doing God such a favor in trying to "*save*" this planet. Yet even if we could do something to stop our own evil desires from harming the world around us, the feeling of empowerment that it would give us would only cause us to feel our need for God even less. Jesus described God's view of such

"service" in this way:

"Not everyone ... will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father ... I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers."⁵⁴

Instead of our coming to God with all our accomplishments, as though God could not get along without us, the Bible instructs us to come to him as an unworthy servant. When we have done any good, it was only what was required of us.⁵⁵

WE MUST TURN TO GOD

God is not unable to intervene in his creation to protect it or restore it. We can see from the gospels that Jesus has power over nature to restore the lame and heal the sick. At his touch or his command cataracts cleared-up and withered tissue was instantaneously restored. The Bible even provides examples of God intervening in his creation to remove pollution. A rarely quoted passage shows God working through the prophet Elisha to restore contaminated water to purity.

"The men of the city said to Elisha, ... 'this town is well situated ... but the water is bad and the land is unproductive.'..."

[The prophet responded,] "This is what the Lord says: 'I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive.' And the water has remained wholesome to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken."⁵⁶

These things bring me great encouragement as an environmental professional who has spent years enforcing the clean-up of waste chemicals spilled at industrial sites. I know that with a word, God can remove the 1000 gallons of cancer causing degreasers which has contaminated a municipal aquifer, even if the best of our own technology cannot. I know that the radioactive soil at so many nuclear munitions facilities will be made clean once again when nature itself is restored.

Beyond that, the gospels also show that God is able to restore more than just the results of our poor stewardship. He is able to restore the poor stewards. Zacheus the tax collector is one example.⁵⁷ Here was a man who as part of his job description over-taxed the poor and the working class to make himself rich. It was people like him that were being spoken of when the Pharisees accused Jesus of eating with tax collectors and sinners. Everyone knew Zacheus was cheating them, but they could do nothing because he represented the government. An encounter with Jesus changed this man's heart. He ceased to live for the profit motive. Luke's gospel provides the words of this changed man:

"Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."⁵⁸

Don't you wish that Wall Street would have that kind of encounter with Jesus. If the workers and the innocent neighbors affected by their actions meant more to decision makers than the bottom line profit, then many of the environmental issues for the future would go away. God is certainly willing and able to heal this land and to cause us to prosper and live in peace. He has also shown that he can take a lukewarm people and cause a revival in their hearts. Some put their hope in re-educating polluters, but it is Jesus who has the proven track record of changing corrupted hearts.

HE HAS PROMISED TO RESTORE AND MAKE NEW

The answers to our problems are to be found not in our own creativity but in looking to God. The Lord rewards those who seek him. To some this will sound like just another call from some preacher for changed priorities, except this time the call is coming from an environmentalist and geologist. If we consider the Bible trustworthy as the foundation for our perspective of the physical world, then it is more than just religious preaching.

In some ways, being exhorted to request God's active involvement in the issues of our day is not unlike our government's health warnings. We don't take offense when we are told that all women over 40 should get an annual mammogram, or when we are encouraged to wear seat belts. Smokey Bear's asking us to be careful with matches is not considered meddling in our private lives. We accept those things as reminders of how to protect ourselves and the environment. We do not resent these requests. Yet we take offense when someone who is wiser than those government agencies calls for us to remember to do certain things that will protect us from harm. Hear how David expresses the call:

"Fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. ... listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Whoever loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. ... Evil will slay the wicked ... [but] The Lord redeems his servants"⁵⁹

If the government encourages us to limit certain actions in order to prevent forest fires, what actions and desired results are promised here by God? When we are warned here that "evil will slay the wicked", the Hebrew word for "evil" being used (*ra`ah*) could also be translated as disaster, calamity or trouble. If we learn to fear the Lord, and in response to that begin doing what is required of us: not speaking about evil or lying; doing good and seeking peace; then we are promised that God will consider this an indication that we are seeking to obey him. When this happens, God has promised that servants such as these will "lack no good thing", "see many good days" and be rescued from their troubles. All this will happen even while the strong around us "grow weak and hungry" and disasters or calamities come upon the wicked. So then, one of the reasons that we are being exhorted to seek God is for protection from natural disasters. Over and over, the Bible reminds us that the Lord rewards those who turn to him for help.

CHAPTER 17 WHAT ARE WE TO DO?

*“When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?”
Psalm 11:3*

WHERE ARE GOD'S PEOPLE?

Each fall the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association has a agricultural fair outside of Augusta called the "*Common Ground Fair*". At it, like any other country fair, livestock and produce are judged. There are oxen pulls, clowns and crafts of all sorts. But along with these things there are differences. Food concessions have no white flour, white sugar or coffee. There is no beer tent. There are also a variety of "*basic*" crafts being presented, showing how to build a stone wall, spin wool, turn pottery, hook rugs, work wrought iron, keep bees and grow grapes. This is a gathering of people focused on returning to our roots on the land. They want to escape the worst of our urban industrial society and become more self-sufficient and pollution free.

Local civic organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Elks, the League of Women Voters or the Augusta Democrats are not represented there. Neither are the local churches. The Catholics do not have their coffee and doughnut tent, offering rest to the weary. The Baptists do not have they eye-catching displays to make you think about God and your salvation. But there are groups representing environmentalists, anti-war activists and a host of social action and social justice advocates promoting food for the poor, equality among races and tax protests against the arms race. This is very much a counter-culture event. The "establishment" is not represented.

From the skills being promoted at this gathering, it was apparent that the "*back to nature*" movement would rather have a sustainable economy modeled more after the 1790s than the 1990s. Yet, although America in that day was still strongly influenced by Christianity, the Puritans and the Quakers who had such an influence in the 18th Century society were obviously absent from this gathering.

So where were God's people? The contemporary equivalent of those people who lived by the Word of God appear to be absent from those who consider themselves "organic." Why? Has God not called any of his children to point out the need for the stewardship of his creation? Are all those who believe in Jesus as the one who has restored our peace with God content to live a life of acquiring possessions in suburbia? Why have God's people not taken a more visible role in the movement toward clean air, clean water, sustainable energy and the reduction of waste? Is neglecting the things that he has put under our care the way that we show God that we love him?

HOW ARE WE TO BE INVOLVED?

It is too easy for many people in our society to just say the Bible is irrelevant today. No one is telling them that God has something to say about the degrading of his creation. Most people consider the Bible to mainly deal with ancient history and what happens after we die. Even many who are committed to Christian teachings feel that the Bible is just about our salvation and "believing in Jesus." That sounds pretty out of place in the modern world. What does "believing in Jesus" mean in Twentieth Century terms? How does any of this make a difference when the issues are global warming, ozone holes and endangered species? In a time when the world considers the wisdom that the Bible offers irrelevant, how are we, as Christians, to engage the issues of our day?

Evangelical churches have rightly avoided placing their names on social and environmental movements. Their calling is to preach the gospel, drawing all whom God will call⁶⁰ to a knowledge of the Father, as shown to us by Jesus Christ. Their purpose is also to provide a nurturing fellowship of believers where there is instruction, encouragement and lives being changed. If such a body of people were to place its name in the political arena, it would inherently cause some people to associate the cause of Christ with a political movement. This would prompt some to stay away simply because they disagree with some aspect of the movement. It would cause others to join the Church out of social concern, rather than as a result of moral repentance and an indwelling of God's Spirit.

So if the churches themselves do not belong on the front lines of the environmental movement, is such involvement appropriate for individuals? Are environmental groups so "*worldly*" in their worship of "Mother Nature" that the followers of Christ should have nothing to do their causes? If the proper stewardship of the physical creation is a godly goal, why should we feel that the involvement of "New Agers" in environmental causes have made these causes ungodly? Has God had nothing to say about the polluting of his creation, the proper use of natural habitats and the value of species that are now endangered? There are many environmentally concerned Christians providing financial support to promote the protection of open spaces and endangered species, or the enactment of laws to prevent pollution. Still there is a shortage of people who are trying to present the Bible's perspective on what an environmentally concerned Christian should be doing!

Today, several decades after the Western World realized that environmental protection was a priority, we as Christians are still trying to find a place for ourselves in the environmental debate. But most Christians writing on this subject enter the debate using the framework and the ground rules set by the media or the dominant portion of the scientific community. The debate has focused on whether the ecological dilemma that we hear so much about is real or not. Is global warming true? Has the hole in the ozone always been there? Can the world produce enough food to feed its growing population, or is the real problem local corruption and mismanagement of resources?

It is as though the Christian community is seeking to be a part of this discussion out of some vague sense of responsibility, rather as a calling. The majority of articles written from the Christian perspective sound no different than their secular counterparts. There is a lack of scriptural authority being presented in the discussions. A Bible verse is merely tossed in here or there to give the discussion a pious tone. Even Al Gore did that much in his book, and he does not claim that Christianity is significantly different than any other religious tradition. Not only should we be contributing our energy to the public discussions, as the ones who are focused on the wisdom of the Bible we have insight to offer in the midst of public indecision. We, who have the eyes to see and the ears to hear what the Scriptures are saying, need to do more than meet the world's scholars on their own turf. Certainly we who read and mediate on the Scriptures daily can do better.

BUILDING UPON BIBLICAL CONCEPTS

Are we afraid to enter the scientific arena and show our true colors? The world is not 6 billion years old, the Scriptures say it is more like 6000 years old. We did not evolve, and neither did the plants and animals around us. Noah's flood really happened and there were young dinosaurs on the ark. There was only one Ice Age. It came in the years immediately after the Flood as the global climate adjusted to the changes. The garden-like, well-watered valley of Sodom was turned into a wasteland when its people were judged by the same God who judged Israel by sending them into captivity. Nature is our home and it is God's tool to lead us to repentance. These are not just things that the Bible clearly teaches. They are also the basis for a world view that can be used to interpret scientific data in light of biblical truths. Therefore, these are the concepts that should be the starting-point of our environmental philosophy.

Science has not "*proven*" any of these assertions to be wrong. The more vocal sections of the scientific community have simply dismissed them as irrelevant myths and sought to belittle anyone who disagrees. These

are ideas which the Bible directly or indirectly claims to be true. Do we believe that our Creator was unable to accurately communicate basic concepts to mankind?

We should be considering the Bible to be a more accurate representation of the truth than "*theories*" promoted by those who deny that the God of the Bible exists. It is time for us to cease discarding the parts of the Bible that our culture finds unacceptable every time we enter the public arena. If we fail to use these concepts in our view of the environment, how can we possibly have realistic theories about what is actually happening to our ecology or determine what an appropriate response should be? Do we really believe that God used the Scriptures to reveal things which cannot be learned through the study of this world? Then how can we say that the Bible must take a position that is subordinate to science? As the stewards of God's creation, how can we possibly understand what the real issues are without the perspective which he has provided to us?

The ground-rules being used by those in modern science have left them unable to distinguish between Eden and the fallen creation. Without a good understanding of where we have come from, how can they know where we are today or plot a course for where we should be going? Shall we allow pressures upon public policy to result in sweeping changes to the world economy without even questioning the basis of their assumptions? Even more significantly, shall we continue to allow the gospel to be discounted by many as irrelevant, simply because its believers are failing to address the very real environmental issues that have captured the public's attention. Christians have yet to show the world what the Bible teaches about the abuse of the environment, the one issue that can get the attention of today's youth.

FEAR

There is distress and indecision among those who have come to realize that we are abusing the planet from which we derive our basic needs. Many who have taken the time to see what is happening around us feel a sense of urgency. There is the perception that the time is short before something significant will happen. They worry that the damage that we are causing to our ecosystems will be irreversible. Species are being lost forever. Some say pollution is threatening the inhabitability of our land. The wilderness places, where nature still remains in an undisturbed balance, are being cleared for lumber, agriculture or mining.

Some feel that the last remnants of "*Eden*" are being threatened. People worry whether the ozone hole will be permanent, even if we stop releasing freon to the atmosphere. If there is global warming, will it be 10,000 to 20,000 years before we return to the climate we have today? What of the cultural changes and turmoil that will be forced upon us by alterations to the environment or by the drastic transformations of our economies as we face the possibility of climate change and rising sea levels? If something is not done soon key elements in the complex balance of nature will be lost forever. Will we irreversibly alter the course of nature's evolution toward its final goal? The natural advancement of all things is at risk!

Although the concerns that I just expressed seem somewhat like a tirade, they are in fact the unspoken concerns that underlie environmentalism for many people. Though they may have once been looking forward to humanity being made perfect along with nature, now many fear that we are simply struggling to survive. A generation ago we feared that man would destroy himself and the world in a nuclear war. Now people are afraid that we will irreparably harm nature with our pollution and face widespread turmoil as the ecology deteriorates.

IS THERE REASON TO BE CONCERNED?

How much of the anxiousness that I have just described is warranted? How much is just the worrying of the fearful-of-heart who have not yet understood God's promise that "the truth will set you free"?⁶¹

What if the weather does change as a result of something that man is doing, such as the release of greenhouse gases? Science has shown that the climate that we are experiencing today has not remained unchanged since the creation.

The geologic record tells us that beneath the sands of the Sahara there was once a river which carved its channel into the bedrock. Who knows what culture flourished along its banks? Thousands of years of drought have filled this area with wind-blown sand amid hills of barren rock as the lack of water destroyed the native vegetation. The topsoil that was blown away would have dwarfed the Oklahoma "dust bowl" of the 1930s. Today all that is left for the wind to carry is sand. This is what a climate changes have done in the past, even to pre-industrial cultures that had not physically altered the balance of the planet.

At the turn of the last millennium the shores of Greenland had settlements of Vikings who farmed the land and prospered for several hundred years. Then a fluctuation in the climate brought on a "little Ice Age." Their fertile land became frozen and those who did not abandon those shores perished. Their villages are now simply an archeological curiosity.

Throughout Central and South America are the scattered ruins of civilizations which vanished before the Europeans came to that land. What brought on the fall of civilizations such as the Mayans whose buildings we find in what is now the jungles of the New World? Archaeologists suggest that Mayan culture endured for at least 1500 years with the city of El Mirador having a population in the range of 80,000 people.⁶² We only know this because of the carved stones that have been unearthed one thousand years later. This culture is gone.

These are just a few examples of how prolonged climate changes have eliminated the bounty which a fertile land had yielded to support large populations. Some fraction of those populations remained to struggle to make a living off what little the land would continue to produce. Others migrated away. The glory days of these civilizations were lost and the culture forgotten except for the enduring stones of their walls.

Our living off the land is fragile. We tell ourselves that our science and transportation systems will be able to provide for people anywhere in this global community. Yet have we grown over-confident in our ability, our finances and our good will? The fact that there are African nations with hundreds of thousands of people facing starvation tells us that those whose land is no longer being blessed with fertility are ultimately left to fend for themselves. The poverty of North Korea and of Cuba reminds us how dependent the growing world population has become on international trade. A prolonged embargo due to political isolation has reminded those nations of just how many people their land can support.

If America's fertile heartland is taken away and we no longer are called the breadbasket of the world, who will we go to for food? When the oceans cover our coastal cities if the polar ice caps do melt, with what riches will we pay for the food to sustain our population? If these things occur in many nations at the same time, as part of the next natural or man-made climate variation, will the nations of the world willingly resign themselves to poverty? Isn't it more likely that there will be wars as the strong nations claim fertile lands from those whose newly found riches have not yet provided them the means to defend themselves?

Our climate has changed many times in the past, whether the world is 6000 or a billion years old. History has shown that it is presumptuous on our part to think that we will be blessed with a perpetually temperate well-watered land. Those who fear what mankind is doing to the land point to things like carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuels and warn that we are bringing global warming upon ourselves. This may be so, yet in the early 1970s the fear of the scientific community was that we were entering the cold phase of what they saw as the earth's 400 year "little Ice Age" cycle.⁶³ Even if we are unable to forecast weather trends decades in advance, we have realized the precariousness of our situation. We worry because we recognize that there is really little we, as individuals, can do to change things. Climatic historians tell us things are stable for the moment. The earth is in balance. Environmental activists warn us not to do anything to threaten that balance. Many scientists feel we must soon drastically reduce carbon dioxide emissions globally if we are going to avoid catastrophe.

Since the world has obviously been through such climatic changes numerous times before, we should be looking

for the thing that controls the changes, rather than trying to maintain our illusion of a "*balance*" of nature. The climate has always been in a state of change, but what has caused it?

The Bible includes direct and indirect records of many of the major climatic changes that have happened over the history of the earth. Consider how God's revelation to mankind documents these changes. First Eden fell. Then about a thousand years later, so did the earth's protective vapor canopy in the rains of the Noah's Flood. The Old Testament prophets of the Bible state that at times fluctuations in the climate have occurred as a result of God's disciplining of nations. It would seem that keeping our balance with God is more vital to the health of the global climate than keeping a balance of greenhouse gases.

ZEAL WILL NOT SAVE THE PLANET

We will not be able to "*save the planet*" by our own strength. On the contrary, the Bible says, "If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive."⁶⁴ Even those who are zealous to save it are part of the problem. What a mess we have made of the Garden! We are sure that we can save ourselves by our own understanding, or else we think that God will not work except by our hands. So we set out to save his creation by our own labors, but that approach really is just a variation of the same perception that we can save ourselves with our own ability. Inevitably, we end up wanting to take the credit for what our efforts have accomplished. If you look around, it is not credit that we should be taking, but blame.

Paul's description of First Century Hebrew society still fits our society today:

"I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."⁶⁵

Righteousness, behavior pleasing to God, does not grow out of our own creativity. It is obedience and confidence that God will do what he has promised. God has said, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways."⁶⁶ When we try to be creative in our service to God, we are offering an "*unauthorized fire*" before the altar and, like Aaron's sons, are considered to have dishonored God.⁶⁷ Instead we are instructed, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame."⁶⁸

Those who have heard what the Scriptures say and yet still seek to please God "not by faith but as if it were by works",⁶⁹ are described in the Bible in this way:

"the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith."⁷⁰

At the same time, God has said:

"All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people."⁷¹

This is how God views the efforts of those who seek to be innovative rather than obedient in their service to God. They will certainly be surprised when stand before God and present their "accomplishments" in attempting to "*save the planet*." Instead God expects that we will learn what God has already instructed us and then do it. There is no sign of praise here for the good intentions of "a disobedient and obstinate people." We have doubted the truth of his word and instead have acted out of unbelief and excessive self-confidence.

What does the Bible direct us to do? We are to turn to God and seek his intervention on our behalf as he did so often for the Old Testament Israelites. We are to return to the teachings of the Bible and make sure that our actions are in accordance with God's will. This is what King Josiah did when the Book of the Law was found and

read to him.⁷² We are to change our ways in accordance with our understanding of God's laws. We are to express our sorrow over the things we have done which violated God's laws, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

Such acts of repentance will not prevent God from one day bringing his judgment upon the earth as he has promised in the Bible, but it can cause him to look upon us with mercy. When Josiah led the country in repentance, God was pleased with his conduct and assured him that the promised judgments of the coming Babylonian Captivity would not occur in his life-time. Similarly, when the Lord was telling Abraham what was about to happen to Sodom and Gomorrah, he assured him that if ten righteous people were found in that city, which is estimated to have had a population numbering in the tens of thousands,⁷³ then his anger would be turned aside.⁷⁴

HUMBLE OURSELVES AND PRAY

What can the righteous do when the biological foundations of our planet seem at risk and the moral foundations of our culture are being destroyed? As we see our culture's acceptance and tolerance of Christianity diminish, our response has been to fight on a political level to stop the permissiveness which has brought-on a deterioration of morality. We seek to use legislation to discourage immorality by punishing or restricting drug use, violence, pornography and promiscuity. Yet from our safe, clean suburbs, evangelicals have tended to consider the pollution of the world around us, a regrettable sign of the times.

With this tendency toward political activism, it has become too common for those in the Church to be fighting against the world on the world's terms. Scripture has advice on this matter. Psalm 11 says:

"In the Lord I take refuge. How then can you say to me: 'Flee like a bird to your mountain. ... When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?' The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is on his heavenly throne."⁷⁵

We need to remember that God has not ceased to be sovereign. God has given us the promise:

"if my people ... will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."⁷⁶

The word here for land is translated in other places as "earth", "ground", "country" and "world". This is environmental protection. These are the legal regulations under which activists should plead their case. The specifics of this legal case will be discussed further in the next chapter. But let us focus for now on the promise, God has told us that he will heal the land when his people repent. This promise is not about the restoration of all things at the Second Coming of Christ. The promise is for a healing here and now.

It is promises such as this which provide hope for the present condition of the world. Even though the Bible says that this world is passing away, it is no time to be fatalistic about nature. God has given us instructions on how to respond to the deterioration of nature which he has sent to chasten us.

CHAPTER 18

THE PURPOSE OF GOD'S INTERVENING

*"When God saw ... how they turned from their evil ways,
he had compassion and did not bring upon them
the destruction he had threatened." - Jonah 3:10*

GOD INTERVENES INTO THE UNIVERSE

From the viewpoint of the Israelites, there was no hope when they reached the Red Sea. The strongest army in the world was approaching and they had no means of escape. Their choices appeared to be either stand and fight or turn and flee. Neither option was encouraging, and so they despaired because they could see no prospect of deliverance. These things were occurring in order to teach this newly formed nation that they were in God's care. He was not limited to these choices. As the Bible records, the Red Sea then parted to let the Israelites through as though it were dry land.⁷⁷

God takes pride in showing himself powerful. Lazarus was raised from the dead, rather than being healed of his illness before it turned fatal.⁷⁸ The loaves and fish were multiplied,⁷⁹ rather than someone having more conventionally come to the rescue with a net filled to over-flowing with fish.⁸⁰ These are not isolated examples of God intervening to bring healing or deliverance. The Bible documents similar things which were done for Gideon, Elijah, David, Daniel, Peter and Paul, to name just a few. When human understanding or ability is inadequate, God shows that he is in control. His ways are not our ways.

Our failure to find solutions for the problems we face, causes us to see our own inability to control our situation. You can apply this to the sense of powerlessness that you may feel in your relationships, your household budget, your illnesses and your eventual mortality. This also applies on a broader scale to the frustration we feel concerning our government, our economy or the depletion of the resources around us. These things have the ability to stretch us beyond our own limits to come up with solutions. It is then that we turn to the one who we have heard has delivered others in the past.

The repeating pattern presented in the Book of Judges is that generation after generation has asserted their independence from God's rules. Then once they have lived with the consequences of their actions for a time, they are given the opportunity to turn from their error. The Bible is quite clear in pointing out that the military oppression by neighboring countries or famines that came upon Israel were the consequences of disobedience.⁸¹ God had warned them about these things through Moses. When Israel remained loyal to God, he was their protector and provider. When they rebelled against his commands or did whatever seemed right in their own eyes, God would allow them to wander from out from under his protection. Then they would have to live with the outcome of their choices until they repented and pleaded to the Lord for deliverance.

Each person needs to learn for himself that: "There is a way that seems right to man, but in the end it leads to death."⁸² As a consequence of these human tendencies, our generation has largely denied that there is a God. Many of those who still acknowledge that he exists do not believe that "he rewards those who earnestly seek him."⁸³ To them, God seems to be nothing more than the glue that holds the universe together. He is merely a spectator on the sidelines, who waits to welcome us home to heaven after our time here is done.

This is not a correct representation of the God of the Old and New Testaments, who guided his people and intervened on their behalf. Because we see those around us suffering loss, and the tragedies in so many places across the world, many people deny that God is there. Worse than that, those who acknowledge he exists, or even claim to be following him, do not seek him for solutions to these problems. We are trying to solve the environmental crisis through our own efforts, while we leave God to deal with the more "spiritual" things. We sing "my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness",⁸⁴ but we place only our future hope in him. We hesitate to put our present circumstances in his hands. We doubt that God could be of any help with these types of problems.

ALIEN FORCES

In light of all of God's interventions into his creation which have been recorded in the Scriptures, anyone who has not already closed his mind to the concept can see that at times God has by-passed the normal physical laws. This is clear from his leading the Israelites out of Egypt, the countless fulfilled prophecies of the prophets and the miraculous signs done by Jesus and the Apostles.

If these things were described as being the result of ESP, extra-sensory perception working outside the normal physical laws, there would be few who would completely discount the concept. There are those who would not consider it unreasonable for someone to cross over through some wrinkle in the fabric of time or space from a parallel universe. Why then is the idea of these interventions into our universe from outside so unreasonable just because we say that it was the Creator who intervened not just another creature?

Are we more comfortable with the idea that aliens and bodiless entities could be looking out for our best interests than we are with angels, the bodiless entities sent from God? If we find it so hard to trust other people to know right from wrong, why would we feel more comfortable with the idea of foreign creatures being our benefactors rather than a threat? Why would we trust another fallen creature like ourselves to be an ally? Remember survival of the fittest? Or do we assume that there is some kind of beneficial "unity" provided by Mother Nature?

We have no reason to consider man or nature our defender, but every reason to consider God as one. This is a key point in the incarnation of Jesus, the Son of God who lived for a time among us. He became like us to be tangible and not just one from beyond. Our benefactor took that extra step.

Immediately there will come to a doubter's mind all the reasons why God could not possibly exist. They cannot believe in the violent God they have heard the Bible portrays. They see the pain and suffering in the world and cannot accept there is a good God who has any power. Therefore a kindly, but somewhat powerless, Mother Nature with a well-intentioned course for evolution is more palatable to many. But that leaves us with little hope as we are left to worry about how we will save our elderly mother.

GOD'S PLAN

Man's track record has already shown that our brain-power will not deliver us out of our difficulties, but each generation has had to learn that for themselves.

"No king is saved by the size of his army ... a horse is vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save."⁸⁵

In spite of all our knowledge and strength, this horse that we are depending on is not sufficient to rescue us. All our science, technology and economic strength will not rescue the planet from the curse it is under. At best we can reduce our contribution to its decay. We do not have the ability to unilaterally undo the effects of the Fall. But still we try to do it ourselves with no consensus on a path to take. Yet God's pronouncement of our weakness is not without a reassuring promise:

"the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine."⁸⁶

He is our hope; first, last and only. If you want to gain the knowledge necessary to help the environment, it is not going to be found in biology, chemistry or climatology, unless you first set out to have a knowledge of God. In order to begin to gain wisdom, you first need to understand what it means to have your hope in his "unfailing love".

God has not lost his control of the creation. He is not in heaven distraught over the fact that species are becoming extinct, there is a hole in the ozone layer and the land is being polluted by chemical and radioactive wastes. The Lord's plans from before the creation of the world are still in place. Though these things may not be pleasant to him, none of this surprises him. He was not caught off guard. What we grow anxious about as ecological degradation beyond our control is not beyond his control.

"the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations."⁸⁷

God has not hidden his purposes from us. Jesus said, "a servant does not know his master's business. Instead I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to

you."⁸⁸ The Father has preserved his revelation to us in the Bible.

I am trying to point out that there is no need for us to fear what those around us fear. Most people assume what they can see and touch is all that exists in the world. They feel threatened by the idea that this earth is temporal and will cease to exist. When Christians take seriously the passage stating that the earth "will wear out like a garment" and "be discarded"⁸⁹ these people take offense. What is precious to them is being considered of secondary value.

If this fearfulness is the perspective of those speaking publicly for the environment, what misconceptions are we likely to be hearing from them? These people are afraid of what they read and see concerning the condition of the world. Pollution is spreading to all points on the globe through the seas and the air. Particulates with heavy metals have spread through the air from industrial and power plant emissions. Polar bears and penguins have man-made pesticides in their bodies. Sea creatures have plastics in their stomachs and mercury in their tissues. There is no place that has not been impacted. They fear that the "balance" of nature is gone. As judged from their view of reality, they are right to be afraid. They see the birth pains that Jesus spoke about⁹⁰ and they worry that the world's health is failing.

WHAT TO DO?

We need to be made aware of the part that we play in contributing to the fallenness of the world around us. If we acknowledge that our behavior is in fact the cause of the Fall and the subsequent continued worsening of environmental conditions, then we have several choices. We can work harder with our own good intentions and perhaps make some progress in restoring or preserving the environment. At least we can lessen our own impact on it. Another option that some people take is to ignore the problem, acknowledge that things are inevitably getting worse and pursue a life of physical pleasures while they can. This is not a solution. It is simply an escape. Others accept defeat and live a life darkened by the impending threat of struggle and decay that is all around them.

Are you expecting that this book will now present the cure for the ills that I have been describing? I am not here to offer an answer to the ecological decline that we are seeing around us. We don't need another "*how to*" book for saving the planet. I am simply lighting a match in a dark room to help us all find the door.

What I do know is that according to the Bible we have been asking all the wrong questions. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the solutions that we are trying are only increasing our sense of futility. The first step in recognizing our predicament is to admit that we are part of the problem. We are in rebellion against God and unable to fully comprehend the impact of our behavior. Through our rebellion, the land has been cursed.

In our rebellion, we have chosen to follow our own ideas of what is the best thing to do or the right thing to do. It is like deciding to put cooking oil instead of motor oil in your car's engine because it was easier when you were changing the oil. It may have seemed the right short-cut at the time because you were unable to

fully comprehend the impact of your decision. It may even work for a short while, but soon enough it will do major damage. You would not make such a foolish choice. If the manufacture says use 10-30 grade oil. You might take the liberty to use 10-40 grade, but you would not use corn oil.

The manufacturer of this world has provided operating guidelines that far too many people have never taken off the shelf to read. Most who have read them only consider them useful for certain types of operations, "*religious*" things. How can we understand how we have damaged our world without first checking the operator's manual to see in what ways it is being operated improperly? Then how can we expect to repair the damage we find, if we will not even first check the manual for instructions on repairs?

Yet even when we can properly distinguish right from wrong, we still often fail to live up to our good intentions. We become frustrated when we see our own faults. But the curse on the creation and the failure of our best efforts have a definite purpose. After Paul had struggled with his own powerlessness to overcome his destructive habits, he cried out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"⁹¹

This is exactly why the land is cursed and our efforts to repair it are failing. God desires for us to be dependent upon him, not on our own ability.

So then, we can see that the difficulties we are facing are the result of our own behavior. Society is also beginning to recognize that the solutions which science and technology have to offer us are only attempts to address the consequences of our behavior. They are unable to eliminate the cause. In our frustration, are we left to agree with the more radical environmentalists that the only hope for nature is the extinction of man?

Once we have realized that our efforts are doomed to mediocrity, it is easy to give in to this type of frustration. But remember that the message of the Bible is one of hope, rather than despair. God has not abandoned humanity. He desires to have us under his care.

If the Bible is offering us encouragement in this time of ecological decay, just how are we supposed to respond to what we see around us? We are to be good stewards of what God has given us,⁹² but we are also told not to love this world.⁹³ We are told let nothing be wasted,⁹⁴ but also that this world will be destroyed by fire.⁹⁵ We have the promise that the meek will inherit the earth,⁹⁶ but we are also instructed to store our treasures in heaven.⁹⁷

Confused? Most people are confused concerning what the Bible says about the environment. How does the Bible describe our role in the world?

OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD

Jesus refers to his followers as the salt of the earth and the light of the world.⁹⁸ We are not told "to be" salt, if we are his disciples we "are" salt! Salt prevents decay. Consider how the environment is affected by man's ability to act as salt in a decaying world.

When God swept away Sodom and Gomorrah in response to the outcry against their "grievous" sin,⁹⁹ man and beast, plant and soil all were destroyed by the fire and brimstone that vented out of the briny bottom sediments of the Dead Sea. Before this occurred, the angels that visited both Abraham and Lot explicitly stated that it was a judgment that was being passed on those cities in response to that culture's undiluted wickedness.¹⁰⁰

Abraham's request for mercy on behalf of the few God fearing people living in Sodom is worth noting. Had ten people living there been seeking to follow God rather than exclusively their own desires, then the city would have been spared. As it turned out only Lot and three of his family would leave the city. The corruption was judged and punished, but the judgment came not because they were wicked, but because they did not maintain enough virtue among them to justify God's continued patience with the wicked. The number of God's intermediaries, the body of believers, was not large enough to prevent the "critical mass" of corruption necessary to bring an end to God's patience.

Had a dozen believers been present in this collection of five cities, which certainly had a population numbering in the tens of thousands, then God would have deferred the judgment. Perhaps they would have prevented the culture from deteriorating to the extent it did. Or maybe there might have been some continued potential that some others would repent as a result of their good influence.

We can ask why God did not just send more believers, missionaries if you will, into these dying cities to spare the destruction of both man and nature. The same question could be asked concerning the world before the Flood or the Canaanites who occupied the land that Israel was given. Yet the real question is why has our continued rejection of God's rules of conduct not caused these things to happen more often.

There were certainly some God-fearing people in the world of Noah's youth. What happened to all these people during the Flood? The ages at which the patriarchs died indicates that God was withdrawing his people from the world in the years immediately prior to the Flood. The "church" of that day had been taken out of the world, and in spite of the presence of Noah and his family, the critical mass necessary for judgment occurred.

So it is the Church that is the real source of environmental protection in the world. Over and over, the Bible records how judgment has come upon mankind when the stabilizing presence of God-fearing people, is absent. Those who have yielded their self-will to the will of God and the direction of his word somehow act to prevent the deterioration of a culture. The Bible describes this as being similar to the way that salt was once used to preserve meat. It is those whose faith God credits as righteousness who are preventing the further deterioration of the world. Therefore, we can conclude that if the salting effect of God-fearing people is reduced, then social decay and environmental degradation would increase. Quite literally we can say, "You are the salt of the earth."¹⁰¹

GOD'S CONCERN FOR THIS WORLD

Let me offer a practical example of how God calls us to end our rebellion and to return to him. Contrast what we have just seen about God's judgment upon Sodom, with the story of Nineveh in the Book of Jonah. God said to Abraham in Genesis 18:

"The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ... [but] If I find ... righteous people in the city of Sodom I will spare the whole place for their sake."¹⁰²

Similarly, God told Jonah:

"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me. ... proclaim the message I give you. ... Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.' The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast ... [saying] 'Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.'

"When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."¹⁰³

This was not Israel, the chosen people with whom God had a special relationship. Like the Sodomites, this was a people whose wicked behavior had become intolerable and was brought up before God, the righteous judge. The people of that city had reached a spiritual crossroads, a point of no return. But God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish.¹⁰⁴ He offered one last warning. In contrast to Lot's prospective sons-in-law in Sodom, who took their warning to flee as a joke,¹⁰⁵ the people of Nineveh took God at his word. They saw their own helplessness and responded with repentance. As a result, they were welcomed into the family of those whose relationship with God has been restored.

Jonah, the reluctant prophet, questioned God's generosity with such an undeserving people, the enemy of the nation of Israel. God's response was: "Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people ... and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"¹⁰⁶

God's character is described here as "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity".¹⁰⁷ This is how God treats us, in spite of our rebelliousness. God is concerned about even the cattle in a middle eastern country, but he is also willing to use his fallen creation as a tool to teach and potentially restore that part of the creation which was made in his image, mankind. Without God first reaching out to us we do not even know enough to turn to him. This is why God provided us with a Savior, because on our own we have made such an awful mess of things.

"[To] the One who remembered us in our low estate ... and who gives food to every

The Desired Response

creature ... Give thanks to the God of heaven. His love endures forever."¹⁰⁸

CHAPTER 19 THE SOLUTION

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." - John 3:16-7

WE KNOW WE ARE GUILTY BUT CLAIM TO BE VICTIMS

In his letter to the Romans, Paul communicates the idea that in response to our rebellion, God caused frailty in our flesh and mind.¹⁰⁹ Though God's commands are for our benefit, they result in affliction when disregarded. This was so that through the standards God has set, our disobedience would be recognized as deserving punishment, rather than deceptively appealing. God used the Fall to draw men back to him in repentance, so that our relationship with him can one day be restored.

We need to be made aware of the part that we play in contributing to the fallenness of the world around us. Your behavior is contributing to the punishment of pain and suffering which you, others around you and the creation are experiencing. Once you have recognized this, you are ready to listen to what God has to say.

Even for those who have not been taught God's requirements, there is an understanding of right and wrong. If there was no right or wrong, then there would be no reason for feelings of guilt. Paul said:

"all who sin under the law will be judged by the law [and those who live apart from the law of God] ... show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts ... accusing ... them."¹¹⁰

The awareness that we perpetually choose what is self-gratifying, rather than what we know deep inside to be right, produces feelings of guilt. People have made a science out of denying, rationalizing and burying guilt. The Bible describes this as searing the conscience and hardening the heart.¹¹¹

"The godless in heart harbor resentment; even when he fetters [confines] them, they do not cry for help. ... But those who suffer he delivers in their suffering; he speaks to them in their affliction. He is wooing you from the jaws of distress".¹¹²

The feelings of guilt within us make us feel dirty. Our tendency is to respond to this feeling by reacting in anger toward the thing that has reminded us of our guilt. This could be our parents, our spouse, religion or the "Puritan culture" that has shaped our society. These institutions are blamed for laying a "guilt trip" on people, meddling in their affairs and imposing old-fashioned ideas on others to take away their freedom.

Yet even when people succeed in silencing all these influences, they still do not feel clean. We know in our hearts that we have chosen to do what is wrong. Though we call ourselves victims of circumstances, our hearts do not absolve us from responsibility for the consequences of our actions. How are we to deal with the fact that we cannot blame everyone else for the mess this world is in?

People go to great lengths to justify their actions to themselves. We all set our standards low enough so that we can consider our behavior to be good and acceptable. But like the laws of physics, God's laws are unchanging. They are unaffected by our personal opinions. Just because we are certain that the ice on a pond should be thick enough to skate on, does not affect the actual thickness of the ice. Our personal opinion has nothing to do with the simple physics of it. In the same way, just because we do not acknowledge the evil in our hearts and the selfish motives for our actions does not mean that our hearts and our deeds are pure and acceptable to God. Like the ice on the pond, we need to measure what we want to believe against what is actually true.

In our hearts we know we are law-breakers. Just feel the adrenaline flow when you realize you have driven through a speed trap. You know that you have no respect for the law. The only question is were you breaking it when the police could see you.

We hate restrictions. We are two year-olds demanding unrestricted access to all we can see or reach. We are guilty of rebellion, but we love to hear people disagree with God's verdict and tell us that we are basically good. We want to believe that circumstances have made us do evil things and we are not to be held accountable. Like a convicted man before the judge, we list the extenuating circumstances and hope it will merit a lighter sentence, in spite of our guilt. We are like children waiting for Christmas to come, counting all the good things we have done. We are not repentant for the evil we do. We simply compare ourselves to someone worse than we are.

Isaiah described the effects of our behavior in this way:

"They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble ... The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. ... no one who walks in them will know peace. ...

"The Lord looked and was displeased ... he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation"¹¹³.

God has seen the hopelessness of our situation. We do not know how to cause peace and justice to be in our land. Our own attempts to correct our problems are ill-conceived and self-centered. Yet God did not look at this world filled with defiant people acting like two year-olds and denounce his toddlers as hopelessly wicked. He saw that there was no one to intercede on our behalf and so he took action himself.

"Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him."¹¹⁴

WE REFUSE TO BE DEPENDENT

We deceive ourselves. We are living in a fantasy when we convince ourselves that under our own strength we can accomplish whatever we set our minds on. It is hard for us to admit that we cannot fix what we have broken. Our pride gets in the way. We don't want to admit that we are not self-sufficient, even when we are up against problems that are bigger than we could ever solve.

Part of the difficulty is that we do not believe God will bear the burdens of someone who has failed on their own. How far the average person is from the words of the hymn-writer:

"Just as I am without one plea ... though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt ...
Just as I am poor, wretched, blind ... O Lamb of God I come!"¹¹⁵

We still struggle against the same thoughts and temptations that Eve succumbed to in the Garden: God's rules don't have our best interests in mind; he is trying to limit us; we don't need his help; with a little more knowledge we can run our own lives.¹¹⁶

We have not really changed that much since then, have we? Acting on that line of thinking our original parents caused the whole creation to be cursed. They ceased to be able to take directions from the Creator for managing the Garden. Humanity was left on our own with a task far beyond our ability. You cannot operate an office tower without having electricity or grow a crop without water. In the same way, the things that we require to fulfill our role as stewards of the creation are not under our control. Our failure is inevitable.

So now that you have had that dose of reality dumped on you, what is the appropriate way to respond to our feelings of incompetence and guilt? If we are unable to do what God asks of us, are we supposed to sit around and wait for his angry judgment? This perception of unfairness causes people to feel frustrated by their inability to live up to the unattainable standards that God holds us to. Many people have rejected the Bible's teachings because they get stuck at this point. If these things are beyond our ability, how could God possibly judge everyone for failing to live up to what he requires of us?

Though that makes sense in human logic, it is not what the Bible teaches. The Apostle Paul understood that "*the law*" was not given to justify our actions. It is to point us to our need for help.

"Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, ... if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But ... we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith."¹¹⁷

But how can this be so? Doesn't everyone have some good in them and just needs to be taught what is right? Think about that for a minute. Can you trust people to do what is right? You have locks on your doors and police on your streets to protect you from lawless people who would do you harm. Are you ever disappointed in your own behavior? Would you want a day of your thoughts printed in the local newspaper? In some way, each of us is irresponsible, weak-willed and prone to poor judgment.

Until you understand the short-comings of the human heart, you will never understand our need for "*justification by faith*". Unless you can see your own failure, you will not admit there is anything wrong. Without an understanding of your rebellion against God, you will not seek forgiveness. Then, when you acknowledge you do not have the capacity to live up to God's standards, you will admit you need help. "*Faith*" means seeking that help, but from who? Other people are no different than yourself, with corrupted hearts and feeble abilities. It is God who has promised to help all who come to him acknowledging their dependence.

We turn to God as a last resort. We come to him only when we have exhausted all other options and feel overwhelmed.

To make this point clear, the Bible says, "Blessed are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right."¹¹⁸ Our reaction to such a requirement is like that of the disciples when Jesus told them how hard it was to enter the kingdom of heaven by their own good deeds. "Who then can be saved?" was their bewildered response. Having made his point, Jesus then explained, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."¹¹⁹

This dependence that we have upon God's provision is what the Psalmist saw when he wrote, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever ... Remember me, O Lord, when you show favor to your people"¹²⁰

WE HOPE OUR SKILL CAN SAVE US

We are not born with that kind of faith. It has to be learned. We do not instinctively put our hope in his unfailing love. Instead we consider ourselves to be endowed with the ability to save ourselves. We merely give God lip service for having equipped us so ably. God does not receive our thanks when we manage to get ourselves out of the messes that we have created. Rather, it is when we realize that we could not have rescued ourselves from a situation that he is given credit for what he has done. That is when we depend upon him and place our hope in him. That is how we learn to have "faith" in God.

As long as we are convinced we can accomplish anything we set out to do using our own wisdom and abilities, we are not depending on God. We must turn from our misdirected self-confidence and from our destructive trial and error attempts to find solutions for the problems we have caused. We must realize that we cannot depend on our technology and determination to solve the spread of poverty in the world, the deterioration of our ecology or our tendency to make war against one another. Our track record should have already made that clear enough.

God will not tolerate our becoming overly dependent on the sense of security we receive from our technology, our economy or our education. These are other "gods" that we become loyal to instead of him. He is not interested in seeing how cleverly we can get ourselves out of the problems we face.

"His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse nor is his delight in the legs of man; the Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love."¹²¹

In the age that the Psalmist wrote, a man working in the fields or in battle was most effective when using a horse. Today, men depend on what science, prosperity and intelligence can do for them. Yet God is pleased with those who trust him, rather than what their horses, machines, possessions or intellect can do.

How many of us are sure that the energy crisis will be cured by another technological breakthrough? We are confident that fuel cells, fusion and solar panels will provide the source of clean, abundant, safe energy. We have been taught to have the optimism that somewhere out there are the di-lithium crystals that will power our warp-drive engines into the new millennium. But is such a hope justified?

We expect that AIDS will be conquered by our science and such momentary cultural traumas will pass like the dim memories of polio and small pox before it. We have prospered through any adversity that has come before. Why should we doubt that our science will prevail for us again this time?

No where has God promised that we will be able to save ourselves. On the contrary:

"the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those who hope in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine."¹²²

Notice that God is not saying he will prevent death and famine in the world. Instead, his promise is given along with a call to be patient during our adversity:

"wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust [him]"¹²³

Remember:

"No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. ... a horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its strength it cannot save."¹²⁴

All our wealth, discernment and technology have not provided us with the assurance of being delivered from the problems we face. The hands of men cannot "*save the planet*." At best we can stop trashing it so quickly. But we cannot change entropy's ongoing unraveling of nature. We also cannot change the corruption in other men's hearts.

THE CURE FOR OUR WICKED WORLD

There are many ways to reduce the environmental degradation around us and slow the advancing imbalances. New technologies, sustainable practices in using resources, education to help the poor feed themselves, all these things can influence our impact on the planet. Yet the only sure solution is God's promise to restore all things.

Many of us have taken the time to read God's promises, still few of us apply those promises to our thinking about the condition of the physical world around us. As we listen to the warnings about environmental degradation and what the world may be like in the future, the fearfulness they are expressing can be contagious. Many people are worried that God has left us on our own with the responsibility to protect the whole world. In their eyes, either God does not exist, became a spectator once he created the world, or is powerless to respond to our pleas for help.

Knowing that we have a tendency to be anxious, God has assured us of his continued care:

"be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'¹²⁵

"Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed".¹²⁶

So, we can say with confidence:

"The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"¹²⁷

"The Lord is my light and my salvation - whom shall I fear?"¹²⁸

What do we have to be fearful about? The Bible provides us with the assurance that we are not forgotten and God is in total control. All is going according to plan.

We are exhorted:

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will

guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."¹²⁹

Why do we have no peace in the face of the physical decay of the planet around us? It is because we do not present our requests to God with thanksgiving. Do we believe that there is a place in God's heart for the creation which he has placed under our care? Then if we are serious about wanting to protect the environment, it is necessary to see what prerequisites God has given us in the Scriptures for his restoring health to the land. Our actions and our prayers to God need to be consistent with what he has directed us to be doing as the stewards of his creation:

"When I shut up the heavens so there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people ... will humble themselves and pray ... and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear ... and will forgive their sin and heal their land."¹³⁰

This promise of healing was not simply given in an eternal sense. It is for today. The Bible tells us that the defiling of our land has come as a result of our own failure to yield "good fruit."¹³¹ If we are anxious about the health and future of our world, this passage tells us that there are three things God expects us to do. We need to acknowledge our arrogance toward God, (*humble ourselves*). We need to become dependent on God rather than our own abilities, (*pray*). And we need to change our behavior so that it is in submission to the commands that God has given us, (*turn from our wicked ways*).

To do this we need to learn what the Word of God says about the world we live on. That is why the book you are reading has spent so much time focusing on the misconceptions that we tend to have about what God has said about his creation. The Bible has already provided us with a knowledge of what we need to know about the future. This knowledge of the truth will help calm our fearfulness about the unknown. Such a calming effect is what the Bible refers to as "the peace of God, which transcends all understanding".¹³² We may not understand how all these things will take place in the future, but we know ahead of time how things will turn out.

Now if we have an assurance that God has not lost control of the situation, we must also remember that there is a difference between putting aside our fearfulness and neglecting our responsibility. When we see something that is not right, but is beyond our control, our responsibility as stewards is to express our concern to the one who is in control. We are not to ignore the problem as someone else's job. The thing to do is to pray as though we actually believe that the God who created the world is able to intervene in his creation. Prayer shows our faith in God and our dependence upon him. People tend to pray when they have no other options, once they have determined that they cannot do something under their strength and understanding. (Doesn't that sound a lot like the ecological problems that we are experiencing?)

But all these things are promised in the context of "if my people who are called by my name".¹³³ The Bible says these instructions concerning the steps necessary to heal the land, can only be put to use by those God recognizes as his own. What about all the others in the world who are concerned about the environment and want to do something to help?

HIS RESTORING US TO HIMSELF IS THE CURE

Let's say that you have cancer, but don't want to get involved with doctors or hospitals because you don't trust them to have any of the answers. Instead you have decided to exercise and start a strict macrobiotic diet. You eat nothing but whole grains, organic fruits and vegetables, herbal teas and vitamins. The advancing of the illness has slowed, but it is still advancing. You have tried everything that you could do on your own to take care of

yourself, but it seems that it is too late for help.

How would you respond to being told that there was a proven cure for cancer when you knew that you were about to die from it? Would you argue that it was not true and refuse the cure? Now what would you do if you were offered a cure for fear and death? You already have been. Are you still arguing about it?

Picture what we would do for the person who found the cure for cancer. They would become a celebrated personality. They would be given prestige, influence and wealth. What have you done for the one who has offered to free you from fear and to rescue you from death?

In his revelation to John from heaven, years after the resurrection, Jesus said:

"Do not be afraid. ... I was dead and behold I am alive for ever and ever! I hold the keys of death".¹³⁴

Don't be afraid of death and the forces at work in the fallenness of the world. Jesus assures us he has already overcome the greatest enemies of his people.

"He who believes in me will live, even though he dies".¹³⁵

You have probably heard that quoted before. Most people no doubt have not given such nebulous spiritual talk a second thought. But this time spend a moment to hear it again, as though it was the first time. God has provided the cure for the curse which is upon creation. Our physical death is no longer permanent. More than that, one day physical death will cease to be altogether. Then all things will be made new and the curse upon the creation will be taken away. But for now there is a cure, the injection of God's Spirit into our mortal bodies which are already spiritually dead.

We had been sentenced to death for our mutiny, but instead God himself came to pay the penalty that we owed. He cared so much about the world he created that he chose to take on a physical body so he could face the consequences of our sentence in our place. We have not "*earned*" acceptance from God. We have been pardoned. Jesus used the image of being in debt to describe our situation.¹³⁶ Whoever has realized that they cannot possibly pay off their debt themselves, and has turned to God as their only hope, is considered to have had their debt paid. This is what the Bible calls our "*second birth*", being born of the Spirit. It is the vaccine against the second death that all face on the last day.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness".¹³⁷

We are not perfect. No one is. Our world, our loved ones and our neighbors all have paid a price for our poor judgment, our indiscretion and our selfishness. The earth and its inhabitants are soiled by our actions.

God is able to make us clean to the very depth of our souls.

"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without a stain or wrinkle or any kind of blemish, but holy and blameless."¹³⁸

The bride, the symbol of the Church, will be presented to Christ without a spot or wrinkle, even though we who comprise the Church have lived our lives in the tattered rags of our self-effort. Jesus presented this idea in the

parable of the wedding feast. The king sent his messengers "into the streets and alleys ... to get the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame"¹³⁹ so that his banquet hall would be filled. Those people did not come dressed as they were. For a royal wedding in the ancient world, the host provided appropriate clothes for the guests. The subsistence farmer, or the unemployed in the marketplace waiting to be hired for a day's work, were in no condition to enter the king's presence and eat at his table. The appropriate clothes for the occasion were provided. And rather than putting a dirty peasant in a royal robe, all who came would have also been to the bath house.

Because the king sent for the people who were in the streets, and unlike many of those who had been initially invited they did come, they were made clean and were given a spotless robes to wear. God has called us, even when we were dirty and dressed in rags. We had been stained by our corrupted desires, lusts and greed, our wastefulness and ungratefulness, our lack of compassion and justice. We had defiled ourselves. But like in a water purification system, the pollutants are removed and that water is made pure again as though it had never been fouled. The contaminants are taken from us. We are regenerated.

The Psalmist prayed "cleanse me ... and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow."¹⁴⁰ This was the concept that Paul was building upon when he described the Church being "washed" by the word.

But what use is all this metaphysical stuff in the midst of our planet dying? Why doesn't God heal the ozone hole, or stop the East African famine and the cutting of the rain forests? Why doesn't he send us political leaders who will stop our wasteful societies from polluting so much? If this is God's creation, why doesn't he do something about this suffering? We're on a sinking ship and he seems to be asleep!

When such frustrations confront you, remember how Jesus dealt with such a physical crisis. The scene was a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee. In an oar-driven fishing boat a dozen or so people were in a panic. Even those who were seasoned fisherman on this sea feared they would soon perish. But Jesus still slept in the stern of the boat. When the men awoke their Bible scholar to see how he could be so unconcerned, the one who had created the universe:

"got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm."¹⁴¹

God is not in a panic over the environmental crisis. This same man walked on the water, healed the sick while he was still miles away and even brought life back to the dead by simply speaking to them. He filled Peter's net with fish after the professional fisherman had worked all night with no success. He took five loaves of bread and fed 5000 people, and then had more than five loaves worth of scraps left over.

This is someone to put our hope in. We do not depend on a God who is unable to intervene in his creation. He was present with Adam and Eve in Eden, with the Israelites in the desert and with the disciples after Pentecost. God is no less a participant in our activities today.

A CAUSE FOR HOPE

The environmental movement has been warning us about the decay, deterioration and extinction happening in the world around us. Their goal is to stop mankind from further destroying the planet which we are all dependent upon. Their premise is that our actions are the source of the problem. We have caused these problems, and so we have to fix them. They see decisive action as being required to stop the destruction of the Garden.

Christianity has a similar message. Christians recognize the world is filled with corruption, misery and death. If this world had been created through the random chance of evolution, it would be discouraging enough to think that it is now being destroyed by the carelessness of one species. But it is even worse to picture the decay that we are seeing if you see that the world was created in all its fullness from the beginning. Because once you recognize this is true, and you see just how imperfect the world is today in comparison, you start to comprehend the magnitude of the damage mankind has caused. From this perspective you can see the futility of the idea that we will fix the harm we have done to what was put in our care, or the idea that nature will restore itself.

Consider the harm that we have done, our inability to repair that damage and the reality that we will never change our wasteful behavior on our own. We really do have reason to despair about the condition of the world. Think about the fact that the whole world was originally like one big lush South Sea island. It had all the food you could want, just to reach out and take. It had a perfect climate year-round; no diseases, no predators and to top it off people did not grow old! Now compare that to what you live with today. Boy did we mess up! How are we going to explain to God what we have done to the perfect creation that he put in our hands to take care of. It brings to mind the image of when the Three Stooges were hired to paint the interior of a mansion. By the time they were through messing things up the owner was ready to kill them.

If you take away science's hope of finding another miracle technology and the spiritualist's hope that some resilient force guiding evolution will make it all work out, then we really have no other hope. That is why understanding Creationism inevitably points us toward the Savior that God has provided to redeem us and to restore his defiled creation. Without a knowledge of the Savior, a world view which has a Creator that we must answer to would be more than we could bear. This is why those of us who speak of the "*created*" world also speak about the Creator and the Savior. Because without that part of the story there is only guilt and despair.

The late Dr. Richard Bliss of the Institute for Creation Research was an active spokesman for Creationism. He felt that a candid discussion about the Creator inevitably ended up in an awareness of the Savior.

"I never talk about creation without talking about the Savior, Jesus Christ, and how He relates to the Creation story. ... If you are honest with the word of God, you're going to find Jesus Christ. You're going to find the testimony of His Creation."¹⁴²

There is a difference between a view of the world that has no external Creator and a view of the world that has a Creator-Savior. The latter offers hope to those who have realized that the deterioration has gone beyond our ability to repair it. It requires an acknowledgement that our own best efforts cannot reverse that prognosis. The hope which the Bible offers is not that we can fix this broken world, but that it is possible for us to be forgiven for having rebelled against the Creator and defaced the creation. The "*bad news*" about our failure and the sad condition of the world is used to point out that people need the "*Good News*".

The conflict between ideas here is that on one side we have environmentalists saying we must do something to save the planet. They feel we must change man's behavior so he will stop hurting the planet. On the other side we have Christianity, which is also based on the idea that we are the source of the problem. The Bible says that if we are left to our own devices all is lost. We are lost. Yet in Christianity there is great hope. God has offered life to those who are perishing, to those who have realized that in themselves there is no hope.

CHAPTER 20

A GLIMPSE OF THE EARTH'S FUTURE

*"Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked,
for the Lord will be your confidence" - Proverbs 3:25-26*

PROPHECIES OF THE FUTURE

Writing this chapter has been intimidating for me. After all, what authority does the opinion of an environmental geologist carry on the subject of interpreting end-time theology. In reading this chapter, remember that it is not our individual opinions that are important, or the explanation that some godly person has handed down to us. Any attempt to understand prophecy in the Bible is only of value to the extent that it can allow the Word of God to speak for itself. In addressing this topic, I am merely trying to use the vantage point of environmentalism to expound on the implications of what the Bible says. This is simply one more facet of the gem, reflecting God's light from a slightly different angle to help illuminate the truth.

"For we know in part ... Now we see but a poor reflection ... then we shall see face to face."¹⁴³

Most of this book has been a discussion of the effects that having a literal interpretation of the Bible can have on our world view. The perspective of the world being about 6000 years old and that sin brought what we call the "survival of the fittest" into the world can profoundly change of view of mankind's role on earth. We have seen that too often we accept cultural concepts such as evolution as a logical result of other less openly perilous concepts like geologic ages. In much the same way, this chapter varies from some standard interpretations of future prophecy because it is building on a literal acceptance of passages dealing with the restoration of various parts of nature. Using that vantage point, it addresses the possible misconceptions that we might be accepting as a result of various explanations of biblical prophecies. Even if you are schooled in a more symbolic renderings of things such as the Millennium, consider with me the implications which a literal view point would have on the creation and the fulfillment of God's purposes.

We should remember that the concepts which the Bible presents on this subject are often foreign to this world. Therefore, they do not fit easily into our limited range of comprehension. Having said this, join me as I delve into the depths of these mysteries.

THE FATE OF THIS EARTH

What does the future hold in store for us? There are many scientists and futurists studying the conditions in the world today. By projecting trends into the future, they try to predict what tomorrow will bring. Though these are educated guesses, still they are only guesses. It is presumptuous of us to think that we can know what will happen to the world in the next century. We cannot even predict the weather for next week with any consistent accuracy. It is God, the Creator, who knows the end from the beginning.

Therefore, the one dependable source of information about the future is the Word of God.

What does the Bible teach will happen to the creation in the future? What will become of the good earth for which "the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy"¹⁴⁴ at the creation? Let's begin to answer these questions by looking at how the Bible treats another set of prophecies which was fulfilled during the years the Bible was still being recorded. In ancient Israel there was confusion over the apparent contradiction of the Messiah being portrayed as both the suffering servant¹⁴⁵ and the victorious ruler.¹⁴⁶ Even today, people who do not recognize the authority of the New Testament, have not resolved this issue. Yet in light of New Testament teachings, it is now obvious to us in retrospect that the first coming of the Messiah was the time of the birth, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The second will be his return at the end of the age to set up his promised kingdom.

In a similar way, there is confusion today. The diversity of perspectives in end-times theology indicates how difficult it is to understand the Bible regarding its images of the restoration of creation and its images of the heavenly kingdom. How can it be true that creation, which is now subject to decay, will be restored, but also have the elements of the universe be destroyed?

Many Christian writers have characterized the new heaven and the new earth referred to in the books of Second Peter and Revelation¹⁴⁷ as being the physical world after it has been purified by the refiner's fire.¹⁴⁸ David Wise presents the perspective that:

"Fire is an image used widely throughout Scriptures, drawing on the analogy of the refinement of metals. ... Thus the image of fire refers not so much to total destruction as to purification by the removal of contaminating elements - typically human sinfulness or sinners."¹⁴⁹

This way of thinking considers Peter's description of the destruction of the elements¹⁵⁰ to be comparable to the Flood "destroying" the antediluvian world. The slate is wiped clean, but the building blocks and laws of the universe are unchanged. They picture the future as having this physical world restored to the garden it once was and mankind being at peace with God and with nature.

Following this same line of thinking, there are those who maintain that Jesus died not just to redeem people, created in his image, but also the whole world. Writing about God's plan of salvation from this perspective, Tony Campolo notes:

"Jesus ... not only provided for our deliverance from eternal death, He also initiated the freeing of nature from the evil effects of Satan's work. The ultimate result of the work of Christ is that all of nature will be giving God glory and worshipping Him throughout all eternity."¹⁵¹

"His salvation was meant for more than humans. ... we have ignored the message of God's saving work for the rest of His creation. ... The salvation that John 3:16 talks about is for everything in the universe, not just for people."¹⁵²

He is not alone in taking this position. Loren Wilkinson similarly writes about a "cosmic Christ" who came to bring salvation to the whole universe, essentially to save the planet:

"by 'cosmic Christ' we mean simply that the world to which God's Son came was not only the human world but the whole created earth - indeed the entire universe."¹⁵³ "Did Jesus die just for you? Or did he die for the whole creation?"¹⁵⁴ "Why has our concept of

salvation shrunk to include merely the personal?"¹⁵⁵

Like the misunderstanding of Christ's first coming, what these people have tried to depict as an eternally restored earth is an unnecessary combining of the biblical images from the two separate ages to come. Jesus has promised to reign on earth for a thousand years¹⁵⁶ in a period of liberation which creation eagerly awaits.¹⁵⁷ Yet he has also promised that he is preparing a place for us in heaven:

"Do not let your heart be troubled. ... In My Father's house there are many rooms; ... I am going there to prepare a place for you. ... I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."¹⁵⁸

The words of Jesus make it clear that this earth is not heaven. After his resurrection, he returned to heaven and is preparing a place for the day that we are to go with him to the place where he has gone. When he returns, it will be to take us to that place. He is returning "*for*" us, not just returning "*to*" us.

The Bible does not teach that we will live eternally on this earth. That is the image it presents of heaven. We want nature, which is familiar to us, to be part of heaven. As a result, many have taken the image of the Millennium's restored creation and have called it our "*eternal*" home. Yet, like those who were waiting for the coming of the Messiah, we have confused two very different events, combining them into one in our minds.

THE END OF THIS PRESENT AGE

If we feel that things have deteriorated in this world today, remember that we are still in the period where God is saying that this tree may yet bear fruit.¹⁵⁹ He is giving us time. But there will come a day when the wheat will be gathered up and the weeds which the enemy has sown will finally be uprooted and burned.¹⁶⁰ If the evil that we see happening in the world today is part of the disciplining that God has allowed while being patient with us, imagine the conditions when his patience has come to an end!

In Mark chapter 13, Jesus describes what will happen as the end of this age approaches. In humanity's attempt to sustain its population, the conflicts between and within nations over diminishing resources will be intense. Added to this will be an alarming increase in natural disasters such as earthquakes and epidemics.

Be assured that today we are still under God's protective care. For now, God is restraining the corruption of the world around us. If you are unsure of this, consider why our frail race was not wiped out long ago by some global catastrophe such as a meteorite impact or an unstoppable virus. Instead of simply causing mankind to become extinct for its corruptness, God has disciplined us by progressively depleting the resources we are dependent on. But rather than repenting under this stern rebuke and finally turning to God for help, the Bible says that men "cursed the God of heaven for their pains ... and would not repent of what they had done."¹⁶¹

We are stewards in the vineyard of the Lord, assigned to dwell in the garden, and we will have to answer for the things we have done. But note that God is doing something which we would not really expect. Rather than sending an epidemic upon man and blessing the innocent creation, the other members of the creation suffer as well. The Book of Revelation describes a time when: a third of the waters on the earth have become "bitter", resulting in the death of millions and untold ecological devastation; a third of the

creatures of the sea are destroyed; a third of the trees are destroyed by fire; and the light of the sun is dimmed.¹⁶² It is interesting to note that this environmental holocaust was in response to the prayers of the saints.¹⁶³ We would have expected that when God answers the prayers of his children his wrath upon the rebellious world would be turned away. But in this case, God satisfies the pleading of his people for justice by bringing great destruction upon the earth.

The Bible says that there will come a time when people's hearts will melt in fear; "those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world".¹⁶⁴ Many look at the deteriorating condition of the environment with fear, because this world is all the future they can conceive of. We must not become wrapped up in the worries of those whose only hope is their plan to "save" this world. Jesus warned, "Watch out that no one deceives you."¹⁶⁵ Many will come offering a misdirected hope, but we are told to take our stand on the truth we have believed in. We are told to not be alarmed, to stand firm and not worry, but remember, nowhere in Scripture are we told we are able to restore this fallen world. Jesus said "such things must happen."¹⁶⁶ Those days of distress will certainly come, but out of the final decline of our civilization and our environment will actually come the answer to our prayers. Jesus reassured his disciples by telling them, "When these things begin to take place... your redemption is drawing near."¹⁶⁷ "Do not be afraid".¹⁶⁸ "I have told you everything ahead of time."¹⁶⁹

The Apostle John described what he saw in a vision as the sky being rolled back like a scroll.¹⁷⁰ The first time I realized what that meant was while singing an old hymn at the start of a worship service:

"And, Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend
Even so it is well with my soul."¹⁷¹

That is not God peeling back the sky like the top of a sardine can so he can enter creation from heaven. When I realized it was the Apostle's description of seeing a nuclear mushroom cloud I was left speechless. Haste the day when "*the bomb*" gets dropped? What was I saying!

"... and the Lord shall descend even so it is well with my soul." He will come to prevent mankind from destroying it all. The Lord will once again calm the storm. Scripture promises that technology will not pull us out of our self-destructiveness. Jesus promised, "If those day had not been cut short, no one would survive".¹⁷² In what would have otherwise been the final chapter in the history of man, the Bible says Jesus will return conquering and victorious. Christ returns to a crushed humanity which apparently would have avoided the barbarism of living in a post-nuclear wasteland only because the planet would be so polluted that no one would survive. So great will be the environmental devastation of the holocaust that had God not intervened human life would have ceased even in the remotest politically neutral corners of the globe.

Education will not finally bring out the good in man's heart, causing us to treat one another and the earth with respect. Mankind does not evolve along with the rest of nature into a utopian world and genetically leap into a New Age. The smart computers do not out-compete man leaving us to become extinct like the dinosaurs. We are not just a brief event in the history of evolution.

The story of our future is not found on the pages of our popular science fiction novels. Humanity does not escape the dying planet to colonize the endless frontier of space. UFOs don't come like the cavalry to save the day and rescue us from ourselves. Yet, there are biblical themes in those ideas. We are saved from the outside, not through our own actions. The next age is a spiritual one, not merely a physical one. Man's heart is finally cured of its corruption and made pure. All these things will happen, but it will be God who intervenes into the universe, not one of our fellow creatures.

CREATION WILL BE RELEASED FROM BONDAGE

The Bible instructs us not to worry about tomorrow. Paul expressed his certainty about the future saying:

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. ... 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."¹⁷³

In some way that we can hardly begin to understand, God has covenanted with the whole creation that it will be delivered from its deterioration and will participate in an age of restoration along with humanity.

The New English Bible words it this way:

"the universe itself is to be freed from the shackles of mortality and enter upon the liberty and splendor of the children of God."¹⁷⁴

J.B. Phillips expressed this passage with the following paraphrase:

"the whole created life will be rescued from the tyranny of change and decay, and have its share in that magnificent liberty which can only belong to the children of God!"¹⁷⁵

The Bible clearly states that the creation will be restored. Yet we need to be careful that we do not assume that this restoration is the sole reason and ultimate goal of the gospel. Gordon Zerbe appears to have confused the two when he wrote:

"the tendency of Christian theology to soften the future-oriented focus of cosmic salvation through an emphasis on spiritual or heavenly salvation ... [is] a diminishment of salvation as a cosmic and earthly reality ... The final hope of Christians is not heaven, but participation in God's restoration of all things."¹⁷⁶

Writings such as this show that the heaven which some people are looking forward to is merely a reestablishment of Eden. Such a viewpoint fails to grasp the fullness of God's promises in the Bible. If the restoration of humanity out of its fallen state is simply one small part of the restoration of all of nature, then what was Paul referring to when he wrote, "creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed"?¹⁷⁷ Why is the creation anticipating God's children coming of age? Isn't that a rather man-centered way for God to have focused that passage if he had really meant to say that man's restoration was only a piece of the larger purpose of restoring the creation?

A better interpretation of this passage is that the rest of creation is dependent on humanity for its care, which is what this passage is literally saying. In this "liberated" creation, God will be ruling over his people, directing them as they learn to become proper stewards. Creation awaits being properly cared for in this way, not independent of man, or co-equal to man, but achieving its fullness under the care of man, who is under the direction of God. No longer will man's touch be more likely to cause harm than good. This is the way things were in the beginning:

"God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."¹⁷⁸

The motivation behind the corrupt behavior of humanity will be changed. Man's heart will be restored. Our renewed mind will enable us to understand the will of God clearly, thereby reviving the talents needed for filling our position as steward and caretaker over the rest of creation. This will either be accompanied by, or result in, the healing of the fallen creation. The Bible promises that the deterioration experienced under the Fall, which produced the "survival of the fittest" struggle, will be reversed. The earth will once again be lush enough to feed the multitudes of creatures without requiring the death of one for the sustenance of another.

Perhaps the purpose of this restoration is to give the creation an opportunity to live without being under oppression. Perhaps it will be a time for God to display the full potential of creation's design, with both humanity and the physical creation prospering along side each other. Maybe this is to show mankind how stewardship really works. Or could it be that a point is being made to the heavenly hosts,¹⁷⁹ showing them something of God's wisdom in tolerating man's rebellion and of his justice in crushing Satan's heavenly rebellion.

DARE TO DREAM OF THAT DAY

Picture the day when Satan is no longer free to deceive people and leave them to suffer the consequences of their poor decisions. Psalm 126 gives us just a taste of the joy that we will feel:

"When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. ... The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy."¹⁸⁰

This psalm is considered to be depicting the return of the Israelites to the Promised Land after 70 years of the Babylonian captivity. It was a time of rejoicing in their new found freedom from a life of bondage in a foreign country. It was a promise which God had made to a generation past that was being fulfilled. God had not forgotten his people. He had not cast them aside forever because of their unfaithfulness. He still kept his promises. It was the fulfillment of what some had longed for and others had not even dared to dream.

But this passage is not just a historic account of Israel's return from Babylon. It is also a foretelling of other events. It would certainly apply to the restoration of Israel as a nation after World War II. God provided them with a homeland and the ability to defend themselves after going through the Holocaust. Not since 70 A.D. had Israel been present in their homeland in some semblance of a nation.

It can also be looked at as a foretelling of our emotions upon seeing the restored creation. We know that the creation is waiting to be released from its bondage under the curse.¹⁸¹ Think about today's predators eating plants like they were originally created to do, rather than stalking their ever-cautious prey. This was the promise that Isaiah prophesied when he said "the lion will eat straw like the ox."¹⁸² There are promises of restoration which cannot be fulfilled without such a time of healing. Isaiah tells us in that day, "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with goat ... and a little child will lead them."¹⁸³ Try to picture a land that has been healed of its pollution and erosion. Just imagine the potential available in the fulfillment of Ezekiel 47, when even the Dead Sea will once again thrive with life.

The Bible is not clear in telling us to what extent the creation before the Fall will be restored. Since the creation is looking forward to the time when it will be freed from its bondage to decay, it is apparent that there will be some form of healing. Will this include a fully restored creation, or will the pollution and tendency toward decay which characterize our world today remain? Will the renewing of the creation from the effects of the curse happen in just a matter of days as it was for the original act of creation? Or perhaps God will use the hands of men and women as his caretakers to bring about the restoration?

It is not apparent whether man will be used for the healing of nature or if man will simply be put in place as a steward of nature once it has been restored. Yet it is clear that it will be a period when we will get another chance at stewarding resources, only this time we will have godly wisdom equipping us to maintain and care for this planet. No longer will our plans to care for the earth be filled with indecision and division. This is what creation eagerly awaits.

Should we expect extinct species to again inhabit the earth as the creation returns to its original biodiversity? Will genetic decay be undone? Will the barren landscapes and the drought-stricken deserts be made lush? Will there be no more violent storms, or blight or drought? These things cannot not be dismissed as being out of the realm of possibility.

Think of how you will feel when there is not a war going on anywhere in the world and you no longer need to have a lock on your door or even need to use mosquito repellent or sun screen.

The excitement of the Psalmist is worth repeating. "We were like men who dreamed ... we are filled with joy." Dare to dream of the day that has been promised. The restoration of the fallen creation. Then the Bible presents something even more exciting, this day we dream of is not even heaven. The best is still to come after this.

HEAVEN ON EARTH?

What is it that will occur during the Second Coming of Christ to allow these things to happen? Note the way the Book of Revelation described how Christ subdues the forces corrupting his creation:

"He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years ... to keep him from deceiving the nations"¹⁸⁴

With Satan bound, people will once again be able to think and reason clearly. Then they will beat their swords into plowshares.¹⁸⁵ There will be 1000 years without armed conflict or law suits, hunger, disease or fear. This is the millennial reign of Christ on earth. It will be a time when God's care and guidance will be unmistakably apparent among all people. The creation will be dwelt in by its Creator.

Even among Bible scholars, there is a variety of interpretations about what Scripture refers to when it speaks of the things that will occur after the Second Coming of Christ. The question is basically, does such a period represent heaven or something prior to that eternal kingdom? Since there are so many passages concerning the restoration of nature, which the creation eagerly awaits, it has forced me to conclude that there will be a time of restoration before the physical world passes away. This period is typically referred to as the "Millennium." In the context that I will be using that term, it will refer to Christ returning to put an end to the battle of Armageddon, which ushers in a thousand years for the creation to enjoy its "Sabbath rest."¹⁸⁶

This period is not merely a figurative way to refer to eternity in heaven. Notice what God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, includes in his description of the land which he will restore:

"I will create new heavens and a new earth. Former things will not be remembered ... the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; ... For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people ... they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them."¹⁸⁷

In his commentary on the Book of Isaiah, Edward Young points out that the reference in this passage to the new heavens and the new earth represents the "Messianic Age." This period is not God's eternal kingdom, since Isaiah makes it clear that people in this age will continue to grow old and die.¹⁸⁸ Young points out that in the coming age there will be a change from the world we know. Instead "when one dies at the age of 100, he shall be regarded as merely a youth, the implication being that he had yet far more life to live."¹⁸⁹ Since death is still a reality, this obviously is not referring to heaven where the mortal have been changed to immortal. Our aging process has only been extended to its former pre-Flood longevity.

So how can Isaiah describe it as being "a new heavens and a new earth" when other New Testament passages translated into that same phrase refer to what is clearly the "eternal" kingdom of heaven?¹⁹⁰ Young continues:

"In the concept of the prophet, time and eternity, the age of the New Testament and the eternal heavens, are not sharply distinguished ... Strictly speaking, the words 'former things' refer to former heavens and earth. But heaven and earth are employed as figures to indicate a complete renovation or revolution in the existing course of affairs. With the advent of the Messiah the blessing to be revealed will in every sense be so great that it can be described only as the creation of a new heaven and a new earth."¹⁹¹

Since we know that there will be a restoration of the earth, should we expect it to be soon? Attempts to develop literal biblical chronologies have indicated that we have been laboring under the curse for approximately 6000 years. Perhaps in God's timing it will not be long until the Millennium will begin. If this is how God's plan unfolds, the thousand years will be giving the creation its Sabbath rest, one in seven. Although this is simply speculation, if this is the case, then the time left before these things occur is indeed short. Yet, we need to be careful in making such an assumption so that it does not cause us to fail to be diligent in our stewardship of his possessions until he does come.

THEN FOR A SHORT TIME

There are a few verses tucked away in Revelation's victorious passage on the Millennium which further support the idea that the thousand years is a time of rest, rather than a description of heaven's eternal city. The brevity of the passage suggests that God does not want us to dwell on the event, but simply to be aware of it when trying to understand what must be fulfilled in the future.

"Satan ... [was] bound ... to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be set free for a short time."¹⁹²

It is not clear what corruption will occur with Satan released from his chains or how long it will last, but we are assured that it will be brief. Scripture does not tell us why this is allowed to happen. God has not told us why, so we obviously do not need to know. We probably would not be able to comprehend it from our perspective as mortals anyway.

We do know that the justice of God has determined that Satan will again be freed for a short time. God's punishment of Satan for his rebellion is being carried out in phases, rather than being fully implemented instantly. The Bible indicates that he had "fallen from heaven... [and was] cast down to earth."¹⁹³ Soon he will be bound with chains for a thousand years. Then Satan will be freed again for an unspecified brief time, "to deceive the nations."¹⁹⁴

Revelation 20:8-9 notes that the number of people who Satan will be able to deceive is as the sand on the seashore. He will gather them to war against "the camp of God's people". The Bible indicates that God will not require his people to re-arm and defend themselves. Instead they are rescued by an act of God which we have incorporated into our cultural imagery. God will fight against this last rebellion himself, "fire came down from heaven."

Apparently, the fall and redemption of man and the fall and judgment of Satan are themes that are played out together in history. Somehow God is displaying to the heavenly hosts that he is fully justified in condemning Satan. Even after a thousand year cooling-off period, Satan continues to be in rebellion. So finally God, who has sustained even the Devil, will withdraw the last of the sustenance he provided Satan in what the Bible calls being cast into the lake of fire.

God is also proven right in his judgment upon man. When the promised Millennium has been completed, the descendants of those who were rescued from Armageddon and environmental destruction are still able to be deceived. After the thousand years of living in the creation freed from its bondage to decay, still people will turn against God's ruling over them and quickly forget their dependence on God. This parallels what happened to the descendants of those who were rescued from slavery in Egypt and lived in Sinai under God's very visible provisions. It was by his hand that they received their daily manna and by his pillar of cloud that they were protected from the scorching desert sun. God provided water from the rock and the law to properly order their lives. In spite of the way that God had so visibly sustained them, these people and their descendants still rebelled against him.

What more could he have done to make the fig tree bear fruit?

CHAPTER 21 A GLIMPSE OF HEAVEN

*"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived
what God has prepared for those love him"
1 Corinthians 2:9*

THIS WORLD WILL PASS AWAY

The laws of physics tell us that given enough time all of the physical universe will eventually expire. The earth's core will cool and its protective magnetic field will fade. The sun will use up its fuel, flicker and fail. These things are projected to happen in the distant future of geologic time.

"*Geologic time*" is a term used to mean more years than we can image. But the Scriptures indicate we do not need to be concerned about these things. When the end comes, it will not be as a result of the resources which God has provided running out. It will be because all that God has desired to accomplish through this fallen world has been fulfilled.

God values all his creation and, as Chapter 14 described, his creation brings him honor as all he has made "sings" about the great things he has done. But the restoration of the earth in the Millennium will not be for all eternity. The new heavens and new earth are not the merely a reconstruction of the ground that Adam and Eve first walked upon and the sky that they saw overhead. From the perspective of God's eternal kingdom, ecological restoration is not of equal importance to spiritual redemption. That would be placing eternal value upon things that the Bible says are temporary. Jesus made it clear that "Heaven and earth will pass away".¹⁹⁵

The Bible says there will be a new earth, not merely a refurbished one. The promise that God has given us is that this world "will all wear out like a garment ... and ... will be discarded."¹⁹⁶ In the final judgment "the elements will be destroyed by fire"¹⁹⁷ and "melt in the heat".¹⁹⁸ Then will come the new heavens and the new earth which are being prepared for all God's people. This will be different than the Eden that once was our home, because in it will not even be the potential for corruption.¹⁹⁹

Mankind, the image of God, the bride of Christ, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, is eternal in spirit. No other part of the physical creation has been described by the Scriptures in this way. God has promised the faithful that he is preparing them heavenly mansions in the eternal city. This New Jerusalem²⁰⁰ is not contained within nature. It is something different.

THE NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH

We all say that we want to go to heaven when we die. We also pray to our Father in heaven. If we are looking forward to being there, what do we know about this place we call heaven? If heaven is not just our

return to Eden without the potential for being tempted to rebel, then what is it?

The Sadducees questioned Jesus on the subject of heaven. Though they were "religious," they did not believe there would be life after this world. This is how Jesus responded to them:

"The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But ... in the resurrection from the dead [they] will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. ... they are children of the resurrection."²⁰¹

Following the resurrection, in what we commonly refer to as heaven, there will be no marriage or death. In combining these concepts, Jesus seems to indicate that the natural result of marriage, the birth of children, would not occur in heaven. If heaven is to be just Eden restored to its former glory, were mankind and the animals in the Garden without sexuality? Of course not, they were commanded to fill the earth. Heaven must be something more than just a restoration of paradise lost.

This may seem obvious enough, but, as noted in Chapter 20, there is a teaching among some Christians who are writing on the subject of the environment which has confused this issue. They envision a restored world where one hundred plus elements exist, the sun shines in the sky and all creatures live in the eternally renewed Eden. They await the restoration of the conditions which were being referred to when "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."²⁰² But they forget that the Bible's descriptions of heaven are not consistent with its descriptions of Eden.

WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT IS TO COME

Recently a child asked my pastor whether dogs have spirits. He wanted to know whether his favorite pet would be with him in heaven. The Scriptures teach that animals have the breath of life,²⁰³ but only people were created in God's image.²⁰⁴ God has promised us that there will be no mourning or tears in heaven, so the presence or absence of our pets will be exactly as God has planned for us and as we would be pleased with. Heaven will be a place prepared for you by the one who gives you all good things. Remember:

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those love him"²⁰⁵

Could we say that about Eden? Was it a restored Eden which Paul was describing when he spoke of being "caught up to paradise ... [hearing] inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell."²⁰⁶

There is much that we do not understand about what is to come. Other than what we are told in the Bible about heaven, we have no physical examples of heaven to build our image of it from. Paul wrote:

"Someone may ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?' ... flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable ... at the last trumpet ... the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ... When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then ... Death has been swallowed up in victory."²⁰⁷

Consider how Christ's resurrected body was more real, not less real than his physical surroundings. He ate

the same food as the disciples, yet he was not excluded by a locked door. In the same way, there will be a new "earth." Like the transformed body of the risen Christ, it will consist of things that are very different than the world we know here. In it will dwell only things that are spotless and pure. Paul described the body we now have as being like a seed, which when planted undergoes changes.²⁰⁸ We will be changed, but for now what we will become is beyond our ability to comprehend.

Sherwood Eliot Wirt, the founding editor of "Decision" magazine, wrote on this subject:

"if you understand that Heaven is not peopled with spooks or disembodied spirits, but with live heavenly bodies that are filled with joy and delight, I think you will arrive at some idea of the wonderful times with Jesus ... that lie ahead".²⁰⁹

We will be with him. He will welcome us home as we would our adult children who have survived their turbulent adolescence and are seeking to be restored. Jesus was referring to each of us when he described the prodigal son who had rejected the life his father offered and left to seek the excitement that the world had to offer. That parable shows this once kosher young man was reduced to the point where he was now tending the pigs as a consequence of his choices. The father welcoming him home is an image of God our Father. We can each be like this broken, repentant child being welcomed back with joy and celebration.

As part of life in Eden, Adam was told to tend the Garden. In the original paradise created for mankind, there was "*work*" to do. Similarly, Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to work with their hands, as a noble way to earn a living. Though now we often dislike our work, we can find joy in even menial tasks when they are done as a job the Lord has asked us to do.

In heaven there will be responsibility given to us. Our work in the Eternal City will quite literally be done for the Lord. It will be "*work*" in the most positive sense of the word, fit for Christ's beloved. In various places the Bible describes this work as our being the bride of Christ, ruling over 5 or 10 cities, being given possessions of our own, and being like him.²¹⁰ The work we will do is the work which is our reward as good and faithful servants who did not grow faint, but persevered to the end. It is our inheritance as adopted sons. It is the purpose for which the potter created us as vessels to be used in his house for noble tasks. We will be pure gold, refined by the fire of our earthen lives.

HOW THEN SHOULD WE LIVE?

When finally the fullness of time has been fulfilled and God's purposes for creation accomplished, time, space and matter will be burned up and the glue that holds it all together released. This glue was the "word" spoken at creation by God when creating the heavens, (space) and the earth (the matter filling that space). Toward that end, the creation that we live in can be looked at as being temporary and mortal, rather than eternal. This universe will pass away. As important as it is, from an eternal perspective, it is of secondary value.

Still it is important to remember that although this creation may be temporal in God's plan, our instructions are to be its caretaker. We are stewards of another's possessions having the opportunity to learn to be obedient.

Jesus is described as "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world."²¹¹ Even before the world

was created, God was aware that mankind would fall and a curse would be placed upon man and nature. This suggests that the world was created not as an eternal home, but as a testing ground, a school if you will, for mankind. So then, God is using his fallen creation, what we call "nature," to correct, purify and ultimately test the tenants of his vineyard. Jesus described the kingdom to come as being for those who had been faithful with the little that has presently been put in their care.²¹² Our faithful care of what God has given us here is somehow connected to our eternal future.

Yet at the same time we need to remember that the ultimate restoration of God's creation is the restoring of the relationship between a person and God, between a fallen creature and his or her Creator. They are the things that are eternal. Jesus warned that the works of all men will be tested by fire and only that of eternal value will survive.²¹³ What will be left of the work of your hands after God's consuming fire has judged the world? Is what you have accomplished described by the Bible as articles of "gold and silver" or as "wood, hay and straw"?²¹⁴ If you have been expecting the good that you have done in your life will outweigh the wrong that you have done, then you are hoping that God did not mean it when he compared our own attempts to be righteous with filthy rags.²¹⁵ The Bible reveals these things to remind us to keep the right priorities – seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then all these other things will be give to you.²¹⁶

Today, popular culture looks forward to a time when men can live in peace with one another and the polluted environment is restored to wholeness. People are saying that the earth is God's creation and we should not abuse it. This is true, but our desire to protect our earthly home and the creatures who reside here should not distract us from greater priorities. God has given us the desire to be proper stewards of the earth, but we are also instructed to store our "treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal."²¹⁷

We must learn the balance between being responsible with the temporary material world that has been entrusted to us here on earth and making God's kingdom and his righteousness our first priority. God feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies. He has promised to give us these things as well, if we will value him more than we love these other things.

EPILOGUE: REASSESSMENT

"Then Job replied to the Lord: ... 'Surely, I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.'" - Job 42:1 & 3

STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND?

Now that you have read about how the curse and our behavior have impacted the good creation, do you understand why God has allowed this to occur? Of course you don't! Neither should you feel that you have to understand what God is doing. With our short-term view of the world, we misunderstand whether something is truly doing us good or doing us harm. What happens in the world, occurs because God allows it from his eternal perspective. All the while he is compelling us to draw near to him as we face the consequences of our rebellion. We live in sinful world where sickness and death are the curse man has brought upon himself. The time, space and matter that make-up the creation became perishable, not that it was necessarily originally designed to last for eternity. Through the curse, the creation was allowed to suffer decay.

So then, what does our suffering in this decaying world have to do with eternal mansions and transformed bodies? Let us look again at the man whose name is synonymous with suffering. As God put it, "Have you considered my servant Job?"²¹⁸ Like us, Job's world had deteriorated around him. His crisis was a little more personal and less world-wide than the environmental threats that we face today, but still he wondered about the same things that we do. Why does God cause or allow tragedy to come upon the innocent?

God has not seen fit to explain these things to us. In response to a similar question, God said to Job:

"who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? ... Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. ... Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? ... Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's?"²¹⁹

In his book *"When God Doesn't Make Sense"*, Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family writes:

"Jehovah never did answer Job's intelligent inquiries, and He will not respond to all of yours. Every person who ever lived ... has had to deal with seeming contradictions and enigmas. You will not be the exception. ... He will not parade his plans and purposes for our approval."²²⁰

But the reply that Job did receive from God was enough to cause him to know all he really needed to understand.

"Then Job replied to the Lord: 'I know that you can do all things; No plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely, I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. ... My ear had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent'."²²¹

CARING FOR THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

Why is any of this relevant? What difference does it make to us today if the things that are happening to the world come as a result of natural events or from God's intervention? We need to remember that to correctly understand our stewardship responsibilities toward future generations and our Creator, we must have an accurate world view. If this world is the seed of something greater and a tool being used in God's hand, then we need not fear that we are in a rudderless ship being tossed by a stormy sea. If we know that God has already told us that the world will one day perish, then our priorities and concerns will be different than if we feel this has to last for eternity. This outlook is what got former Secretary of the Interior James Watt such a negative response from the media.

Still the fear and urgency we see in the more vocal or radical branches of the environmental movement in some cases may be valid. We are making a mess of this place and poisoning ourselves in the process. But without an accurate world view how can we judge which fears to respond to and which fears to just calm with a proper interpretation of the facts. The environmental conditions that we are facing did not come as a surprise to God. The deterioration of our ecology was part of the way that the curse was designed. (Yes, even the curse was designed.)

As an illustration of how God is dealing with of mankind, note how God instructed Israel when placing them in the Promised Land:

"you are about to cross over and take possession of that good land. Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the Lord your God has forbidden. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

"...If you ... become corrupt ... doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God and provoke him to anger ... you will quickly perish from the land ... But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul. ... For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers".²²²

Those were the instructions that Israel was given before being allowed into the land of milk and honey. There is nothing in these instructions that is not also applicable to our situation in this bountiful land that God has provided us to live in. Since many of us have the God-given desire to do something to help prevent the further deterioration of nature, how should we respond? We can slow our personal impact on the creation, but we cannot restore the effects of curse on the creation ourselves. Instead, our responsibility is to base all our decisions on the standards in unchanging Word of God. We must look at our actions to see whether the Father will be glorified through what we are doing and that our work is not contrary to his purposes. To encourage us to have an eternal, rather than a temporal perspective, we have been told to store our treasures in heaven. We are told to be in the world but not of it.²²³ But realistically what does that mean?

BE CONFIDENT IN THIS VERY THING

Compare your own outlook concerning the world, with the idea of all this passing away. Paul reassured us that the present suffering that we are undergoing is insignificant when compared to the reward that we will receive. He said this because he knew that we are often fearful about the future. Our fearfulness is caused by our lack of faith that God will be able to accomplish what he has set out to do. The anxiety brought on by this fearfulness is compounded by our lack of knowledge about what God has already told us. Just as the Serpent tempted Eve in Eden, today we are still being tempted by the same words, "Did God really say ... ?"²²⁴ We forget his promises or we do not even know his promises, and so we fall into the same fears that the world around us fears. God has promised to return, take his people out from the depravity that they face in this world and bring them to the place that he has prepared for them. In that place there will be no more suffering, death or darkness. But as we wait, we are living under the same physical conditions which the fallen world suffers under. Though the Church and the creation have the "promise" of redemption, it is something hoped for, but not yet seen. It is by "faith."

Jesus asks his people to be patient.²²⁵ The weeds have not been uprooted to avoid damaging the wheat that is not yet ready for harvest.²²⁶ We forget that Jesus said that he will be with us until the end of the age.²²⁷ There is an end that is coming. We have already been told that. We all will face suffering in this world, but not all people have begun to grasp what the Bible means when it says this world is passing away. There is a difference between those who are depending on Jesus for their present safety and future hope, and those who trust in themselves, science and nature. One has a hope beyond what they see. Those who have no such hope can see the same things, but they react by being fearful. More than that, in their hearts they reject the Church because those in it are not scared too. It is as though because the Church is not worried, it must be the cause of the problem. Those with nothing to put their hope in, other than their own efforts, are acting out of a sense of urgency as though it is within their power to control whether the creation is to survive.

The work of the Church in this world is to communicate the patience that God is showing us, for a time, during our rebellion against him. At the same time, those who still refuse to admit their need for God's forgiveness, are accusing the followers of Christ of neglecting the creation because we feel that it is disposable. Even if it is not eternal, the earth is still not ours to dispose of. We are its stewards, not its consumers. The fact that we consider this temporal world to be disposable is a sign that we do not understand or believe the Scriptures.



SUMMARY

Let's take a moment to review the scriptural concepts that are the central findings of this book:

1. There are many things about this created world that we lack the ability to understand on our own through simple observations. (See Chapters 2, 3 and 7.)
2. The Bible teaches that the "survival of the fittest" struggle which we see in nature is not part of the original "good" creation that was placed under our care. (See Chapters 8, 9, 12 and 13.)
3. Our wasteful habits and poor understanding of nature have caused only a small part of the degradation that we are experiencing. (See Chapters 12, 14 and 15.)
4. The corruption in our own hearts is the primary source of environmental degradation in this world. The result has been that nature's ability to give praise to God has been diminished. (See Chapters 14 and 15.)
5. Though we react out of fearfulness when things happen that are out of our control, we still remain too proud to admit our dependence on God. (See Chapters 1, 3 and 6.)
6. God has been progressively withdrawing his extravagant provisions over the course of history in order to discipline us for our rebellion against him as our heart and actions stray farther and farther from his instructions. (See Chapters 10 and 15.)
7. Despite the present state of the world our situation is one of hope rather than fear. Everything that we see around us is part of God's plan. The degradation that has impacted the world has not caught God unprepared. (See Chapters 11 and 12.)
8. Those who sincerely seek to protect the environment while they are still separated from God by their rebellion can only really pursue that goal after expressing their own personal repentance to him. (See Chapters 17 and 19.)
9. Our own efforts to undo the damage that we have caused are futile, but God has provided the means for our restoration to himself and the restoration of the creation. (See Chapters 16, 18 and 19.)
10. In spite of the fact that the creation will be restored, it will ultimately pass away once its purpose has been fulfilled and it be replaced by a new creation which we cannot begin to conceive of from our mortal perspective. (See Chapters 20 and 21.)

PART III - NOTES

1. Psalm 24:1
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3. Genesis 9:3
4. Nahum 3:16
5. John 6:12
6. RC Sproul, "*The Holiness of God*", Tyndale Press, Wheaton IL, 1985, page 117-8.
7. Acts 16:30
8. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-11
9. 1 Thessalonians 4:7, 4 & 5
10. Matthew 15:18-20
11. Isaiah 3:9
12. Ezekiel 16:49
13. Genesis 13:10-13
14. Genesis 14:4
15. Genesis 14:4
16. Luke 13:6-9
17. Hebrews 6:7-8
18. Nahum 1:3-4
19. Ephesians 4:19
20. Leviticus 26:3, 6, 9, 14-22
21. Deuteronomy 28:15-66

The Desired Response

22. Deuteronomy 28:47
23. Leviticus 26:27-8, 31-2 & 34
24. Daniel 9:11-13
25. Romans 9:21
26. Deuteronomy 30:2-10
27. Billy Graham , “*Peace With God*”, World Wide Publications, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1984 page 49.
28. Genesis 1:1
29. 2 Peter 1:12-15
30. 2 Peter 1:16
31. 2 Peter 2:1-3
32. 2 Peter 3:3-5
33. 2 Peter 3:3
34. 1 Corinthians 1:2
35. Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17
36. John 20:29
37. 1 Corinthians 1:22
38. Psalm 106:13-14
39. Romans 1:22-23
40. Acts 17:11
41. Proverbs 8:23, 30, 31, 35, 36, 9:10
42. Proverbs 9:11
43. Jeremiah 35:16-17
44. Romans 8:19
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93. 2 Timothy 4:10
94. John 6:12
95. 2 Peter 3:10

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97. Matthew 6:20
- 98.. Matthew 5:13-14
99. Genesis 18:20-23
100. Genesis 18:20 & 19:13
101. Matthew 5:5
102. Genesis 18:21 & 26
103. Jonah 1:2 & 3:2-10
104. 2 Peter 3:9
105. Genesis 19:14
106. Jonah 4:11
107. Jonah 4:2
108. Psalm 136:23-26
109. Romans 7:13
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