

The Environment



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Genesis 1–2:7, 18–24; 3:7, 17–19; Ps. 24:1; Matt. 25:34–46; Mark 2:27, 28; 3:4.*

Memory Text: “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (*Psalm 24:1, NIV*).

The Creator spent the first five days of Creation week preparing the environment for the human beings who were to follow. He placed Adam and Eve in a garden (*Gen. 2:8, 15*) and gave them the oversight of all earthly creatures. This offered them the opportunity for study and enjoyment and the chance to develop as God’s representatives on earth. The Sabbath would seal their relationship with Him.

Sin changed God’s preferred plan. The environment became hostile. Hard toil replaced pleasurable work. Selfishness ruled. Exploitation of the earth’s resources began and continues to this day. Forests have been cut down. Water courses have been changed, and pollution is rampant. The richness of the soil has been squandered thoughtlessly. Sunlight, though crucial for health, can become a foe of health if we are exposed to it in excess. Through all this, the world still supports our existence here, despite our endless abuse of the planet.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 1.*

To view and/or download a Hope Channel program on this week’s lesson, visit www.lifesbeat.org.

Creating the Environment

Some theories today depict the creation of the earth, and life on it, as nothing more than an accident, nothing but the chance creation of amoral forces that over time and without thought brought the earth and all life on it into existence. In contrast, the Bible presents a radically different picture of our origin. The contrast between the godless and purposeless model of our origin, as expressed by the theory of evolution, and the Genesis Creation account could not be more distinct. These two views are, at their core, incompatible.

Read Genesis 1 and Genesis 2:1–7. How did God’s acts of Creation week prepare the way for the crowning act of Creation—man and woman? How did creation of humans differ from the rest of creation?

Let us pause for a moment at the scene of the Creator God working on the creation of man and woman. First, He forms Adam from the ground; here is God, the Sculptor. Then, when all else is ready, He bends down and breathes His own breath into Adam’s waiting form. God the Giver of life brings Adam to life. What a marvelous picture of our God at work!

But that is not all. He becomes God the Surgeon as He takes a rib from Adam and forms Eve to be the partner of Adam and the mother of the race. She is also to stand by his side in this perfect setting (*see Gen. 2:18–24*). He then puts these brand-new beings into the place of beauty and wonder He had spent previous time preparing.

God provided the most healthful surroundings for Adam and Eve. The restful green of foliage, the color of flowers and fruit—all combined to make the ideal home for them. The Lord did not plan a life of idleness for our first parents. They were to work in the Garden and care for it. In this way they would find satisfaction and enjoyment. They would learn more of God in what we have come to call God’s second book—*nature*.

Read through the Genesis Creation account again in Genesis 1 and 2. What do we find there that points us toward the idea that, as humans beings, we should be good stewards of the earth?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Psalm 24:1*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize how all aspects of the environment, as they came from the hand of God, are designed to impact our health positively.

Feel: Appreciate God's wisdom and love in providing for our needs in His creation of the environment and of holy time, the Sabbath.

Do: Take responsibility for using and caring for the environment's resources in such a manner as our Creator would approve.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: All Things Were Created Good

A How do light, air, water, plants, and animal life all play important roles in supporting our health and happiness?

B How can you and your family become more knowledgeable about the state of your local environment and how it affects your health and that of your community?

II. Feel: Enjoying His Gifts

A What do you most appreciate about God's gifts in the environment? How does your lifestyle include these promoters of health?

B Which elements of the natural environment do you need to have more of in your life?

III. Do: Using and Caring for His Gifts

A Clearly we need to wisely appropriate natural promoters of health in our environment, but why do we also need to be stewards of the natural world?

B How are you being a responsible steward of God's world and of His natural promoters of health?

C What steps can you take to be more responsible?

▶ **Summary:** The environment, as God made it, has natural promoters of health and happiness that we need to use, promote, and protect.

The Sabbath Environment

How interesting that amid all the work of creation, God was not quite done until He created the Sabbath day. What a contrast: all the work of creating the world, the animals, the seas, the grass, and finally humankind—and then, one final act, the act of resting.

Read Genesis 2:2, 3. What can we read into the fact that God Himself rested on the Sabbath day?

God Himself, in the role of Creator, keeping the seventh-day Sabbath? Talk about showing us the deep roots of the Sabbath! Whatever the implications of that idea, one thing is sure: the seventh-day Sabbath came from God long before there ever was a Jewish nation and people.

The Sabbath, meanwhile, has provided us an opportunity to focus attention on the Creator, His love, and His care for His creatures in a way that would otherwise not easily be available to us. It helped set a limit to labor, even in a time when labor was relatively easy and productive. After sin entered and work became much harder and tiring (*Gen. 3:17–19*), this limit on work and the call to remember the Creator became even more important. As a reminder of the Creation itself, it should help us focus on our responsibility to our created world, as well.

As the centuries passed, the true meaning of the Sabbath rest became lost in numerous rules and regulations that turned the thoughts of the people away from the true meaning and value of the Sabbath.

Read Mark 2:27, 28 and Mark 3:4. What was Jesus' understanding of the Sabbath?

Christ restored the meaning of the Sabbath to what God originally intended it to mean. He showed how God viewed the day as a time for doing good, for seeking the advancement of His kingdom, and for being of service to all in need.

How could and should Sabbath keeping help us better understand the wonderful gift we've been given of this created world and, more so, how could and should it help us understand better our obligation to take care of it?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: In this lesson, class members should learn that caring for the earth is not just a political or social obligation but part of the Christian’s responsibility to use judiciously the resources with which God entrusted human beings at Creation.

Don’t be “so heavenly minded you’re no earthly good,” American singer/songwriter Johnny Cash sang in “No Earthly Good.” While the song focuses on spreading the gospel through actions, the line above also could apply to Christians and the environment.

This week we discover the biblical basis for protecting earth’s resources. In some circles, caring for the environment seems largely driven by a bandwagon mentality, with people scrambling to drive the newest Prius or recycle the most newspapers. In other circles, “the environment” sadly seems little more than a buzzword, with politicians rooting their stump speeches in promises of cutting carbon emissions, protecting polar bears, and tripling fuel efficiency. But the Bible seems to suggest that our conservation of earth’s resources should hinge on something beyond popularity or political convenience.

Consider This: Throughout the Creation story in Genesis 1, the phrase “God saw that it was good” is used repeatedly. Discuss with the class the purpose of this repetition. Generally, we repeat things that we want others to realize are important or that we worry they might forget. Could God be using repetition to convey to us the intrinsic value He places on His creation? Is that a prompting we need, particularly given our throwaway culture, in which it’s easy to treat earth’s resources as disposable paper and plastic or to protect them only when it’s socially or politically advantageous?

Where should Christians find their motivation to protect God’s creation?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: The theme of God’s ownership of Creation, established in this week’s memory text, may seem broad and basic. It states a fundamental truth upon which we may build and expand the principles that guide our actions. In this section we study other parts of Scripture

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Changes in the Environment After Sin

Read Genesis 3:7, 17–19. What was the first indication to Adam and Eve that their action in eating the forbidden fruit had consequences?

With the entry of sin into their lives, Adam and Eve faced some hard consequences. First, as Ellen White wrote, the clothing of light that had covered them disappeared. The environment that had clothed them changed. The environment of the plant world changed, as well. Thorns and thistles grew. The soil became hard and unyielding. And, worst of all, there was now the entrance of death, something that they never were to have known.

Suddenly, the wonderful environment that had been theirs to enjoy now had a new face, and it presented to them new challenges, challenges that over time and in subsequent generations only became worse. Humans, meanwhile, began to exploit the earth, often for their own gain and glory.

See 1 Kings 10:14–22. What does this tell us about how humans had come to view the Creation?

Exploitation, decay, loss of substance, and death have been present with all peoples—so much so that we may take them for granted as part of the cycle of life. But it was not so in the beginning and is not in God’s final plan. Humankind’s stewardship of the earth has turned into an exploitation of it, as greedy people seek to take all from the earth that they can, regardless of the consequences.

The pollution of air and water, the contamination of soil, and the presence of new and fearful disease agents all point to the aging of the earth and the escalating need for renewal. As more and more countries seek to develop, and as developed countries seek to continue to maintain their standard of living, the health challenges humanity faces are becoming enormous because of damage to the environment.

Years ago, a political leader made a statement to this effect: “We don’t have to worry about the environment because Jesus is coming back soon.” What is the logic of that argument? How would you respond to it?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

that illuminate our roles as caretakers of God's Creation.

Bible Commentary

I. God's Signature (Review Psalm 19:1–4 and Romans 1:20–23.)

Not only does the earth belong to God, but it serves as His signature across the galaxies. The psalmist writes, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (*Ps. 19:1, NIV*). He continues, writing that God’s creation “pour[s] forth speech” and “display[s] knowledge” (*see vs. 2, NIV*). The psalmist makes it clear that the creation exists fundamentally to reflect the Creator. In the New Testament, Paul continues the theme: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (*Rom. 1:20, NIV*). We are told that after Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, God “cursed . . . the ground because of [them]” (*Gen. 3:17, NIV*). In the same way that sin marred the image of God in humanity, it also marred His reflection in the creation. Yet, just as the characteristics of God—love, compassion, and forgiveness—still are evident in the lives of His people, our earth still remains a strong and visible reminder of God’s power and glory. What a responsibility we have to maintain God’s “signature” on planet Earth.

Discuss: Why is it fair to say that our efforts to protect our environment serve ultimately to preserve opportunities for our fellow human beings to see evidence of God’s existence and His creative power? Why should ensuring that our earth reflects its divine origins as closely as possible in a sinful environment be a bigger component of our Christian witness?

► STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

① The Bible makes it clear that our feeble efforts can never save us; it is only our faith in Christ’s righteousness that redeems us (*Eph. 2:8, 9*).

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Our Responsibility for the Environment

Read Psalm 24:1. What implications do these words have for us and how we relate to the world? As we look around at the conditions in our world, we need to ask the question, “What, if anything, can we do to improve the environment?”

We need to begin by reminding ourselves of the Lordship of God over the earth. We are not free of responsibility to Him and His created works. Not only the earth is His but the people also—we and everyone else. We are responsible to Him for other people, as well as the rest of the earthly creation. We can conserve resources.

One example is water. We can be thoughtful in using water. We can support efforts to provide clean water to those who do not have it. In certain parts of the world, lack of clean water is a very serious problem, leading to a tremendous loss of life.

We can follow the diet that the Lord has outlined for us. If more people were on a vegetarian diet, there would be more food to go around because it takes a lot more natural resources to sustain a meat-eating diet than to sustain a vegetarian one.

We can care for the plants and trees that we have responsibility for. This will assist in maintaining clean air.

To whatever degree we can, we should seek to reduce the level of carbon emissions, which is increasingly becoming a worldwide concern due to the potentially dangerous impact to the environment caused by carbon emissions.

By being good stewards of the earth, by seeking to take care of the environment, by not hoarding natural resources for ourselves, by being willing to share with others out of our own abundance (if we have it), we can improve the daily lives of those who need our help. As Christians, as those who profess to follow the Lord Jesus, we are obligated to help those in need.

Read Matthew 25:34–46. How might our stewardship of the earth in some way play a role here in doing what Jesus asks us to do? What other verses could you think of that also could apply to this issue?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED


Just as our own efforts to improve our characters are futile without Christ, our efforts to protect the earth that God has given us are of little ultimate value unless they flow from our acknowledgment and worship of the Creator-God. Discuss with the class the influence of New Age beliefs on environmentalism. How can we ensure that our care for the creation does not replace our worship of the Creator?

2 There's much debate among psychologists over whether "nature" or "nurture" is more instrumental in shaping a person's growth and development. Discuss with the class how a harmful environment might impact negatively more than just our physical health. How could a smog-filled sky cloud more than just our view of the stars? In what ways could it also cloud our recognition of God's creative power?

Application Questions:

1 How do you treat borrowed property? When a friend lends you a book or article of clothing, you likely care for it as well as or better than you would your own possessions. You know that if you misuse what your friend has lent you, he or she likely will not let you borrow again. If we consider the earth "borrowed" property, how does that influence how we treat it? In what shape do you think God would have us "return" that property?

2 A friend used to drive an old yet spotless car. He vacuumed, washed, and waxed it habitually. He sanded down rust spots and carefully applied paint to keep them from spreading. Whenever anyone asked why he cared so much about his "old beater," he would say, "Someday I'm going to drive a brand-new BMW." His point was clear: he took care of the old car the same way he planned to take care of a new and expensive car in the

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Sun Worshipers

Only in the light of eternity will we be able to grasp fully the negative impact of sin on the environment. It's hard for us to imagine what this world must have looked like and how perfectly suited for life the environment must have been for our first parents.

Of course, sin didn't just impact the earth. It impacted humans, as well. Among the negative impacts of sin on humans was their degeneration into idolatry, which was manifested in (among other ways) their worshiping and serving "created things" (*Rom. 1:25, NIV*) as opposed to the Creator.

Read 2 Kings 23:1–5; Jeremiah 8:1, 2; and Ezekiel 8:16. What was going on here? Why, in one sense, would it make sense to worship the sun?

One thing we can know for sure about the environment of the earth today is that sunlight, though very important for our health, can have exceedingly deleterious effects if we're exposed to too much. Thus, in a sense, modern sun worshipers are living in almost as much ignorance as their ancient predecessors.

We now know that too much exposure to sunlight increases the risk of various skin cancers.

On the other hand, sunlight exposure helps to produce vitamin D, which is essential for body metabolism and the building of strong and healthy bones. Adequate exposure to sunlight also helps to prevent certain types of cancer.

What, then, is the optimal exposure to sunlight? Light-skinned people in equatorial environments who rely on sunlight for their vitamin D require at least five minutes per day of direct exposure. Dark-skinned people in the same environment require about thirty minutes to make the same amount of vitamin D. In areas where the hours of sunlight are more limited, vitamin D should be supplemented under medical supervision.

It also is healthful to open curtains and windows to allow sunlight to enter our rooms, which helps destroy certain bacteria.

Studies show that folk without adequate sunlight exposure can be more prone to suffer from seasonal depression (known as seasonal affective disorder); this problem occurs especially in areas where the days are short in winter. The cure is very straightforward: more exposure to light, even if artificial, in the winter months.

The bottom line? As with so much else regarding healthful living, temperance and balance in regard to sunlight exposure are crucial.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

future. He didn't want to get into a habit of disrespect and carelessness. Even though God has promised that one day we'll get a "newer model" of our planet—the new earth—we ought to be practicing now how we'll treat it. In what specific ways can we treat our planet as we will one day treat our heavenly home?

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: This week we learned that the Christian's concern for the environment is rooted in God's ownership of His creation and the value He places on His handiwork. Encourage your class members to apply that fundamental principle practically. How can the suggestions below make us better caretakers of God's possessions? Ask your class to add their own ideas to the list.

1 God spent the very first Sabbath in Eden reflecting on the beauty, perfection, and order of His creation. Make a list of ways you can spend an upcoming Sabbath afternoon reflecting on His handiwork.

2 Ask your pastor or a church leader about making your church "green." Volunteer your time to clean up church grounds and the surrounding community or install hand driers to replace paper towels in the bathrooms. Brainstorm with fellow church members for more ideas.

3 When we appreciate someone or something, we usually are eager to show our gratitude. If we consider the creation one of God's gifts to us, how can we show our thanks? Write a "thank You" note to God with members of the class. Encourage each member to contribute at least one action that illustrates gratitude in a practical way. God appreciates our words, but He wants to see deeds, as well.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Creation,” pp. 44–51, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Controversy Ended,” pp. 675–678, in *The Great Controversy*.

“ ‘Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead.’ Romans 1:20 [NKJV]. The things of nature that we now see give us but a faint conception of Eden’s glory. Sin has marred earth’s beauty. On all things may be seen traces of the work of evil. Yet much that is beautiful remains. Nature testifies that One infinite in power, great in goodness, mercy, and love, created the earth and filled it with life and gladness. Even in their blighted state, all things reveal the handiwork of the great Master Artist. Wherever we turn, we may hear the voice of God and see evidences of His goodness.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Health and Healing*, p. 234.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ The issue of the environment, especially the question of global warming, has in recent years come to the forefront of the news. What is the response of your nation, community, and church to these issues?
- ❷ How should a Christian, someone who believes that God did create the world, relate to questions of the environment differently than someone who believes we are here as products of pure chance alone?
- ❸ How can and should the Sabbath play a role in our concern for the environment? How does Sabbath keeping help us be better environmentalists?
- ❹ If Jesus is coming back soon, as we believe, should we really be all that concerned with the environment? Justify your answer.
- ❺ Do some research, if possible, on the negative health effects that damage to the environment is causing in various parts of the world. What about in your own community? What role could and should your church take in this area? How might you be able to use any activism here in outreach?
- ❻ What are ways, even small ways, you could make some lifestyle changes that could impact the environment for good? How much self-sacrifice would it take on your part?