

Creation Care



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Pet. 3:10–14, Rom. 1:25, Psalm 100, Heb. 1:3, Gen. 2:15, Neh. 13:16–19, Gen. 1:26–28.*

Memory Text: “And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (*Genesis 2:15*).

Key Thought: How should Christians relate to the environment?

What should we, as Seventh-day Adventists, think about the environment, especially because we know that this earth is corrupted, will continue to be corrupted, and will one day be destroyed, burned up in a great lake of fire: “and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (*2 Pet. 3:10*)? Add to this the biblical injunction about humans having “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (*Gen. 1:26*), and it’s no wonder that, at times, we struggle with how to relate to environmental concerns.

At the same time, as stewards of all God’s gifts, don’t we have an obligation to take care of the earth? After all, didn’t God create it and pronounce it “very good”? As a people with a distinct message about God as Creator (*Rev. 14:6, 7*), shouldn’t we have something to say about the question of how we treat God’s creation?

This week we’ll explore what the Bible says about some of these concerns.

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 25.

The Lobster Liberation Movement!

Years ago an environmentalist entered a seafood restaurant. There before him, sitting in a large tank, were half a dozen Maine lobsters that probably wouldn't last the night. A customer would pick out the one that he or she wanted to eat, and before long the lobster would be sitting on someone's plate next to, perhaps, a potato smothered in cheese.

Moving stealthily, the environmentalist reached into the tank, grabbed the first lobster he could get his hands on, threw it into a bag, and ran. He then put the lobster in a tank in his car and drove to the shore. There, a helicopter took him over the ocean, and he then returned the lobster to the water. A lobster liberator strikes again!

The man was not alone in his concern. You can visit a Web site titled "Lobster Liberation" that talks about saving lobsters from getting eaten by humans. It even has a section called "Tips for Releasing Lobsters," telling you what to do once you rescue lobsters from a restaurant.

Another time, an American actress dedicated an entire episode of her sitcom to smuggling lobsters out of restaurants and releasing them in the ocean.

Caring about the environment is one thing, but stealing a lobster out of a restaurant and taking it, by helicopter, back to the ocean does seem a bit extreme, does it not?

All of which leads to the question, what about Christians—indeed, Seventh-day Adventist Christians—and the environment? Putting aside the strangeness of the lobster liberators, how should we relate to environmental concerns? After all, isn't Jesus coming soon? Isn't our whole message predicated on the notion that this world is coming to an end, that this earth is corrupted and not going to last? Given our understanding of the Second Coming, how concerned need we really be about the earth itself?

Read 2 Peter 3:10–14, Isaiah 51:6, 65:17, and Revelation 21:1. What does the Bible clearly teach about the ultimate fate of the earth? How should this teaching impact the way we look at the environment? Or should it at all?

The Bible is more than unequivocal: this world, this earth, will not last. It is destined to be destroyed by God, who promises to make it over, to re-create it, to make a "new heaven and a new earth." Although that's hardly an excuse (as we'll see this week) to abuse or exploit the environment, it should at the same time help to protect us from making a god, as many have done, out of the earth and of the environment. While we can laugh at the extremists, we need to be careful not to get caught up in those extremes ourselves.

Read Romans 1:25. What important message should we take in regard to how we show our concern and care for the creation?

A Statement on Creation Care

How, then, do Seventh-day Adventists view the question of the environment? How do we get involved and yet seek to keep a right balance? Below is an official statement, voted by the church leadership back in 1995.

“Seventh-day Adventists believe that humankind was created in the image of God, thus representing God as His stewards, to rule the natural environment in a faithful and fruitful way.

“Unfortunately, corruption and exploitation have been brought into the management of the human domain of responsibility. Increasingly men and women have been involved in a megalomaniacal destruction of the earth’s resources, resulting in widespread suffering, environmental disarray, and the threat of climate change. While scientific research needs to continue, it is clear from the accumulated evidence that the increasing emission of destructive gasses, the depletion of the protective mantle of ozone, the massive destruction of the American forests, and the so-called greenhouse effect, are all threatening the earth’s ecosystem.

“These problems are largely due to human selfishness and the egocentric pursuit of getting more and more through ever-increasing production, unlimited consumption and depletion of nonrenewable resources. The ecological crisis is rooted in humankind’s greed and refusal to practice good and faithful stewardship within the divine boundaries of creation.

“Seventh-day Adventists advocate a simple, wholesome lifestyle, where people do not step on the treadmill of unbridled consumerism, goods-getting, and production of waste. We call for respect of creation, restraint in the use of the world’s resources, reevaluation of one’s needs, and reaffirmation of the dignity of created life.”—Adventist Administrative Committee (ADCOM), released at General Conference Session in Utrecht, the Netherlands, June 29–July 8, 1995.

Look up the following texts. How do they help us to understand the reasoning behind this church statement? *Gen. 1:1, 26; 9:7; Pss. 24:1; 100; James 5:1, 2, 4, 5; Heb. 1:3.*

If anything, as Christians who believe that this world and the life and resources on it are gifts from God, we should be at the forefront of seeking to take care of it. If we believed that the earth is just a chance creation, the product of cold, uncaring forces, we could almost be excused in seeking to exploit it to our own ends. When, though, we understand this world as something that God created and sustains, it’s hard to see how we could do anything other than be responsible stewards of it.

How might your own selfishness impact how you treat the environment? And what’s wrong with the attitude that says, “Well, I’m only one person, so what does it matter?”

Creation Care

The issue of the environment, and caring for the environment, isn't specifically and openly addressed in the Bible. Of course, there are a lot of specific issues that the Bible doesn't address. What the Bible does do again and again, is give us principles that should be applied to all areas of life, which include the question of the environment.

Think about Matthew 22:37–40. In what ways could the principles taught here impact our attitude toward environmental concerns, especially when misuse of the environment can have some very detrimental effects on others?

Early on in the Bible, we are given some indication of humanity's call to be a steward of what God had given Adam on the earth. Although the context is very specific, it's hard to see why the principle shouldn't continue.

Genesis 2:15 reads, "And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it." How does this reveal the way in which humankind was originally intended to relate to the earth?

Notice the reciprocal relationship here. God created this beautiful environment for man; it was given to him as a gift. And yet, see how Adam was supposed to relate to it. He was to work it and to keep it. The word translated as "keep" comes from the Hebrew root *smr*, which means "to watch" or "to preserve" or "to protect." Thus, right from the start, even in the pre-Fall world, Adam was called to be a steward of the environment in which he was placed. God didn't tell him to exploit it, to use it for his own selfish means, and to get out of it all that he could. Instead, he is told to work it and protect it.

What reason could we have for believing that this principle has changed? In fact, if this is what Adam was called to do in a world before sin entered, how much more important would good stewardship of the world be after it has been damaged by sin?

How conscious are you of environmental concerns? How much do you really even care about them? How important or unimportant are they to you? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Sabbath and the Environment

“Hell and Destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied” (Prov. 27:20, NKJV). How does the truth of this text directly impact the whole question of creation care and the danger our exploits pose to the environment?

As the creation statement said, part of the reason for the issue with our environment today has to do with “human selfishness and the egocentric pursuit of getting more and more through ever-increasing production, unlimited consumption and depletion of nonrenewable resources.” In other words, people just want more and more, and the only place they can get it is, ultimately, from the earth. Using natural resources, though, isn’t the problem; instead, the problem is that no matter how much a person gets, it’s never enough. When was the last time you heard someone, no matter how wealthy, say that they had enough money?

In the midst of all this, God has given humanity the gift of the Sabbath.

Look up these Sabbath texts. Although we tend to think about them in other contexts, try thinking about them in the context of how Sabbath keeping, by commanding us to rest from our work, to rest from seeking to make money and do business, could in a very real way impact the environment for good.

Exod. 20:8–11 _____

Neh. 13:16–19 _____

Sure, the Sabbath is about remembering that God created the world (which itself should make us conscious about how we treat it), but it is also about resting from the pursuit of making money. By keeping the Sabbath, by purposely taking one seventh of our lives every week and, without exception, not pursuing wealth and money and goods, we not only have a powerful weekly reminder that life isn’t all about making money, but we also often refrain from the kind of pursuits that, when overdone, do damage to the earth.

How has Sabbath keeping been a means of helping to restrain your own greed and desire for more? How often has the lure of money tempted you to violate the Sabbath?

Humankind's Dominion

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. . . . And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (*Gen. 1:26–28*).

In the above verses we have some of the Bible’s earliest references to the way in which humanity is to relate to the created world. Read them over prayerfully and carefully, thinking about them in the context of creation care and environmental concerns, and then answer the following questions:

- How complete was humanity’s control over the earth to be?

- What does it mean to subdue, and to have dominion over, the earth and all that was in it? What, if anything in the texts, gives humanity the license to abuse and defile that creation?

- Genesis 1:28 says that they are to “replenish the earth.” The literal Hebrew means to “fill the earth.” How might that be understood in regard to the question of how the earth should be treated?

No question, humanity was to rule over the earth, at least under the power and direction of the Lord. The fact that these verses were given in the pre-Fall world, a world without sin and death and suffering, should teach us that whatever dominion over the world means, it doesn’t mean a violent exploitation and plundering of the world, for those things certainly would not have happened in a world before sin. Whatever subduing and dominion entailed, it didn’t entail destroying that world.

Of course, a lot has changed since then: the Fall, the Flood, the curse (*Gen. 3:17–19*), and the general degeneration caused by sin as a whole. Yet, one would be hard pressed to see in these texts anything that justifies the plunder and ruin of the planet itself. If anything, we can see in these texts humankind’s responsibility, as ruler of the world, to take care of it, because God created it, and it was “very good.”

Further Study: “In the beginning, God was revealed in all the works of creation. It was Christ that spread the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth. It was His hand that hung the worlds in space, and fashioned the flowers of the field. ‘His strength setteth fast the mountains.’ ‘The sea is His, and He made it.’ Ps. 65:6; 95:5. It was He that filled the earth with beauty, and the air with song. And upon all things in earth, and air, and sky, He wrote the message of the Father’s love.

“Now sin has marred God’s perfect work, yet that handwriting remains. Even now all created things declare the glory of His excellence. There is nothing, save the selfish heart of man, that lives unto itself. No bird that cleaves the air, no animal that moves upon the ground, but ministers to some other life. There is no leaf of the forest, or lowly blade of grass, but has its ministry. Every tree and shrub and leaf pours forth that element of life without which neither man nor animal could live; and man and animal, in turn, minister to the life of tree and shrub and leaf. The flowers breathe fragrance and unfold their beauty in blessing to the world. The sun sheds its light to gladden a thousand worlds. The ocean, itself the source of all our springs and fountains, receives the streams from every land, but takes to give. The mists ascending from its bosom fall in showers to water the earth, that it may bring forth and bud.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 20, 21.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, go over your answers to Tuesday’s final questions.
- ❷ How would you respond to the person who says, “Jesus is coming soon, so why should I care about the environment”?
- ❸ How can we as Christians strike the right balance in our understanding of the need to be concerned about the environment while at the same time not getting caught up in some of the extremist movements involved in environmental issues? Why is it so important that we don’t get caught up in them, especially those that are very political?
- ❹ If you have the resources, do some research on just how beneficial a vegetarian diet is to the environment in contrast to a meat-eating one. Discuss your findings with the rest of the class.

Summary: There is no question that this world is coming to an end; it will not last forever. And yes, Jesus is coming soon. All that’s true, but nothing in these truths gives us the right, or the mandate, to defile the earth. If anything, as Christians, we should seek to take care of the world that our God has created for us.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** Genesis 2:15

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe the biblical foundation for the importance of caring for the environment.

Feel: Sense the value of the environment and the need to care for it as a steward of God's property.

Do: Live a simple life, respecting our natural resources as a gift from God and minimizing our negative impact on the environment in needless consumerism and waste.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Caring for Our Home

- Ⓐ What did God ask our first parents to do for their garden home? How does this work help us to understand our own obligation to care for the environment?
- Ⓑ How does the Sabbath teach us restraint in our pursuit of business and worldly goods?

II. Feel: The Beauty of the Earth

- Ⓐ Of what value is the natural world? How has the entrance of sin affected the ways in which we are to care for this world?
- Ⓑ Why would our understanding of Creation and our Creator influence the way in which we care for what He has created?

III. Do: 'Tis a Gift to Be Simple

- Ⓐ How should we as Christians live in a world that is given to consumerism and "progress"?
- Ⓑ How can we simplify our lives in order to be more in tune with God's natural world?

► **Summary:** Because God created this world to be a home, not only for us but for many other plants and animals, and asked us to be its stewards, we have a responsibility to respect and care for our environment in such a way as to bring God glory.

Learning Cycle

► STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: As people of God who believe in His act of Creation and His promise of re-creation, we are called to be stewards of all creation. By doing this, we worship God and serve others, as well as gaining greater insight into God's Creator care for all His creatures.

Just for Teachers: Of course, many of the political aspects of environmentalism are complicated by other issues and agendas, but we should not let this distract us from our role as God's stewards of the natural world in which we live and on which we depend. We need to find ways to reclaim this role as God's representatives in, and to, His world.

Opening Activity: Ask class members to list environmental issues, problems, or concerns. Note these on a blackboard or large sheet of paper, if possible. Encourage class members to focus on some local issues, as well as large-scale issues. Choose just a few from this list and lead a brief discussion about what a Christian response might be to each of these issues: Should we be concerned? Who or what is being affected by this issue? What are others doing in response? What can we do about it? Allow discussion that might reflect and respect a range of views, without necessarily resolving differing opinions or responses. Try to focus discussion on responses that are based on our belief in God as Creator, us as stewards, and others as people we should seek to serve.

► STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: This section invites class members to consider creation and its care.

Bible Commentary

I. In the Beginning . . . (Review Genesis 1, 2:15, John 3:16 with the class.)

We live in a world created and loved by God. He spoke, and the world was created not all at once, but piece by piece, with God paying special attention to each component. Then He made extra-special creatures in His image—human beings—to whom He gave the task of caring for the world He had made. Despite the brokenness of our world and our own fallenness, our world is still loved by God, as is the whole cosmos (*see John 3:16*). And we are still called to be His stewards.

Consider This: How should belief in God as Creator affect our attitude toward creation care? Do you think this is something we talk or think about enough in our discussions about Creation issues?

- *What does it mean to you to be a steward of this world, of God's creation?*

II. Creation Praise (*Review Psalm 8; 24:1, 2; 100 and Revelation 14:7 with the class.*)

One of the recurring themes of the Bible is that of praise to God as Creator of this world. Not only is this a topic of human praise, but the Bible also describes creation itself as giving praise to Him. At times, in the book of Job, for example, the wonders of creation are even considered sufficient answers to questions about the way in which God appears to order the world. Creation is regularly referred to as a powerful testament to the nature of God and His goodness. Thus, in caring for that creation, we contribute to this avenue of worshiping the Creator God.

Consider This: Give one example of something in nature that fills you with wonder at God's creativity.

- *Are the wonders of nature sufficient to satisfy your questions about God? Or is that too simplistic? Explain your answers.*

III. Sabbath Keeping and Creation Keeping (*Review Exodus 20:8–11 and Leviticus 25 with the class.*)

In *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*, Sigve K. Tonstad urges the imperatives of “creation-keeping” as something broader than “Sabbath-keeping” and deeper than “environmentalism,” which, even by its labeling, places the natural world as a backdrop to the human action on our planetary stage. Quoting Terence Fretheim in his book, he writes, “The Sabbath is thus a divinely given means for all creatures to be in tune with the created order of things. Even more, Sabbath-keeping is an act of creation-keeping. To keep the Sabbath is to participate in God’s intention for the rhythm of creation.” Then Tonstad himself asks, “Is not the absence of ‘creation-keeping’ precisely the reality that is staring at us, people living in the twenty-first century, in the face?”—(Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2009), p. 122.

Consider This: Considering the broader principles of Sabbath, as set out in Leviticus 25, how is Sabbath keeping connected with care for the land?

- *How might a deeper understanding of this aspect of Sabbath influence your Sabbath keeping?*

IV. Toward a New Creation (*Review 2 Peter 3:10–14 and Revelation 21:1–5 with the class.*)

The Bible is clear that the world as we know it will not go on forever. At and after Jesus' return, the world will be cleansed by fire. But that is not the end of the story for our planet. We do not merely float off to an ethereal heaven. Ultimately, this world will be our home for eternity. God will re-create this world and, more than that, He will set up His kingdom here.

Consider This: How important is it to our understanding of God and His plan that we believe in a physical resurrection and life on a re-created earth?

■ *What difference should it make to our care for our world now that we believe this world will be re-created as our final home?*

► STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: “Nature and revelation alike testify of God’s love.” —Ellen White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 9. When the natural world is degraded, this testimony of God’s love is diminished, both in itself and in its provision for human life. In caring for creation, we partner with God as stewards, helping to preserve this testimony of His love.

Thought Questions:

- ❶ Compare “nature” and “revelation” in regard to how they testify to God’s love. Which do you think is more important? Why?
- ❷ Why do you think that God’s role as Creator is such an inspiration for praise throughout the Bible?
- ❸ Why do you think that the end-time message of the first angel of Revelation 14 still cites Creation as the reason to worship God? How important is Creation at the “other end” of history?
- ❹ Many believers in evolution care deeply about preserving creation, as do many creationists. How should the way in which we care for the world be affected by how we believe it began?
- ❺ Do you think that Christians have a good or bad record when it comes to caring for creation? Explain your answer.

- ⑥ How important is creation care for the credibility of the church's witness in the world? Do you think that the Seventh-day Adventist Church should do more to advocate for, and protect, the environment?
- ⑦ The Seventh-day Adventist Church has long recommended a vegetarian diet, where appropriate and possible. How is the value of this recommendation increased by the fact that vegetarianism is one of the most significant things an individual can adopt to live a more environmentally sustainable life?
- ⑧ List some things that you can do to make less of a negative impact on the environment. What do you need to change in your life to do these?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: These activities are intended to prompt class members to actively care for God's creation in practical ways. Adapt the suggested activities to the opportunities, resources, and needs of your class, church, and community.

Suggestions for Individual Activities: Encourage class members to spend time by themselves contemplating the wonders or beauties of Creation. Depending on your circumstances and situation, this could happen in a variety of ways. It may be spending time outdoors in your church yard, taking time to visit a nearby nature reserve, or watching a DVD that explores some aspect of the created world. Read from, or give copies of, the opening page (p. 9) of Ellen G. White's *Steps to Christ* for contemplation by class members. Prompt class members to spend some of their time in prayer, praising God for His creation, and asking for His guidance of His people in being His stewards.

Suggestions for Team Activities: As a class, refer back to the list of environmental issues made in the opening activity, with particular focus on local issues, and plan an activity or event that you or your wider church could undertake to make a contribution. Examples might include cleaning up rubbish from a community area, planting trees around the church or in some other public area, assisting a local school with a garden project, or something similar by which a visible difference can be made as a result of your project. Contact community leaders or members with whom you might be able to work, and set a day and time to work on this project. Invite other church members to join you and share in a day or morning/afternoon of action to improve the environment in your community. In planning this event, pray that God can use your group to be His stewards and represent Him as you do this.