



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 **Becoming Better Gardeners**
(Moral Landscape of Creation, pp. 66-71)

Suggested Article:

📖 **Little Things Mean a Lot**
(Moral Landscape of Creation, pp. 52-56)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Becoming Better Gardeners

After careful reflection on the Christian theology of creation, we must act on our responsibilities. Several organizations are ready to help us become better “gardeners,” wise and committed environmental stewards who keep and serve God’s creation.

Prayer

Dear Creator God, you created us to show our dominion over the earth in careful, creative ways. We confess that we have not been good stewards of what was entrusted to us. We have squandered the resources of this planet; we have hoarded mere material things; we have built bigger barns; we have filled our bellies until they are too full, yet we allow others to die of malnutrition. Most of the things that you made and called good, we have polluted, perverted, or destroyed. We ask for forgiveness. We beg for mercy, knowing that we are here by your grace. We ask that you open our eyes to what you would have us do and be, as we strive to be more like whom you are, as revealed to us by Jesus, your Son. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Hosea 4:1b-3,6; Isaiah 24:4-6

Reflection

“Civil war breaks out! North invades the south!” That headline describes the terrible 8th century before Jesus’ birth. Divided by monarchies for 200 years, but still united in religious history, the northern kingdom (Israel, or Ephraim) invaded the southern (Judah). In our country we know the destruction of civil strife. Its horrors repeat each decade in some part of the earth. Through these prophecies by Hosea (in Israel) and Isaiah (in Judah) we hear the moans of God from both sides of their conflict.

Hosea, like a lawyer asserting charges on the LORD’s behalf, declares that there is no faithfulness, loyalty (steadfast love), or knowledge of God. The people violate the Decalogue and “bloodshed follows bloodshed.” In a crescendo he lays the ultimate charge: the created order is in ruins. Human faithlessness to God wrecks the landscape and its creatures. “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge,” a finish that Hosea describes in words reminiscent of his painful marriage to unfaithful Gomer (cf. “I will also forget your children” in Hosea 4:6 with 1:2-8).

Isaiah echoes Hosea’s diagnosis, but with words drawn carefully from the Genesis stories. The heavens and earth now languish because people have broken the “everlasting covenant,” the agreement offered by God to Noah and his descendants (Genesis 9:8-17), which included the earth (9:13) and its creatures (9:10,12,15). Once again, as in the time of Noah, the earth is polluted and its creatures suffer.

For the record, the southern kingdom of Judah won the war, but only by making allegiance with powerful Assyria and becoming its vassal state. The northern kingdom of Israel declined into near anarchy. Within a decade Assyria destroyed Israel and nearly subjugated Judah. As the prophets clearly saw, there were



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no winners. The people's unfaithfulness brought political chaos to both kingdoms and degradation to the earth.

We should heed the word of God concerning creation that is found in these powerful prophecies: "Stop the unfaithfulness!" Teresa Morgan, a Baptist activist for the environment, reminds us that we too have wrecked much degradation. She recalls us to faithful action on our responsibilities, which include:

- ▶ encouraging reuse, recycling, and renewable energy;
- ▶ fostering local conservation and sustainable growth strategies;
- ▶ educating about environmental degradation and its impact on human health and wellness;
- ▶ seeking fair distributions of economic benefits and risks produced by our ecological problems, in regard to wealthy and poor, urban and rural populations;
- ▶ forging local connections among churches and with other groups in order to address common problems; and
- ▶ developing an ethic for the church that combines with integrity our concern for the creation and for the gospel.

Study Questions

1. How is your congregation being faithful to our responsibilities as stewards of the earth? Make an inventory of the congregation's and your own activities in response to the six responsibilities mentioned in the lesson.
2. What support does your congregation need in being faithful to these environmental stewardship responsibilities: lesson plans, worship helps, relations of mutual support with other churches in your community, contacts with local or national Christian groups, and so on? Study the Web sites of the organizations introduced by Teresa Morgan on pp. 69-71 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*. How could each organization help your church?
3. How do the New Testament ideas of the earth's community as the household of God and Christian people as deacons to the creation motivate us to address the earth's environmental problems? (See Teresa Morgan's discussion on pp. 68-69 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*.)
4. Read "Grandeur of God" by Gerard Manley Hopkins (on p. 57 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*). With what images does Hopkins describe the disorder of the earth's environment? What hope does he find in the biblical stories of creation?

Departing Hymn: "The God Who Set the Stars in Space"

Becoming Better Gardeners

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan

Prayer

Scripture Reading

Study Hosea 4:1b-3,6

Question 1 and 2

Departing Hymn

Standard Plan

Prayer

Scripture Reading

Reflection (all sections)

Questions (selected)

Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the prophetic message that the degradation of the earth is a sign and result of our unfaithfulness to God's covenant with us.
2. To know our environmental stewardship responsibilities.
3. To review our personal and congregational behaviors in light of our environmental stewardship responsibilities.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Moral Landscape of Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a story

Allen Temple Baptist Church members bought an ugly corner lot filled with wrecked automobiles in their city of Oakland, CA and built an attractive housing complex for seniors. They are replacing another boarded-up building with new apartments for people who are HIV positive or have AIDS. Both projects were accomplished with assistance from Housing and Urban Development. The pastor of the Allen Temple, J. Alfred Smith, Sr., writes, "The neglected inner city is part of creation, just as mountains and beaches are. God loves the city as he does any part of creation." (J. Alfred Smith, Sr., "God's Holy Presence in a Pagan World," in *The Best Preaching on Earth*, ed. by Stan L. LeQuire [Judson Press, 1996]: 115-119.)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently, and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read Hosea 4:1b-3,6 and Isaiah 24:4-6 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Though the context of these prophecies of Hosea and Isaiah is the civil war and political chaos of the 8th century BC, the prophets' theme applies to our culture too: human faithlessness to God wrecks the landscape and its creatures.

Two other passages will help members to better understand the poetic allusions in these prophecies. You may want to read these before the session and summarize them for the group. Study the personal story of Hosea and his unfaithful wife, Gomer, which introduces the book of Hosea's prophecies (Hosea 1:2-8). Hosea's description of his society as "faithless" to God is rooted deeply in this personal experience. Review also the covenant that God offers to Noah and his descendants (Genesis 9:8-17). Isaiah's poem refers to this covenant that includes the earth and its creatures.

The environmental responsibilities listed by Teresa Morgan incorporate a call to social justice. Ask members to notice these phrases: “Educating about environmental degradation and its impact on human health and wellness” and “Seeking fair distributions of economic benefits and risks produced by our ecological problems, in regard to wealthy and poor, urban and rural populations.” As discussed in the second lesson, “Stewardship of Creation,” our stewardship can never be merely environmental; it also addresses the links between human poverty and environmental degradation.

Study Questions

1. Members may have more to say about the first three responsibilities, because a single congregation may address them effectively. Our actions for the last three responsibilities require cooperation across many Christian and secular groups; encourage members to include denominational, parachurch, or other organizations with which your congregation partners.
2. You might ask several members to review the Web sites of these organizations before the meeting. Or, after the group generates a list of needs, ask some members to research the organizations and match their support to the list of needs.
3. When we think of the earth’s community, including beasts and plants, as the household of God, we more easily accept our responsibility to protect it into the future. No longer are we caring just for ourselves and our own, but for the larger family of which God is the head. The notion of “environmental deacon” reminds us of responsibilities to a larger family, in a way similar to church deacons serving many Christian people to whom they are not related by birth or personal ties. As a church deacon cares for other members of the congregation, we are called to care for the wider environmental community. God’s incarnation indicates the great value of the created order to God.
4. Members might mention these images of disorder: the earth “trod” upon by generations upon generations; everything burned, distorted, and dirtied by our economic choices; the world made dirty and smelly by our actions; and we cannot notice the earth’s destruction, our feet “being shod” or kept at a distance from the earth. The dominant image of hope is the sunrise, in which the poet sees the “bright wings” of the Holy Spirit of God. Members might compare the brooding Holy Spirit depicted in the cover art, David J. Hetland’s *Teeming with Life*.

Departing Hymn

“The God Who Set the Stars in Space” is on pp. 44-45 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.