

The Earth Is the Lord's



Psalm 24 Project

www.psalms24project.org

Curriculum (Moderator's Guide)

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[In this moderator's edition, suggestions for how to guide the discussion and comments that the moderator might offer if the conversation hits a snag are italicized.]

A 3-Part Reflection on Humanity's Responsibilities to God's Creation

Part 1: What Is God's Ideal? pp. 2-4

Part 2: Do Animals Have God-Given Rights? pp. 4-6

Part 3: What Are the Implications for Humans? pp. 6-7

Part 1: What is God's Ideal?

Overview

Many Christians regard humanity's "dominion" over God's Creation as a sacred responsibility to be good stewards. Yet, humanity is harming the environment and animals on a historically unprecedented scale. This series explores biblical teachings about our responsibilities to God's earth, and it aims to facilitate discussion and reflection about our God-given duties.

Part 1: What Is God's Ideal?

Video (1:41)

Introduction – Blessings and Curses

Read this introduction, then read the beginning of the 1 Samuel 8 passage. Encourage others to read biblical passages and to contribute to the ongoing conversation. Human free will means that people have opportunities to do what they want, even if they go against God's desires. Consequently, the Bible describes many examples of God giving humanity permission to do things, but the Bible often makes clear the consequences of going against God's will. For example, read 1 Samuel 8:10-22, in which God grants the Hebrews their request for a king, but warns that a king will abuse them.

Is human free will a blessing or a curse? The moderator may want help people explore how free will is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, we cannot have fulfilling lives or honor God if we have no free will. However, people often make foolish or harmful choices.

Read the blessings in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-11). Jesus then describes what befalls those who do not abide by the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, for example Matthew 7:1-2 and 7:24-27. Can you think of ways that people today or in the Bible appear to have been punished for their sins (for example, God's punishing evil-doers)? Can you think of ways that people today or in the Bible appear to have been punished by their sins (suffering harmful consequences of their hurtful decisions). *It is important to be respectful and diplomatic here, since the notion of "sin" can vary. For example, someone might assert that AIDS is a consequence of the sin of homosexuality, while others would likely disagree strongly with this view. If there seems to be strong disagreement that threatens to escalate to an argument, it may be prudent to intervene with a comment such as, "It seems to me that judgment of sin is God's prerogative. Our charge is to discern sin, to the best of our ability. There will always be disagreement among people on what constitutes sin, and I don't think it is helpful to try to resolve this disagreement right now. Can anyone else think of ways we are punished for (or by) our sins?"*

Read:

Genesis 1:28-31 – God blesses Eden and creates a peaceful, harmonious world

Genesis 2:16-17 – warning not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil

Genesis 3:14-19 – curses for Adam, Eve, and the serpent

What was the consequence, in terms of Adam and Eve's relationship with the Garden of Eden and with the animals, when they did not abide by God's instructions? *They no longer enjoyed a peaceful co-existence with the other animals, and instead there was enmity between them. Similarly, they were forced to struggle to survive outside the Garden of Eden, making peaceful coexistence among people more difficult.*

What has happened to you, people you know, or people in the news who have not followed God's teachings? (If discussing other people, please remain mindful of confidentiality issues.)

The Bible gives examples of humans using animals for human purposes. In what ways is this a blessing? Are humans sometimes harmed as a consequence of mistreating animals? *The moderator may note pollution from "factory farms," adding hormones to animal feed to quicken their growth, or growing resistance to antibiotics among infectious organisms as a consequence of routinely feeding antibiotics to farmed animals.*

Read Isaiah 11:6-9, an end-of-time vision often called the "Peaceable Kingdom" or the "Realm of God."

Jesus prayed, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Do you think this calls us to work towards the Peaceable Kingdom/Realm of God now?

What is the "knowledge of the Lord" (Isaiah 11:9)? *The moderator may add that this is a difficult question that has challenged Jews and Christians for millennia. If people assert that this is knowledge that people can't have, the moderator may note that we need to try to discern this knowledge in order to learn how to live in the world. If people note that the lion cannot survive on straw, the moderator may comment that there will be peace when the world is filled*

with the knowledge of the Lord, and that includes the lions. It might require divine intervention to allow the lion to thrive on straw, in which case we can't create the Peaceable Kingdom/Realm of God by ourselves. However, to the degree that we understand the "knowledge of the Lord," we can participate in making this ideal world come into being.

Reflect on Matthew 7:20-21 and Galatians 5:22-23. In thinking about how our lives might show the "fruit of the Spirit";

Name three or more ways we can help make the world resemble that ideal in our communities.

Name three or more ways we can help make the entire world resemble that ideal.

Part 2: Do Animals Have God-Given Rights?

Video (4:41 minutes)

Introduction

The moderator may want to briefly review last week's session for those who were not present and then read this introduction. There are numerous biblical passages dealing with animals, some describing kindness and compassion and others harsh treatment. The Bible relates humans using animals for food, labor, and sacrifices, often with divine approval, but the Bible does not permit cruelty to animals and, some have argued, the Bible does not endorse any unnecessary harm to animals. As we consider the passages below, we will reflect on the following questions: Does God care for animals? Can humans treat animals any way that humans desire, or do humans have special obligations or responsibilities? Do animals have God-given rights?

Read Genesis 1:20-22. What does God's blessing the animals indicate? *If nobody notes that this indicates that God cares about the animals, the moderator may do so.*

Read Genesis 1:26-31. What was the initial relationship between humans and animals in the Garden of Eden? *Genesis 1:29 specifically instructs humanity to eat plants and then Genesis 1:30 instructs all the animals to eat plants. What do you think is meant by "dominion" (1:26)? Some may assert that we may do with animals as they please, however the subsequent verses indicate that humanity was not meant to eat animals, indicating that "dominion" means something else here. The moderator may want to suggest that "dominion" might mean responsible stewardship, rather than exploitation or abuse.*

Read Genesis 2:18-22.¹ Why do you think God create the animals? *It would be easy to spend the entire hour on this section, so the moderator may need to move the conversation onward after several minutes of discussion. We suggest that the moderator acknowledge that this passage is important for women's issues, but we should try to stay focused on today's topic of animal issues. Though different interpretations are possible, it seems that animals were created to be Adam's companions and helpers. This seems reasonable, since Genesis 1 describes a vegetarian Garden of Eden. The moderator may want to suggest that Adam seems to be naming individual animals rather than species (though it does not seem black-and-white). Favoring this*

view 1) is the reference to “every living creature”, which seems to focus on individuals; 2) Adam “gave names to all cattle” which seems to indicate that each cattle had a unique name – otherwise, he would simply have announced the single name “cattle” for all of them; 3) God does not instruct Adam to name all the other things in the Garden, so the instruction to name the animals is not about developing language. If Adam is naming individual animals, it shows concern for the animals as individuals – we generally treat with compassion and respect those creatures to whom we give names.

In what ways have animals enriched your life? *The moderator may want to touch on this discussion at later points, for example noting how we treat with compassion and respect animals with whom we have relationships.*

Read Genesis 9:1-3. This is the first passage which describes humans having permission to eat animals. Why was permission given at this time? *If nobody else mentions it, the moderator may want to suggest that there was little vegetation to eat immediately after the Flood.* Thinking back to last session’s discussions of blessings and curses, some people regard this passage as a blessing to eat animals, but some have noted that it comes with a curse in that animals will no longer be humanity’s friends. What do you think?

Read Proverbs 12:10 and Psalm 145:9. Do these passages indicate God’s concern for animals?

Read Ecclesiastes 3:20-21. What do you think is the fate of animals? *To those who are convinced that humans, but not animals, experience an afterlife, the moderator might suggest that, if this were true, it would seem to favor our being as compassionate toward animals as possible. While we will enjoy everlasting bliss, animals have only this life. Also, pain and suffering would have no meaning for animals, if there is no chance that they will experience redemption.*

Read Matthew 6:26. What does this passage say about God’s concern for humans and for animals? *The moderator may want to note that the passage indicates that God cares more for humans, but God also cares about animals.*

Do you think animals have a God-given right to not suffer or be harmed unnecessarily? *Some people may raise objections to animal rights, but the question here is not about animal rights. The question asks whether our duties to God require that we treat God’s animals properly. Andrew Linzey has talked about “theos-rights” – duties we have to God that include showing compassion and respect for animals because they belong to God. If we cause unnecessary harm to God’s creatures, we fail in our duties to God to be good stewards of God’s Creation.*

Do you think animals have a God-given right to do the things God created them to do? *This is a challenging question. If the answer is yes, then we should avoid confining them in environments in which they are unable to express their natural behaviors. Some may object that enclosed environments are more humane than places where animals are exposed to harsh weather. Here, the moderator might point out that animals can suffer in different ways, sometimes from confinement, sometimes from exposure. The moderator can then ask if there is agreement that animal welfare should be an important consideration. If so, then we should explore whether we*

can do better than modern animal agricultural standards. In general, we can find compassionate solutions, if we really want. Sometimes, they will be more costly or inconvenient, but our principle calling as Christians is to serve God.

1. Most Bible translations indicate that God created animals to be companions and helpers for Adam. Animals did not fully meet Adam's needs, and consequently God created Eve. However, the New International Version does not lend itself to this interpretation. It reads:

^{2:18}The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." ^{2:19}Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.

The King James Version reads: ^{2:18}And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. ^{2:19}And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

The Revised Standard Version reads: ^{2:18}Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." ^{2:19}So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

Part 3: What Are the Implications for Humans?

Video (1:43)

Introduction

The moderator may first review the first two sessions, discussing how the first session explored how our free will is a blessing in that it allows us to utilize the earth to serve our needs, but it can also be a curse if used improperly. The moderator may then read this introduction. Many Christians believe that we are called to be good stewards of God's Creation. However, through pollution, global warming, and resource depletion, humanity has damaged God's earth. In today's session, we will consider whether we can find well-being while remaining mindful of the world's poor and hungry and of future generations.

Read Psalm 24:1 and Genesis 2:15

Do our responsibilities to serve God involve caring for the earth? Depending on how the conversation goes, the moderator may want to ask whether people think that the earth belongs to humans or to God. The moderator may discuss how we can destroy what we own, but not something that is on loan or something for which we are supposed to be caretakers.

What are our obligations to future generations to preserve land, water, and energy resources?

What do you think are the most effective ways that we might preserve scarce resources, e.g. land, water, and energy? *The moderator may have a list on a blackboard of important things we can do as individuals and things that our community or society can do.*

What do you think are the most effective ways to reduce global warming? *The moderator may refer to the readings. Some people may deny that global warming is happening, or claim that what we are seeing are natural fluctuations and not manifestations of human activity. Rather than debating this point, the moderator might elect to refocus the question as follows: A lot of scientists are convinced that human activity is making global temperatures rise. Among those who find the case for global warming compelling, what are things we can do to reduce our footprint on the earth?*

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19

Do we have a sacred obligation to God to care for our bodies?

What changes can we make in our habits or lifestyles to preserve our health? *The readings can be helpful here. The moderator might note that the Cornell/China study found that among rural Chinese people, who eat largely a plant-based diet (with some fish), exercise vigorously as they work, and don't smoke, heart attacks before age 65 are very uncommon, unlike in the U.S.*