



**Christian Reflection**  
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection  
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Study Guides for

# Moral Landscape of Creation

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us delight in and care for God's creation. The guides can be used in a series or individually. You may download and reproduce them for personal or group use.

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Focus Article:

📖 Eden: Moral Power of a Biblical Landscape  
(*Moral Landscape of Creation*, pp. 9-16)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Sin's Landscape  
(*Moral Landscape of Creation*, pp. 38-39)

📖 Isolation  
(*Moral Landscape of Creation*, pp. 40-41)

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# Eden: A Moral Landscape

In the Eden story, we are made from and called to serve the land. How do the values of interrelationship and dependence in this story challenge and enrich our view of our place in the world?

Prayer†

Creator God, you have entrusted the earth to our keeping. Help us to give you a good account of our management: to keep the earth generously and thoughtfully, even as you keep us rich in Christian living. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Genesis 2:4b-24

Responsive Reading†

When we are blind to the mystery of our landscape,  
**And forget it is God's handiwork;**

When we are careless with its plants and animals,

**And forget they are God's creatures;**

When we are unkind to those who work with us,

**And forget they are God's children;**

When we are careless about our work,

**And forget we are God's co-workers;**

When we mistreat the earth,

**And forget we are God's stewards;**

**God, forgive us.**

Reflection

Throughout the Garden of Eden story, human life and farming go hand in hand. Before the creation "there was no one to till the ground" (Genesis 2:5); then God creates human beings to be farmers (2:15) and farming remains our calling, even outside the garden (3:23; cf. 3:17-19). Details in the story vividly express our close relationship to the landscape:

- ▶ *Interrelationship.* God makes the human, *adam*, from arable land, *adamah* (2:7; the same word, "ground," is in 2:6, 9; 3:17, 19, 23). We are farmers by nature, made out of the very soil we cultivate. "I know of no statement in our entire religious heritage," Hiebert says, "that so categorically asserts that we are linked to our landscapes and this linkage is a part of the divine order of creation." We share a close relationship with other living things because God forms plants (2:9) and animals (2:19) from the same topsoil. This relationship is clearer in Hebrew because the same phrase, *nephesh chayyah* ("living being"), describes the human and the animals at creation (2:7, 19). Furthermore, God identifies the animals as helpers and brings them forward to be named (2:18-20). "Much has been made of humans asserting power over the animals by naming them, but namers in the Bible can be either more or less powerful than those they name," Hiebert notes. "The naming described in Eden is the naming that is possible only when living shoulder to shoulder with the animal world, as did the ancient Israelite farmer."



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► *Dependence.* The Garden is an ideal farm landscape with a constant source of water (2:6), plenty of fertile soil, and every species of fruit tree imaginable (2:9). God appoints humans to “till” (literally “serve”) the arable land (2:5, 15, 3:23). How did the same Hebrew verb come to mean both “cultivate” and “serve”? “Just as servants are dependent upon masters, subjects upon kings, and people upon God,” Hiebert suggests, “so the farmer must have sensed his absolute dependence upon the soil.... In the land’s health lay the human future. Thus the biblical farmer believed his work, the human’s work, to be in the service of nature’s needs and orders.”

For most people the instruction in 1:26-28 to subdue the earth and have dominion over its creatures is *the* biblical teaching about our role in the world. However, the Garden of Eden story offers another perspective: we are called to *serve* rather than rule the earth. This enriches our view of the earth and our place in it:

- God created us as a part of an interconnected web of life. All creatures are interrelated and, together with the environment in which they live, function as a unified whole.
- As servants rather than managers of this web of life, our well-being depends upon our serving the needs, requirements, and well-being of the whole environment. The danger of thinking of ourselves as managers is that, regarding ourselves as dominant, we lose this sense of humility and dependence and of the restraint demanded of us by our landscapes.
- We live by what farmers grow. This demands that we be thoughtful about what we eat, the health of our agricultural economy, and the well-being of our farmers and our farming communities. Our lives depend upon our collective support for a wise, productive, and sustainable agriculture.

### Study Questions

1. Many people today live in a city or town, rather than on a farm. How does the Eden narrative relate to their experience?
2. In what ways, discovered by environmental scientists, are we interrelated with and dependent on our landscapes?
3. After making the human from topsoil, God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (2:7). How might this image be drawn from a farmer’s experience (see p. 11 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*)? If this image suggests that God is like a farmer, then what are its implications for us?
4. Contrast the landscapes in Michelangelo’s *Original Sin and Expulsion From the Garden of Eden* and Ezekiel’s *Eve Hearing the Voice*, on pp. 38 and 40 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*, with the description of Eden (Genesis 2:4b-10). In these artists’ interpretations, how has our sin changed the Garden’s landscape?
5. How does your local community fail to *serve* its landscape?

Departing Hymn: “Morning Has Broken”

† Adapted from Plough Sunday liturgy developed by Peterborough Diocesan Council for the Countryside, Crick, England ([www.crick.org.uk/rural](http://www.crick.org.uk/rural)).



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Focus Article:

📖 **The Stewardship of Creation**  
*(Moral Landscape of Creation, pp. 17-23)*

Suggested Article:

📖 **Joyous Innocence**  
*(Moral Landscape of Creation, pp. 36-37)*

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# Stewardship of Creation

As God's stewards we are not to exploit, but to exercise care and responsibility for God's domain particularly in the interest of those who are poor and marginalized. How do the contours of stewardship in the Bible shed light on our work as we grapple with the earth's ecological crisis?

Prayer<sup>†</sup>

Creator God, you have entrusted the earth to our keeping. Help us to give you a good account of our management: to keep the earth generously and thoughtfully, even as you keep us rich in Christian living. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Reflection

The evocative hymn in Genesis 1 sounds merely the first notes of the biblical symphony of praise to God as creator of heaven and earth. Already we hear this salient melody of creation theology:

- ▶ The creation has its origins in the sovereign, creative and sustaining power of God. It is centered on God, or is theocentric.
- ▶ Creation is not a singular event; it is an on-going process requiring the continual sustaining power and presence of God.
- ▶ Order is central to the creation. God brings order, moral as well as physical, out of primordial chaos. Moral behavior is required to maintain the harmonious working of creation.
- ▶ Creation, including heaven and earth, is a relational entity, a harmonious whole in which creatures fulfill their appointed places and functions within a grand design.
- ▶ As the primary author of its meaning and value, God fills creation with inherent goodness and beauty.
- ▶ God is transcendent yet also immanently present within creation. Moreover creation discloses both the nature of God and the human role within God's world.

We often describe this role as being God's stewards. In the Old Testament this term is linked with Israel's king, who ruled the chosen people as God's steward and so was accountable to God. This royal interpretation of stewardship helps us understand the declaration that we, being created in the image of God, are to subdue the earth and have dominion over its creatures (1:26-28).

"Image" and "likeness" suggest the statues that monarchs erect to remind their subjects of who is in power. So, our role is to be living reminders of the Creator who is the King of the universe. To understand "dominion" (from *radah*, "to tread down"), remember that Israel's king had covenantal responsibilities to care for those over whom he ruled. "Dominion, therefore, does not mean to exploit or destroy," Butkus suggests, "but to exercise care and responsibility for God's domain particularly in the interest of those who are poor and marginalized."

We also interpret "image of God" and "dominion" in light of



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the lordship of Jesus and the reign of God that he proclaims. The kingdom of God not only offers salvation to us but also points to the future renewal of all creation (cf. Romans 8:18-23). As stewards, therefore, we will participate in this salvific future of God by protecting, sustaining, and restoring creation.

As wise stewards, we will refine our knowledge of God's world through the natural sciences, environmental ethics, and a vision of sustainability. From that conversation we might learn:

- ▶ *We are called to care for the diversity of life.* A corresponding scientific insight is that life is a biotic community and everything is interconnected. So, we must care for the non-living aspects of creation (land, water, and air) that are essential for life.
- ▶ *We are special members of earth's biotic community, being given the capacity for conscious self-reflection.* This approaches the view that we have exceptional characteristics yet remain one among other species formed from the earth.
- ▶ *Creation is valuable in its own right independent of its instrumental value for fulfilling human needs.* However, our stewardship can never be merely environmental; it also addresses the links between human poverty and environmental degradation.
- ▶ *Stewardship must restore and maintain the entire creation in hopeful anticipation of God's coming reign.* This matches a vision of sustainability that incorporates both social justice and ecological restoration.

### Study Questions:

1. How has the directive to subdue the earth and have dominion over its creatures (Genesis 1:26-28) been understood in a way that is harmful to, rather than caring for the environment?
2. Both Israel's ideal of kingship and the New Testament thought that Jesus is ruler over the Kingdom of God should reshape the way we think about dominion. What key changes do they require in our understanding of dominion?
3. Review the four points of conversation between the biblical idea of stewardship, natural science, and a vision of sustainability. Which points challenge or enrich your understanding of the Bible? Which points challenge some other (secular or new-age religious) approaches to the environment?
4. The beautiful Psalm 8 also links God's self-disclosure in creation with the human purpose and role in God's world. For the psalmist, why do human beings exist, and what is our role?
5. David J. Hetland's colorful window, *Teeming with Life* (the cover art of *Moral Landscape of Creation* which is discussed on pp. 36-37), highlights the exuberance of the first chapter of Genesis. Can you find echoes in Hetland's work for each salient feature of biblical creation theology outlined at the beginning of this lesson?

Departing Hymn: "Stars and Planets Flung in Orbit"

† Adapted from Plough Sunday liturgy developed by Peterborough Diocesan Council for the Countryside, Crick, England ([www.crick.org.uk/rural](http://www.crick.org.uk/rural)).



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Focus Article:

📖 God's Measure of Creation  
(*Moral Landscape of Creation*, pp. 24-29)

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# God's Measure of Creation

After hearing God speak from the whirlwind, Job realizes that God delights in a wild creation that exceeds the vision and interest of humans. Understanding our place in the creation requires that we see it in terms of God's intention and scale. Reducing it to the scale of human significance invariably results in pain to ourselves and in death to creatures around us.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Job 38:4-11,25-27,39-41; 39:9-12; 40:15-19; 41:1-8

Responsive Reading†

The LORD spoke to Job out of the storm:

**“Who darkens my counsel by words without knowledge?  
Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?  
Let him who accuses God answer him!”**

Job replied to the LORD:

**“Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”**

Scripture Reading: Job 42:10-17

Reflection

In the speeches from the whirlwind (Job 38-41), God delights in wild things: barren areas “where no one lives,” lions, ravens, wild oxen, and monstrous creatures like Behemoth and Leviathan. The world is filled with species and places beyond human domination. “Whereas Job sees in wildness the marks of fragility and impoverishment, perhaps even cruelty and capriciousness,” Wirzba notes, “God sees dignity and strength.”

Why does Job need this dramatic encounter with God?

We might say that Job is living an ancient version of the American Dream: he is morally virtuous, spiritually pious, and blessed with family, wealth, and the respect of his peers (1:1-5). He assumes that God has ordered the world so that people who work hard are guaranteed a prosperous life. Yet this assumption is put to the test when God allows Satan to inflict terrible suffering on Job by taking away his family, wealth, and health. His peers tell him that God is punishing him for his sins; Job protests that he is innocent and his suffering indicates a cruel creator and a meaningless creation. In despair, feeling totally abandoned by God and hounded by his peers, Job seeks an honest measure of creation and his place in it before the Creator.

At just this moment, God speaks from the whirlwind. “Job learns about the inadequacy of [his] self-serving, human-centered views,” says Wirzba. “Whereas Job was inclined to view the creation through the prisms of his own success (the world is a just place) or his own misery (the world is an unjust place), God forces Job to take a wider and more honest view of the universe.” Beauty, justice, and usefulness in the created order far exceed what Job, in his arrogance and human-centered thinking, was prepared to accept. Creation is far more than he can compre-



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hend, imagine, or control since it is framed to the divine rather than a human scale. This vision works a powerful change in Job, causing him to repent his former haughty ways. Stephen Mitchell translates Job 42:6, “Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.” Job despises his ways, not himself, for he knows that God created him with the same care as the rest of creation. He learns that his complaint was misinformed.

Job mirrors in his own life the Creator newly revealed to him. When God restores his fortunes, Job deals with these gifts in a new way. We learn the names of his three daughters and that they are beautiful (an indication of his welcoming the goodness of blessing). More importantly, Job gives them shares in the inheritance. He welcomes the world on its own good terms rather than in terms of the conventional understanding that relegated daughters to a subordinate role. Job’s newfound compassion and delight in creation are grounded in God’s own compassion and delight. Job embraces the creation with the selfless care and joy that marks God’s own involvement with the world.

### Study Questions

1. What similar features recur through the list of creatures and landscapes that God mentions in the speeches from the whirlwind? What interesting differences among them do you notice? Have you experienced creatures or landscapes that have a similar effect on you as these exercised on Job?
2. How do some “self-serving, human-centered” attitudes prevent people today from studying attentively our landscape and its creatures and plants, or from making the sacrifices required to care properly for them?
3. “There are probably not many ethics courses in colleges or seminaries that spend the first three days in silence—one day in the forest, one day at the shore of the sea, and one night in a field gazing at the stars,” observes Carol Newsom in “The Book of Job,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Abingdon, 1996). “Yet something like this is what God requires of Job as the starting point for a new moral understanding.” Could a contemporary person learn something valuable and be changed by Job’s course of study?
4. As we increasingly move into cities and are removed from the wildness that God also loves, what attitudes may we be tempted to adopt toward the landscape and its creatures?

Departing Hymn: “I Sing the Mighty Power of God”

† Adapted from Job 38:1-2; 40:2; 42:3b,5-6. Scripture taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.



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Focus Article:

📖 **Two Languages**  
(*Moral Landscape of Creation*, pp. 30-35)

Suggested Article:

📖 **The Glory Robe of God**  
(*Moral Landscape of Creation*, pp. 75-81)

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# Two Languages

The speech of creation is a kind of “sign language” and very different from the language of torah which instructs us in the wisdom of the LORD. From Psalm 19 we learn that one language interprets the other, yet both point to the same God.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 19; John 1:1-18

Reflection

The psalmist celebrates the wisdom of being fluent in the two languages of creation and torah. In the expansive opening images, the heavens are a storyteller and the firmament is a preacher announcing God’s creative work (19:1-4a). God created the cosmos with speech in Genesis 1; now the orderly and beautiful progress of the created order from day to day and night to night is re-sounding those words. This language of creation is:

- ▶ *a testimony of praise and wonder*: “In God’s sight and hearing,” says Hoezee, “the physical cosmos is like a symphony of praise.... [The psalmist asks us] to tune our hearing to recognize in the cadence of creation something of what God hears.”
- ▶ *not a full revelation of God, but a witness to the Creator*: “Because creation is being re-presented day by day,” Earwood writes, “we catch a glimpse of the ongoing work of the Creator. The Apostle Paul understood this when he argued, ‘Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made’ (Romans 1:20).”

Abruptly the witness of creation (19:1-6) gives way to the “sweeter than honey” words of torah (19:7-13). The Hebrew word *torah* means “instruction pointing to the way of life.” Though it may prescribe necessary boundaries, torah is not as narrow as we usually think of law. Rather, like the speech of creation, Torah is expansive and its words point beyond themselves to the LORD whose instruction is rewarding to people who follow the path of life.

Interpreting the glory of God in creation and torah, which is never a simple task, is made more problematic by our own moral faults, self-deception, and pride (19:12-13). Consequently, in the coda to this psalm (19:14) the poet pleads not for better skills to interpret God, but to be interpreted and judged truly by the Author of the two languages.

Through the witness of both creation and torah we are drawn into a deeper understanding of the LORD God. The writer of the Gospel of John has learned this lesson, for its majestic prologue echoes the two languages of creation and torah: *creation* (John 1:1a, 2-3a); *light and darkness* (1:4-5); *testimony* (1:7); *glory* (1:14); *Torah* (1:17); and *invisible/visible* (1:18).

To the psalmist’s question of how we can know the glory of God, the gospel responds that Jesus, the person who came to live among us, is the Word made flesh. When we look at Jesus and



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his life, he uniquely reflects the glory, mercy, and truth of the God of creation and torah (1:14).

### Study Questions

1. Psalm 19:4b-6 demonstrates how to avoid a pantheistic view that deifies nature and invites us to worship it. How does the psalmist personify the sun, yet not deify it as commonly done in ancient Near Eastern (and today's New Age) religions?
2. In light of Psalm 19, comment on C. S. Lewis' testimony: "Nature never taught me that there exists a God of glory and infinite majesty. I had to learn that in other ways. But nature gave the word *glory* a meaning for me. I still do not know where else I could have found one."
3. Describing how the language of creation functions is difficult (Psalm 19:3-4). While there are 'words,' they are inaudible to human ears. In what ways might the language of creation be something like "sign language" (*Moral Landscape of Creation*, p. 32)?
4. If the physical cosmos actively praises God in what Scott Hoezee calls the "ecology of praise," then should we embrace the preservation of species and their habitats "as keeping all of the members of God's choir in place" (*Moral Landscape of Creation*, p. 76)?

Departing Hymn: "All Things Praise Thee" (verses 1, 2, and 5)

All things praise Thee, Lord most high,  
heaven and earth and sea and sky,  
all were for Thy glory made,  
that Thy greatness thus displayed  
should all worship bring to Thee;  
all things praise Thee—Lord, may we!

All things praise Thee—night to night  
sings in silent hymns of light;  
all things praise Thee—day to day  
chants Thy power in burning ray;  
time and space are praising Thee,  
all things praise Thee—Lord, may we!

All things praise Thee—gracious Lord,  
Great Creator, powerful Word,  
Omnipresent Spirit, now  
at Thy feet we humbly bow;  
lift our hearts in praise to Thee;  
all things praise Thee—Lord, may we!

*George W. Conder*, Appendix to the Leeds Hymn Book, 1874  
*Suggested tune*: DIX



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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)*

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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 8<sup>th</sup> 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"



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Teaching Children  
the Story of Creation  
(*Moral Landscape of  
Creation*, pp. 60-65)

### Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Our Two Gardens  
(*Moral Landscape of  
Creation*, pp. 72-74)
- 📖 The Glory Robe of God  
(*Moral Landscape of  
Creation*, pp. 75-81)

### What do you think?

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# Teaching Children the Story of Creation

Children should not merely appreciate the majestic drama of creation, but understand *their role* in this story “that gives us breath and life.” Do we encourage them to be good stewards of the earth, or stifle their curiosity about the physical world by signaling that it doesn’t belong at church?

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Mark 9:33-37; 10:13-16; 1 Corinthians 13:11

### Responsive Reading<sup>†</sup>

O God, we thank you for this universe, our great home; for its vastness and its riches, and for the manifoldness of the life which teems upon it and of which we are a part.

**We praise you for the arching sky and the blessed winds, for the driving clouds and the constellations on high.**

We praise you for the salt sea and the running water, for the everlasting hills, for the trees, and for the grass under our feet.

**We thank you for our senses by which we can see the splendor of the morning and hear the jubilant songs of love, and smell the breath of the springtime.**

[Unison] Grant us, we pray you, a heart wide open to all this joy and beauty, and save our souls from being so steeped in care or so darkened by passion that we pass heedless and unseeing when even the thornbush by the wayside is aflame with the glory of God. Amen.

### Reflection

Jesus teaches his disciples to remain humble and trusting as children (Mark 9:33-37, Matthew 18:1-5, Luke 9:46-48). Later Jesus rebukes them when they prevent children from coming to him in trust: “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). Mark and Matthew, in pairing this latter event with Jesus’ teaching on divorce, suggest that true disciples will care for women and children, who are among the least powerful people in society (Mark 10:1-16, Matthew 19:1-15). Luke’s gospel places the children’s trusting behavior into greater relief by contrasting it to a Pharisee’s self-righteousness and rich ruler’s independence (Luke 18:9-30).

Jesus does not idealize childhood, of course. Neither does the Apostle Paul, who warns us not to linger uncritically in “childish ways.” Some childhood demeanors we need to outgrow, while others, such as humility and trust, we should continue to nourish into adulthood. We care wisely and truly for children when we help them to know this difference.

Curiosity about the physical world is another childhood trait that we should nourish. “Among the many holy tasks of Christians is to foster, nurture, and develop children’s God-given sense of curiosity in such a way that it will still be there when they are adults,” writes Scott Hoezee. “For this whole world



## Christian Reflection

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belongs to God—we should want to know more about it.” Are we nourishing this inquisitiveness at church, or stifling it with opaque windows, lessons, and songs that ignore or diminish curiosity about the natural world? “It’s easy to grow up,” he observes, “thinking that there’s little connection between a Thursday afternoon field trip when you tramp through a wetland and a Sunday morning in church.”

Andrea Moore invites children to bring into church their curiosity about the physical world. Without it, how will they learn to investigate, love, and care for the world in its details? So that they may “live well in the place given to them for well-keeping by the Creator,” she offers guidance to help children understand:

- ▶ *God’s relationship with creation.* Children can avoid pantheism and human arrogance, and learn to worship God as creator.
- ▶ *God’s relationship with his people.* Children can see themselves to be co-workers with God in caring for the creation.
- ▶ *The child’s relationship to creation.* Through joyful encounters with the natural world, children can become a new generation of Christians who grow spiritually through tending responsibly to the earth and its needs.

### Study Questions

1. What interests, stories, or activities could you share with children in your congregation in order to encourage their curiosity about the physical world and teach them good habits of environmental stewardship? (For ideas, look at the resources in *Our Two Gardens* on pp. 72-74 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*.)
2. What activities could your study group share in order to nourish your members’ curiosity about the physical world?
3. In light of Scott Hoezee’s comments on pp. 78-79 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*, examine your congregation’s worship and church architecture. How could your church community become a more “creation friendly” place?

Departing Hymn: “Morning Has Broken”

† Based on a prayer by Walter Rauschenbusch, cited in *The Communion of Saints: Prayers of the Famous*, ed., Horton Davies (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990).

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# Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30 to 45 minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

# Eden: A Moral Landscape

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Genesis 3:1-24
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Discuss Gen. 2:4b-24	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss Gen. 2:4b-24	Discuss Genesis 3:1-24
Questions 1 and 5	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching goals

1. To appreciate the importance of farming in the Garden of Eden narrative.
2. To reflect on the relationship we share with the landscape and its creatures.
3. To begin to reflect on what it means to *serve* the earth.
4. To recognize how sin distorts the landscape and our relationship to its creatures.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 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 articles before the group meeting. Locate the hymn “Morning Has Broken” in your hymnbook, or select an alternate hymn.

## Begin with a Story

“After making the first human from topsoil, God ‘breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,’ and the human being came to life (2:7). This colorful image itself likely comes from life on the Israelite farm, as was suggested to me once by Richard Austin, author of *Hope for the Land: Nature in the Bible*, and a farmer himself. In the moments after a lamb or a kid or a calf is born, if it cannot start breathing on its own, the farmer blows into its nostrils to bring it to life. Thus this narrator describes God’s own behavior when God first brought humans to life in terms of an experience with which Israelite farmers were intimately familiar: breathing life into the newborn.” (*Moral Landscape of Creation*, p. 11)

## 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

Arrange for a group member to read aloud Genesis 2:4b-24 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

Members will be familiar with this wonderful story of the Garden of Eden. What features of the story did they only just notice when they heard it read again? Perhaps they will mention details of the landscape (Genesis 2:5-6, 8-10); that God *plants* the garden; that the living creatures are presented as helpers to Adam; that the human is described as a farmer. Call attention to how human life and farming go hand in hand throughout the story. Ask a member to read Genesis 3:23 and then 3:17-19.

- ▶ *Interrelationship.* Make the point that human beings share a close relationship with the topsoil and with plants and animals. This is clearer in Hebrew than in many English translations. Discuss the better translations of *adam* and *adamah* reviewed by Hiebert on p. 12 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*.
- ▶ *Dependence.* Ask a member to read Genesis 2:4b-8, 15, but replace “till” with “serve.” Discuss Hiebert’s suggestion about how the same Hebrew word came to mean both “cultivate” and “serve” (*Moral Landscape of Creation*, p. 14)

Ask members to reflect upon how the notion of serving the landscape adds to their understanding of stewardship. How does it challenge the usual understanding of subduing the earth and having dominion over its creatures? Ask them to react to the three bulleted points: (1) God created us as a part of an interconnected web of life; (2) As servants rather than managers of this web of life, our well-being depends upon behavior that serves the needs, requirements, and well-being of the whole environment; and (3) Like our biblical ancestors, we live by what farmers grow.

### **Study Questions**

1. Members might describe particular experiences through which they learn to value their landscape—through classroom study, nature walks, or vacations. Perhaps they have become aware of how city life isolates many of us from food preparation, dependence on weather patterns, and understanding of the lives and needs of creatures. Does your congregation’s worship often mention dependence on the landscape?
2. Ask members to brainstorm some ways in which we are interrelated with our landscapes. Prompt a member who is active in an environmental group to report on this. You will find many ideas in your newspaper or in the Web resources described in *Becoming Better Gardeners*, on pp. 69-71 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*.
3. Reflect on Richard Austin’s suggestion in the “Begin with a Story” section above. Look for verses that describe God as a farmer (e.g., Genesis 2:8,9; 3:8). One implication is that God created us to treat the earth just as would God, with attention, knowledge, and care.
4. The analyses of the artwork on pp. 39 and 41 give some hints. Members might list the elements of the Garden (described in Genesis 2:8-10,19) that are missing in these images.
5. Focus attention on the immediate community before branching out to state or national issues. Members might mention farming practices, unregulated development of suburbs or businesses, abandonment of portions of their city, water or air quality problems, or loss of habitat for animals by logging, farming, or other development practices.

### **Departing Hymn**

Distribute hymnbooks with “Morning Has Broken.” If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

# Stewardship of Creation

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Psalm 8
Discuss Gen. 1:1-2:4a	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss Gen. 1:1-2:4a	Discuss Psalm 8
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2 and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching goals

1. To identify key themes in biblical creation theology.
2. To understand the notion of “dominion” within the contexts of Israel’s ideal of kingship and the New Testament teachings about the Kingdom of God.
3. To connect the biblical idea of stewardship with our knowledge of God’s world drawn from natural sciences.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 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

Near Anchorage, AK, Philip Yancey pulled off the highway to look at what many other motorists had stopped to observe, a pod of silvery white beluga whales that was feeding just offshore. “I stood for forty minutes, listening to the rhythmic motion of the sea, following the graceful, ghostly crescents of surfacing whales. The crowd was hushed, even reverent. We passed around binoculars, saying nothing, simply watching.... Just for that moment, nothing else—dinner reservations, the trip schedule, my life back in Chicago—mattered. We were confronted with a scene of quiet beauty and a majesty of scale. We all felt small. We stood together in silence until the whales moved farther out. And then we climbed the bank together and got in our cars to resume our busy, ordered lives, which somehow seemed less urgent. And it wasn’t even Sunday.” (Philip Yancey, “Of Whales and Polar Bears,” in *The Best Preaching on Earth*, ed. by Stan L. LeQuire [Judson Press, 1996]: 163-166.)

## Prayer

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

## Scripture Reading

Emphasize the passage’s symmetry by reading aloud from a modern translation in this way:

(Reader #1) Genesis 1:1-2

(Reader #2) Genesis 1:3-5

(Reader #3) Genesis 1:6-8

(Reader #4) 1:9-13

(Reader #2) 1:14-19

(Reader #3) 1:20-23

(Reader #4) 1:24-31

(Reader #1) 2:1-4a.

## **Reflection**

The lesson has three parts. In the first part, themes of the salient “melody” of biblical creation theology are identified. Ask members to recall images and ideas from Genesis 1 that relate to each theme.

The second section enriches our understanding of stewardship. Some people blame the current environmental crisis, at least in part, on human beings obeying the declaration to “subdue” the earth and exercise “dominion” over its creatures. This is a misinterpretation of Genesis 1:26-28 and a distortion of the biblical idea of stewardship. To move toward a better interpretation, remind members that the king in ancient Israel ideally was to be God’s steward. Furthermore, Jesus, as the one who reigns in God’s kingdom, should be our model for a steward who has dominion over the earth (cf. 1 Timothy 6:15-16; Revelation 1:4-6).

Four points of conversation between the biblical notion of stewardship, science, and a vision of sustainability are introduced in the final section. Like any conversation, there are two voices and potentially a difference in point of view. The italicized statements use concepts drawn from the scripture reading and the wider biblical theology of creation; the sentences in plain text echo the ideas of science. Do members find harmony or tension in each part of the conversation?

## **Study Questions**

1. Members may share what comes to mind when they hear the words “subdue” or “dominion.” Some may describe events from recent or earlier history.
2. The king is a servant of someone who is greater, God. The king’s economic and political agenda, therefore, is ‘set’ and not up to his individual whim; his desires should be evaluated by whether they meet the needs and requirements of his subjects. We are not without guidance: we can find rich models for the ideal king in the psalmists’ and prophets’ descriptions in the Old Testament and, more concretely, in the life and teachings of Jesus.
3. As challenges to their understanding of the Bible, members may mention that: (a) environmental science enriches the notion of “diversity of life” beyond the brief, representative list of creatures in biblical creation accounts; (b) science highlights the common origin of humans and other creatures, an idea that is in tension with some interpretations of the creation accounts; (c) we rarely explore what is good (from God’s perspective) about features of the creation that are either harmful or simply not useful to us; (d) we should study the two-way links between human poverty and environmental degradation. Some biblical challenges to other approaches to the environment might include: (a) the biblical call to exercise stewardship even over features of the creation that are unattractive and not useful (in any obvious way) to us; (b) the need to preserve the specialness of human beings’ role in the creation; (c) the call to be more than mere *environmentalists*, which means to be concerned with human poverty and social justice as well.
4. The psalmist answers by appealing to the royal model of stewardship (Psalm 8:5-8). Note that Yahweh (“LORD”) is called “Sovereign” in verse 1, so God is the psalmist’s model for the true King.
5. Notice that God (represented by the dove with nimbus and cross) is the central element in the image. The brooding stance of the dove might suggest a continuing presence of God to the creation. Despite the wild diversity of creatures, the image is filled with balance of objects and colors; the mosaic-like background also suggests order. Perhaps the relationship of all the creatures to the brooding dove dominates the image, but there is also a suggestion of interrelationship in the presence of fish-eating birds. The goodness and dance-like beauty within this image reflects the Creator’s joy and owes nothing to human uses for these creatures. The artist cannot image transcendence directly, but he suggests a ‘beyondness’ to God through the mysteriousness of the nimbus and cross; the brooding dove only *represents* (like a steward) and does not fully present the deity.

## **Departing Hymn**

“Stars and Planets Flung in Orbit” is on pp. 42-43 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.

# God's Measure of Creation

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To understand what God's speeches from the whirlwind convey in the story of Job.
2. To reflect on the moral changes that should occur in us when we study God's creation.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 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 before the group meeting. Locate the familiar hymn "I Sing the Mighty Power of God" in your hymnbook, or print copies of this public domain text from the Web site [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a story

Wendell Berry tells about having a pond dug on a steep hillside that he wanted to be able to pasture. "The pond appeared to be a success. Before the bulldozer quit work, water had already begun to seep in. Soon there was enough to support a few head of stock. To heal the exposed ground, I fertilized it and sowed it with grass and clover. We had an extremely wet fall and winter, with the usual freezing and thawing. The ground grew heavy with water, and soft. The earthwork slumped; a large slice of the woods floor on the upper side slipped down into the pond. The trouble was the familiar one: too much power, too little knowledge. The fault was mine. I was careful to get expert advice. But this only exemplifies what I already knew. No expert knows everything about every place, not even everything about any place." (Wendell Berry, *What are People For?* [North Point Press, 1990]: 5.)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members will hear God speak to them, as he did to Job, from the whirlwind.

## Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read, in alternating fashion from a modern translation, the six selections from God's speeches from the storm: Job 38:4-11, 25-27, 39-41; 39:9-12; 40:15-19; and 41:1-8.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read Job 42:10-17 from a modern translation.

### **Reflection**

Members might not be familiar with these amazing final chapters of the book of Job, or they might not have compared them to other passages of biblical creation theology. Let the scripture readings 'sink in' and give members a chance to ask hard questions about each section of the readings.

Other interpretations of Job have made the epilogue (Job 42:7-17) appear to be 'false' to the drama of the central chapters of the book. These interpretations emphasize only Job's restoration and vindication against the views of his three peers. They imply that Job was virtuous and theologically correct after all, so God blesses him and everything returns to the way it was in the beginning (1:1-5). Nothing about Job has changed, and he repents only because for a while he doubted God and his own (Job's) sense of justice.

By contrast, the interpretation offered here suggests that Job is profoundly changed from his former ways by his encounter with God; his old attitudes are challenged. He repents from his former ways and attitudes, his remorse being shown by his breaking with his culture and giving attention and grateful reception to his new daughters.

### **Study Questions**

1. These are large-scale creatures, obvious to the eye; most are powerful, carnivorous, beyond human taming, of no obvious 'use' to human beings, and potential threats to us. God cares for and enjoys them. Some differences might be where they live (air, water, land), that some are relatively familiar while Behemoth and Leviathan seem to be 'larger than life' monsters. Perhaps members will describe creatures they have studied, seen in zoo captivity, or encountered in the wild places; they might mention smaller creatures, even microscopic ones.
2. For a discussion starter, mention some of the seven risks of environmental degradation faced by the earth and its natural systems that are listed on p. 17 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*. Members may mention an excessive desire for profit, control, or entertainment; or may notice that the world can be damaged by hasty or inattentive pursuit of good ends such as inexpensive transportation, productivity, and environmental problem solving.
3. People might still develop traits of attentiveness, gratitude, and humility. The key words in Newsom's comment are "in silence," for a person must approach these landscapes with some measure of prayerful attentiveness. By contrast, the "Survivor" programs on CBS television demonstrate that people who approach wild areas with other motives, such as proving their own skills or competing for prestige and money, may return from the experience with less attentiveness, gratitude, and humility.
4. We might be tempted to think we should and can easily understand, manipulate, and domesticate the landscape and its creatures. We may think of them as 'ours' for the taking. We may think that our desires determine what is valuable about them, that our economic accounting systems should measure their value only in terms of their beauty and usefulness to us.

### **Departing Hymn**

Distribute copies of the hymn "I Sing the Mighty Power of God." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

# Two Languages

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Study Psalm 19	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1 or 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To realize that God speaks to us through the beauty and order of creation.
2. To understand that the language of torah, God's instruction, helps us to interpret this speech of creation.
3. To see how the New Testament views Jesus as the Word of creation and torah.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 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. Ask your musician to locate the popular tune DIX in your hymnal (used for the hymn "For the Beauty of the Earth") or at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a story

Read Ken Chafin's poem "Multiple Sunrises" on p. 33 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. After voicing common concerns of the group, ask the members to read aloud the first verse of the hymn "All Things Praise Thee" as a conclusion to the prayer time.

## Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read Psalm 19 from a modern translation in this way: (First Reader) 19:1-6; (Second) 19:7-13; (Unison) 19:14. Ask a member to read John 1:1-18 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

The two readers have emphasized the structure of Psalm 19: a hymn to God as creator (19:1-6), a hymn to God as giver of torah (19:7-13), and a concluding prayer (19:14). Perhaps the concluding prayer was part of the second hymn. In this context, however, it is a request that God examine both of these hymns ("the words of my mouth") and the singer ("the meditation of my heart").

The first hymn celebrates the fact that the physical world, especially its beauty and order, proclaims God's glory. Members may react in several ways to this hymn. One response is to accept its claim and then brainstorm other aspects of the physical world that give us insight into God's glory. Another is to note that the physical world sends mixed signals, for it also contains ugliness and apparent disorder that cause us to doubt God's goodness. A third response is to doubt that the universe says anything at all about its creator.

The psalmist does not think we can learn everything from the physical world that we want or need to know about God. This is evident in two passages. First, many scholars think that verses 4b-6 are a hymn borrowed from an ancient culture that worshipped the sun, but deftly changed by the psalmist into a praise to Yahweh, creator of heaven and earth. If so, then the psalmist recognizes that people, misinterpreting the 'words' of the physical world, can be led into idolatrous worship of nature.

Second, the psalmist has added the second hymn (19:7-13) to interpret the first. God communicates more directly through torah (“law”), decrees, precepts, commandments, fear, and ordinances. These are not six separate things, but six ways of using our human language to point to God’s life-giving way. Notice that our speech is inadequate to capture the thick and rich reality of God’s communication in torah. The psalmist does not experience torah as a burden, but as wonderful beyond any simple description: it revives our souls, puts joy in our hearts, enables us to see clearly, is just and right, and endures forever. No gold is more valuable, and no honey is sweeter.

Many who are familiar with the prologue to John’s gospel may not have noticed its many allusions to both the speech of creation and of torah. The claim that “the Word (creation, torah) became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14) becomes even more startling and remarkable. John means the Author of the texts (of creation and torah) is present in Jesus Christ.

### **Study Questions**

1. We personify the sun in our everyday language when we speak of it as rising and setting, peeking above the hills, dancing on the waves, and so on. Notice how the psalmist personifies the sun as a bridegroom and a strong runner, but without treating it as a god. The psalmist says that the LORD God sets the sun in place for its celebrated arrival and daily run across the sky.
2. Lewis is saying that the language of creation cannot replace the language of torah. While creation’s speech is not primary, it can help us to understand and appreciate the language of torah instruction.
3. Earwood suggests these similarities: (1) most of us respond to “the speech of creation,” like we do to sign language, primarily through our visual experience; (2) even when we cannot understand the meaning of creation (or sign language), we can appreciate the beauty and be uplifted emotionally by the created order (or the motions of a skilled interpreter); (3) we can become fluent, through years of training, in interpreting the meaning of the created order (sign language).
4. Hoezee says, “In the preservation of the physical cosmos we are helping to preserve and perpetuate what to God is a most beautiful song of praise.” Christians have a tapestry of reasons to care for the creation, which includes these catalogued by Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth* (Baker Academic, 2001): (1) the earth is “on loan from our children,” (2) it is more pleasurable to live simply, (3) animals have rights, (3) because creatures and habitats are good in themselves, we have duties to care them, (4) our ability to flourish is interdependent with other creatures and the landscape, (5) “God says so,” (6) “God’s concerns are our concerns,” and (7) caring for creation is our appropriate, grateful response to God’s care for us. Hoezee’s view is an instance of the sixth (or seventh) reason. It does not supplant the other reasons in the tapestry, but it does have much independent weight for us.

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

# 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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.

# Teaching Children the Story of Creation

## **Lesson Plans**

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Study Bible passages	Reflection (all sections)
Question 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## **Teaching Goals**

1. To recognize curiosity about the physical world as a childlike demeanor that we should nourish into adulthood.
2. To inventory whether our church communities are “creation-friendly” places.
3. To focus upon what we want children to learn from the stories of creation.

## **Before the Group Meeting**

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 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 articles before the group meeting. Ask some members to look at the books and Web sites mentioned in “Our Two Gardens” (pp. 72-74 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*) and report on them to the group. Locate the hymn “Morning Has Broken” in your hymnbook, or select an alternate hymn.

## **Begin with a story**

Share the story that Andrea Moore tells about her son restoring the sand to the ocean (on p. 60 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*). The story highlights the joyful wonder that children can experience when they encounter majestic places. An alternative is to tell a story from your own experience as a child, or as an adult with a child, of curiosity about the physical world.

## **Prayer**

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently, and then voice common concerns of the group.

## **Scripture Reading**

Ask three members to read Mark 9:33-37, 10:13-16, and 1 Corinthians 13:11 from a modern translation.

## **Reflection**

The two readings from the Gospel of Mark have parallels in Matthew and Luke. Familiarize yourself with the contexts in each gospel of this story about the children coming to Jesus (Mark 10:1-16; Matthew 19:1-15; Luke 18:9-30). You might ask a member to scan these contexts before the meeting and summarize them for the group.

While Paul is not speaking directly about children, his comment about “childish ways” reminds us that the biblical writers do not sentimentalize childhood. They recognize that we need to outgrow many childhood ways, while others should be nourished into adulthood. You might ask members to list some childhood ways they admire. Do they include on their list curiosity about the physical world?

The quotation from Hoezee introduces the need to inventory whether our church communities are “creation-friendly” places. Touch lightly on this theme and return to it when you discuss question three.

Andrea Moore outlines three goals we should have when we teach children the story of creation: teaching (1) God's relationship with creation, (2) God's relationship with his people, and (3) the child's relationship to creation. Notice that she is *building* good stewardship habits upon natural childhood curiosity and does not assume that children, if left to themselves, simply will develop into good stewards. Expand on each of these goals and illustrate them with the activities that Moore mentions on pp. 62-65 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*.

### **Study Questions**

1. Members may enjoy hobbies like hiking, bird-watching, wild-flower study, nature photography, nature drawing, or camping which they can share with children in the church community. Perhaps they would share personal stories or read books (like those mentioned in "Our Two Gardens" on pp. 72-74 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*) with children. They may have a project, like starting a church garden, recycling, or cleaning up a church property, that can involve children in some way, such as creating project posters, making announcements in worship, or supplying some child-power for the project.
2. Members may share hobbies with one another, too. For instance, the associate teacher of our Sunday School class for many years was also a high school biology teacher. Each spring the class met at a nature preserve for a Saturday walk, and our teacher helped us to identify the wild flowers, trees, and animal tracks that we saw. Sharing personal experiences, nature books and movies, or creation prayers and hymns are other ways for group members to take part in one another's lives and grow spiritually. Perhaps the group should share a creation-care project.
3. Discuss a brief checklist like this: worship (hymns, prayers, scripture readings, sermon topics and illustrations, and testimonies), architecture (new buildings, retrofits, landscaping, gardens indoor or out, play areas, murals or paintings), educational programs (children, youth, adults), outreach (indoor gardens for home-bound members, community recycling, and cleanup) and ministry (information gathering, lobbying, recycling and reusing, energy conservation, and home and church energy inventories). Do not lose sight of the trees for the forest! Choose one or two items to focus your discussion and action.

### **Departing Hymn.**

Distribute hymnbooks with the children's hymn, "Morning Has Broken." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.