

# Eden: The Link Between Faith and Stewardship

by Barbara Buzzard

It is an often heard accusation that Christians do not care for this earth. “Let me just say it: care for the environment is not something that can be comfortably applauded in many Bible-believing church contexts. It is not a popular subject.”<sup>1</sup> Care and concern for the environment is generally thought to be a part of the liberal agenda. The specific charge often leveled against Christians is this: “They just don’t care.” And since most Christians believe that they escape this earth and spend eternity in heaven, it would make sense that their view of gladly leaving it behind would shape their attitude toward it. It is almost a “to hell with the earth” approach.

But we who firmly believe that God has promised us this earth — the land (and with Scriptural validation) could not be guilty of the same dismissive attitude. Or could we? Let’s see.

This is not an article about gardening, even though I am an unapologetic lover of God’s incredible Creation. However, it is a look at how faith either does or does not influence our environmental stewardship. Michael Abbate’s wonderful book *Gardening Eden* brings together the physical and the spiritual and questions the great divide that we *think* is there. “People of faith are rarely recognized for leading the way in promoting environmental moderation, protection, or restoration. Many nonbelieving friends and colleagues have rightly pointed this out to me as they ask, ‘Why aren’t Christians more involved in environmental issues?’”<sup>2</sup>

I am not a “tree hugger.” I am a radical in pursuit of Truth but I have no political agenda. Since all truth is God’s truth and since our ancestors came from Eden and we are destined for Eden, let us have a look at it. Do we not have a calling to care for the earth? Is it not a sacred task? We know that God rejoiced in all that He made (Ps. 24:1). And we could therefore deduce that He would want to preserve it.

The preservation of this earth (and not the trashing of it) is basic in our job description (Gen. 1 and 2). Is it only the chorus which speaks of “standing on holy ground” or is it an attitude — bound up with our identity? Our identity is surely connected to the purpose of our Creator which is to find a people obedient to His Gospel and bless them unbelievably.

“Heaven the way Scripture describes it — a bright, vibrant, and physical New Earth.”<sup>3</sup>

“The truth is, in our seminaries, churches, and families, we have given amazingly little attention to the place where we will live forever with Christ and his people — the New Earth.”<sup>4</sup>

“Oh, I see,” said a friend. “It’s heaven on earth.”

## Something Is Wrong Here

“It’s a great irony...Secular humanism doesn’t offer a higher rationale for its convictions, and people of faith recognize no moral imperative to protect the planet. It appears something is rather wrong here.”<sup>5</sup>

“The Christian worldview holds that humans have special, unparalleled significance in the universe. From this perspective, it matters if humans disappear from the earth and it would be a great tragedy for us to destroy ourselves by destroying our world.”<sup>6</sup>

Dare we ignore God’s everlasting “covenant between Me and the earth”? (Gen. 9:13). Dare we ignore creation care?

**“People of faith claim to know the Artist but lack any compunction for protecting the artwork. Why have God followers not been defending this masterpiece from degradation?”<sup>7</sup>**

## Root of the Problem?

What hinders us from taking care of our world in the way that its Creator would expect and be pleased with? First would be the idea that we will leave the earth by going to heaven and therefore the earth is of little consequence. Second, I believe, would be the false but somewhat popular idea that “everything is going to burn.” Or to put it in the vernacular, “everything is going to burn, baby.” Or “the planet is going to be destroyed anyway.” Where did this idea come from? Let’s examine the source — 2 Peter 3:10b (NLT) in describing the Day of the Lord: “...and the earth and everything in it will be *exposed* to judgment.” *Note: exposed, not destroyed.* Likewise, Psalm 18:15b: “...and the foundations of the earth were *laid bare.*”

God established the earth and its myriad complexities. He is not about to destroy it. God is about restoration, transformation, rehabilitation, renewal. As was pointed out by a diligent Bible student, the verse we most often turn to for the promise of restoration is Acts 3-2-1 — countdown. That is, Acts 3:21: “For he must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through His prophets.” God’s plan from the beginning will not fail. He does not have to move it to heaven. He does not have to work with plan B. Paradise lost will be followed by paradise regained.<sup>8</sup> In store for us is The Great Reversal!

<sup>1</sup> Randy Alcorn, Foreword to *Gardening Eden*

<sup>2</sup> Michael Abbate, *Gardening Eden*, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Gardening Eden*, p. 20

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Although this is the title of a Jehovah’s Witness publication, the Paradise described there does not bear true witness to the Scriptures, in my opinion.

And think of this: when Abraham comes to life in the resurrection, there will be no need for him to ask God why He burned up his (Abraham's) inheritance!

"The heavens belong to the LORD, but he has given the earth to all humanity" (Ps. 115:16). Why is this verse not known, taught and used as basic? The earth is on loan to us, rather like the breath of life (which returns to God Who gave it). To miss this is to be at sea, to be at a loss as to where to put your stake in and thereby be grounded by Truth.

### How Do We Live Out the Things That We Believe?

The two following paradigms are representative of most Christian views: 1) This world is a gift from God and therefore we must do our best to preserve it and protect it from harm. 2) This planet is a tool, only useful for meeting temporary needs, and destined to be done away with in favor of a cosmic, heavenly home.<sup>9</sup> Our viewpoint necessitates a theological decision as to God's Plan and Purpose; it necessitates a *theology of the earth*.

"There is a danger of sometimes losing our faith and being left with only its application. The New Testament gospels reveal how the Jewish Pharisees were guilty of this. They had emphasized personal works and the obedience to their society's rules so much that their rules eventually became what they believed. After a century or so of teaching people to do things, or not to do things, the reasons for the commands were lost, and there was nothing left but the commands."<sup>10</sup>

### Oh, How I Love This One!

"After he created the world, all the living things, and man, God invented *landscape architecture*. He planted a special, protected garden and added all sorts of beautiful trees and a river to water it. It was probably a purely delightful place, lacking nothing but a gardener."<sup>11</sup>

In teaching junior master gardeners I find that having them plant a garden answers the question as to what a miracle is far better than any definition I could give. And it teaches them something that we simply cannot. When, as the teacher, one feels their joy at harvesting something, or even just working in the earth, one senses what it feels like for God to watch our success — He derives pleasure from our successes.<sup>12</sup>

"While the world was still pure and sinless, there was meaningful work to be done in this special garden to ensure its health. Gardening Eden was not Adam's punishment; it was his *purpose*."<sup>13</sup> And we follow the model of our Father and our brother: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener" (John 15:1). The entire planet is our garden. It's just a matter of keeping up your

piece of the planet. A disinterested Christian? I don't think so.

### It's about Restoration!

We are all familiar with the parables about stewardship and so to just leave them there on the page and not to employ them is dangerous for us. And so we must face our positions as corporate stewards of this planet and ask ourselves how we are doing. God is so unbelievably generous to us. "God gives us this universe freely, wanting us to discover the joys of responsible stewardship, of moderation, and the freedom that comes with self-discipline and caring for a flock, of not squandering resources. And by doing these things, God tells us, we'll better understand and appreciate Him. He alone knows the deep joy and satisfaction that will be ours when He catches us fulfilling our calling and says to us, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!'"<sup>14</sup>

"We're told that a time is coming when God will restore *everything*. This is an inclusive promise. It encompasses far more than God merely restoring disembodied people to fellowship in a spirit realm...It is God restoring mankind to what we once were, what he designed us to be — fully embodied, righteous beings. And restoring the entire physical universe to what it once was.

"God will restore everything *on Earth*. The prophets are never concerned about some far-off realm of disembodied spirits. They are concerned about the land, the inheritance, the city of Jerusalem, and the earth they walk on. Messiah will come from Heaven to Earth, not take us away from Earth to Heaven, but to restore Earth to what he intended so he can live with us here forever.

"Will the earth we know come to an end? Yes. To a *final* end? No."<sup>15</sup>

### Loving Your Neighbor?!

"How can you love your neighbor if you don't know...how to keep your filth out of his water supply and your poison out of his air?...How can you be a [good] neighbor without applying principle — without bringing virtue to a practical issue? How will you practice virtue without skill?"<sup>16</sup> And so, as with most things in life, it's a matter of knowledge combined with application and performance.

What does God say about environmental stewardship? He is all too clear: He will destroy those who destroy the earth (Rev. 11:18b) and it is His, on loan to us, and requiring looking after. And since what He made was good and since He loves the world He created — so must we (Ps. 145:17).

<sup>9</sup> How to Live Like a Conditionalist, *From Death to Life*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> *Gardening Eden*, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Instead of saying I am a Master Gardener, I prefer to say that I work in my Master's Garden.

<sup>13</sup> *Gardening Eden*, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> *Gardening Eden*, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land*.

“The more I study the vast wonders of this natural interlocking system, the more I’m amazed by God. He didn’t simply call for casting individual species and create separate environments for them all. He scripted an incredible living drama of interaction, dependence, and interdependence upon interdependence. **It is the performance of this creation in motion that is so ridiculously awesome.**”<sup>17</sup>

### Moved by Beauty

Why are we moved by beauty? Knowing that we are unique in this among all God’s creation ought to make us stop and think. What is the *point* of beauty, either of the eye or of the ear? It is not necessary, to be sure, but the benefits are monumental. Our reaction to beauty is a quality given from the One in Whose image we are made and we share this with Him. Our appreciation of beauty is a gift from a Father Who also appreciates it.

Science and psychology together make a connection between health and nature. The restorative power of God’s creation is undeniable. The sheer power of the outdoors to refresh and inspire, to instill peace and calm are well attested facts. The therapeutic power of the outdoors is witnessed to by both medicine and theology. Many would agree that they go outdoors to have their senses put in order. Is it just an accident that as you nourish the soil, the soil nourishes you?

And I would add that research has shown that there is a bacteria (a good one) in the soil which stimulates our feel-good hormones. That bacteria is also said to increase learning ability.

And so the pay-off for gardeners is out of proportion to anything they might put into it. And the creation of beauty is the crowning glory, that delight which we share with our Father in harmony.

“So if we did nothing else in our Christian view of nature than to save and enjoy beauty, it would be of value, and worthwhile...When we have learned this — the Christian view of nature — then there can be a real ecology; beauty will flow, psychological freedom will come, and the world will cease to be turned into a desert.”<sup>18</sup> “The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy” (Isa. 35:1-2). It has been suggested that people from a planet without flowers would think we must be mad with joy the whole time to have such things around us. As Einstein said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is.”

### Case in Point

Hundreds of millions of butterflies migrate each year to the mountains of central Mexico, some traveling over 2,000 miles. How, Abbate asks, does a creature barely an inch and a half long, weighing virtually nothing, travel 25 to 100 miles a day? Their arrival in Mexico creates a staggeringly beautiful sight as they cover the pine trees there so densely that the trunks, branches and needles of the trees cannot be seen. Their movements make the trees appear like twinkling gold, a sight so majestic that it is breath-taking.<sup>19</sup> And if it is God’s Plan that this scenario takes place — shouldn’t we do our part to ensure that this fragile beauty continues?

### Moved by Understanding and Appreciation

The Bible speaks about trees more than any other living thing other than humans.<sup>20</sup> It seems that God has a very great fondness for trees since they are woven into the Scriptures from one end to the other.<sup>21</sup> Every significant event in the Bible is marked by a tree or its parts — branches, fruit and seed. There is a tree featured on the first page of Genesis, the first Psalm, the first page of the New Testament and the last page of Revelation.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the tree of life begins and ends the Bible. Our Rabbi Jesus is the true vine, the shoot and descendant of David, and we are that wild olive tree grafted in. And we are to be like trees, firmly planted, firmly rooted, bearing fruit, and never withering.

Understanding the mechanics of trees offers us a glimpse of the world that many miss. Missing the wonder means missing much about the nature of God and His love for us. In fact, you might wonder how it is that you have read the Bible your entire life and missed so many insights and treasures. The more one knows the more one finds he doesn’t know. Appreciation and understanding help bridge the gap between faith and environmentalism. Nature is not a self-acting instrument. We must be aware of the connection between heaven and earth so that we might participate in God’s Plan.

In one class on trees the professor informed us that there is such a vast amount of knowledge that can be ascertained from “reading” a tree’s rings that we could even discern what spring was like in the year Jesus was born in Bethlehem!<sup>23</sup>

No stone was left unturned in the planning of the universe.

“By my great power I have made the earth and all its people and every animal. I can give these things of mine to anyone I choose” (Jer. 27:5).

We must *tread carefully upon the earth* out of respect for its Designer, Creator and Sustainer. ✧

<sup>17</sup> *Gardening Eden*, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*.

<sup>19</sup> *Gardening Eden*.

<sup>20</sup> And, of course, with the exception of God Himself.

<sup>21</sup> The word *tree* or *trees* is found 311 times in Scripture.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Sleeth, *Reforesting Faith*.

<sup>23</sup> Known as the hidden language of trees.