
The Environment, God's Judgment and Our Priorities

Scripture frequently describes environmental disaster as an act of judgment against sin. This form of judgment is not necessarily directed toward *individual* people, but toward nations or people as groups. Also, it does not necessarily come as the result of "supernatural" judgment by God; rather, it can come by way of "providential" judgment - God using the natural forces of creation to accomplish his purposes.

Examples of God and his relationship to environmental issues can be found in the last few chapters of Deuteronomy, and in some of the prophetic books. The book of Revelation speaks of the final environmental cataclysm. Even the book of Job and some of the Psalms make reference to God and environmental issues.

The real, ultimate issue is *spiritual*, not *ecological*. And it is in the spiritual realm that the greatest *long-term* benefit to the environment can occur.

All creation is revelatory of the Creator. A nation that has open hostility toward the Creator *cannot* have a proper relationship with creation, which everywhere reveals Him. Inevitably, the environment will suffer at the hands of such a people. Of course, creation will *still* be revelatory of the Creator, but it will have an increasing tendency to reveal aspects of his *judgment*, rather than of his *love*.

On the other hand, a nation that ceases to be openly hostile toward the Creator (which is not necessarily the same as "becoming saved") will be in a position to receive the blessings that come from the Creator. It may take years, however, for the consequences of their rebellion to be minimized. (Some consequences might never be totally eliminated.)

I am not saying that people cannot do "physical" things (as contrasted to "spiritual" things) that are beneficial for the environment. But there will be limitations to the success of those efforts - or even very detrimental effects. A nation such as described above (hostile to God) may focus on (and even partly succeed in) various environmental causes, but it will do so at the expense of something else. That "something" may be people (directly or indirectly) or another aspect of the environment.

In addition to these potentially detrimental effects, there is an even more serious issue at hand. *Anytime* one's focus on the earth becomes *greater than* one's focus on God, idolatry is being committed. As a result, much of the modern-day "environmentalism" is nothing more than a masked form of idolatry. "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator-who is forever praised. Amen." (Romans 1:25)

Our ultimate obligations are to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Compared with these obligations, environmental issues are secondary. Yes, they can be done as an expression of love toward God and neighbor (which includes our enemies), but they also can be (and frequently are) done in a manner that violates these commands.

Here are some examples of ways that environmental concerns can violate these commands: A person who spends so much time "saving the whales" that he no longer has time to take care of known needs of his neighbors (especially of neighbors who cannot give "pay backs"), is sinning against those neighbors. A person who has time to walk along the highway and pick up trash, but doesn't have time to "walk" with God or pick up a Bible, is sinning against God. A person who devotes all his time and energies to improve the "quality of life" (or to promote an environmentally-correct "American dream"), yet who takes little thought about improving people's "quality of *eternal* life," is sinning against his neighbor and really has no love for him at all.

All the activities in these examples *can* be good and noble, *if* the person's primary focus is on his ultimate obligations. They become wrong when they, though *secondary* issues, become one's primary focus.

As for the environment itself, there is some good news and some bad news. First the bad news: The book of Revelation warns us of some very terrifying things that will happen to the environment. God will bring many environmental judgments against mankind because of its increasing wickedness and its hostility toward him. These judgments will include his providential use of *naturally occurring events*. These judgments may also include natural consequences of *mankind's previous misuse* of the environment. "The time has come . . . for destroying those who destroy the earth." (Revelation 11:18)

Now for the good news: This final environmental "collapse" is only temporary. Ultimately, God will replace the devastated world with a new (restored) earth, in which all environmental problems will cease. Even at the present, there is good news: We can (in the "here and now") have a positive effect on the situation. We can attempt to minimize our own contribution to this environmental "downward spiral." If we do so in a manner that doesn't go against our greatest obligations (love toward God and neighbor), our efforts will be pleasing to God. And we will have at least a temporary positive effect on our little "niche" in the world.

We can also have a greater, long-term impact. When we work to bring people into the kingdom of God, this will ultimately have the greatest positive effect on their environment - their eternal one! Remember: we all - Christians and non-Christians alike - are only temporary residents on this world that is destined to perish.