

# Inhabiting Eden

*Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis*

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Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
—Isaiah 43:18–19

We are discovering that the human heart is not changed by facts alone but by engaging visions and empowering values. Humans need to see the large picture and feel they can act to make a difference.

—Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, “Daring to Dream: Religion and the Future of the Earth,”  
*Yale University Reflections Magazine*

# The Problem of Change, Then and Now

## The Challenge

One January I was traveling in South India with my daughter Claire, who lives in Nepal. When our host in Coimbatore took us to the train station to return to Bangalore, he boarded with us, settling us across the aisle from a nun in full habit, explaining to her in Tamil who we were, where we were going, and for all we knew, how ignorant we were about Indian transit. She nodded in our direction. She was wearing the white and blue habit of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, and I was entranced. All my romanticism about Mother Teresa, about nuns, and about travel in India drowned out apprehensions about finding our way.

We set out among the mountains. Throughout South India's flatlands, everywhere we had traveled, along every road, we had passed masses of people working, walking, driving, biking, sitting, eating, sweeping, bathing, cooking, laughing—as if all humanity had congregated on the tip of South Asia to sink it. But there was no road beside this track, and for the first time in three weeks we saw open countryside, mountains almost close enough to touch. I smiled at my daughter and then at the sister, who was eating her lunch, a box of chicken. We ate a couple of bananas and I looked for a waste bin and, finding none, wondered if it was proper to throw the peels from the train. The sister finished her chicken,

stood up, leaned over the two people sitting between her and the open window, and tossed box, drinking cup, napkins, fork, bones, the whole litter of a fast food meal, into the mountain, and then sat down and took out a prayer book.

It's tempting to shrug and say, that's a different culture. But on the Ohio River near our house, hundreds of thousands congregate for the annual fireworks display that wakes up all creation, Thunder over Louisville. The trash that strews roads and sidewalks from the river to downtown the next morning puts American manners badly on display. This is something more: a mentality that the earth is our waste bin.

Once I was talking to a colleague, a left-leaning scholar, in her office. She commended me for some environmental deed or another as she threw an empty, recyclable Coke bottle into her waste basket.

I tell these stories not because they are so egregious but because they are so common. If being religious, or being in public, or even being verbally committed to ecological causes cannot help us reexamine small actions, what will change us in the large ones? I myself am just as guilty: if the nun trashed the mountainside, I had trashed the stratosphere by jetting across the world, even if it was to see my daughter. Although ecological awareness has often inspired me to stay put, it has not led me to cease flying altogether. And perhaps this is part of the issue—we are social beings, and while some may be more committed than others to improving ecological behavior, we are limited both by personal habits and by what society as a whole makes possible.

In his book *The Creation*, written as a letter to Christian preachers, Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson calls religion and science “the two most powerful forces in the world today.” He comments:

If religion and science could be united on the common ground of biological conservation, the problem would soon be solved. If there is any moral precept shared by people of all beliefs, it is that we owe ourselves and future generations a beautiful, rich, and healthful environment.<sup>1</sup>

We may search for technological answers to the multiple ecological problems we face, but the questions are really human ones: What do we value? How do our lives and values line up? Do we see ourselves as part of the magnificent web of life, or do we, like Esau, trade our birthright for a momentary mess of stew?

Wilson argues that science can provide information about the biosphere, “the totality of all life, creator of all air, cleanser of all water, manager of all soil, but itself a fragile membrane that barely clings to the face of the planet.”<sup>2</sup> Religious leaders, he said, help shape awareness of and gratitude for this complex and tender sphere. There can be no change in action without changes in perception of who we are and to whom and what we owe allegiance.

This book is written as a resource for people who look to the Bible for guidance in contemporary life. Scripture doesn’t by any means tell us all that we might like to understand. But if we remove some modern blinders we will find it says a great deal more than we think about our ties with the rest of creation, ties we must now reclaim, ties that will not only lead us into restoring our surroundings, but into joys that consumer culture cannot offer.

Scripture tells us that our original forebears lost the garden of Eden before they realized what they had. Not ever having been there myself, I have trouble picturing a world more exquisite than our own. It’s not just the snowcapped peak of Fishtale Mountain behind my daughter’s house in Pokhara, nor the vast red hues of the Grand Canyon, nor the Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah Valley. It’s the mockingbird practicing its repertoire in the burning bush; it’s the maple tree in the backyard, changing with the seasons from greens to oranges to intricate, rugged browns. Each locale has its bits of Eden, habitats to inherit, enjoy, tend, and bequeath to our descendants.

We are approaching a turning point in history, one that will tell us whether we truly are the *Homo sapiens*, the “wise ones,” we call ourselves. It’s time to dig into our spiritual heritage to find wisdom for crucial decisions that face us all.

### The Problem of Precedent

We are not alone in this. Every generation faces challenges for which our upbringing has not directly prepared us—challenges economic, military, moral, religious, and social. To overcome problems our parents and grandparents did not foresee, we find ourselves forced to reexamine established assumptions. Change is hard enough for individuals. It is far more difficult to motivate a whole society to work together, particularly in a time as contentious and individualistic as our own. Until a critical mass of people are convinced of the necessity, convinced in heart and soul as well as mind, change does not take root. Such conviction is hard to find when the crisis is unprecedented. What the world has not seen before, we resist seeing now.

Christians who rely on Scripture for guidance are sometimes dismayed that the Bible does not give clear direction about contemporary issues unknown to the ancient world. We search the Bible to see whether passages overlooked in the past, when asked new questions, may offer unforeseen wisdom. This study contends that careful reading of Scripture can indeed lend insight for approaching the current ecological crisis.

This crisis is both multifaceted and urgent. Despite strides made over the past several decades, challenges continue to intensify:

- *Water*: Because of overuse and misuse, and because of increasing population, drought, and pollution, fewer and fewer of the earth's people enjoy access to clean, drinkable water. What was once seen as a basic right is being commodified as the "new gold." Many say that the next war will not be fought over oil, but water. Oceans are warming and acidifying, and seas are overfished. Nitrogen runoff from farming has created algae blooms that kill ocean plants and animals, creating large dead zones along the coasts.
- *Land use*: As the population not only expands numerically but demands more, wild lands worldwide have vanished into suburban sprawl and industrial farms. Topsoil

is disappearing. Tropical rainforests are being clearcut for timber and for cattle grazing. Species that made their homes in these places have become extinct, upsetting nature's balance.

- *Trash and toxic waste:* Nonbiodegradable waste is filling the planet. In each of the earth's oceans floats a large patch of plastic waste. Some say that the Pacific Garbage Patch is as large as the United States, poisoning sea creatures that try to feed from it. Industries and individuals use the air, water, and ground as toxic garbage dumps, sickening people and other life. Newer generations of electronic toys have created new toxicities as computer waste is dumped into landfills or sent to developing countries for dismantling, exposing families to toxic metals.
- *Energy:* Increasingly over the past century, most of our energy has come from nonrenewable coal, oil, and natural gas. As these resources become less accessible, it takes more energy and more risk to mine them. Wars are being fought over access. As the population increases and as more people prosper, demand and competition are rising.
- *Climate Change:* According to environmental scientists worldwide, other problems pale next to the swiftly growing crisis of global climate change, signaled by severe weather events such as heat waves, droughts, deluges, and hurricanes. Immediate, broadscale energy conservation measures and development of renewable energy can prevent destruction of life as we know it. Though scientists agree that the problems are severe but solvable, political debates—especially in the United States—continue to stall meaningful action.

### **We've Always Done It This Way**

As humans we can cure these ills, but only if we accept the challenge of change. We tend toward inertia, toward thinking that whatever we grew up with was normative, even our God-given



right. In the United States we have believed in unlimited resources and ever-increasing wealth, yesterday's luxuries becoming today's entitlements. Yet since the world began, change has never ceased. Insofar as change promises to bring more of the life to which we would like to become accustomed, we embrace it. But there is no rule that says change will always be onward and upward; in fact, history shows that changes can also worsen conditions. We need not look past Hurricane Katrina in 2005 or the economic crisis of 2008 to see this. When such shifts occur, failure to adjust expectations can exacerbate otherwise solvable problems. This is not negativity, but realism.

Yet the need for change is nothing new. The human story consists of a series of crisis points—moments when people have been moved to reexamine assumptions, to change direction, to turn from what they were doing and follow another path, even against their convenience. As we can see in Scripture as well as in recent history, farsighted change in direction stands at the beginning of our most world-shaping moments. Scripture tells such stories: of Noah, called to save his family and every animal species from a great flood that destroyed and remade the world; of Abraham and Sarah, called to move to a land they had never seen; of the pharaoh's daughter, called to adopt a baby found along the riverbank; of Esther, called to confront the Persian emperor, saving her nation; of ordinary fishermen called to travel the Mediterranean world preaching a Jewish savior.

Not all changes are individual. In fact, named individuals hardly ever act alone. Scriptures tell, for instance, of the remaking of the Hebrew people at Sinai, promising to follow the God who delivered them from slavery; and of the reformation of the Jewish nation after the Babylonian exile, rebuilding the ruined city of Jerusalem. The book of Acts records adaptations made by the first Christian communities as they negotiated changed relationships with both Jews and Gentiles. Scripture is filled with such turning points. We will examine two of these below, one reflected in the book of the prophet Isaiah, and a second from the story of Paul in Acts. But first let's consider movements in recent history.

## **Abolition of British Slave Trade**

The 2007 movie *Amazing Grace* tells of a British politician named William Wilberforce. His transformation began in 1786 when a group of citizens urged him to help end the buying and selling of Africans as slaves. This two-hundred-year-old practice had supported the British economy for twice as long as the auto industry has for ours today.

Up to that point, Wilberforce's Christian faith had led him to uphold British society as he knew it. But as he listened and began to learn, he recognized the unthinkable suffering this practice inflicted on others. We can imagine how it might have been for Wilberforce, confronting realities he knew but had not taken to heart, and facing earnest Christians who claimed that as a politician he could and should help change British law. Wilberforce was no social liberal—in fact, he opposed workers' rights to organize unions and women's leadership in abolitionist meetings. He was a complex person with growing convictions rooted in evangelical faith, a person becoming convinced, despite societal norms, that slaveholding was immoral.

In 1791 he introduced legislation to abolish the slave trade. The bill lost 163 to 88. Others called him unpatriotic, disloyal, and insensitive to the economic needs and even the international security of Britain. Slave trade as a source of energy and wealth was as entrenched then as fossil fuel is today. Few white people could imagine Western civilization functioning without others' forced labor.

But against all odds he persisted, introducing his bill every year for the next sixteen. In the meantime, he and a growing number of others worked to change opinions by offering tours of slave ships, putting manacles on display, and publishing slaves' autobiographies. Every year they gained more converts. And finally, one day in 1807, by a vote of 283 to 16, British slave trade was ended. This step led to slavery's abolition in the British Empire in 1834. American slaves had another generation to wait for freedom, and another century still to obtain legal rights due to all. Racism lingers still, with all its frustrations, dangers, and harms, but where

would we be today without the courageous faith that kept a few people pressing for change?

### **Women's Equal Rights**

For a Quaker minister named Lucretia Mott, the call to promote societal changes began as a rude awakening. In 1840 she and her husband James traveled to England as delegates to an abolitionist convention. James was welcomed, but Lucretia and another woman, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were forced to sit behind heavy curtains where they could hear but not participate. Having come to advocate slaves' rights, Mott found herself deprived of speech and action. So in 1848 she and Stanton organized the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Thirty years later, Stanton and Susan B. Anthony persuaded California Senator Aaron Sargent to introduce a U.S. constitutional amendment for women's suffrage. It was defeated. The amendment was reintroduced each year for the next forty-one until it passed in 1920, eighty years after Lucretia Mott's rude awakening and forty years after her death. Women's suffrage took twice as long as it took the Israelites to wander their wilderness. Though the Equal Rights Amendment proposed in 1923 still stands unratified nearly a century later, women nevertheless occupy almost every office of political power.

### **Indeed, We Have Always Done It This Way**

History consists of many such unprecedented turns from prior norms, turns sometimes angrily or even violently opposed. During the rise of Nazism in Germany seventy years ago, three-fourths of all Americans opposed letting so-called "refu-Jews" emigrate to America. Christians had found numerous ways to interpret Scripture to support their anti-Jewish prejudice. But the shock of the Holocaust led Christians to repudiate ancient beliefs. They began to learn the strength found in interfaith cooperation not only with Jews but with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other religious folk around the world.

Changes have taken place in our ecological thinking as well. A generation ago we freely used aerosol sprays filled with chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), chemicals that destroyed the ozone layer, contributing to skin cancers, cataracts, and global warming. In 1978 the United States helped lead the world in halting these pollutants. Aerosol manufacturers themselves voluntarily changed their practices. The ozone layer now shows signs of recovery, and environmentalists celebrate this turnaround as evidence that concerned individuals, businesses, and governments can together change our behavior and the planet's future.

Every day we hear public calls to change, and never so many as when, during a crisis such as Hurricanes Katrina or Sandy, we are moved by the pain and grief of others. Not every call is divinely inspired. But when we discern God's voice beckoning us to follow a fork in the road, we can walk securely, knowing that God makes the impossible possible, creating a future from which the human race can gaze back with gratitude.

### **See, I'm Doing Something New**

Scripture itself provides models for finding guidance in unprecedented times. The exodus from Egypt, for instance, became a powerful precedent for later generations who had likewise become refugees outside their land. According to that story, miracle after miracle had confirmed God's determination not to let any power stand in the way of Israelite freedom, resulting in their dramatic flight from Egypt to safety beyond the Red Sea, and finally to self-governance.

By the time of the Judean exile to Babylon in the early sixth century, the exodus story had become the stuff of legend. Descendants of the Israelites found themselves once again living under foreign domination, having endured unprecedented destruction in their homeland, their capital city, and their temple. But differences between the old story and exilic conditions outnumbered similarities.

When a shift in international control brought the Persian Empire to power, Jews were permitted to return to Judah. But

many understandably resisted leaving what had become a second home to return to a devastated city that only the oldest remembered. As Judeans searched the writings that were becoming their Scriptures, there seemed little precedent for changing direction so dramatically. In fact, some parts of Scripture seemed to indicate that they had lost Jerusalem through their own heedlessness and should not expect to regain it.

But a particular poet saw it differently, and penned the words found in Isaiah 43:16–19:

The LORD,  
 who makes a way in the sea,  
 and a path in the mighty waters,  
 who brings out chariot and horse,  
 army and warrior;  
 they lie down and cannot rise,  
 they are extinguished, quenched like a wick—  
 the LORD says, “Do not remember past events;  
 do not ponder ancient history.  
 See, I’m doing something new;  
 now it sprouts up—don’t you notice it?  
 I’m making a way in the desert,  
 streams in the wilderness.”

That farsighted writer glimpsed analogies between the exodus long before and the contemporary moment. The God who had long ago brought their ancestors across the Red Sea to a new homeland was also guiding events at hand. The God who overcame obstacles back then, who “made a way in the sea,” could also make a way across the desert. The God who had given water to thirsty ancestors would provide what the exiles needed, both literally and spiritually. The return from Babylon was not the same as the exodus from Egypt. Where analogies could be drawn, the poet suggested that the audience “remember past events from long ago” (Isa. 46:9, AT). But where they could not, the poet suggested that precedent must be held loosely: “Do not remember past events; do not ponder ancient history. See, I’m doing

something new.” As a result of such prophetic insights, Jerusalem was reestablished, changing the course of Western history.

### **Ananias’s Courage and Saul’s Transformation**

The book of Acts tells of an unprecedented event in the lives of two faithful Jews six centuries later, after Judaism had spread across the eastern Mediterranean world. One was Saul from Tarsus in southern Turkey. The other was Ananias, who lived in Damascus.

When Saul first heard the puzzling message being preached by others, a message highlighting the deeds, death, and reported resurrection of a teacher named Jesus, he reacted as many faithful people do to new ideas. He wanted to shut it down. Saul began a campaign of imprisoning and even killing fellow Jews who followed Jesus. Acts 9:1–9 relates his journey to further this work:

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord? The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

The world as Christians know it has always been that in which Saul was stopped in his path. So it challenges our imaginations

to see that day as it might have looked to him. What would it be like to pursue one course so zealously, only to learn that, sincere as you may have been, you were wrong? To learn that you must stop and do something else, now, without finishing the project?

Ananias was a Jewish follower of Jesus living in Damascus, the city where Saul intended to make his arrests. His predicament is even harder to imagine than Saul's:

The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (Acts 9:10–16)

What mix of fear and anger, dread and hope must he have felt at the prospect of revealing himself to one who could have him imprisoned or killed? Once he has done this, would his family ever be safe again? Could he put others' lives at risk to help a violent person like Saul?

Saul waited on a street called Straight. Since individual roads are seldom named in Scripture, this one must have borne significance for the author, who had begun his narrative by quoting Isaiah's ancient words: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Luke 3:4, quoting Isa. 40:3). Saul's zealous, well-intended, but violent path was about to make a U-turn for world history. With his leadership, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Leah and Rachel, and of Moses, that Jewish God would become the God of Gentiles too.

Christians can hardly imagine our history without this fundamental swerve in Saul. But it lay well beyond the expectations of earliest believers. At that moment the church's future hinged on frightened individuals being called to stop what they were doing and to do something else. Out of that moment came Saul's—that is, Paul's—creative and learned reinterpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures to make room for a theology of Jesus Christ, reinterpretations foundational for Gentile Christian self-understanding. In the days of both the exile and the early church, searching Scripture to find continuity between past and present changed the world.

As Jesus said, “Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matt. 13:52). Modern people who look to ancient Scriptures for guidance find that they must both search the text and hear it anew. They do not romp down safe, well-worn, familiar paths, but look expectantly to find both old and new—what Scripture has been saying all along, whether we heard it or not, and what new word applies today.

### **This Book's Plan**

History, including Western religious tradition, has been characterized by a human self-centeredness that has taken the rest of the earth for granted. But Scripture tells a different story, one in which human culture finds itself embedded within, and dependent upon, a larger cosmos that invites our respect and gratitude. Finding our way out of assumptions that are killing us into relationship with Creator and creation is crucial.

In chapter 2 we will read the creation story in Genesis 1 and consider our ties to other species and to the earth, our original vocation, and the kind of world the Bible's first chapter describes as our habitation. Care for the earth begins with grateful appreciation for its splendor.

Genesis 2–4 are filled with ecological language that we will examine in chapter 3. Both the deeds of Adam and Eve and those of their son Cain led to social alienation. They also led



to alienation from the earth itself. According to these stories, what we do to one another directly affects our relationship to the ground from which our sustenance comes, and what happens to the ground determines our own life conditions.

In chapter 4 we will examine what Scripture says about human pride and its continued twisting of relationships. Humans imagine that we exist to take and gain. But we were made to give ourselves away. Ignoring God and God's creation, we find ourselves serving lesser things. The commodities that we have come to crave weigh us down, exacerbate injustices here and abroad, and degrade the earth with debris. To put human-made objects in their proper place as tools, we must learn the art of contentment.

Our relationship to the plant world will be discussed in chapter 5. Beginning with the manna in the wilderness and the food rules from Mount Sinai, we will examine contemporary agricultural practices. Some practices depend on cooperation from businesses and governments, but many can be adopted by communities, families, and individuals.

Chapter 6 concerns our relationship to animals. The Pentateuch prescribes a symbiosis between people and domestic beasts, and Scripture teaches respect for living creatures. Yet whole food systems today begin with the premise that neither animal suffering nor ecological degradation should stand in the way of human appetites. Changing our treatment of animals not only can answer biblical ethics but also can contribute to ecological and human health.

It is common in contemporary debates to pit social and ecological issues against one another. Quicker than one can say "spotted owl," caricatures replace reason and discussion is closed. Yet chapter 7 will argue that ecological health and human justice go hand in hand. Although the Bible has much to say about treatment of those who are economically weaker than ourselves, perhaps none speaks more clearly than Matthew 7:12, well known as the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," or as farmer and writer Wendell Berry paraphrases, "Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do unto you."<sup>3</sup>

The Golden Rule spans not only space but time. Chapter 8 examines biblical injunctions to assure prosperity for our

descendants. The notion that children should suffer from parents' sins is viewed as every bit as unjust today as it was then. In this chapter we will discuss how our generation is spending our children's ecological inheritance, especially by overusing fossil fuels.

The final chapter asks what kind of future Christians are building for. Apocalyptic preachers prefer worldwide, violent disasters that the faithful escape through "rapture" from the ruined planet. Such ideas lend themselves to ecological recklessness. Other visions of the future may be less entertaining, but are far more central to Scripture, such as the biblical virtue of moderation. Changes require not only creativity but courage, not only vision but gumption. Yet self-control is just what our tradition wisely teaches. The reward we may gain, what Jesus called "the pearl of great price," is the restoration of our good life on earth.

Each chapter includes not only questions for group and individual reflection but also practical suggestions for individuals and families to try at home. The notes and "For Further Reading" bibliography in the back of the book may also be of interest. Our own church's green team began its work by reading a book together. This study can help such groups, as well as adult classes and Bible study groups. Since each chapter grows from Scripture, the book could accompany a preaching and worship series. Key passages are listed in appendix A.

### **Questions for Thought and Discussion**

1. What do you think are the greatest ecological challenges facing us today? What do you think are causes of concern? Reasons for hope?
2. What societal changes have you seen in your lifetime—changes you welcome? Changes you do not welcome? What factors make society able to change? What factors make it slow to change?
3. What heroes of cultural change do you admire most? What do you think enabled them to be more clear-sighted than others? How did they communicate their vision?

4. What biblical heroes do you admire? What is it like to imagine their own viewpoint on their circumstances and actions? What if Saul or Ananias had lacked sufficient courage?
5. Thinking ahead to the subjects of the rest of the study, what connections do you perceive between faith and ecological responsibility?

### **Try This at Home**

For the next week, as you read the Bible or hear Scripture read in church, pay attention to what is said about creation, the earth, and its creatures. Try your hand at a little writing. It may be a poem, a prayer, or simply a list. Try putting on paper two things: first, the gifts of life that you cherish most, and second, what concerns you most about the state of the world. If you have children, you might consider inviting them to express their joys and concerns as well.

Also, for the next week, observe your news sources. How often do you find ecological problems raised? Who discusses them? On what basis? What do they commend?