

Series: **Aliens 3.0**
Today's Title: **"Nature Worship"**

April 28, 2024 – *Selected passages*

Objective: To help people understand the blessing of God's creation and our responsibility as stewards.

Opening prayer

Earth Day was this past Tuesday – April 22nd.

When Earth Day was birthed, Richard Nixon was in the White House and was the first American president to make improving the environment a policy goal.

The events of that first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, were intended to build awareness of real environmental problems – and there were plenty of problems... like rivers catching fire. (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-christians-should-support-earth-day/>)

Consider Cleveland's Cuyahoga River in the 1960s.

There is definitely something wrong when rivers are on fire.

Cleveland was a manufacturing hub and the river, which empties into Lake Erie, had long been a dumping place for sewage and industrial waste.

But on June 22, 1969, from the train tracks which were on a bridge over the river, a spark flared down to the river below, igniting industrial debris floating on the surface of the water. Flames spread across the river, in some places reaching five stories high. (<https://www.history.com/news/epa-earth-day-cleveland-cuyahoga-river-fire-clean-water-act>)

Also in 1969, the Rogue River also burned near Detroit. The Chicago River and Buffalo River also lit up with flames.

In the 1950's and 1960's, little care or concern was given as to what damage would result from business and industry dumping sewage and industrial waste directly into rivers. These rivers burning – and the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969 – were events which prompted congress to pass:

- Clean Water Act (CWA)...
- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)...

This also led to the formation of a new government agency.

- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)...

And of course... Earth Day.

When Earth Day was first introduced, it was embraced across political lines – because it was obvious that some changes needed to take place.

The environment was being ignored – and outright trashed.

However, it didn't take long before the new government agencies and Earth Day itself was taken over for political and ideological purposes.

In 1968, Dr. Paul Ehrlich's book, "The Population Bomb" added to the frenzy and panic of a polluted planet by saying the planet was becoming overpopulated.

Ehrlich proposed the solution to the increasing population on the planet was government regulation of family size and abortion on demand.

A few years later, in 1972, the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future published a report calling for population control using government-provided contraceptives for minors, abortion on demand, and voluntary sterilization.

(<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-christians-should-support-earth-day/>)

It didn't take long for 'Earth Day' to be hijacked by the political left to advance its agenda and used as a political weapon.

This created a great divide, alienating those on the conservative side – the political right – who also care about the environment – but they could no longer go along with the expanded agenda of Earth Day.

Fast forward to today...Pastor and author, Dr. James Emery White, says regarding many Christians and the environment:

“Politicization has invaded our thinking to such a degree that when it comes to environmental concerns, challenges, responsibilities, and commitments, we think about our political moorings before we look to what the Bible actually says. Or more to the point, *instead* of what the Bible actually says. We carry our political views like they are religious views, and we often make those political views our true religion.”

(Church & Culture blog, **A Theology (Not Ideology) of Creation Care**, by James Emery White, April 20, 2023 - <https://www.churchandculture.org/blog/2023/4/20/a-theology-of-creation-care>)

There is no denying the great divide in our nation on issues related to the environment.

I can tell you that the conservative side is not for dirty water, dirty air, etc.

Conservatives want a clean planet – like those on the left.

The question is how to make that happen.

The conservative position is to have essential, but minimal government regulation in place so that business and technological development can occur within market pressures and tolerances, but without overly burdensome and very costly government bureaucracy and regulation.

Liberals want to empower government – empower the EPA and other government agencies – because they don't think business can be trusted to be responsible players.

OK... that's a very simplistic description of the cultural and political sides to this issue.

But my point this morning is not to forge a political path.

My point is 3-fold.

- 1) Define / describe the issue (I've just attempted that).
- 2) Shed the light of truth on the issue.
- 3) What does the Bible say about the environment.

Let's now look at some truth we don't hear in the media...

Even with the political divide around this issue, there has been great progress made over the past 50 years in reducing pollution *in the Western world*.

New technologies have been invented which eliminates or captures many harmful pollutants (e.g. catalytic converters, smokestack scrubbers, etc.).

Over the past 50 years, we've been able to restore habitat, lakes, and rivers back to healthy and in many cases pristine condition.

The Paul Ehrlich's of the world were convinced that the world's population in 1968 was approaching its maximum limit – that the earth could not sustain any more people.

In 1969, the world's population was 3.6 billion.

(3,620,655,275 - <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/world-population-by-year/>)

Today – the world's population is just over 8 billion.

(8,045,311,447 - <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/world-population-by-year/>)

Paul Ehrlich and those who shared his views – were very wrong.

But overpopulation scares are not the only headlines that have advanced the idea that we are destroying the planet.

We repeatedly read and hear the headlines:

“Climate Emergency”

“Superstorms”

“Historical Flooding”

“Climate Caused Wildfires”

Climate change is almost always stated as the reason for these various disasters and extreme weather conditions – which activists and politicians use to create the urgency by which we must pass new laws and additional governmental regulations.

But the reality doesn't match up with the headlines.

In a speech delivered at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar on April 24, 2023, in Irvine, Texas,

Bjorn Lomborg, Ph.D., president of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, among many other things he does.

He is a social scientist, focused on the economics of the climate issue. *He is not a climate scientist* – and he does not discount that we are experiencing changes in our climate. But then again, that's what climate does... it changes and fluctuates over time – due to various causes.

But Dr. Lomborg points out some interesting data that we never hear about in the media.

Superstorms: The annual number of hurricanes that make landfall in the U. S. since 1900 is slightly declining, not increasing. The same is true for major hurricanes hitting the U.S. (category 3 & above). We see the same thing if we look at world data for total hurricane energy in the satellite era, 1980-2022. In fact, 2022 was the second lowest recorded year. This wasn't reported anywhere because it doesn't fit the dominant narrative. (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-022-01388-4/figures/1>)

Wildfires: According to satellite data, the amount of burned area due to fire on a global level shows a dramatic decline over the past 25 years. (Chart source: <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aal4108>)

Deaths from Climate: What's typically classified as 'climate disasters' which includes all geophysical, meteorological, and climate events including earthquakes, volcanic activity, landslides, drought, wildfires, storms, and flooding. This is what the reality is tracking deaths from these disasters.

1920 – over 500,000

2020 – just over 38,000

(Chart from: <https://ourworldindata.org/natural-disasters>)

The headlines don't tell the full story.

However, throughout the world, pollution is still happening at unacceptable levels. China and India are the worst offenders (See chart from <https://nypost.com/2021/10/26/why-destroy-economy-to-cut-emissions-when-china-and-india-are-spewing-away/>), along with other developing nations around the world who haven't been able to afford the pollution-limiting technology many Western nations have incorporated into their industrial, manufacturing complexes.

That covers some of the things we don't hear about in the media – some details that help balance out our understanding of this issue.

But our concern today is what does the Bible say about the environment?

What does the Bible say about caring for the environment – for nature?

Creation is God's testimony about Himself.

It's important for us as Christians – but for all people – whether they're Christ-followers or not – to realize the priceless blessing of the world we live in.

God's creation is not something to treat with disrespect – or carelessly.

There are 2 reasons for this.

The 1st reason is that the creation – the planet and the universe speak to the nature and reality of God.

Psalm 19:1-5

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork.

Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard.

Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In them He has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.”

If we damage the creation, we may damage its testimony of the greatness and beauty of God.

We need to see the world as God's creation – but also as a witness to who and what He is.

Psalm 24:1 (Also: Psalm 50:10-11, Colossians 1:15-16)

“The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein...”

Caring for the creation protects creation's declaration of God's glory and might.

The 2nd reason is simply respect for God and worship of God.

As we just read in **Psalm 24:1** – “The earth is the LORD's...”
Isn't the most basic thing we should do is give basic care to what belongs to God?

When God had finished creating, we're told, “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good.”

(Genesis 1:31a)

God was satisfied with the world He created.

Creation is the handiwork of God – and being a good steward of what He has created is one of the ways we worship our Creator.

If one of our kids – made something they were proud of and it reflected something about them – who they are – what they value, it would be terrible and insulting to them if I treated it in a careless way and in a way that caused damage, that would reveal great disrespect for our kids work.

We don't worship creation. But one of the ways we worship God is by caring for what He has created.

The primacy of mankind on the earth.

One of the beliefs / dogmas of the modern environmental movement is that the earth is more important than people.

People are seen as a threat to the earth.

This is why the Paul Ehrlich's of the world thought it was OK to limit or kill human beings in order to protect the planet.

But the Bible is clear: People are the crowning jewel of God's creative work.

Psalm 8:4-9

"...what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You care for him?

Yet You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.

You have given him dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!"

As Kevin DeYoung states, "...people matter most – and people are more valuable than animal life and plant life. People are also producers – not just polluters.

Some environmental activists think all people do is pollute – but God has created us to produce on this planet – and that is the story history tells again and again. We can take sand and make it into silicon chips.

We create beauty, and we invent technology to limit and reduce pollution.

We have the ability to transform a harsh and inhospitable part of the planet – and make it inhabitable and supportive to the point of human flourishing.

The world was not meant to be an untouched relic, but for us to live on and use its resources in a responsible way to support human life.

(<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/building-a-better-earth-day-2/>)

The responsibility of mankind on the earth.

God placed us here – created us as the jewel of His creation – the crowning glory of His creation – with a divine purpose.

In fact, He has given us multiple purposes, but for today, I want to focus on our God-given purpose as it relates to His creation.

We are to steward – care for His creation.

We are responsible to take care of it – and use it for good.

Genesis 1:26, 28

Then God said, “Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over

the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Then, in the next chapter, we read:

Genesis 2:15

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”

“...to work it and keep it.” – Hebrew Lit. – to serve (‘abad’) and guard (‘shamar’).

This is not an insignificant detail.

There’s a strong overtone of stewardship – of responsibility to take care of what God has created – and given us to use.

Dominion does not mean destroy or to dominate.

It has the idea of ‘authority’ and ‘control’ – to use what it can provide, but at the same time, we must ‘serve’ and ‘guard’ the creation with responsible stewardship.

As I mentioned earlier, the Western world has made great progress in reducing pollution and by restoring polluted areas – in some cases to pristine condition.

But other countries – China and India and some parts of Africa – are unwilling to limit their pollution - or they are unable to incorporate the technology that would “decrease their footprint”.

This doesn’t mean we – in the West - can stop trying to make further advances, but we must keep a global

context and realize there are other nations that need to make the changes we've been making for the past 50 years.

Confusing / Replacing the creator with the creation.

When Earth Day was established, it didn't take long for some to form some extreme, unscientific views of the planet.

'Mother Nature'

'Mother Earth'

In fact, worshiping nature – or parts of nature is some of the oldest, most ancient forms of religion in human history.

Nature Worship – is often called 'naturism' or 'physiolatry'.

'Naturism' has no defined or orthodox beliefs or doctrines.

Different places – and different natural events – or objects in nature are treated as deities – sometimes metaphorically, but sometimes literally.

(<https://www.learnreligions.com/what-are-nature-religions-250718>)

Just take a trip to Sedona and you'll see many people – some are intentional – others are ignorantly caught up in a cultural idea or practice – but Sedona is a destination for those who want to experience the spiritual vortexes

that are unique to the red canyon walls and rock formations.

People come from all over the world to have some spiritual experience in the natural settings of Sedona.

But this is nothing new.

Humanity has been replacing the Creator – with the creation – since the beginning of time.

Romans 1:22-25

“Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts...because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”

Nature worship (‘Naturism’) - is expressed in many forms. One of the most common is through bumper stickers – that we see all over Tucson.

Pic: ‘Love Your Mother’ bumper sticker.

For all of human history people have been worshiping the sun, the moon, stars, rivers or mountains, majestic trees or forests, animals, and even specific locations.

Many of these people will deny the supernatural miracles in the Bible – or the existence of God, but they will consider a mountain or a location as sacred – believing it holds the very power of nature and life that

must be protected, preserved, respected no matter the cost, and in some cases, worshiped.

The fallen state of our planet.

The reality is even in its fallen state, the creation declares the glory of God.

But we need to realize our planet is fallen – somewhat defaced and damaged from its original perfection due to sin.

Can you imagine what the mountains – the valleys, the rivers, canyons, the prairies, lakes, forests, and wide-open plains were like - before sin entered the world?

One day we will see these w/out the dimming of sin – when the new heaven and earth is recreated for eternity.

But even in its fallen state, our world is amazingly beautiful and stunning.

But it is in pain – in misery.

Romans 8:21-22

“...the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.”

There are hurricanes – tornadoes – earthquakes – floods – droughts – wildfires – all because of sin – not just because of climate change.

The earth has been cursed – and as a result, there are thorns, thistles, and natural disasters.

So, any theology of the environment we have must include the reality of a fallen world as our starting place. This does not excuse us from working to ‘serve’ and ‘guard’ the garden (Genesis 2:15), but it is a reminder that a perfect world is beyond our reach – on this side of eternity.

Apply it...

1. Beware of biased information about the environment.

What voices are you listening to?

There is biased info on both sides of this issue.

Critically think about what you hear – don’t take things at face value – research it.

If you only hear bad news about the climate – or only hear good news, or no news about the climate, then you’re probably listening to voices that are advancing an agenda, and not the truth – or not the full truth.

2. People are more important than the planet.

3. God expects us to steward and care for His creation.

Jeremiah 29:7

“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,
and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find
your welfare.”