

Why the Environment Matters?

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Preacher: Steve Osmond

[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening everybody. It is wonderful to be with you this evening. Yeah, it's the first time that I've actually really been here to the church, so I'm a guest here this evening and it is very good to be with you. If you are a guest yourself, then, well, I suppose welcome on behalf of the church. As you can tell, I'm not really from around these parts. I'm from a little bit further south in South Africa and so I've been celebrating the rugby very much lately. For those of you, if there are any Welsh people in the audience, I apologize on behalf of the rugby team. But it is wonderful to be with you this evening.

So what I'm going to do, I just want to tee things up before I leap in. I will be throwing a couple of verses out near the end, but what I want to do is give you a taste of what I do when I go out and engage, especially on university campuses or if churches are putting on events where we want to try and show people who are guests, people who maybe don't have a faith, who aren't followers of Jesus, to really show how faith makes sense of things better than other worldviews and better than any other religion. So as I do that, the framework that I use for doing that is initially to really identify with people. So it's identification. What is it that we're actually speaking about? And then from there, move on to basically show persuasion. What do the other worldviews say about these things? How do they make sense of this kind of question?

And then the invitation, which is what does Christianity have to say about this? What does the Bible say? So it might feel slightly different. I'm not going to give you a grand expository sermon, on this topic, because we could do that for several weeks. But as was mentioned, I work for a ministry called SOLAS, the SOLAS Center for Public Christianity. And so what we do is really go and look at some of these big questions. And then as we'll look at tonight, say, okay, well, how do we actually make sense of this? Does that sound good? Cool. I'm going to hand over to you guys. It'll be slightly interactive. I'll give you some time for discussion in a couple of moments.

But yeah, this is our topic for the evening. Have you ever wondered why the environment matters? Does it matter? I mean, it's one of the things that's in the headlines all the time. It's really sort of a tester, if you will, to see sort of where you are on the moral scale. Do you love the environment and do you have several recycling bins or not really? And then you kind of lower down.

But I actually, I haven't always been doing this kind of ministry. I started my studies in the sciences. But even way before that, you know, being South African, I would go on these holidays out into the South African bush felt. And you'd spend the nights in the tent, spend a couple of nights in the tent. And you look up at the African night sky, and it is just amazing. The stars, I mean, if there's no light pollution, and you've gone far enough out, it is just absolutely amazing. And so I remember as a young boy, and even as a teenager, just lying there under the stars and being swept up in the sense of amazement and awe and the sense of wonder. And as I did that, the sense of tininess in me just grew.

[3 : 3 2] And I always wondered, oh, man, where does this come from? What is this? What is my point, you know, the world? It was really something that grew and grew and grew every time I did. And so from very early on, I always sort of wondered about the natural world, because it seemed to me drawing me to something much bigger than myself. I don't know if you've maybe experienced the same kind of thing.

Maybe it's the stars, or maybe it's something else. But very much to me, it was that. And, you know, then I spent a lot of time looking or watching at National Geographic and Discovery Channel, as you can see there. And I was just absolutely fascinated with the natural world. When you start to dig into it, and you see the amazing complexity of the world, and the interactions that go on between different kinds of animals, and just the way that the climate is set up, everything is just so perfectly designed, it seems. Or, well, to me, it points to a designer in many, many ways. And so this sense just kind of grew in me as I, you know, as a teenager watched Discovery and National Geographic and looked up at the stars. And that really followed me as I went then on to university. So I studied at the University of Johannesburg for several years. I ended up doing a master's degree in zoology, and then went on to environmental ecotoxicology. And I worked in that realm for many, many years. I actually went to work on the coast in South Africa for around about three years in like a marine biology consultancy. And it was my love of the environment, my love of nature that drove me to that. It drove me to study the natural world more. It drove me to work in that world because I wanted to make a difference, right? Because I cared for the environment.

And thought, well, you know, let's preserve this thing. I want to make a difference and make it better, right? And one of my favorite guys, I remember, as I was, you know, studying, but even when I used to watch National Geographic and Discovery and all that, was David Attenborough. I'm sure you guys will know David Attenborough. And he seems to share, obviously, the sense of all-white nature. He says, it seems to me that the natural world is the greatest source of excitement, the greatest source of visual beauty, the greatest source of intellectual interest. It is the greatest source of so much in life that makes life worth living. And I agree with that sentiment in so many ways. I mean, he's not a Christian as far as I understand. He's an atheist. But he looks at the natural world. He looks at the beauty of all of it. And he exclaims what he does there. And he's basically saying, wow, this is amazing, right? And at the same time, he also says, the fact is that no species has ever had such a wholesale control over everything on earth, talking about humans, living or dead, as we have now. And that lays upon us, whether we like it or not, an awesome responsibility.

In our hands now lies not only our future, but that of all other living creatures with whom we share the earth. So what he's doing there, and this is interesting to me, as someone who doesn't believe in God, he looks at the natural world and has this, wow, look at this. This is beautiful. This is amazing.

To me, that's part of the human condition. This is how we're wired. We're part of the created order. And so we resonate with the beauty of the world. And so he's pulling on that, right? But then as someone who doesn't believe in God, he also makes this statement up there. And essentially, he's saying, there's also a moral dimension. We have a moral injunction, as it were, to look after this thing.

[7 : 39] And that, to me, raises a question. If there is no God, and the natural world is just what it is by the sort of chance forces, chance physical forces of physical matter, that's all it would reduce to, then, well, why the moral aspect of it? Where does that come from? How is that justified? What is the basis for that? Interesting question. So with that in mind, I'm going to hand over to you for just five minutes or so, if that, to chat about these two things. First, what aspect of the environment brings you a sense of wonder and joy? I hope there would be some aspect of it. You don't look at it and be like, this is boring. Number two, do we have a moral responsibility to protect the environment?

That is the question. And if we do, why? Okay, why? Because that's the way it's framed in sort of the world at large, be it secular or religious people. It seems that we were coming at this and saying, no, no, we have a moral responsibility. So where does that come from? Or do we actually have one? And why? So let me hand over to you for just sort of four or five minutes, chat amongst yourselves, chat to each other, and then we will carry on.

All righty, let's bring those little conversations to a close. I'm going to give you another chance to chat near the end. All righty. So I hope that that at least gets you thinking. And I should have maybe preface the second question with, or at least put it on the front there, if there was no God, you know, how do we justify, you know, this moral responsibility? You know, if there is no God, where does it come from?

So, as I say, I studied in the sciences, worked in the sciences, environmental sort of protection, that arena of things for many years. But I remember, I mean, just as an aside, when I was studying, I became a Christian in my, really kind of somewhere between my first and third year at university.

I started going to church a lot more, and my friends started seeing that, hey, I'm not so crazy anymore. I'm like, you know, actually being a decent human now. Like, what happened? What changed?

[10:04] And then I got to have these really good conversations with them about, oh, well, let me tell you about that. But one of the things that really I was confronted with very early on was this idea that, oh, well, but, you know, you can't believe in God and be a scientist. You know, these things are at war.

So you might get that as a question, just sort of as an aside. And that is something that I got a lot, sort of as I was studying in the sciences, but then working in environmental sciences, a lot of this idea that, hey, there's the idea of God and the idea of science.

We, or anyway, I've done an article series this year. So if you go to the SOLUS website and just search science, there's a article series called Lab Notes from the Faithful, where I've been interviewing a scientist every month, like a really good scientist who's also a Christian, and they answer this question. So if you do have that question, head over to the SOLUS website. So I got that kind of question a lot. But then there was a lady who I worked with at this marine biology consultancy that I was at, and she was a veterinarian who was very, very anti any kind of religion, really.

She thought the idea of God is just, you know, complete nonsense. But at the same time as that, she would say very, very strongly, you know, that we have a moral obligation to take care of the environment, right? This is the question we were discussing. She, in many ways, would frame it this way. And, you know, she was a passionate and enthusiastic environmentalist, a campaigner for environmentalism in many, many ways. And if you weren't on that kind of page, and as fervent as she was, she almost like, you know, she should push you a little bit and say, well, no, it's actually wrong to not be as excited about environmentalism as I am. There's this moral injunction on us. There's this responsibility that we have, this obligation to look after the environment. And I sadly never got to have many conversations with her about this. But the question is, you know, why should we look after the environment? Why should we care for the environment? Have you ever wondered why? And so if you've come across the blue, have you ever wondered book, which I'm assuming you have seen as you've been working through this series, then maybe you've read the chapter on that. But let me give you a couple of thoughts from that. And this whole question in general, have you ever wondered why the environment matters? In the book, there's this story of a colleague of ours. And he has an encounter with a Greenpeace worker, right, who is trying to, you know, get, do some fundraising for

Greenpeace, and basically saying, hey, you know, you can get behind looking after the environment if you just sign up and give some, give some money. But this chap, this friend of ours, he said, well, you know, to this guy, why should we care for the environment? And to this Greenpeace guy, it seemed like this was a question he hadn't really thought about. And it exposed a little bit of a gap in his reasoning, sort of the cultural gap that I think is a good question for us to ask. And so what would you say most people would respond with when you say, why should we care for the environment?

[13 : 28] It's a good question. I think most of the time, and this came up as we were chatting, most people, when you say, why should we care for the environment? They will go straight to the answer of, well, for future generations. We need to look after the environment for other people so that they too can have a good environment to live in and that they can look after it, it can look after them kind of thing. What is the problem with that thinking? I mean, it's good thinking, like, sure, we want to look after people and so, but, you know, what is, what's the question based on? What is it pointing toward?

Well, it's definitely not pointing toward the environment, right? It's not getting to the point of, oh, we need to look after nature because of the value of nature. It's taking the focus off nature and saying, oh, no, we need to look after it because humans are valuable, right? So it's saying nothing about the inherent value of the environment itself. And so this logic basically bases environmental value not on the environment itself as the created order in and of itself, but it bases it on human dignity, okay? And that's sort of taking the focus away. So it kind of avoids the question. And so the thing is, well, why do we have a moral duty toward the environment? No, we have moral duty towards persons, not objects. You know, we walk on rocks and things. We don't walk on people. There's a difference. We'll step on them. And so this thinking sort of in the secular world has actually led to legislations. Some rivers and even some mountains in places like New Zealand and Canada have been granted legal personhood to try and get them protected, basically equating them with humans. And so people have realized there's this sort of inconsistency and say, oh, man, okay, we should look after the environment. Why should we do that? Because people are important. Okay, so what should we do? I know, let's make the natural world a person. That's literally where it's going, to try and import the values that humans have onto the created order. And that's just really, really weird in my estimation. And so what's intended to protect nature, and so it leads to really good things, protecting the world. But it actually ends up devaluing human dignity because it kind of just reduces it. You know, it's after the Second World War that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed that we have inherent human dignity, inherent human rights, right? And so that is something that can't be assigned or removed based on governments. It's a recognition that in and of ourselves, we have value. And as a Christian, obviously, I say, well, yeah, because I'm made in God's image.

That's where it comes from. But basically, what happens with this is that secular philosophy kind of starts eroding it. Okay, let me show you just one example of that. One philosopher named Alex Rosenberg, who is not at all a theist, doesn't believe there's a God, and so he tries to make sense of things. And he basically says that only all that exists is the physical stuff and the physical facts of the world, right? And it basically ends up meaning that, well, there's no, nothing more, there's no kind of moral dimension to anything. And so in summary, he would say, well, there's just the physical facts of the world. And he concludes, you know, when pressed on it, people would say, well, what is the ultimate nature of reality? He says, just the physical stuff that we have.

Okay, so then the question of, okay, well, what is the purpose of the universe? To that, he says, there is none. And then, okay, well, what is the meaning of life? His answer is, ditto. There is no meaning to life. So he's a fun guy to have at a party. But this kind of concern was put to this chap, this green piece guy that our friend was chatting to. And basically, the idea was that, well, the physics tells us that, you know, the whole universe is winding down. Eventually, the sun is going to burn out, and everything's just going to end. And so for my life and the life of this planet, it's basically just all destruction and meaninglessness. This is what our friend put to this green piece guy. That is, it seems where the physical facts are pushing us. And he said, so if that's the case, well, why should I care about the environment? Shouldn't I just get as much as I can while I'm here? And the guy responded, well, okay, that's pretty messed up. And we do agree. We say that it's pretty messed up. It doesn't really make sense. But here's the issue with the logic, right? If the universe and the whole natural world is ultimately just meaningless and destined for destruction, why should we care about the environment at all? Right? It just, you've kind of eroded the basis for it. And so the whole point of that, this pushback, and you can read about it in the chapter in the Have You Ever Wondered book, is to point out that if there is no God, we've kind of lost any basis for really caring for the environment in many ways. So how can we make more sense of it?

What is a Christian response? Because someone might say, okay, well, you know, how do you make sense of this as a Christian? And I think what we need to do is actually rethink our worldview a little bit, right? So perhaps we know that the environment matters with or without us because our planet actually exists, our whole world exists in relation to another person, okay, in relation to God.

[19:17] Okay, so my answer to why the environment and future generations matter is because God matters. And as a Christian, my responsibility to the environment and future generations is then grounded in my relationship to God, which also gives all of life and the universe meaning, purpose, and value. And so if you care about the environment and future generations, as most environmentalists would, because that's the whole basis for caring for the environment, well, then I think we can encourage them to bring God into their thinking. And so I think this is, you know, it's a question that the Bible has been touching on since its inception, right? So here are a couple of verses.

In Genesis 1, God blessed them and said to them, this is speaking about Adam and Eve, be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground. Okay, why is that important?

Well, here we have the commission to actually be stewards of the created order, right? It's not just that we exist in it, but in God's perfect setup that we see being instituted in the account of Genesis 1 is that we are made to be both in the world, but also looking after it, to be stewarding it, to be, the language is hard. Some people can sort of think that it's not framed in a good way, you know, rule over it and subdue it. Oh, no, no, this is a good thing. It's to say like, no, no, this is something that you exercise control over as humans, made in my image to be my emissaries as it is, and you're supposed to look after it and care for it. Okay, what about Genesis 2? The Lord took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. Okay, and this is a picture of the whole created order working in its perfection. This is what it was supposed to be, right? Us working the land and taking care of it.

And so the admonition to be environmentalists, I think, is a thoroughly biblical theme. We have a basis for it because this is God's good creation, and we've been put in it to be looking after it. Okay, what about a couple of other verses here? In Psalm 24, it says, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it. So on the one hand, we have, okay, it is, there's the justification for environmentalism because, yes, we do need to actually look after it for future generations.

There's the one aspect that comes thoroughly from the verses we just looked at, but also because in and of itself, the created order is good. It is a gift given to us by God. And that's what we see there in Psalm 24. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it. It's not a random accident, but it's something that is beautifully designed. And even through the world, even through the created order, we can actually get to know God in a sense. And that is why we have the next verse there from Romans 1. And this is one of my favorite verses. I'm not going to dig into it and do much with it, but it says this, for since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen being understood from what has been made so that people are without excuse. So this idea of, oh, well, you know, hey, God hasn't put enough evidence into the world for me to believe in Him, I don't think really just holds any water, really, because if you, what Romans 1 is saying is if you look around at the world, even through the created order, as you look up at the stars, as you look under the microscope into the fine workings of the cell and see, I mean, like, just why mathematics works so well, why chemistry works well, all these things are pointing us to a grand designer. And so even doing that, it says, okay, well, even based on that, no one can say that, oh, well, there is no God. So even the created order itself is shouting to that. There's another sort of issue, though. While I was, you know, working in this environmental space for these couple of years, you know, I went into, like, as I say, to, you know, hey, make a difference in the world, you know, make the environment better, make the world a better place. And so we would go out on these long fieldwork expeditions and say, like, there's this piece of land where guys are saying, hey, we want to build a mine in the middle of the wetland. And we'd go out and do our assessments and write these long, long, long reports and submit them saying you shouldn't do that for all these reasons and against legislation and all that. And so you're out there doing this work that is, you know, good to preserve the environment. And then a couple of months later, you drive past and you see, oh, they've built the mine in the wetland anyway. And so you get a bit dejected. And this just happened again and again. And I mean, you're like, okay, well, what's the point? We have these amazing laws saying you can't do these things. You do these acute reports. You're spending your life doing this kind of work. And essentially what happens is the report gets taken. A little box gets ticked that the work was done. But then a bit of money gets passed under the table and, you know, people are going to do what they want to do anyway. And so this really just pointed out that the issue isn't actually the laws. It's not our technology. We could, you know, preserve the world. We could, you know, get to carbon neutral. We could do all of these things.

[25 : 16] Theoretically, we have all the laws to do it. But for some reason, we don't do it. We don't get there. Why not? What's going on? A guy named Gus Speth, he was the leading climate and environment advisor to the White House. And he says this, and I think he is really on the money. He says, I used to think the top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought with 30 years of good science, we could address those problems.

But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy. And to deal with these, we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that.

He's not a Christian. I don't think he believes in God at all. But on reading that, I'm like, oh, isn't that interesting? We need a spiritual and cultural transformation. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy. This sounds remarkably similar to what the Bible says that our problem is. It's not that we don't have the right tech, we don't have the right laws and legislation, all that. The problem at the core of all of this, the problem that leads us to say, we need to make these changes. There is a moral obligation. And we're not doing it. And people are getting so passionate about this. The problem is sin. At the core of all of it is that we're broken and we don't do what we know we should. And we keep doing what we know we shouldn't.

So at the core of even the environmental issues that we see is the brokenness that we have as humans. And so it's in the face of that that we actually long for something better. We long for a world that is working rightly, a world that is not degrading. And so as we look around at the world and see all that's going wrong, be it externally to us, be it internally, all these different things, we cry out for restoration. That's just intuitively, you don't have to believe in God even to know this, but it's a pointer to the fact that God is there. All of us intuitively know or at least cry out for the fact that we want things to be better. We long for a better world, a world that is restored and functioning properly. This is just part and parcel of the human condition. Have you ever wondered why we long for restoration? Right? I think this is an amazing bridge for our friends and family and colleagues who might not have any faith, right? Let me put it to you this way. Do any of you enjoy restoration shows? Maybe like a makeover show or like a house restoration show? I love watching those all through like my teenage years. I just sit there watching these things and you like see at the beginning, the person, you know, the way they look and then the end is the great reveal and you go, whoa, that's pretty cool. Or the whole house thing is this dilapidated, broken down house and then they come in and do this whole revamp and at the end there is the big reveal and you're just like, oh my goodness, that's amazing. You just get the sense of like, oh yeah, that's good, right? Well, not too long ago I discovered a YouTube channel where this guy takes these old like broken trinkets of different kinds and he restores them. And one of the things he, that really stood out to me is he finds an old

Zippo lighter up there on the screen, you can see it, and it's like rusted and dented and twisted and broken and it's not doing what it should do. It's not functioning in the way that it should. And then through this really cool photography and film technique, he shows how he files it and chemical baths it and blow torches and hammers the thing. And through this amazing process, in the hands of the skilled craftsman, by the end you have this amazing, amazing restored little lighter. And the end shot, it's sort of on this like twisting platform and the hand reaches and he picks it up, he flicks it open and he lights it.

[29 : 29] And there's this little flame just like flickering. And just the sense of like, oh yes, that is good. There's something good about that. There's something right about that. Seeing something taken from its brokenness and its corruption and it's not working the way it's supposed to be, being moved to a place of restoration, doing the thing that it's made for. I think we have a bit of a biblical theme there, don't we? All through the pages of scripture we see God has created the world, Genesis 1, and things are working the way that they should. Humanity is placed into the world to have relationship with God in his creation and be his sort of stewards, his emissaries in this world to be looking after it.

But then Genesis 3, we know something goes wrong and it is broken. The relationship is broken, the whole created order is broken and we're living in that still. Right? And so part of the human condition is that we see the environment around us is broken, that's what we're talking about this evening, and we want to fix it. Right? But we can't because we ourselves are broken. And so we need restoration. The whole created order needs restoration. And that is the story of scripture about how God himself steps in to bring that. And this is, I think, one of the, if you're not, if you don't believe that there's a God, I don't know how you can have any hope for the future really. Not based on like, if you look at, okay, well the technology we have, all the science, all the things we're doing, the laws. The question is, how's that going? If you're a humanist, he says, no, us humans will get this right with more science and more technology. All we've done is create like better ways to kill ourselves and the environment. You just look around at the news, that's what we're doing. But with God, we have a true hope. In Revelation 21, among just one of many verses, it says this, he who is seated on the throne said, I am making everything new. I'm making everything new. And then he said, write this down for these words are trustworthy and true.

And we have that account where there in Revelation as well, there's the promise that God will be the one to come back, step in and bring this restoration to its completion and that he will wipe away every tear. He will restore everything. There'll be the new heavens and the new earth. And then there will be the completion of our glorification and taking up our residence in that new created order. That is what we're longing for. When you see all the headlines and people's passion about fixing the environment, it's like, well, we're trying to create that by ourselves and we won't get there. We need God who's the great restorer and redeemer to step in and bring us there. I'll show you just one more little illustration of this before I close. This theme of restoration really, to me, sticks out. So I heard this story and thought I'd share it with you. Often I get the question of, you know, well, you know, you Christians, you believe that God himself steps in, right, in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, and he comes to save us. But why?

Why would he need to do that? That question comes up very often. And so imagine this. There's an artist, right? And he's gotten on in his years and he's walking through the town that he grew up in.

A little bit slower now, obviously, but as he's sort of shuffling down the streets that he used to run around in when he was a child, he's walking and he sees an antique shop next to him. And as he looks in the window, he sees an artwork, a piece that he did many, many years ago. And he remembers how he gifted it to a friend all those years ago before he was famous. And as he looks at it, he sees it's torn and ripped and scuffed and the frame is broken. It's not what it once was. It's not what it's supposed to be. But it's his and he loves it and he wants to get his hands on it. He wants to fix it.

[33 : 46] Right? But before he can do that, before he can get his hands on it to start fixing it up, what does he need to do? Can he just go into the shop and grab it? No. He has to go in and he has to buy it back. He has to buy it back before he can fix the frame and start touching it up and restore it to what it's supposed to be, this beautiful thing hanging on the wall, working in the right way, restored. He has to part with his money. And that in the same way, it's a poor, poor illustration, but in the same way, God sees us and sees the created order, the environment, the whole world in its broken state. And so he says, I'm going to step in. I'm going to find you and I'm going to start restoring you. But he has to pay the price. He himself goes to the cross and he dies the death that we deserve. He pays the price for our sin that we should rightly pay. And then he offers us grace. And that relationship with God, that coming to know him is really the only way that we can ever start to even change in this life now in terms of looking after the environment or having any kind of real basis for wanting to look after it. I'm going to stop there and hand over to you for a little bit more discussion. Two questions. First, if our care for the environment depends on our view of human value and dignity, what worldview best protects both people and nature and why? Number two, how might seeing the environment as part of God's creation rather than just physical matter change the way we live day to day? And that is maybe a bit of a challenge to all of us. Let me pray for us and then I'll hand over to you for a small discussion. Father God, we thank you that we can be here this evening. Lord, I just want to thank you for the beauty of your creation. Thank you that we get to live in this world and just see your mighty hand. We see the works of your hand, Lord.

At the same time, we look around and we know that it is not working the way that it should, that it is broken. And we are to blame for that, Lord, in an ongoing way. And so I pray, Lord, that as we think about this question of why the environment matters, we wouldn't first look to ourselves, but we would look to you and we would recognize and declare that the environment matters because it is your creation.

It is your creation. And so, Lord, I pray that as we speak to family and friends and colleagues who might not know you, we'd be able to show that even our passion for the environment, even the yearning that we have for it to be working and not degraded, even that, Lord, is a pointer to you. I pray that you would help us to be bold in being able to declare that to those who don't know you. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.