CHAPTER 3: HUMAN – HABITAT

Because humans are intimately connected to our earthly habitat, Creation suffers in response to human sin. Based on the love of Christ, a Christian environmental ethic approaches the natural world with humility as its defining characteristic.

As rural farmers are forced to walk further and further each day to search for clean water, they are reminded of how utterly and fearfully dependent they are on the earth and its valuable resources. They understand that they are intrinsically linked to their environment, and must approach their habitat with an attitude of humility, instead of entitlement. Only then will their hopes of clean water and fruitful land be fulfilled.

INTRODUCTION

When we hear the word “habitat,” we usually think of plants and animals before we think of people. A habitat restoration project, for example, might focus on restoring the natural habitat of a wetland that has been dredged for commercial development. Efforts are made to vegetate the area with native species of plants in order to draw back migrating birds and provide a place for fish to spawn. The goal is to reestablish a balanced ecosystem that can support a diverse community of life forms. We humans tend to think of ourselves as outside of such ecosystems. As we have previously explored, humans are, indeed, distinct from other forms of life in that God chose humans to represent His image most directly within Creation. Our very ability to engage in activities like habitat restoration evidences this distinction, for humans can make decisions about the natural world in a way that plants and animals cannot. However, it is important to remember that humans, while distinct from other
animals, are also creatures living in a habitat. We are dependent on the earth for sustenance—for the food that we eat, for the water that we drink, and for the natural resources with which we build our lives.

But Earth is more than simply a place that provides natural resources like food, water, and shelter. The word “ecology” comes from the Greek root oikos, which is translated to mean “house.” Ecology, then, is the study of our earthly house, and ecological concerns focus on the health of this house. Recall Adam and Eve in Eden, serving and protecting their home in the garden: when we think of our habitat as also our home, will we not strive to similarly serve and protect that home? Do we not defend our homes from those who seek to destroy them?

With this understanding of habitat as home, we can further explore the Human-Habitat relationship we first see in Genesis 2, as Adam and Eve dwell in Eden. We will first explore how human identity is linked with the earth, and how this connection is important to healthy spirituality by looking at the history of Israel and its relationship to the Promised Land. We will then consider the consequences of human sin for Creation. Finally, we will establish humility as necessary for Creation’s restoration, and thus as the central and defining characteristic of a Christian environmental ethic.

HUMANS FROM HUMUS

“The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground.” (Genesis 2:7)

Anyone who has spread compost over a garden plot or walked through the woods during autumn knows the rich smell of humus, the decomposed organic matter of fruit peels, vegetable skins, or fallen leaves. Humus is another word for the healthy soil that results from the natural processes of death and decay. Interestingly, the words “humus” and “human” are related in their origination. Indeed, the account of Adam’s creation in Genesis 2 illustrates this link between humans and soil as God forms a human being from “the dust of the ground” (verse 7), the humus of Eden. While this human form bears God’s image in a way distinct from other creatures, this scene reminds us that humans are fundamentally similar to all other
creatures, and share much in common with our earthly habitat.

This connection with the land is not just important to human identity, but is linked to spiritual identity as well. In the Old Testament, relationship with the land is central to the God-Human relationship. For the Israelites, their spiritual identity as “God’s chosen people” rests in the promise of healthy land, “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8). The Promised Land symbolizes the covenant relationship between God and Israel, which is a relationship of blessing. Abundant land is a blessing from God, and is a result of Israel’s righteousness.

- Read Genesis 2:7. What two elements are involved in the creation of humans? What two relationships do these represent?
- Read Deuteronomy 6:10-12, 8:6-14. What does the land promised to Israel look like? Against what does God warn in these passages?

THE LAND CURSED

“Cursed is the ground because of you.” (Genesis 3:17)

We see the relationship between humans and habitat even more strongly when we explore the implications of human sin for Creation. Throughout the Bible, Creation’s suffering is a direct result of human sin. This begins in Genesis, when the ground is cursed alongside the serpent and the deceived human couple (3:17), and when God resolves to cause a flood to destroy all life on the earth (6:17). When Israel turns against God in disobedience to His laws, images of environmental destruction often accompany the warnings issued by Old Testament prophets. Throughout the Bible, we see that Creation is very responsive to human sin. It “vomits” out sinful people (Leviticus 18:25) and “mourns” their unfaithfulness (Hosea 4:3). Animals, birds, and fish die in response to cursing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery (Hosea 4:3). In the New Testament, all of Creation is described as “groaning” in “bondage” as it awaits redemption (Romans 8:18-23).

What does God, the King of Creation, have to say to humans whose sin results in destruction of His marvelous work and interrupts the harmony of this symphony of Creation? Because God’s kingship seeks to defend the oppressed, part of divine justice involves judg-
ment on those who corrupt dominion and destroy the natural world. Indeed, there will come a time not only for rewarding the righteous, but also for “destroying those who destroy the earth” (Revelation 11:18). Recall that God, as Creator, established a covenant relationship with Creation before His covenant with humankind. The Human-Habitat relationship may be characterized by much unfaithfulness, but the Creator will not abandon His Creation to destruction. Included in this covenant is punishment for those who abandon their tasks as stewards.

- Read Genesis 3:17-19. Who does God identify as responsible for Creation’s curse? How will humans now relate to the earth? How has their relationship with habitat changed?
- Read Isaiah 24:1-12. How is the earth affected by human sin?
- Read Ezekiel 36:1-8. To whom does the prophet speak in this passage? What does God promise?

**HUMILITY AND HEALED LAND**

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14)

God invites humans to participate in Creation’s restoration by returning to righteousness. This is only possible if humans acknowledge God’s supremacy and abandon their “god-complexes” in pursuit of proper spiritual relationship, which must involve humility. The word “humility” also shares a common root with the words “human” and “humus.” The image of God shaping the human form (adam) from soil (adamah) is a humbling reminder that we are fundamentally made of dust, and to dust we will ultimately return. As the focus of the Christian story, Christ’s incarnation emphasizes this humility, as God took on human flesh and the King of Creation “humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8).

“But,” some may ask, “what does Christ’s death have to do with the environment?” Indeed, we typically emphasize salvation as the restoration of human relationship with God. However, the Bible makes it clear that all of Creation benefits from Christ’s redemptive
sacrifice. John 3:16 does not limit God’s love to humans, but states that God gave His only Son because He “so loved the world (kosmos).” Similarly, Colossians 1:20 affirms that Christ came to reconcile “all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” What, then, should be the focus of a uniquely Christian environmental ethic? It is the presence of Christ in such an ethic that sets the Christian voice apart from other approaches to environmental issues. And, with Christ at its core, a Christian environmental ethic models itself on the humility of its servant-king. Only by approaching Creation with an attitude of humility can Christians work for the restoration of Human-Habitat relationship.

- Read 2 Chronicles 7:13-14. What might humility look like to you in regards to healing the earth?
- Read Psalm 37:11 and Matthew 5:5. What does it mean when God says the meek will inherit the earth?
- Read Mark 16:15. What might preaching the good news to all creation look like? Read Mark 12:28-31. If we think of our earthly habitat as our home, how can we extend love to our neighbors, both human and non-human?

IN ACTION

- In order to better understand the importance of soil, start a composting project at home or on your church property. Learn about the processes that break organic matter down into humus that then nourishes further life.
- Adopt a local park or road and schedule regular clean-ups that families from your church can participate in together. Collect trash and plant trees or join a local restoration project to demonstrate a commitment to your local habitat.
- Start or get involved with a community gardening project.
- What kinds of environmental healing would you pray for? What are the environmental issues that most impact your community? How can you incorporate these into your personal and community prayer?