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# How to Use Threshold Bible Study

Each book in the Threshold Bible Study series is designed to lead you through a new doorway of biblical awareness, to accompany you across a unique threshold of understanding. The characters, places, and images that you encounter in each of these topical studies will help you explore fresh dimensions of your faith and discover richer insights for your spiritual life.

Threshold Bible Study covers biblical themes in depth in a short amount of time. Unlike more traditional Bible studies that treat a biblical book or series of books, Threshold Bible Study aims to address specific topics within the entire Bible. The goal is not for you to comprehend everything about each passage, but rather for you to understand what a variety of passages from different books of the Bible reveals about the topic of each study.

Threshold Bible Study offers you an opportunity to explore the entire Bible from the viewpoint of a variety of different themes. The commentary that follows each biblical passage launches your reflection about that passage and helps you begin to see its significance within the context of your contemporary experience. The questions following the commentary challenge you to understand the passage more fully and apply it to your own life. The prayer starter helps conclude your study by integrating learning into your relationship with God.

These studies are designed for maximum flexibility. Each study is presented in a workbook format, with sections for reading, reflecting, writing, discussing, and praying. Space for writing after each question is ideal for personal study and allows group members to prepare in advance for their discussion. The thirty lessons in each topic may be used by an individual over the period of a month, or by a group for six sessions, with lessons to be studied each week before the next group meeting. These studies are ideal for Bible

study groups, small Christian communities, adult faith formation, student groups, Sunday school, neighborhood groups, and family reading, as well as for individual learning.

The method of Threshold Bible Study is rooted in the classical tradition of *lectio divina*, an ancient yet contemporary means for reading the Scriptures reflectively and prayerfully. Reading and interpreting the text (*lectio*) is followed by reflective meditation on its message (*meditatio*). This reading and reflecting flows into prayer from the heart (*oratio* and *contemplatio*).

This ancient method assures us that Bible study is a matter of both the mind and the heart. It is not just an intellectual exercise to learn more and be able to discuss the Bible with others. It is, more importantly, a transforming experience. Reflecting on God's word, guided by the Holy Spirit, illumines the mind with wisdom and stirs the heart with zeal.

Following the personal Bible study, Threshold Bible Study offers a method for extending *lectio divina* into a weekly conversation with a small group. This communal experience will allow participants to enhance their appreciation of the message and build up a spiritual community (*collatio*). The end result will be to increase not only individual faith, but also faithful witness in the context of daily life (*operatio*).

Through the spiritual disciplines of Scripture reading, study, reflection, conversation, and prayer, you will experience God's grace more abundantly as your life is rooted more deeply in Christ. The risen Jesus said: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Rev 3:20). Listen to the word of God, open the door, and cross the threshold to an unimaginable dwelling with God!

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY**

- Make your Bible reading a time of prayer. Ask for God's guidance as you read the Scriptures.
- Try to study daily, or as often as possible according to the circumstances of your life.
- Read the Bible passage carefully, trying to understand both its meaning and its personal application as you read. Some persons find it helpful to read the passage aloud.
- Read the passage in another Bible translation. Each version adds to your understanding of the original text.
- Allow the commentary to help you comprehend and apply the scriptural text. The commentary is only a beginning, not the last word on the meaning of the passage.
- After reflecting on each question, write out your responses. The very act of writing will help you clarify your thoughts, bring new insights, and amplify your understanding.
- As you reflect on your answers, think about how you can live God's word in the context of your daily life.
- Conclude each daily lesson by reading the prayer and continuing with your own prayer from the heart.
- Make sure your reflections and prayers are matters of both the mind and the heart. A true encounter with God's word is always a transforming experience.
- Choose a word or a phrase from the lesson to carry with you throughout the day as a reminder of your encounter with God's life-changing word.
- Share your learning experience with at least one other person whom you trust for additional insights and affirmation. The ideal way to share learning is in a small group that meets regularly.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP STUDY

- Meet regularly; weekly is ideal. Try to be on time and make attendance a high priority for the sake of the group. The average group meets for about an hour.
- Open each session with a prepared prayer, a song, or a reflection. Find some appropriate way to bring the group from the workaday world into a sacred time of graced sharing.
- If you have not been together before, nametags are very helpful as a group begins to become acquainted with the other group members.
- Spend the first session getting acquainted with one another, reading the Introduction aloud and discussing the questions that follow.
- Appoint a group facilitator to provide guidance to the discussion. The role of facilitator may rotate among members each week. The facilitator simply keeps the discussion on track; each person shares responsibility for the group. There is no need for the facilitator to be a trained teacher.
- Try to study the six lessons on your own during the week. When you have done your own reflection and written your own answers, you will be better prepared to discuss the six scriptural lessons with the group. If you have not had an opportunity to study the passages during the week, meet with the group anyway to share support and insights.
- Participate in the discussion as much as you are able, offering your thoughts, insights, feelings, and decisions. You learn by sharing with others the fruits of your study.
- Be careful not to dominate the discussion. It is important that everyone in the group be offered an equal opportunity to share the results of their work. Try to link what you say to the comments of others so that the group remains on the topic.
- When discussing your own personal thoughts or feelings, use “I” language. Be as personal and honest as appropriate and be very cautious about giving advice to others.
- Listen attentively to the other members of the group so as to learn from their insights. The words of the Bible affect each person in a different way, so a group provides a wealth of understanding for each member.

- Don't fear silence. Silence in a group is as important as silence in personal study. It allows individuals time to listen to the voice of God's Spirit and the opportunity to form their thoughts before they speak.
- Solicit several responses for each question. The thoughts of different people will build on the answers of others and will lead to deeper insights for all.
- Don't fear controversy. Differences of opinions are a sign of a healthy and honest group. If you cannot resolve an issue, continue on, agreeing to disagree. There is probably some truth in each viewpoint.
- Discuss the questions that seem most important for the group. There is no need to cover all the questions in the group session.
- Realize that some questions about the Bible cannot be resolved, even by experts. Don't get stuck on some issue for which there are no clear answers.
- Whatever is said in the group is said in confidence and should be regarded as such.
- Pray as a group in whatever way feels comfortable. Pray for the members of your group throughout the week.

### **Schedule for group study**

Session 1: Introduction Date: \_\_\_\_\_

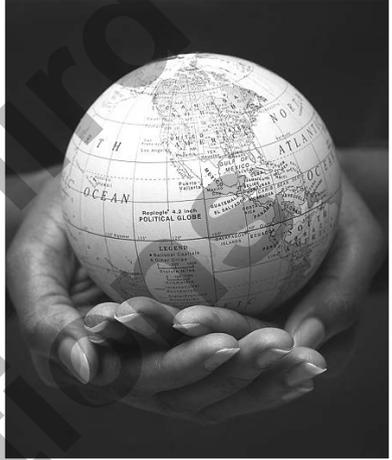
Session 2: Lessons 1–6 Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Session 3: Lessons 7–12 Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Session 4: Lessons 13–18 Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Session 5: Lessons 19–24 Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Session 6: Lessons 25–30 Date: \_\_\_\_\_





**The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world,  
and those who live in it. Ps 24:1**

# Stewardship of the Earth

**F**or centuries people have had the ability to look outward from the earth at the planets and stars in the universe with the aid of telescopes. But only in recent decades have we had the ability to look at the earth itself from the perspective of outer space. This image of the earth as a blue-green orb, with its verdant vegetation and deep azure seas, surrounded by a misty atmosphere, has become a sacred icon for people of our day. It is a reflection of the goodness and grandeur of its Creator, a reminder that our world is a beautiful place, a friendly habitat, and a blessed creation.

The faith expressed by the biblical writers recognizes the world as God's good creation. The world belongs to God and humanity is God's steward, responsible to God for the care of creation. Preserving the resources of the earth and protecting its creatures are essential aspects of a human life faithfully bonded with God. Being a steward of the earth by living in harmony with the world's other creatures is a joyful privilege that flows from a right relationship with God. Viewing the earth as a divine gift leads to a deep and personal desire to care for that gift and to pass it on to forthcoming generations.

Our modern life often keeps us isolated from the natural wonders of our world. Surrounded by manufactured environments, insulated in our urban homes and offices, eating prepackaged foods, we may rarely have the opportunity to encounter the wild and awesome wonder of the earth's grandeur.

When we stand at the edge of a cliff with a roaring surf below, pause in an ancient forest at the foot of a giant hardwood, look out upon a dew-sparkled meadow at sunrise, we place ourselves in the situations which have engendered awe-filled reverence for the Creator and for creation through the ages. By reflecting on these kinds of experiences and by listening to the Scriptures that speak of the wonders of creation, we can nurture within our hearts a love for the natural world and a passion for its care.

In the face of the earth's ecological crisis, mostly we know what we have to do but we lack the will to do it. For this reason, many have concluded that working out the current crisis is as much a religious challenge as a political one. Our tendency to use the world's resources to gratify our selfish desires is a temptation that can be overcome with a changed spiritual viewpoint. A religious approach to caring for the earth teaches us reverence for creation and shows us how to base our attitudes and actions on God's revelation. Studying the Scriptures moves us toward a deeper awareness of the created world and appreciation of its meaning and blessing. Rather than seeking meaning by rapaciously consuming the gifts entrusted to us, we can find spiritual fulfillment through respectful engagement with the beauty of the earth.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What experiences have given me a deeper respect and reverence for the earth?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- In what way is the ecological crisis which faces the earth a spiritual and religious problem? In what way could studying the Bible help?

## God's Awesome Yet Fragile World

The earth is a delicate series of balanced systems and processes which support and nurture all of life. Surrounding our beloved emerald and azure globe is a fragile layer of vapor and gases that protects and supports the wonderful fabric of life called the biosphere. Some gases absorb the energy of the sun and regulate its warmth while other elements shield the earth from the sun's destructive radiation. Because of the tilt of the earth and its continual rotation, the atmosphere circulates, the oceans create currents, and the seasons change. Moisture is continually recycled and purified through evaporation and the rain and snow irrigate the earth in regular cycles. Water is also naturally filtered through the flow of streams and rivers, making it habitable and drinkable for earth's creatures. The soil is nurtured and renewed through a cyclical process as decaying organisms and other elements support a growing fabric of vegetation.

The biosphere is comprised of many communities of organisms in their diverse environments called ecosystems. Forests, glades, marshes, prairies, lakes, and oceans are all places of wondrous environmental harmony. The animals, plants, soils, and climates of each system all interact as an integrated ecological unit. In each natural system, diverse species of life flourish and reproduce from one generation to the next. The wondrous balance exhibited in each natural environment requires respect for its intricate complexity.

Though we are able to investigate and understand the natural world in a way that was impossible for our ancestors, we recognize with them that creation declares the wisdom and glory of God. God lovingly provides the rains and the seasons, gives food and flowing water for the creatures, and satisfies the earth. God's eternal power and divine nature are understood and seen through the beauty and abundance of the things God has made.

Yet, in our day, living creatures, and the air, soil, and water that support them, face unprecedented threats. Many of these perils are global; most stem directly from human activity. Economies that seek to maximize immediate returns at the expense of long-term sustainability are becoming the norm throughout the world. The current practices of humanity may so alter the living world in the future that it will be unable to sustain the delicately balanced systems required for life to flourish.

Threats to the atmosphere include toxic emissions that fill the air, depletion of the protective ozone, and an unprecedented buildup of greenhouse gases

causing rising temperatures and climate changes. Perils to the earth's waters include dangerous chemicals discharged into rivers, toxic leaks trickling into the groundwater, and abundant waste dumped into seas and oceans. Land abuse includes destruction of tropical forests, devastation of natural habitats, and the ruin of creation's natural fertility with pesticides and herbicides. As a result, the variety of earth's species is diminishing and creatures that once thrived in their habitats have died.

We must learn that creation is not humanity's possession. It is entrusted to humanity for its tending and safekeeping. Exercising responsible stewardship means pursuing simpler lifestyles. It means seeking contentment in those things that will sustain us, and not grasping more and more from the earth for our own selfish advancement. Sustainable living means providing an acceptable quality of life for the present generation without compromising that of future generations. Caring for the earth means taking into account all of our fellow creatures, leaving for them what is naturally theirs and allowing creation to heal, to restore its fruitfulness, and to praise its Creator.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What do I know about the ecosystems near where I live? What are the trees, birds, fish, and other wildlife that share my habitat?
  
- How would I rate my own personal stewardship of creation? What do I do well to care for the earth, and what can I do better?

## Biblical Perspectives on Ecology

The Bible offers a rich foundation for environmental consciousness. Some have accused the Christian tradition of fostering apathy for the material world by orienting people toward an immaterial existence in a spiritual heaven. But a review of biblical texts shows us that the world is not something from which we should try to escape. Both the ancient literature of Israel and the writings of the early church demonstrate that God's original intentions for creation as well as God's plan for creation's future fulfillment are centered in the world of bodily, worldly reality.

The psalms and wisdom literature of Israel rejoice in the created world. They present the world in all of its diversity as a gift from God in which all creatures delight. Singing the psalms convinces us that the non-human world is precious in God's eyes quite apart from any usefulness to humanity. The skies and the birds that fill it, the seas and the creatures that swim the deep, and the land with all of its vegetation and animals exist in a wonderful harmony in which each creature contributes to the good of the others. The book of Job and the other wisdom writings demonstrate that God's purposes for the world reach far beyond the understanding and control of humans. God loves his creation and watches over and sustains it with utmost care. Humans exist as an integral part of creation, yet God desires that people live wisely, in a way that contributes to the created world with respect for its meaning and goodness.

The opening chapters of Genesis present God's original design for the world. Every part of material reality comes from the loving hand of its Creator who declares it very good. Within this diverse and magnificent creation God fashioned his masterpiece, made in the divine image. Humankind was entrusted with the task of stewardship of the earth, charged with preserving and protecting what God had made. Even when man and woman abandoned their task, their responsibility remained. God made an everlasting covenant, not only with humankind, but with every living creature on the earth. The rainbow would be the sign in every generation of God's commitment to the earth.

Because the sinful tendencies within human beings lead to greedy consumption and callous exploitation of God's creatures, the law and prophets of Israel established commands and boundaries to encourage respect for God's gifts. The weekly Sabbath requiring rest for all creatures and the Sabbath year

for the regeneration of the land promote a lifestyle that honors the natural rhythms and cycles of the earth. The prophets condemn abuse of the earth's resources and continue offering hope for a time when God would restore creation to its wholeness.

The gospels proclaim that God loved the world so much that the divine Word became flesh and lived within it. He delighted in the natural world, taught about the seeds, flowers, and birds, retreated to the mountains to pray, and calmed the storms on the sea. And finally he rose bodily from death and assured his followers of complete victory over every brokenness and bondage.

The Christian Scriptures proclaim that God's saving will is complete restoration of the whole creation. Not only will God raise people to the fullness of life, but the entire world will be redeemed from the bondage of futility and decay. The risen Christ is the world's first experience of God's eventual renewal of the whole cosmos. The last book of the Bible returns to images from Scripture's first book, depicting a renewed and fruitful earth. The images of a fertile garden with the tree of life watered by a pure, flowing river express God's original intentions for the earth which will inevitably be fulfilled.

These wondrous images that fill the Bible's sacred texts demonstrate that God loves the world so much that he will never abandon it and will eventually restore its broken beauty. These texts teach us the responsibility of stewardship and offer us abiding hope. If God loves the world so much, then so must we. We must not abuse and destroy what is so precious to God. The Scriptures call us to be environmental stewards, people who joyfully and lovingly care for God's good creation.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- Some heretical teachers in the early centuries of Christianity taught that the physical world was evil and the goal of life was to escape from material reality. How does the Bible demonstrate this teaching to be false?

- What does it mean to love the world as God loves it? How do I demonstrate a love for creation?

### **The Practical Challenge of Stewardship**

The challenge of environmental stewardship is to put what we know and what we believe into practice. As individuals and families, we must examine our energy consumption and water usage, our garbage and recycling practices, and our lifestyle choices and decisions as consumers. We should consider how we pass on a respect and appreciation for God's creation to the next generation and how we can instill hope in young people that a more sustainable world is worth struggling to achieve.

Within our society we must move beyond short-sighted policies that increase production but harm the earth. In business, labor, and government, we must support the common good, considering not only the environmental needs of the present generation but also those of future generations. All decision-making regarding the use of the earth's resources ought to pass the ethical test of sustainability so that resources are not depleted or damaged for the future.

The contribution of the church is critical in raising awareness of environmental concerns. It must issue the prophetic call for a change of heart on the issues that threaten our world. The challenge to stewardship of the earth should be communicated in the preaching, worship, and educational programs of Christian communities. Studying the Scriptures helps people understand that our planetary home is sacred, and what people regard as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect.

We need today a joint commitment by science and religion to preserve the earth. Science tells us what we need to do; religion tells us why we need to do it. Science has not demystified the natural world. Rather, the more we understand its intricacy and extravagance, the more we are able to contemplate its mystery. Religion and science have different roles to perform in the work of

caring for the earth, but drawing on the insights of both, humanity can figure out how to live in harmony with all the creatures of the earth. Then we can continue to enjoy the intoxicating beauty of the sunset, the amazing power of the roaring sea, the exquisite loveliness of the butterfly, and the delicate perfection of the blooming flower. Then nature can continue to amaze us with its miracles.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- In what practical challenge facing the world can I make a difference? What step can I take first?

- How can religion and science become partners in the work of preserving the earth? Why do we need the contributions of both?

### **A New Ecological Spirituality**

A spirituality that reflects the biblical understanding of the created world requires a deep humility. It admits that the earth was not created merely for human use, but to give glory to God. Such a spirituality calls for a profound respect and reverence in the face of creation's sacredness. It recognizes that humanity did not weave the web of life, but that we are strands within it. It realizes that ultimately, "the earth is the Lord's" (Ps 24:1).

Our spiritual ancestors, like most traditional peoples of the world, possessed this type of respectful awe for the natural world. Their psalms called upon the worshipping assembly to join with all the elements of creation to offer praise to God. They acknowledged their spiritual kinship with God's other creatures, and they knew that these creatures always give God glory just by being what they were created to be. In previous ages, the praise of all creation had a much more important place in the prayer and liturgy of the temple and the church. But this ecological spirituality is being renewed in our day and will no doubt continue to affect the content of our prayer and the form of our worship.

Francis of Assisi is a wonderful model for the humility and reverence for creation that is being birthed again today. He evangelized not only the human inhabitants of his medieval world but also the birds and the wolves. In his prayer to God, Francis deposed humanity from any exclusive focus of concern and praised God with all his creaturely kin. He addressed the creatures of the world as his family—brother sun and sister moon, brother wind and sister water, brother fire and sister earth. His Cantic of Creation can inspire us to look at creation with new eyes and see within its beauty, as through filigree, the love of God.

### Prayer

*Thank you, Creator God, for the world you have given to us. Thank you for its beauty and wonders and for the witness it offers of your power and love. I ask you to help me reflect your image on the earth by treating your creation with care and affection. As I read these sacred Scriptures, give me a new respect for the earth and a new understanding of my responsibilities as your steward. Help me serve you with humility and treat with reverence the sacred gifts you have given to me.*

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FACILITATORS, GROUP SESSION 1

1. If the group is meeting for the first time, or if there are newcomers joining the group, it is helpful to provide nametags.
2. Distribute the books to the members of the group.
3. You may want to ask the participants to introduce themselves and tell the group a bit about themselves.
4. Ask one or more of these introductory questions:
  - What drew you to join this group?
  - What is your biggest fear in beginning this Bible study?
  - How is beginning this study like a “threshold” for you?
5. You may want to pray this prayer as a group:

*Come upon us, Holy Spirit, to enlighten and guide us as we begin this study on our stewardship of your creation. You have given us this world and all its creatures along with the privilege of caring for them. Motivate us to read the Scriptures and give us a deeper love for God’s word each day so that we will better understand your will for creation. Work deeply within us so that we will join with all creation in worshipping our Creator. Bless us during this session and throughout the coming week with the fire of your love.*
6. Read the Introduction aloud, pausing at each question for discussion. Group members may wish to write the insights of the group as each question is discussed. Encourage several members of the group to respond to each question.
7. Don’t feel compelled to finish the complete Introduction during the session. It is better to allow sufficient time to talk about the questions raised than to rush to the end. Group members may read any remaining sections on their own after the group meeting.
8. Instruct group members to read the first six lessons on their own during the six days before the next group meeting. They should write out their own answers to the questions as preparation for next week’s group discussion.
9. Fill in the date for each group meeting under “Schedule for Group Study.”
10. Conclude by praying aloud together the prayer at the end of the Introduction.



**When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them? Ps 8:3–4**

## God's Majesty and Humanity's Dignity

### PSALM 8

<sup>1</sup>*O Lord, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

*You have set your glory above the heavens.*

<sup>2</sup>*Out of the mouths of babes and infants  
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
to silence the enemy and the avenger.*

<sup>3</sup>*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;*

<sup>4</sup>*what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?*

<sup>5</sup>*Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.*

<sup>6</sup>*You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,*

<sup>7</sup>*all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
<sup>8</sup>the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

<sup>9</sup>*O Lord, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

The psalms are the hymnbook of ancient Israel, inviting us to enter a long tradition of praise to God. Psalm 8 is a wonderful example of what a hymn should be, celebrating who God is and what God has done, all in a spirit of awe and wonder. The hymn is addressed completely to God, beginning and ending with an exclamation of God's sovereign rule over the cosmos (verses 1, 9). God's supreme majesty is evident in all creation, and our rightful response is to cry out in praise and worship.

Gazing at the moon and the stars, the vastness of the night sky can lead us to a feeling of insignificance (verse 3). With wonderful poetic imagery, the psalmist describes God's arrangement of the heavenly bodies as the work of God's "fingers," the handiwork of the divine artisan. Within such a magnificent creation, the singer asks, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (verse 4). Who are we in relation to the grandeur of the heavens or the majesty of God? Communal worship of our transcendent God offers us a healthy dose of humility in the face of the awesome wonder of creation.

Though small and insignificant from the standpoint of human rationality, from the view of God's revelation human beings have a special and unique place in the order of creation. In God's plan our value is incomparable. We have been made "a little lower than God" (verse 5), placed between God and his other creatures, as stewards of creation. In fact, human beings have been given a share in God's royal rule, "crowned" with honor and glory, the regal traits of God. Though minuscule in comparison with the Creator and his wondrous works, earthly mortals are appointed to represent God's reign to other creatures.

This divinely appointed task for humanity to serve as God's royal regent in the world is described as "dominion" over the works of God's hands (verse 6).

Humans are endowed by God with tremendous dignity and remarkable responsibility in regard to the other creatures of the world. The sphere of this dominion is over all living creatures, both domesticated and wild animals (verse 7) as well as the birds of the air and the fish of the sea (verse 8). Yet, human authority over creation is far from absolute. It is a power exercised only at the behest of the Sovereign, a control that must reflect the purposes of the Creator. Dominion is nothing less than representing the reign of God in the world.

Human dominion over creation has been misunderstood and abused through the ages. Dominion has become domination, and humanity has misconstrued the tremendous privilege of serving as God's viceroy in the world and taken it as an excuse to use its rule for ruin. This psalm of praise to God's majesty challenges us to think again about our dignity and our accountability as representatives of God's rule within creation. This hymn to creation's Sovereign reminds us that our supremacy in the natural world is subordinate to the One who reigns over the cosmos.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What natural experiences have been powerful reminders to me of God's sovereign majesty?

- In what sense does gazing at a star-studded sky lead me to feel both my insignificance in the cosmos and my dignity in God's eyes?

- Why does it mean to say that human beings have dominion over the other creatures of the earth?

- How has the privilege of humanity expressed in verses 5–6 been misunderstood, leading to destructive abuse of creation?

- In what way do I feel important to God?

### Prayer

*O Lord, our Sovereign, when I look at the vast beauty of your creation I marvel at the dignity and calling you have given to me. As a steward of your earth, help me care for your creatures and embody your reign in the world.*



**Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it.  
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy.** Ps 96:11–12

## All Creatures Sing Praises to God

### PSALM 96

<sup>1</sup>*O sing to the Lord a new song;  
sing to the Lord, all the earth.*

<sup>2</sup>*Sing to the Lord, bless his name;  
tell of his salvation from day to day.*

<sup>3</sup>*Declare his glory among the nations,  
his marvelous works among all the peoples.*

<sup>4</sup>*For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;  
he is to be revered above all gods.*

<sup>5</sup>*For all the gods of the peoples are idols,  
but the Lord made the heavens.*

<sup>6</sup>*Honor and majesty are before him;  
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,  
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;  
bring an offering, and come into his courts.*

<sup>9</sup>*Worship the Lord in holy splendor;  
tremble before him, all the earth.*

<sup>10</sup>*Say among the nations, “The Lord is king!  
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.  
He will judge the peoples with equity.”*

<sup>11</sup>*Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;*

<sup>12</sup>*let the field exult, and everything in it.*

*Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy*

<sup>13</sup>*before the Lord; for he is coming,*

*for he is coming to judge the earth.*

*He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with his truth.*

This psalm is a great universal summons to praise God. “All the earth” is called to sing a hymn of praise to God in a grand symphony of creation. All the creatures of the earth, each in their own way, sing of God’s salvation, his glory, and his marvelous works (verses 2–3). The whole cosmos reverberates with praise.

Following the summons to sing to the Lord, bless his name, and declare his glory, the psalmist expresses the reasons for this call: God is great and worthy of great praise (verse 4). The Lord is to be revered above all would-be gods or whatever other powers people worship and trust. Most of the nations of the ancient world worshiped the heavenly bodies, but God’s worthiness to be praised lies in his work as the Creator of all: “the Lord made the heavens” (verse 5). Therefore, all the attributes of divine kingship can be ascribed to God: honor, majesty, strength, beauty, and especially glory (verses 6–8).

The primary message that all the earth is summoned to acclaim is this: the Lord is king—God reigns over all of creation (verse 10). This royal king has firmly established the world with an order in both nature and society that can be trusted. The same Lord who created the world also comes to judge the world with equity, righteousness, and truth (verses 10, 13). All the earth can look backward to creation and forward to judgment with confident trust because the Lord reigns.

Because we mistakenly think that divine judgment will be a day of gloom and doom, it might sound strange to us that the impending judgment of God is described here as a cause for rejoicing. But here God's judging the world with equity, righteousness, and truth means restoring the world to order and harmony. As God sets things right, the world is restored. So, not only do the people sing praise, but the heavens are glad and the earth rejoices (verse 11). Everything in creation is joyful, each in its own way: the sea and all its creatures roar, the field and all the creatures within it exult, and "all the trees of the forest sing for joy" (verses 11–12).

This symphony of creation shows the natural connectedness of all the elements of the created world. The social order of humanity and the created order of nature are intertwined in a deep ecological bond. Throughout the biblical literature, this interconnected harmony and peace in the world is called the kingdom of God or God's reign. It is God's desire for the world, the way the world ought to be.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- In what way do humans sometimes prevent creatures of the earth from offering their natural praise to God?

- How can we allow all creatures of the earth to praise God?

- In what ways does human worship of God parallel the worship by God's other creatures?

- How can I include the natural elements of the world in my praise of God?

- Why is God's coming to judge the earth a cause for rejoicing? What new understanding of the final judgment does this offer to me?

### **Prayer**

*Royal Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth, and all creation sings your praise. Deepen my reverence for all the creatures of the world so that I can join with the roaring sea and the singing trees of the forest in a symphony of praise to you.*