

The Problem of Change, Then and Now

Goal for the Session

Participants will identify commonalities between today's ecological challenges and historical challenges discussed in chapter 1, and will articulate a stance of courageous faith in the midst of uncertainty.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Opening Prayer
- Moments of Social Change
- Today's Theme

EXPLORING

- What Do We Care About?
- What Have We Been Taught?
- What Are Some Precedents?

RESPONDING

- Coaching Courage in Crisis

CLOSING

- One Action
- Closing Prayer

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Your Teaching

While individual attitudes toward ecological concerns vary, it may help to think ahead about the general “temperature” of the church or organization for which you are teaching and the likely composition of the class. Environmental issues have unfortunately been politicized, and the group may well consist of members who hold differing political loyalties. So it is helpful to model—and to affirm—recognition that our relationship to God’s creation fundamentally arises from faith convictions, and that within the broad spectrum of information and views available, no one owns all the facts.

Avoid and discourage soapboxes. Consider how to encourage class participants to listen respectfully and reflectively to one another’s views. It may be necessary, without pointing fingers, to find ways to discourage any one participant from dominating the conversation or dismissing other views (“Is there anyone we haven’t heard from yet who would like to respond?” “Let’s go around the room and state our reaction in a single word or phrase.”). If we believe God loves the breadth of created beings, we must believe God loves even those whose opinions differ from our own.

Compassionate God, help me to show compassion to all in the room, practicing hospitality and grace as Jesus did. Amen.

Preparation Checklist:

- Several weeks in advance, ask participants to purchase their books for the study. Or, better, have the church or organization buy and provide books for sale at least a week before the study begins. You may consider a slight

price mark-up to cover extra copies. Let participants know that the accompanying *Reading and Writing Workbook* is also available if they wish to record their own reflections while reading.

- The previous week, ask participants to prepare by reading chapter 1 of *Inhabiting Eden*.
- Read chapter 1 and this guide at least once, and peruse the rest of the book.
- Adapt this guide for the needs and time limits of your group. The times given are for a one-hour session—you can expand or contract each section accordingly.
- Pray for participants.
- Gather materials listed below.
- Arrange chairs so that all can see one another comfortably.

Materials Needed

- Copies of *Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis*
- Bibles
- Newsprint and markers (more than one color may prove helpful)
- Index cards or scratch paper, one per participant, and extra pens



LEADING THE SESSION

Opening (10 minutes):

Welcome participants as they arrive and introduce any newcomers. Make extra copies available to participants who do not yet have their books. Lead the group in this prayer or one of your choosing:

Loving God, guide us as we study together. Enrich our minds, enliven our hearts, and prompt our faithful actions. Amen.

1. Moments of Social Change

If participants are reading *Inhabiting Eden* in preparation for each session, ask them to name briefly one “takeaway,” something they learned by reading chapter 1.

Ask participants to think about a critical moment in the Bible or in more recent history in which change was afoot and leadership was needed. It could be one named in the book, or something else they are aware of. Once they have done so, ask them to think about feelings they themselves might have had if they had been there. Then ask them to turn to the person next to them and each describe the moment they identified and the feelings involved.

Call the group back together and ask volunteers to call out some of the feelings and reactions they imagined. Tell the group that today's session considers what it is like to live in moments of social change, and what we can learn from forebears who have faced these moments with courage, faith, and persistence.

Exploring (30 minutes)

2. What Do We Care About? (10 minutes)

Remind the group that the book opens with several brief accounts of ecological waste, mostly in the form of littering. Yet the list of environmental concerns summarized beginning on page 4 is much broader than litter. It includes problems in the areas of water, land use, trash and toxic waste, energy, and climate change.

Ask participants to call out in single words or brief phrases the environmental problems they find most troubling. Have someone list them on newsprint as they do so. Then ask them a second question: are these distinct issues, or are they interrelated? Allow participants to draw connections among the issues listed on the newsprint.

3. What Have We Been Taught? (10 minutes)

Read this quotation from the top of page 3 of *Inhabiting Eden*:

We may search for technological answers to the multiple ecological problems we face, but the questions are really human ones: What do we value? How do our lives and values line up?

Ask participants to reflect on their values. As the conversation unfolds, you might prompt with such questions as: In what sense are religious values involved in the environmental problems that have been named? Are there biblical texts or religious teachings that come to mind when thinking about how we treat our surroundings? What does it mean to live as if we valued the world God created?

4. What Are Some Precedents? (10 minutes)

Introduce the next part of the conversation by saying that social change often occurs when people reach a point that they either can't return to the past—as when the ancient Judeans lost Jerusalem to Babylonian destruction—or when they become convinced that business as usual has become unacceptable. Even when the past becomes unavailable or unacceptable, future direction may be unclear, daunting, or disputed.

Ask participants to recall some of the feelings they named at the beginning of the session, imagining themselves in a critical time in history. Then ask for two volunteers for a role play. One volunteer will be God, speaking to Ananias about Saul. The other will be Ananias. Reminding them that biblical stories often condense the drama, offer them their first lines from the story in Acts 9:10–14, and invite them to carry the conversation between God and Ananias as they imagine it might have taken place.

After a few exchanges, thank the role players. Note that an important distinction between Ananias's story as Luke tells it and most of ours is that the prompts we receive to do the right thing don't usually come as God's voice speaking as specifically as Luke portrays in Acts. Ask participants to think of instances when they may have felt prompted to do something, but also found themselves struggling with doubt or uncertainty. What fears or doubts did they know? What role did faith values play in their decisions? Was the actual outcome the same as what they feared? How did it differ?

Responding (10 minutes)

5. Coaching Courage in Crisis

Give each participant an index card or piece of scratch paper, and make sure everyone has a pen. Invite them to imagine that they have a friend who feels convicted to do something (even if they don't yet know what) about one of the environmental issues that were named earlier, and to write one sentence of encouragement or coaching about how to do so as a Christian.

After allowing time for participants to think and write, invite volunteers to read aloud the encouragement or coaching they have written.

Closing (10 minutes)

6. One Action

Invite participants to imagine themselves taking one step this week to address an environmental issue for which they care. It can be a personal action or a public one, one single thing, not more than one.

Invite participants to name the actions they imagine in the context of the following closing prayer, or one of your choosing:

Creating God, create within us the courage to change one small part of our world. As we name our intentions before you, let us affirm one another, saying, "Faith, courage, and perseverance be yours this week."

[Leave time for all who wish to name their actions aloud, and lead the group in response. Then close with:]

*In the name of the one who made heaven and earth, we pray,
Amen.*

Suggest that participants try the “Try This at Home” suggestions on p. 16 of *Inhabiting Eden*, to pay attention to presence of natural world when reading Scripture, and to ecological issues in the news. Remind participants to read chapter 2, “Humans and Creation,” concerning the human role as Scripture describes it.

Key Scriptures in Chapter 1

Isaiah 43:16–19

Acts 9:1–16

For More Information

Berry, Wendell. *The Citizenship Papers: Essays*. Washington, DC: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2003.

Wilson, E. O. *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. New York: Norton & Co., 2006

