

God's Green Book

*Seven Bible studies
about the environment*

Charlotte Sleigh
and
Bryony Webb



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Contents

<i>About the authors</i>	vi
<i>Introduction</i>	vii
1 God's character revealed in creation	1
Overview	1
Bible study: Genesis 1.1—2.3	1
Pointers for prayer	3
Practical activity: Sow a seed	4
Creative reflection: 'The divine game of Pinzatski'	5
Facts and figures: Creation quiz	12
Further Bible study: God made plain (Romans 1.18–25)	14
Knotty question: Don't we have dominion?	15
2 Give us this day our daily bread	16
Overview	16
Bible study: Exodus 16	16
Pointers for prayer	18
Practical activity: Throw a leftover party	19
Creative reflection: The manna blog	20
Facts and figures: Being content with what we have	23
Further Bible study: The feeding of the 5,000 (Mark 6.30–44)	25
Knotty question: But surely I've earned it?	26

3	What I do with my portion affects you	27
	Overview	27
	Bible study: Leviticus 25.1–24	27
	Pointers for prayer	30
	Practical activity: What would Jesus eat?	31
	Creative reflection: Beautiful belongings	33
	Facts and figures: The portion on your plate	34
	Further Bible study: The good Samaritan (Luke 10.25–37)	36
	Knotty question: Do these rules apply to me?	38
4	God's ecology	39
	Overview	39
	Bible study: Psalm 104	39
	Pointers for prayer	41
	Practical activity: Check your roots	42
	Creative reflection: 'Let me tell you why'	43
	Facts and figures: God's humble servants	46
	Further Bible study: Have you seen? (Job 38 and 39)	48
	Knotty question: Is climate change real?	49
5	The land mourns	51
	Overview	51
	Bible study: Hosea 2.8–13 and 4.1–3	51
	Pointers for prayer	56
	Practical activity: Your carbon footprint	57
	Creative reflection: Down the line	63
	Facts and figures: The rain in Spain	66
	Further Bible study: Anger and lust (Matthew 5.21–22 and 27–28)	68
	Knotty question: Surely my contribution is insignificant?	69

6	The land rejoices	71
	Overview	71
	Bible study: Isaiah 35.1–7	71
	Pointers for prayer	74
	Practical activity: Organize a litter-pick	75
	Creative reflection: Prepare the way of the Lord – a meditation	78
	Facts and figures: Minet Country Park, a land redeemed	80
	Further Bible study: The water of life (John 4.4–15)	82
	Knotty question: Does the New Testament talk about the environment?	83
7	Life in abundance	85
	Overview	85
	Bible study: Matthew 6.25–34	85
	Pointers for prayer	88
	Practical activity: Dropping the shopping	89
	Creative reflection: Walking the talk	91
	Facts and figures: What we treasure	95
	Further Bible study: Godliness and contentment (1 Timothy 6.6–11)	97
	Knotty question: How much do I have to give up?	98

About the authors

Charlotte Sleigh is leader of an environmental ‘cluster church’ in her home town, Canterbury. She is also senior lecturer at the University of Kent, where she teaches science communication and the history of science. Charlotte has long been interested in green issues and conservation, with the exception of slugs.

Bryony Webb is an experienced leader of church small groups. She works managing a conservation project on the South Downs, which involves young people in understanding and enhancing their local landscape. Her interest in green issues blossomed during an extended trip to Canada, seeing the beauty of the wilderness, and the devastation of our impact upon it.

Introduction

'I can't be bothered with all this environmental stuff. Don't drive that car, don't take that plane, don't turn on that central heating, don't buy that tomato from abroad. It just takes all the pleasure out of life.'

'I can't be bothered with all this Christian stuff. Don't swear, don't take drugs, don't sleep with him, don't fiddle your expenses. It just takes all the pleasure out of life.'

Do any of these comments seem familiar? If you are a Christian, the second set of comments probably doesn't ring so true. You're on a journey of discovery to find that what Jesus offers is not a set of prohibitions but positives: forgiveness, freedom and a sense of worth. Most likely you will have stopped doing a few things, but these 'thou shalt nots' are not the core of your faith. Instead, they flow from your love for God and from the recognition that they won't bring you the same contentment as he can.

When Christians understand more about God, themselves and the environment, a similar thing happens to the list of green 'thou shalt nots'. They get replaced with a deeper appreciation of how God is revealed in creation, and of how God's plans for humans are inseparable from the fate of creation. Once we truly understand this, our desire to respect God's creation grows naturally, and so our lives change.

It's a subtle and powerful shift from secular environmentalism to a Christian approach. The responsibility to change is no less serious, but Jesus does not condemn us with damaging judgement when we fall short. This is good, because judgement is all around! If someone professes to be green, people often want to know how they have changed their lives. 'She says she's green, but I've just seen her drive her kids five minutes down the road to school,' they might comment. 'Why should I listen to her?' It's like when non-believers focus on the failings of prominent Christians. It's true, these failings do not reflect how God wants us to live, but focusing on them deflects people from the truth of the gospel. We know we're not perfect when it comes to living green lives, but knowing this is not a reason to stop changing. We change because we love God, not because we think we can actually be perfect. The analogy between environmental 'sin' and conventional sin is really very close.

A green lifestyle is completely in tune with the gospel; indeed many of the changes that secular environmentalists recommend are actually very good spiritual disciplines. For example, they promote reducing consumption, having our share of what we need and not more. In this they echo Jesus, who was really clear that material possessions and love of wealth are not the route to happiness. By lightening up on these things we reduce our impact on the planet and also grow more contented. We are liberated to focus on the things that really matter.

This book aims to get to the core of how green issues fit into the gospel, and to encourage you to embrace a greener lifestyle without fear or guilt. It aims not just to change your actions but to change your whole understanding of the gospel in relation to the environment. Then, we hope, the changed actions will flow naturally.

How to use this book

Each of the following seven chapters includes a Bible study and is based on a particular theme:

- Study 1 tells how God created people as part of his abundant creation. We see how humans are made creative in his image, and start to look at our responses to what he made.
- Study 2 considers God the provider. We see that he has given us everything we need to live, including a right balance and rhythm to our days.
- Study 3 examines the principles that God put in place to keep all of creation in the right balance. These give us responsibility in choosing how much we take, both from the natural world and from each other.
- Study 4 is a meditation on God's wonderfully interconnected world, and considers how it is that we can affect so significantly what he has created.
- Study 5 considers how ungodly living in our daily lives can profoundly affect other people, the land and its creatures. It takes a look at the effects we have on God's creation when we start to serve other gods.
- Study 6 explores how God yearns to redeem us, and to redeem his whole creation – and shows us that creation's redemption, as well as our own, is referred to throughout the Bible.
- Study 7 presents the effects of responding to God's call, which transforms us, our actions and the world around us. God offers us a life of freedom and abundance; our journey towards this promise cannot be separated from our response to environmental issues.

Each chapter opens with an **Overview** which is intended to help the group leader get an idea of where the study is going. The leader will need to read the study ahead of time, to be clear about the questions and to make sure any of the simple resources needed are to hand.

Each **Bible study** starts with an activity, called *Getting started*. This should be a relatively short introduction to the theme, around five to ten minutes, to get people turning their thoughts to the discussion ahead. It

is generally suitable to use during the coffee time that starts many small group meetings.

The subsequent *Bible study questions* should be simple to follow, and the leader will be able to read out the questions as they are written. Occasionally, there is some direction or explanation to the leader in brackets which is not designed to be read aloud along with the question, but to help lead the discussion.

The Bible study ends with **Pointers for prayer**, which are intended to give you some prayer ideas; of course you will probably also want to pray about any particular issues that were raised in the group discussion. If you are going to do one of the four follow-on activities (see below) immediately after the Bible study you might prefer to save the prayer until the end of your session together.

The **Taking it further** section lists teasers for four possible follow-on activities that the leader can choose to use after the main discussion. The four activities fall into the following categories:



Practical activity: ways to experience God's world a little differently.



Creative reflection: stories and resources to help you appreciate God's creation and explore your own creativity.



Facts and figures: accessible ways to look at the world, global resources and energy use.



Further Bible study: considers a different but related biblical passage and includes questions to think about.

These activities give alternative ways for people to consider the theme of the Bible study. Some will be easy to do in the same evening as the

Bible study; some need time outside of the small group's usual meeting time. You may find that some are particularly good to use with youth groups while others are better suited to adults. As you plan the way you use this book, you may want to have one week to a theme, or you may wish to spread one or more of the themes over two weeks, to allow you to explore their resources more fully.



Also listed in the **Taking it further** section is a **Knotty question**. This section offers some pointers for resolution when important but tough issues come up in discussion and risk side-tracking the group. It is designed to help the leader facilitate a productive discussion, address questions that are asked, and keep on track. It could provide the basis for some further research, and maybe an evening in its own right, if the group or any individual feels they want to explore any particular knotty question some more.

1

God's character revealed in creation

Overview

God's character is revealed in all the things he created. The creation story tells of the abundance and sheer joy of his creativity. Within this context, we will start to look at our response to his creation, as people who are made creative in his image.

Bible study: Genesis 1.1—2.3

Getting started

The Genesis account tells of the seven days in which God made Creation. It is a story we all think we know – but do we? Either individually or in pairs, write down the timetable of creation as you remember it. What was created on which day?

Now read Genesis 1.1—2.3.

How accurate was your timetable? What differences were there from the Genesis account? How might these differences change assumptions about how we see creation? Think about which parts of creation get a day to themselves, and which parts share a day.

Bible study questions

- 1 What does the creation account tell us about God's character? If you are stuck for ideas, the following questions help draw out some relevant themes.

- (a) What are the words that reflect the abundance of creation in verses 20–23?
 - (b) What phrases are repeated throughout the entire story? How do they highlight God's orderliness, his purposefulness and his pleasure?
 - (c) What characteristic of God comes through in verses 29–30? Compare it with God's provision as revealed in Jesus' miracle of Matthew 14.19–20.
- 2 If you know a person's character, you can guess their motivations. Building on the elements of God's character that emerge from the account in Genesis 1.1—2.3 (question 1), what clues are there about why God created the universe?
- 3 We are created in God's image, and so we share his creativity. Many acts are creative, and it is a great mistake to consider ourselves uncreative if we don't do things like write poetry or paint pictures. Fixing a car, decorating a house, raising children, thinking of something to cook every day – all these are creative acts that echo God's creativity. In pairs, try the following activity:
- (a) Describe a time when you have been creative. Then think about how in doing so you were showing some of the characteristics of God you've mentioned so far.
 - (b) Once everyone has had a chance to answer, ask the following question:
Describe how someone might damage or vandalize your creation – or that of the person you are paired up with. How would you feel about what you had created? How would you feel about the person who damaged it?
- 4 As Christians we are called to honour God. What obligation do we have towards God's creation?
- 5 How are we called to exercise our God-given creativity? Think about how we treat other people and about how we treat the natural world, as all these are loved and intended parts of God's creation.

- 6 The more we understand and appreciate God's goodness, abundance and majesty, the better we are able to worship him. Do we therefore have any obligation to find out more about God's creation and our relationship with it?

Taking it further . . .



Get creative and sow God's beauty where there is only neglect and ugliness. Learn more about how God sees his creation, including humans.



If we look with an open heart, we can find God throughout creation.



Astound yourself with the complexity, weirdness and scale of God's creation.



God can be seen through all of creation, but it is God, rather than created things, that we should be worshipping.



According to the Genesis account, humans were given 'dominion' over the earth, to rule over it and subdue it. Doesn't that mean we can do what we want with creation?

Pointers for prayer

Praise God for the abundance of his creation, and for the pleasure that he takes in it. Pray that God will open your eyes to see the beauty and detail of what he has made and to share his pleasure in it. Thank God for the fact that we are made creative in his image, and pray that he will develop this gift in you so that your creativity, like his, brings life to the world and its people.



PRACTICAL ACTIVITY

Sow a seed

Get creative and sow God's beauty where there is only neglect and ugliness. Learn more about how God sees his creation, including humans.

Take a packet of native wild flower seeds, available from any garden centre, and sow them together as a group in a patch of waste ground. Ideally, find somewhere near to where your group meets so you can go back and see how they are transforming the area you've chosen. If they grow, they will attract bees, butterflies and other insects. Water them from time to time if you can.

Sowing a seed teaches us about God's creation because it is a risky business. If your seeds bloom, think about how God rejoices over a creation, made in love, as it blossoms. If the flowers die, or get dug up, or blitzed with weedkiller, think about how God feels when his love is rejected and trampled on.

God's creation is love laid down where we walk, strong and vulnerable in equal measure. His love is a wild flower blooming on waste ground.

If you want to see how other people have got on with this activity look up www.guerrillagardening.org



CREATIVE REFLECTION

'The divine game of Pinzatski'

If we look with an open heart, we can find God throughout creation.

Everybody loves a story. Take a risk: ask your group to sit back for ten minutes, and read aloud 'The divine game of Pinzatski', a moving story about finding the character of God in creation.

The divine game of Pinzatski

A curious and entertaining game was played by Ellen Pinzatski and her husband. They only played it once a year and then only when they were camped out far in the mountains by a silent turquoise lake they had named Infrequent. The game consisted of one of them pointing out a natural object, a moss-swaddled cedar stump or a high and voluminous cloud formation, and the other stating, to the best of their ability, what characteristic of God was expressed in that object. The idea for the game had arisen from Paul's statement in Romans: '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.' No sort of score was kept, and there were no rules, except that the person interpreting the natural object had to be able to explain to the other, if it was not patently obvious, how they had come to see a particular aspect of God's being manifested in the stump or cloud or grazing elk.

The game would go on for hours, days, weeks, as long as the two of them were able to stay in their tent by the lakeside. Once they had retired – both worked and they had no children – there was, of course, much more time for the game. They never tired of it.

I first heard about the game when I was chatting with Arthur, Ellen's husband, after a church study group on the nature of God. Arthur explained how Ellen and he played the game by Lake Infrequent every year, toyed with his teacup as we discussed God's various characteristics, and finally asserted, 'Abstractions are a poor second cousin to analogies. Analogies always get you closer to the truth. Never rely on an abstraction if you can get an analogy.'

This coming from a professor of mathematics and physics! I asked him why he felt this was so. 'Because abstractions establish distance,' he answered, 'cool, logical, objective distance. Analogies get you in close so you can smell the sweat. They're warm-blooded, make you feel something. That's why the Bible is loaded with them when it gets down to talking about God.'

I mentioned the theory that the Bible was loaded with analogies because it was addressed primarily to an uneducated and naive peasant population. Arthur snorted. 'If you believe that,' he told me, 'you'll believe anything.'

Perhaps it was this exchange that led to the Pinzatskis' invitation to join them on a camping trip that August. I was purportedly an Old Testament scholar, at least Princeton had said so, and they may have felt I needed a good dose of the analogical to set my lecture notes straight. I took them up on the invitation, if for no other reason than to get out of the city for a week. I threw a few pairs of jeans into a dufflebag, a bottle of insect repellent, and a canteen. They had been quite firm about doing all the cooking. 'Think of it as spending a week at our house,' said Ellen. 'Would you bring over your own plate and fork?'

The drive to Lake Infrequent was long, about nine or ten hours. Part of the highway ran through pale desert, but the lake itself was situated among a rush of trees, high above on a plateau, a good hour down a potholed track that shook my teeth. The four-person tent was erected. Ellen got a fire going and Arthur started wrapping corn cobs in aluminium foil. I had just brought several containers of water up from the lake when Ellen said in a clear voice: 'Ash.'

Arthur looked up from his cornhusking. 'Ash,' he repeated. 'I can't believe we've never talked about that one before.'

I set the water down. The pair of them were oblivious to me. Arthur took his time, rolled a few more cobs of corn into tight foil bundles. Finally, he responded: 'The purity of God.'

'How so?' demanded Ellen, raking white coals to another area of the fire so they could be used for cooking purposes.

'Because God uses fire to purify what is unholy, reducing it to ash.'

'But God also uses fire to burn what is holy and reduce it to ash,' retorted Ellen. 'Think of a holy sacrifice.'

'All right,' mumbled Arthur, bringing a bowl of wrapped corn cobs over to the fire and placing them on the coals. 'But whatever God uses the fire for, ash symbolizes something that has been consumed because the purity of God required it.'

While they were eating the meal, Arthur pointed to the ground in front of him as he was chewing. 'What would you say about that, Ellen?' Ten or twelve ants were staggering off under bits of corn that had fallen in the dirt.

Ellen laughed. 'I think we've come close to something like this before, but okay, I'll go with it. To me, these ants express God's desire to use what is apparently weak and puny to do those tasks which are most difficult and arduous. God is rarely the show-off. Most of the time he likes to work at the big things quietly, operating from a person we'd least expect his power to be present in. I think it is also to do with God's innate pleasure in surprises. It may also have something to do with his sense of humour.'

'Good,' commented Arthur, sipping at his tin mug of coffee. 'Good.'

When we were rinsing the plates down by the lake and the sun set in a line of bright green, Ellen asked, 'And this particular sunset?'

'This particular sunset,' responded Arthur, using a bit of sand to clean grease off his plate, 'I would say it expresses the peacefulness of God, that inner tranquillity represented by his use of the colour green in the

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