

A Look at Waste Products Through the Spectacles of Scripture

The life of the living creatures that God has placed upon this earth requires the consumption of food and the production of waste. Without this process of consumption, and the production of waste, life as created on this earth would cease to exist. Life requires energy. The energy required is not provided in a pure state, but comes packaged within particular arrangements of atoms and molecules. When digested, these arrangements of atoms and molecules release the energy stored within. After the particular arrangements of atoms and molecules have been broken down to release the needed energy, they are discarded as waste.

Scientists have long been fascinated by the whole process by which a living creature releases and uses this energy. With the ability to see within an individual living cell, they have discovered many secrets of this process. There in the cell, tiny machines with cogs and levers a few atoms thick break the packaging apart to release the precious energy that had traveled nine million miles from the sun. That energy had been packaged by a plant into a form suitable for use by the living creatures that moved upon the face of the earth. Once released, the left over parts are discarded from the cell, and eventually from the body of the creature as waste.

God created the earth to be filled to the brim with living creatures. He commanded the creatures to fill the earth. Wherever there are molecules of matter that can be broken down to release energy, there is found a creature designed to consume it and produce waste. Each creature has been created with a certain range of genetic flexibility to adapt and conform to the particular environment where this food is found so that it is able to live and reproduce as God commanded.

With such a creation, it would appear that the earth would soon fill with waste. Anyone who sets up an aquarium must understand this problem or the fish will soon fill their “world” with waste and die as a result. Bacteria are needed to break down the waste, and filters must regularly be changed as they fill with waste. Yet, despite the fact that the earth is filled with living creatures, the earth does not fill with waste.

You most likely learned about the wonder of waste removal first when you studied the process of photosynthesis. Plants need carbon dioxide in order to grow, and that carbon dioxide is one of the major waste products produced by living creatures. With the help of bacteria and other microscopic organisms, plants also use the solid waste produced by living creatures. Not only do the plants which God created absorb and use waste and prevent it from piling up, they convert it back to the food living

creatures need and bring beauty and shade to the earth. That relationship between plant and living creature is beautiful, fascinating, and amazing. “And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so. And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:30-31a).

As God created the world and the living things which fill it, there really is no such thing as “waste” as we usually think about it. Waste is something that is left over after it has been used but is no longer useful. But in the creation of God, what is waste for one creature is necessary for another. One of the “waste” product that a plant produces is oxygen which is necessary for the living creatures to break apart food to release the energy stored within. When God said “very good,” of His creation, there was nothing vain or pointless. Everything had a good purpose and every creature fit perfectly into its place. Any reference to vanity is tied to the fall of the king of creation into sin. And the hope of all creation is tied to redemption in Christ. “For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now” (Rom 8:20-22).

The travail of creation grows as we near the end of Satan’s apparent dominion in this earth. The greed and insatiable desire of man to satisfy his desires is resulting in mountains of waste. And recently it has been discovered that the ocean currents in the Pacific have been collecting tons of plastic waste that wash into the rivers and get caught in the center of the circular swirl of ocean currents.

This is known as the Eastern Garbage Patch, part of a system of currents called the North Pacific subtropical gyre. Located halfway between San Francisco and Hawaii, the garbage patch is an area of slack winds and sluggish currents where flotsam collects from around the Pacific, much like foam piling up in the calm center of a hot tub.

Curtis Ebbesmeyer has been studying the clockwise swirl of plastic debris so long, he talks about it as if he were tracking a beast.

“It moves around like a big animal without a leash,” said Ebbesmeyer, an oceanographer in Seattle and leading expert on currents and marine debris. “When it gets close to an island, the garbage patch barfs, and you get a beach covered with this confetti of plastic.”

Some oceanic trash washes ashore at Midway—laundry baskets, television tubes, beach sandals, soccer balls and other discards.

Nearly 90% of floating marine litter is plastic—supple, durable materials such as polyethylene and polypropylene, styrofoam, nylon and saran.

About four-fifths of marine trash comes from land, swept by wind or washed by rain off highways and city streets, down streams and rivers, and out to sea.

The rest comes from ships. Much of it consists of synthetic floats and other gear that is jettisoned illegally to avoid the cost of proper disposal in port.

In addition, thousands of cargo containers fall overboard in stormy seas each year, spilling their contents. One ship heading from Los Angeles to Tacoma, Washington, disgorged 33,000 blue-and-white Nike basketball shoes in 2002. Other loads lost at sea include 34,000 hockey gloves and 29,000 yellow rubber ducks and other bathtub toys.

The debris can spin for decades in one of a dozen or more gigantic gyres around the globe, only to be spat out and carried by currents to distant lands. The U.N. Environment Program estimates that 46,000 pieces of plastic litter are floating on every square mile of the oceans. About 70% will eventually sink.” (*Los Angeles Times* “Plague of Plastic Chokes the Seas” by Kenneth R. Weiss, Times Staff Writer August 2, 2006)

What, then, does all this waste look like through the spectacles of Scripture? The word “waste” is used in a variety of ways in Scripture, but the idea of “empty, decayed” and “useless” gets at the idea in a passage such as Isaiah 51:3: “For the LORD shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.” In each case, the word is used in connection with war or some other effect of sin and corruption in the earth. The word “vanity” also captures the idea behind the waste that we find piling up. “Vanity” means “emptiness” and figuratively refers to something transitory and unsatisfactory. We live in a disposable society. What is “in” changes so fast and everyone is in such a hurry so packaging for the things we want is designed to attract and then be discarded. Even the things we want quickly become empty when something new comes along and we throw it away.

The whole book of Ecclesiastes addresses the issue of vanity and the ever-changing fad-chasing pleasure seeking world in which we live. The mountains of waste we generate and the vast swirling Pacific toilet that never flushes are a monument to the vanity of life under Satan’s dominion. The monument grows every day, and nobody is able to stop it because only a radical change of heart for every man living can release him from the vanity that drives his life.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes gives the conclusion of the whole matter: “Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.” When we heed this instruction, we will minimize our contribution to the monument of vanity because the treasures we seek to gather will not be earthly, but heavenly. Given the fact that we live in this world and society, we buy and sell what is available, even if it is the product of a society of vanity, and pile the garbage each week at the end of our driveway. But when we look at our pile through the spectacles of Scripture, let us see it for what it is. On the one hand we ought to look for ways to reduce the monument to vanity in our own life; and on the other hand, we hear creation groan, and we look forward to the glorious redemption of the children of God and the melting of these earthly elements, when Christ returns, into a new heaven and earth.