

A Most Elegant Book

I'll never forget my first wilderness camping experience as a young man. Some of my friends prevailed on me to join the Boy Scouts, and not long after I pledged to "do a good turn daily," our troop went on a tent campout to the Hocking Hills in southeastern Ohio. The late fall weather was cold and crisp. We didn't arrive at our campsites until well after dark.

I stepped out of the car, stretched, and surveyed what little I could see in the dark. We were in the forest surrounded by leafless deciduous trees and tall pine trees that insulated us from most sounds except for the soft hush of the breeze wafting through the branches. Never had I been in an environment like this. Then I looked straight up. The stars were the most vivid I'd seen in my young life. They were clear and bright and seemed so close I could almost reach out and scoop them into my hands. I was awed. And my instinctive response was that all of this was no accident. There is a God, and He's awesome because His creation is awesome.

Flash forward twenty-five years or so. This time we were camping at Dillon state park north of Zanesville with a good number of friends and families from this church. It was well after dark. The ladies were around the campfire talking and laughing, our kids were playing nearby, and a half dozen of us guys were sitting in lawn chairs several yards away at the crest of a hill, admiring the crystal clear nighttime sky. There was a lull in our conversation when, in the full view of us all, a meteor burst from the northern horizon and traversed the sky in front of us until it disappeared below the horizon to the south. The apparition took, probably, 7 or 8 seconds, and the only words we spoke during that time were whispers of "Ohhhhh!" and "Wow!" and "Amazing!" When the streak of light was no longer in view there was a 3 second delay...and then we burst into wild cheers, giving each other high fives and crying out "Glory to God!" We had witnessed something that was a rare gift, and we knew to Whom we should give the credit.

The last time I spoke we considered the first main point in our Millersport Covenant Church Statement of Faith, which reads:

"We believe the Bible to be God's Word, inspired, inerrant, infallible, and completely relevant for our lives today."

Our trust in God's Word is why we should be able to call ourselves "people of the Book." The Words in the Bible are more than a collection of old stories and good advice. They are the very Words our Sovereign Lord has given to us so that we may more thoroughly know and serve Him. But did you know God has more than one book? Before you brand me as a heretic, let me explain!

Christian theologians, in considering the ways God reveals Himself to men, distinguish between general revelation (the light of nature) and special revelation (the light of the written Word of God in the Bible). Perhaps the most beautifully crafted statement of this belief is in Article 2 of the Belgic Confession of Faith, authored in 1561. The subheading of Article 2 is "By what means God is made known unto us":

“We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to *see clearly the invisible things of God, even His everlasting power and divinity*, as the apostle Paul says in [Romans 1:20](#). All which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse. Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation.”

The awe we feel as we observe the works of God in creation are meant to clearly display His everlasting power and His divinity. King David, in Psalm 19, indicates that this general witness is available to all people everywhere, regardless of their location or native language:

“The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.” ~Psalm 19:1-3

This witness is so obvious that men and women are without excuse...they cannot claim ignorance regarding the existence, the power, and divine nature of God. But it is important to distinguish between what general revelation accomplishes versus the special revelation we receive in Scripture. We come to salvation through the specific truths given in His word, not simply by observing His power and divinity in nature. It may sound spiritual when someone exclaims “See these mountains and trees? THIS is my church!” Without the special revelation we receive in the word of God, we idol makers would manufacture gods of our own and we’d end up worshipping the creation instead of the Creator. Note the First and Second Commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai:

“You shall have no other gods before me.
You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” ~Exodus 20:3-4

These are the first two commandments for a reason. We must guard against idol worship. God’s special revelation in the Bible tells us how to worship Him “in spirit and in truth,” as He requires.

This past week, a tiny house finch flew into a window next door and didn't survive the impact. My dad discovered the bird only minutes later. He brought it over to show me. The bird was still warm so its muscles were very flexible. I spend a good number of minutes just marveling over the intricate details of its feathers, the shape of its wings, the tiny legs and feet, its little eyes, and the shape of its beak. I was in awe. I took a photo of the finche’s outstretched wing and posted the photo along with my impressions on Facebook, giving the Creator God the glory for His amazing work. Dozens of people Liked the post, and several left comments either telling of their similar experiences or agreeing with my reflections about God’s wonders. One of my friends, who is a Buddhist, disagreed with my assessment, saying “It is incredible that the species has evolved in such a way...thanks for appreciating and sharing!”

You can see that simply appreciating nature does not lead one to belief in an almighty creator. The Apostle Paul, in Romans 1:18-25 reflects on this sad phenomenon:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, *because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator*, who is blessed forever! Amen. ~Romans 1:18-25

But among those of us who believe, who can argue that regularly exposing ourselves to the beauty of the created cosmos through which we sense His omnipotence is not a good and healthy thing? One symptom of a sick society is that we do not fear God enough. Our reverence is lacking. We are more easily impressed with the things man has wrought than the works of the Almighty. I believe part of the problem is that we simply aren't outside as much as our predecessors. More people work inside than ever before, and the modern technological advances of the past century have spun off thousands of electronic entertainment devices and venues that lure viewers and players indoors, away from the wonders of nature.

Recently, I came across a blog post by Conrad Mbewe, a pastor whom I greatly respect from Zambia, Africa. In Conrad's post, he was reflecting, with sadness, how so many in the church have been wooed away from the sacred things of God and have become enamored with distractions. In this particular case, he was troubled by the number of people who were staying away from church to watch the Zambian soccer team (in Zambia and most other countries it's called "football") on television whenever they had a match on Sunday. Now, obviously, people need to miss church from time to time due to a number of reasons, but this particular sports-related condition was chronic, especially among the younger members of the congregation. Conrad made this comment, which I think is pertinent to our topic this morning:

"I am sorry to say that as I mingle with the younger generation today, I cannot help feeling that this culture of deep meditation on God has been largely lost. There is too much noise. Noise from the television, noise from the radio, noise from the internet, noise from the smartphone, noise from the computer, noise from the sports stadium—noise, noise, noise. The injunction of Scripture seems to be largely missing that says, "Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth" (Psalm 46:10). Our young people always want to be with the bawling crowds and where the music is loudest. The result has been a tragic loss of this weighty sense of the living and majestic God."

To cultivate an integrated lifestyle that glorifies God in both our work and our play, we must consider whether constantly choosing to distract ourselves with artificial forms of entertainment is wise and healthy. Certainly I am not condemning wholesome games, movies, books or other forms of distraction. But a recreational life that does not include regular opportunities to encounter, firsthand, the beauty of the created world is unbalanced and potentially toxic.

Perhaps the wisdom books of Job, Psalms, and Proverbs might provide some helpful examples of how the authors of those books encountered the Almighty through His creation. God's revelation of his majesty to Job (Job chapters 38-41) was sufficient to cause Job to repent of his doubts regarding God's purposes in allowing Job to suffer so much loss and pain. God takes Job on a virtual tour of the created order that roughly parallels the six days of creation found in the opening chapters of Genesis. God confronts Job, asking him rhetorical questions about the earth, the sea, light, life, weather, the heavens, and the creatures He has made. Here is a sample:

“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
that a flood of waters may cover you?
Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go
and say to you, ‘Here we are’?
Who has put wisdom in the inward parts
or given understanding to the mind?
Who can number the clouds by wisdom?
Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,
when the dust runs into a mass
and the clods stick fast together? ~Job 38:34-38

It is interesting that God never explains to Job why He allowed Job to suffer so much. It's also fascinating that, after God's tour of the heavens and the earth, Job didn't feel the need to ask. The revelation of God's eternal power and divine nature was all Job needed. At the end of it all, Job said:

“I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted...
I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know....
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.” ~Job 42:2-6

Numerous passages in the Psalms provide examples of how a God fearing person should allow the beauty of the heavens and the earth to evoke praise in his soul. In Psalm 8, David exclaims

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?" ~Psalm 8:3-4

David's was a shepherd prior to being anointed as King of Israel. No doubt he spent many nights alone in the fields observing the majesty of the heavens. This observation put him and the entire human race in their place. A little humility is a very good thing, and the humiliation David felt when marveling at the work of God's fingers in the heavens evoked in his soul the kind of worship that pleases the Almighty. Consider these verses from the Psalms:

"The heavens declare His righteousness, for God Himself is judge!" ~Psalm 50:6

"The heavens proclaim His righteousness, and all the peoples see His glory." ~Psalm 97:6

David connected his awe when observing the heavens with the righteousness of God as the supreme judge of the earth. There is something about immensity that causes us to reflect not only on our smallness, but also on our sinfulness in relation to His holiness.

As awesome as the heavens are, we can observe more than just the heavens as we consider the handiwork of God. His fingerprints are evident in all His aspects of His creation. Recall my reflections about the little house finch as you listen to these words from Psalm 111:

"Great are the works of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in them.
Full of splendor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever." ~Psalm 111:2-3

Psalm 104 is a magnificent poetic discourse on the glories of the created order. This psalm references the six days of creation as the psalmist marvels in the majesty of the heavens, the earth, the oceans, the seasons, and all the wildlife contained in the earth and the seas. The psalm closes with these lines:

"May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
may the Lord rejoice in His works,
who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke!
(Do we really think earthquakes and volcanoes happen without His causing them?)
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
May my meditation be pleasing to Him,
for I rejoice in the Lord.
Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and let the wicked be no more!
Bless the Lord, O my soul!
Praise the Lord!" ~Psalm 104:31-35

The psalmist is enthralled with what he sees. The Lord expresses His glory through His works, and the psalmist trusts this glory will endure forever. On the other hand, sinners and wicked people will suffer the opposite fate, and will be “consumed from the earth.” The righteous will enjoy the Lord, blessing and praising Him as long as they live, pleasing Him through their meditative worship as they ponder the things His hands have wrought. It is instructive to note again that created things are not the object of the psalmist’s worship. Created things don’t get the praise. God is the One who is glorified.

The book of Proverbs frequently exemplifies the observation of animals as a way to gain wisdom regarding the mysteries of God. The sayings of Agur in Proverbs 30 are rich with these types of allusions:

“The leech has two daughters:
Give and Give.” ~Proverbs 30:15a

“Three things are too wonderful for me;
four I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a serpent on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a virgin.” ~Proverbs 30:18-19

“Four things on earth are small,
but they are exceedingly wise:
the ants are a people not strong,
yet they provide their food in the summer;
the rock badgers are a people not mighty,
yet they make their homes in the cliffs;
the locusts have no king,
yet all of them march in rank;
the lizard you can take in your hands,
yet it is in kings' palaces.” ~Proverbs 30:24-28

It is not my purpose here to interpret the deeper meanings of Agur’s words, except to point out there is much we can gain by pondering the behavior of our creature friends. God chose to include these interesting observations in His holy word so we would do well to take note and, perhaps, deduce our own wisdom from the things we see in nature.

One of my personal spiritual heroes is Jonathan Edwards, a theologian, scholar, and minister who lived during the first half of the 18th century in colonial America. Many have remarked that Edwards was one of the greatest philosophical minds America has yet to produce. His writing are prolific, and he is particularly remembered because of his astute observations and remarks concerning the behavior of individuals and congregations during the First Great Awakening. Edwards himself, and his family, were greatly affected during the many waves of revival they experienced through this unique time in America’s history. But the spiritual experiences that seem to have made the most impact on Edwards personally were those he had as a young man during the times he spent outside “year after year; often

walking alone in the woods, and solitary places, for meditation, soliloquy, and prayer, and converse with God; and it was always my manner, at such times, to sing forth my contemplations” (from his *Personal Narrative*). He explains in more detail:

“I often used to sit and view the moon for a long time; and in the day, spent much time in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things; in the mean time, singing forth, with a low voice, my contemplations of the Creator and Redeemer. And scarce any thing, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning; formerly nothing had been so terrible to me. Before, I used to be uncommonly terrified with thunder, and to be struck with terror when I saw a thunderstorm rising; but now, on the contrary, it rejoiced me. I felt God, if I may so to speak, at the first appearance of a thunderstorm; and used to take the opportunity, at such times, to fix myself in order to view the clouds and see the lightnings play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God’s thunder, which oftentimes was exceedingly entertaining, leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God. While thus engaged, it always seemed natural to me to sing or chant forth my meditations; or, to speak my thoughts in soliloquies with a singing voice.”

Immensity, majesty, awe, terror, joy...all sensations we experience as we encounter our Creator by availing ourselves to His works in nature. Let’s commit to spending more time with nature where we can “see clearly the invisible things of God, even his everlasting power and divinity” (Romans 1:20) producing in us the worship He deserves. Absolutely, we are people of the book, the Word of God. But we also need to consider the other books we are reading, figuratively speaking. What kinds of things are filling our minds and grabbing our attention? How much noise do we allow in our lives instead of following that admonition to “be still and know that I am God?” Recall Paul’s admonition in Philippians 4:8:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ~Philippians 4:8

It’s tragic to hear young people remark that outside activities are boring, that activities like taking hikes, or flying kites, or riding bikes are not as fun as sitting inside playing video games or staring at their Smartphones. Let’s admonish ourselves and those we love to spend more time reading God’s two books!

In closing, give strong consideration to these often quoted words from Isaiah 40:28-31:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.

Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint. ~ Isaiah 40:28-31

Bonus Material

“The Two Books” – sermon by Tim Challies

<https://vimeo.com/118541041>

“We Have Lost the Sense of God” – blog post by Conrad Mbewe

<http://www.conradmbewe.com/2017/03/we-have-lost-sense-of-god.html>

The Belgic Confession of Faith 1651

<http://www.creeds.net/belgic/>