

CHAPTER TEN

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When we tread into the arena of nature's revelation, we cannot do so as scientists, mechanically gathering data. Nor are we on a Walden Pond nature excursion. Instead, we explore nature as those who have a personal relationship with Jesus and know without a doubt that he is the Creator. In our quest to know him, we want to hear his voice resound from the grandeur of every mountain, the burst of the cherry blossoms, the lashing of every wave, and the stillness of a starry night.





My (Randy's) favorite poem is the Windhover by Gerard Manley Hopkins. In it Hopkins celebrates the majesty of God in nature by the falcon's "riding"—"how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing"—and by the colors revealed in the shine of "sillion" turned up by a plough. Hopkins deeply understood revelation with God through nature.

"Day unto day" nature speaks to us of the glory of God, the Psalmist declared (Psalm 19:1-4).

The beauty of God's character is everywhere revealed in nature. It transcends every language.

It has so much to say to us if we only have ears to hear or eyes to see as Hopkins did.

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In nature, we find the intricacies of the human eye, the aerodynamics of maple seeds, and the amazing colors of seashells. We find the language of a designer in all of these and his fingerprint in the DNA of all creatures. In nature, we also find the presence of God.



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We are reminded of the life of Jonathan Edwards, who regularly took rides in nature. One day he even experienced a vision of the Lord.

Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk in divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view that was for me extraordinary...I saw the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension. This grace that appeared so calm and sweet, appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception—which continued, as near as I can judge, about an hour.

This kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated.

I wanted to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love him with a holy and pure love; to trust in him, to live upon him, to serve and follow him, and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure with a divine and heavenly purity.⁵

I (Cathy) find that the outdoors provides the best place for object lessons (just as Jesus did). Just as my father did for me, I point out to my children the details and artistry in nature my eyes are trained to see, using them to convey the spiritual lessons of nature: allowing time to wonder about the Creator, visualizing scriptural truths so they embed in our hearts, seeing God more clearly, and learning to rest.



I often feel God revealed himself to me through the plants, trees, mountains, and especially the beach. As a city girl, I was lucky to have what seemed like miles of woods beyond the fence of our backyard. My brother and I would tromp through them for hours, discovering everything from tadpoles to patches of poison ivy, before hearing my mother call us in for dinner. Later, my time in nature was limited as I grew up and spent less and less time outdoors.

When I was thirteen, I spent my first day at the beach and was hooked. I became a different person at the beach (according to my husband, anyway). The beach creates margin in me, and the constant wind blows the broken loops and stressors in my mind away. God always speaks to me when I've created margin—usually somewhere out in nature.

Once, when I (Cathy) had been divorced from my first husband and close to burnout (I busied myself working for the church to avoid facing pain), God broke into my devotions, demanding rather loudly that I "Come away" with him. His voice was like a hammer in my mind, persistent as a dripping faucet, until I made the decision to drive to my uncle's lake house in the North Georgia mountains—in the middle of a snowstorm. Once there, he "downloaded" volumes to me, speaking clearly and at length. I journaled for hours. I prayed and cried for still more. In the end, he sealed Isaiah 54 to my heart, promising that one day I would indeed have children and a family. I hung on to this for over ten years. Just as he did for others, God broke in when I made the space for him. And a large part of that had to do with meeting him in the hush of nature.

God broke in when I made the space for him.



Another time, I experienced God’s breaking in while surrounded by family at St. George Island. There were no lights for miles around us (lights at night are illegal because of turtle activity) and no lights were on the ocean in front of us. So, the sky was filled with the Milky Way. We were overcome.

We reclined out on the deck on St. George Island, just looking up at the majesty of God for hours.

Prior to this, since I grew up in Atlanta near the airport, I had no idea what a sky full of stars looked like. Frankly, I was unimpressed by the handful of stars I saw typically at night. I had absolutely no idea what others meant when they wrote about a starry night—until then. Now Psalm 19:1 made sense: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”

When through the woods and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze;

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee,
How great thou art, how great thou art!
(Lyrics to How Great Thou Art by Stuart K. Hine)

Unfortunately, I’m not alone in my latent ability to appreciate and meet God in creation. *We like chaos and busyness because it distracts us from ourselves.* And the American Church in its current state is not much help here—there’s not much place for the disciplines of solitude and silence and we’re not taught these Christian disciplines.



Instead, we find silence deafening and solitude terrifying. When we do get out in creation and the sounds of nature have quelled our stressors to silence, we're stuck with our own voices. It's here that we grapple with what we've been keeping at bay—pushed to the periphery—and God breaks in.

Sure, God in his mercy breaks in at any time, but being out in nature makes it easier to do so. (Maybe this is why God was able to break in to reveal himself to Paul, out on the road to Damascus, not in the busy metropolis of Jerusalem.)

As a busy mom and businesswoman, I am in need of building into my schedule outdoor time because I am not normally a naturalist. I'm a doer and homebody. And I hate heat, humidity, bugs, gnats, and cold. But I'm convicted of the need to program time to wonder at creation.

Martin Luther tells us that it is only with the 'eye of faith' that we can see miracles all through nature, miracles that he believed were even greater than the miracles of the sacraments. If we truly understood the growth of a grain of wheat, he says we would die of wonder.⁶

If we don't appreciate creation, we can't fully appreciate the Creator. We must learn to seek the Creator behind the creation, which Martin Luther called the "mask of God," partially concealing yet revealing the Creator for the one who seeks Him.⁶

Earth's crammed with heaven,
and every common bush afire with God;
but only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.
—Elizabeth Barret Browning



Now I train my children to appreciate the beautiful lacework that a Creator places on the backs of every leaf, yet few stop to appreciate it because leaves are so plentiful.

I help them see the God who creates beauty because he likes it, regardless of whether we appreciate it.

Or the grains of crushed seashells that make up the beach and how the Bible says God thinks more thoughts of us than there are grains of sand. Or the Artist who paints details on the seashells that are not “necessary” or “utilitarian.”

So I adjust my busy-mom ways to make sure I properly appreciate the flecks of “gold” in the pockets full of rocks my son brings home, the million-dollar-dinosaur-tooth, or the bent twist of the “awesome” stick my son hid in his shorts all day long to bring home to me. (I cannot fathom how uncomfortable that must have been.) To appreciate every acorn my son brings home, every dandelion my daughter picks for me. I adjust my aversion to the “dirtiness” of the feathers they find outside and grit my teeth to pick up the dead Luna moth because I know my son will adore it.

I close my laptop and go walking in the garden.

In nature, will he not be to us “...a billion times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!”?

5 The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol 1, p.xlvii

The Windhover by Gerard Manley Hopkins

To Christ our Lord

*I caught this morning morning's minion,
kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,
in his riding*

*Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing*

*In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend:
the hurl and gliding*

*Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!
Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!*

*No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.*





The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies
proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.
In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.
It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its
circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth.

- Psalm 19:1-6

When I consider...

the beautiful lacework that a Creator places on the backs of every leaf, yet few stop to appreciate it because leaves are so plentiful. He is the God who creates beauty because he likes it, regardless of whether we appreciate it or not. A God whose thoughts toward us are more than the grains of crushed seashells that make up the beach. Or an artist who paints intricate patterns and details on the seashells that are not "necessary" or "utilitarian."

1. In what ways do you see the hand of God in creation?

2. Have you sensed the presence of God in creation? How has it refreshed you?

3. What can you do more to appreciate God through his creation? How can you pass this on to your children and grandchildren?

For Review

How does nature calm us from the distractions of life?

Why is it sometimes easier to hear God while enjoying nature?

How do you develop the disciplines of solitude and silence in your life?

Journal

Creation calls us to revelation.

Read Psalm 19:1-6. How does the Psalmist describe the revelation of God? How can you heed the call creation makes for us to experience our Creator? In what ways does the Psalmist see God's glory revealed in nature? Journal some of the ways you have experienced God's glory revealed in nature.

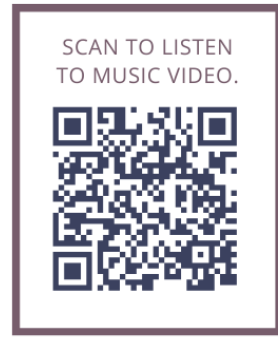
Experiencing God's Word in God's creation and experiencing our Creator in his creation are considered sacred pathways within the Christian faith tradition. However, this seems to have been lost as we focus on the community within the four walls of the church. Many of us are wired to experience God while outside, with bare feet on the ground.

Reflection & Prayer

Read Psalm 19:1-6 again. As you read it, ask God to help you hear his voice in his creation. Take a night to sit under the Milky Way this week to listen. Get up early for a sunrise. Make plans to immerse yourself in a sunset.

Listen to the call.

Take a prayer walk in the woods and stop to observe something unique in nature. Look up and praise God for his grandeur in the treetops, the clouds, and the light of the sun.



Group Discussion

1. When was the last time you walked on grass with bare feet?

2. What is your biggest takeaway from this chapter?

3. As a group, discuss how you are going to make room for God to reveal himself out in his creation. Maybe take this opportunity to read scripture together, outside. How are you going to incorporate this in your walk in the future?
