



DISCOVERY SERIES

Celebrating  
The Wonder Of The  
Wilderness

# CELEBRATING THE WONDER OF THE WILDERNESS

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In these times of industrial and commercial expansion, wilderness regions are often seen as low-rent real estate. Some see undeveloped land as untapped potential waiting for a developer's big idea and investors' money.

But not RBC research writer and naturalist Dean Ohlman. With a weathered face, hiking boots, and a sun-shielding hat, Dean's searching eyes scan rocks, weeds, soil, and whatever moves or doesn't move in the rustling leaves and grass.

There's wonder and significance in the regions of our world that many of us have looked at without ever really seeing. I hope you find this booklet as inspiring as I have.

*Martin R. De Haan II*

## A SOJOURN IN THE WILDERNESS

Bob Barr had returned from his tour of duty in Vietnam healthy in body, but he was wounded emotionally and spiritually. Although he was a follower of Christ, he felt estranged from his Creator and confused about what God was doing in his life—indeed, what God was doing in and with the world. He was angry and frustrated with God.

Hoping to at least get relief from dwelling on this inner turmoil, he joined a group of friends on a backpacking trip into the mountains of Colorado. While the excitement and toil of the trek distracted him temporarily from his spiritual struggle, the restlessness in his soul kept breaking through into his consciousness—compelling him one evening to go

off alone into the alpine tundra that surrounded their campsite high above the tree line. Bob tells the story:

I remember walking away from the camp one evening and looking across a narrow valley. We were at 11,500 feet, camped at the foot of a sheer rock face that went up to 13,800 feet. The sun was beginning to set—filling the sky and landscape with spectacular colors—and I was struck by God's power and the majesty of the world that He had created. Then my eyes were drawn down to my feet where tufts of tundra grass were crowned with little flowers. On the side of one tuft was a little opening, and a small bird was nesting there—surrounded by beautiful white and blue wildflowers. As I bent

down to look closer, the bird flew away leaving behind tiny eggs the size of jellybeans. At once I was overwhelmed with God's presence, thinking about His power and authority and majesty as the Creator of these mountains. He had created this vast vista, but He also cared to create beautiful little flowers and these tiny birds to live in this harsh environment. They were nesting there very comfortably—God caring for the small things in the midst of this awesomeness. His presence then was so real to me that I still get emotional thinking about it more than 30 years later. I felt His presence so strongly that I couldn't stand up. I was forced to my knees. And if you can hear an audible voice of God, I heard that voice, and His

words to me were,  
“Bob, I am with you.  
And everything is okay.”

In the quiet wonder of a mountain wilderness, Bob discovered the presence of One who long ago had said, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). A sojourn in the wilderness produced, once again, the profound spiritual healing that so many followers of Christ have experienced over the centuries.

## DEFINING WILDERNESS

The word *wilderness* evokes impressions and emotions in people that vary widely. To some, the wilderness is frightening—bringing to mind mostly negative images: savage mammals, dangerous reptiles, harmful insects, treacherous landscapes, and threatening climates. To them, the wilderness is

mostly to be avoided and is best observed from behind glass. For others, the images are mostly positive: plentiful and mostly harmless mammals, captivating reptiles, amazing insects, beautiful landscapes, and wonderfully varied climates. To them, close-up wilderness experiences are to be coveted and remembered.

The Bible frequently gives us negative impressions about the wilderness. It brings to mind the rebellious children of Israel wandering in the desert, fearful prophets seeking to escape threatening rulers, and Satan's temptation of Jesus. But on the positive side are pictures of patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob following their flocks; Moses and Elijah interacting with God; David and Jonathan forging a lifelong friendship; and Jesus retreating into the wilderness for rest, quietness, and communion

with His Father.

The original Hebrew gives us some significant insight into the meaning of the word *wilderness*. The most common word for it, used some 255 times in the Old Testament, delineates a desert, a pasture, or simply an uninhabited and uncultivated land. A couple of other words add the concept of desolation or the dwelling place of wild beasts. The root word in New Testament Greek translated as *wilderness* is similar to the Hebrew but adds remoteness and solitude. The basic meaning of the English word is "the place where the wild creatures are," set in opposition to regions where domesticated animals and people predominate.

For the purpose of this booklet, *wilderness* is used broadly to define areas of the earth where the influence of people has

been light. While artifacts and influences of human exploration, industry, recreation, and warfare are now present everywhere on the globe, there are many areas where we can still experience the outside world in much the same manner as our ancient ancestors.

Over the centuries, civic and national leaders have recognized the importance of preserving natural areas in the vicinity of urban developments—like parks, lakes, forest preserves, trails, and riverside recreation areas. The existence of a city park is mute testimony to the fact that the human heart yearns for relief from the unrelenting pressure of manmade things and human systems. Any place where we can manage to be mostly alone with our senses and attuned primarily to what God has made can serve as a sort of wilderness. As a child, I often found that

a square foot of grass observed with a magnifier, or a clump of overhanging shrubs that could give me a private “fort,” served to fulfill some of the beneficial aspects of a wilderness experience.

Yet as one outdoor adventurer noted, “The deeper the wilderness, the deeper the experience.” This is perhaps why the most significant biblical sojourns into the wilderness were the ones that were for an extended time or were the most remote. Sometimes more space and time are required for us to receive the positive spiritual impact of a wilderness experience.

There’s another wilderness theme in the Bible that we will *not* examine: the use of the word *wilderness* as a metaphor for one’s life experiences. In fact, *wilderness* as a symbol or figure of speech is by far its

most common treatment in books and commentaries on the Bible. Studies that look at the wilderness as the *place* of the most significant disclosures of God's "general revelation" are in the minority. In the pages that follow, we will focus on the natural places in our world where people can go to be alone with their Creator—the wild regions.

## **GOD'S REVELATION IN "HIGH DEFINITION"**

**S**ince the time of Augustine in the 4th century, Christian theologians have used the metaphor of "two books" to picture how God has revealed Himself to us. Augustine said it like this: "Listen to the book that is the divine page; look at the book that is the orb of the world."

Much later in the Belgic Confession, there is a more dramatic formation of the word picture:

We know [God] 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 (Rom. 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.

What God discloses about Himself in the natural

world, the book of His *works*, has traditionally been called His “general revelation.” The testimony of Himself received in an extraordinary way by chosen recipients through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the book of His *words*, is termed “special revelation.” The conclusion of this theological classification is that the natural world is as much God’s “book” as is the Bible—both books often having significantly different purposes. Yet the Bible itself declares that both types of revelation are undeniably of divine origin (Job 38–41; Ps. 19).

Regarding general revelation, the Belgic Confession makes reference to the conclusion of the apostle Paul, who wrote:

What may be known about God is plain to [people], because God has made it plain to them. For 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, so that men are without excuse (Rom. 1:19-20 NIV).

So according to Paul, people have no excuse for denying the existence of God because nature itself shouts, “God is!”

For years I used this passage as an argument for God’s existence. But I have to confess that for most of those years I did not really spend a great deal of time considering what there is in the natural world that has such profound spiritual implications. The wilderness, where one can most clearly read God’s second book, must somehow have spiritual values for those who earnestly seek Him.

# WHAT THE WILDERNESS REVEALS

The apostle Paul said that we can “clearly” see God’s “eternal power and divine nature” in what He has created. So what is it we can actually witness in the wild? This question compelled me to pay attention more carefully to the natural world and also to learn from others about what they have discovered while reading the book of God’s works in the wilderness.

Here’s a sampling of what we can witness when we enter the less traveled areas of what John Calvin called “the theater of God’s glory”:

## **Mystifying Light, Energy, And Matter.**

Even though science tells us much about the cosmos, the true nature of light, energy, and matter still

defies human definition and understanding. Because we do not know much about what these natural features do and how they do it, we usually forget that we use them much like a person who skillfully drives a car but knows next to nothing about what’s under the hood. In the wilderness, these natural elements meet to produce a sense of awe that primitive civilizations often understood better than our more mechanized world.

## **Seemingly Endless Time And Space.**

According to the apostle Paul, the material world provides evidence of God’s “eternal” power. Time has no beginning or ending apparent to our human senses or understanding. Because our earthbound human mind cannot conceive of eternity, we want to either deny it or somehow bring it into our human scope. But we can’t.

Space too has no span measurable by our human instruments. Using our most powerful microscopes, we find no limit to smallness. In the largest telescopes, bigness gets forever bigger.

Yes, timelessness and infinity are frightening realities for time-bound, finite creatures to ponder. Nonetheless, those actualities that we can “clearly see” should cause us to bow in humility before our Creator.

**Astronomical Extravagance And Magnitude.** Realizing how immense our galaxy is and how many stars and planets it contains staggers the mind. But grasping the fact that there are billions of such galaxies is beyond our capacity. We try to somehow understand the dimensions of God’s cosmic creation by using specific measures like “light years.” But one night under the stars in

the wilderness is enough to show us that the extravagance and magnitude of the universe is beyond our imagination and beyond our mathematical calculations. Astronomers say, for instance, that one star is 20 million light years away and another is a billion light years from earth—figures based on the speed of light (186,000 miles per second). In saying so, we often think we’ve made the universe measurable. Reality mocks that assumption.

**The Wonder Of Life.** Life is a human mystery like light and matter. Scientists don’t know what it is or how it came to thrive so richly on one small planet in a wider cosmos that is so hostile to life.

Yet even, and perhaps especially, in the wilderness regions of our earth, one is awed by the constant celebration of life—life that

is intricately balanced in its multitude of different structures, from slugs to sequoias. That's one reason that abuse of our wilderness areas seems so profane. We're causing the extinction of thousands of these life forms—which the Bible affirms our Creator loves (Ps. 145:9)—before we even know their God-given purposes. Certainly our destruction of these living creatures cannot continue without negative consequences for humanity.

### **Awesome Power.**

John Muir wrote of an experience he had of climbing as high as he could in one of Yosemite's huge Douglas firs in a windstorm. He wanted to feel the power of the gale experienced by the tree. He writes:

When the storm began to abate, I dismounted and sauntered down through the calming woods. The storm-tones died away,

and, turning toward the east, I beheld the countless hosts of the forests hushed and tranquil, towering above one another on the slopes of the hills like a devout audience. The setting sun filled them with amber light, and seemed to say, while they listened, "My peace I give unto you." As I gazed on the impressive scene, all the so-called ruin of the storm was forgotten, and never before did these noble woods appear so fresh, so joyous, so immortal.<sup>1</sup>

The power of the forces that God maintains to keep the engine of His creation going is so overwhelming that it is beyond words. A blinding blizzard, a roaring waterfall, a surging wave, a bolt of lightning, a grinding glacier—all these fill our souls with wonder and admiration.

## **Profound Mystery.**

Light, matter, energy, and life remain inscrutable to mankind. But those are not the only mysteries that surround us in the natural world. I have a philodendron vine that has existed indoors for years. This common domesticated vine still causes me to marvel. It grows about a foot each month by taking artificial light, carbon dioxide, and water to create its solid material structure. I'm still amazed at photosynthesis.

All around us are similar mysteries: birds that were never carpenters' apprentices but know how to construct intricate nests; fireflies that turn organic matter into flashlights; wasps that make paper; spiders that spin nature's strongest fibers; fish that spend their entire adult lives at sea, only to return over thousands of miles to the very creek that spawned

their existence. We may well be able to dissect their anatomies and describe their life processes, but we remain mystified about the hows and the whys.

## **Abiding Orderliness And Unfailing Regularity.**

Secular scientists often speak of apparent randomness and disorder in nature; yet for science even to exist, the creation must be mostly predictable. Researchers cherish its orderliness and regularity while at the same time admit that the source of such order and regularity is beyond their understanding. If planetary motions and gravity, for instance, were not orderly and regular, life would not exist. There is such order and regularity in the entire creation that mathematicians who don't acknowledge God often speculate that mathematical laws are eternal and are the

ultimate cause of the cosmos. One theoretical mathematician, in fact, calls the mathematical principles in nature “beautiful.”

### **Constant**

**Re-creation.** One of the most significant aspects of the wilderness is that when we enter it, we come nearest to being present at creation. In the wilderness, God’s work is still going on. Christian philosopher Wolfhart Pannenberg exclaims:

The creation does not remain what it was at its point of origin. It changes. It develops. New forms appear. New things happen. There is a sense in which one can say that creation *ex nihilo* [out of nothing] is complemented *ex continua*, continuing creation. . . . The faithfulness of the creating God continues to conserve the existence of this world while

drawing it forward toward a new and transformed state of existence.<sup>2</sup>

God rested from the original work of creation, but we can praise Him that He still works in the process of its continuation and its redemption:

*For by [Christ] all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. . . . For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross (Col. 1:16-20).*  
When we’re in the

unspoiled regions, it's thrilling to contemplate the divine Trinity's ultimate purpose for us: to be looking for and working in the power of God the Holy Spirit toward the time when God the Son will come and reconcile all things to God the Father.

### **Unfathomable Complexity And Incredible Design.**

Naturalistic evolutionists assert that life on earth is the result of uncomplicated basic elements acted on by simple forces in an entirely random and undirected manner. But scientific studies show us that the material world is irreducibly complex and its features reflect astounding design. Every year, millions of words are written and hundreds of thousands of research studies are conducted that do little more than raise even more questions about how things work and how

they are made to work. In spite of the arguments of those who deny the existence of a Creator, the creation defies simple explanation. From massive cosmic forces to subatomic particles, the natural world is unrelenting in yielding up only more complexity and more evidence of purpose.

George MacDonald used the purposefulness of the creation to touch the heart of the key character in his novel *The Musician's Quest*. Agnostic Robert Falconer had gone to the wilderness for solitude and rest, but found himself pondering whether the natural world might have its source in a supernatural Creator.

Now working in Falconer's mind was the dull and faint movement of the greatest need that the human heart possesses—the need of God. There must be truth in the scent of that

pinewood; someone must mean it. There must be a glory in those heavens that depends not upon our imagination; some power greater than they must dwell in them. Some spirit must move in that wind that haunts us with a kind of human sorrow; some soul must look up to us from the eye of that starry flower. Little did Robert think that such was his need—that his soul was searching after the One whose form was constantly presented to him, but as constantly obscured by words without knowledge spoken in the religious assemblies of the land.<sup>3</sup>

Impressed by the same obvious design in nature, C. S. Lewis shared MacDonald's belief that a proper consideration of the natural world will point away from itself and to its Creator. Lewis believed,

therefore, that “because God created the natural—invented it out of His love and artistry—it demands our reverence.”<sup>4</sup>

**Abundant Joy.** The French term is *joie de vivre*, “the joy of living.” Few things in the outdoors fill me with delight like the joy of living that is often demonstrated by God's creatures. Recently while I was kayaking on a lake, a sudden commotion in the water near the shore caught my eye. As I paddled closer I saw a lone female mallard splashing in the shallows, turning in mad circles and making the water fly. After that she began preening and then drinking—savoring whatever flavors and organisms the lake water yielded by holding her mouth wide open and then clacking her beak. Academics might propose that her activity was mere utility. But I'm

sure I saw the duck smiling!

And what about cavorting calves, squirrels playing tag, songbirds rejoicing at the dawn, otters gliding down muddy slides over and over again, and grizzly bears deliberately somersaulting on mountain slopes? You'll not convince me that these creatures are not living with joy.

Henry Van Dyke, the writer of the well-known hymn "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," must have felt the same way:

All Thy works  
with joy surround Thee,  
earth and heaven  
reflect Thy rays,  
Stars and angels  
sing around Thee,  
center of unbroken praise.  
Field and forest,  
vale and mountain,  
flowery meadow,  
flashing sea,  
Chanting bird  
and flowing fountain  
call us to rejoice in Thee.

God made the wild creatures and the wilderness for them to live in. And the Psalms tell us that God delights in the wilderness and its creatures. Hence, the more we delight in them, the more we share in God's joy.

**Virtually Endless Variety.** Science has a word for nature's great variety: *biodiversity*. And for virtually every variant, scientists offer supposed practical values. Male cardinals are brilliant red and more striking than the dull orange females in order to get the female's attention for mating. So why do male and female blue jays look the same? The males of some species are larger than the females so they can protect the females. So why are females of some species larger than the males? Some insect species are brilliantly colored to attract attention. So why are other insect species dull in color to keep from attracting attention?

I heard a scientist say that biologists once thought they knew why a certain animal acted a particular way, but new observations have forced them to conclude: “We don’t have a clue why it does it!” That was a refreshing admission to hear.

The endless variety in nature is just another aspect of God’s boundless creativity. Noted evolutionist J.B.S. Haldane, when asked what could be inferred about the Creator from the works of nature, is reported to have replied, “An inordinate fondness for beetles.” So far, over 350,000 variants have been identified.

**Amazing Adaptability.** Charles Darwin used his observation of finches on the Galapagos Islands to formulate the theory that the capacity of the birds in that isolated region to adapt to a great variety of food sources is the function that “created” all

life forms. Such adaptation (“natural selection”) is the origin of all species, he concluded. His observations were truly significant, as are the thousands of similar observations made by other biologists since that time. It is obvious that God gave His creatures the capacity to change in this manner.

This capacity is often called “microevolution,” a highfalutin term that simply means “small changes.” We can see small changes like this in many similar animal and plant groups. Such changes, however, are noted only in creatures that retain their primary basic life functions and form. Hence, we could logically conclude that natural adaptation is more of an evidence of God’s design than proof of Darwin’s conjecture—that all living things had their source in one simple life form, and that without direction or purpose

through the course of minute changes, this natural adaptation created all the diversity and complexity we see in life.

**Overwhelming Beauty.** In the Genesis creation account, the first fact mentioned about the trees of the garden was that they were “pleasant to the sight” (Gen. 2:9). Because of this, I’m convinced that the beauty we see and sense in the natural world is one of the most important evidences of God’s divine nature.

Nineteenth-century American historian George Bancroft expressed it like this: “Beauty is but the sensible image of the Infinite. Like truth and justice, it lives within us; like virtue and the moral law, it is a companion of the soul.”<sup>5</sup>

In commenting on William Cullen Bryant’s beliefs about beauty in nature, theologian Augustus Strong observes: “The

external world is beautiful, because unfallen. It shares with man the effects of sin; but whenever we retreat from the regions which man’s folly has despoiled, we may find something that reminds us of our lost paradise.”<sup>6</sup>

John Muir believed that “everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in where nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike.”<sup>7</sup>

The value of natural beauty to the human soul was what inspired the masterful landscape painter Thomas Cole, founder of the Hudson River School of painting. With his paintings, he wanted to put people back in touch with the Creator. He hoped his paintings would give a city-dwelling admirer a yearning for the outdoors where he too could discover what he had—that “in gazing on the pure creations of the

Almighty, he feels a calm religious tone steal through his mind, and when he has turned to mingle [again] with his fellow men, the chords which have been struck in that sweet communion cease not to vibrate.”<sup>8</sup> Maybe that’s why I admire Cole’s paintings and not Picasso’s. If we saw something like a Picasso in nature, we’d know at once it did not come from God’s hands! Beauty may be nature’s most profound apologist for God.

**Extravagant Fruitfulness.** It’s hard to find a more exuberant expression of praise for God’s abundance than the one penned by the Hebrew psalmist David:

*You visit the earth and water it, You greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; You provide their grain, for so You have prepared it. You water its ridges abundantly, You settle its furrows; You*

*make it soft with showers, You bless its growth. You crown the year with Your goodness, and Your paths drip with abundance. They drop on the pastures of the wilderness, and the little hills rejoice on every side. The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered with grain; they shout for joy, they also sing (Ps. 65:9-13).*

The fruitfulness of the earth and all its creatures is a major theme both of the biblical creation story and the repopulation of the earth after the Genesis flood. In both instances, the Creator’s mandate was that the nonhuman creatures and mankind should “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:22,28; 8:17; 9:1,7). We all have the capacity to multiply because the earth produces enough food for us to live and thrive.

All the creatures of the earth are taken care of by

God. The Psalms speak of the wilderness as God's great larder where "the young lions roar after their prey, and seek their food from God" and where God gives the sea creatures "their food in due season" (Ps. 104:21,27). Psalm 145 affirms the same: "The eyes of all look to You, and You give them their food at the proper time. You open Your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing" (vv.15-16 NIV). And God does that because He "is gracious and full of compassion. . . . And His tender mercies are over all His works" (vv.8-9). The amazing fruitfulness of the earth that provides both for us and for all the creatures of the wilderness is a gift from a righteous, gracious, merciful, and loving Creator.

### **Sacrificial Nurture.**

When I was about 10, I came across a baby bird called a killdeer, and my

instinct was to save it by capturing it. Being naturally endowed with long legs, the little bird made a successful run for shelter. As I was trying to lay my hands on it, my eye was distracted by another bird—a larger one flapping helplessly on the ground only a few feet away. So I quickly went off in pursuit of this new prey. After about a 50-yard scamper, however, I called off the chase. The "injured" bird suddenly took flight. I watched it fly without any handicap over to the spot where I first saw the baby bird, which was now far from my reach. I'd been fooled by the mother killdeer, which had merely feigned injury to draw me away from her fledgling. She had risked capture and death to save her young, just as countless other creatures commonly do. Many other examples of this sort of natural devotion and self-

sacrifice can remind us of the ultimate sacrifice the Son of God made on our behalf (Eph. 5:2) and encourage us to sacrifice on behalf of others (Col. 1:24; Heb. 13:16).

**Limitless Sensory Stimulation.** While vision is the sense we consider most important in experiencing nature, the other senses also add immeasurable delight to wild things and places. The flavors, odors, textures, and sounds we most enjoy are almost always natural ones: the taste of a wild raspberry, the fragrance of a clump of spring violets, the feel of a cool mountain stream, the sound of pebbles tumbling after a receding wave. A pristine wilderness offers us an unending supply of “candy for the senses.”

I’m reminded of the great sensory Psalm about God: “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8). The

implication of that invitation is that one needs to have a relationship with the Creator to truly learn of His goodness. Likewise, when we use all our senses to experience what the Creator has made, we learn of His goodness and greatness more profoundly.

### **Complex Interrelationships.**

When Cal DeWitt, professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin, was advocating for wetlands conservation and restoration in his township, he came across a couple of residents who told him they didn’t see much value in preserving wetlands. Dr. DeWitt knew they were both avid pike fishermen. When he explained to them that pike fingerlings depended on wetlands for their survival, he won their support.

The truth is that all natural systems are important in God’s scheme

of things, but the value of most of them is not so quickly grasped. That God would care for a sparrow, the humblest and most ordinary of birds, ought to be a sign to us that we should not see anything in nature's community as being valueless or unnecessary. All things in nature are interrelated. And the pristine wilderness provides us the best of laboratories in which to learn about these connections. This may have been what Thoreau had in mind when he said, "In wildness is the preservation of the world."<sup>9</sup>

Modern science often gives us the impression that we understand the complexity of wild nature. The truth, however, was stated well by ecologist Frank Egler: "[Wilderness ecosystems] are not only more complex than we think, they are more complex than we *can* think."<sup>10</sup> It's

because of such complex interconnectedness that the wilderness makes us humble—which is the right attitude to have in the presence of our Creator.

**Models For Efficiency.** The man who invented Velcro received his inspiration when, after a walk in the wilds, he found cockleburs hooked to the thread loops of his shirt. Hundreds of inventions beneficial to people are modeled after natural structures and systems. Untold numbers of natural constructions and arrangements likely remain in the wild for us to learn from.

We moderns think of ourselves as masters of efficiency, but our accomplishments in that area are mocked by the honeycomb, the anthill, and the tree. If we were to leave wild areas untouched for no other reason than this, we

would be blessed to have the opportunity to learn again and again from the handiwork of our Creator.

Christian farmer and philosopher Wendell Berry challenges us:

We need wilderness also because wildness—nature—is one of our indispensable studies. We need to understand it as our source and preserver, as an essential measure of our history and behavior, and as the ultimate definer of our possibilities.<sup>11</sup>

**The Uniqueness Of Mankind.** Finally, we get a glimpse of God's eternal power and divine nature in the natural world as we observe the unbridgeable gap between people and the other created things. This difference—and the reason for the difference—has been immortalized by David:

*When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your*

*fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen—even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth!* (Ps. 8:3-9).

In spite of secular humanism's claim that people are merely the most evolved animal and morally little different from the ape, we believe instead that we are God's special creation. We are, as the Bible

declares, made in the likeness of our Creator and given the awesome privilege and responsibility to be stewards of the natural world (Gen. 1:27-28). That we have dominion over nature cannot be denied. But Francis Schaeffer makes clear what that means for the follower of Christ:

Man was given dominion over creation. This is true. But since the Fall, man has exercised this dominion wrongly. He is a rebel who has set himself at the center of the universe. . . . Because he is fallen, he exploits created things as though they were nothing in themselves, and as though he has an autonomous right to them. Surely then, Christians, who have returned through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ to fellowship with God, and have a proper

place of reference to the God who is there, should demonstrate a proper use of nature. We are to have dominion over it, but we are not going to act as though it were nothing in itself or as though we will do to nature everything we can do.<sup>12</sup>

## A PLACE OF RETREAT

**B**ecause I grew up in a Christian home and attended church all my life, I've gone on countless "retreats." In a military sense, of course, to retreat means to back away from the enemy. This is often done to prevent defeat and capture—with the ultimate aim to strengthen and reequip your own forces so you can once again go on the offensive and hopefully be victorious. Churches, missions, and ministries

sometimes use spiritual retreats for a similar purpose—to provide temporary escape from opposing physical and spiritual forces. Perhaps taking their cue from withdrawals into the wilderness mentioned in the Bible, some Christian ministries bring their people to attractive and remote natural areas for a retreat.

The wisdom of this is evident when we consider what we're less likely to face in such places:

- Too many voices to attend to
  - Too many people to relate to
  - An overload of news (information)
  - An overabundance of technologies
  - Extraneous noise
  - The need to talk incessantly
  - Constant time pressure
- Most of us could

benefit from lessening these

manmade distractions by going on a “civilization fast.” But while there are some obvious physical benefits from this sort of retreat, this list of negatives relates primarily to the spiritual. When we're surrounded by the many positive evidences of God's eternal power and divine nature and are at the same time relieved of these many negatives, our souls have an opportunity to rest and to remain open to the voice and calling of God's Holy Spirit.

While we tend to think of wilderness retreats as being important for adults, we often forget that children need them as well. I would propose, in fact, that children today need these experiences more than ever.

When our own children were young, my wife Marge was a homemaker, and her activities with the kids were mostly domestic. When the three boys became restless

with toys, television, and household tedium, sibling strife frequently broke out. By the weekend, Marge was ready to turn them over to me so she could get out of the house and go somewhere to regain her sanity. So the boys and I would go fishing, or we would take a trip to the ocean tide pools, the wooded hills, or the desert. "Were the boys okay for you?" she'd sometimes ask when we returned. They always were. Eventually she stopped asking because she came to realize that there is enchantment in the wilderness that can alter the behavior of children. Books have even been written about that kind of magic.

Rustic camps and lodges can be an important alternative to comfortable resorts where seemingly endless activities distract from the spiritual benefits of the wilderness. Outdoor education offered in these

places can help young and old alike to gain knowledge that will increase their sense of wonder in God's creation. The solitude and quietness offered there provide opportunities for people to more thoroughly contemplate their Creator's words in the light of His works. In so doing, they may gain wisdom similar to that attained by King Solomon:

*He spoke of trees, from the cedar tree of Lebanon even to the hyssop that springs out of the wall; he spoke also of animals, of birds, of creeping things, and of fish. And men of all nations, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom, came to hear the wisdom of Solomon (1 Ki. 4:33-34).*

When we neglect the chances we have to observe characteristics of God's eternal power and divine nature that can

be discovered in the wild places, we are denying ourselves of knowledge that is critical to our spiritual growth and witness.

Collectively, we buy thousands of books to read about knowing God. What we often miss, however, is the opportunity to enter the wild places that showcase the wonder of God's nature.

## ENTERING THE CATHEDRAL OF THE WILDERNESS

**C**ertainly everyone can benefit from contemplation of the divine in “the theater of God’s glory.” Our reflections there will highlight our finitude, our vulnerability, and our utter and complete dependence upon the creating and sustaining power of God. But the wilderness is even more than a theater; it’s a

cathedral. And awareness of God’s holiness occurs only when we enter it with the right spirit.

The word *cathedral* comes from the Latin term for “chair,” *cathedra*. Traditionally, a cathedral is the sacred place where a church bishop has his chair of authority—his throne.

While church leaders are supposed to keep us mindful of our stewardship role in the created order, too often the trappings of modern life and our long-held prejudices and traditions hinder our capacity to hear the “still, small voice” of God in our urban churches. Even Elijah needed to go into the wilderness to hear it, because stressful human interactions had dulled his spiritual senses (1 Ki. 19).

For that reason, it’s important for us to preserve and treasure the cathedral of the wilderness where we can be reminded that God is on

the throne and where His wordless revelation can still be clearly seen and valued. When attentive people enter a wilderness, they immediately recognize the signs that it is holy ground—a place where an autumn maple ablaze with color can have some of the same effects that Moses experienced in the flaming bush of his own wilderness encounter with God.

## **SPIRITUAL INSIGHTS FROM THE WILDERNESS**

**T**hroughout the centuries since the biblical canon was established, poets and sages have followed the example of Old Testament poets who gained a great deal of spiritual insight from attending to the natural features of the wilderness. Some insights were

practical, some profound. Consider these:

William Cullen Bryant, on watching a solitary waterfowl wing its way through autumn skies, reaffirmed the validity of his faith in God's leading: "He who, from zone to zone, guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight, in the long way that I must tread alone, will lead my steps aright."<sup>13</sup>

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, pondering depressions on a sandy beach, drew this analogy: "Lives of great men all remind us we can make our lives sublime; and, departing, leave behind us footprints on the sands of time."<sup>14</sup>

Robert Frost, comparing his life's journey to a walk in the autumn forest, tells us that "two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."<sup>15</sup>

Joaquin Miller, examining a tree, exulted, “Ten thousand leaves on every tree, and each a miracle to me; and yet there be men who question God!”<sup>16</sup>

Nineteenth-century English novelist, poet, and preacher George MacDonald tells us why the natural world teaches us about our Creator:

If it were not for the outside world, we should have no inside world to understand things by. Least of all could we understand God without these millions of sights and sounds and scents and motions weaving their endless harmonies. They come out of His heart to let us know a little of what is in it.<sup>17</sup>

In perhaps the most spiritually profound of MacDonald’s novels, *The Curate’s Awakening*, the author goes deeper into the

communion that can occur when our souls are touched by the Holy Spirit who still broods over the surface of the creation (Gen. 1:2).

All about us in earth and air, wherever eye or ear can reach, there is a power ever breathing itself forth in signs. Now it shows itself in a daisy, now in a waft of wind, a cloud, a sunset—and this power holds constant relation with the dark and silent world within us. The same God who is in us and upon whose tree we are buds, also is all about us. Inside, the Spirit; outside the Word. And the two are ever trying to meet in us; and when they meet, then the sign without and the longing within become one. The man no more walks in darkness, but in light, knowing where he is going.<sup>18</sup>

# TREASURING THE WILDERNESS

The wilderness provides us with wonderful natural resources. But it is so much more than a place of economic opportunity. When we look at an Appalachian mountain as mostly a mound of coal or a hill of timber for us to use for our own purposes, we may be failing to see it comprehensively. A second look can help us to see the same mountain as a watershed, a climate regulator, a source of clean air, a shield against flooding, a habitat for wild creatures, a thing of beauty, a place of peace and solitude, and a location for recreation. And we are not seeing it as God sees it—in all its glory with all its purposes. It's part of our God-given trust of the earth to have a comprehensive and biblical

vision when looking at the wilderness.

Followers of Christ have so many reasons to value the wilderness. Because we see the natural world as entrusted to us by an infinitely wise Creator, it's not difficult to see the wilderness as a treasure of inestimable worth. It allows the wild creatures to fulfill their God-given responsibility to multiply and fill their portion of the earth.

Caring for the wilderness is an aspect of the Creator's dominion and stewardship mandated to us. Further, it helps to preserve our own health and to assure our continued survival. Further still, it no doubt holds many future benefits we are currently not even aware of.

Nancy Newhall reminded us over 50 years ago, in a book featuring the masterful black-and-white wilderness photos of Ansel Adams,

that the wilderness holds answers to questions man has not yet learned to ask.

Finally, we come to an observation by John Muir: "Like most other things not apparently useful to man, [poison oak] has few friends, and the blind question, 'Why was it made?' goes on and on with never a guess that first of all it was made for itself."<sup>19</sup>

Muir was hinting at a purpose for the natural world that the patriarch Job learned when God paraded before his mental vision the entire cosmos He created. In the longest direct address of God in the Scriptures (the 129 verses of Job 38–41), the Creator Himself uses numerous parts of the natural world that are beyond human control, human understanding, and human utility to humble Job with the reality that we cannot know all the purposes of God for wild

creatures and wild places.

The apostle John, however, does reveal to us one of God's purposes: He created all things for His pleasure (Rev. 4:11 κτν). So if the natural world was in part created to give God pleasure, are we not being irreverent when we forget that while people can preserve, conserve, or destroy the wilderness, only God can create it?

In the course of our enjoying and properly valuing the wilderness, we can be motivated by the words of Isaac Watts:

I sing the mighty  
power of God  
that made the mountains rise,  
That spread the flowing  
seas abroad  
and built the lofty skies.  
I sing the wisdom  
that ordained  
the sun to rule the day;  
The moon shines full  
at His command  
and all the stars obey.

I sing the goodness  
of the Lord  
that filled the earth with food;  
He formed the creatures  
with His word  
and then pronounced  
them good.  
Lord, how Thy wonders  
are displayed  
where'er I turn my eye:  
If I survey  
the ground I tread  
or gaze upon the sky!

There's not a plant  
or flower below  
but makes  
Thy glories known;  
And clouds arise  
and tempests blow  
by order from Thy throne;  
While all that borrows  
life from Thee  
is ever in Thy care,  
And everywhere  
that man can be,  
Thou, God,  
art present there.

## THE GOD WHO CARES

**W**hen I was a member of the Audubon Society, I often found that a sense of sadness and hopelessness pervaded our meetings—especially when all the threats to wild habitats were enumerated. It seemed that few in attendance believed there was a Creator, or if there was one He didn't care about the things they cherished.

But He does care. He cares enough to promise that in the future, all nature will be refreshed, restored, and reunified (Acts 3:19-21; Eph. 1:7-10). More important, this restoration will show how much He cares for us, even though we have idolized and abused the living world that has been entrusted to us (Rom. 1:18-32).

According to God's other revelation, the Bible, the

Creator Himself has come to our rescue (Jn. 1:1-14). This Savior said, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (Jn. 15:13). With these words, Jesus anticipated how He would carry out our rescue. By alluding to His own ultimate sacrifice, He showed why He could say, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (Jn. 3:16).

The apostle John wrote of Jesus, "He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name" (Jn. 1:10-12).

If our Creator has proven His love for us in this way,

we can have a confidence in the future for ourselves and all creation that is not just wishful thinking.

J. B. Phillips' New Testament paraphrase puts it like this:

*The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own. . . . In the end the whole of created life will be rescued from the tyranny of change and decay, and have its share in that magnificent liberty which can only belong to the children of God! (Rom. 8:19,21).*

### **Endnotes:**

1. "A Windstorm in the Forests," *The Mountains of California*;
2. *Toward a Theology of Nature*, p.11;
3. *The Musician's Quest*, pp.95-96;
4. *God in the Dock*, p.148;
5. *Literary and Historical Miscellanies*, p.413;
6. *American Poets and Their Theology*, p.25;
7. *The Yosemite*, p.198;
8. "Essays on American Scenery," *American Monthly Magazine* (Jan. 1836);
9. *Walking*, p.275;
10. "The Nature of Vegetation";
11. *Home Economics*, p.146;
12. *Pollution and the Death of Man*, pp.71-72;
13. "To a Waterfowl";
14. "A Psalm of Life";
15. "The Road Not Taken";
16. "Twenty Carats Fine";
17. *The Highlander's Last Song*, p.153;
18. *The Curate's Awakening*, p.184;
19. *My First Summer in the Sierra*.



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