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A MAN AND CREATION

PREVIEW



In this chapter we will examine what God says about His creation. We'll:

- See how nature reveals God's character.
- Learn why it's important to cultivate an attitude of enjoying God's creation.
- Consider positive ways to begin incorporating this discipline into daily life.

Let's begin this chapter with a brief pop quiz to test your creation IQ.

1. Circle the answer that best reflects how you regard creation. Creation is:

Good

Evil

Neutral

2. Which of the following answers best describes the relationship between creation (nature, the universe) and God?

- a. Nature hints of God.
- b. Nature reveals God.
- c. Nature conceals God.
- d. Nature tarnishes God.

Let's explore how the Bible answers these two questions.

The Bible on Nature

When C. S. Lewis was an atheist, he explained why he didn't believe in God. He wrote,

Look at the universe we live in. By far the greatest part of it consists of empty space, completely dark and unimaginably cold. . . . It is improbable that any planet except the Earth sustains life. And Earth herself existed without life for millions of years and may exist without life for millions more when life has left her. And what is it like while it lasts? It is so arranged that all the forms of it can live only by preying upon one another. . . . In the most complex of all the creatures, Man, yet another quality appears, which we call reason. . . . It enables men by a hundred ingenious contrivances to inflict a great deal more pain than they otherwise could have done on one another and on the irrational creatures. This power they have exploited to the full. Their history is largely a record of crime, war, disease, and terror, with just sufficient happiness interposed to give them, while it lasts, an agonized apprehension of losing it, and, when it is lost, the poignant misery of remembering. . . .

There was one question which I never dreamed of raising. . . . If the universe is so bad, or even half so bad, how on earth did human beings ever come to attribute it to the activity of a wise and good Creator? Men are fools, perhaps; but hardly so foolish as that.¹

So is creation good, evil, or neutral? Author Leonard Sweet helps us uncover the answer in his book *Soul Tsunami*, in which he describes his family buying their first television set. His mother was a traveling

evangelist, and their church was quite legalistic. The Sweet family bought the set when TVs first became available. One night there came a knock on the door. The pastor had dropped by the house to visit, and the TV happened to be on.

The pastor peered in and said, “So it’s true. You have bought the devil’s blinking box.” Leonard’s mother argued that matter is not evil—it’s what people do with matter that makes it evil. Still, the Sweet family was put out of the church for having the “devil’s blinking box.”

Mrs. Sweet was right. Matter itself is not evil. *Nothing* in God’s creation is evil—not thunder, lightning, storms, movies, or television signals. And yet, because of the fall, thunder can scare your children, lightning can hit your home and start a fire, storm winds can split a tree that then crashes into your living room, movies can debase human beings made in God’s image, and television can bring profanity to your ears and lust to your eyes.

Nevertheless, the Bible says, “The whole earth is full of his *glory*” (Isaiah 6:3, emphasis added). Now, this used to really bother me, because when we look around we see a lot of *evil*. We also see a third force at work in the world: *futility*, or that which simply doesn’t matter. I wondered, *How could the earth be full of God’s glory when there is so much evil and futility?*

Then one day, while studying glucose, I was struck with an analogy. Glucose is a three-part compound: C₆ H₁₂ O₆—six parts carbon, twelve parts hydrogen, six parts oxygen. So glucose is full of oxygen, but not only oxygen; it is also full of carbon and hydrogen. In the same way, the earth really is full of God’s glory, despite the fact that it is also full of evil and futility.

The Bible also says, “For everything God created is good” (1 Timothy 4:4). Colossians 1:16 goes even further,

For by [Jesus] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

So the bottom line in Scripture is this: (1) God made everything. (2) Everything God made is good. Therefore, (3) everything is intrinsically

good. That implies that nature has meaning and value. This is not to say that nature is incorruptible. Because of the fall we have to explain the stench of polluted rivers, belching smokestacks, and natural disasters. What the Bible does mean, however, is that apart from sin, nature is good. According to his wife, Edith, theologian/philosopher Francis Schaeffer would often say, “There is a lot of leftover beauty in nature.” Or as Sam said to Frodo at a point of despair in the movie adaptation of *The Two Towers*, (book two of J. R. R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy), “There’s some good in this world, and it’s worth fighting for.”

For our belief system to hold together, we must explain evil, but, frankly, that’s not very hard. Evil wasn’t part of the original plan. The answer lies in the fall. The fall of man and woman introduced every evil and bad thing that exists in creation. You’ll find that event recorded in Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve were tempted and sinned. We’ve been sinning ever since.

Now back to question #1: Is creation good, evil, or neutral? What’s *your* answer?

To See God in Creation

Now to the second question in our pop quiz: Does nature *hint of, reveal, conceal, or tarnish* God? Theologians describe two ways God reveals Himself to men and women. They call the Bible God’s *special revelation*, and they call creation (or nature) God’s *general revelation*. This is the idea that nature “reveals” a “general” knowledge about the nature and characteristics of God to everyone. As John Calvin said, “The painter reveals something of himself in his painting.”

When we watch a bloodred sunset disappear over the horizon, lilies sway in a field, or baby ducks paddle for all their worth to keep up with mama duck, we also get a glimpse of God. To comprehend the visible creation is to comprehend the invisible God. We see God everywhere.

The next few paragraphs on God’s works in creation deal with cultural and historical perspectives and largely reflect Schaeffer’s thinking in his book *Escape from Reason*. (If you’re not interested in history, you can skip to the next section.) Early in Christian history, Schaeffer notes, scholars

didn't dwell much on the value of creation. You can see this reflected in a visit to a fine art museum. Before the thirteenth century, art featured high and holy subjects, but they were portrayed symbolically rather than realistically.

Then, in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas arrived on the scene. Some consider Aquinas the most prominent theologian and philosopher of the Middle Ages. Aquinas lived in a time when non-Christian philosophers like Aristotle first captured the attention of cultural thinkers. They admired Aristotle's ability to explain the natural world simply through his observations, and the resulting emphasis on man's reason seemed to endanger long-held Christian beliefs.

Aquinas tried to harmonize *reason* and *revelation*, creating some unity between grace and nature (or between divine and earthly things). Because of Aquinas, people began to explore creation simply because they enjoyed it. And so, for instance, in the fourteenth century, history records that a man named Petrarch climbed a mountain just for the sake of climbing it—he had no other goal!

Then in 1410, someone drew a small landscape, the way we would see landscapes pictured today. It was only 3 x 5 inches, but it's extremely important, because it's our first example of a natural landscape painting.² This probably would not have happened if it hadn't been for the efforts of Aquinas to draw a connection between the temporal and the eternal.

Recall that the natural world reveals God's nature (called general revelation). For example, the first half of Psalm 19 describes how God speaks through His works (*general revelation*), and the second half about how God speaks through His Word (*specific revelation*). So Psalm 19 begins like this: "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 display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard."

God doesn't merely speak through His creation—His voice erupts in peels of thunder, or whispers from the ripple of a rock that splashed into a still pond in the middle of a quiet wood. Everyone has seen God in creation. In fact, "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" (Romans 1:20).

We can experience creation through our senses—we can see it, smell it, hear it, touch it, taste it. Nature will not necessarily lead us to salvation, but it will reveal God's grandeur and give us tangible evidence of His invisible qualities. As a spiritual habit, I know of no better way to experience awe than to observe God as the Creator of the heavens and earth. Through general revelation, the window is open.

So back to question #2: Does nature hint of God, reveal God, conceal God, or tarnish God? The contemplation of the visible *reveals* the deity of the invisible. The spiritual habit of observing nature leads to a deeper understanding of God.

Suggestions for Pursuing God in Creation

What's the best way to observe God in creation? Is it to gaze upon the beauty of creation? Should we look with amazement at man himself, created in God's image? Or can we stand in awe of the accomplishments of men and women? After all, people have built skyscrapers, airplanes, spaceships, televisions, telephones, and computers. They've explored new lands, naming and listing a host of animals and plants. They've found miracle medical cures. The list could go on and on. So which more clearly reveals God—raw nature, man, or man's work?

Okay, this is a trick question, because the answer is . . . we can see God in all three places. This is a powerful truth, because it frees us from the tendency to segment our lives into "Christian" and "secular" categories. We don't have to live in a world where Bible study is "Christian," therefore "good," and work is "secular," therefore "bad." Everything God made is good. First, God reveals Himself in creation. Second, He reveals Himself through His reflection in mankind. And third, He reveals Himself through our accomplishments as well.

Pursue God's Creation through Nature

You may put this book down and walk outside to enjoy the beauty of your yard. You might go to the mountains or to the beach for a weekend

break. Perhaps you live in a city, but you can still do what I love to do—look up at the nighttime sky and admire the stars.

I love sitting in my backyard before dawn and gazing up into the sky. In that quiet moment, when a tangible hush rests on my neighborhood, before the kitchen lights announce the day's beginning and before the engines rev and car doors begin slamming on my street, I think about Psalm 8: "When I consider 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, the son of man that you care for him?" (verses 3–4).

You can pick up a book about any topic, and you will find that it communicates something about its author. Similarly, creation offers its own message of beauty and grandeur, and it also communicates something about its Creator. It gives perspective. Nature reveals God's invisible qualities, His eternal and infinite power, His divine nature. When I sit in my backyard and stare at the stars and the planets and the moon, I am humbled by God's greatness. Yet I also am encouraged by His willingness to stoop into my world and pursue me.

Pursue God's Creation through Man's Work

Raw nature has the power to turn our thoughts to God, but so do man-made things. Consider, for instance, the intricacy of a fine watch, the grandeur of a skyscraper, the glorious sound of a symphony, the hum of a finely tuned engine, the delicious smell of steaks on the grill. I love driving through beautiful neighborhoods and admiring the homes, manicured lawns, and flower gardens. I love the smell of freshly mown grass and the restful simplicity of a well-designed golf course. This list is almost endless: parks, sculpture, art, music, cathedrals, computers, the muscular curves of a Porsche.

God uses our works to echo His own character throughout the world. Who doesn't marvel at the power of a laptop computer or PDA? How did that happen? It is a reflection of God's own creative character, which He has put in human beings.

Pursue God's Creation by Observing His Human Creation

Beyond raw nature and man's work lies the wonder of how God has handcrafted people. Who doesn't admire a beautiful woman or a handsome man? We love to recognize and reward human achievement. In the creative arts, we have Emmys, Oscars, Tonys, and People's Choice awards. We can't wait to celebrate the athletic exploits of people like Lance Armstrong and Jeff Gordon and to present Espys to outstanding athletes.

One man may not appear very talented when compared to another man, but both will appear quite talented when compared to a rabbit or a dancing bear. The least human being is infinitely more interesting than the highest beast in creation. Every human being—whether beautiful or talented or athletic—is part of the creation and, when pondered, can turn our thoughts to the greatness of God.

Whether you're focusing on natural beauty, man-made beauty, or mankind's beauty, let the result be the same—let it propel your mind to meditate on the greatness and goodness of the holy God. In *The Idea of the Holy* Rudolph Otto summed it up well, as he described what he called the *mysterium tremendum*, the presence of the transcendent One:

The feeling of it at times may come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane,' non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. . . . It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures.³

That's what we're looking for in contemplating nature—the experience of God's holiness. When you find it in creation, how should you

respond? Do not fall in the trap described in Romans 1:21: “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.” Instead, glorify God; give thanks to God. That’s why we want to cultivate these habits—so we can come to a place where we voluntarily glorify God and give Him thanks.

A Suggested Spiritual Exercise

- Sit quietly in a quiet room at a quiet time of the day.
- Become aware of everything in the room—the noises, the silence, the creaks, the wind outside or lack of it, a draft, the humidity, the temperature, your body, the furniture, the light, each chair, fabric, texture, color, and how these things make you feel.
- Consider what else is in the room that you cannot see—radio waves, TV waves, microwaves, cellular phone conversations, Internet transmissions.
- Next, become aware of the Spirit of God in the room—in the same sense that He was always there even when you were not focused on Him.
- Pray, “Jesus, I know that You are right here with me. May I sense Your presence.”

Other Suggested Spiritual Exercises

- Sit quietly in the predawn hour gazing into the sky.
- Watch a vermillion sky yield to a new day, or to darkness.
- Go sit still beside a stream. Listen to the rippling water and the sounds beyond it . . . the birds, the rustling leaves.
- Watch an anthill.
- Stare back at a heron.
- Marvel at the mating ritual of two birds.

- Look at a mountain and think how long it would take one person to cart it away, or make one, or climb it.
- Consider a mother duck and her little chicks.



Heavenly Father, we do worship You, we do glorify You, we do give You thanks, and we do see You in creation. We see You everywhere around us. We see You in people. We see You in things made well by man. We see You in nature, and it is good, and we acknowledge that You have revealed Yourself to us. Lord, give us the habit or the discipline to come often to this place, to this attitude, to this mind-set so that we might be with You, that we might have communion with You and that our relationship with You might deepen. We ask this in the name and the power of the invisible God made visible in creation. Amen.

A Review of the Big Ideas

- ↳ The contemplation of the visible creation reveals the deity of the invisible God.
- ↳ When we watch a bloodred sunset disappear over the horizon, lilies sway in a field, or baby ducks paddle for all their worth to keep up with mama duck, we also get a glimpse of God.
- ↳ The spiritual habit of observing nature leads to a deeper understanding of God.
- ↳ You can pick up a book about any topic, and you will find that it communicates something about its author. Similarly, creation offers its own message of beauty and grandeur, and it also communicates something about its Creator.
- ↳ Whether you're focusing on natural beauty, man-made beauty, or mankind's beauty, let the result be the same—let it propel your mind to meditate on the greatness and goodness of the holy God.

Discussion Questions

- 1.** Look up the creation story in Genesis 1—especially look at verses 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31. What do you see in each of those verses? What does that tell you about God's creation?
- 2.** Look up Psalm 139—especially look at verses 13–16. What does that tell you about yourself?
- 3.** Describe your last experience of interaction with God's creation.
- 4.** What did that experience teach you about God?

5. We've described ways to experience God through nature, through people, and through accomplishments. Which of those ways most clearly gives you a sense of God's majesty? Which most clearly gives you a sense of His presence?

Additional Resources

Escape from Reason, by Francis Schaeffer (especially for more information about nature, grace, and Aquinas)

The Problem of Pain, by C. S. Lewis

The Idea of the Holy, by Rudolph Otto

www.kenduncan.com (a commercial Web site for Christian photographer Ken Duncan, whose pictures will inspire you and turn your thoughts to God)