

LIBERTY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

ENCOUNTERING GOD
THROUGH HIS CREATION

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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

By

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ABSTRACT

ENCOUNTERING GOD THROUGH HIS CREATION

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Liberty Theological Seminary, 2007

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A review of current literature demonstrates the need for a comprehensive understanding of the revelation of God through His creation. The purpose of this project is to examine this subject from a biblical, historical, and theological perspective. Personal testimonies, pertinent research, and the writings of numerous authors have also been employed in this study. Additional insights have been gleaned from a survey given to the members of seven Southern Baptist churches. The project concludes with a number of recommendations for those who wish to pursue more meaningful encounters with God through His creation.

Abstract length: 93 words

To Sherry, Joy and Tim

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this thesis project is to examine how people encounter God's presence through His creation. Frequently referred to as "natural revelation" it is one of four ways in which God has chosen to reveal Himself. The first and the most objective revelation of God is through His Word, the Bible. Writing to Timothy, Paul, the great first century apostle said, "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3:16).¹ Without the Scriptures, we would know very little about God and how He desires for us to live in terms of our relationship with Him and with one another.

God has also chosen to reveal Himself in a very personal way through His Son, Jesus Christ. In our day and time that revelation is contained within God's Word, the Bible. For the disciples and the followers of Jesus, however, it was a revelation of God that they had experienced personally. In John's first letter he writes, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of

¹Unless otherwise noted, all quoted passages of scripture are taken from the New International Version translation of the Bible.

life” (I John 1:1). They believed that they had met God in the form of a human being who had lived among them and who had given His life for them. Writing to the church in Colossae, Paul stated that Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15).

Another way in which God has chosen to reveal Himself is through the lives of His people. In Genesis 1:26, as well as in a number of other places, the Bible teaches that we were made in His image. The Bible also teaches that His Spirit dwells within the hearts and lives of His followers. For example, Peter declared on the day of Pentecost that those who repented and were baptized would receive the “gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). God’s Spirit would dwell within them in such a way that they would become a reflection of the very presence and power of God Himself. In fact, speaking to the Christians of Galatia, Paul said, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

The final way in which God has chosen to reveal Himself is through His creation. Once again the Bible very clearly indicates that He made it (Genesis 1:1), that He governs it (Isaiah 40:21-26), and that He reveals Himself through it (Psalm 19: 1-4). In fact, this revelation precedes all of the others, and it is universal in the sense that it is available to all people regardless of whether or not they are aware of the other means by which God has disclosed Himself (Romans 1:18-20). Before the Bible was written, before the coming of Christ, and before there were a multitude of Spirit filled believers, people often encountered the presence of God when they were outdoors. For example, in the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve met with Him in a garden, Abraham on a starlight night, and Jacob on a “stony” pillow at a place he named “Bethel.” Over and over again, the Bible declares that God has chosen natural settings in which to unveil Himself to

those who either were or would become His people. To what extent is that taking place today, and if so, how does it happen and what, if anything, can be done to facilitate its happening?

This is an intriguing topic and one which is generating renewed interest among today's writers and theologians. Having grown up in the country, the author of this thesis learned at an early age to appreciate the wonder and majesty of God's creation. During his years as a Boy Scout, he spent a great deal of time outdoors. Later, during his college years, he was introduced to the writings of Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan pastor who was instrumental in the birth of the First Great Awakening in America. In one of his narratives, Edwards describes an encounter with Christ while he was riding on horseback through the forests of New England.² The author could not help but wonder if that was an isolated event, or if it was genuinely possible for others to also have spiritual experiences in outdoor settings.

Several years later the testimony of a friend provided confirmation that encounters with God in natural surroundings are not only possible but also desirable in terms of enriching our lives as Christians. At an outdoor worship service during a church sponsored camping trip, an invitation was given to share personal testimonies. The friend related an experience which had taken place while he was in high school. Having been asked to write an essay about a sunset, he decided to observe one that very evening. He sat down in his back yard and watched the sun dip below the horizon. He stated he had

²A *Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995; Yale Nota Bene 2003), 293.

become aware of God's presence as he beheld the setting sun. For him it was a treasured memory of an encounter with God on a very special evening.

Having served as a pastor for over thirty years, the author is aware of the fact that people both need and desire to experience God's presence. In spite of today's secular culture, which does everything it can to eradicate even the mention of His name, people are still searching for God. They want to know Him and establish a relationship with Him. The New Age movement is but one example of this ongoing interest in all things spiritual. Indeed, our culture in America has become quite similar to the one Paul confronted in the city of Athens. The people were interested in spiritual things, but they were unaware of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. They were aware, however, that God had revealed Himself through His creation. This, therefore, became a point of common understanding upon which Paul could build his gospel presentation. When he spoke to those who had gathered for the meeting of the Areopagus, he introduced his message by saying, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands" (Acts 17:24).

Like Paul, sharing Christ through a common awareness of God's revelation of Himself through creation, and the possibility of even encountering Him through that creation, is an important consideration for evangelical outreach in today's world. It provides Christians with a means by which they can effectively share their faith by drawing upon shared experiences with those who are non-Christians. This study, therefore, can be genuinely beneficial in two ways. First, it can enrich the lives of God's people as they seek to know and experience His presence by encountering Him through His creation. Second, it can provide them with a new way in which to share their faith

with those who are aware of God's presence in His creation, but who have not made a personal commitment of their lives to Jesus Christ. To these two ends this paper is dedicated.

Research Questions

This examination is built around two key research questions. First, how much time are people, especially Christians, spending outdoors? Second, are Christians in today's world encountering God through His creation, and if so, how would they describe what they have experienced, and how has it impacted their lives? With regards to the first question, prior to the twentieth century, most people in the United States came from an agrarian background. They spent a great deal of time outdoors. But during the twentieth century a massive population shift took place. People moved to the cities, they purchased homes with central heating and air conditioning, and they began driving automobiles instead of walking. Today it is possible to spend almost twenty-four hours a day in a man-made environment.

It, therefore, becomes crucially important to discover how much time people are actually spending outdoors and the kinds of things that they are doing when they are outdoors. From a biblical and historical perspective, many of those who have had significant experiences with God in an outdoor setting did so in a solitary fashion over extended periods of time. For example, Moses was a shepherd for forty years before he met God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 3:1-3), and Jesus spent forty days in the Judean wilderness before He began His public ministry (Matthew 4:1-2). If people today spend little or no time outdoors, and if what time they do spend outdoors is always in the

company of other individuals, the opportunity to experience God's presence in that setting will probably be greatly diminished and in many instances even non-existent.

In fact, recent findings seem to indicate that human beings need to spend time outdoors, and if they are denied this opportunity it has a negative effect upon their well-being. That at least is the thesis of a recently published book entitled *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*.³ Therefore, the first question that must be answered has to do with time. How much time are people today spending outdoors, and when they are outdoors what are they doing? Are they involved in a variety of activities with other people, or are they reserving time for quiet meditation and solitude? This question, in all of its various aspects, is the subject of the first part of a survey. The survey will be given to Christians from at least three different churches, representing congregations located in urban, suburban, and rural settings.

The second question addresses the issue which is at the heart of this project. Are Christians in today's world encountering God through His creation, and if so, how would they describe what they have experienced, and how has it impacted their lives? For example, biblical experiences with God in an outdoor setting are usually described using language that is sensory in nature. Moses saw a burning bush and heard the voice of an angel (Exodus 3:1-5). As a result of his encounter with God, his life was transformed. No longer was he a shepherd in the wilderness. Now he was God's deliverer of Israel. The same could be said of Paul in the New Testament. On the road to Damascus he saw a light and heard the voice of Christ (Acts 9:1-6). Instead of persecuting Christians, he

³ Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* (New York: Algonquin, 2005), 98-111.

became God's apostle to the Gentiles. In fact, throughout the Scriptures, those who had significant and life changing encounters with God were frequently outdoors when the experience took place. The same is true with regards to a number of individuals whose lives God impacted down through the centuries. They had some of their most profound experiences with Him when they were outdoors. Is the same true today? Do God's people still have significant and even life changing encounters with God when they are in an outdoor setting? And if so, how do they describe these experiences? This multi-phased question is addressed in the second part of the survey.

These, therefore, are the two questions addressed in this presentation. They are examined from a biblical, historical, and theological perspective. They are also examined through the survey given to members of Southern Baptist churches representing urban, rural, and suburban settings. Based upon the above research, the author hopes to be able to answer these questions in a way that will be instructive and helpful for those who desire to encounter God through His creation.

Defined Terminology

Most of the words and concepts in this paper are clearly recognizable and easily understood. There are a few, however, which deserve to be defined for the sake of enhanced clarity. They are listed as follows:

God—the divine being who created the universe and who is identified in the Bible as the Lord of heaven and earth. When capitalized, it refers to the Judaic-Christian understanding of God.

Encounter—an awareness of being in the presence of someone else whether that individual is another human being or God. This includes those experiences in which there is a sensory interchange involving, for example, hearing and seeing, as well as those instances in which a person is simply aware of another's presence.

Outdoors—any setting which is outside of a man-made environment. This could include the backyard of someone's home or a park in the city as well as a rustic setting on a quiet lake or in a national forest.

Wilderness—an outdoor setting which may or may not be rugged and desolate, but which is isolated in terms of contact with other human beings. This definition is derived from Susan Bratton's definition of wilderness environments in her book, *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife*.⁴

Sensuality—the five senses of sight, hearing, taste, feeling, and smell which are used to describe an individual's physical experiences, but which may also be used to describe spiritual experiences. For example, John, the author of the last book in the New Testament, uses sensory language to describe what he has seen and heard when he is called forth to witness the events that are taking place in heaven (Revelation 19:1).

Physical—that which can be experienced in the time/space continuum of everyday life. We live in a world where we are continually in contact with other people and things through our five senses.

⁴Susan Power Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1993), 18.

Spiritual—that which can be experienced within another dimension of reality that ushers us into the presence of the divine. This realm is perceived through a sensual awareness that is similar to our physical senses but which is nevertheless distinctly different and even transcendent.

Revelation—an act of God whereby He makes known to mankind a truth or realization that was previously undisclosed or hidden. This disclosure can be either general or specific in nature. When it is general, it is available to everyone. When it is specific or special, it is usually regarded as being disclosed in God’s Word, the Bible.⁵ Natural revelation is the disclosure of God through or in His creation as separate and apart from that which has been specifically revealed in the Old and New Testaments.⁶ For the purpose of this paper, however, natural revelation refers to any and all accounts—including those which are biblical, historical, and personal—in which God has chosen to reveal Himself through or in the realm of nature.

Theophany—a theological term that “refers to the temporal and spatial manifestation of God in some tangible form.”⁷ Many of mankind’s biblical encounters with God in outdoor settings, especially those in the Old Testament, can be described as theophanies.

⁵Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 922.

⁶Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964), 158.

⁷*Ibid.*, 241.

Limitations Declaration

The subject matter for this thesis project is rather broad in scope. Therefore, a number of limitations need to be delineated. First, this paper will address the subject of encountering God through His creation from a Christian perspective. Throughout history mankind has attempted to relate to God through the forces of nature. For example, there are prehistoric ruins in Ireland which clearly indicate a relationship between the burial of ancestors and the worship of the sun. At Newgrange, a site near the east coast of Ireland, a huge passage tomb was built in such a way that during the winter solstice the rising sun would send a shaft of light into an inner chamber where the bones of deceased members of the community had been placed.⁸ This and other practices are found in many if not most religions throughout the world. In many instances, the forces of nature are the principle means by which individuals attempt to be in touch with God. This was certainly true of Native Americans. Religion and the world in which they lived were inextricably tied together.⁹ While these religious practices and beliefs about encountering God through nature might be interesting and informative, they are not addressed in this paper, except to indicate that they often lead people to begin worshipping the creation instead of the Creator, a problem Paul addresses in Romans 1:24-25.

A second and corresponding limitation involves those who have been selected to take the survey. The author at first thought that it might be interesting to compare the experiences of Christians and non-Christians. While such an endeavor is worthy of

⁸Sean Duffy, *The Concise History of Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2005), 22-23.

⁹Betty Ballantine and Ian Ballantine, *The Native Americans: An Illustrated History* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, Inc., 1993), 191.

consideration, it too is beyond the scope of this paper. What the author is attempting to do is to describe how God's people have encountered Him through His creation beginning with the Bible, continuing on through the centuries of Christian history, and ending with those who are members of today's churches. Moving the focus of the paper beyond these parameters would, in the author's opinion, be a difficult if not impossible undertaking.

A third limitation involves the selection of the biblical and historical characters who will be surveyed in terms of their encounters with God through His creation. There are so many that it would simply be impossible to write about each and every one. Instead, a number will be selected depending on the life changing significance of their experiences and, with regards to the historical individuals, the accuracy of the accounts describing their experiences. All too often truth and fable, especially during the Middle Ages, become entangled with one another.

A fourth limitation has to do with the debate between evolution and creation. This is an ongoing controversy that would require a tremendous amount of time and research to adequately describe, and such a digression would not directly address the two questions upon which this paper is based. It is, however, briefly addressed at the beginning of chapter four. If the creation, our world, and the universe beyond it, has not been created by God, then the possibility of encountering Him through it is both impossible and illogical. Therefore, a brief section in the fourth chapter must address the fact that more and more individuals, especially those in the field of science, are embracing the idea that the creation does reveal the presence of the Creator.

A fifth research restraint involves the life style changes that have taken place in America during the past century. Years ago people lived in smaller homes and spent a great deal of time outdoors. A favorite evening pastime for adults was sitting on the front porch. Their children were also outdoors playing a variety of games from hop-scotch to sandlot baseball. Today, those scenes have vanished for the most part in favor of big screen TV's, computer games, and professional sports played in indoor stadiums. While a study comparing the amount of time people spend outdoors today as compared to previous generations might prove to be interesting, an in-depth presentation is beyond the scope of this paper. This change in life styles, however, will be briefly addressed in chapter five.

The final limitation deals with the subject of ecology, man's relationship with the world in which he lives. This too is a broad subject, and could itself become a thesis topic. Originally, the author was not going to address this subject, but to not do so would be an injustice. It would ignore mankind's divinely ordained participation in the redemption of creation as expressed by Paul in Romans 8:19-23. It would also ignore a key insight that is found in the writings of the great Puritan theologian, Jonathan Edwards. He believed that people can perceive the Lord's presence when they become involved as partners with God in the appreciation and creation of natural beauty.¹⁰ Therefore, the importance of protecting and caring for the environment is a topic that will be briefly addressed in the sixth chapter of this paper.

¹⁰ This theme is addressed in many of Edwards' writings such as his *Miscellanies* and *End of Creation*.

Theological Foundations

The theological foundations upon which this paper is structured are threefold in nature. First, it is built upon the biblical declaration that God created the universe. This, of course, is the central theme of the first two chapters in Genesis, and it is repeated elsewhere throughout the Bible. Psalm 89:11-15, Psalm 146:5-6, Isaiah 40:28-31, John 1:1-12, and Revelation 4:11 are but a few of the many references to God as creator. Landon Gilkey, author of *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, states, “In the idea that God is the Creator, therefore, we find one of the affirmations about God which the Biblical writers, and Christians after them, have regarded as of primary importance to the Christian faith.”¹¹

This affirmation is essential for several reasons, the most important of which is that God is preeminent. In Genesis 1:1 the writer declares, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The verb in this sentence is the Hebrew word *bara*. Clyde Francisco, in his commentary on this passage of Scripture, states, “Although *bara* comes from a root which means to cleave or split apart and describes the activity of a carpenter, this form used in Genesis is never applied to anyone except God. Man cannot *bara*. Only God can *bara*. It is an exclusive activity of God. The verb is never used with the accusative of the materials employed; so it certainly points in the direction of creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).”¹² In other words, God, unlike human beings, does not have to make the universe out of pre-existent materials. He does not slay a dragon and then

¹¹Landon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1959; Anchor Books, 1965), 4.

¹²Clyde T. Francisco, *Genesis*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 1, revised, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1973), 121-122.

fabricate the world out of its remains, as is the case with some of the other creation stories from the ancient Middle East.¹³ He stands above and beyond His creation. He transcends it. He is the one who speaks it into existence. It has its origin and beginning in the One who is eternal. In his commentary, Thomas Whitelaw writes: “Thus, according to the teaching of this venerable document, the visible universe neither existed from eternity, nor was fashioned out of pre-existing materials, nor proceeded forth as an emanation from the Absolute, but was summoned into being by an express creative fiat.”¹⁴

Although this foundational principle may seem perfectly obvious, it is nonetheless of significant value. During college, this author took a number of religion courses under Dr. O. W. Rhodenhiser. One of the things he was taught was that all religions address the subject of god, mankind, and the world, and that one of these three will always be preeminent. Buddhism, for example, stresses the importance of the human soul. Traditional Chinese religion emphasizes the need to live in harmony with an overarching universe. Judaism and Christianity, on the other hand, state that God is the beginning and origin of all things. He is the one who has created mankind and the world in which mankind lives.¹⁵ That the universe is not pre-existent, but actually requires a creator, is, therefore, a key foundational principle upon which this paper is built.

¹³Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R.K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 110.

¹⁴Thomas Whitelaw, *Genesis*, The Pulpit Commentary, vol. 1, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Excell (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Company, 1985), 3.

¹⁵O. W. Rhodenhiser, televised course “Christianity Among the World’s Religions”, University of Richmond, Channel WRVA, Richmond, VA, 1966-67.

A second theological principle that is foundational to this paper is the assertion that the realm of nature testifies or bears witness to its Creator. Psalm 19 is perhaps the most beautiful expression of this theological doctrine. The psalmist says, “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” (Psalm 19:1-2). In fact, this entire psalm, which may have originally been two different psalms that were joined together, might be summarized by saying that God has chosen to reveal Himself through both the creation that He has made and the law that He has ordained for His people. In his commentary on this particular psalm, John Durham writes, “The one respect in which the two poems are alike is that they each extol, in admittedly divergent ways, the revelation of God. The first poem extols the revelation in his handiwork; the second the revelation in his word. This similarity of direction probably brought the two poems together in the first place.”¹⁶

Of course, the idea that the creation reflects the nature and character of God is expressed in other passages of scripture as well. For example, Psalm 50:6 states, “And the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for God himself is judge,” and Psalm 89:5 says, “The heavens praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones.” And of course, there is Paul’s declaration concerning natural revelation in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans.

Indeed, one of the arguments for the existence of God has its origin in this theological concept. Known as the teleological argument, it is ancient in origin, going all

¹⁶John I. Durham, *Psalms*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 4, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1973), 206.

the way back to Plato. Its most famous explanation, however, dates back to William Paley's book, *Natural Theology: Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of Deity Collected from Appearances in Nature*, which was published in 1802.¹⁷ His argument for the existence of God can be summarized in this manner:

Suppose that while walking in a desert place I see a rock lying on the ground and ask myself how this object came to exist. I can properly attribute its presence to chance, meaning in this case the operation of such natural forces as wind, rain, heat, frost, and volcanic action. However, if I see a watch lying on the ground I cannot reasonably account for it in a similar way. A watch consists of a complex arrangement of wheels, cogs, axles, springs and balances, all operating accurately to provide a regular measurement of the lapse of time. It would be utterly implausible to attribute the formation and assembling of these metal parts into a functioning machine to the chance operation of such factors as wind and rain. We are obliged to postulate an intelligent mind which is responsible for the phenomenon.¹⁸

The creation, therefore, demonstrates by its very nature that it is not a chance event or a self-perpetuating reality. It bears the stamp of a designer without whom it could not have come into existence. This is the second theological principle upon which this paper is based.

The third theological principle foundational to this paper is the universality of God's revelation of Himself in nature. It is there for all to observe. It is not something that is hidden and then suddenly revealed to a select group of people. It presents itself to one and all, each and every day. This is precisely what Paul is saying in Romans 1:20. He writes, "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

¹⁷John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), 23.

¹⁸Ibid., 23-24.

made, so that men are without excuse.” Commenting on this verse of scripture, the editors of the *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* include a quote from a Dr. Schaff that states, “The book of nature is . . . a *paideuterion theognosias*, a school of general knowledge of God; and there is no nation on earth which is entirely destitute of this knowledge.”¹⁹

Indeed, all people, even in societies which have no knowledge whatsoever of Christianity, seem to have an awareness that there is a god who created the universe. Occasionally, some of them make a decision to find out who He is. Such was the case with a Japanese girl about ten or eleven years of age who grew up on a farm on the island of Miyako, Japan. One warm August evening she went outside and watched the moon as it gradually descended across the evening sky. It seemed so close that she could almost reach out and touch it. She thought, “Who made this?” The next day she observed the various plants that grew on the farm and wondered where all of the seeds came from that created such a variety of vegetation. The same was true with the trees and flowers that grew around her home. She wondered, “Where did they come from?” Although she had been raised in a family that practiced ancestor worship, she came to a decision that would alter the future direction of her life. She said, “I’m going to leave here and find the truth about who made all of this.” She is now a Christian and a member of the author’s church.²⁰ The universality of God’s revelation through His creation is, therefore, an

¹⁹Albert N. Arnold and D. B. Ford, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, An American Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Alvah Hovey (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1889), 49. No citation is given for Dr. Schaff.

²⁰Sumiko Wiggins, interview by author, 15 January 2006, Portsmouth, VA, Calvary Baptist Church.

important foundational principle for this paper. It is supported by both the Word of God and the testimonies of those, such as this Japanese girl, who have encountered Him through His creation.

Methodology Description

In today's world, people are becoming increasingly disconnected from the natural environment around them. In fact, in many instances, they never really spend any time outdoors. They exist in a totally man-made environment. This is certainly a departure from the past, and there is growing concern that its effects may be detrimental to our society's health and well-being.²¹ From a Christian perspective, the potential for harm involves not only the physical aspects of life, but also the spiritual ones. This is a serious problem that Christians need to address.

Beginning with the scriptural accounts in the Old Testament, God's people encountered the Lord in outdoor settings. That's where they both met and worshipped Him. Over and over again the Lord revealed Himself to them through His creation. That is also true with regards to the New Testament, especially in terms of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. He spent a great deal of time outdoors, often in solitude communing with His heavenly Father (Luke 6:12). The same could be said of some of God's most notable servants down through the centuries. They had meaningful, life changing experiences with the Lord when they were outdoors. Was there something about that environment that drew them to God, and if so, are God's people still availing themselves of that opportunity today? The question, therefore, around which this thesis

²¹Louv, 46-53.

is being developed, can be summarized as follows. How can Christians in today's world encounter God through His creation? The author will attempt to address this question in a thesis project involving seven chapters.

The first chapter is an introduction. It sets forth the parameters of the paper. It begins with a purpose statement regarding the subject matter to be examined. It then introduces the two research questions that are being proposed. The next section defines the special terminology that has been employed, and the one which follows sets forth the paper's limitations. The most important part of the first chapter is devoted to the theological foundations upon which the thesis has been established. The two concluding sections outline the content of the paper's seven chapters and provide a review of the literature utilized for this thesis.

The second chapter presents a number of biblical accounts in both the Old and New Testaments that describe mankind's encounters with God in a natural setting. These individuals include Adam and Eve, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, and Paul. What kind of experiences did these people have with God in an outdoor setting? How were they affected by these encounters? What changes took place in their lives as a result of their encounters? While these last two questions can be easily answered based on the biblical accounts, the first one should prove to be both fascinating and challenging. Did these individuals encounter God through their physical senses, or was something of a more spiritual nature taking place? Were they perhaps having visions that could only be expressed in language that refers to sight and hearing? Several biblical commentators have raised this question in their discussions of these divine encounters. Exploring the

various explanations and coming to at least a tentative conclusion as to how these individuals encountered God is a substantial part of the subject matter in this chapter.

The third chapter presents the accounts of Christians who have experienced God's presence in a natural setting throughout the centuries following Christ's birth. It begins with the ascetic movement of the third century and includes various medieval individuals such as Saint Patrick and Francis of Assisi. The accounts of other individuals such as Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, and Billy Graham are also included in this chapter. It is chronological in order. This chapter provides a brief biographical sketch of each of these individuals along with an in-depth description of their encounters with God. What they experienced, how they described their experiences, and any insights which they gained from these experiences are presented. For example, Jonathan Edwards described these special times with God as utilizing a "sixth sense" that enables a person to have an overwhelming and intuitive encounter with God.²²

The fourth chapter is the most complex. It begins with an exposition of key biblical passages, especially the writings of Paul in his letter to the Romans. It addresses the biblical presupposition that God has chosen, not only to reveal Himself, but to also express Himself through the forces of nature. This is particularly obvious when one examines the Old Testament account of the Exodus and Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Baal at Mount Carmel. The fourth chapter also explores the idea that not only man but also creation itself praises and exalts the Creator. Is biblical language that describes trees as "clapping" (Isaiah 55:12) merely symbolic in nature, or does it, and

²² *Selected Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Harold P. Simonson (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1970) 13.

other passages such as Psalm 148, actually describe a scriptural truth that all of creation, including the realm of nature, is involved in worshipping the Lord? The writings of well-known theologians, such as Martin Luther and Jonathan Edwards, are examined along with what has been written by leading naturalists during the past two centuries. The overall purpose of this chapter is to examine the theological question as to how God reveals Himself through His creation. Research tends to indicate that He reveals Himself in two ways. First, God reveals Himself through His creation rationally. The complex design of the universe leads people to the logical conclusion that it did not come into existence on its own or by accident. The second way in which God reveals Himself is experientially. Regardless of how it is described, people have a personal encounter with God that is facilitated by their presence in an outdoor setting. This, rather than a revelation based upon reason, seems to have a more profound effect upon people's lives.

The fifth chapter attempts to do two things. First, it describes the current habits of Americans in terms of the amount of time they spend outdoors. There is a growing body of research which indicates that people need to spend time outdoors. When they do not take advantage of this opportunity, it can have a negative impact upon their well-being known as "nature-deficit disorder."²³ In Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods*, the author presents a number of studies to support this claim. One of them comes from a nine year research project conducted by Stephen and Rachel Kaplan for the U. S. Forest Service. Summarizing this couple's findings, Louv writes, "They followed participants in an Outward Bound-like wilderness program, which took people into the wilds for up to

²³Louv, 99.

two weeks. During these treks or afterward, subjects reported experiencing a sense of peace and an ability to think more clearly; they also reported that just being in nature was more restorative than the physically challenging activities, such as rock climbing, for which such programs are mainly known.”²⁴

The second thing that this chapter attempts to do is to report the findings of the survey. Given to members of Southern Baptist churches in at least three different congregations in the Hampton Roads area, it indicates the amount of time that people are spending outdoors each week and the kinds of things that they are doing when they are outdoors. It then indicates how many people have sensed God’s presence when they were outside and if those occasions were more of a rational realization of His presence or an experiential encounter with the Lord. A number of personal interviews are also included. These interviews reflect the accounts of individuals who have had significant experiences with God in an outdoor setting.

The sixth chapter is a brief presentation of two topics that are tangentially related to this study. The first deals with the subject of ecology. It surmises that the preservation of the environment is essential not only for the continuation of human life upon this planet, but also as a divinely appointed locale for encounters with God. The second surveys the various ways in which people can prepare themselves for these encounters. A number of recommendations are suggested such as the practice of solitude, the observation of nature, camp experiences, and Christian meditation.

²⁴Ibid., 102.

The seventh and final chapter is a summary of what has been presented in the previous chapters. The paper's hypothesis is examined in light of the two key questions the author has attempted to address. Seven conclusive insights are presented. This is followed by a section offering recommendations for further study.

Literature Review

The research for this thesis involves a panoply of literature covering a vast spectrum of time and subject matter. It can best be reviewed on a chapter by chapter basis, beginning in chapter two with the biblical accounts of those who encountered God. The primary resources for this section of the thesis are the various commentaries which address these encounters with God. Some of them include: *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, *The Interpreter's Bible*, *The New American Commentary*, and *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. The author also seeks to research what has been written about various individuals such as Moses. For example, two books, John Davis' book, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, and Alan Cole's book, *Exodus*, are referred to in the paper.

The third chapter of the thesis presents the testimonies of Christians who have encountered God's presence in nature. To the extent it is possible, their actual writings have been used as opposed to what others have written about them. Saint Patrick, for example, wrote a defense of his ministry in Ireland. Written in Latin, it is one of the earliest manuscripts from the medieval period. The accounts of other historical figures, including Saint Francis of Assisi, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, Charles H. Spurgeon, and Billy Graham, have also been included. These accounts, along with brief

biographical introductions, are presented in this third chapter. Another feature is the inclusion of some of these individuals' poems and songs, especially those from the Middle Ages. They represent a rich testimony of praise regarding the revelation of God through His creation.

The fourth chapter examines God's revelation in nature from a theological perspective. It explores various authors' explanations as to how God communicates with mankind through His creation. The works of Augustine and Calvin are briefly examined, since they served as a foundation for the extensive commentaries of writers such as Jonathan Edwards. Edwards more than any other author, either before or after his time, went to great lengths to explain how God reveals Himself to His people. In fact, the First Great Awakening in America was largely due to the fact that Edwards stressed the importance of experience as opposed to reason in terms of becoming a child of God.²⁵ For him a very important aspect of that experience was encountering the Lord through nature. Edwards' comments in his works, such as his *Personal Narrative*, are vitally important to this chapter.

The concepts and ideas of other writers, some of whom are theologians and others who identify themselves as naturalists, are also presented in this chapter. Among their number is Rudolf Otto. His book, *The Idea of the Holy*, is a classic in terms of defining divine encounters. Another theologian, Belden Lane, a professor in the Department of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University, has made important contributions in this field of inquiry. Attention will also be given to the writings of Sigurd Olson, John Muir,

²⁵A *Jonathan Edwards Reader*, XIX.

and Annie Dillard. These writers are considered to be either naturalists or ecologists. Nevertheless, their writings dip into theological issues as they discuss nature and its relationship to God. Finally, an author mentioned in Gary Thomas' *Sacred Pathways* is utilized. Written by Susan Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife*, contains a wealth of information and concepts that have enabled this thesis to be a much more insightful presentation.

As stated previously, the fifth chapter deals with statistical and survey information regarding time spent outdoors and the kinds of experiences people have when they are outdoors. Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods*, is a good place to begin with regards to this topic. The chapter will also explore other books on this topic such as Edward Wilson's *Biophilia*.

The sixth chapter includes comments from several theologians and writers on the subject of ecology. Jürgen Moltmann's *God in Creation* and Eric Rust's *Nature—Garden or Desert?* stress the importance of a Christian response to the growing environmental crisis. Brady and Neuzil's *A Spiritual Field Guide* presents a revised interpretation of Genesis 1:26. In terms of helping people to encounter God when they are outdoors, key insights are offered in Gordon McDonald's *Ordering Your Private World* and Eugene Peterson's *Working the Angles*.

In the seventh chapter, recommendations for further study are buttressed by a descriptive illustration from T.M. Moore's *Consider the Lilies*, as well as a reference from a paper written by William Unsoeld, "Spiritual Values in Wilderness" and an insightful interview with Tim Parker. Each highlights the need for additional research, especially with regards to enhancing the spiritual pathways and discovering the

psychological dynamics that usher people into God's presence when they encounter Him through His creation.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL RECORD

Adam and Eve

When all of the biblical accounts are taken into consideration, one thing becomes immediately obvious regarding mankind's encounters with God. Most of them took place in an outdoor setting. In fact, the story of mankind's relationship with the Lord actually began in an outdoor setting, the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:4-25). It was here according to the Genesis account that God planted a garden and placed man within it. It was here that man was given the responsibility of being its caretaker, and, of course, it was here that the man, and then his wife, Eve, had an ongoing relationship with their Creator. Unfortunately for them and for the rest of mankind, that relationship was broken when they ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. Suddenly they became aware of a nakedness that separated them not only from one another but also from the God who had created them. They no longer felt comfortable in His presence. The writer of Genesis 3:8 states, "The man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden."

Initially one might surmise that this verse of Scripture is a rather simple, straight forward declaration of what was taking place. The Lord was strolling through the garden during the cooler part of the day looking for Adam and Eve. When they heard the sound of His footsteps, they hid themselves from His presence. Is this, however, the best way to

come to a proper understanding of this verse of Scripture? When examined from a linguistic point of view, another possibility emerges. According to Kenneth Mathews, the adverbial phrase “in the cool of the day,” is an attempt to translate the actual Hebrew that reads “wind of the day.”¹ There is, consequently, a subtle change in the verse’s meaning, a change that John Calvin, the great Reformation theologian, mentions in his commentary on Genesis. He believes that the change in wording took place when this verse of Scripture was being translated from the Hebrew into Greek and then into Latin. Calvin states, “Moreover, what Jerome translates, ‘at the breeze after mid-day,’ is, in the Hebrew, ‘at the wind of the day;’ the Greeks, omitting the word ‘wind,’ have put ‘at the evening.’”² Thus Genesis 3:8 is not just talking about when God appeared. It is also describing how He appeared. His appearance was announced by the wind that blew through the garden.

How did such a misunderstanding arise? It appears that an assumption was made that when the wind begins to blow it naturally follows that it also becomes cooler, especially as evening approaches. Such is the case, at least, in many parts of the world, including the Middle East. When a breeze stirs, especially during the evening or early morning, it has a cooling effect upon the surrounding countryside. For that reason a translation which would have rendered the phrase as a “wind of the day” or a “gentle breeze” could easily be replaced by one which describes the consequences of such a phenomenon. The meaning of this verse would, therefore, be altered. The sound of the Lord could easily become confused with either God’s presumed footsteps as He walked

¹Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1A, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 239.

²John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. and ed. John King (London: Billing & Sons Limited, 1965), 160.

through the garden or the sound of His voice when He asked Adam and Eve, “Where are you?” Consequently, a more accurate translation of Genesis 3:8 would be, “The man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking during or at the wind of the day, and they hid from the Lord among the trees of the garden.”

In terms of encountering God through His creation, the writer of Genesis thus seems to be saying that the realm of nature played a role at least in introducing God’s presence. As the wind began to stir, it indicated that the Lord was approaching, an event that might have taken place on a regular basis. Addressing this possibility, Calvin states, “Yet I do not doubt that some notable symbol of the presence of God was in that gentle breeze; for although (as I have lately said) the rising sun is wont daily to stir up some breath of air, this is not opposed to the supposition that God gave some extraordinary sign of his approach, to arouse the consciences of Adam and his wife.”³ Another theologian, G. Charles Aalders, has arrived at the same conclusion. He writes that Adam and Eve “became aware of the presence of the Most High through a specific movement of nature. This movement or activity is designated as the ‘cool of the day’ or ‘day wind.’”⁴

The consequences of this encounter with God are, of course, well known. Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden. The rigor of hard labor in a thorn infested environment and the pain of childbirth became a part of their lives. Because of their disobedience, they also faced the eventuality of death, an inheritance that was passed on to their heirs. Fortunately, however, not all was lost. A future redemption was promised

³ Ibid., 161.

⁴ G. Charles Aalders, *Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. William Heynen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 104.

in Genesis 3:15, a redemption that would be realized in the coming of Christ. Speaking of that redemption, Paul declares to the Christians in Corinth, “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (I Corinthians 15:22).

One further observation also deserves to be stated. The Hebrew word for “wind” used in Genesis 3:8 is *ruach*. This word possesses three different and yet interrelated meanings. It can refer to the movement of air, to the breathing of a person, and to the Spirit of God.⁵ For example, the *ruach* or “wind” of Genesis 3:8 is the same word that is used to describe God’s creative presence in Genesis 1:2. In fact, throughout the Scriptures this word, or its equivalent in the Greek, *pneuma*, reflects not only a force of nature, but also the active presence of God Himself. In Exodus 14:21, the Lord delivers Israel through a strong wind out of the east which separates the waters of the Red Sea. In John 14:8, Jesus compares the Spirit of God to the wind that “blows wherever it pleases.” In Acts 2:2, the Spirit of God descends upon the apostles when “a sound like the blowing of a violent wind from heaven” fills the house in which they have gathered. Based upon these and other biblical accounts, it appears that God has chosen to reveal Himself in some very special ways through this particular aspect of nature. Speaking to his soldiers as they were preparing for battle, David said, “As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, move quickly, because that will mean the Lord has gone out in front of you to strike the Philistine army” (II Samuel 5:24).

⁵George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962) 432-33.

Abraham

Abraham is known as the father or patriarch of the Jewish people. He is also the spiritual father of all who have placed their faith and trust in God. The story of his life begins in the twelfth chapter of Genesis when the Lord called him to leave the city of Ur and begin a nomadic existence in the land of Canaan. From that point on he and his family spent most of their time in an outdoor environment, and it's in that environment that he had numerous encounters with God.

Sometimes these encounters are described in general terms. For example, in Genesis 12:7, the Scripture says that the Lord “appeared” to Abraham. No further description of what took place is given. On other occasions, however, the encounters are more specific in nature. In Genesis 18:1-33, God is described as not only appearing unto Abraham, but also as actually taking on human form. Sitting at the entrance to his tent, Abraham greeted three strangers who had arrived about noon. One of them is portrayed as the Lord. Another such visitation took place on Mount Moriah as Abraham was about to sacrifice his son. Genesis 22:11 states, “But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, ‘Abraham! Abraham!’” Speaking of these accounts, biblical commentators have treated them in different ways. Gunkel, for example, consigns them to legend, an ancient story that has found its way into the Scriptures.⁶ Other commentators infer that they might represent either God’s messenger, God Himself, or simply a voice that is heard.⁷

⁶Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 239.

⁷Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R. K. Harrison and Robert L Hubbard, Jr. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 112.

The account in Genesis 15:1-21, however, describes an encounter with God in a somewhat different manner. The first verse states, “After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your great reward (Genesis 15:1).’” Unlike the other accounts, this one moves beyond that which a person normally experiences through his five physical senses. It takes Abraham out of the realm of the physical, and places him in another dimension of reality, the realm of the spirit. He is able to catch a glimpse of what God intends to accomplish in the future. During this encounter with God, Abraham was reassured that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. One can almost sense Abraham standing side by side with the Lord in a dream like trance looking up at the stars as the promise was delivered and later confirmed in a dramatic, sacrificial covenant making ceremony. In his commentary, *On Genesis*, Bruce Vawter states, “For the first time the Yahwist seems to have become sensitive to the anthropomorphism of the man-to-man talk which thus far he has represented as the vehicle of divine revelation. Now—briefly, as it happens—he clothes the divine communication in the mysterious aura of the prophetic experience, the nature of which was never adequately explained even by the great prophets of Israel themselves.”⁸

Any attempt to describe this most unusual outdoor experience with God is fraught with difficulties, especially when the Scriptures state that Abraham fell into a deep sleep, heard the prophecy concerning the future generations of his children, and witnessed the passing of the smoking firepot and torch between the pieces of the animal sacrifices. One thing, however, is certainly taking place. The realm of the physical and the realm of the

⁸Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977), 207.

spiritual were interacting with one another as God entered into a covenant making ceremony with His servant Abraham. This ceremony was both a frightening and a majestic experience for Abraham. In fact, the firepot and the torch may have represented the very presence of God Himself. Gunkel states, “Such a description of God’s appearance is very naïve and surely very ancient. Yet one should note how carefully the narrator speaks. He does not say directly that this epiphany is Yahweh, but merely gives that impression.”⁹ It is an impression, however, that will find a fuller expression not only in the life of Moses at the burning bush, but also on numerous other occasions throughout God’s Word.

In terms of the impact of this event upon Abraham’s life, the Scriptures speak for themselves. Genesis 15:6 declares, “Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” In spite of the fact that he still had no children and in spite of the fact that he might be attacked in retaliation for having rescued Lot, an event which had just previously taken place, Abraham laid his fears and concerns aside, and instead placed his trust in a God who had promised to be his shield and great reward. That which followed in the covenant making ceremony was a confirmation of God’s intentions. God would fulfill His promises because of Abraham’s faith. Paul, referring to this very passage of Scripture, indicates that this is the means by which all of mankind can find peace with God. It is by faith, not good works, that people are rightly related to the Almighty. Quoting Genesis 15:6, he declares, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3).

⁹Gunkel, 181.

Jacob

Jacob was the grandson of Abraham, and like his grandfather, he had a number of encounters with God in an outdoor setting. Two of them deserve to be examined. The first one occurred while he was fleeing from his brother Esau. It is recorded in Genesis 28:10-22, and can best be described as visional in nature. Having stopped for the evening in a place which he later named Bethel, Jacob bedded down for the evening using a stone for a pillow. While asleep, he had a dream in which he saw a staircase reaching to heaven with angels ascending and descending up and down its steps. God, who was standing at the top of the staircase, promised to protect him and to give to him and his descendents the land of Canaan. Upon waking, Jacob was immediately aware of the fact that he had encountered the presence of the Lord. It was an unsettling and frightening discovery. He declared, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17).

A question, of course, immediately arises concerning this event. Was there something special about this location? Biblical scholars such as Gunkel believe it was already a sacred place where people gathered for worship.¹⁰ Others are not so sure. Calvin, for example, sees it as a desolate location which only acquired a special spiritual status at a later date.¹¹ One thing, however, cannot be debated. The stone on which Jacob rested his head became a memorial to what had taken place. Jacob poured oil upon it and set it up as a pillar or *massebah*, an act of worship that was repeated on numerous

¹⁰Gunkel, 311.

¹¹Calvin, 120.

occasions throughout the Old Testament.¹² He even promised to return and incorporate it into a house for God. Whether or not he considered the stone to have magical properties as a sort of foundation for a staircase into heaven cannot be ascertained. That certainly was the case among other peoples both in the Middle East and elsewhere.¹³ What is certain, however, is that the experience was not forgotten. On his return to Canaan, Jacob stopped at Bethel to build an altar to the Lord.

Before that could transpire, however, there was a second encounter with the Lord. Heading back home to Canaan, Jacob was fearful that his brother, Esau, was coming to destroy him and his family. After dividing his company into two groups, he spent the night alone until he was confronted by a mysterious stranger. Genesis 32:24-26 states, “So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. The man said, ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’ But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’” The blessing, of course, was the acquisition of a new name. Concerning this new name Francisco writes, “The new name *Israel* meant that from now on his life would take a new direction. *Israel* literally means, “God prevails,” but the explanation reversed the meaning into “you have prevailed.” The implication is that Jacob became truly victorious in life when he recognized the supremacy of God.”¹⁴

¹²Francisco, 210-11.

¹³Gunkel, 308.

¹⁴Francisco, 211.

But what actually happened that evening? What kind of an experience took place? Did God take on human form, did Jacob wrestle with an angel as indicated in Hosea 12:4, or was it a prayer struggle in which Jacob was pleading with God for protection before meeting Esau? Biblical scholars have presented a multitude of differing interpretations. Concerning the location of the struggle, there is, however, an interesting play on words. In Cuthbert Simpson's exegesis of Genesis 32:24-32, he writes, "J1 [Cuthbert's designation for the writer of this passage] appears to have taken over practically unchanged the legend of the Jabbok—the word *abhaq*, **wrestled**, occurring only here in the O. T., is a wordplay on "Jabbok"— according to which some supernatural being, presumably the numen to the place, wrestled with Jacob all night (vs. 24) to prevent him from crossing the stream."¹⁵

Whether or not Simpson's assertion is valid is highly debatable, but the use of the word *abhaq* and its association with the Jabbok, a clear flowing mountain stream that is about thirty feet wide at the place where it is forded,¹⁶ should not be overlooked. It indicates that God's encounter with Jacob was associated not only with a particular place but also with a particular natural phenomenon, a fast flowing stream of water. In fact, just like at Bethel, Jacob felt compelled to give it a special name, *Peniel*, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared" (Genesis 33:30). Having acquired the new name of "Israel," and having survived and in a sense prevailed in a wrestling match with God, Jacob was now ready not only to confront his brother, but also

¹⁵Cuthbert A. Simpson, *The Book of Genesis*, The Interpreter's Bible, vol. 1, ed. George A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), 722-23.

¹⁶Francisco, 227.

to face the new challenges that would be before him. Once again Francisco states, “What God by his grace would give him was more than Jacob could achieve by his best efforts. When God prevailed, Jacob prevailed.”¹⁷

In summary, what can be said regarding these two encounters that Jacob had with God? First, a precise understanding of what took place will probably always be a matter of conjecture. Scholars will arrive at differing conclusions as to what actually occurred. Second, regardless of what happened, one thing is certain. The writer of Genesis locates both of these events in an outdoor setting—the first while Jacob was sleeping under the stars at Bethel and the second by the banks of the Jabbok River. Third, Jacob had these encounters while he was alone, during times in his life when he was facing a crisis. At Bethel he had to confront the fact that he was isolated and separated from his family. At Peniel, he was preparing to meet a potential adversary, his brother Esau. In both instances, but in startlingly different ways, God reassured Jacob of His presence and protection. Fourth, both of these encounters were life changing events in Jacob’s life. The first might be likened unto a conversion experience in which Jacob confessed faith in God, even though it was all wrapped up in a rather selfish bargaining agreement. The second might be likened unto a sanctification experience. God became not only his protector and provider but also his Lord. That’s why he acquired the new name of Israel. Finally, in both of these events there is this sense in which the realm of the physical and the realm of the spiritual were becoming intertwined with one another. There was an interchange of activity and communication between what was taking place on earth and what was taking place in heaven. This interaction hearkens all the way back to the days

¹⁷Ibid.

of Abraham, when, for example, the angel of the Lord told the patriarch to stay his hand on Mount Moriah. The Scriptures indicate that the angel “called out to him from heaven” (Genesis 22:11). Regardless of whether the word “heaven” refers to the sky or to the actual abode of God, the fact remains that two separate realities were interacting with one another. That is a recurrent theme in Genesis as well as throughout the other biblical accounts of God’s encounters with mankind, especially those which take place in an outdoor setting.

Moses

The biblical account of Moses is well known, particularly with regards to his encounters with God. In fact, Moses and the Lord became so well acquainted that the book of Deuteronomy ends with these words, “Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt . . .” (Deuteronomy 34:10-11). These encounters began when Moses met the Lord as he was caring for his father-in-law’s sheep near Horeb, the mountain of God. It was the beginning of a spiritual adventure that would not only transform his life, but also the lives of an entire nation who were enslaved in Egypt.

In Exodus 3:1-4:17, the writer states that the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a burning bush that was not consumed by the flames. Curious as to what was happening, Moses decided to get a closer look. As he drew near, the Lord spoke to him from the midst of the bush saying, “Moses, Moses!” After removing his sandals because he was standing on holy ground, Moses was introduced to the God of his fathers. He was commissioned to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt, and he was given authority to

perform miracles using his shepherd's staff. What exactly, however, transpired during Moses' first encounter with God? Where was he? What kind of bush was on fire? Who was the angel of the Lord? Did Moses see and hear all of this with his physical eyes and ears, or was this a vision that he had experienced? These are among the various questions that have been raised by those who have studied this passage of Scripture.

Concerning the location of Moses' encounter with God, no one really knows where it took place. There are, however, some clues in terms of the two names by which the place is identified. The first name is "Horeb" and the second is "Sinai". In his commentary on Exodus, R. Alan Cole writes, "Horeb is demonstrably Semitic, probably meaning 'desert' or 'desolation.' It is conceivable that it was the Semitic name for the non-Semitic place-name Sinai."¹⁸ Sinai, on the other hand, seems to be a very ancient word whose meaning cannot be definitely ascertained. It can mean "thorny" with regards to a bush or a place that is difficult to access, and it may even have its origin in the worship of the moon, a cult that was located in Arabia.¹⁹ It can, therefore, be assumed that Moses met God in a remote wilderness location, and that it may have had some association with the idea that a god or divine being could reveal Himself in that place.

The biblical account, however, seems to suggest that Moses was not really looking for God when he encountered the Lord. The burning bush was a curiosity that captured his attention. This bush has been described and identified in many different ways. For example, Werner Keller suggests that it might have been a desert plant which possesses tiny oil glands that can burst into flame or the crimson blossoms of mistletoe

¹⁸R. Alan Cole, *Exodus* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1972), 62-63.

¹⁹Unger, 1029.

twigs that grow on acacia bushes and trees in the Holy Land.²⁰ Others have noted the symbolic value of the plant in that its humble status as a common, ordinary bramble bush represents the unpretentious people of Israel who were about to be touched by God's holiness without being destroyed.²¹

Regardless of what it was or what it represented, the bush was the means by which God captured Moses' attention. The fact that it was on fire indicated that God was present. H. L. Ellison describes the phenomenon in this manner, "The "flame of fire" is the glory of God's presence, which transforms but does not consume; it marked the presence of the angel of the Lord, "Yahweh present in time and space". It was intended to make Moses realize that nature in all its uniformity is not a barrier to exclude God, but merely a veil to hide the working of God's power throughout life around us."²² In his book on Exodus, Terence Fretheim also states, "The association of the divine appearance with fire in a bush is unique (cf. Gen. 15:17), but it anticipates God's appearance to Moses "in fire" at Sinai (19:18); there God spoke "out of the midst of the fire" (Deut. 4:12).²³

The presence of God in the burning bush is also indicated by the phrase "the angel of the Lord." For most commentators this is just another way of saying that God Himself was present. For example, John Davis states in his book, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*,

²⁰Werner Keller, *The Bible As History*, trans. William Neil (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1956), 131.

²¹W. H. Gispen, *Exodus*, The Bible Student's Commentary, trans. Ed van der Mass (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 53.

²²H. L. Ellison, *Exodus*, The Daily Study Bible, ed. John C. L. Gibson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 16.

²³Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, ed. James Luther Mays (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 55.

“The special call of Moses to the task of leadership came by means of the ‘angel of the Lord’ (v. 2), which, in fact, was an appearance of the Lord himself, the second Person of the Godhead.”²⁴ In other words, the Lord appeared in such a way that He took on a shape and a form that could be recognized by Moses. Having seen the burning bush, having been told to remove his sandals, and having heard the voice of the Lord, Moses knew that he was standing in God’s presence. Indeed, that seems to be what the writer of Exodus 3:6 has in mind when he says, “At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.”

One final question remains regarding this encounter with God. Was it subjective and visionary in nature, or was it an actual event that took place? In his commentary on Exodus, Honeycutt suggests, “Such a revelation, however, may well have been mediated through a visionary experience. The visionary experience would likely have assumed its descriptive character from the cultural ideas common to the era in which Moses lived. For Moses the bush burned with the flaming presence of the angel of the Lord. But it may well have been an inner experience, and one standing next to Moses may have seen nothing extraordinary.”²⁵ Other commentators would, however, disagree. They believe that it was an observable event. In fact, one of them states that it was an observable event in which nature itself played a role. Fretheim states, “This is not an ecstatic vision into an other worldly sphere; nor is it simply an ‘inward sight.’ While it is unusual, what is seen is within the world. As with other theophanies, *God uses nature as a vehicle for*

²⁴John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 69.

²⁵Roy L. Honeycutt, Jr., *Exodus*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 1, revised, Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1973), 312.

“clothing” that which is not natural. The natural does not stand over against the divine but serves as an instrument for the purposes of God, evoking both holiness, passion, and mystery (fire) and down-to-earthness (bush). The word comes “out of the bush,” from God and *from within* the world.”²⁶

It would, therefore, appear that God chose mountainous terrain and a burning bush in which to reveal Himself to Moses. It would also appear that beginning with this encounter and continuing throughout the remainder of Moses’ life, a series of events took place in which the natural and the supernatural were interacting with one another. This was certainly the case with the plagues of Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the miracles in the wilderness, and the covenant making ceremony at Sinai (Exodus 7:14-20:19). In different ways God revealed Himself through the forces of nature, demonstrating that He had authority over them and that at least to a certain extent His nature could be perceived through them. For example, when the Lord descended upon the mountain in fire, smoke, and thunder, the people of Israel were dramatically introduced to the power and majesty of God. In Exodus 20:19 it says that they “trembled with fear.”

One other encounter in the book of Exodus also deserves to be mentioned. After the covenant between Israel and the Lord had been sacrificially confirmed, God invited Moses and the leaders of Israel to come up on the mountain for a fellowship meal. Exodus 24:9-11 states that during the meal those who had climbed the mountain actually saw the Lord without being harmed. As they gazed upon His presence, they saw something that resembled a pavement under God’s feet, made of sapphire that was as

²⁶Fretheim, 55.

clear as the sky. It was if the curtains of heaven had been pulled aside for this special occasion. Describing this encounter Fretheim writes, “The exact nature of the divine participation in this meal is ambiguous, but God was certainly fully present in the midst of the people during the eating and drinking. It is a communal activity, in which both God and people participate. The seeing of God is an actual, if impressionistic, seeing (it is stated twice), not an inner perception or a perception without analogy in human experience.”²⁷ This understanding of what took place is also alluded to in Honeycutt’s commentary. With regards to the Hebrew words for sight that are used in this passage of Scripture, he says that they embrace both the purely physical as well as the spiritual aspects of this experience. Speaking of the first time that a word for seeing is used in verse 9, he writes, “**Saw** is the common word for seeing with the physical eye (*ra’ah*), while **beheld** (v. 11) is the customary word for seeing as in a vision (*chazah*).”²⁸ In other words, the writer of the book of Exodus believed that there was a genuine encounter on the mountain between God and the leaders of Israel. It was an experience that embraced both the physical and the spiritual, a real event that took place in this world as well as a visionary event that took place in God’s world.

In closing, it is interesting to note the similarities between what Moses and the leaders of Israel experienced on the mountain, and what is recorded in Ezekiel 1:26 and Revelation 4:6. Whether experienced in a vision or with one’s physical senses, the Bible clearly teaches that mankind is occasionally ushered into the presence of God. It also seems to be clearly indicating that these encounters, more often than not, take place in a

²⁷Ibid., 260.

²⁸Honeycutt, 413-14.

natural setting, whether it is a mountain in the wilderness, a river downstream from Babylon, or a rocky island off the coast of Asia Minor.

Elijah and Elisha

Even the greatest of God's servants can be overwhelmed by despair, and that's exactly what seems to have happened to the prophet Elijah. In response to Jezebel's threats, he fled to Horeb, the mountain of God. He was exhausted both physically and spiritually. In spite of his best efforts, Israel and its leaders had not returned to the Lord. Confused and dispirited, Elijah had come to the place where the power and majesty of God was most dramatically manifested in the days of Moses. Elijah had lost his way in life, and he didn't know where else to turn. He was also frustrated in terms of his relationship with the Lord. He had done everything he thought he was supposed to do, and yet it seemed to have all been for naught. His repeated word for word responses to God's questions in the nineteenth chapter of I Kings reveals Elijah's despondent, angry, "woe is me" attitude. In response, God confronted him in a most unusual way.

In I Kings 19:11-12, Elijah was summoned to stand before the Lord as He passed by in a strong wind, an earthquake, and a fire. These were natural phenomena with which Elijah was well acquainted in terms of being manifestations of God's presence (I Kings 18:38). In fact, they were reminiscent of the days of Moses. God, however, did not choose to present Himself in these forces of nature. Instead, He captured Elijah's attention in the stillness that followed. Then and only then did Elijah realize that the Lord was present and that he should cover his face in anticipation of a personal audience with God. Concerning this encounter with the Lord, Jerome Walsh states:

A second comment on the theophany concerns the natural phenomena listed: wind, earthquake, fire. These are traditional accompaniments to Yahweh's appearance; compare, for example, the theophanies at Sinai in Exodus 3:2 (fire) and Exodus 19:16-18 (thunder, lightning, cloud, smoke, fire, and the "the whole mountain shook violently"). Two of the three have already appeared in the story of Elijah as manifestations of the divine—fire (18:38) and wind (18:45). The repeated denial of Yahweh's presence in these phenomena is not, therefore, a denial that they point to the divine presence but that they *contain* the divine presence. Yahweh's appearance is heralded by natural upheaval, but it is ineffably more: it is a "sound of sheer silence."²⁹

Walsh also attempts to describe this mysterious sound of silence. He says, "It is a 'sound,' perhaps intelligible, perhaps not (Hebrew *qol* means "voice" as well as 'sound'). Yet it is a sound of 'silence' (*demama*)."³⁰ In other words, God had chosen to address Elijah in a distinctly different way than he expected. His message was conveyed in silence rather than a bombastic display of divine power. Exactly how God had accomplished this is not explained in a way that is clearly comprehensible. Did Elijah hear God's words in his mind? Did he hear an audible voice that could only be heard after all of the uproar had subsided? Or did God choose some other means by which to communicate with the prophet? No definable answer is given. The best thing that can be determined is to simply state that Elijah became conscious of the fact that God was speaking to him. In fact, God was not only confronting Elijah as to why he had abandoned his calling, but he was also re-commissioning him for further service. Once again Walsh writes, "Yahweh's commands offer a rebuke and a compromise. The rebuke is that instead of accepting Elijah's resignation, Yahweh assigns him new duties to perform; the compromise is that one of those duties is the installation of someone to

²⁹Jerome T. Walsh, *I Kings*, Berit Olam, ed. David W. Cotter (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 276.

³⁰Ibid.

succeed him as prophet.”³¹ This installation, of course, involves one final encounter with God. In II Kings 2:1-18, the account of Elijah’s departure into heaven is recorded. He was carried away in a whirlwind. For the prophets of Jericho who view this event, it was simply a natural phenomenon. The prophet had been snatched away by a wind storm, and they demanded permission to go in search of him. Elisha knew that their efforts would be in vain. He had seen something that transcends the natural. In response to his request to be Elijah’s successor, the aged prophet had promised that it would be granted if Elisha saw him as he was being taken away. That, indeed, was what transpired as a heavenly chariot and horses separated the two men. In response Elisha cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel” (II Kings 2:12). Commenting on this passage of Scripture in II Kings 2:9-12, Matheney and Honeycutt state, “The promise of prophetic succession rests on that potential to discern the hidden powers of God at work in the world, the insight necessary to perceive the presence of God which many, though having eyes yet never see.”³² In other words, what appeared to others as a natural phenomenon became for Elisha a vivid demonstration of God’s presence and power.

Once again the forces of nature and the presence of God had become intertwined. The realm of the spirit and the realm of the physical had embraced one another. As a result, one man’s life on earth had come to an end, but another man’s life had been infused with spiritual power and authority. As has been previously stated, mankind’s

³¹Ibid., 277.

³²M. Pierce Matheney, Jr. and Roy L. Honeycutt, Jr., *I Samuel – Nehemiah*, The Broadman Commentary, vol. 3, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 230.

encounters with God in the realm of nature had the potential to become transforming events. On the mountain, Elijah's prophetic calling was restored. By the Jordan River, Elisha's was inaugurated. Could they have taken place by other means and in other places? That is certainly true. Isaiah encountered God's presence in the Temple (Isaiah 6:1-8), and Samuel heard God's voice in the Tabernacle (I Samuel 3:1-14). The number of occasions in which these encounters took place outdoors, however, is remarkable. That is true with regards to both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Jesus

Defining and describing Jesus' encounters with God when He was outdoors is, of course, a challenging endeavor. The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus was the incarnation of God Himself. The Bible also teaches, however, that He was a genuine human being. Referring to Jesus, the writer of Hebrews states, "For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2:17). In other words, Jesus did not have a special means of accessing God's presence. He had to come to the Lord in the same way that all people come to Him. Those encounters are described in the Gospels. They portray a man who lived and taught for the most part in outdoor settings, and who sought His Father's counsel in solitary, natural surroundings.

A study of the Gospels, especially the Synoptics, clearly indicates that the life and ministry of Jesus were undergirded by extended times of prayer in remote locations. For example, Luke 6:12 indicates that Jesus spent an evening by Himself on a mountain before selecting the twelve disciples. After the feeding of the five thousand, Mark 6:46

indicates that Jesus retired to a mountainside for prayer before meeting His disciples as He walked upon the Sea of Galilee. Finally, there is the evening of agonizing prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before He was crucified (Mark 14:32-42). These and other New Testament accounts clearly indicate that Jesus sought God's presence in outdoor settings, especially during those times that were of utmost importance to His ministry. Two of them deserve special attention.

The first is the wilderness temptation. It is recorded in all three Synoptics (Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13) and takes place immediately after Jesus' baptism. Describing the location where this experience took place, Leon Morris suggests that the word *wilderness* refers to that which is high up.³³ He writes, "The term covers a wide area, but the meaning here is surely not that Jesus remained in that part of the wilderness which adjoins the Jordan but that He went up to the lonely mountainous area to the west."³⁴ It is in this location, of course, that Jesus was tempted in terms of the future course of His ministry. In his commentary Frank Stagg states, "Although Jesus was tempted in every way that we are (Heb. 4:15), the wilderness temptations were basically messianic, having to do with his mission."³⁵ Confronted by the devil, Jesus had to choose the future direction of His life. This encounter, which ended on a triumphant note as angels attended to His needs in Matthew 4:11, is, nevertheless, a warning that both God and Satan have access to the realm of nature. That was certainly true in the

³³Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 71.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Frank Stagg, *Matthew*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 8, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 96.

Garden of Eden and is equally evident here. In fact, in the ancient world evil spirits were thought to roam about in desolate places. Speaking to the believers in Ephesus, Paul reminded them that their struggles were “not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). Jesus, therefore, spent a significant period of time, forty days and nights, in a wilderness location. During that time He fasted, “a natural accompaniment of serious thinking and prayer.”³⁶ He also, however, faced a serious challenge from the forces of evil, a vivid reminder that in the realm of nature people can be led to or away from God.

A second encounter that is vitally important to Jesus’ life and ministry takes place near the end of His life. It is recorded in all of the Synoptics. Jesus took the inner circle of disciples, Peter, James and John, to a high mountain. Although this mountain is not named, it’s description as being high and the fact that this account comes on the heels of Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi indicates it was probably Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in that region. During this experience, Jesus was transfigured by the light of God’s glory, He conferred with Moses and Elijah, He and the disciples with Him were enveloped in a bright cloud, and there was the voice of God’s commendation. Although some scholars doubt the historicity of this account and others would describe it as a post resurrection appearance, many consider it to be an actual event which describes “the enthronement of Jesus as Messiah and High Priest, which Peter and the others

³⁶Morris, 72.

behold.”³⁷ In fact, James Brooks in his commentary on Mark states, “A reasonable conclusion, therefore, is that the transfiguration actually happened, that it was an objective experience and not just a vision, and that it was reported to the early church by the participants. If in fact Peter was a source of information for Mark, the account is an eyewitness report.”³⁸

When considering the life and ministry of Jesus, the following conclusions can thus be drawn with regards to His encounters with His heavenly Father. According to the Scriptures, most of them took place outdoors, usually when He was by Himself, although there were occasions when His disciples were nearby. These encounters were for extended periods of time, a major portion of an evening or longer, such as His temptation experience in the wilderness. In many respects they were similar to events recorded in the Old Testament, especially those that are related to Moses. Finally, as has been the case throughout this survey of biblical encounters with God in outdoor settings, they had a transforming effect. They provided Jesus with the encouragement, instruction, and divine power He needed for His ministry here on earth.

Paul

On the road to Damascus, a man who had been persecuting Christians had a life changing experience with Christ. Instead of jailing them, he became one of them. In fact, even though he was a Jew, he eventually became known as the apostle to the Gentiles. What happened on that day around noon as he was approaching the city? In

³⁷Sherman E. Johnson, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, The Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 7, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1951), 458.

³⁸James A. Brooks, *Mark* The New American Commentary, vol. 23, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 141.

three different places—Acts 9:1-9, Acts 22:6-11, and Acts 26:12-18—an account is given of what transpired. An examination of these accounts indicates that once again an outdoor environment and perhaps even the forces of nature were chosen as the means through which Paul would have a personal encounter with the risen Lord.

Indeed, each of these accounts provides key insights as to what happened. All of them indicate that this encounter took place around noon as Paul was approaching the city of Damascus. They state that a light brighter than the sun blazed down upon Paul and his companions. It was accompanied by a sound that everyone heard but which not everyone understood. Paul was the only one who received a personal message in Aramaic from Jesus Christ.

There are, of course, a variety of opinions as to what took place in terms of the natural phenomenon that precipitated Paul's encounter with Christ. None of them, however, provides a satisfactory explanation with the possible exception of what William Barclay says in his commentary. He writes, "Just before Damascus the road climbed Mount Hermon, and down below lay Damascus, a lovely white city in a green plain, 'a handful of pearls in a goblet of emerald' as someone had called her. That very region had one characteristic phenomenon. When the hot air of the plain met the cold air of the mountain range, violent electrical storms resulted. Just at that moment there came such a lightning storm, and out of the storm Christ spoke to Paul."³⁹

If this is indeed what happened, Paul's encounter with Christ is similar to the events which transpired on Mount Sinai in Exodus 20:18-22. God spoke to the people in a voice of thunder, but only Moses actually understood what He was saying. It is also

³⁹William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955), 72.

similar to an event recorded in the Gospel of John. Referring to Paul's Damascus road experience, John McRay states in his commentary, "The situation may be parallel to the one in John 12:27-29, where Jesus understood God's voice speaking to him while the crowd standing nearby only heard the sound and thought it was thunder."⁴⁰ In fact, Paul himself seems to be suggesting that this is exactly what took place. Luke quotes him as saying in Acts 22:7 that "my companions saw the light, but did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me." Finally, Luke's description in Acts 9:1-9, which describes Paul's companions as being "speechless," also seems to indicate that something happened that startled and perhaps even frightened them, a reaction reminiscent of that which occurred when God spoke in a voice of thunder at Mount Sinai.

Regardless of what actually took place, one thing is absolutely certain. Paul believed he had seen the Lord and had heard His voice. Commenting on Paul's references to this experience in his letters, G. H. Macgregor writes, "Paul refers four times in his epistles to his conversion experience (Gal. 1:15-16; Cor. 9:1; 15:8; II Cor. 4:6). From these passages it is clear that he was convinced that the vision had a truly objective reality. He had 'seen Jesus our Lord' (I Cor. 9:1) just as truly as had the original disciples. There was for Paul no distinction in kind between the appearance of Christ to Himself at his conversion and the appearances to the eleven before the Ascension."⁴¹ This is also the position of Conybeare and Howson who point out in their commentary, "It is evident that his revelation was not merely an inward impression made

⁴⁰John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 54.

⁴¹G. H. C. Macgregor, *Acts*, *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), 119.

on the mind of Saul during a trance or ecstasy. It was the direct perception of the visible presence of Jesus Christ. This is asserted in various passages, both positively and incidentally.”⁴²

Another aspect of Paul’s life that deserves to be mentioned is his reference to Arabia in his letter to the Galatians. Like Jesus, it appears Paul spent at least a brief and perhaps even an extended period of time in quiet solitude before he began his preaching ministry. He writes, “But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately to Arabia and later returned to Damascus” (Galatians 1:15-17). How long he stayed and exactly where he went cannot be determined. However, this passage of Scripture and the one that precedes it, where Paul says that he received a revelation from Christ, does convey the idea that this was a time of spiritual communion with God in a solitary location. Addressing this possibility, Hubert Johnson states, “In his Arabian retreat Saul wrestled with the perplexing problem that arose from his acceptance of Jesus. Fasting and excluding the world from his thoughts, until he felt himself mystically alone, he sought the presence of the risen Jesus.”⁴³

In conclusion, Paul, like many of his spiritual predecessors, had a life-changing encounter with God. It began on a road near Damascus and was confirmed during a time

⁴²W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eedermans Publishing Company, 1984), 75.

⁴³Hubert Rex Johnson, *Who Then Is Paul?* (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, 1981), 55.

of spiritual preparation in Arabia. The way in which the Lord communicated with Paul will always be a matter of conjecture. That it took place in an outdoor setting and that God chose to reveal Himself in and through that setting cannot be denied.

Summary

Having examined the lives of nine biblical individuals and their encounters with God in outdoor settings, what conclusions can be drawn? First, God chose to reveal Himself through His creation. In fact, at times the creation actually participated in the divine revelation. That was certainly true, for example, of Moses and the burning bush. It was also true of a number of other encounters with God, going all the way back to the Garden of Eden.

Second, many of these encounters took place in wilderness locations, away from large population centers. This is evidenced in the lives of individuals such as Jesus in the New Testament and Jacob and Elijah in the Old Testament. Being alone, especially in locations such as mountains and deserts, seems to have been important in terms of preparing people to encounter the Almighty.

Third, when people encountered God, it was in the realm of the physical and the realm of the spiritual were reaching out to embrace one another. That's why it is so hard to distinguish between those experiences that were visional in nature and those that were seemingly referring to an objective reality that can be sensually perceived. For example, did Elijah actually hear God's voice in the silence after the storm, or was it simply the best way to define an experience that could not be explained in any other way. One possibility is that these kinds of experiences involve that which is both physical and spiritual.

Fourth, the question arises as to whether or not these encounters were readily observable? Sometimes they were as when the elders of Israel met with God for a fellowship meal on Mount Sinai. More often than not, however, these experiences can best be described as personal encounters between the Lord and the individual to whom He is speaking. Paul, for example, heard the voice of Jesus, but it appears that his companions were only aware of a sound or a noise that they did not understand.

Fifth, these encounters involved a number of natural phenomena such as fire, clouds and wind storms. In fact, these phenomena frequently became the means by which mankind was made aware of God's presence. Speaking about the Lord, the writer of Psalm 104:3 says, "He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind." As the Israelites stood before the Lord at the foot of Mount Sinai, they became aware of God's presence as He came down upon the mountain in smoke and fire.

Sixth, a wide variety of individuals had encounters with God. They came from many different backgrounds and walks of life. Abraham was a displaced urbanite. Jacob was the son of a nomadic herdsman. Moses was reared in the household of a pharaoh. Elijah was a prophet from Galilee. Jesus grew up in the home of a carpenter. Paul was a rabbinic scholar from the Greco-Roman city of Tarsus. Nevertheless, they and a host of others had meaningful encounters with God when they were outdoors.

Finally, regardless of the notoriety and accomplishments of these individuals, all of them were transformed by their encounters with God. Some experienced His presence during times of personal crisis such as Jacob, who was fleeing from his brother. For others the event signified a major change in the future direction of their lives. That was certainly the case with Elisha who became the prophetic successor to Elijah upon seeing

the chariot and horses of fire that had been sent from the Lord. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding their encounters with God, the lives of these individuals were transformed almost without exception.

This, of course, raises one final question. All of these biblical encounters with God could be classified as theophanies, events in which God personally revealed Himself to an individual or to groups of individuals in ways that most people would describe as miraculous or supernatural. Were there other encounters with God in outdoor settings where people became aware of His presence but did not have the kind of experiences in which God communicates with them through a vision or a physical manifestation? The biblical record is silent in that regard. One thing, however, is certain. Encountering God through His creation is a consistent theme throughout the pages of the Bible. Man's relationship with God begins in a garden called Eden and ends in a garden called the New Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 3

TESTIMONY OF THE SAINTS

Antony of Egypt

During the first two centuries, Christianity was primarily a missionary enterprise that faced periods of active persecution. Christians were often despised and rejected by those in authority in the Roman world. By the end of the third century, however, things were beginning to change. There were greater numbers of Christians, and martyrdom was no longer seen as the “height of a Christian’s glory and his ideal of perfection.”¹ In his book on Christian monasticism, David Knowles writes, “Though persecution was to recur under Decius (249-52) and Diocletian (284-305) in a form fiercer than ever before, this was in a sense a desperate measure, and was immediately followed by the conversion of Constantine and the swift transformation of the Christian Church from a persecuted and fervent sect into a ruling and rapidly increasing body, favored and directed by the emperor, membership of which was a material advantage.”²

In response, those who wanted to live a life in radical obedience to Christ began to look for a new way in which to express their spiritual fervor. Having fled into the Egyptian desert during times of persecution, they began to see it as a place where they

¹David Knowles, *Christian Monasticism* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969), 11.

²Ibid., 12.

might escape the cares of this world and experience a deeper communion with God, “tasting the sweetness of that solitude, and remaining in it or returning to it when the Peace of the Church came.”³ Among the first of these was a man named Antony. Many consider him to be the “father of monasticism,”⁴ a way of life that is derived from the Greek word *monos* which means “alone or solitary.”⁵

Most of what is known about Antony comes from the writings of Athanasius who compiled a biography called the *Vita Antonii*.⁶ It is a chronological epic of the man’s life beginning with his childhood along the Nile River. Born around 254, Antony was raised in a Christian home by parents who, although they were peasants, were nevertheless quite wealthy in terms of their land holdings. At about the age of eighteen his parents died, and he took over the management of the family farm. One day shortly thereafter, as he was walking to church, he found himself thinking about the early Christians who laid everything at the apostles’ feet. Upon his arrival he listened to the reading of Matthew 19:21 in which Jesus told the rich young ruler to give everything to the poor and to come follow after Him. Deeply impressed by what he had heard, Antony immediately disposed of everything that he possessed, except for a small portion that was reserved for the care

³Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert City* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1966), 7.

⁴William Harmless, S. J., *Desert Christians* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), 18. This is an excellent and well-researched book which contains a wealth of information that would not otherwise be readily available.

⁵Knowles, 9.

⁶With the exception of a number of brief accounts by other Christians of that day and time, most of what is known about Antony comes from Athanasius, the famous church father and bishop of Alexandria. He wrote what is considered to be the first genuine biography of a Christian saint. Although it is somewhat fanciful and even legendary at times, it probably reflects a reasonable account of Antony’s life. That, at least, is Harmless’ position in his book *Desert Christians*. (See page 69.)

of his sister.⁷ He then “apprenticed himself to an old man from a nearby village in order to practice the ‘solitary life.’”⁸ Thus began his *asceticism*, a Greek sports term meaning “exercise regimen.”⁹

This spiritual exercise regimen included six practices that he continued throughout his long life and that in many respects became the foundation upon which monasticism was built. First, he spent the daylight hours doing manual labor, either weaving baskets for sale or later tending a garden. Second, he practiced “watchfulness” at night, spending entire evenings without sleep. Third, he pursued an austere diet of bread and water along with frequent fasting. Fourth, he practiced introspection, the weighing of his thoughts so that he might not be dissuaded from his commitment to Christ. Fifth, he prayed unceasingly in accordance with I Thessalonians 5:17. Finally, he gave careful attention to the hearing and memorization of the Scriptures since he was uneducated and perhaps even illiterate.¹⁰

Antony gradually withdrew from the world. He moved from the fringe of a village to a nearby necropolis and finally at the age of 35 into the desert. For twenty years he existed as a hermit in an abandoned fort, seeing no one, but accepting gifts of bread that were left for him. When he finally emerged, his friends noticed that he had not

⁷Harmless, 60.

⁸Ibid.

⁹James E. Goehring, “Asceticism,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, vol. 1, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1990), 104.

¹⁰Harmless, 61-62.

aged physically, but that he “now possessed a mysterious inner tranquility visible in his face.”¹¹

From that point on he became a spiritual leader, attracting a following of devotees who lived with him in the desert. At first he had wanted to flee from this new found notoriety, but was led by a voice “from above” to go to the “Inner Mountain,” an oasis on a high hill about three days journey to the east of the Red Sea. There a community of followers developed who sought his wisdom and practiced his way of life. Coming and going from his beloved spiritual retreat, he became known not only as a teacher but also as a miracle worker, especially with regards to the casting out of demons.¹² Having literally fought with them during the earlier years of his monasticism, he taught his disciples how to discern their presence and how to recognize their negative impact upon human existence.¹³

Visiting philosophers were amazed by his wisdom, and even the emperor Constantine and his sons sent letters requesting his counsel. Thus his stature continued to grow as both a visionary and a prophet, at times even anticipating events that would take place in the future. In terms of his theology, he was orthodox, especially with regards to the Arian heresy.¹⁴ He lived to be 105 years of age and was buried in an unmarked grave, ending a life that had a tremendous impact upon the development not only of monasticism but also of Christianity itself. His impact upon Athanasius, the bishop of

¹¹Ibid., 64.

¹²Ibid., 66-67.

¹³Ibid., 87.

¹⁴Ibid., 67-68.

Alexandria, was so profound that he became Antony's biographer. The record of his life also played a role in the conversion of the great Christian theologian, Augustine of Hippo, and it set the standard for an understanding of Christianity as a disciplined way of life that required the spiritual martyrdom of the believer's life on a daily basis.¹⁵

Where and how did Antony have such an impact upon Christianity? The answer arises out of the environment in which he lived. Like Elijah, the Old Testament prophet which he especially admired, Antony was a man who spent a great deal of time outdoors, much of it in solitude. Like Francis of Assisi, he also seems to have had a special relationship with God's creatures. In fact, a miracle is attributed to him in which he and his followers wished to cross a canal filled with crocodiles. "Antony simply prayed, and the crocodiles kindly allowed the monks to cross without incident."¹⁶

He and those who became his disciples believed that they were creating a new Eden. They had banished the forces of evil from their desert retreat, and were recreating in Christ the mystical relationship with God that had been intended from the beginning. Harmless, in his book, *Desert Christians*, states, "Athanasius portrays Antony as the 'natural' man, humankind as it would have been had there been no Fall. It is no accident that when Antony retires to the Inner Mountain, he creates a miniature Eden, planting a garden and getting the wild beasts to obey him."¹⁷ In order to accomplish this goal, Antony had to rely on those Scriptures which he had memorized. Access to God's Word was limited, and he may not have even been able to read. He also had to rely upon a

¹⁵Ibid., 99-100.

¹⁶Ibid., 66.

¹⁷Ibid., 93.

special kind of divine inspiration that was imparted unto him as he lived alone in the realm of nature. On more than one occasion, philosophers were amazed by Antony's wisdom which "came from mysterious illuminations he received while in his mountain solitude."¹⁸ He did not, however, worship nature. Rather, it was the means by which God communicated his truth. As far as Antony was concerned, a monk who was no longer residing in the desert, was like a fish out of water.¹⁹ In conclusion, a story by Evagrius Ponticus, a well-educated theologian who settled in Egypt in the late fourth century and who was fascinated by Coptic wisdom, provides an insightful summary regarding the way in which God revealed Himself to Antony. In his book, *Praktikos* he shares this story about Antony. He writes, "A certain member of what was then considered the circle of the wise once approached the just Antony and asked him: 'How do you ever manage to carry on, Father, deprived as you are of the consolation of books?' His reply: 'My book, sir philosopher, is the nature of created things, and it is always at hand when I wish to read the words of God.'"²⁰

Patrick of Ireland

Patrick was born somewhere between the years of 385 and 416 A.D. on the western coast of England. The exact location of his birthplace is unknown, although it was probably within the southern region that was under Roman jurisdiction. In fact,

¹⁸Ibid., 67.

¹⁹Chitty, 6.

²⁰Harmless, 109 (*Praktikos* 92 SC 171:694; trans, John Eudes Bamberger, CS 4:39).

some believe that it may have been as far south as the Bristol Channel.²¹ His father, Calpurnis, was a civil magistrate and a deacon in the church. His mother, Conchessa, was a spiritually minded woman who taught her son how to pray.²² His grandfather had served as a priest, and the entire family could trace its Christian heritage back to the Roman occupation of Britain in the second century.²³

Patrick grew up in a world that was rapidly changing. Rome's legions had departed from the country in 400 A.D. to protect Italy from the barbarians. The people of Britain were left to fend for themselves against a host of enemies, one of which was Irish pirates who raided the coastline.²⁴ During one of these raids, Patrick, whose name means "noble,"²⁵ was taken captive along with many of his countrymen. In Patrick's *Confession*, he states, "I was then about sixteen years of age. I did not know the true God. I was taken into captivity to Ireland with many thousands of people . . . and deservedly so, because we turned away from God, and did not keep His commandments, and did not obey our priests, who used to remind us of our salvation."²⁶

²¹Paul Gallico, *The Steadfast Man* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1958), 23-25.

²²Celibacy was not required as a prerequisite for serving as a deacon or priest at this time. Only later did it become a mandatory requirement for ordination.

²³William J. Federer, *Saint Patrick* (St. Louis, Mo: Amerisearch, Inc., 2002), 7-8.

²⁴Gallico, 26-27.

²⁵Federer, 12.

²⁶Much of what is known about Saint Patrick can be found in this work and in a letter that he wrote to Caroticus. Both documents were written in Latin, a language in which Patrick was not well versed. The *Confession* is an autobiographical defense of his life and ministry among the Irish. In many respects it is similar to Paul's defense of his apostleship in the New Testament. His correspondence to Caroticus, a British tyrant, is a letter of excommunication for enslaving some of his converts. The quotes in this paper are taken from a translation by Ludwig Bieler, Christian Classics at Calvin College, www.calvin.edu. Bieler's translation of both documents is included in Federer's *Saint Patrick*.

Thus began six years of slavery in the northern part of Ireland. His owner may have been a Druid Chieftain by the name of Miliucc, who lived a few miles north of today's Belfast. Patrick became a shepherd, caring for his master's sheep near a place that is known as Mount Slemish.²⁷ Survival was difficult not only in terms of being outdoors in all kinds of weather, but also with regards to the culture into which Patrick had been enslaved. It was both pagan and violent. The people practiced Druidism, the worship of the forces of nature, which included both animal and at times human sacrifice.²⁸ Their way of life was one of continual conflict. Will Durant in his book, *The Age of Faith*, states, "Clan fought clan, kingdom fought kingdom, for a thousand years; between such wars the members of a clan fought one another; and when they died, good Irishmen, before Patrick came, were buried upright for battle, with faces turned towards their foes."²⁹

Facing this kind of natural and cultural environment, Patrick began to give serious consideration to the faith that he had spurned as a teenager. He rediscovered a life of prayer. In his *Confession* he states, "But after I came to Ireland . . . every day I had to tend sheep, and many times a day I prayed . . . the love of God and His fear came to me more and more, and my faith was strengthened. And my spirit was moved so that in a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and almost as many in the night, and this even when I was staying in the woods and on the mountains; and I used to get up for prayer before daylight, through snow, through frost, through rain, and I felt no harm,

²⁷Gallico, 31.

²⁸Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, vol. 4, *The Age of Faith* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), 83.

²⁹Durant, 82, W. E. Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, vol. 2 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1869), 253.

and there was no sloth in me . . . as I now see, because the spirit within me was then fervent.”³⁰ One evening while he was asleep, he heard a voice speaking to him. It said, “It is well that you fast, soon you will go to your own country.”³¹ Then after a short while, whether it was that same evening or on another occasion, the voice spoke again, “See your ship is ready.”³² Commenting on this experience, G. A. Chamberlain states, “This is not the place to enter into a discussion upon these curious phenomena, nor to question the reality of an experience which St. Patrick claims to share with the Hebrew Prophets, with St. Paul, and with the goodly fellowship of the mystics. He believed that God revealed to him His will. He believed that the voice he heard was a voice from God and something more than an echo of his own commonsense.”³³

Based upon that conviction, Patrick fled from his captor, found passage on a ship carrying a cargo of wolfhounds, and eventually, after a possible sojourn in the southern part of Europe, made his way back home to Britain. It was there that he received his call to missionary service. Once again, one evening while he was asleep, Patrick received a vision from the Lord that in many ways was similar to Paul’s experience in Acts 16:9. Patrick writes in his *Confession*, “And there I saw in the night the vision of a man, whose name was Victoricus, coming as it were from Ireland, with countless letters. And he gave me one of them, and I read the opening words of the letter, which were, ‘The voice of the Irish’; and as I read the beginning of the letter I thought that at the same moment I heard

³⁰Federer, 57.

³¹Ibid., 58.

³²Ibid.

³³G. A. Chamberlain, “St. Patrick: His Life and Work,” in *Sixteen Centuries with Ireland’s Patron Saint Patrick*, ed. Alice-Boyd Proudfoot (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1983), 20.

their voice . . . they were those beside the Wood of Voclut, which is near the Western Sea . . . and thus did they cry out as with one mouth: ‘We ask thee, boy, come and walk among us once more.’”³⁴ After several more such visitations, one of which involved what he surmised to be the voice of the Holy Spirit, Patrick became utterly convinced and convicted that he was to return to Ireland with the gospel. But first he had to prepare himself for the ministry, a task which probably required a number of years of study at Auxerre, a center of Christian activity in northern France.³⁵

After being consecrated as a bishop, Patrick set sail for Ireland. He was now over 40 years of age. Nevertheless, he was an energetic man who fearlessly proclaimed Christianity. In fact, his confrontation with the Druids on the eve of Easter proved to be the turning point in his ministry among the Irish. The lighting of a paschal fire prior to the ceremonial blaze at Tara, the religious and political center of Ireland, produced a hostile onslaught to which he and his companions responded by singing Psalm 20:7. Victorious in that encounter with the Druid priests and their followers, Patrick received permission from King Loeghaire to preach the gospel. This and many other accounts are recorded in a number of documents that are probably part truth and part legend.³⁶ What can be stated, however, with certainty is that Patrick had a profound impact upon the conversion of Ireland to Christianity. Will Durant states, “He ordained priests, built

³⁴Federer, 59-60.

³⁵Chamberlain, 26-29.

³⁶R. P. C. Hanson, *Saint Patrick* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1968), 75-81. The *Book of Armagh* is a collection of ancient Irish documents that dates back to at least 807 A.D. It contains several accounts of Patrick’s life, one written by a man named Muirchu Moccu Machteni and another by a Bishop Tirechan. Both were written in Latin and appear to come from an earlier time. The historical accuracy of their accounts, however, has been questioned, especially with regards to the numerous miracles that are attributed to Saint Patrick.

churches, established monasteries and nunneries, and left strong spiritual garrisons to guard his conquests at every turn. He made it seem a supreme adventure to enter the ecclesiastical state; he gathered about him men and women of courage and devotion, who endured every privation to spread the good news that man was redeemed. He did not convert all Ireland; some pockets of paganism and its poetry survived, and leave traces to this day; but when he died (461) it could be said of him, as of no other, that one man had converted a nation.”³⁷

That conversion had begun with Patrick himself during those years when he was a slave. Living outdoors, the realm of nature was his constant companion as he cared for his master’s flocks. Separated from his family and friends and living among a people whose language at first he probably did not even understand, Patrick probably spent long periods of time in quiet, reflective solitude. It was in that environment that the Lord first spoke to him. It was the beginning of a relationship with God that would not only transform Patrick, but also the Irish people as well. In conclusion, an ancient poem attributed to his authorship is a fitting summation of Patrick’s life and ministry. Known as *The Lorica (Breastplate) of Saint Patrick*, its repetition was intended to guard a traveler against spiritual adversaries.³⁸ The third and fifth stanzas include these words which are reminiscent of Patrick’s love of nature and his devotion to Christ:

I bind unto myself today the virtues of the starlit heav’n,
The glorious sun’s life-giving ray; The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free; The whirling wind’s tempestuous shocks;
The stable earth; The deep salt sea, around the old eternal rocks.

³⁷Durant, 84.

³⁸Alice-Boyd Proudfoot, ed., *Sixteen Centuries with Ireland’s Patron Saint* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, Inc., 1983), 49.

Christ be within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me,
 Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me,
 Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
 Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.³⁹

Francis of Assisi

A visit to a garden shop or nursery generally reveals the presence of at least one statue portraying Saint Francis of Assisi. The reason for his prominence in outdoor statuary can be traced to the fact that this twelfth century friar is considered to be the friend of all living things. In fact, he is not only the patron saint of Italy, but in 1980 he was also designated by Pope John Paul II as the patron saint of ecology.⁴⁰ With that in mind, a brief consideration of his life is essential with regards to a consideration of those Christians whose lives have been significantly impacted by their encounters with God through His creation.

Francis was born in the town of Assisi which is about one hundred miles north of Rome in the year 1181. It was a town rife with violence between the various families and a host of social, religious, and political interests vying for power. Francis' family members were cloth merchants in the rising mercantile class. Their increasing prominence, however, was not beneficial in terms of providing either for their son's discipline or education. Speaking of his teenage years, Lawrence Cunningham states, "Francis seems to have been a typical indulged, wealthy, spoiled, and thrill-seeking

³⁹Ibid, 49-50. Translation by Mrs. Cecil Frances Alexander.

⁴⁰Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, eds. *Francis and Clare* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 5.

adolescent who was indulged by a family who could afford to look with a benevolent eye on the peccadilloes of youth.”⁴¹

This self-centered life, however, was brought to an end by a number of events including a failed military campaign, an imprisonment, a serious illness, and a spiritual awakening that gradually began to transform his life. Forsaking his family’s wealth by dramatically disrobing in front of the bishop of Assisi, Francis became a religious hermit. Pursuing the vision that he had received from Christ to “go and repair my house, which you can see is all being destroyed,” he set about the task of rebuilding a tumbled down church at San Damiano. Only later, as he heard Matthew 11:7-10 being read in a worship service, did he come to a fuller understanding of the implications of this vision and discover his true mission in life.⁴² Thus began “his new life as an itinerant lay preacher, dependent on providence, in order to follow the poor Christ.”⁴³ Gathering around himself others who also desired to live this way of life, Francis received permission to preach the gospel from Pope Innocent III around 1209. From this point on his life was dedicated to that task, a task which frequently placed him and his companions outdoors.

There are, of course, numerous accounts that describe the love and respect which Francis exhibited towards God’s creation. In fact, it was a frequent theme throughout the Middle Ages. Stories about saints who befriended animals, even those who would

⁴¹Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Francis of Assisi* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 6.

⁴²Mark Galli, *Francis of Assisi and His World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 28-57.

⁴³Cunningham, 25.

normally be ferocious, are numerous.⁴⁴ However, not all of these stories, especially those about Francis, should be dismissed as legendary. Some of them can be found within Francis' own writings. Others are included in biographies that were written within twenty years of his death. In fact, Thomas of Celano's *First Life of Francis (Vita Prima)* was written just two years after the saint's demise.⁴⁵

In these accounts Francis actually addressed the creation. For example, one of the best-known stories involves a flock of birds. He addressed a mixed gathering of crows, doves, and daws, calling them his brothers and reminding them of their God given gifts such as "feathers, wings, the pure air for a home."⁴⁶ Later, on another occasion when he was speaking to a crowd of people, he asked the noisy birds overhead to be quiet, and they graciously complied with his request. He also addressed inanimate objects such as fire. "In one instance, one of his garments caught fire, but he refused to put it out because he did not want to harm Brother Fire."⁴⁷ While many would consider such behavior bizarre, it nevertheless revealed an understanding of the creation that is rooted in the Bible, especially the book of Genesis. Describing Francis' unique understanding of the creation, William Cook writes, "If God is the father of all human beings and indeed of all things that are, then all God's creatures are related by virtue of having the same father—i.e., they are brothers and sisters. Thus, Francis came to understand that God's family included crickets and rocks and sticks as well as fellow humans of all sorts and

⁴⁴Roger D. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 20-21.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁶William R. Cook, *Francis of Assisi* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 57.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 53.

conditions.”⁴⁸ All of these things, both animate and inanimate, therefore, had the ability and the privilege of joining with mankind in praising God in their own unique and distinctive ways, ways that reflected their God given nature and purpose.

For Francis this became the doorway through which he could encounter the very presence of God Himself. As he not only observed but actually entered into a personal relationship with the natural world around him, he was drawn into the realm of the spirit. It was a mysticism of the heart, based upon feelings of joy and delight in discovering what it means to dwell in the presence of not only the created but also the Creator. In his book on Saint Francis, Sorrell says, “Francis often entered a state of mystical rapture while delighting in an affectionate interaction with various creatures.”⁴⁹ He then provides an example from the *Legend of Perugia*, which is believed to have been written by Brother Leo, an intimate friend and companion of Francis. The described event took place while Francis was crossing a lake in a borrowed boat. The fisherman who owned the boat gave Francis a waterfowl “that he might rejoice over it in the Lord.”⁵⁰ Included within later works such as Celano’s *Vita Secunda*, the incident is described in this manner. “The blessed father accepted it joyfully (gaudenter) and opening his hands, he gently told it that it was free to fly away. But when it did not wish to leave, but wanted to rest there in his hands as in a nest, the saint raised his eyes and remained in prayer (in oratione). And returning to himself as from another place after a long while (quasi

⁴⁸Ibid., 52.

⁴⁹Sorrell, 94.

⁵⁰Ibid., 95.

aliunde post longam moram ad se reverses), he gently commanded the bird to go back to its former freedom.”⁵¹

This and other accounts indicate that on such occasions Francis entered into a state of mystical transcendence as he contemplated the creation and the Creator.⁵² In fact, whenever he focused his attention upon God, whether he was enjoying nature or thinking about Christ’s birth and crucifixion, he seems to have been elevated to a higher spiritual sensitivity, a sensitivity that was grounded in his emotions.⁵³ Sorrell states, “Francis’ mystical experiences, especially his nature-mystical ones, occurred because he was unusually open to his senses and emotions which led him into ecstasy. . . . One gets the impression that Francis’ emotions on these occasions sweep him completely off his feet.”⁵⁴ In fact, Sorrell compares Francis’ feelings to those of a child. He says, “They bounce along with ecstatic, free joy, and reveal a mystic absorbed in an ineffable, timeless wonder of the experience.”⁵⁵ In other words, Francis encountered God’s presence in the creation when he reached out to experience it through his senses—seeing, hearing, touching, and even speaking to the realm of nature that surrounded him. In those encounters he was overwhelmed by feelings of joy and peace which he attempted to convey to those who were around him. Perhaps their most beautiful expression can be found in *The Canticle of Brother Sun*. The main section, which deals with nature, was

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., 96.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., 96-97.

⁵⁵Ibid., 97.

written about 1224, just two years before his death.⁵⁶ It is still sung to this day, often in a paraphrased form known as “All Creatures of Our God and King.”⁵⁷ A more accurate translation of this poem can be found in Benen Fahy’s book, *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*. It begins with these words:

Most high, all-powerful, all good, Lord!
 All praise is yours, all glory, all honour
 And all blessing.
 To you, alone, Most High, do they belong.
 No mortal lips are worthy
 To pronounce your name.
 All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made,
 And first my lord Brother Sun,
 Who brings the day; and light you give to us through him.

How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendour!
 Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.
 All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars;
 In the heavens you have made them, bright
 And precious and fair.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
 And fair and stormy, all the weather’s moods,
 By which you cherish all that you have made.⁵⁸

Jonathan Edwards

The opening statement about Jonathan Edwards in Clyde Fant and William Pinson’s *20 Centuries of Great Preaching* reads, “He preached what is perhaps the most famous sermon of all time. He participated in the most dramatic single revival in American life. He is regarded as one of the world’s great thinkers—and probably the greatest mind of early colonial America. He is widely regarded as the greatest preacher

⁵⁶Ibid., 98.

⁵⁷Wesley L. Forbis, ed., *The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1991), 27.

⁵⁸*The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Placid Herman and Benen Fahy (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1976), 130.

of his era in the American colonies. Without a doubt, Jonathan Edwards is one of the most significant names in the history of American preaching.”⁵⁹ What they failed to mention, however, is that not only was Jonathan Edwards a great preacher, evangelist, and theologian, but also a gifted naturalist who carefully examined and was divinely inspired by the wonders of God’s creation. In fact, Sereno Dwight penned these words about his great grandfather, “One characteristic, of which he has not generally been suspected, but which he possessed in an unusual degree, was a fondness minutely and critically to investigate the works of nature. This propensity was not only discovered in youth and manhood, but was fully developed in childhood, and at that early period was encouraged and cherished by the fostering hand of parental care.”⁶⁰

Jonathan Edwards was born on October 5, 1703, in East Windsor, Connecticut, the only son of Timothy and Esther Edwards. He was an intellectually gifted child whose life was influenced by the religious instruction of his parents and the natural beauty of the countryside in which he grew up. Religion and nature, therefore, became intertwined in his life at an early age. For example, his letter, “Of Insects”, written when he was twenty years of age, is both a physical and a metaphysical treatise on flying spiders.⁶¹ He concludes by stating to the recipient of the letter, “. . . I thought it might at least give you occasion to make better observations on these wondrous animals, that should be worthy

⁵⁹Clyde E. Fant, Jr. and William M. Pinson, Jr., eds., *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, vol.3 (Waco: Word Books, 1971), 45.

⁶⁰*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, memoir by Soreno E. Dwight, vol. 1 (London: Billings & Sons Ltd., 1834; reprint, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), xvi.

⁶¹*A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995; Yale Nota Bene, 2003), xi.

of communicating to the learned world, from whose glistening webs so much of the wisdom of the Creator shines.”⁶²

Educated not only at home but also at Yale College, Edwards devoted most of his life to the local church. In 1727 he became the co-pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts, assisting his grandfather, the revered Solomon Stoddard. After Stoddard’s death, he became the pastor, and under his leadership two great spiritual awakenings took place, the first around 1734 and the second in 1740-1741. Unfortunately he was later dismissed from the Northampton Church over a membership issue. He then became the pastor of a small church on the frontier and served as a missionary to the Indians. In 1758, he was selected to be the president of the newly established Princeton College, but died an untimely death as a result of a reaction to a smallpox inoculation.⁶³

Much has been written about Edwards in terms of his preaching, especially his famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” His theological positions have also been carefully scrutinized. However, his marvelous encounters with God, especially those in outdoor settings have not received as much attention. They reveal, however, the heart and mind of a man who was not only intellectually brilliant, but who also had a consuming passion to encounter the presence of the Almighty. This is particularly evident with regards to a “Personal Narrative” which he wrote around 1740. In their introduction to Edwards’ writings, Smith, Stout, and Minkema state that this narrative “bears all the earmarks of the classical Puritan conversion narrative and its obsessive

⁶²Ibid, “The Spider Letter”, 8.

⁶³Fant, 46-47.

concern with the salvation of the soul.⁶⁴ They also acknowledge that it provides unique insights into Edwards' understanding of the human soul and how it is affected by a divine encounter with God.⁶⁵

Nowhere, is this more evident than in two separate passages within the narrative. The first has to do with his realization of the sovereignty of God. By Edwards' own admission, it was a difficult and challenging doctrine to accept. But once he had become convinced of its "reasonableness," his entire life was transformed, especially in terms of his relationship with the Lord. His awareness of God's sovereignty began, according to his account, when he read I Timothy 1:17. He states, "Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was: and how happy I should be if I might enjoy that God, and be wrapped up to God in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him."⁶⁶ This newfound joy spilled over into every area of his life, especially when he was outdoors. Speaking of those experiences he says, "God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which were used greatly to fix my mind."⁶⁷

The second passage, a description of a profound religious experience which took place later in life, also deserves to be examined. Whereas the first grew out of a reading of God's Word, this one took place while Edwards was alone in the forest. In this beautifully written account he states:

⁶⁴*A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, XXXIV.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, "A Personal Narrative," 284.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 285.

Once, as I rid out into the woods for my health, anno 1737, and having lit from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer; I had a view, that for me was extraordinary, of 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 to me so calm and sweet, appeared 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; which kept me, the bigger part of the time, in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt withal, an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, than to be emptied and annihilated; 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 totally wrapped up in the fullness of Christ; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity. I have several other times, and views very much of the same nature, and that have had the same effects.⁶⁸

These and other outdoor experiences were instrumental in the development of Edwards' understanding as to how God reveals Himself and how human beings should respond to that revelation. They are expounded upon in a number of his treatises such as *Freedom of the Will*, *Original Sin*, *The Nature of True Virtue*, and *Concerning the End for which God Created the World*. As such they are a reflection of what Edwards had experienced himself when he encountered God through the creation, and they can best be summed up in a particularly insightful comment by Clyde Holbrook. Describing how Edwards perceived the process of divine communication between God and man to be taking place, he writes, "God, like a fountain or sun, overflows in His goodness and power, both creating the world and establishing the manner which the saints will forever approach to a total union with Him. . . . The relation of God to His world is not that of a ruler exercising his sovereign rights over subjects so much as that of an infinitely fertile source

⁶⁸Ibid., 293.

of being and excellence that overflows into the world, filling the saints with His own nature, which is reflected back to Him.”⁶⁹

Like Antony of Egypt and Francis of Assisi, Jonathan Edwards was a mystic. In his book, *Encounters with God*, Michael McClymon states, “Complete absorption in God, rapt, enjoyment of the divine ‘sweetness,’ and forgetfulness of one’s self—here in a nutshell is Edwards’ spiritual ideal.”⁷⁰ That ideal, which became the focus of his writings and his preaching, had its origin in two sources of revelation, God’s Word and the realm of nature. In both, he found doorways that provided him with access to God’s presence. Contemplation and meditation, whether it took place in his study or among the forests and fields of his beloved New England, afforded Edwards with opportunities to move beyond the merely physical and into the realm of the divine. Having grown up in a home where he could spend significant periods of time outdoors and being able to pursue that passion as an adult, coupled with a keen and inquisitive intellect, enabled Edwards to develop an understanding of the relationship between God and man that is still an authoritative resource for theological investigation.

Charles G. Finney

He was one of America’s greatest evangelists during the nineteenth century. His revival meetings in Rochester, New York, served as a catalyst for the General Awakening which began in 1830. Because he developed new and sometimes controversial evangelistic measures such as a public invitation or altar call, he has become known as

⁶⁹Clyde A. Holbrook, *Jonathan Edwards, The Valley and Nature* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1987), 120.

⁷⁰Michael J. McClymond, *Encounters with God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 48.

the “Father of modern revivalism.”⁷¹ In his book on Charles Finney, Lewis Drummond states, “Probably no preacher has ever ministered with more raw spiritual power than this man. His words were like an artillery barrage, felling multitudes to the floor. His piercing eyes seemed to search out people, boring into their very souls, confronting them with the demands of the Savior. His plain, pungent, colloquial preaching arrested people in frozen and rapt attention. He was a man ‘mighty with God.’”⁷²

From whence did such spiritual power emanate? It had little to do with his upbringing. His family was not particularly religious and Finney himself confessed that “he had never heard a prayer uttered in his home.”⁷³ In fact, after serving briefly as a teacher, he decided to become a lawyer. As Towns and Porter state, “For much of his early life, preaching the gospel was the last thing on the mind of Charles Gradison Finney, a New York lawyer and confirmed atheist. Because of his brilliance and hardheaded approach to life, many people in town doubted that his conversion was even possible.”⁷⁴

All that changed, however, on October 10, 1821, when he experienced a dramatic religious conversion. Having returned home to Jefferson County in the western part of New York, he was gradually becoming more and more interested in Christianity. He began giving serious attention to God’s Word and started attending a local Presbyterian church. Realizing that he must make a decision as to whether he would accept or reject

⁷¹Elmer Towns and Douglas Porter, *The Greatest Revivals Ever* (Virginia Beach, VA: Academx Publishing Services, Inc., 2005), 102.

⁷²Lewis A. Drummond, *The Life and Ministry of Charles G. Finney* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 22.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 33.

⁷⁴Towns, 100.

God's promise of salvation, he agonized over the decision for several days. At last he could bear it no longer and sought God's presence in a secluded grove of trees on or near a hill outside of the village where his law office was located.⁷⁵

As he entered the woods, he said to himself, "I will give my heart to God, or I will never come down from there."⁷⁶ Thus began his titanic, spiritual struggle with God, a struggle that he describes in detail in his autobiography. Basically, he was dealing with the issue of pride. Was he willing to utterly and completely trust his life into the care of God without any sense of embarrassment as to what others might think or say about him? As he wrestled with that question, a passage of scripture came to mind which he believed was a revelation from God. He writes:

Just at that point this passage of Scripture seemed to drop into my mind with a flood of light: "Then shall ye go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. Then shall ye seek me and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart." I instantly seized hold of this with my heart. I had intellectually believed the Bible before; but never had the truth been in my mind that faith was a voluntary trust instead of an intellectual state. I was as conscious as I was of my existence, of trusting at that moment in God's veracity. Somehow I knew that that was a passage of Scripture, though I do not think I had ever read it.⁷⁷

Finney's conversion began in the woods, but it continued even after he returned to his law office. He received a "mighty baptism in the Holy Ghost" which he describes in this manner. "Without any expectation of it, without ever having the thought in my mind that there was any such thing for me, without any recollection that I had ever heard the thing mentioned by any person in the world, the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a

⁷⁵Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 10-13.

⁷⁶Drummond, 47.

⁷⁷Charles G. Finney, *An Autobiography* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), 16.

wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love for I could not express it in any other way.”⁷⁸ No longer was Finney ashamed of Christ. He became a fearless witness for the Lord, using his eloquence as a lawyer to drive home the claims of Christ. Throughout America and later in England, he became known as a world-renowned evangelist. His success was built not only upon his preaching and “new measures” but also upon a profoundly personal relationship with God, a relationship that required significant periods of time when he was alone with the Lord, frequently in outdoor settings. In his autobiography he states, “I used to spend a great deal of time in prayer; sometimes, I thought, literally praying ‘without ceasing.’ I also found it very profitable, and felt very much inclined to hold frequent days of private fasting. On those days I would seek to be entirely alone with God, and would generally wander off into the woods, or get into the meeting house, or somewhere away entirely by myself.”⁷⁹ In such solitary settings, some of which were outdoors, Finney was imbued with a spiritual fervor and power that was not his own. It was a gift from God to a loyal and obedient servant.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Like the Colossus of Rhodes, Charles Haddon Spurgeon stood astride Victorian England in a way that far surpasses any other minister of his day and time. He served as the pastor of the largest church in the world during the nineteenth century and has been variously described as the “Prince of the Preachers” and the “Last of the Puritans.” Spurgeon was born on June 19, 1834, at Kelvedon in Essex, the first of seventeen

⁷⁸Ibid., 20.

⁷⁹Ibid., 35.

children.⁸⁰ Within eighteen months, probably due to the impending birth of a second child, Charles went to live with his grandparents, John and Sarah Spurgeon.⁸¹ John was the pastor of Stambourne’s Congregational Church, a position which he held for fifty-four years.⁸² Charles lived with his grandparents for the first six years of his life and returned for frequent visits thereafter. He explored his grandfather’s library and learned to read at an early age. In many respects he was home schooled. As his father stated, “He was always reading books—never digging in the garden, keeping pigeons, like other boys. It was always books, and books.”⁸³ That does not mean, however, that Spurgeon had a distaste for nature. He grew up in a rural setting and enjoyed the countryside. As one biographer has stated, “He was a child of nature. Nothing pleased him more than taking two or three friends on a jaunt through rural lanes. He delighted in the open landscape, plowed fields, and healthy brown earth.”⁸⁴

In fact, during the early years of his pastoral ministry at Waterbeach, he spent a great deal of time outdoors. In the autobiography edited by his wife and his personal secretary, Spurgeon recounts an incident that took place during a thunderstorm. Everyone was frightened, but Spurgeon speaking of himself said, “There was real danger, for a stack was set on fire a short distance away, but I was as calm as in the sunshine of a

⁸⁰James J. Ellis, *Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1890), 17.

⁸¹Richard Ellsworth Day, *The Shadow of the Broad Brim: The Life Story of Charles Haddon Spurgeon Heir of the Puritans* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1934), 27.

⁸²Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 4.

⁸³G. Holden Pike, *The Life and Work of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, vol. 1 (London: Cassell & Company, Limited, 1892), 17.

⁸⁴J. C. Carlile, *Spurgeon*, ed. Dan Harmon (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, Inc., 1945), 85.

summer's day, not because I was naturally courageous, but because I had unshaken confidence in my Lord."⁸⁵ He then continues:

Men are by nature afraid of the heavens; the superstitious dread the signs in the sky, and even the bravest spirit is sometimes made to tremble when the firmament is ablaze with lightning, and the pealing thunder seems to make the vast concave of heaven to tremble and to reverberate, but I always feel ashamed to keep indoors when the thunder shakes the solid earth, and the lightnings flash like arrows from the sky. Then God is abroad, and I love to walk out in some wide space, and to look up and mark the opening gates of heaven, as the lightning reveals far beyond, and enables me to gaze into the unseen. I like to hear my Heavenly Father's voice in the thunder.⁸⁶

It was the same voice that had called him to repentance when he was saved under the preaching of the Primitive Methodist lay preacher who took as his text from "Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth."⁸⁷ It was also the same voice that he had heard down through the years as he studied God's Word, the source of his faith and theology. It was a voice that guided him in a preaching ministry that brought thousands to Christ as he proclaimed the matchless wonder of God's saving grace. It was a voice that also spoke through the realm of nature. For Spurgeon, however, it was a voice that spoke most clearly and beautifully after a person had found the Lord, not before. In his autobiography he states:

The greatest mind in the world will be evolved by beginning at the right end. The old saying is, "Go from nature up to nature's God;" but it is hard work going uphill. The best thing is to go from nature's God down to nature; and if you once get to nature's God, and believe Him, and love Him, it is surprising how easy it is to hear music in the waves, and songs in the wild whisperings of the winds, to see God everywhere, in the stones, in the rocks, in the rippling books, and to hear Him everywhere, in the lowing of cattle, in the rolling of thunders, and in the fury

⁸⁵Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography*, vol.1, revised ed., originally compiled by Susannah Spurgeon and Joseph Harrad (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 186-87.

⁸⁶Ibid., 187.

⁸⁷Carlile, 29.

of tempests. Christ is to me the wisdom of God. I can learn everything now that I know the science of Christ crucified.⁸⁸

Spurgeon was a great preacher, a great pastor, a great writer, and a great humanitarian. The Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, Spurgeon's College, the orphanage and the home for widows, as well as a huge literary repository that he left behind, all bear testimony to the impact of his life and ministry. In fact, he exhausted himself, both physically and mentally in the service of the Lord. What drove him was a desire to help others experience what he himself had experienced, God's love and salvation in Christ Jesus. It was the consuming passion of his life. In many respects he might even be described as a mystic. In his book about Spurgeon, Carlile writes, "Spurgeon never lost his mysticism. While laboring or traveling, he delighted in the beautiful vision. Whenever he spoke of his Savior, he lingered with longing of love to see more. His one passion was Christ."⁸⁹ It was a passion grounded in God's Word and buttressed by his encounters with God in the realm of nature. Speaking of his younger days, when Spurgeon was serving the church in Waterbeach, Richard Day states, "In those formative days he gave himself with utter abandon to study, and to the service of God. And he 'high-lighted' it all with meditation; lonely walks; such solitude as the mystic Emerson felt to be essential to radiance in the City of Man-Soul."⁹⁰

⁸⁸Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography*, 109.

⁸⁹Carlile, 190.

⁹⁰Day, 65.

Billy Graham

Billy Graham is the greatest evangelist of the twentieth century. In fact, the editors of *20 Centuries of Great Preaching* state, “The popular impact of Billy Graham is greater than that of any preacher in history.”⁹¹ What could account for such success in Christian ministry? Some would say that it comes from his use of the media such as radio and television. Others would point to the well-organized crusades that have been held all across America and around the world. None of these explanations, however, adequately describes the real source of Billy Graham’s greatness as an evangelist. In order to discover the origins of that greatness, careful consideration must be given to three key events in his life.

The first is well known. During his senior year in high school, Graham was led to the Lord by the evangelist, Mordecai Ham, during a three month revival in Charlotte, North Carolina. One evening as the choir was singing the invitation hymn, Graham and a new friend, Grady Wilson, went forward “to register a decision that would forever alter their lives.”⁹² It was not an emotional decision. In fact, later that evening Graham knelt beside his bed and prayed, “Oh God, I don’t understand all of this. I don’t know what’s happening to me. But as best I can figure it, I have given myself to you.”⁹³ It was, however, a decision that would transform his life.

⁹¹Clyde E. Fant, Jr. and William M. Pinson, Jr., eds., *20 Centuries of Preaching*, vol. 12 (Waco: Word Books, 1971; 4th printing, 1979), 281.

⁹²William Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 63.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 64.

The second took place several years later while Graham was a student at Florida Bible Institute. The school was located near Tampa on the grounds of a former country club and luxury hotel that had gone bankrupt during the Great Depression. Graham had the opportunity to hear some of the greatest, fundamentalist preachers of that day and time. It also offered him an opportunity to wrestle with the future direction of his life. After being rejected by his girlfriend because she didn't think he would amount to anything, Graham began to earnestly seek God's direction for his life.⁹⁴ "Night after insomnia-wracked night he stalked the streets of Temple Terrace or roamed the lush, humid countryside for three and four hours at a time, praying aloud as he walked."⁹⁵ He had had some success preaching at a trailer park, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to do that for the rest of his life. Finally, one evening on the eighteenth green of the school's golf course, he got down on his knees and prayed, "O God, if you want me to serve you, I will."⁹⁶ In his autobiography he writes, "The moonlight, the moss, the breeze, the green, the golf course—all the surroundings stayed the same. No sign in the heavens. No voice from above. But in my spirit I knew I had been called to the ministry. And I knew my answer was yes."⁹⁷

The third decision came a number of years later just before the Los Angeles Campaign in 1949. It was that campaign that launched his career as a worldwide evangelist. Prior to the crusade, a close personal friend had said to him, "Billy, you're fifty years out of date. People no longer accept the Bible as being inspired the way you

⁹⁴Ibid., 70-74.

⁹⁵Ibid., 74.

⁹⁶Billy Graham, *Just as I Am* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 53.

⁹⁷Ibid.

do.”⁹⁸ Deeply disturbed as to whether the Bible could be trusted as completely true, he once again retreated to an outdoor setting, the San Bernardino Mountains surrounding the retreat center where he was staying. Sitting on a large rock, which has since been memorialized by a bronze plaque, he began to pour out his heart regarding all the questions that had been raised in his mind regarding the reliability of God’s Word. Then at last he felt freed by the Holy Spirit to pray, “Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—*faith!* I’m going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be Your inspired word.”⁹⁹

Sensing God’s presence and power, Billy Graham was now ready to fully embrace the ministry of evangelism that the Lord was about to set before him. It was a ministry founded not only upon a decision that he had made at a revival meeting when he was a high school student, but also upon two additional life changing encounters with God that he had experienced when he was outdoors. Had it not been for each of these special times with God, it is doubtful that Billy Graham would have become the world-renowned evangelist that he is today.

Summary

In this chapter the lives of seven men and their encounters with God through his creation have been examined. These men came from different times, cultures, and backgrounds. One was born in Egypt in the third century. Another grew up in medieval Italy. Still another was a pastor in New England, and the last is a well-known evangelist

⁹⁸Ibid., 138.

⁹⁹Ibid., 139.

who is still alive today. Some of them, like Jonathan Edwards, were well educated. Others, like Antony and Francis of Assisi, probably had little formal education. In spite of such differences, there are, however, a number of remarkable similarities in terms of their lives and their relationships with the Lord.

First, each of these men was deeply devoted to Christ. Their commitment to Him was rock solid. Second, each of these men had a profound respect for God's Word. It was the standard by which they lived. Third, they looked to the Lord for leadership and guidance. They were willing to give up everything to follow Him. Fourth, they wanted others to experience what they themselves had experienced. In other words, they wanted to know Christ and to make Him known. Fifth, they became great men, not so much because they themselves were great, but because they were willing to be greatly used. They were humble and obedient servants of the Lord. Sixth, each of these men believed in the sovereignty of God. They were much more Calvinistic than Arminian in their theology. Finally, they encountered God not only through His Word, but also through His creation.

Sometimes these encounters took place at crucial points in their lives such as Patrick's imprisonment or Finney's conversion. At other times these encounters reflected an ongoing relationship with the Lord. That was certainly true of Francis and Edwards. It should also be noted that these outdoor encounters with God bear a remarkable similarity to one another in at least three ways.

First, many of their experiences, especially those that were the most profound, were of a solitary nature. They took place when they were by themselves. This is particularly true of those men who were more mystically oriented. They longed for

opportunities to be alone with God. Francis, for example, spent forty days, for the most part by himself, on Mount La Verna near the end of his life. It was during this time that he received the *stigmata* of Christ.

Second, most of these encounters with God could be classified as relational experiences that were sensual and/or emotional in nature. These men were in touch with God in terms of desiring to have a deeper, more personal relationship with Him. They sensed His presence, both physically and spiritually, and they were frequently overwhelmed emotionally during these experiences. One has only to read Edwards' account of encountering God in the forest in his *Personal Narrative* to realize that it was an emotionally intense experience that very quickly moved beyond the limitations of the physical into the realm of the spiritual. Even Billy Graham, who downplayed the mystical aspects of his outdoor encounters with God, was nevertheless brought to tears when he sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit on that California mountainside.

Third and finally, the realm of nature seems to serve as a conduit between God and man. It enables the Lord and His people to be in touch with one another. Francis of Assisi may have actually been hinting at this in his *Canticle of Brother Sun*. In John Smith's book on Saint Francis, he suggests that the use of the preposition "through" in the canticle means that mankind is to praise the Lord "through" or even "for" His creation.¹⁰⁰ In other words, as a person becomes enthralled by the beauty and majesty of the creation and begins to praise God for it, he is potentially ushered into the very presence of the Creator Himself. As was stated earlier, that seems to be what transpired when Francis embraced the waterfowl on the lake, and it also seems to have been evident

¹⁰⁰John Holland Smith, *Francis of Assisi* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 174.

in some of the other men's lives as well, especially Jonathan Edwards. In his *Personal Narrative* he states, "I often used to sit and view the moon, for a long time; and so in the daytime, spent much time in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things: in the meantime, singing forth with a low voice, my contemplations of the Creator and Redeemer."¹⁰¹ In many respects these and some of his other comments, especially those which speak of his delight in hearing "the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder,"¹⁰² are reminiscence of the well known Swedish hymn "How Great Thou Art."

After examining the lives of these men, who represent only a small handful of those who have had similar experiences, one cannot help but conclude that God can be encountered through His creation. Coming to a better understanding as to how that process takes place will, of necessity, become the topic that is addressed in the next chapter.

¹⁰¹A *Jonathan Edwards Reader*, 285.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

CHAPTER 4

DOCTRINAL IMPLICATIONS

Creational Evidence

The biblical record and the testimony of the saints all bear witness to the proposition that mankind can encounter God through His creation. But how does that revelatory process take place? Various writers and theologians have addressed this question, and it is the subject matter of this chapter. There is, however, a prior concern that must first be addressed. Is there any evidence for a creator within the creation? In other words, does a careful examination of the universe provide any indication that it was created by a creator, a supernatural being who is transcendent to its existence?

Prior to the Renaissance, few if any would have raised such a question. The Bible said God created the universe, and that was the end of the discussion. Things began to change, however, beginning with the discoveries of men like Galileo and Copernicus. Because the Roman Catholic Church had adopted an incorrect understanding of the universe based upon the writings of Philo, the church, the Bible, and even the idea of a divine creator were gradually discredited.¹ As Western culture became more scientifically oriented, God, as a first cause of creation, was no longer considered necessary.

¹Ken Ham, *Genesis and the Decay of the Nations* (El Cajon, CA: Master Books Publishers, 1991), 33-35.

This paradigm shift became even more evident after Charles Darwin published *The Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859. It presented a view that “all life came not from the hand of the Creator but from the process of survival of the fittest. Thus Darwin disclosed his god. In a letter to a friend he even named it and capitalized it: ‘My deity [is] Natural Selection.’”² During the remainder of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, a whole host of other scientists, many of them biologists, began to embrace Darwin’s ideas. In an article for *American Scientist*, Francisco Ayala argued, “Biological evolution can, however, be explained without recourse to a Creator or a planning agent external to the organisms themselves. There is no evidence, either, of any vital force or immanent energy directing the evolutionary process toward the production of specified kinds of organisms.”³

This understanding of creation was then gradually applied to other areas of scientific inquiry. Not only the origin of life but also the formation of the cosmos itself was considered to be a random, evolutionary process that took place over eons of time. The universe became a self-creating entity devoid of a creator. Carl Sagan, a well-known astronomer who hosted the *Cosmos* television program, for example, developed a cosmological theory known as the Oscillating Model of the universe. Commenting on this theory, Lee Strobel notes, “This theory eliminates the need for an absolute beginning of the universe by suggesting that the universe expands, then collapses, then expands

²William L. Krewson, “Evolution’s Deadly Theology,” *Israel My Glory*, July/August 2005, 15, quoting Francis Darwin, ed., *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 2: 165.

³Francisco J. Ayala, “Biology as an Autonomous Science,” *American Scientist*, 56 (Autumn 1968), 213.

again, and continues this cycle indefinitely.”⁴ In other words, since the universe has no beginning or end it needs no one to create it, or to express it in Sagan’s own words, “The Cosmos is all there is, or ever was or ever will be.”⁵ Other esteemed scientists, such as Stephen Hawking, a theoretical physicist at Cambridge University, have echoed this position. He writes, “So long as the universe had a beginning, we could suppose it had a creator. But if the universe is really self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end: it would simply be. What place, then, for a creator?”⁶

A new paradigm shift was, however, already in the making, even as Sagan, Hawking, and a number of other scientists envisioned a creation without a creator. In fact, it had begun as far back as 1929, when Edwin Hubble invited Albert Einstein to view the universe through the 100-inch Hooker telescope on Mount Wilson. Hubble had discovered that the “universe was expanding and gradually decelerating, precisely as Einstein’s general theory of relativity had predicted.”⁷ In other words, the universe was not infinite. It had a beginning, and if it had a beginning someone or something had to have brought it into existence. Furthermore, additional scientific research revealed that the universe would forever continue to expand. Sagan’s idea of an oscillating universe, and, in fact, all of the notions of a self-perpetuating universe were no longer valid. This new, “Big Bang” theory was supported by a discovery that two physicists at AT&T Bell Laboratories made in 1965. They had stumbled upon a background radiation that

⁴Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Creator* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 113.

⁵Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4.

⁶Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1988), 141.

⁷Fred Heeren, *Show Me God*, vol. 1, Wheeling, IL: Day Star Publications, 2000), xvii.

emanated from all over the universe. After carefully examining all of the possibilities, they and others realized that this microwave activity reflected a moment in time when the universe had come into existence.⁸ Further investigation has also indicated that the creation of the universe was “not a random explosion, which could never have produced the galaxies we observe, but a precisely controlled beginning for the universe.”⁹

Another event that also deserves consideration, took place at the 500th birthday celebration of Copernicus in the fall of 1973. Some of the most illustrious, scientific minds of our time gathered in Poland for a two-week symposium. Numerous papers were presented, but the one that will be most remembered was written by Brandon Carter, an astrophysicist and cosmologist at Cambridge University. It was entitled “Large Number Coincidences and the Anthropic Principle in Cosmology.”¹⁰ His paper literally shook the foundations of the popularly held belief that mankind is an accident in the universe. The paper was based upon what he called the “anthropic principle.” “In essence, the anthropic principle came down to the observation that all the myriad laws of physics were fine-tuned from the very beginning of the universe for the creation of man—that the universe we inhabit appeared to be expressly designed for the emergence of human beings.”¹¹

Essentially what had taken place was the emergence of a new paradigm. The discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo and later the writings of Darwin had been interpreted to mean that we live in a “random” universe driven by the mechanical,

⁸Ibid., 153-56.

⁹Ibid., 175.

¹⁰Patrick Glynn, *God: The Evidence* (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1997), 21-22.

¹¹Ibid., 22-23.

impersonal forces of nature. Mankind was an accidental by-product of this process.¹² This understanding of reality, along with its assumption that the universe is eternal and God is non-existent, had now been turned upside down. As Patrick Glynn states in *God: The Evidence*, “The point is this: The ‘death of God’ had been based on a fundamental *misinterpretation* of the nature of the universe, on a very partial and flawed picture that science had come up with by the late nineteenth century. Now that picture was being replaced by a new one, vastly more complex—and decisively more compatible with the notion that the universe had been designed by an intelligent Creator.”¹³

Amazingly, many in the scientific community have reacted to these findings in the same way the church responded to the discoveries of Galileo and Copernicus. There is and will continue to be an ongoing debate between atheistic evolution and what has become known as “intelligent design.” More and more scientists, however, are beginning to embrace this new and more biblically based understanding of the creation of the universe.¹⁴ In fact, they are discovering things that one scientist, George Smoot, describes as the “fingerprints of God”.¹⁵ It would appear, therefore, that the claims of Psalm 19:1-4 and Romans 1:20, are accurate and truthful. A careful examination of the universe bears undeniable evidence that it was created by a God of infinite majesty and wisdom and, just as the book of Genesis declares, mankind is the crowning achievement in that process. In conclusion, astronomer George Greenstein has observed, “As we survey all the evidence, the thought insistently arises that some supernatural agency—or,

¹²Ibid., 25-26.

¹³Ibid., 26.

¹⁴Timothy Lamer, “An Evolving Debate,” *World*, 21 May 2005, 18-20.

¹⁵Heeren, 169.

rather, Agency—must be involved. Is it possible that suddenly, without intending to, we have stumbled upon scientific proof of the existence of a Supreme Being? Was it God who stepped in and so providentially crafted that cosmos for our benefit?”¹⁶ Or, as is so beautifully expressed in Isaiah 45:18, “For this is what the Lord says—he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited.”

Biblical Concepts

In order to understand how God reveals Himself through His creation, the best place to begin, of course, is the Bible. There are over forty references in the Bible which declare that the Lord created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. In terms of how He reveals Himself through His creation, there are also a number of passages, some of which deserve special attention.

The first is found in Psalm 19:1-6. This ancient hymn of praise is unique in that it declares that the creation, specifically the heavens or sky, actually proclaims God’s majesty and greatness. In so doing it is speaking to both God and man. Commenting on this twofold declaration, Peter Craigie states, “. . . it is addressed to God as praise, yet it is also addressed to mankind as a revealer of ‘knowledge’ (v3). That is, as mankind reflects upon the vast expanse of heaven, with its light by day and its intimation of a greater universe by night, that reflection may open up an awareness and knowledge of God, the Creator, who by His hands created a glory beyond the comprehension of the human

¹⁶George Greenstein, *The Symbiotic Universe* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), 27.

mind.”¹⁷ Although these are varying interpretations, verse three seems to be indicating that creation’s voice is silent, inaudible. In fact, in the Hebrew the verse ends with the words “was not heard.”¹⁸ However, in the next verse the psalmist says this silent word is broadcast to the ends of the earth, and, therefore, is somehow discernable among all the world’s various peoples. How can this be? Artur Weiser’s comments provide an insightful explanation. Referring to these two verses he says, “The language which God speaks through Nature is not tied to the linguistic frontiers of men which hinder men from making themselves understood by each other. . . . The knowledge of the world’s divine ordering (literally, plumb-line or canon) penetrates into every country, because the laws of Nature can be inferred everywhere and directly from the orbits of the celestial bodies and from the change of day and night. The language of Nature is understood in every part of the world (‘to the end of the earth’). The heavens are the book from which the whole world can derive its knowledge of God!”¹⁹

In other words, God’s creation and especially the laws that govern it are like a mathematical equation that can be deciphered by individuals from many different cultures and backgrounds. The creation, therefore, speaks to mankind in a universal language, which although silent, is nevertheless discernable. And what does this equation state? It states that the creation is the product of the Creator. In fact, this is precisely what more and more people, even non-Christians, are beginning to realize. Meithe and Habermas state, “Many non-Christian scientists are beginning to see the

¹⁷Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19 (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 180.

¹⁸Ibid, 177-78.

¹⁹Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 198-99.

implications of the limitations of their own methodology and also to be much more open to a view which not only allows, but seems to point to, the idea of a Creative Intelligence. This openness has been brought about *by* the directions in which the best of current scientific research seems to clearly point, that is away from a closed, entirely independent and self-supporting, mechanical system.”²⁰

If Paul were living in the twenty-first century, he would rejoice to know that non-Christians are beginning to realize that God created the universe. He would be quick to point out, however, that this self-evident truth has been suppressed because of mankind’s sinfulness. In fact, in Romans 1:18-32 he addresses the issue of mankind’s rejection of God and its consequences. In so doing he makes this statement regarding God’s disclosure of Himself, through His creation. He says, “. . . since what may be known about God is plain to them, 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” (Romans 1:19-20).

This, therefore, is a second passage of Scripture deserving careful consideration. In fact, John Stott declares that it “is one of the principle New Testament passages on the topic of ‘general revelation. . . .’”²¹ Its importance is derived from three things that Paul says about God’s revelation of Himself through His creation. First, the revelation is a divinely ordained gift that is open and available to everyone. No special knowledge or mental acuity on man’s part is required in order to discern the hand of the Creator in the

²⁰Terry L. Miethe and Gary R. Habermas, *Why Believe? God Exists!* (Joplin, Mo: College Press Publishing Company, 1993), 120.

²¹John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove, Il: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 73.

creation. Indeed, Thomas Schreiner goes so far as to say that this awareness is a part of mankind's basic nature. He opines, "God has stitched into the fabric of the human mind his existence and power, so that they are instinctively recognized when one views the created world."²²

This revelation of God through His creation is also something in which the visible provides evidence and insight into that which is invisible. The realm of the physical is testifying to the reality of the spiritual. Stott says, "In other words, the God who in himself is invisible and unknowable has made himself both visible and knowable through what he has made. The creation is a visible disclosure of the invisible God, an intelligible disclosure of the otherwise unknown God."²³

Finally, this revelation provides mankind with specific information about God, namely His "eternal power and divine nature." Stuart Briscoe declares, "There is enough evidence available to man through the revelation of creation and man's God-given abilities to observe, understand, and interpret such revelation, to know not only *that* God is, but also *who* He is."²⁴ The awesomeness of the creation and how it expresses itself through the forces of nature clearly indicate that the One who made it has eternal, everlasting power. But what does Paul mean when he says that the creation reveals God's divine nature or godhead? Stott observes that "God's power, skill and goodness are displayed in the beauty and balance, intricacy and intelligibility of the universe. . . ."²⁵

²²Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 86.

²³Stott, 73.

²⁴D. Stuart Briscoe, *Romans*, The Communicator's Commentary, vol. 6, ed. Lloyd J. Ogilve (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 43.

²⁵Stott, 75.

This is certainly a reasonable conclusion especially in light of what Paul expresses in Acts 14:17. Addressing the people of Lystra regarding God's revelation of Himself through His creation, he declares, "Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."

Therefore, a great deal can be discerned about God through His creation, but not everything. His concern for and care of humanity are clearly recognizable. However, mankind's need for deliverance from sin is not addressed, except perhaps in the realization that natural disasters might be expressions of God's displeasure. But even more importantly, God's plan for mankind's redemption requires a special revelation of His goodness and love, a revelation that is only provided through His Son and presented in His Word. This disclosure of God is at best only hinted at in His creation. In fact, it is virtually unknowable aside from what He has specifically stated and accomplished through Jesus Christ. Developing a truly meaningful and genuinely personal relationship with God, therefore, requires a further act of revelation beyond that which is available through His creation.²⁶

With regards to what Paul has stated in Romans 1:19-20 and what the psalmist declared in Psalm 19:1-6, it would appear that these writers have presented strong arguments for the vital role that creation plays in informing individuals of the reality of God. But are there occasions when God uses the creation to express Himself in a way that can not only be rationally perceived but also personally experienced? The Bible clearly indicates that this does indeed take place.

²⁶Stott, 73 and Schreiner, 86.

For example, numerous passages in the book of Exodus indicate that God is using the creation to express His will, especially in His contest with Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. The various plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea indicated that God has sovereign control over the forces of nature. In his book, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, Davis declares, “The sovereignty of God is also exhibited over the forces of nature and the political systems of men. The powerful existence of God is placed in contrast to the impotent deities of Egypt who could do nothing in the face of divine authority and power.”²⁷ This same theme is also reiterated in other Biblical accounts. God makes the sun stand still at Gibeon so that Joshua can defeat the Amorites (Joshua 10:12-13). The Lord sends thunder and rain during the dry season of the year to confirm His displeasure over Israel’s desire for a king (I Samuel 11:17-18). Elijah calls down fire from heaven to consume the offering that has been prepared on Mount Carmel (I Kings 18:38). Even the famous passage in II Chronicles 7:14 is preceded by the acknowledgement of God’s use of the forces of nature as a means of disciplining His people when they have sinned.

The Bible even goes so far as to assert the visual presence of God in the physical phenomena of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21), and to declare that He has spoken to His people in a voice that sounds like thunder (Exodus 18:19). In fact, Honeycutt concludes, “The word for thunder (*qol*) is identical with the word for voice. Thunder is the voice of God.”²⁸ He also states that the same word is utilized in numerous Old Testament passages. For example, in I Samuel 7:10, the Bible says that the thunderous voice of the Lord threw the Philistines into a state of panic. Even in the

²⁷Davis, 47.

²⁸Honeycutt, *Exodus*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 1, 393.

New Testament, thunder is associated with the voice of God in passages such as John 12:28-29 and Revelation 14:2.

Although some might tend to interpret these passages as being figurative in nature, the fact of the matter is they are presented as actual events which were personally experienced by God's people, and sometimes even by those who were not God's people. Therefore, it can be concluded, at least from a biblical standpoint, that God is not only revealed by His creation but that He also interacts with humanity and indeed with all that He has made through His creation. This is the marvelous message of Psalm 104.

Before departing from this section of the paper, there is one further observation that deserves to be mentioned. The Bible declares that the creation not only reveals God's handiwork, but also actually celebrates it. Job 38:7, for example, says that the morning stars burst into song when the earth was created. In Psalm 148, the sun and moon, the stars, the great sea creatures, the forces of nature, even the trees and the mountains are called upon to join with mankind in praising God. When Jesus enters into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He tells the religious leaders that if His followers hushed their joyful praise, the stones themselves would cry out (Luke 19:40).

While these and other passages are certainly anthropomorphic in nature, they may also indicate that creation does, in fact, honor its Creator with praise. Francis of Assisi, as has been previously stated, certainly believed that it did, and there are others who have affirmed this idea going all the way back to Augustine. They believed that the beauty of the creation, the way in which it functions in a harmonious and purposeful manner, is its testimony of praise to God. In other words, when a bird sings because it has the God given ability to sing, then it is praising the Lord. Therefore, as Sorrell states in his book

on Saint Francis, “All creation participates intimately in the beauty given it by Immutable Beauty, and confesses its Maker with the display of its own beauty.”²⁹

Carrying this concept a bit further, Bob Sjogren asserts in his CD that nature actually has the ability to usher people into God’s presence through its praise. He even goes so far as to state that, like humanity, nature possesses a variety of languages which are spoken in ways that are both animate and inanimate. Based upon passages of Scripture such as Psalm 98:4-8, Isaiah 35:1-2, and Revelation 5:13, he affirms that the creation testifies to the majesty and glory of the Creator and that it invites mankind to join with it in praising Him. He states, “So when we hear a bird singing, could not the bird be saying, ‘Praise God?’ Could not thunder be declaring, ‘Creator?’”³⁰

In conclusion, how does God reveal Himself to mankind through His creation? A study of the Scriptures indicates that He has chosen to accomplish this in one of three ways: design, testimony, and phenomenon. First, God has designed a world that is attractive and well ordered. When rationally investigated it provides unmistakable evidence of having been created by the Creator. Second, the creation itself bears testimony to its Creator. It glorifies His name by declaring His greatness to those who are listening to the sound of its voice. Finally, the creation can become the means by which God Himself is seen and heard, whether it be a burning bush, a thunderous mountain, or a bright new star in the evening sky. In each and all of these ways, the Scriptures declare that God has revealed Himself to mankind through His creation.

²⁹Sorrell, 86.

³⁰Bob Sjogren, *The Glory of God in Nature*, CD (Unveiling Glory and APMC, Inc., 2001) www.jealousGod.org.

Theological Insights

Throughout the centuries since Christ's birth, numerous theologians have addressed the issue of natural revelation. They have attempted to come to a better understanding as to how God has chosen to unveil Himself through His creation. Although this portion of chapter four is by no means exhaustive, it does endeavor to provide some of the insights of Christianity's most eminent theologians on this subject, beginning with Augustine and leading up to the present time.

Augustine

Out of the turmoil of a rapidly declining empire and a church rife with heresy there arose a theologian of consummate wisdom and oratorical skill. His name was Augustine. Born in Thagaste, North Africa, in 354, he spent the first thirty-three years of his life pursuing worldly pleasure and secular wisdom. Through the prayers of his mother and the preaching of Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, he finally came to faith in Christ as he read Romans 13:13-14 in obedience to a voice which instructed him to "take up and read; take up and read."³¹

The remainder of his long life was given in humble service to the kingdom of God. He became the bishop of Hippo, but more importantly the standard bearer of Christian orthodoxy. Using his keen mind that had been schooled in the art of rhetoric and was versed in most if not all of the schools of philosophic thought in that day and

³¹*Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, ed. Whitney J. Oates, vol. 1, *The Confessions* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1948; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 126.

time, he ably defended the Christian faith both in his preaching and his writings.³² His influence has been keenly felt both then and now. Clyde Fant and William Pinson declare, “Other than Paul, no one has been more influential in the development of Christian thought than Augustine. His mark is seen on both Catholic and Protestant thought. He contributed greatly to the shaping of men such as Thomas, Luther, Calvin, Pascal, Barth, Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr.”³³

He also seems to have contributed a great deal of insight about issues that are still being discussed with regards to the creation of the universe. For example, according to Mark Ellingsen, Augustine seems to have anticipated Einstein’s notions regarding the relationship of time and matter as well as postulating that the complexity of the universe requires a creator, the foundational principle of the Intelligent Design Theory.³⁴ Ellingsen also postulates that Augustine may even have embraced a Darwinian concept, but in a uniquely theistic manner. He writes, “Also in the *City of God* Augustine offers a profound comment with rich constructive implications for our post-Darwinian world. He claims that part of the harmonious beauty that God has established in the universe is by means of the principle of “survival of the fittest.”³⁵

With regards to the manner in which mankind encounters God, especially in terms of His creation, Augustine seems to have relied upon two key precepts. The first is faith

³²Ibid., xx. Augustine’s philosophical pursuits included Manichaeism, Skepticism, and Neo-Platonism. He rejected the first two, but was attracted to the third because it stressed the reality of the immaterial. Augustine saw many similarities between Neo-Platonism and Christianity, and for that reason it played an important role in the development of his theology, especially in his earliest writings.

³³Fant and Pinson, vol. 1, 117.

³⁴Mark Ellingsen, *The Richness of Augustine* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 60.

³⁵Ibid., 57.

and the second is reason. Vernon Bourke says, “Augustine’s position on the relation of faith and reason influences all the rest of his thinking; it could be argued that Augustinianism is essentially a certain way of looking at these key notions.”³⁶ With regards to reason, Augustine is talking about the operation of a person’s intellect, which includes his ability to receive knowledge by “Divine illumination”.³⁷ With regards to faith he was speaking about that which people give assent to, even though they may not fully understand or comprehend all of its implications.³⁸ For example, the great doctrines of the church and the teachings of the Bible would fall into this category.

Therefore, people can come to a better understanding of God and perhaps even encounter His presence as they rationally examine the world around them. In one of his sermons, Augustine says, “Some people read books in order to find God. Yet there is a great book, the very appearance of created things. Look above you; look below you! Note it; read it! God, whom you wish to find, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that? Why, heaven and earth cry out to you: ‘God made me!’”³⁹ He also asserts in his treatise, *The City of God*, “For, though the voices of the prophets were silent, the world itself, by its well-ordered changes and movements, and by the fair appearance of all visible things, bears a testimony of its own, both that it was created, and also that it could not have been created save by God, whose greatness and beauty are unutterable and

³⁶*The Essential Augustine*, ed. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: New American Library, 1964), 19.

³⁷*Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 1, xxiii.

³⁸*The Essential Augustine*, 19.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 123.

invisible.”⁴⁰ He even goes so far as to say in a message on Psalm 26, “Let the mind roam through the whole creation; everywhere the created world will cry out to you: ‘God made me.’”⁴¹

People can also, however, come to an even better understanding of God and encounter His presence by relying upon faith in His Word, the Bible. For Augustine, this is a superior and more reliable way through which God Himself has spoken. He states, “Of all visible things, the world is the greatest; of all invisible, the greatest is God. But, that the world is, we see; that God is, we believe. That God made the world, we can believe from no one more safely than from God Himself. But where have we heard Him? Nowhere more distinctly than in the Holy Scriptures, where His prophet said, ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’”⁴²

Based upon the above references as well as the sum total of his writings, it is not unreasonable to conclude that Augustine surmised that the creation bears witness to its Creator, both through rational observation and biblical revelation. Did Augustine, however, contemplate the possibility for a personal encounter with the Almighty, especially in terms of experiencing His presence in an outdoor setting? In his introduction to Augustine’s writings, Whitney Oates offers the following observation. “The reader should never forget, when he is considering the major theses of Saint Augustine’s Christianity, that his writing is all created in the light of his own intense mystical experience upon conversion. The inner conviction of its validity colors in one

⁴⁰*Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 2, *The City of God*, 146.

⁴¹*The Essential Augustine*, 131.

⁴²*Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 2, 145.

way or another everything he does and everything he says. In this respect he is to be found in the company of such men as Saint Paul, Saint Francis, Martin Luther, Pascal, and even, in a curious way, Descartes, all of whom enjoyed their greatest creative activity under the impulse of an extraordinary inner experience.”⁴³

That inner experience, which was birthed in an Italian garden when Augustine heard what he believed to be the voice of God instructing him to read Romans 13:13-14, was his first, personal encounter with God, but it was not his last. There was at least one other, and, like the first, it too took place in a garden. In his *Confessions* he writes:

. . . (My) mother and I were alone, leaning from a window which overlooked the garden in the courtyard of the house where we were staying at Ostia. . . . As the flame of love burned stronger in us and raised us higher towards the eternal God, our thoughts ranged over the whole compass of material things in their various degrees, up to the heavens themselves, from which the sun and the moon and the stars shine down upon the earth. Higher still we climbed, thinking and speaking all the while in wonder at all that you have made. At length we came to our own souls and passed beyond them to that place of everlasting plenty. . . .⁴⁴

For Augustine, therefore, the reality of God was a certainty discovered not only through a rational examination of God’s Word and world, but also through mystical encounters, some of which had taken place in outdoor settings.

Thomas Aquinas

Like Augustine, Aquinas was born in an age of turmoil. Soldiers were returning to Europe from the Crusades with new customs and ideas. A desire for more political and religious freedom was beginning to assert itself across the continent. The writings of

⁴³Ibid., vol. 1, xxi.

⁴⁴Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, England: Penquin Books, Ltd., 1961), 196-97.

the ancient world were being rediscovered. For Aquinas, who lived from 1225 to 1274, the challenge was to formulate a new understanding of reality based upon a synthesis of Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle, and the Christian faith. This he attempted to accomplish as a Dominican friar, rising to the heights of scholastic endeavor.⁴⁵

Aquinas, who was both an intellectual giant and a religious mystic, was primarily interested in “the nature of being, the nature of knowledge, and the nature of man”.⁴⁶ These philosophical interests significantly influenced his writings, including his understanding of God and how He reveals Himself through His creation. According to Aquinas, God is not just the Creator of the universe. He is the one who fills it with life and who upholds it by His presence. God and His universe are, therefore, dynamically related to one another. Addressing this proposition, Mary Fatula writes, “Nothing, therefore, holds or contains the triune God, who is the fullness of life itself. Rather, Thomas tells us, we and all of creation are contained within God. By lavishing its inmost existence on everything, the triune God enfolds and fills all that is. God is ‘in’ us by enveloping us. We are known by God through our existence *in* God.”⁴⁷

In other words, Aquinas believed that the world was a divinely created entity that reflected, at least to some degree, the nature and character of God Himself. Coming to a better understanding of the creation, principally through rational investigation, would, therefore, enable a person to also come to a better understanding of God. In reply to his critics, Thomas stated, “They hold a plainly false opinion who say that in regard to the

⁴⁵Fant and Pinson, vol. 1, 185-189.

⁴⁶Ibid., 191.

⁴⁷Mary Ann Fatula, *Thomas Aquinas: Preacher and Friend* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 87.

truth of religion it does not matter what a man thinks about the creation so long as he has the correct opinion concerning God. An error concerning the creation ends as false thinking about God.”⁴⁸

Contrary to the typical theological mindset of his day and time, which can best be described by the phrase, “world fleeing and life denying,” Aquinas was fascinated by the beauty of God’s creation. He was a realist. He moved beyond the allegorical understanding of the physical world that was so prevalent during the Middle Ages, and instead reached out to touch and embrace it as something which is both tangible and good. He saw it as “the first fruit of God’s activity.”⁴⁹ Mary Fatula suggests, “Indeed, the reason that Thomas loved the created beauty of this world is that it has come from the God who is be-ing itself, the God who makes creation not only good but also *holy*.”⁵⁰

This is not to say, however, that Aquinas believed that a person could arrive at an adequate understanding of God through the realm of nature alone. Drawing upon the first chapter in the Gospel of John, he saw God the Word as the one who expresses Himself through the creation in the same way that an artist expresses his ideas through the colors on his canvas. The world in all of its beauty is, therefore, a reflection of the even greater beauty of its Creator. It points to, but is not greater than, the One who brought it into existence. It is always a partial and thus an inadequate revelation of God’s ultimate

⁴⁸Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Notre Dame, ID: University of Notre Dame, 1987), 48. Quote taken from Aquinas’ *Summa Against the Pagans*, 2, 3. Access to English translations of Aquinas’ writings appears to be quite limited, and for that reason this quotation from Pieper’s well annotated book was utilized.

⁴⁹Fatula, 88.

⁵⁰Ibid.

reality.⁵¹ That ultimate reality is something that must be revealed, first through the Scriptures, and later by God Himself in eternity.⁵²

For Aquinas, the reality of God could also be experienced through the celebration of the Eucharist. For him, this was the ultimate example of the eternal manifesting itself in the temporal. In fact, he became the spiritual father of a movement that swept through Europe emphasizing the possibility of a mystical encounter with God through this sacrament. Aquinas saw it as an opportunity for God's people to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8), to satisfy their spiritual hunger in the same way that a sumptuous banquet satisfies physical hunger.⁵³ This was the source of his mysticism, and although it did not necessarily involve being in an outdoor environment, it did hinge on his appreciation of the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus, an incarnation of that which is spiritual into that which is physical.⁵⁴ In the same way that he was attempting to create a synthesis of faith and reason, Aquinas was also attempting to show that what is created can participate in what is divine.⁵⁵ In other words, the examination of the beauty and majesty of what God has accomplished through His creation, including the incarnation of Christ, enables mankind to perceive and perhaps even to experience the presence of God. This was a profoundly important contribution to an understanding as to how God reveals Himself through His creation.

⁵¹Ibid., 87-88.

⁵²Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin and Contemporary Protestant Thought* (Washington, D.C.: Christian University Press and William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 96.

⁵³Fatula, 236-239.

⁵⁴Ibid., 246-249.

⁵⁵Pieper, 117-118.

Martin Luther

Few Christians have risen to the stature of Martin Luther. Regarding the impact of his life, Fant and Pinson state, “Martin Luther has few equals in Christian history. His versatility, devotion to Christian duty, courage, and widespread impact upon the world set him apart from most men.”⁵⁶ His revolt against the Roman Catholic Church and his translation of the Scriptures into the German language are among his most notable achievements. His theological contributions are also of significant importance, including his understanding as to how God reveals Himself through His creation.

For the most part, Luther rejected the notion that God can be known through a rational investigation of the natural world. Contrary to the writings of Aquinas and others like him, he surmised that all knowledge about God, that which is revealed both through the world and the Word, is a divine gift. At best people, because of their sinful nature, can only perceive what God has purposefully disclosed about Himself. They are not capable of arriving at such conclusions on their own. Luther, therefore, set aside the scholastic dichotomy of a rationally perceived understanding of God as opposed to one that is divinely revealed. Instead, he replaced it with a new understanding of the immediate presence of God in all that He has made, including even God’s incarnation of Himself in Christ.⁵⁷ In *Let God Be God*, Watson declares, “For Luther, God is not to be

⁵⁶Fant and Pinson, vol. 2, 3.

⁵⁷Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God!* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947), 76-78.

sought behind His creation by inference from it but is rather to be apprehended in and through it.”⁵⁸

But how does this take place? In his writings, Luther declared that the whole of creation is God’s mask.⁵⁹ As such it both veils and reveals His presence. It conceals Him because otherwise humanity would be consumed by God’s unshielded glory. It reveals Him because it discloses what God is doing as He expresses Himself by using this mask in all of its various forms.⁶⁰ “The whole created world, then, as Luther sees it, occupies a kind of mediatorial position between God and man.”⁶¹ It is separate and distinct from God so that the two should never be confused, but because it is the means by which God communicates with humanity, it deserves to be honored and revered. Luther himself states, “The monarch, the empire, secular authority, the teacher, the schoolmaster, the father, the mother, the lord, the lady, the servant, the maid, are all masks, persons whom God desires to be revered and honored and acknowledged as his creation.”⁶²

Luther, of course, is taking a position that is much more broadly defined than just the realm of nature. In fact, he would also be quick to point out that the principle character on the stage of creation is Christ, God’s special revelation of Himself from

⁵⁸Ibid., 78.

⁵⁹Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 198.

⁶⁰Watson, 78-79.

⁶¹Ibid., 79.

⁶²Ebeling, 198-99. This quote was taken from Betram Lee Woolf’s *Reformation Writing’s of Martin Luther* (London: Lutterwood Press, 1952), 40, I; 175, 3-6 (1531). Woolf’s edition could not be located for verification.

which everything else derives its origin, meaning, and purpose.⁶³ Nevertheless, this theological concept is applicable to that which takes place in an outdoor setting. Even there God can choose to actively and personally express Himself through His creation. In fact, Luther's calling into the ministry took place during a violent thunderstorm when "he flung himself down on the road and cried, 'St. Anne, help me! I will become a monk.'"⁶⁴

John Calvin

Like so many other great men of God, John Calvin grew up in turbulent times. Born in 1509 in Noyon, France, he encountered the Reformation during his studies in Paris, and eventually renounced his allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. Forced to flee imprisonment, he finally settled in Geneva, Switzerland. As both a theological and a political leader, he exercised considerable authority, which at times was not readily accepted by the populace of Geneva. His most lasting accomplishment is his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. First published in 1535, it was revised on several occasions, the last edition being printed in 1559.⁶⁵

Concerning his views on God's revelation of Himself through His creation, Calvin is essentially a biblicist. John Dillenberger states in his introduction to Calvin's writings, "For Calvin, theological work is essentially the exposition and elaboration of Scripture through which one attains a lively knowledge of God."⁶⁶ Another author, A. Dakin, in his book on Calvinism says, "We shall consider Calvin's doctrine of Scripture

⁶³Watson, 79.

⁶⁴Fant and Pinson, vol. 2, 4.

⁶⁵Fant and Pinson, 133-39.

⁶⁶*John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 13.

at a later stage. Here it is only necessary to point out that all his work rests on this foundation, so that every argument is buttressed with texts and expositions.”⁶⁷ This predisposition is clearly evidenced in the opening chapters of volume one of his *Institutes*, especially with regards to his comments on general and special revelation.

In chapter three, he opines, “That there exists in the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God Himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man, being aware that there is a God, and that He is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.”⁶⁸ In other words, every man has the God given ability to perceive and if he wishes to acknowledge the reality of God. Then in chapter five, Calvin takes this idea further. He declares:

Since the perfection of blessedness consists in the knowledge of God, he has been pleased, in order that none might be excluded from the means of obtaining felicity, not only to deposit in our minds that seed of religion of which we have already spoken, but so to manifest his perfections in the whole structure of the universe, and daily place himself in our view, that we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold him. His essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought; but on each of his works his glory is engraven in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse.⁶⁹

⁶⁷A. Dakin, *Calvinism* (London: Duckworth, 1940), 19.

⁶⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 43.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 51.

Finally, in chapter six, Calvin arrives at this conclusion:

Therefore, though the effulgence which is presented to every eye, both in the heavens and on the earth, leaves the ingratitude of man without excuse, since God, in order to bring the whole human race under the same condemnation, holds forth to all, without exception, a mirror of his Deity in his works, another and better help must be given to guide us properly to God as a creator. Not in vain, therefore, has he added the light of his Word in order that he might make himself known unto salvation, and bestowed the privilege on those whom he was pleased to bring into nearer and more familiar relation to himself.⁷⁰

For Calvin, therefore, knowledge about God comes from two sources. The first is the creation. It includes the realm of nature, the realm of mankind's affairs, and mankind itself. Describing this basic tenet of Calvinism, Henry Meeter observes:

By the book of nature the Calvinist understands more than the mere natural objects of God's creation such as minerals, flora, fauna, and men. These natural objects were not only created by God, but he also directs them in their movements in history. Therefore, history, both natural and human, reveals to us many facts about God and shows us his finger. In addition to nature and history, moreover, we must also include man himself. The psalmist once said, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalms 139:14). Man himself as the image of God tells us much about God.⁷¹

The second source of knowledge is the Bible, God's Word. It is a much more accurate source because it describes God's plan of salvation in Christ in a way that can be clearly understood, apart from the ambiguities of nature and the sinfulness of mankind. In fact, Dillenberger goes so far as to state that the two major themes of Calvin's works are "God as Creator and God as Redeemer."⁷²

There is, however, one final point that needs to be expressed. Calvin believed in a God who is actively engaged in calling mankind unto Himself. This is the work of the

⁷⁰Ibid., 64.

⁷¹H. Henry Meeter, *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 25.

⁷²*John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, 12.

Holy Spirit. It is chiefly accomplished through God's Word. Calvin states, "Then only, therefore, does Scripture suffice to give a saving knowledge of God when its certainty is founded on the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit."⁷³ That does not mean, however, that God is silent with regards to expressing Himself through His creation. There too His Spirit speaks, but the message is consistently garbled and distorted by mankind's fallen nature. Speaking of this inevitable consequence, Calvin sadly reflects, "But though God is not left without a witness, while, with numberless varied acts of kindness, he woos men to the knowledge of himself, yet they cease not to follow their own ways. . . ."⁷⁴

Jonathan Edwards

As has been previously stated, Jonathan Edwards was one of the greatest theologians America has produced. His writings, especially with regards to natural revelation, are both a unique creation and a masterly summation of those who preceded him, including Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. It is, therefore, well beyond the scope of this paper to provide an in-depth presentation of his theology on this subject. However, a number of insights can be presented which are helpful in describing his doctrine of natural revelation.

To begin with, Edwards experienced God's presence in nature before he came to a theological understanding as to how these kind of experiences take place.⁷⁵ His *Personal Narrative* aptly describes his conversion,⁷⁶ and according to Paula Cooley "marked the

⁷³John Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, 83.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 62.

⁷⁵Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 15.

⁷⁶Jonathan Edwards, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, "Personal Narrative," 283-85.

beginning of a new attunement with nature as the visible manifestation and communication of God's glory."⁷⁷ For Edwards these experiences were both natural and a supernatural in nature. They were natural in that they were sensually perceived. Describing his encounter with God in a thunderstorm, Edwards declares, "I felt God, so to speak, at the first appearance of a thunder storm; 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. . . ."⁷⁸

This and other similar experiences, however, engaged more than just his physical senses. They were supernatural experiences in that they ushered him into a higher plane of reality. In fact, he alludes to this when speaking about the thunderstorm by using the phrase "so to speak." In other words it was something that he experienced both physically and spiritually, a tendency noted by many of those who have studied his writings. Cooley, for example, observes, "The 'sight' or the excellency of the things of God and the 'taste' of their good regenerated him. Insofar as the 'things' include natural phenomena, Edwards was quite literally seeing their excellency and tasting their good. That these things are 'of God' implies that his sensory awareness included a wider range of possibilities than our usual, more restricted understanding of the senses allows."⁷⁹

The means by which these kinds of phenomena take place in a person's life became a focal point in Edward's understanding of the nature of God. Developed over the course of his life and finally summed up in his *End of Creation*, Edwards saw God

⁷⁷Paula Cooley, *Jonathan Edwards on Nature and Destiny* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1985), 25.

⁷⁸Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," 285.

⁷⁹Cooley, 27.

not as a static Divinity enthroned in heaven, but as a dynamic Creator who continually communicates His glory and beauty through all that He has made. In fact, God Himself is an intra-communicative being—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—who delights and desires to express the full reality of His being through everything which He has created. As Sang Hyun Lee states, “God’s end in the creation, in other words, is to communicate or repeat God’s internal dynamic fullness now in time and space.”⁸⁰ Or as Stephen Holmes declares in his account of Edward’s theology, “The physical world is created and ordered to reflect and to show forth the spiritual world—God, and His relationships with His creatures—so that, through knowing God, we will glorify Him.”⁸¹

The creation, therefore, serves as a “medium of divine communication”, enabling people to discern spiritual truths, which are themselves emanations of God’s nature.⁸² In other words, that which is physical describes that which is spiritual in the same way that a windblown tree on a mountainside not only depicts but also actually participates in the idea of perseverance. As such it becomes representative of an even greater reality than itself, a reality which is first grasped in terms of a spiritual principle and which is then seen as a reflection of God’s nature and character. The physical, although quite real, is, therefore, a shadow of that which is a greater and finally an ultimate reality. Thus everything in God’s creation points back to the one from whom it derived its origin, and

⁸⁰Sang Hyun Lee, “Edwards on God and Nature: Resources for Contemporary Theology,” in *Edwards in Our Time*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee and Allen C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 20.

⁸¹Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 101.

⁸²Douglas J. Elwood, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 99.

in so doing draws humanity into the very presence of God Himself.⁸³ Any intelligent being is capable of experiencing this kind of revelation, but for God's people, who know Him through His Word and who have committed their lives into His care, the experience becomes even more meaningful and wondrous.⁸⁴

For Edwards, the realm of nature was "a cosmos of which God is the throbbing heart, a world dazzling with the brilliance and pulsating with the energy of a living God."⁸⁵ He had first discovered this truth as a child growing up on his father's farm. Its reality was pervasive in his writings, and is even now instructional in terms of how mankind can encounter God through His creation. It is His glory, God's beauty and loveliness manifesting itself throughout the entire universe that draws mankind into His presence. It radiates from His being through all that exists. As Edwards himself stated:

When we are delighted with flowery meadows and gentle breezes of wind, we may consider that we see only the emanations of the sweet benevolence of Jesus Christ. When we behold the fragrant rose and lily, we see His love and purity. . . . When we behold the light and brightness of the sun, the golden edges of an evening cloud, or the beautiful bow, we behold the adumbrations of His glory and goodness; and in the blue sky, of his mildness and gentleness. . . . That beautiful light with which the world is filled in a clear day is a lively shadow of His spotless holiness, and happiness and delight in communicating Himself.⁸⁶

Current Considerations

Numerous theologians and Christian writers of the twentieth century have addressed the subject as to how God reveals Himself through His creation. For the most

⁸³Ibid., 90-103.

⁸⁴Cooley, 57.

⁸⁵Elwood, 97.

⁸⁶Ibid., Elwood is quoting from Edwards' "The Excellency of Christ," in *Observations Concerning the Scripture Oeconomy of the Trinity and Covenant of Redemption*, a work that was edited by E. C. Smyth, pages 92-97, but which is unfortunately not readily available in Edwards collected writings.

part they have built upon the observations of those who have preceded them. For example, Jürgen Moltmann's theology of creation is an extension of Jonathan Edwards' understanding of the God who desires to communicate Himself through and in that which He has created. In *God in Creation* Moltmann develops this doctrine from a Trinitarian point of view. He writes, "According to the Christian interpretation, creation is a Trinitarian process: the Father creates through the Son in the Holy Spirit. The created world is therefore created 'by God', formed 'through God' and exists 'in God.'"⁸⁷

In so doing, Moltmann is moving beyond a deistic notion of God, one in which He creates the universe and then steps aside to merely observe it, to one in which He is dynamically a part of that which He has created. In other words, He continues to be relationally involved with His creation, and this primarily through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Moltmann declares, "Through the energies and potentialities of the Spirit, the Creator is himself present in his creation. He does not merely confront it in his transcendence; entering into it, he is also immanent in it."⁸⁸ He asserts that the biblical foundation for this position can be found in Psalm 104:29-30 which reads, "When you [God] hide your face, they [the creatures of creation] are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth." He further asserts, "From the continual inflow of the divine Spirit (*ruach*) created things are formed (*bara'*). They exist in the Spirit, and they are 'renewed' (*hadash*) through the Spirit. This presupposes that God always creates through and in the power of his Spirit, and that the presence of his Spirit therefore

⁸⁷Jürgen Moltman, *God in Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 9.

⁸⁸Ibid.

conditions the potentiality and realities of his creation. The further assumption is that this Spirit is poured out on everything that exists, and that the Spirit preserves it, makes it live and renews it.”⁸⁹

Nevertheless, a pertinent question remains. If God through His Spirit is immanently involved with His creation, how can mankind become aware of His presence and perhaps even relationally touched by that presence? Moltmann does not answer this question in a direct manner. He does, however, provide an interesting insight with regards to his understanding of the Sabbath. For Moltmann, the Sabbath marks not only the completion of the creation, but also “the revelation of God’s reposing existence in his creation.”⁹⁰ It is an opportunity to lay aside the cares and the work of the world and to enter into a time of restful contemplation with the One who has both created the universe and who has revealed Himself in and through that universe.⁹¹

Therefore, it would seem that Moltmann is suggesting the importance of creating opportunities for meditation and reflection as a viable methodology for encountering God’s presence. He doesn’t state this directly, but it does seem to be implied in the final chapter of his book, “The Sabbath: The Feast of Creation”. In fact, the very idea of a feast, especially from a biblical perspective, indicates that it is a time of intimate fellowship between the host and His guests. In anticipation of that future event, God’s people can even now begin to experience something of this reality as they allow themselves periods of quiet repose, or in other words, a Sabbath rest.

⁸⁹Ibid., 10.

⁹⁰Ibid., 288.

⁹¹Ibid., 276-296.

Another German theologian, Rudolf Otto, also addresses the subject of encountering God. He approaches it, however, from a different perspective. He seeks to discover how such experiences impact people's lives emotionally. In so doing he uses a number of terms that help to illustrate his insights. The first is *numinous*. It represents the holiness of God. It is a holiness, however, not based upon God's goodness, but rather upon His awesomeness, His otherness, His unfathomable greatness and power.⁹² The second is *mysterium*. Otto defines it as "that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception and understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar."⁹³ The third is *tremendum*. It can best be described as a feeling of awe or godly fear that takes possession of a person's life when he encounters the mystery of God's presence. Its root can be found in the idea of "trembling" before God.⁹⁴ Isaiah's vision in the temple would be a good example of this experience. In fact, Otto declares, "The awe or 'dread' *may* indeed be so overwhelmingly great that it seems to penetrate to the very marrow, making the man's hair bristle and his limbs quake."⁹⁵

Such experiences are, therefore, very emotional in nature. They shake a person to the very core of his being and strip away all pretenses of self-importance and power. Otto believes that these experiences also possess an attractiveness, which he describes as *fascination*.⁹⁶ When a person encounters the numinous, the holiness of God, he is

⁹²Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923; Oxford University Press paperback, 1958), 5-11.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 12-15.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 31.

overwhelmed by a “harmony of contrasts.” He is fearful of, but also attracted to, that which has claimed his attention.⁹⁷ The account of Moses and the burning bush serves as a good illustration of this principle. Moses was fascinated by the unusual sight, but was also careful to remove his sandals in fearful respect of God’s holiness.

Such experiences with the numinous, Otto surmises, can create two reactions. The first is a desire to appropriate or utilize the experience for one’s own personal enhancement through the acquisition of divine power. He describes these as being “shamanistic” in nature.⁹⁸ The other involves being possessed by rather than possessing the holiness of God. It is mystical in nature. He observes, “Possession of and by the numen becomes an end in itself; it begins to be sought for its own sake; and the wildest and most artificial methods of asceticism are put into practice to attain it.”⁹⁹ Both of these reactions, however, spring from a common source in that “the mysterium is experienced in its essential, positive, and specific character, as something that bestows upon man a beatitude beyond compare. . . . It is a bliss which embraces all those blessings that are indicated or suggested in positive fashion by any ‘doctrine of salvation.’ . . . It gives the peace that passes understanding, and of which the tongue can only stammer brokenly.”¹⁰⁰

Otto has thus provided a psychological framework upon which experiences with the divine can be quantified and described. Although his terminology can be applied to all religious experiences, he primarily investigates those that transpire within Christianity.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid., 33.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

In so doing he provides a number of specific examples in the appendices of his book. One in particular deserves consideration. It is taken from the writings of John Ruskin and describes his perception of “Sanctity in the whole of nature.”¹⁰¹ Ruskin states, “I could only feel this perfectly when I was alone; and then it would often make me shiver from head to foot with the joy and fear of it, when after being some time away from hills I first got to the shore of a mountain river, where the brown water circled among the pebbles, or when I first saw the swell of distant land against the sunset, or the first low broken wall, covered with mountain moss.”¹⁰² Ruskin then goes on to impart the realization that these spiritual emotions and experiences gradually faded in their intensity. He declares, “These feelings remained in their full intensity till I was eighteen or twenty, and then, as the reflective and practical power increased, and as the ‘cares of this world’ gained upon me, faded gradually away. . . .”¹⁰³ Thus it would appear that the experiential side of life, especially that which takes place in an outdoor environment, can become the very place in which divine encounters become a distinct and even a life changing possibility.

That, indeed, is the thesis of numerous Christian writers such as Gary Thomas who devotes an entire chapter to seeking God outdoors in *Sacred Pathways*. He writes, “I love to be in the middle of a deep forest or high on a mountain or out on the water. My schedule doesn’t permit me to be out as much as I would like, but I have learned that

¹⁰¹Ibid., 215. John Ruskin, “Influence of Nature,” *Selections and Essays*, ed. Frederick William Roe, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946), 27.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid.

there are few better places for me to earnestly seek God.”¹⁰⁴ This same theme is reiterated in T.M. Moore’s *Consider the Lilies*. He opines, “We must face up to the realization that, daily and in every place, we are confronted with the fact of God’s revelation of Himself and His glory in the things He has made.”¹⁰⁵

Another writer and theologian, Belden Lane, goes a step further. Utilizing the insights and practices of monastic Christianity, he posits a spiritual pilgrimage that involves desert, mountain, and cloud. In these rugged and at times inhospitable environments, he pursues “the three stages of the spiritual life generally described as purgation, illumination, and union.”¹⁰⁶ The desert in its austerity fosters an attitude of relinquishment and self-denial. The mountain reflects the search for illumination as new heights are ascended. The cloud provides an environment in which one becomes both enveloped by and even lost in the “brilliant darkness” of God’s love.¹⁰⁷

The possibility of encountering God in austere, unpopulated places finds further refinement in Susan Bratton’s *Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife*. She refutes the modern day trend to dismiss such encounters as symbolic and allegorical, and instead embraces their reality not only as a record of the past but also as a possibility for the present. In fact, she sees them as a proper and appropriate response to what is so often absent in contemporary Christianity. She states, “The traditional Christian wilderness experience is an intense confrontation with God. Visionary and other worldly in

¹⁰⁴Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 50.

¹⁰⁵T.M. Moore, *Consider the Lilies* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing Company, 2005), 46.

¹⁰⁶Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*

substance, the material and the cultural dissolve in the fire of divine splendor.”¹⁰⁸ Such experiences provide people with an opportunity to encounter God through solitude, to find His strength in dealing with stress, to provide opportunities for spiritual transformation, to contemplate the beauty of His creation, and finally to find a place of rest and refuge.¹⁰⁹ She envisions the wilderness, those places devoid of the noise of today’s world, as locales for rediscovering a vibrant and living faith. In fact, near the end of her book she offers this concluding observation. “The wilderness offers an alternate ancient ground, where the babbling voices are largely silent and cultural clutter rarely intrudes. Perhaps not the entire church, but at least some of the leadership, need to consider the value of wilderness as a platform for speaking to God . . .and for hearing God reply.”¹¹⁰

Naturalists’ Observations

The Romantic Period in English literature, 1760 to 1820, created a renewed interest in the realm of nature as evidenced in the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats.¹¹¹ These and others like them were drawn to nature, and they celebrated not only its beauty but also its spirituality. They sensed its ability to inspire and mourned its depreciation in an ever increasingly industrialized England. Wordsworth, for example, sadly lamented, “The world is too much with us; late and

¹⁰⁸Bratton, 242.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 245-256.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 276-277.

¹¹¹Alexander M. Witherspoon, ed., *The College Survey of English Literature*, rev. ed., (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1951), 677-689.

soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in Nature that is ours.”¹¹²

These and later Victorian writers such as John Ruskin were joined in their devotion to nature by American authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau. Known as Transcendentalists, they looked to nature as a source from which to draw spiritual enlightenment. In fact, Thoreau’s famous journal was inspired by his lengthy, solitary sojourn on Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts. What, however, did these naturalists and those who have followed after them have to offer in terms of how God reveals Himself through His creation? For the most part Emerson and Thoreau are silent with regards to this question, especially when it is addressed from a strictly Christian point of view. Others, however, are a bit more conversant.

One of them, John Muir, who lived from 1808-1914, literally hiked across most of America from Florida to California to Alaska. He loved the outdoors, especially wilderness areas, and was instrumental in helping to establish a myriad of national parks, including such treasures as Yosemite in California. In terms of his religious convictions, Edwin Teale writes, “The forests and mountains formed his temple. His approach to all nature was worshipful. He saw everything evolving yet everything the direct handiwork of God. There was a spiritual and religious exaltation in his experiences with nature. And he came down from the mountains like some bearded prophet to preach of the beauty and healing he had found in this natural temple where he worshipped.”¹¹³ For Muir, therefore, God revealed Himself through the beauty and majesty of His creation.

¹¹²Ibid., 724.

¹¹³John Muir, *The Wilderness World of John Muir*, ed. Edwin Way Teale (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982; Mariner Books, 2001), xiii.

Just being there, especially in wilderness settings, occasioned an awareness of His presence. On one occasion he observed, “We gaze morbidly through civilized fog upon our beautiful world clad with seamless beauty, and see ferocious beasts and wastes and deserts. But savage deserts and beasts and storms are expressions of God’s power inseparably companioned by love.”¹¹⁴

Such is also the case with regards to another naturalist, Sigurd Olson. Living a little closer to the present, he too loved the wilderness, and spent a great deal of his life in the wilds. Like Muir he was deeply influenced by Thoreau, and this becomes clearly evident when he speaks about God in the last chapter of *Reflections from the North Country*. He writes, “Man’s only goal, that of human destiny, is the evolution of his mind to the point where he, and mankind as a whole, becomes aware of love, beauty, and truth. This is the emergent God, and if man works toward it constantly in his outlook, thoughts, and actions, he will become Godlike.”¹¹⁵ This, of course, is a far cry from orthodox Christianity. Olson has reduced God to a philosophical ideal binding all of life together. However, what should not be forgotten is the fact that even though Olson’s understanding of God is deficient, he is at least aware of a greatness beyond himself, a greatness which he encountered and experienced when he was outdoors.

Finally, there are the writings of Annie Dillard, especially her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. It is an account of her experiences while living at this remote location in Virginia’s Roanoke Valley. Although filled with numerous biblical allusions, no clearly defined examples are provided in terms of how God unveils

¹¹⁴Ibid., 313.

¹¹⁵Sigurd F. Olson, *Reflections from the North Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 167.

Himself through His creation. Instead, Dillard sees the realm of nature as a teacher that helps her to grapple with the mysteries of human existence in an uncertain world. In fact, she identifies herself with Moses who at best could only catch a glimpse of God's glory as He passed by the cliff in the rock. She cries out, "I sit on the bridge as on Pisgah or Sinai, and I am both waiting becalmed in a cliff of the rock and banging with all my will, calling like a child beating on a door: Come on out! . . . I know you're there."¹¹⁶

Summary

Having briefly examined scientific, biblical, theological, and philosophical propositions concerning the way in which God reveals Himself through His creation, what conclusions can be drawn? Simply stated, all of the evidence points to two distinct possibilities. God can be encountered through His creation both rationally and experientially.

The first takes place because of humanity's ability to derive conclusions based upon what has been observed. This is precisely what Paul was addressing in Romans 1:20 when he wrote, "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." It is also a conclusion that various theologians and Christian writers have arrived at down through the centuries. Even men like Luther and Calvin, who were somewhat suspicious of natural revelation, could not escape the realization that when people take a serious look at the creation, they almost inevitably postulate a creator. In fact, even those who are uncomfortable with such a

¹¹⁶Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: HarperCollins, 1974; Perennial Classics, 1998), 207.

notion, including scientists who just don't want to deal with the god question, are being driven to the realization that the creation is not an accident. It was created by a creator.

Unfortunately such conclusions do not always lead people to embrace the God who has revealed Himself in His Word, the Bible, and in the person of Jesus Christ. As has been demonstrated in the sentiments of several well-known naturalists, their understanding of God can become a rather nebulous philosophical construct that embraces ideas such as love, beauty, and power. While these are certainly representative of God's nature and character, they do not provide a clear and unambiguous portrait of who He really is, especially as seen from the Christian perspective. Neither do they serve as a basis upon which to build a genuine relationship with Him. At best, a rational appreciation of God alerts people to His existence, and hopefully creates within them a heightened desire to encounter His presence personally. It does not, however, guarantee such an outcome.

For that reason the most fulfilling and satisfying outdoor encounters with God are experiential in nature. Sometimes they take place when creation itself bears testimony to its Creator. The lilting song of a bird at daybreak or a beautiful sunset in the evening can awaken a sense of God's presence as well as a desire to join with creation in praising Him. Christian writers, theologians, and the Bible itself also declare that God actually and personally addresses mankind through His creation. This usually takes place in one of two ways. The first is championed by theologians like Moltmann and Edwards. They envision a God who is actively involved in His creation, who desires to enter into meaningful relationships with all that He has made, who rejoices in the beauty and complexity of the created order, and who embraces it as essentially good. When mankind

comes to God's creation with that same attitude, it's almost as if the Lord and His people are laboring together side by side in the dust of the earth, just as God did when He created Adam. Even if they do not directly speak to one another, they nevertheless sense each other's presence and rejoice in the fellowship that grows out of such an experience.

The second includes those special and rare occasions when God actually uses His creation to convey a message to His people. They sense that He has communicated with them through the forces of nature. The children of Israel, for example, heard the thunderous voice of God on Mount Sinai, and it was during a violent thunderstorm that Luther surrendered his life to full-time Christian ministry. In many instances these experiences have the potential to awaken both spiritual and physical sensitivities. For example, on the road to Damascus everyone saw a light and was startled by an unexpected sound, but only Paul heard the voice of Jesus. It was an event that was both visually perceived and visionally experienced. The same could be said with regards to Jonathan Edwards' religious experiences. They took place in a New England forest, but they also took place within the realm of God's Spirit.

For those who are already Christians, these encounters serve to heighten and deepen their faith and devotion to God. They confirm what they have already experienced through a study of God's Word and through their worship experiences with His people. For those who are not believers, these experiences can become a catalyst for conversion. They may compel the person to move towards a saving relationship with Christ. This is precisely what happened to Augustine when he heard the voice in the garden.

God, therefore, has chosen to reveal Himself through His creation, at times even using it as His megaphone to mankind. This is what Job discovered when he demanded an audience with God. Job 38:1 states, “Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm.” But why is this such a recurring theme, both in the Bible and in the lives of God’s people? Perhaps the answer can be found in this very simple observation. One of the best places to find a gardener is in his garden. God created the world in which we live, and when we spend time in His world, especially that part of it that is not all cluttered up with the things of men, the opportunity arises for a divine encounter. Susan Bratton and Belden Lane’s emphasis on discovering God in wilderness settings should, therefore, not be overlooked or disregarded. It was to just such a place that Jesus went after being baptized by John; and when the nation of Israel strayed from the Lord, it was to just such a place that God said He would once again summon His people:

“Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the desert
and speak tenderly to her.” Hosea 2:14

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

Current Insights

In 1984 Edward O. Wilson published a book entitled *Biophilia*. He had coined this new word to define an observation that he described as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes.”¹ To further illuminate his literary intentions he stated, “I will make the case that to explore and affiliate with life is a deep and complicated process in mental development. To an extent still undervalued in philosophy and religion, our existence depends on this propensity, our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents.”² In other words, in order to be fully human, people need to have meaningful relationships with the world around them, especially that world which is filled with life, and in particular those remote and mysterious places which have escaped the mechanization of modern day man.³ Wilson’s ideas were not greeted with immediate recognition or acceptance, but in recent years they have begun to gather an audience. Other writers, scientists, and researchers have come to support Wilson’s assertions. In a book containing articles by a host of respected academicians, Stephen Kellert addresses the subject of biophilia in this manner. “The biophilia hypothesis proclaims a human

¹Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 10-13.

dependence on nature that extends far beyond the simple issues of material and physical sustenance to encompass as well the human craving for aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive, and even spiritual meaning and satisfaction.”⁴

Is there, however, any evidence to support such claims? A growing body of information suggests there is. For example, a recent article in a regional newspaper stated, “Special technology will shed a little more natural light on learning when the city’s newest high school opens next year.”⁵ The reason for this engineering decision was two fold. First, the designers of the school believe that enhanced lighting will result in significant energy savings, perhaps as much as 30 percent of the light bill. Second, they believe the increased natural lighting will improve the students’ performance. Studies had indicated that students in schools with more natural lighting are more alert, exhibit fewer behavior problems, and miss fewer days in school than those who are not.⁶

Being outdoors also appears to have therapeutic value for those who are facing behavioral problems, especially young people who are dealing with issues such as drug and alcohol addiction. According to Dan Orzech, there are roughly 150 wilderness programs in the United States treating about 15,000 young people.⁷ Many of these programs involve extended periods of time hiking and camping outdoors in wilderness areas. Sometimes they also include solo experiences that range from a few hours to several days. Orzech concludes that students benefit from interpersonal bonding with

⁴Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson, eds., *The Biophilia Hypothesis* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993), 20.

⁵“Natural Light to Brighten Interior of New High School in Chesapeake,” *The Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk, Virginia) 14 August, 2006.

⁶Ibid.

⁷David Orzech, “Mother Nature’s Medicine,” *Social Work Today* 6, No. 4 (July/August 2006): 15.

their instructors and from what he describes as the “power of the wilderness.”⁸ He concludes his article with a quote from Mark Ames, program director for one of these outdoor therapy camps. Describing the healing power of the wilderness, Ames declares, “We like to say that the woods can absorb a lot of anger, a lot of feeling. It’s an opportunity for them [the campers] to take a deep breath, to relax, and maybe, rather than seeing the world revolving narcissistically around them, to feel themselves as a part of something larger than themselves, part of the universe.”⁹

This same theme is reiterated in Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods*. He provides a wealth of information about children and their need for unstructured time outdoors. He laments the growing restrictions that are limiting children’s access to nature, and provides research information to support his claims.¹⁰ After discussing what is happening not only in the United States but also in other countries such as Japan and England, he concludes, “Support for scientific research on this issue is more common overseas than in the United States. Nonetheless, a growing body of evidence indicates that direct exposure to nature is essential for physical and emotional health.”¹¹

It is also essential, Louv believes, for spiritual health. In fact, he dedicates an entire chapter to this proposition. For example, he cites a Massachusetts Institute of Technology research project which indicates that Americans associate the preservation of nature with a belief that it was created by God. He describes how one woman, a conservative Christian, impacted her sterile California neighborhood by transforming her

⁸Ibid., 15-18.

⁹Ibid., 18.

¹⁰Louv, 27-35.

¹¹Ibid., 33-34.

front yard into a natural habitat where neighbors and their children could enjoy being outdoors. He also discusses the sense of connectedness with God that people experience when they are in natural surroundings.¹² For Louv, these and a number of other studies and accounts demonstrate that the spiritual dimensions of life are enhanced by meaningful interaction with the realm of nature. In fact, his views regarding the relationship between nature and spirituality can be summarized by a single sentence. Quoting Paul Gorman, founder and director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, Louv declares, “The extent that we separate our children from creation is the extent to which we separate them from the creator—from God.”¹³

Survey Results

Based upon Louv’s research, which indicates that being outdoors is beneficial—physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually—the question naturally arises as to how God’s people are taking advantage of this opportunity to enhance their well-being. How much time are they spending outdoors, and what kinds of things are they doing when they venture outside? More importantly, is their time outdoors providing them with meaningful encounters with God? Do they sense His presence and if so how would they describe that experience?

This was the subject of a survey that was completed by 305 members of seven churches in the Portsmouth Baptist Association, a geographical area including the cities of Portsmouth, Chesapeake, and Suffolk in the Hampton Roads region of Virginia. Two of the churches are located in an urban setting, four in a suburban setting, and one in a

¹²Ibid., 285-300.

¹³Ibid., 293.

rural setting. The members of these churches, however, reside in a diverse number of localities, some of them driving considerable distances to their congregations' facilities. Calculating whether rural members, for example, spend more time outdoors as opposed to those living in an urban environment was, therefore, impossible to determine. Approximately 80% of those taking the survey were from a European-American origin and 20% were from an African-American origin. Before the survey was given to the members of the seven churches, it was reviewed and formatted by the Matrix Marketing Research Group in Richmond, Virginia. They were also responsible for tabulating the results and establishing a confidence interval of ± 5.7 .

In terms of the amount of time that people spend outdoors and the kinds of activities in which they are involved, the survey indicated that almost 70% spend between one and two hours outdoors per day. Only 30% spend more time outside. When asked to check the kinds of activities in which they are involved, checking each applicable category, the following results were recorded:

(Q.4) What Kind of Activities Do You Pursue When You Are Outdoors?	
Yard work (gardening, grass cutting)	68.6%
Recreation (sports, hiking, walking)	58.0%
Eating (cookouts, picnics)	46.8%
Contemplation (prayer, meditation, Bible study, devotional reading)	21.8%
Employment (outdoor work)	18.8%
Other	24.6%

Those who checked "other" recorded a wide range of activities including such things as "playing with children," "shopping," "boating," and "doing volunteer work." Only a few activities are mentioned as more meditative in nature such as "prayer walking" or

“observing nature.” The survey also indicated that when people are outside, they are usually with someone. In fact, 42% indicated that they were with two or more people. Only 30% indicated that they spend time by themselves when they are outside.

In terms of extended outdoor excursions, 94% of those who took the survey said that they participated in such events rarely, seldom, or occasionally. Only 6% described their outdoor excursions as something in which they were frequently involved. When asked to check the kinds of activities in which they participated during these excursions, checking each applicable category, the following results were recorded:

(Q.7) Why Do You Go on These Outdoor Excursions?	
Fun and fellowship (a hike with friends)	68.3%
Solitude and reflection (time by yourself)	44.5%
Observations and discovery (examination of wildlife)	24.6%
Other	55.0%

Those who checked “other” once again reported a wide range of activities including such things as “exercise,” “hunting,” “yard work,” and “vacation.” Only a few mentioned activities such as “enjoying nature” and “meditation.” In most instances these excursions involved at least one other person. In fact, only 18% could be described as solitary experiences. It should also be noted that most of these experiences took place over a relatively short period of time. Most people, 67.9%, indicated that their excursions lasted for several hours. Some, 14.2%, indicated that they lasted for a day, and others, 14.9%, stated that they took place over several days. Only 2.6% said that their excursions were for one or more weeks, and only 1% for one or more months.

Two concluding questions in the first section of the survey revealed some rather interesting findings. When asked if they were spending more or less time outdoors, 45.4% stated that they were spending less time and only 24.2% more time. The remaining 30.5% indicated that the amount of time spent outdoors in the past and the present were about the same. When asked to indicate whether they would like to spend more time outdoors, the response was, however, decidedly different. An overwhelming majority, 83.4%, said, “yes!” They wanted to be given the opportunity of spending more time outside.

The second part of the survey dealt with people’s encounters with God when they were outdoors. Over 71% indicated that they had sensed His presence on three or more occasions. These occasions took place when they were involved in a multitude of activities such as praying, meditating, walking, reading, observing nature, gardening, driving a car, or admiring God’s handiwork. Some of them were quite unusual such as riding in a military vehicle between Fallujah and Baghdad in Iraq. A small number took place during a crisis such as an automobile accident. Walking, observing, meditating, and praying were the four activities most frequently mentioned. They, as well as the other responses, indicated that there was a contemplative aspect to these experiences. They were more reflective in nature as opposed to being activity based.

For most people these encounters were serendipitous. Sixty nine percent indicated that the events just happened. They were not actively seeking to experience God’s presence. When asked to state whether these encounters took place during times of crisis or during the normal ongoing events of life, nearly 60% said that both were involved. They also indicated that on most occasions, 65.7% of the time, they were by

themselves as opposed to being with other people. The responses to the important question as to whether those taking the survey encountered God rationally or experientially were revealing. For most people, 62%, their encounters were a combination of both. Only 23.7% encountered God solely in a rational fashion, and an even smaller percentage, 14.2%, encountered Him solely by means of their experiences.

In terms of how people defined or explained their experiences with God, there was a wide range of responses, especially since they could check whichever categories were personally applicable. The following results were recorded:

(Q.18) If You Have Experienced God's Presence Personally, How Would You Define That Encounter?	
Feelings or inner awareness	86.0%
Sight that you saw	34.9%
Touch that you felt	18.2%
Sound that you heard	15.2%
Other	10.4%

These results revealed that most people did not have an experience with God that could be clearly perceived as having been one in which they saw Him, heard Him, or felt His touch. Instead they overwhelmingly described their experiences as something that was inwardly perceived. This same tendency was also reflected in the various comments that were made in response to this question. Words like “inner peace,” “just knew,” and “sense of safety” were frequently used. When speaking about something they had seen, most comments were not visional or other worldly in nature. They mentioned things that are seen when someone is outdoors such as a “majestic rainbow,” a “beautiful snowfall,” or a “multi-colored sky.” One person, however, did mention an experiential event that

had a specific, spiritual impact. She said, "I was driving in the rain, after Cathy died. I was praying that Cathy was happy in heaven when suddenly a beautiful rainbow came out. I felt like it was an answer to my prayer." Another individual described his experience as "words spoken to me." No further explanation, unfortunately, was given.

When asked if their encounters with God were physical experiences, spiritual experiences, or a combination of both, the responses were quite varied. Thirty-four percent said they were both physical and spiritual. Forty-one percent said they were spiritual. Twenty-five percent indicated that they were only physical in nature. When compared to the responses in the previous question, it appears that most people defined spiritual as sensing God's presence regardless of whether it took place under ordinary or extraordinary circumstances. In other words, having a spiritual encounter with God did not require seeing a vision, confronting an angel, or being a part of some other kind of supernatural experience. It also appears that most of these spiritual experiences were rather vague and generalized as opposed to something that can be clearly and specifically defined.

Question twenty was one of the most open-ended questions in the survey. It provided those taking the survey with the opportunity to briefly describe their encounters with God. There were a multitude of responses. They can be broken down into five categories. These categories, however, are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes a response could fit into two or three categories at the same time. The first category can be designated as *ecstatic* responses. This was by far the most prevalent response. Those who experienced God in this way were overcome by the kinds of feelings that can best be described as responses to the loving embrace of the Almighty. There was a sense of

oneness with God. They felt secure and protected in His presence. Words such as “comfort,” “tranquility,” “contentment,” “joy,” “warmth,” “calmness,” and “peace” were used to describe these encounters with God. One person stated, “[I] felt like I was cupped in His hands like an infant.” Another said, “It was like a glove being placed over your hand. You knew you were safe.” Still another reported, “[It was like] just feeling that God was with me and everything was going to be alright.”

The second category can best be described as *worshipful* responses. In many ways it was similar to the first in the sense that it was an emotional response to God’s presence. Nevertheless, it was significantly different in that people were responding not only to God’s care and protection but also to His majesty and greatness. They were praising Him for who He is as opposed to what he had done for them personally. Words such as “splendor,” “awesome,” and “wonderful” were frequently used. One person said, “It was a great feeling, as if the trees were moving as I was worshipping God, and He was moving through everything around me.” Another individual also seemed to sense that the realm of nature was participating in the worship of God. He spoke about walking “in the spring in early morning to hear the birds praising God through their chirping.” For some people, however, merely viewing the beauty of God’s creation was enough to create a worshipful response. One person remarked, “Looking at sweeping hills in Barcelona, I felt God’s presence and beauty so strong that I knelt down and cried.”

A third category could be called *guidance* responses. God had informed them or provided them with something that they needed to know. One person indicated that God had issued a warning. This individual said, “I wanted to go somewhere that I knew I should not be, and I didn’t go because of the feeling I got when I stepped in that car.” In

response to an intercessory prayer, another person, a mother, stated, “I asked God why He didn’t save my daughter from cancer and He said, ‘I did, I saved her soul.’” Another respondent mentioned the impartation of intuitive knowledge. He spoke about “a feeling of peace, knowing I’m never alone, suddenly being able to see into situations more clearly.” For still another person’s encounter with God, it was “a question and answer period whereby He [God] did the talking.”

The fourth category could be described as *protective* responses. People encountered God during times in their lives when they were confronted with something dangerous or life threatening. Some of these experiences were described in general terms. One person remarked, “I experienced His healing power with personal illness as well as family [illnesses].” Others, however, were quite specific in nature. Reflecting upon an event, which had taken place years ago, a former marine, stated that he had survived a firefight in Vietnam. With bullets and grenades flying all around him, he had ministered to fellow marines who had been wounded, praying that he could help his fellow marines and not get hit. Another spoke of a near drowning in the Lynnhaven River at Virginia Beach. He said, “I saw a light and was saved by someone who jumped off a boat.” While working in the garden, another individual felt that God had protected her from a lightening bolt that hit nearby.

Such experiences were very similar in nature to the fifth category, *supernatural* responses. The main difference between the two is that with regards to the latter, God appears to be manifesting His presence in a way that is more keenly and personally experienced. The realm of the spirit is asserting itself into the realm of the physical in a purposeful manner, sometimes even manifesting its ascendancy. Only a few individuals

described such experiences. One said, “I saw or experienced a bright light that gradually disappeared.” Another indicated, “I heard a voice and then felt a touch. I knew it was God. I marveled at His presence.” The most dramatic involved a potential automobile accident. The individual reported, “I was making a left turn at an intersection. About mid way of the turn I saw a car coming, very fast, and my steering wheel seemed to turn a sharp left putting my car into a u-turn and the other car stopped about 20 inches from me.”

These as well as a number of other accounts clearly demonstrate that Christians have had some very meaningful encounters with God when they are outdoors. These experiences, however, are not unique to the outdoors. Ninety-one percent of those who took the survey indicated that they had encountered God’s presence when they were indoors as well as being outdoors. Given an opportunity to check whichever categories were personally applicable, 66% said that they had taken place during personal devotions at home, 63% during worship services at church, and 41% during Bible study. Thirty percent said that these experiences had taken place at other times such as visiting the hospital, talking to other people, praying, going in for surgery, attending a Christian concert, or simply being involved in the ongoing, everyday events of life. Almost half, 45%, said that these non-outdoor encounters took place at about the same frequency as those that they experienced when they were outdoors. Thirty-five percent said they were more frequent, and only 20% said they were less frequent. Likewise, over 68% said that their outdoor and their non-outdoor experiences were equally meaningful.

The final question in the survey asked people to describe how these outdoor encounters with God had changed their lives. Once again, there was a wide range of

comments out of which three categories of responses began to emerge. The first was a feeling of being *drawn closer to God*. One person commented about being “more aware of God’s presence.” Several intimated that they now have “a closer walk with God.” Numerous individuals indicated that their faith had been strengthened. The second category could be described as a *deeper appreciation of nature*, especially in terms of it being the result of God’s handiwork. One person, for example, said, “My outdoor encounters have allowed me to see the awesomeness of God in nature, rain, snow, sunshine and darkness.” Another added, “I don’t take nature for granted. I thank Him [God] every day for the beauty that surrounds us.” The third category could be defined as the *spiritual growth* that had taken place as a result of these outdoor experiences. One person said that a “daily outdoor walk and prayer time in a remote area” had prepared him for full-time ministry. Another indicated that she was more patient, and still another commented, “I’m a better person all around.”

Summary

When everything is taken into consideration with regards to the research that was presented in this chapter, a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, being outdoors or being exposed to that which has been outdoors, awakens people to their connectivity with all that surrounds them. The beauty, majesty, and complexity of the world, especially that which possesses life, intrigues and fascinates mankind. It’s a reminder to people that they are a part of something bigger than themselves. This is what Edward Wilson is suggesting when he uses the word *biophilia*, and that’s what therapists are attempting to accomplish when they expose troubled teens to an outdoor environment.

This innate interest and curiosity also begins to raise the question of origins. Where did all of this come from? Did the realm of nature invent itself, or was it created? People begin to consider the possibility that there is a creator of the creation. This is precisely what happened to a lonely little boy who ventured into the attic of his new home many years ago. He found a collection of birds' eggs and butterflies, and was intrigued by their fragile beauty. Over and over again he returned to the attic, fascinated by what he had discovered. "The experience," he said, "left me with a reverence for the handiwork of God that never left me." The name of this little boy was Ronald Reagan, the 40th president of our nation.¹⁴

Being outdoors, or in an outdoor environment, is, therefore, a way in which to introduce people to God. In fact, 71% of those who took the survey said that they had encountered God on three or more occasions when they were outside. Only 9% said that they had never experienced His presence when they were outdoors. They also reported that they wanted to spend more time outdoors, but in a sizeable number of instances this desire was not being reflected in their current life styles. Some, in fact, were spending even less time outside than they had previously. Their comments mirror the findings of Richard Louv in *Last Child in the Woods*. He reports that in Western societies people are increasingly being isolated from the outdoors, especially those places that could be described as wilderness areas. For example, he notes that children are often no longer able to roam on their own because of fears for their safety and security. Likewise, he concludes that they are more familiar with cartoon characters on TV than with the native

¹⁴Paul Kengor, "Providential President," *World*, 7 February 2004, 34.

plants and animals that live around them in their communities.¹⁵ He believes that these trends have created a phenomenon which he calls *nature-deficit disorder*, a condition that impairs people's health and well-being.¹⁶

Therefore, a second conclusion can be drawn. People need to spend more time outdoors. For Christians this can be beneficial both physically and spiritually. The overwhelming majority of those who took the survey, for example, reported that they had encountered God when they were outdoors, even though these encounters took place on a rather limited basis. For example, nearly 70% indicated that they spent no more than two hours per day outside, and when they did, the vast majority pursued activities with other people such as gardening or cookouts, as opposed to those that would be more meditative in nature. The survey also indicated that outdoor excursions, especially those over extended periods of time, were more the exception than the rule. This, of course, is contrary to the biblical and historical accounts of people's outdoor encounters with God. More often than not, they took place in rugged environments, frequently involving significant periods of solitude. What would happen, therefore, if people spent even more time outdoors, especially with regards to extended excursions into areas that are more thoroughly removed from the distractions of mankind? One cannot help but surmise that the consequences would be of significant spiritual value.

A third conclusion that arises out of the survey is that people's encounters with God are difficult to define. Those taking the survey said that their experiences with God were both rational and experiential in nature. They also said that they took place during

¹⁵Louv, 39-111.

¹⁶Ibid., 34.

the ongoing events of life as well as during crisis situations. Generally speaking most people defined an encounter with God as being spiritual, regardless of whether it was either physically or supernaturally perceived. There are, however, three things that do stand out. First, most people's encounters with God involved a feeling or an inner awareness of His presence. A much smaller percentage encountered Him in a way that could be more specifically delineated as something that they heard or saw. Second, most people were by themselves when they encountered God. It was a solitary experience. Finally, these encounters with God took place for the most part in response to something that was seen or heard in the realm of nature such as a beautiful sunset or the melodious song of a bird. Only a few individuals encountered something that could be clearly defined as a supernatural, other worldly experience.

A fourth conclusion involves the relationship between outdoor and non-outdoor encounters with God. The survey clearly revealed that non-outdoor experiences were just as prevalent and took place just as or perhaps even a bit more frequently than those on the outside. They were also just as meaningful. In other words, God uses a variety of ways in which to communicate His presence to mankind. Revealing Himself through His creation is one of the ways but not the only way that He addresses humanity. In fact, God's revelations of Himself through His Word and through His Son, Jesus Christ, are clearly superior. Nevertheless, the creation is a viable means through which people can have life changing encounters with the Lord.

Finally, the survey indicates that when people encounter God through His creation, they respond in a number of different ways. These responses can be grouped into the five categories that were previously mentioned. For some, it is an ecstatic

experience; for others, a worshipful one. Some people receive guidance and others are afforded divine protection. A few are even the recipients of God's personal, supernatural presence and intervention. As a result, people are drawn closer to God, develop a deeper appreciation for nature, and experience transformational, spiritual growth.

This final conclusion is also supported by a number of personal testimonies. These testimonies were gathered independently of the survey. Nevertheless, they support the survey's findings, especially with regards to the transformational power of these outdoor encounters with God. Two are particularly relevant. The first involves a former drug addict and alcoholic, who was hiking the Appalachian Trail. After a life of petty crime that had involved at least one incarceration, he was desperately searching for something that would provide him with a new meaning and purpose in life. Viewing the stars at night and listening to the testimonies of several friends he had met along the way helped him to accept the reality of God. He did not, however, have a personal relationship with this Creator of the universe. Then one night, as he was backpacking all alone in the mountains, the remnants of a hurricane struck the area where he was camping. The fury of the storm matched the fury within his soul, but by the next morning the grace of God had quieted both, and he had become a Christian.¹⁷

Another account involves a teenager who at the age of fourteen had come to one of those crossroads in life. Was God real, or was He just a figment of her imagination? She had always enjoyed thunderstorms because they reminded her of God's power and awesomeness. On this particular evening, however, the thunderstorm that had just passed over brought no reassurance of His reality. Watching it move across the far distant

¹⁷A personal interview with a resident of Damascus, Virginia, August 2006.

horizon, she cried out, “Lord, if You are real, could You please show me a light.” No sooner had she uttered that last word, than two streaks of lightning arched across the sky right in front of the window where she was standing, followed by a resounding clap of thunder. She remained quiet for a few moments, letting the butterflies in her stomach settle down, and then she said, “I will never doubt You again.” And she hasn’t.¹⁸

These and other accounts, as well as the survey itself, clearly indicate that God reveals Himself through His creation. For the person who is not a Christian or who has no knowledge of the Bible, such encounters may be the first step in a process that ultimately leads from an awareness of His presence to a genuine personal relationship. For others these experiences are reassurances of God’s continuing care and concern. For still others, they are the trademarks of an ongoing intimacy and fellowship between the Lord and His people. In each and every one of them, however, there is this one singularity. The creation is a medium through which God reaches out to communicate His love to mankind.

¹⁸A personal interview with a professor at Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia, spring of 2006.

CHAPTER 6

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Christian Ecology

If the creation affords mankind with the opportunity for meaningful encounters with God, then its care and preservation are genuine and legitimate concerns. This is particularly true if God is still personally involved with His creation, a theological position championed by theologians such as Jonathan Edwards and Jürgen Moltmann. In fact, Moltmann believes that the wholesale destruction of the natural environment is one of the biggest challenges facing modern day man. He writes:

Our situation today is determined by the ecological crisis of our whole scientific and technological civilization, and by the exhaustion of nature through human beings. This crisis is deadly, and not for human beings alone. For a very long time now it has meant death for other living things and for the natural environment as well. Unless there is a radical reversal in the fundamental orientation of our human societies, and unless we succeed in finding an alternative way of living and dealing with other living things and with nature, this crisis is going to end in a wholesale catastrophe.¹

Moltman, of course, is not alone. A number of people, including scientists, researchers, naturalists, and theologians, have been addressing this issue for quite some time. The alarms, however, began to sound more stridently in the 1960's and early 70's, as the United States ventured into outer space. When people saw photographs of a blue orb

¹Moltmann, 20.

spinning in the blackened vastness of the universe, the world was immediately perceived in a new way. No longer were its resources considered to be inexhaustible. Increasingly it was referred to as “spaceship earth.” People began to sense that there were environmental issues that could no longer be ignored. This growing concern was also reflected in the Christian community. Eric Rust, for example, a professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote in 1971, “Christian Theology has too often neglected the implications of the Christian revelation for the natural environment in which man’s earthly existence is set.”² Based upon this premise, he then proposed a new approach that recognizes “the organic interrelatedness of man and nature.”³ In other words, man and his world must find a way in which to live in harmony with one another. Otherwise both will be diminished and eventually destroyed.

Unfortunately, the warnings of the environmentalists as well as the words of the theologians have been largely ignored. In fact, some have even been martyred, as was the case with Dorothy Stang, an elderly Roman Catholic nun from America who was killed trying to protect the Amazon rain forest and its poor residents from loggers and ranchers.⁴ Even when eighty-five evangelical leaders, including Rick Warren, released a statement called “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action,” the response was not altogether favorable. Concerned that the National Association of Evangelicals might

²Eric C. Rust, *Nature—Garden or Desert?* (Waco: Word Books, 1971), 15.

³*Ibid.*, 94.

⁴Michael Astor, “Brazilians Mourn Nun Killed for Her Activism,” *The Virginian Pilot* (Norfolk), 16 February 05, A11.

adopt this report on global warming, a number of leaders within that organization urged the NAE not to take a position with regards to this topic.⁵

Meanwhile, reports of environmental degradation have continued to increase. A United Nations report, for example, states that greenhouse gases, a suspected cause of environmental warming, reached record highs in 2005.⁶ Another report warns, “Without more ecosystem-wide protections, global fish and seafood species will collapse by 2048.”⁷ Still another focuses on the oyster crisis in the Chesapeake Bay of Virginia. It declares, “In little more than a century, over fishing, disease, and pollution nearly eradicated the Bay’s oyster population. By the early 1990’s, the population had plummeted by 99 percent.”⁸

In light of these and all of the other reports that are being disseminated about the environment, some churches and religious groups are beginning to initiate a response. One Baptist congregation in Boston, for instance, encourages its members to bring their own coffee mugs instead of using disposable cups.⁹ Others are providing recycling bins for plastic and aluminum. Some churches have even volunteered to pick up trash along the nation’s highways. By and large, however, these efforts are more the exception than the rule. There is not a great deal of environmental concern among many of God’s

⁵Robert Marus, “Groups of Evangelical Leaders Face Off over Global Warming,” *The Religious Herald* (Richmond), 16 February 2006, 7.

⁶Elaine Engeler, “Greenhouse Gases Reach Record Highs in 2005,” *The Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk), 4 November 2006, A12.

⁷Scott Harper, “Study: Sea Life in Dire Peril,” *The Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk), 3 November 2006, A1.

⁸“Restoring Chesapeake Gold,” Chesapeake Bay Foundation pamphlet, Annapolis, MD, 7.

⁹“Boston Congregation Working to Be Green” *The Religious Herald* (Richmond), 26 October 2006, 9.

people, and even when there is, it is sometimes met with ridicule and even hostility. People do not care about the natural world around them because they are not a part of it. They spend most of their time in a man-made environment. They may also be afflicted by a theological error that has its origin in a misunderstanding arising out of the book of Genesis.

In Genesis 1:26, God says, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” Commenting on this passage of Scripture, Moltmann states, “The crisis of the modern world is not due merely to the technologies for the exploitation of nature; nor can we put it down to the sciences which made human beings the lords of nature. It is based much more profoundly on the strivings of human beings for power and domination.”¹⁰ This striving for power, he says is based upon a doctrinal misunderstanding of Genesis 1:26, one which fosters the belief that in order to be like God, mankind must not only have dominion over the earth but must actually subdue and rule over the realm of nature, even if that involves its wholesale destruction.¹¹ In other words, creation is frequently viewed as a potential adversary that must be mastered and controlled to fulfill mankind’s needs and desires. This, Moltmann declares, was not God’s intention. In fact, he postulates the need for a whole new theological doctrine of creation, one in which people no longer think of nature as

¹⁰Moltmann, 20-21.

¹¹Ibid., 21.

“unclaimed property” but rather see themselves as the caretakers of an interconnected community of life.¹²

This same concept is expressed in Brady and Neuzil’s *A Spiritual Field Guide*. Commenting on the above passage of Scripture, they isolate the words *dominion* and *image*. They suggest that in the Hebrew language the word *image* comes from the same root as *viceroys*, a viceroy being someone who has been appointed to rule in the name and character of the king to which he owes his allegiance. The word *dominion*, they believe is better understood as *stewardship* instead of *domination*.¹³ Although their interpretation of the words *image* and *domination* are open to debate, such an understanding certainly fits within the framework of the biblical account in Genesis. Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden and was appointed “to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 2:15).” He was God’s gardener with regards to the vegetation and he was God’s husbandry man with regards to the animals whom he named. In other words, being made in God’s image and being granted dominion over God’s creation does not necessarily mean that mankind has permission to abuse and misuse it, but rather that humanity has the privilege of joining with the Lord in its care and preservation.

When the relationship between mankind and the realm of nature is defined in such a manner, the possibility for meaningful encounters with God through His creation are greatly enhanced. For one thing, nature is no longer just an object, something to be utilized for man’s pleasure and then wantonly discarded. For another, it becomes a meeting place where God and humanity can commune with one another. This is what

¹²Ibid., 2-4.

¹³Bernard Brady and Mark Neuzil, *A Spiritual Field Guide* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 51.

took place in the Garden of Eden, and Moltmann believes that it is a genuine possibility for modern man as well. He writes, “If the Holy Spirit is ‘poured out’ on the whole creation, then he creates the community of all created things with God and with each other, making it that fellowship of creation in which all created things communicate with one another and with God, each in its own way.”¹⁴

Addressing this same topic, Jonathan Edwards also stresses the interconnectedness of God, His creation, and mankind. For Edwards the creation is the ongoing actuality of God’s creativity in time and space. It is a tangible repetition or image of His divine beauty and majesty. The appreciation, therefore, of what has been created leads to an appreciation of the Creator. It also leads to an appreciation of the fact that God has not completed His creation, but that it is an ongoing process, which will be culminated in the unveiling of a new heaven and a new earth.¹⁵ Mankind’s acknowledgement and participation in this work of God is thus of significant importance. It becomes the basis for His involvement in the care and restoration of the creation, a theological concept first expressed by Paul in Romans 8:19-21 and given further explanation in works such as Moltmann’s *God in Creation*.¹⁶ For Paul, as well as for other theologians like Moltmann, God’s redemption embraces not only humanity but also the world in which humanity dwells. It too is crying out, eagerly awaiting its liberation from the bondage of death and decay.

¹⁴Moltmann, 11.

¹⁵Sang Hyun Lee, “Edwards on God and Nature: Resources for Contemporary Theology,” in *Edwards in Our Time*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee and Allen C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 39-44.

¹⁶Moltmann, 39.

With that in mind, mankind cannot be absolved of the responsibility to be ecologically concerned for and involved in the care and preservation of the natural environment. Rather mankind must become God's partner in this endeavor, an endeavor that can begin in the simplest of ways.¹⁷ In so doing, perhaps a sound will be heard from on high, similar to that which was uttered at the dawn of creation when God said, "Behold, it is good. It is very good!"

Spiritual Pathways

In addition to being involved in the care of God's creation, the question naturally arises as to whether there are other activities and practices that can help people to have meaningful encounters with God when they are outdoors? Based upon the ideas and concepts that have been presented in this paper, there are a number of practical suggestions and useful applications that deserve to be mentioned.

The first is rather simple and immediately obvious. Get outside, even if it is just for a few moments early in the morning or later in the day. One individual described his walks as an ongoing conversation with God. They had a meeting every morning as he walked around the neighborhood before going to work. It was his prayer time with the Lord, an experience reminiscent of the Old Testament admonition, "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so (Amos 3:3)?" These early morning devotional walks helped to prepare this man for the challenges of a stressful, work environment. He said that he could sense God's presence as he walked with the Lord early in the morning.

¹⁷The planting of trees around a person's home lowers the cost of air conditioning in the summer and reduces the level of CO² in the atmosphere. In fact, 50 million trees planted in strategic locations around people's homes would create an energy savings equal to the construction of seven large power plants or the amount of energy that is consumed by 683,000 homes each year. Stuart Leavenworth, "Shades of a Global Warming Fix," *The Virginian Pilot* (Norfolk), 20 August 2006, J1.

The second is a bit more defined and a little longer in terms of time spent outdoors. In Eugene Peterson's *Working the Angles*, he defines it as "Sabbath keeping." It is a special day each week that has been purposely emptied of life's ongoing activities so that he and his wife can be spiritually renewed. On Mondays they pack a lunch and head out into the country, choosing a natural setting that varies from week to week. They begin their Sabbath with prayer and the reading of a psalm. Then they spend the rest of the morning in silence. Describing this part of their day, Peterson writes, "We walk leisurely, emptying ourselves, opening ourselves to what is there: fern shapes, flower fragrance, birdsong, granite outcropping, oaks and sycamores, rain, snow, sleet, wind."¹⁸ Their silence is broken as they eat lunch, sharing their thoughts, ideas, and observations. Then they return home, renewed and ready to resume the duties and obligations of pastoral ministry.

The observation or study of nature is another way people can be introduced to both the creation and the Creator. As previously mentioned, a growing number of scientists are being drawn to God through their investigations of the physical universe. They are not, however, the only ones. People of all ages and backgrounds are endowed with a capacity to be observant and knowledgeable of the natural environment that surrounds them. They are also capable of experiencing a high degree of fascination as they uncover the intricacies of God's creation. This is clearly evident in the life of Jonathan Edwards. His youthful study of flying spiders helped him to develop a greater appreciation not only for arachnids but also for the God who had created them. In fact, Edwards' knowledge of spiders was interwoven into his famous sermon, "Sinners in the

¹⁸Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987; reprint, 1993), 81.

Hands of an Angry God.”¹⁹ This same kind of fascination with nature can also be manifested in the lives of children and young people today. When one of them looks up into a star filled night and beholds its grandeur in wondrous amazement, that person is well on his or her way to sensing the presence and power of God.

A fourth possibility for introducing people to the God of creation involves the utilization of camp experiences. There are hundreds if not thousands of camps all across America, many of them with a Christian orientation.²⁰ They offer a variety of activities and accommodations. A few stress the more rugged aspects of being outdoors such as sleeping in a tent and cooking over an open fire. Others, however, are more like a Holiday Inn in the woods. Activities can involve anything from adventure sports to repairing homes in economically depressed areas.

Two things, however, should be noted with regards to this approach to promoting encounters with God through His creation. First, a growing number of people, especially children and youth, perceive the outdoors as a foreboding and alien environment. They prefer their ipods and laptops at home as opposed to spending a week in the woods.²¹ Second, when they are outdoors, there are few if any clearly defined methodologies for helping them to have meaningful experiences with God. A variety of programming options are utilized ranging all the way from lectures about God and nature to just letting

¹⁹Jonathan Edwards, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, xi.

²⁰Christian Camp and Conference Association, P.O. Box 62189, Colorado Springs, CO 80962, (719) 260-9400, info@ccca-us.org is an excellent resource for learning more about camping from a Christian perspective.

²¹Louv, 115-145.

campers explore the outdoors in the hope that something meaningful will transpire.²²

Camp experiences, therefore, offer the potential, but not necessarily the realization of those kinds of outdoor encounters with God that positively impact people's lives.

A fifth recommendation, and one that embraces all of those previously mentioned, is meditation. Unfortunately, the practice of meditation has become a lost art for many Christians, and as a result some people are turning to other religions in search of this experience. A recent article in the *Virginian-Pilot*, "Buddsters: Teenage Buddhist Hipsters Find Inner Peace Amid Adolescent Stress," addresses this subject. It reported that a growing number of young people are turning to the meditational practices of Buddhism as a way to deal with the turmoil of adolescence. In so doing some are rejecting Christianity altogether while others are combining the two into a new religious amalgam.²³ What the article failed to mention, however, is the fact that Christianity possesses a rich meditational history, a history that had its origin in the deserts of the Middle East and a history that still involves encountering God through His creation.

With that in mind, there are a number of meditational practices that deserve to be mentioned. The first is prayer. When Jesus prayed, the Scriptures indicate He usually prayed outdoors in secluded places, away from the crowds that were so often a part of His ministry. This is still a useful enterprise as evidenced by the thousands who gather on

²²For additional information, consult the research study "Nature as a Means to Spiritual Growth" by Tim Parker at www.experientialeducators.com/natureandministryreport.htm [24 November 2006].

²³Rupali Arora, "Buddsters: Teenage Buddhist Hipsters Find Inner Peace Amid Adolescent Stress," *The Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk) 17 November 2006, E3.

Prayer Mountain in South Korea. In little grottos all over its slopes, people fast and pray, seeking God's presence and power for the spiritual needs of their lives.²⁴

A second practice is devotional reading, whether it's passages of Scripture from the Bible or inspirational poetry and prose. While most people usually envision this kind of reading as an indoor activity, Brady and Neuzil suggest that an outdoor environment is better suited to this kind of meditational endeavor. In fact, their excellent volume, *A Spiritual Field Guide*, is designed to be used during day trips, weekend trips, weeklong trips, and even "backyard breaks."²⁵

A third practice, and one which is seldom utilized in a disciplined manner, is introspection. People live such busy lives that they never sit down to seriously contemplate the meaning and significance of what they are doing. At least one Christian camp, however, has endeavored to address this issue. Young people are encouraged to go off by themselves and reflect upon what they have been experiencing. This kind of thoughtful ruminating is at the heart of what meditation is really all about, and the appropriateness of an outdoor setting for the pursuit of this practice should not be discounted.²⁶

A fourth and related practice is journaling. Gordon MacDonald feels that this is a very important aspect of developing a person's spiritual life. Comparing a person's inner life to the cultivation and care of a secret garden, he writes, "When I studied some of the mystic and contemplative Christians, I found that one practical way to learn to listen to

²⁴Paul Y. Cho, *More Than Numbers* (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 99-102.

²⁵Brady and Neuzil, 13-22.

²⁶Confrontation Point, www.ConfrontationPoint.org, is a Christian camping enterprise located in Tennessee. Its devotional workbooks for campers as well as its programming emphasize the use of reflection as a valuable tool for spiritual growth.

God speak in the garden of my private world was to keep a journal. With a pencil in hand ready to write, I found that there was an expectancy, a readiness to hear anything God might wish to whisper through my reading and reflection.”²⁷

In summation, when people want to encounter God, one of the best places to find Him is in His creation. Observing what He has made in contemplative solitude, accompanied by prayer and the guidance of inspirational literature and the Bible, can help to prepare individuals for those serendipitous moments when God draws near.

Summary

Mankind needs to become reconnected with the realm of nature. It is essential to his continued existence upon this planet. It is also of crucial importance with regards to his relationship with the Creator. Fortunately, the utilization of spiritual practices such as meditation as well as involvement in the care and preservation of the environment afford people with an opportunity to have meaningful encounters with God. Informing them of this possibility and helping them to actually experience it from a Christian perspective are worthwhile endeavors that should be vigorously pursued.

²⁷Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2003), 196.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

Pertinent Insights

Can people have genuine and meaningful encounters with God when they are in an outdoor environment? This paper has attempted to address that question from a biblical, historical, and theological perspective. Personal testimonies, pertinent research, and the writings of numerous authors have also been employed in this study. Additional insights have been gleaned from a survey given to the members of seven Southern Baptist churches. This survey sought to discern how much time people are actually spending outdoors and its impact upon their relationship with God. Based upon everything that has been examined in the pursuit of a better understanding of this topic, what conclusions can be drawn?

The first, and the most obvious, is that people really do have meaningful encounters with God when they are outdoors. The biblical record, the historical accounts, the survey results, and the personal testimonies all support this conclusion. Furthermore, the writings of various theologians, scientists, naturalists, and contemporary Christian authors, provide additional insights as to how this revelatory process takes place. For some people it is a rational realization based upon what they had observed when they were outdoors. They look up into the heavens on a starry night, for instance, and come away with a distinct impression that what they have seen was created by God. For

others, their encounters with God are more experiential in nature. They sense His presence in a way that at times can be sensually perceived both physically and spiritually. They feel that God is actually communicating with them through His creation. That was certainly the case, for example, in the life of Francis of Assisi, and it continues to be a part of people's lives today.

A second conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that encountering God through His creation is a genuinely beneficial experience. A growing body of research, in fact, indicates that just being outdoors improves people's sense of well-being, and as such has become a recognized treatment alternative for troubled teens. When examined from a spiritual perspective, being outdoors generates a number of significantly positive outcomes. People feel more secure and at peace. They sense God's protection and guidance. Their relationship with the Lord is strengthened, and they gain a new appreciation for the beauty and majesty of His creation. These encounters can even become transformational experiences. People's lives are changed in ways that are profoundly rewarding not only for themselves, but also for others. For example, had it not been for an encounter with God on a hillside near Los Angeles, the world might well have been denied an evangelist named Billy Graham.

A third conclusion that arises out of this study is the universality of mankind's creational encounters with God. People may not choose to meet Him through the reading of His Word, the Bible, but they cannot escape the possibility of meeting Him through His world, the creation. When confronted by an outdoor environment that is not only beautiful to behold but which is also imbued with an amazing panorama of complexity, a question naturally begins to arise within people's minds and hearts. They begin to ask,

“Where did all of this come from? Who made it? Is there, indeed, someone or something who created the universe?” Without even realizing it, those who raise these questions are being drawn into the presence of God. That’s what Paul was talking about when he spoke to the people of Lystra in Acts 14:17, and that’s what men like Augustine and Aquinas were proposing in their theological discourses.

There is, however, a fourth conclusion that must also be stated concerning God’s revelation of Himself through His creation. It does not clearly and specifically define His nature and character. Nor does it provide the means by which people can experience His salvation. At best it is a general revelation which leads people to God, but which is not sufficient in terms of either establishing or maintaining a meaningful relationship with Him.

In fact, this revelation of God through His creation can be easily distorted. People can decide to worship the creation instead of the Creator. This was frequently the case among ancient peoples who worshipped the forces of nature, and it remains as a temptation in today’s world as well. For example, there are philosophical and ecological movements that have replaced the Christian understanding of God with one that envisions a mystical, impersonal presence and power emanating throughout the universe. Whether featured in the dialogue of a blockbuster movie, which continually intones, “May the Force be with you,” or celebrated in the writings of respected intellectuals like Emerson and Thoreau, such notions have gained quite a following, both in America and abroad. Paul’s warning in Romans 1:8-23 should, therefore, be taken quite seriously along with what Luther and Calvin had to say regarding this subject. They were justifiably

concerned that, when given an opportunity, mankind can use the creation to lead people away from God instead of to Him.

These men of God were also cognizant of a fifth, tangential conclusion. Although it has not been definitively developed in this paper, it is nevertheless, of significant importance. Not only God, but God's adversary, has access to mankind through the creation. This is clearly evident in the account describing the fall of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. Satan disguised himself as a serpent and made his first appearance in the Garden of Eden. He also made his presence known during Jesus' forty days of fasting in the Judean wilderness. Later, legions of his demons were cast out of a man who was living in a graveyard beside the Sea of Galilee. In fact, wilderness areas have often been associated with the presence of evil, as evidenced, for example, in the life of Antony, the father of monasticism. He was continually battling demonic oppression in the deserts of Egypt. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the worship of Satan is frequently conducted in outdoor locations, and that various religious movements, such as Mormonism, have their origin in just such an environment. Its founder, Joseph Smith, for instance, reported that his first encounter with spiritual beings took place in a forest in the state of New York.¹

With that in mind, all outdoor encounters should be carefully scrutinized in light of God's Word. Are they similar or dissimilar to the biblical record, and do they lead people to embrace or reject the God who has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ? Although not directly addressed in the survey, it is interesting to note that most people indicated that their outdoor and non-outdoor encounters with God took place at

¹Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, Bethany House Publishers, 1997), 184.

about the same level of frequency and were equally meaningful. Had they been asked to compare what they had experienced, the author of this study believes that for the most part, their responses would have been of a similar nature. Nevertheless, Paul's warning in II Corinthians 11:14 should be kept clearly in mind. Satan can masquerade as an angel of light, and sometimes he utilizes the realm of nature as the format for that masquerade.

A sixth conclusion suggests that there are some things that people can do to enhance their outdoor encounters with God. For one thing they can simply spend more time outside. Most of those, for example, who took the survey, indicated that they wanted to spend more time outdoors, perhaps even sensing its importance for their well-being. When queried as to whether that was actually taking place, a significant number, however, reported just the opposite. Even more importantly, when people do spend time outdoors, they tend to surround themselves not only with other people, but also with all of the accoutrements of our modern day, technological society. As a result they fail to take advantage of two things that appear to be of significant value in terms of acquiring a more meaningful relationship with God through His creation. They are best described as solitude and separation. Being alone and getting away from life's distractions help to create an atmosphere which is more conducive to divine encounters. The survey is supportive of this observation, and it is certainly evident in the lives of men like Jacob and Moses in the Old Testament, as well as in the lives of more recent individuals such as Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney. In each and every instance, they were by themselves in an outdoor environment that, for the most part, could be described as a remote location. The same is true today. Getting outdoors, hopefully for an extended

period of time, in a place not frequented by others, helps to prepare a person for a divine encounter with God.

If God reveals Himself through His creation in ways that are genuinely beneficial to mankind, then there is one final conclusion that must be addressed. People need to be informed of this opportunity so they can experience it for themselves. They need to discover that God has created a wonderful world for mankind, and has given humanity the privilege of joining with Him in its redemption. Such endeavors can be accomplished in any number of ways beginning with discipleship materials similar to Blackaby's *Experiencing God*. Developing such a workbook, especially if it possessed interactive DVD capabilities, would be an interesting and exciting study for small groups as well as for individuals. Seminars held in churches or at denominational conferences would also be a way in which to create an interest in exploring this topic. In addition, camp programs and retreats, especially those that take place in outdoor settings, might prove to be not only informative but also inspirational. Finally, the inclusion of this subject in the curriculum of Christian schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries should be given serious consideration.² These and other steps could, and, indeed, should be undertaken to insure that people have the privilege of encountering the God who has revealed Himself through His creation.

²There is a growing realization of the value of outdoor education. Children in the public school system of California, for example, are invited to participate in outdoor programs at camps where they learn about nature. There are also an increasing number of courses and even degrees being offered in institutions of higher education, some of which are addressing spiritual concerns similar to those that have been presented in this paper.

Recommendations for Further Study

No study is ever complete. There are always lingering questions and unresolved issues that require further investigation. Such is certainly the case regarding this research project. There are a number of topics deserving future consideration. The first involves the survey. It needs to be more carefully defined, and the sampling needs to be expanded. For example, some of those who took the survey considered driving to work an outdoor activity. While driving is indeed something that takes place in the outdoors, it is worlds apart from a secluded walk in the woods. A more carefully defined description of what is meant by the term “outdoors” might have been helpful. Likewise, a broader sampling, especially in terms of defining differences between age groups and racial backgrounds might have proven to be insightful. For instance, do African Americans spend more or less time outdoors than European Americans? And if so, are their encounters with God in that environment more or less frequent, and are they more or less meaningful? There were simply not enough people taking the survey to draw any conclusions with regards to these questions. It might also be interesting to compare the responses of Christians and non-Christians or even among various denominations within Christianity. Since the study only involved Southern Baptists, none of these possibilities could be addressed.

A second area that desperately requires further investigation is the Christian response to the growing ecological crisis. Although briefly discussed in this paper, a growing body of research indicates that humanity is doing irreparable harm to the natural environment. Wilderness areas are disappearing, and pollution is becoming more and more widespread. Some Christian leaders have begun to address this topic, but for the

most part, God's people are completely oblivious to what is taking place around them. In fact, they are actually contributing to the environment's degradation by virtue of their incessant consumerism. How does the current life style of modern Americans, including those who call themselves Christians, measure up to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ? Addressing the subject of ecology from a genuinely Christian point of view and conveying that message to the average church member is an endeavor worthy of pursuit.

A more detailed treatment of the spiritual pathways that lead people to God in an outdoor setting should also be explored. Otherwise they will not know how to apply what they learned in terms of having meaningful encounters with God through His creation. Although this paper has attempted to provide some guidance in this area, a much more detailed presentation of pertinent research is required. Unfortunately, at the present time there appears to be a dearth of available information with regards to helping people engage in this kind of spiritual adventure. What information is available tends to be rather vague and general in nature. There are, however, a few noteworthy exceptions. One of them is found in T. M. Moore's *Consider the Lilies*. He provides the reader with an opportunity to examine trees from both a biblical and a biological point of view. He then proceeds to discuss how trees convey spiritual truths about God.³ His presentation could be easily adapted to a retreat experience in which participants not only learn more about trees but also about the God who created them.

A fourth and final recommendation for further study involves the pursuit of a psychological understanding of what is taking place when people have an outdoor encounter with God. The field of experiential education is beginning to throw some light

³Moore, 103-110.

on this subject, and initial conclusions are being drawn, some of which are quite interesting. The first has to do with the majesty and mystery of nature, especially when people are subjected to its overwhelming grandeur. William Unsoeld addressed this topic in a paper presented at a conference in 1974. Using Rudolph Otto's terminology, he spoke about the way in which nature possesses spiritual values that are similar to those associated with God. Both nature and God are mysterious, powerful, and fascinating. Just as a distant mountain peak allures the climber up its slopes in spite of the inherent dangers, the realm of nature, especially that which can be described as a wilderness, draws people not only unto itself but also unto the One who created it.⁴

A second observation that arises from the field of experiential education is the discovery that being outdoors in an unfamiliar habitat heightens one's physical senses. Because there is the potential for the unexpected as well as the possibility of encountering real danger, an individual's sensual perception is elevated. The sights and sounds, the smells and tastes, even the tactile impressions, are more keenly felt. If such is the case physically speaking, could not the same be assumed with regards to a person's ability to perceive things spiritually? Perhaps the realm of nature, therefore, puts people into a state of mind where they are more consciously aware of that which surrounds them both physically and spiritually.⁵

In conclusion, this paper has raised a number of important issues that deserve further consideration. Four of them have been specifically mentioned. Each could serve

⁴William Unsoeld, "Spiritual Values in Wilderness." A paper presented at the Conference on Experiential Education at Estes Park, Colorado, in October of 1974.

⁵Interview with Tim Parker in December of 2005, based upon his observations as a student in the master's degree program of experiential education at Minnesota State University.

as the basis for a new thesis project that will hopefully enable God's people to enter into a more profoundly rewarding relationship with both their Creator and His creation. This was God's intention in the beginning, and it awaits His consummation in the future when the Garden that was lost shall be restored, and the fellowship that was broken shall be reclaimed.

APPENDIX

Encountering God through His Creation

Church: _____ Questionnaire # _____ (1-4)

Your participation in this survey is genuinely appreciated. It will be of great assistance in providing information for a doctoral thesis on Encountering God Through His Creation. This survey is divided in to two parts. The first part will provide you with an opportunity to describe the time that you spend and the activities that you pursue when you are outdoors.

The second part will provide you with an opportunity to describe any encounters that you have experienced with God when you were outdoors.

PART I: Outdoor Activities

Please check the box that is applicable to you for each question. When responding to questions, provide answers that reflect an over-all average.

(Q.1) Do you spend time outdoors? (Check one) (5)

₁ Rarely ₂ Seldom ₃ Occasionally ₄ Frequently

(Q.2) How much time do you spend outdoors each day? (Check one) (6)

₁ 0 to 1 hour
₂ 1 to 2 hours
₃ 3 to 4 hours
₄ 5 hours or more

(Q.3) How many days or parts of days do you spend outdoors each week? (Check one) (7)

₁ 0 days
₂ 1 day
₃ 2 days
₄ 3 or more days

(Q.4) What kind of activities do you pursue when you are outdoors? (Check all that apply)

(8-25)

- ₁ Eating (cookouts and picnics)
- ₂ Recreation (sports, backpacking, hiking, walking)
- ₃ Yard work (gardening, grass cutting)
- ₄ Employment (outdoor work)
- ₅ Contemplation (prayer, meditation, Bible study, devotional reading)
- ₆ Other: (please specify below)

(26-225)

(Q.5) How many people are around you when you are outdoors? (Check one)

(226)

- ₁ No one
- ₂ One person
- ₃ Two or more people

(Q.6) Do you go on extended outdoor excursions? (Check one)

(227)

- ₁ Rarely
- ₂ Seldom
- ₃ Occasionally
- ₄ Often

(Q.7) Why do you go on these outdoor excursions? (Check all that apply)

(228-241)

- ₁ Fun and fellowship - a hike with friends
- ₂ Observations and discovery - examination of wildlife
- ₃ Solitude and reflection - time by yourself
- ₄ Other: (please specify below)

(242-1241)

(Q.8) How many people are around you during these extended excursions? (Check one)

(1242)

- ₁ No one
- ₂ One person
- ₃ Two or more people

- (Q.9) How long are these extended excursions? (Check one) (1243)
- ₁ Several hours
 - ₂ One day
 - ₃ Several days
 - ₄ One or more weeks
 - ₅ One or more months

- (Q.10) Are you spending more or less time outdoors than you did five years ago? (Check one) (1244)
- ₁ More
 - ₂ Less
 - ₃ About the same

- (Q.11) Would you like to spend more time outdoors? (Check one) (1245)
- ₁ Yes
 - ₂ No

PART II: Outdoor Encounters With God

Please check the box that is applicable to you for each question. Do not hesitate to use language that is genuinely descriptive of your encounters with God in an outdoor setting.

- (Q.12) How many times have you encountered God's presence when you were outdoors? (Check one) (1246)
- ₁ Never – [Go to Q.21]
 - ₂ Once
 - ₃ Twice
 - ₄ Three or more occasions

- (Q.13) What were you doing when you encountered God's presence? (1247-2746)
-
-
-

- (Q.14) Were you actively seeking to encounter God's presence or did it just happen? (Check one) (2747)
- ₁ Actively seeking to encounter God's presence
 - ₂ It just happened

(Q.15) Have you encountered God during times when you were facing a crisis or major decision, or did you encounter Him during the normal ongoing events of life? (Check one)

(2748)

₁ Crisis / decision ₂ Normal / ongoing ₃ Both

(Q.16) How many people were with you when you encountered God's presence? (Check one)

(2749)

₁ No one ₂ One person ₃ Two or more people

(Q.17) Some people encounter God rationally when they are outdoors. They examine and observe the world around them and come to the conclusion that it was created by God. Others encounter God experientially. They actually sense His presence and feel drawn to Him emotionally. How have you perceived God's presence when you were outdoors? (Check one)

(2750)

₁ Rationally ₂ Experientially ₃ Both

(Q.18) If you have experienced God's presence personally, how would you define that encounter? (Check all that apply)

(2751-2766)

- ₁ Feelings or inner awareness
 ₂ Sound that you heard
 ₃ Sight that you saw
 ₄ Touch that you felt
 ₅ Other: (please specify below)

(2767-4266)

(Q.19) Was your encounter with God a physical experience in this world or a spiritual experience in another dimension of reality? (Check one)

(4267)

₁ Physical experience ₂ Spiritual experience ₃ Both

(Q.20) How would you describe your encounter with God? Briefly describe what you experienced.

(4268-5767)

(Q.21) Have you encountered God's presence on other occasions when you were not outdoors? (Check one)

(5768)

- ₁ Yes ₂ No

(Q.22) What were you doing when these encounters took place? (Check all that apply)

(5769-5782)

- ₁ Personal devotions at home
₂ Worship services at church
₃ Bible study
₄ Other: (please specify below)

(5783-7282)

(Q.23) How would you compare these non-outdoor encounters with God to your outdoor encounters with God? (Check the phrase which most nearly reflects your experience)

(7283)

- ₁ They are more frequent
₂ They are less frequent
₃ They are about the same

(Q.24) How would you compare these non-outdoor encounters with God to your outdoor encounters with God? (Check the phrase which most nearly reflects your experience)

(7284)

- ₁ They are more meaningful
₂ They are less meaningful
₃ They are about the same

(Q.25) How has your life been affected as a result of your outdoor encounters with God?

(7285-9284)

CONCLUSION

Thank you for filling out this survey and for completing the information that is requested. Your signature is not required. However, if you have additional questions or comments, or if you have had a particularly meaningful outdoor experience with God and would like to share it in more detail, please include your name, telephone number, home address, and e-mail address.

(Q.26) What is your age?

(9285)

- ₁ 12 and younger
 ₂ 13 years to 19 years
 ₃ 20 years to 39 years
 ₄ 40 years to 59 years
 ₅ 60 years and older

(Q.27) What is your gender?

(9286)

- ₁ Male ₂ Female

(Q.28) In what type of area or surroundings is your residence located? (check one)

If you live in or near the downtown or central urban area of a city, check box 1. If you live in a town like Smithfield or Windsor, check box 2. If you live in a suburban neighborhood or a community of homes that is located on the outskirts of the urban center of a city, check box 3. If you live in a rural or mostly-rural setting that is located out in the country, check box 4.

(9287)

- ₁ City ₂ Town ₃ Suburban ₄ Rural

(9288-9412)

Your name: _____
(optional)

(9413-9662)

Your address: _____
(optional)

(9663-9787)

Your telephone number including area code: _____
(optional)

(9788-9912)

Your e-mail address: _____
(optional)

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