



DOES ~~AMERICA~~ SHOW US THE NATURE OF GOD?

Romans 1:20: (NASB) *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*



Special Guest: Tom Gilbert

241 years ago tomorrow, the course of world history changed, for on July 4th, 1776 the 13 colonies adopted "The Declaration of Independence" and proclaimed themselves to be The United States of America. Since then these United States have risen to become a world power and have been the source of many amazing world innovations. One innovation that seems to never be talked about or even noticed is this country's profound contribution to recognizing, appreciating and preserving the wonders of the natural landscape: Nature. It covers

the world with its intricate complexity, its unfathomable beauty and its breathtaking majesty. For most of us our park system does not feel like an innovation; rather it feels like a common scarcely noticed commodity - yeah, we have National Parks - cool! Today we stop for a moment and ask how these National Parks came to be, what was the motivation for their existence and what does all this have to do with Almighty God?

(Commentary has been edited for brevity and clarity. Tom's comments are shown in brown.)

Some background as to why we invited Tom as our guest:

I spent most of my career working for the National Park Service. I specifically worked on the National Trail System. Listeners may be familiar with the Appalachian Trail; I was put in charge of planning and developing similar trails in other parts of the country. In addition, I have an interest in God's plan and God as the Creator of our world. I have been a Christian for 45 years and am a pastor for the Southern Wisconsin Bible Students church.

Some background on the profound influence of nature upon thousands of years of history:

For centuries and ages, mankind has been in awe of the natural world around them, when they have taken the time to notice the small intricacies of living things...and the majestic scenery of landscapes.

Psalms 19:1-4: (NAS) ¹The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. ²Day-to-day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. ³There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. ⁴Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world.

(Source: Augustine of Hippo, commonly known today as St. Augustine, lived from 354-430 A.D.) Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it. Read it. God, whom you want to discover, 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 shout to you: "God made me!"

(Source: Hugh of St. Victor, a Saxon theologian who lived from 1096-1141, and became the head of the school at the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris) "This whole visible world is a book written by the finger of God."

God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars. — Martin Luther (1483 - 1546)

Tom, what got you hooked on nature and the work you would eventually do?

My parents took the family camping whenever there was vacation time. I grew to love the outdoors and nature. On one of those family vacations in 1962, when I was 12, my parents took us out west to visit many of the National Parks, and I decided then that I wanted to work for the National Park Service. And, eventually, I found myself doing so.

But I remember clearly my disappointment in the scenery of Nebraska when my job with the National Park Service moved my wife and I to Omaha in 1981. Having grown up in Michigan with its extensive forests and many lakes and streams, I was disheartened by the relative lack of those things in Nebraska and the surrounding region. That is, until I was assigned to work on establishing the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, following the route of their famous expedition, and I began to read the journals of Lewis and Clark.



**What did you expect from those journals?
Did you get what you expected?**

I did not know what to expect but was amazed when I started reading them. William Clark was rather pragmatic in his descriptions of what they did, and what they encountered and saw, but Meriwether Lewis could wax poetic in his enrapturing descriptions of the scenery and wildlife and plant life.

It was not until I was able to see the lands they traversed - including Nebraska - through his eyes that I began to appreciate the beauty of the prairies and high plains and mountains through which they passed.

(Source: Meriwether Lewis, May 31, 1805) The hills and river cliffs which we passed today exhibit a most romantic appearance. The bluffs of the river rise to the height of from 2 to 300 feet and in most places nearly perpendicular; they are formed of remarkable white sandstone which is sufficiently soft to give way readily to the impression of water; ...The water in the course of time in descending from those hills and plains of either side of the river has trickled down the soft sand cliffs and worn it into a thousand grotesque figures, which with the help of a little imagination and an oblique view at a distance, are made to represent elegant ranges of lofty freestone buildings, having their parapets well stocked with statuary; columns of various sculpture both grooved and plain, are also seen supporting long galleries in front of those buildings; ...As we passed on it seemed as if those scenes of visionary enchantment would never have an end....

A little further up river they encountered the Missouri River...



(Source: Meriwether, June 13, 1805) I had proceeded on ...about 2 miles ...when my ears were saluted with the agreeable sound of a fall of water ...a roaring too tremendous to be mistaken for any cause short of the great falls of the Missouri. ...I wished ...that I might be enabled to give to the enlightened world some just idea of this truly magnificent and sublimely grand object, which has from the commencement of time been concealed from the view of civilized man....

Of course, Lewis and Clark and their men were experiencing these lands in near-pristine condition. But much of the beauty and wonder remains today, despite human modifications to the landscape. It is specifically for preserving unspoiled remnants of those landscapes that the United States began setting aside lands as "National Parks." The first national park set aside was Yellowstone in 1872. Others followed, such as Mackinac Island in 1875, Yosemite and Sequoia in



1890, Mount Rainier in 1899, Crater Lake in 1902, Glacier in 1910 and Rocky Mountain National Park in 1915. But there was no agency to take care of these places until the National Park Service was created in 1916. Last year marked the 100th anniversary of the creation of the National Park Service. Previous to that, the U.S. Army cared for the Parks.

The legislation creating the Park Service said that the purpose of setting aside and managing these parks is "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."





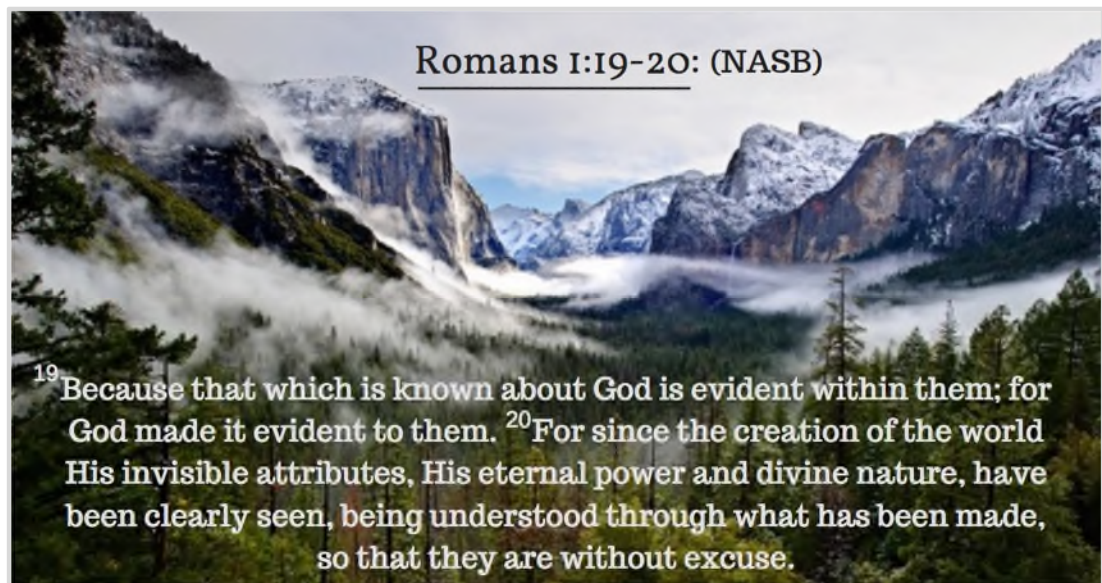
National Parks open to the enjoyment of everyone was a totally new idea. It was something America introduced to the world, and is frequently referred to as "America's Best Idea."

America's best idea? That must be something because America has had many world-changing ideas!



If you explore the stories and histories of those who worked to preserve these landscapes and the plant and animal life that inhabit them, we learn that they were motivated by their understanding of what these places communicate to us about God, about the character and power of our Creator. While today it is a popular notion that Christianity is opposed to conservation and environmental protection, the truth is that the National Parks movement, and the larger conservation and environmental movement, was begun by people who were motivated by a desire to honor God, or the Creator.

Those who worked to preserve these special places found their inspiration in two revelations from God, two "books" of Scripture - the Bible *and* the natural creation in which we dwell with the revelations it contains about the nature, character, and power of God the Creator. God's written word reveals and points to this second "book" by way of the Apostle Paul.

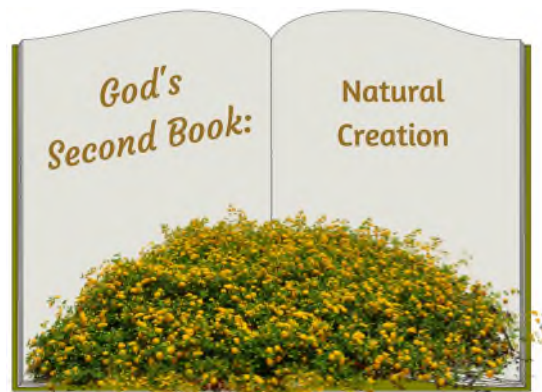


Nature really does deserve our respect as it really is one of God's masterpieces! Let's pay attention!



So, going back, who would you say was primarily responsible for making "God's second book" come alive?

The whole idea of "God's second book" is very inspiring. How many people who look at and appreciate nature ever stop to think about its complex system of existence? We are in awe of the delicate beauty of a flower and we are stunned by the power of a giant waterfall but are we ever struck by the planning and foresight that put it all there?



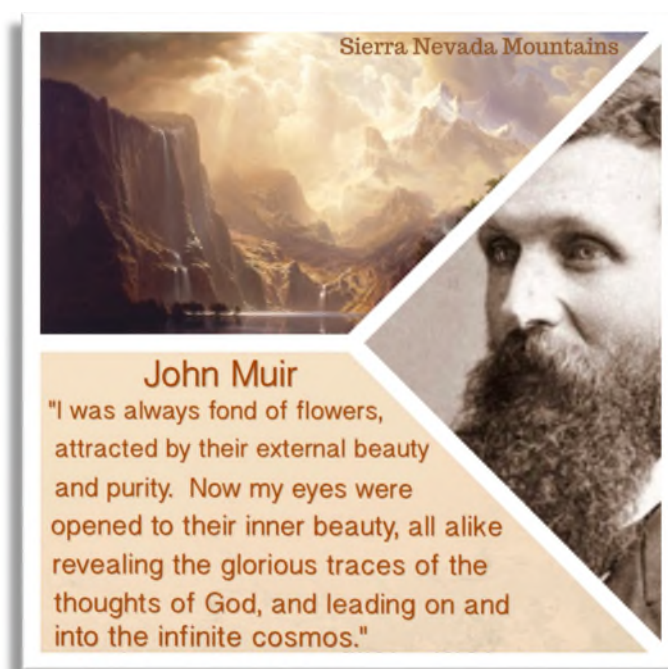
When we think of National Parks, we often think of John Muir, who is known as the father of the National Park System, not only for his campaign to protect Yosemite Valley, but his continued campaign to have the parks cared for in a manner that protects their natural and scenic values.

John Muir was born in Scotland in 1838. In 1849, at age 11, his family emigrated to the United States and settled in Wisconsin. John loved to spend time in the marshes and meadows on their farm. His love of the natural world began there and heightened when he studied botany at the University of Wisconsin.

In America, the Muir family joined a Disciples of Christ congregation of the Restoration Movement begun by Thomas and Alexander Campbell. John's father, Daniel, sometimes served as the minister of their local church. He believed that anything that distracted from Bible study was frivolous. He required his children to memorize Scripture. Consequently, by an early age John could recite more than half of the Old Testament and all the New Testament.

His religious upbringing and his love of all things "nature," merged to result in rhapsodic praise and admiration for the Creator of all things. John found the natural beauty of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California to be the grandest cathedrals in which to worship God.

From your description we see Muir's sense of awe for God expressed through nature. He was instrumental in showing us how big "God's second book" really is.





Reflecting on his studies at the University, he wrote: "Like everybody else I was always fond of flowers, attracted by their external beauty and purity. Now my eyes were opened to their inner beauty, all alike revealing the glorious traces of the thoughts of God, and leading on and on into the infinite cosmos."

In March 1867, when he was 28, Muir had an accident that changed his perspective on life and the world around him. A tool he was using slipped and struck him in the eye. He was confined to a darkened room for six weeks and wondered if he would regain his sight. His sight eventually did return and the experience changed the way that he saw his purpose in life. He later wrote, "This affliction has driven me to the sweet fields. God has to nearly kill us sometimes to teach us lessons." From that point on, he determined to "be true to himself" and follow his dream of exploration and the study of plants. He began a wandering walk to Florida. Once there he caught a ship to Cuba and then New York. Then he booked passage on a ship to San Francisco, arriving there in March of 1868. He headed for Yosemite Valley and spent the months of April, May and June there.

In 1869, he spent the summer shepherding sheep in Tuolumne Meadows in the High Sierra country above Yosemite Valley. He began hiking, climbing and studying nature in the Sierras. When he left the high meadows at the end of the summer, he descended into Yosemite Valley. "It was," Muir wrote, "by far the grandest of all the special temples of nature I was ever permitted to enter."

As he explored the valley and surrounding area, he later recorded, "I drifted from rock to rock, from grove to grove. ...When I discovered a new plant, I sat down beside it for a minute or a day, to make its acquaintance and hear what it had to tell. ...I asked the boulders I met, whence they came and whither they were going."

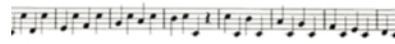
It seems like John Muir and David the Psalmist would have had an instant bond! They both had a sense of the presence of nature.

Let's pause here for a moment and attempt to read "God's second book" in a different way - through music. Let's try and combine the word pictures that Tom was giving us with some music written for the same purpose.

"America the Beautiful" is an American patriotic song. The lyrics were written by Katharine Lee Bates and the music composed by church organist and choirmaster Samuel A. Ward.

The poem was initially published in 1895 in *The Congregationalist* to commemorate the Fourth of July. It quickly caught the public's fancy. Amended versions were published in 1904 and 1913.

Ward had originally written the music, *Materna*, for the 19th century hymn "O Mother Dear, Jerusalem" in 1882. Ward's music combined with the Bates poem was first published in 1910 and titled "America the Beautiful."



"America the Beautiful," (Verse one) Ray Charles

Oh beautiful, for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties,
Above the fruited plain,
But now wait a minute, I'm talking about
America, sweet America
You know, God done shed His grace on thee,
He crowned thy good, yes, He did, in brotherhood,
From sea to shining sea

In everything he saw, Muir believed he was witnessing the work and presence of God. "Heaven knows," he wrote, "that John the Baptist was not more eager to get all his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all of mine in the beauty of God's mountains."

In 1870, Muir wintered in Yosemite. One winter day, hiking in deep snow to a ridgeline in hopes of seeing an avalanche, he instead became part of one. Somehow Muir survived being swept several thousand feet down a canyon on a cascade of snow and ice. He described his experience as "the most spiritual and exhilarating of all the modes of motion I have ever experienced. Elijah's flight in a chariot of fire could hardly have been more gloriously exciting."

This was the beginning of John Muir's lifelong dedication to saving and preserving Yosemite and other superlative landscapes for all people to enjoy. His motivation was based on his reverence for God. He considered these landscapes to be the most sacred temples or cathedrals in which to worship God.



Most of us do not seem to have such a reverence for nature. Perhaps it would help to remind ourselves that we are reading "God's other book!"



In 1871, Ralph Waldo Emerson came to Yosemite to be guided through it by Muir. He encouraged Muir to give up his reclusive life in Yosemite to teach or write. Reflecting back, "O these vast, calm measureless mountain days," Muir wrote, "inciting at once to work and rest. Days in whose light everything seems equally divine, opening a thousand windows to show us God."

In 1890, Muir and others were successful in getting Congress to set aside 1,500 square miles as Yosemite National Park. But the West was being settled and tamed. Muir was concerned. He began advocating for more parks.

In 1903, President Roosevelt visited Muir in Yosemite and toured and camped with him for three days. On the third night, with President Roosevelt as his captive audience, Muir made a plea for Yosemite wilderness and for setting aside other areas in the United States for park purposes. Muir's main focus was not only the need for forest preservation but also his concern that the California State Grant of Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove, (given to the state of California years ago) surrounded by Yosemite National Park, be receded to the United States for inclusion in the park. In 1906, this resulted in a Joint Resolution in Congress that accepted the recession by the State of California of the Yosemite Valley Grant and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias, withdrawing them from state protection and putting them under federal protection, making them part of Yosemite National Park.

He also began advocating for a government agency to administer the parks. John Muir died on Christmas Eve, 1914. Less than two years later, the National Park Service was created.

(Source: The opening of Ken Burn's PBS series, "The National Parks: America's Best Idea.") One learns that the world, though made, is yet being made. That this is the morning of creation. That mountains, long conceived, are now being born, brought to light by the glaciers, channels traced for rivers, basins hollowed for lakes. When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. ...The whole wilderness in unity and interrelation is alive and familiar ...the very stones seem talkative, sympathetic, brotherly. ...Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike. This natural beauty ...is made manifest ...in our magnificent National Parks - Nature's sublime wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world.

John Muir's contributions were amazing! When you think about it, they came from his passion and reverence for God and His creation and his determination to allow God's creation to be seen and appreciated by all forever!

John Muir was not the first person in the modern era to think of the natural world as a revelation of the Creator.





In early 1836, American painter Thomas Cole was desperate to create a painting for the annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design, of which he was a founding member. He decided to paint a landscape which he had sketched several years before.

He had made his reputation and living as a painter of landscapes, but in his own mind he was first and foremost a religious painter. He dreamed of the day he could stop painting landscapes and paint just religious scenes. Some of his religious paintings are "Christ Crowned with Thorns and Mocked" (1825), "Hagar in the Wilderness" (1829) and "The Angels Appearing to the Shepherds" (1834).



Those who effect change are those who live that change before it actually happens. This is what we are seeing so far.

John Muir makes sense, but what effect could a "religious painter" have on our National Park System?

Up to this point we are clearly unfolding a connection in American history many seem to want to bury and forget - that is, the connection between a profound reverence for God Almighty and many important decisions and actions of American national significance. Let us remind ourselves of the deep, truthful connection between God and the building of America.

"The Oxbow"
by Thomas Cole,
1936

The landscape Cole produced for the exhibition, which he formally titled "View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm," and is more popularly called, "The Oxbow," was a sensation, having such an effect on the artistic world that it launched what has become known as the "Hudson River School" of landscape painters.



In January of 1836, *The American Monthly Magazine* published an article by Cole entitled, "Essay on American Scenery" in which he laid out his perspectives on how essential the preservation of wild scenery is to the well-being of mankind, and how important it was for his fellow landscape painters to reveal God's glory hidden in nature to their materialistic countrymen.



In his essay, he affirmed the world's purpose:

(Source: *The American Monthly Magazine*, January 1836, article by Cole entitled "Essay on American Scenery") It has not been in vain - the good, the enlightened of all ages and nations have found pleasure and consolation in the beauty of the rural earth. Prophets of old retired into the solitudes of nature to wait the inspiration from heaven. It was on Mount Horeb that Elijah witnessed the mighty wind, the earthquake and the fire; and heard the "still small voice" - that voice is YET heard among the mountains! St. John preached in the desert; - the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak to God. ...Nature has spread for us a rich and delightful banquet. Shall we turn from it? We are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly.



In the writings and paintings that Cole produced, there is a remarkable sense of the all-inclusiveness that God's

creation is meant to have on humanity. He seems to label the spirituality of God's creation as a great equalizer of men before God. Honor and reverence Him.

Like nearly everyone else raised in New England, Thomas Cole was raised in a Congregational Church community. With its Calvinist roots, one might think that the austere teachings of John Calvin would have taught him to disregard the things of the earth and focus on the things of heaven. But in painting "The Oxbow," Cole inserted into his landscape religious elements pointing to the awesomeness of God as Creator.

And this perspective was not at all at variance with what John Calvin taught. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin wrote, "We know the most perfect way of seeking God... is ...for us to contemplate Him in His works whereby He rendered himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner, communicates Himself."

In writing a preface to a French translation of the New Testament prepared by his cousin, Calvin stated:

(Source: John Calvin) It is evident that all creatures, from those in the firmament to those which are in the center of the earth, are able to act as witnesses and messengers of his glory to all men; to draw them to seek God, and after having found him, to meditate upon him and to render him the homage befitting his dignity as so good, so mighty, so wise a Lord who is eternal; yea, they are even capable of aiding every man wherever he is in this quest. For the little birds that sing, sing of God; the beasts clamor for him; the elements dread him, the mountains echo him, the fountains and flowing waters cast their glances at him, and the grass and flowers laugh before him.

Even the iconic Puritan preacher, Jonathan Edwards, saw God's glory exhibited in the natural world and drew inspiration from it:



(Source: Jonathan Edwards) 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 I used greatly to fix my mind. I often used to sit and view the moon, for a long time; and so, in 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.

Edwards frequently retired to the woods and fields to meditate and pray alone.



"America the Beautiful," (Verse two) Twila Paris

O beautiful for pilgrim feet,
Whose stern impassion'd stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness!
America! America! God mend thine ev'ry flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law

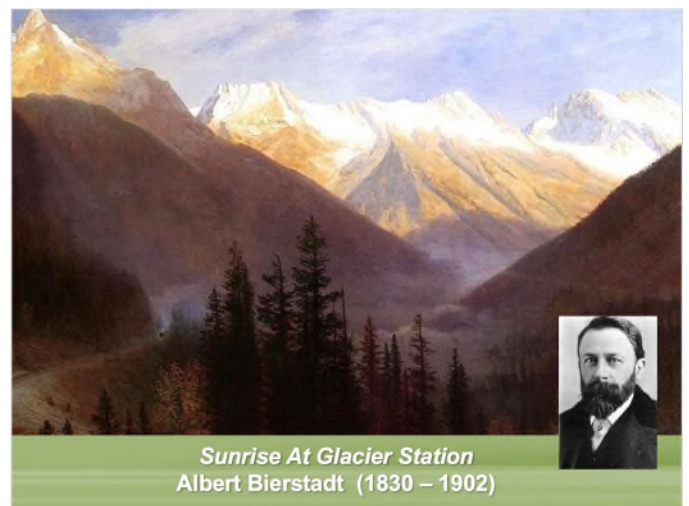
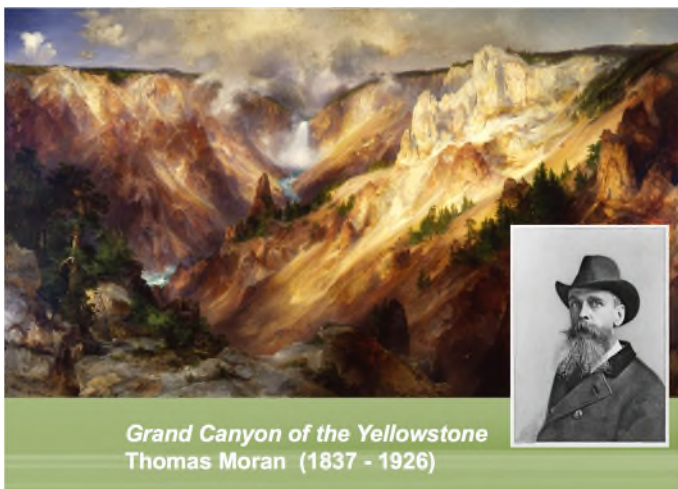
The Calvinist tradition also placed high value on stewardship of all that one possessed. In his *Commentaries on Genesis*, he stated,

Let him who possesses a field so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence; but let him endeavor to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. ...Let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses.

This echoes the passage in Leviticus.

Leviticus 25:23: (GNT) *Your land must not be sold on a permanent basis, because you do not own it; it belongs to God, and you are like foreigners who are allowed to make use of it.*

As the seeds of the conservation movement were sprouting in the Calvinist-Congregational Church and town meeting culture of New England, landscape painters did their part to illustrate God's handiwork and fire the imaginations of the people.



Those who explored the expanding frontiers of the nation took landscape painters with them. Artists Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran gave the American people a glimpse of the amazing natural grandeur that lay west of the Mississippi.



Early leaders in the conservation movement were New Englanders, brought up in the Congregational Churches and learning the Calvinist values of reverence for the creation and stewardship of all that God has given us. George Perkins Marsh, who wrote *Man and Nature* in 1864, Frederick Billings and Fredrick Law Olmsted all came from New England towns. These men and others of their generation formulated a powerful conservation ideology for agricultural improvement, forest conservation and parks, and vigorously worked to realize their vision of a righteous, moral and democratic society.

The point was to be godly in our reverence. This really gives a sense of the iconic power of a painting of a church surrounded by the beauty of creation. Seeing such depictions must have given people a sense of awe for God as they perhaps felt His total presence on that canvas. At that time, there was no Instagram and paintings showing people what they might not naturally see.

Those paintings were published in the periodicals of the day. Olmsted became the foremost landscape architect and park planner of his day. In 1850, he set sail for Old England and an intended walking tour of England and Scotland to make notes on agricultural practices for articles in *The Horticulturalist* magazine. However, after disembarking in Liverpool, he was directed to visit a new public park in Birkenhead, the first anywhere that had been developed with public funds. He was fascinated with its playgrounds, winding paths, little lake, and the presence of people of all classes and ages. He reported, "Five minutes of admiration, and a few more spent in studying the manner in which art had been employed to obtain from nature so much beauty, and I was ready to admit that in democratic America there was nothing to be thought of as comparable with this People's Garden."

Seven years later, in 1857, without any experience or training, Olmsted found himself as the landscape architect for New York's Central Park. In the plan produced for the park, Olmsted and his associate, Calvert Vaux, consciously translated the Hudson River School painters' principles into an actual landscape.

Through New Englanders like Olmsted, the landscape values emanating from New England towns and churches manifested themselves in state and national parks. When Yosemite was set aside as a California state park in 1864, Olmsted was named head of the Yosemite Park Commission.

Somehow these days we do not think so much about how art not only reflects life but can truly define its direction as well. This seems to be another angle of "God's other book" - the ability to capture God's nature on a canvas and deliver it to those who cannot see the real thing, inspiring them to action!

Sara Jane Clarke Lippincott, great-granddaughter of the Puritan preacher, Jonathan Edwards, and editor of the children's magazine, *The Little Pilgrim*, wrote an account of the pilgrimage she and fellow travelers made in 1872 to the "sacred Sierra." Yosemite, she wrote, was "the temple of [Nature's] ancient worship, with thunderous cataracts for organs, and silver cascades for choirs, and wreathing clouds of spray for perpetual incense, and rocks three



thousand feet high for altars." These writings, along with the paintings, took their message to the American people.

Connecticut Valley Congregationalists continued to lead the American Parks movement. Ferdinand V. Hayden and Cornelius Hedges of Westfield, Massachusetts, were the principal proponents of Yellowstone National Park, established by Congress in 1872. George Bird Grinnell, Yale graduate and grandson of a Massachusetts Congregational minister, led the creation of Glacier National Park in 1910. Stephen Tyng Mather, a deeply religious man and descendent of several Connecticut Congregational ministers, was the driving force behind the creation of the National Park Service. The principal author of the bill passed by Congress in 1916 creating the Service was Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.

What does the natural world reveal to us about God's natural laws?

We sit in a unique spot looking at all this American history 100 to 150 years later. We see the power of the godly beliefs and actions of the people we are talking about, and we also see an alarming lack of godly belief surrounding us today. Let's take a few minutes and remind our present-day society of the miracles of God's creation we now call "science." Contrary to popular opinion, believing in God is not denying science; it verifies science because science shows us how things work and how deeply important the Creator is.

Tom, what does the natural world reveal to us about God's natural laws?

I think each person answers this question for him or herself. I think the expressions I have shared from various people reflected their very individual personal experience with the natural creation around them.

The Natural world **reveals** God's love, care and provision for us and all of His creatures.

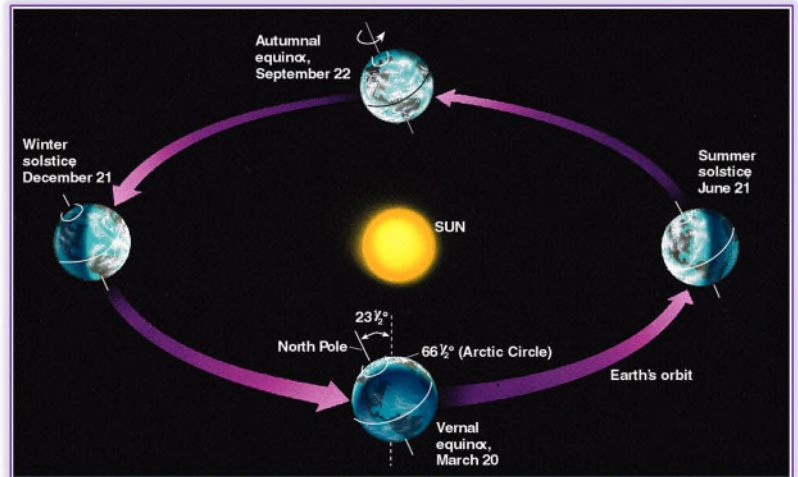




God's love for His creatures is shown in that, in forming the earth, He provided in it all that His creatures would need to sustain life, develop and grow. Earth teems with life, sustained by very complex systems that provide light, air, heat, water and food, all in exquisite balance. It shows evidence of having been specially built to accommodate living things comfortably - like a magnificent house.

Let's look at some specific examples:

Light and Heat: Among the many precise conditions vital to life on earth is the amount of light and heat received from the sun. The earth gets only a small fraction of the sun's energy. Yet, it is just the right amount required to sustain life. This is because the earth is just the right distance from the sun - an average of 93 million miles.



As it orbits the sun once a year, the earth travels at a speed of about 66,000 miles an hour. That speed is just right to offset the gravitational pull of the sun and keep the earth at the proper distance. In addition, the earth consistently makes a complete rotation on its axis every 24 hours. This provides regular periods of light and darkness. But what if the earth rotated on its axis, say, only once a year? Venus rotates only once every 243 earth days. There is a reason there is no life on Venus! This would mean that the same side of the earth would be facing the sun all year. That side would likely become a furnace-like desert, while the other side would likely become a sub-zero wasteland. Few, if any, living things could exist in those extreme circumstances.

We have light and heat in just the right amounts and the life that they produce teems with potential. God is light, and in so being, we can see His power as a life-giver and sustainer.

The Atmosphere: The atmosphere around the earth also factors into maintaining the balance of radiant heat received from the sun.

The atmosphere has many beautifully designed features:

- It has a perfect balance of gases - too much oxygen would be toxic to us and materials would be more flammable in higher levels of oxygen.
- Lightning causes the nitrogen in the air to form compounds with oxygen which then fertilize our soil when it comes to earth in rain.
- The ozone layer filters out harmful radiation from the sun.



- The atmosphere shields the earth from meteors. Generally, they burn up as they pass through the atmosphere.
- The atmosphere insulates the earth, retaining warmth and protecting us from the cold of space.

When was the last time you thought about all these purposes which the atmosphere plays and about how carefully God prepared your earthly habitation?

We should all pause a moment, look up and look around. God is awesome and we need to revere His greatness!

Most of us appreciate the atmosphere daily by the beauty it provides in sunrises, sunsets, cloud patterns, moonlit nights and starry skies. Think of it! God not only made the atmosphere functional, but He also made it to be beautiful so that we can enjoy it.

Interesting thing about light, heat and the atmosphere - they are not the godly inspiration of the physical environment you have been talking about, but light, heat and atmosphere feed and nurture that environment. We cannot have the incredible beauty without the light, heat and atmosphere.

Think for a moment about the *mansions* that have been prepared for the faithful overcomers of this Christian Age. Can you imagine how marvelously they have been prepared? Think about what a blessing the perfected earth will be to the restored human race in God's kingdom, and how it will bring forth praise and reverence for the Creator.



"America the Beautiful," (Verse three) Annie Karto

O beautiful for heroes prov'd
In liberating strife
Who more than self their country loved
And mercy more than life
America! America!
May God thy gold refine
Till all success be nobleness
And ev'ry gain divine

Water: Water is truly amazing. It is the most abundant substance on earth and has many properties essential for life.

To me, its most amazing property is that it occurs as a solid, liquid and gas all within earth's normal temperature range. Think of what this has meant to the technological progress of civilization in terms of water power, water transportation, steam power, food preservation, etc.

Water will dissolve more substances than any other liquid - all living things are dependent on it to dissolve the substances on which they feed.



Water is also extraordinary in the way it freezes. As water in lakes and seas cool, it becomes heavier and sinks. This forces the lighter, warmer water to rise to the top. Yet as water approaches the freezing point, the process reverses! The colder water now becomes lighter and



rises. When it freezes into ice, it floats. The ice then acts as an insulator and keeps the deeper waters underneath from freezing, thus protecting aquatic life. Without this unique quality, every winter more and more ice would sink to the bottom where the sun's rays could not melt it the following summer. Soon, much of the water in rivers, lakes and the oceans would become solid ice. All aquatic life would perish. The earth would turn into an icy planet that would be inhospitable to all life. This speaks loudly to me about Intelligent Design, the work of a Creator to make a substance like that.

It is a sad thing that our society is kept from marveling at such things. To marvel at them would be to laud their intricate and supernatural design and that would lead people down the "horrificing" road of acknowledging that there is great intelligence out there beyond our scope!

Look at what we are missing when we are not in awe of God's creation!

To me, the natural world around us proclaims God's existence and His love, care and provision for His human creation and all other living parts of His creation. How perfectly He prepared it for us.

Parents, think of how well you would design and build a house for your son or daughter and their family to live in (if resources to do it were no object!) - how much care and love you would put into it. That is what God has put in to creating the natural landscape.

We have looked at just a few things the natural world reveals. Based on this uncovering of what is already there, what does the natural world teach us?

The natural world **teaches** there are natural consequences for both good and bad decisions and actions.



God has designed the world so that there is a system of checks and balances called "natural consequences." It works in the physical world as well as in human society. Sometimes things appear to be a bit out of balance, generally because man through his ingenuity manages to delay or temporarily avert the natural consequences of his actions. But, there comes a time when consequences cannot be denied their lawful operation.



- There is a justice to God's laws and systems.
- The system of natural consequences teaches or should teach discipline - accepting the reality of the way things work and working with, rather than against, the laws of the universe.
- By having a system that operates by laws, God has designed mankind's habitation in a way that it is a self-teaching system - teaching by experience.

Natural consequences are occurring in the earth today. Human activity is adversely affecting earth's natural systems, overloading them beyond their ability to restore themselves. Ignorance and greed have led to water pollution, air pollution and toxic chemicals in the food chain. While advances were made in this country in the 1960's and 1970's to regulate human activity and improve the quality of the environment, political forces today are arrayed to roll back regulations designed to protect our air and water. Consequences will result; there is no denying it.

Even within the human family, natural consequences should teach us the better ways of living, because hatred breeds hatred, but forgiving leads to forgiving, kindness breeds kindness and love produces loving responses.

Mankind does make a mess of things because of selfishness and greed. But God is the Creator of eternity. We know the kingdom He promised will bring a balance back - no matter how bad mankind messes things up.

I believe that in the kingdom, under God's direction, mankind will be tasked with cleaning up the messes they created. Accountability!

The Bible also testifies there are natural consequences to human behavior:

Galatians 6:7: (NASB) *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.*

How many national parks are there?

The official count right now is 417, which includes national parks, national monuments, seashores and National Historic Sites.



Do you have a favorite?

I have been to about 250 of those, but I think my favorite one to visit is Great Smoky Mountain National Park, not only because of the natural beauty but also an area there called Cades Cove that preserves the story of pioneer life in the mountains.

Obviously, this has increased and driven your faith because you spent your time preserving what God made.

Every one of these places I go to, my favorite stories to look into are the stories of the people who worked to bring about their setting aside to be enjoyed by the American people.

**The natural world reveals and teaches.
What then does it display? What does it simply show us?**

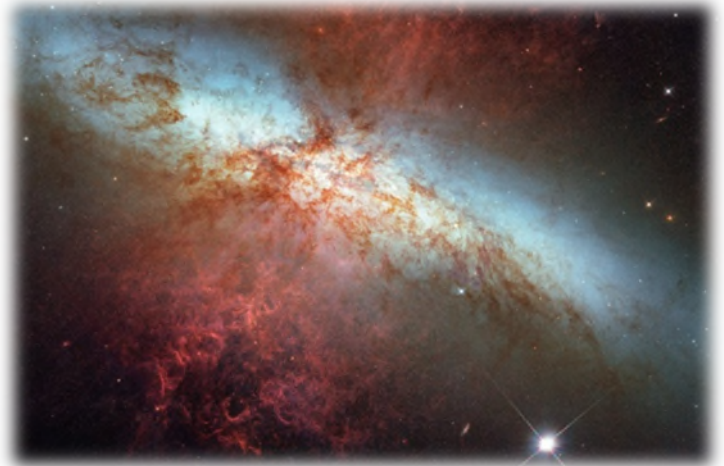
It is really kind of cool to be reviewing God's magnificent natural creation - His "other book" - and not just being in awe of it but also applying it as a powerful teaching tool as well. Think of it as an illustrated educational book - we have read what it reveals and teaches, now let's look at the pictures!

The natural world **displays** the magnitude of God and His love for order and organization.

Who has not tried to contemplate how big is the universe? Our Milky Way galaxy contains over 100 billion stars. The diameter of our galaxy spans so vast a distance that if you could travel as fast as the speed of light (186,282 miles per second), it would take you 100,000 years to cross it! Our Milky Way galaxy is 600 quadrillion miles in diameter. The average distance between stars within the galaxy is said to be about 6 light-years, or about 36 trillion miles.

So many galaxies have now been detected that it has been said that they "are about as common as blades of grass in a meadow." About 10 billion galaxies are in the observable universe!

These awesome galaxies are not scattered haphazardly in space. Instead, they are usually arranged in definite groups called "clusters," like grapes in a bunch. The Milky Way, for example, is part of a cluster of about 20 galaxies. There is even evidence that the clusters themselves are arranged in "super-clusters," like bunches of grapes on a vine.





Consider the order of our solar system - the planets move around the sun with such precision that astronomers can accurately predict where they will be at any time in the future. (And now with computers, any time in the past!) Dr. Wernher von Braun said, "The natural laws of the universe are so precise that we have no difficulty building a spaceship to fly to the moon and can time the flight with the precision of a fraction of a second. These laws must have been set by somebody."

With such a massive magnitude on display we can become overwhelmed!

Psalm 8:3-4: (NASB) ³*When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained;* ⁴*What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?*

Our entire experience in life teaches us that everything organized must have an Organizer. Consider the magnitude of God in some of the smallest features of His Creation. Consider photosynthesis - synthesis of chemical compounds with the aid of radiant energy and light; especially the formation of carbohydrates in the chlorophyll-containing tissues of plants exposed to light.

This is nature's food producing process. It takes place in tiny cell bodies called "chloroplasts." They are so small that 400,000 could fit on the period at the end of a sentence. Within these tiny chloroplasts, there are about 70 separate chemical reactions that take place in photosynthesis. Everything works together, in the right order, to produce the basic organic building blocks of our world. Did it just start happening? Or did someone design it?

See, as we look at the pictures on display in this second book of God's called the "Natural Creation," we can be inspired by things so large and far away they defy imagination, as well as things so small and precise that they defy comprehension!

The natural world **shows** God appreciates His creatures working together for the common good.

In the Natural Creation, we recognize what is known as symbiosis, the intimate living together of two dissimilar organisms in a mutually beneficial relationship. Certain plants and animals need each other to exist.

Stinging ants live in the hollow thorns of acacia trees. They keep leaf eating insects off the tree and they cut up and kill vines that try to climb on the tree. The tree secretes a sugary fluid that the ants relish, and it also produces small false fruit, which serves as food for the ants.



We might ask, did the ant first protect the tree and then the tree rewarded it with fruit? Or did the tree make a fruit for the ant and the ant then thanked it with protection? Or did it all chance to happen at once? I think it loudly displays the intelligence of a Grand Designer. In general, insects' pollination of flowers of plants displays symbiosis.



There is also the general symbiotic relationship, or partnership, between plants which utilize carbon dioxide and give off oxygen, and animals which utilize oxygen and give off carbon dioxide.

The natural world teaches me that God values partnerships, working together and helping one another.

God intends it to work that way within true Christianity as well:

2 Corinthians 1:3-4: (NASB) ³*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*

We have seen God's amazing book of natural creation **reveal, teach, display and show**. The most amazing part of this book is it is available for any who would choose to read and observe it! All we must do is look, experience and be humble enough to learn.



"America the Beautiful," (Verse four) Lee Greenwood

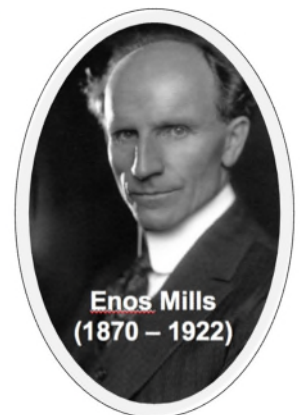
O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea

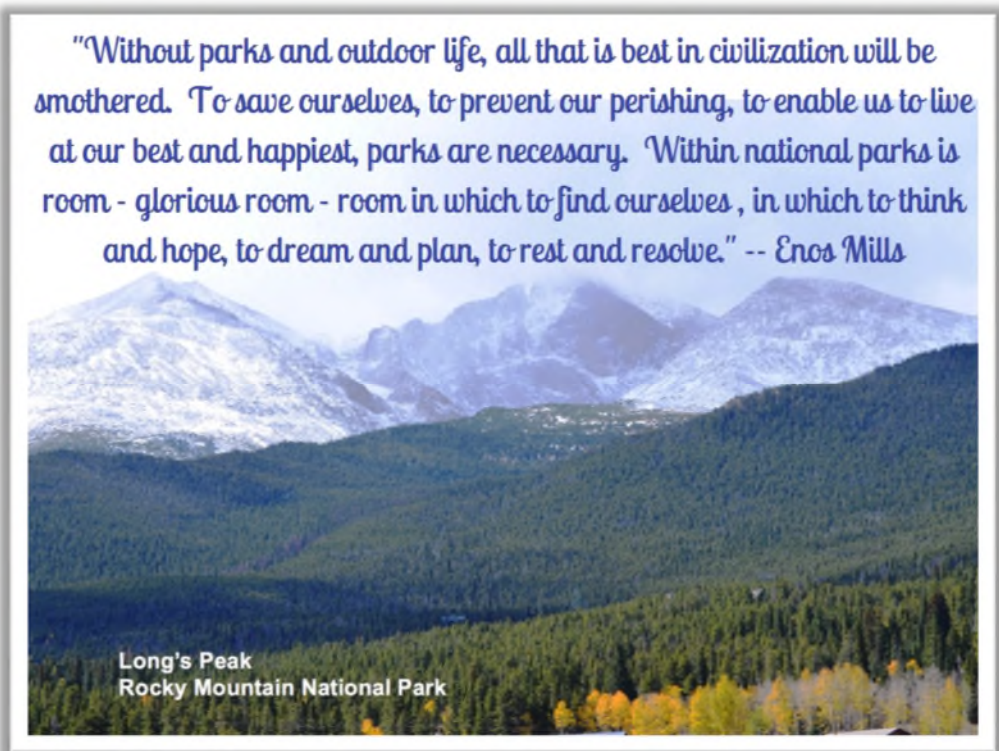
Every verse of this song is about giving praise and honor to God.

The influence of one life upon another is wonderfully demonstrated in one final story, the story behind the establishment of Rocky Mountain National Park.

Enos Mills was born in Kansas in 1870. At the age of 14, he left his family and moved to Colorado, establishing a homestead near Long's Peak, south of present day Estes Park. The next year at age 15, he climbed the 14,255 foot peak by himself. During his life, he climbed the mountain by himself 40 times and nearly 300 times guiding others.

In 1889, he had a chance encounter with John Muir on a San Francisco beach. It changed the direction of his life. He dedicated himself to campaigning for the protection of outstanding natural landscapes, writing and lecturing to build public support. His speeches focused on the life cycle of trees, forestry practices, the lives of wildlife and the preservation of natural lands. In his speeches and writings, he encouraged people of all ages to get outside to appreciate the natural world.





Enos Mills was the driving force behind the effort to persuade Congress to establish Rocky Mountain National Park in 1915, and he is known as the "Father" of the park. One of his notable statements is:

(Source: Enos Mills) Without parks and outdoor life, all that is best in civilization will be smothered. To save ourselves, to prevent our perishing, to enable us to live at our best and happiest, parks are necessary. Within national parks is room - glorious room - room in which to find ourselves, in which to think and hope, to dream and plan, to rest and resolve.

What a different world it was just 130 years ago - such a young man striking out on his own and following his passion.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) expressed similar thoughts, when he wrote:

(Source: Henry David Thoreau) We need the tonic of wildness—to wade sometimes in the marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk ...to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. ...We can never have enough of Nature. ...In wildness is the preservation of the world.



I think the energizing thing about the stories of those who had a role in launching conservation and wilderness preservation efforts in America is their acknowledgement of the sacred and divine in those places, their continuing sense of wonderment and excitement over the mysteries yet to be discovered and understood.



John Muir expressed it this way:

(Source: John Muir) I used to envy the father of our race, dwelling as he did in contact with the new-made fields and plants of Eden; but I do so no more, because I have discovered that I also live in "creation's dawn." The morning stars still sing together, and the world, not yet half made, becomes more beautiful every day.

Richard Nelson, a modern-day environmental author wrote, "Alaska shows us America's treasures the way God intended them to be, because they are so untouched by humans." He makes an interesting observation on patriotism. He said, "I have come to believe that the rapidly growing community of citizens who care deeply about our natural heritage, who are working to celebrate, sustain and protect this heritage, should be regarded as patriots for the American land." I really like that idea that patriotism is preserving what God has given us. That should be part of our patriotic ethic.

The other point comes back to Romans 1:20: (NASB) *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*

We can protect the land, air and water, because in protecting them, we protect the witness they give us of God the Creator and the lessons there for us.

We appreciated going through the work of creation and the people who did so much to preserve it in the name of God and the responsibility that we as individuals have to laud that work, laud that creation, look heavenward and say "Thank you, God, for everything You have given us."

*So, does America show us the nature of God?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!*

*And now even more to think about...
only in the **Full Edition** of CQ Rewind!*





The information about those who saw and wrote about the natural creation around us as God's "Book of Nature," and who acted to protect and preserve the most majestic examples of that creation in our magnificent National Parks, was gathered from three principle sources:

Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism, by Mark R. Stoll, New York: Oxford University Press, May 2015, 416 pages. Dr. Mark Stoll is Associate Professor of Environmental History and Religious History at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas.

Christian History magazine, Issue 119, "The Wonder of Creation." How Christians have responded to God's "Book of Nature." Published by The Christian History Institute, 2016.

The National Parks: America's Best Idea, by Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns, Alfred A. Knopf (publisher), September 2009, 432 pages. This is the illustrated companion volume to the 12-hour PBS series of the same name by producer Ken Burns.

A few details from Tom's notes we did not have time for:

John Wesley (1703-1791), founder of the Methodist denomination, made an interesting observation about God's love for variety and diversity in the creation, and his reflection on what is yet to be revealed about the future in God's plan.

(Source: John Wesley) If there be ... eight thousand species of insects, who is able to inform us of what use seven thousand of them are? If there are four thousand species of fishes, who can tell us of what use are more than three thousand of them? ...Consider how little we know of even present designs of God; and then you will not wonder that we know still less of what he designs to do in the new heavens and the new earth.

Mark Twain wrote with great sarcasm about futile efforts by men to try to control the Mississippi River. The river follows the laws of gravity and nature and not the wishes of men.

The military engineers of the [United States River] Commission have taken upon their shoulders the job of making the Mississippi over again - a job transcended in size by only the original job of creating it. They are building wing-dams here and there to deflect the current; and dikes to confine it in narrower bounds; and other dikes to make it stay there; and for unnumbered miles along the Mississippi they are felling the timber-front for fifty yards back, with the purpose of shaving the bank down to low-water mark with the slant of a house-roof, and ballasting it with stones; and in many places, they have protected the wasting shores with rows of piles. One who knows the Mississippi will promptly aver—not aloud but to himself—that ten thousand River Commissions, with the mines of the world at their back, cannot tame that lawless stream, cannot curb it or confine it, cannot say to it, "Go here," or "Go there," and make it obey; cannot save a shore which it has sentenced; cannot bar its path with an obstruction which it will not tear down, dance over, and laugh at. But a discreet man will not put these things into spoken words; for the West Point engineers have not their superiors anywhere; they know all that can be known of their abstruse science; and so, since they conceive that they can fetter and handcuff that river and boss him,



it is but wisdom for the unscientific man to keep still, lie low, and wait till they do it. Captain Eads, with his jetties, has done a work at the mouth of the Mississippi which seemed clearly impossible; so, we do not feel full confidence now to prophesy against like impossibilities. Otherwise one would pipe out and say the Commission might as well bully the comets in their courses and undertake to make them behave, as try to bully the Mississippi into right and reasonable conduct.

The natural world **shows** God's appreciation for the beauty of variety and diversity.

Why is there more than one kind of tree? One kind of bird? One kind of fish? The natural and human creation teaches us that God appreciates variety and diversity. One of the wise benefits of having a wide variety of plants and animals with differing growth patterns and resource requirements is that it assures survival of life after natural catastrophes.



The variety of plants and animals made necessary a variety of environments and ecosystems, and vice versa. Would we wish the whole land surface to be a desert? Forested? Mountainous? We appreciate the beauty of God's creation because of this variety, including the diversity of the human family.

God has also arranged for diversity in the church. He develops each member in a unique social environment. Variety leads to balance, harmony, beauty.

Ephesians 4:4-8, 11-13: (Phillips) ⁴You all belong to one body, of which there is one Spirit, just as you all experienced one calling to one hope. ⁵There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God, one Father of us all, who is the one over all, the one working through all and the one living in all... ⁷Naturally there are different gifts and functions; individually grace is given to us in different ways out of the rich diversity of Christ's giving. ⁸As the scripture says: When he ascended on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men... ¹¹His gifts to men were varied. Some he made his messengers, some prophets, some preachers of the Gospel; to some he gave the power to guide and teach his people. ¹²His gifts were made that Christians might be properly equipped for their service, that the whole body might be built up ¹³until the time comes when, in the unity of the common faith and common knowledge of the Son of God, we arrive at real maturity—that measure of development which is meant by the fullness of Christ.