

Weekly devotional series:

God's character revealed in creation

Introduction

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth,” Psalm 19: 1-6 (NIV).

“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 people are without excuse,” Romans 1:20.

Think about the Prairies.

Most of us step outside our door and observe the open Prairie grasslands so I brought them to you: <https://www.youtube.com/live/19nlhCI7Yfw?si=Dx-KguitJDUKfeji>.

Watch for a minute or leave the video playing peaceful background ambience. What do you see?

I see plants that no farmer planted. They grow back year after year and live on sunlight, rain, animal droppings and nutrients in the soil.

The cattle “*mooring*” in the background play the role of the bison of old—eating and trampling the grass and keeping the trees from overtaking the open land. It’s a beautiful system that, with little human intervention, could keep running for thousands of years. It goes even deeper than what you can see.

The Prairie grasses grow deep and wide root systems. Unlike the crops or vegetables we grow, which only last a summer, the perennial grasses live for years. They turn sunlight into sugars. The roots find water and nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus in the soil which also sustain the plant. Even in the winter, the roots are still alive and active beneath the soil. The soil around the roots is home to microorganisms. One is called arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi. “*Arbuscular*” refers to its finger-like nature. It sends its ‘fingers’ out in search of nutrients and ‘pulls’ them closer. If the plant is struggling to find enough nutrients on its

own, the fungi can act as an extension of its root system. Meanwhile, the fungi benefits from the sugars the plant provides.

When the plant dies it rots and adds nutrients and structure to the soil—something scientists call “*soil organic carbon*.” The more soil organic carbon, the healthier and more nutrient-dense the soil is.

To me, the Prairie grassland reveals God’s character as a magnificent designer. Humans would be hard-pressed to build a more efficient, self-sustaining system.

It also illustrates that God’s ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:9).

Watch: https://youtu.be/-J_RbFkv82o?si=CX3T8O_y2eRWplJH.

Farming techniques helped to create the dust storms that ravaged the Great Plains. That included plowing up the Prairie grasses and tilling the soil into dust. This killed the roots that once held the soil together and exposed the soil to the wind. Since crops only grow a few months out of the year, the soil had plenty of time in which to blow away.

The crops were far “*hungrier*” for nutrients than Prairie grasses, and spent less time putting sugars into the soil and growing roots. The plows scattered the colonies of microorganisms. Over time, not only did the soil blow away, but it also began to lose its organic carbon—becoming less nutrient dense.

After the Dust Bowl, farmers and scientists did something that began to make farms more like the Prairie grassland. For instance, they created seeding equipment that would slice small slits into the ground to insert the seeds—leaving the rest intact.

You won’t see this much around Steinbach where, with our heavy, sticky soil it doesn’t work as well. However, in the west “*no-till*” and “*reduced-till*” farming is common. It’s no accident that, since they became popular, the soil organic carbon in Prairie soil has begun to increase.

Some farmers and scientists have even begun finding ways to encourage the microorganisms to grow in the soil, knowing they will help feed the crops.

God’s design works!

This week, we will observe nature carefully and ask—in what way do the heavens and the earth reveal God’s character? Consider this your invitation to take your devotional time outdoors. But if you can’t or would rather not, I’ll provide daily soothing natural “*ambience*” to bring the outdoors to you.

Day 1: Reflect on the Prairie grassland:

- How else do you see God’s magnificent design in the Prairies?

- The Dust Bowl is an example of how people accidentally or purposefully ignore God's design with dire consequences. Can you think of examples in the world today in which people are disrespecting God's design and acting like they know best?
- Pray: have you ignored or disrespected God's designing wisdom? Talk to God about this and confess as necessary.

Day 2: God cares for our wellbeing.

It's remarkable how time spent outdoors can make you feel better. Spending time in the sun gives the body vitamin D, which can reduce inflammation in the body and strengthen the bones. Sun exposure also promotes the brain chemical serotonin, which causes content and happy feelings.

Sometimes I act like God only cares about whether I'm sinning or not, how much I'm praying or serving, and other "*spiritual*" things. Does he really care about my social anxiety? How about my workouts or health goals? The benefits of the sun tell me that God cares about my well-being. He made a readily-available, free source of health that everyone—not just believers—can benefit from.

God is a good father. What good dad doesn't care about his kids' well-being?

- Today's ambience: <https://youtu.be/fDSxjXcQfAU?si=PWbQdq1zWJkdbbHL>
- Read: 1 Peter 5:7; Matthew 7:7-11
- Reflect: what else in nature shows how God cares for me?
- Pray: tell God about something small or seemingly insignificant that you are worried about or excited about today.

Day 3: God is our provider

Look at the tag on your shirt. What is it made from? If it says cotton, it comes from the cotton plant. If it says rayon or viscose, it's made from cellulose, which is a wood or plant product. If it's linen, it comes from the flax plant. If it says acrylic or polyester, it's a petroleum by-product. Even that comes from nature!

Many of us thank God when we sit down to eat. Maybe we should also thank God when we get dressed in the morning! The clothes we wear are an everyday reminder that God provides us everything we need.

When money is tight and there are bills to pay or things I need to buy, I can become frantic with my money. I dedicate my time and effort to it. I may refuse to be generous. As we'll read in the Bible today, Jesus graciously calls us to something different.

- Today's ambience: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqntA0XsWg8>
- Read: Matthew 6:19-34.
- Reflect: where else in nature do I see God's provision (for myself, others, animals, etc)?
- Reflect: How does this passage challenge you to trust in God's provision?
- Pray: tell God what you need today and ask him to increase your faith in his provision.

Day 4. Nothing is wasted

I considered asking you to reflect on manure today. However, I decided on seeds and leaves instead.

When leaves or branches die, they fall to the forest floor and become part of the 'carpet' that gives a home to mice, bugs, fungi and other small living things. The leaves slowly rot and build the soil beneath.

Likewise, flowers don't last forever. The beautiful petals die and give way to a pod or fruit that falls and disperses seed.

Sometimes when I sin and disappoint myself with my weakness, I remember Paul's words in Romans 7: "Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

God has designed the earth to take death, decay—even manure—and repurpose it into new life. Likewise, God can take the rot and ugliness in our lives and turn it into something new and full of life. One day he will rescue us from our bodies of death and make all things new.

- Today's ambience: <https://youtu.be/Go4YMAws6BU?si=lOwwneR0kZWXHojO>.
- Read: John 12:20-36; Romans 7:21-25
- Reflect: what else does the "*wastelessness*" of nature tell us about God's character and design?
- Reflect: how has God, in the past, used difficult things in your life to bring about good?
- Pray: Is there something difficult—even terrible—happening in your life right now? Talk to God about it and ask him to help you to trust he can use it for good. Ask him - is there anything you want me to do to ensure this hardship isn't wasted?

Day 5. God is big and powerful

Watch: https://youtu.be/2HoTK_Gqi2Q?si=N5lIY9oYqSrsGmLK

The sun is immense! Yet, it's only one among many stars in the Universe.

It's a life-giving force to the whole earth, but we have no control over it.

Recently there was a solar storm in which the boiling '*soup*' of the sun's surface splattered magnetic particles toward earth. The interaction of these particles with Earth's atmosphere created beautiful auroras visible as far south as Florida.

I heard about the storm on social media when farmers, who were out seeding their fields, realized the GPS systems they rely on for precise planting weren't working. The solar storm was interfering with their equipment. With all their massive, expensive, technologically-advanced machinery there was still nothing they could do. They had to seed the "*old-fashioned way*" (no GPS) or park and wait for the solar storm to ease up.

Scientists have written about how we need to prepare for these storms. Bigger ones (look up the Carrington Event) have happened before. We can only try to prepare. We can't stop it. We don't have that kind of power.

God does. The vastness of space isn't intimidating to him. The sun isn't dangerous to him. God is vast and all-powerful. How tiny we are in comparison! Yet—as we read earlier this week—he knows us down to the number of hairs on our head.

- Today's ambience - given a lack of space sounds, I've subbed soft "sci-fi" music that's my go-to for concentration: <https://youtu.be/wjJ3-SzXhCk?si=gFEo4vC3GAF5Uo6z>
- Read: Isaiah 40:21-31
- Reflect: How else does the size of the universe and my relative smallness illustrate God's character?
- Pray: God is big and powerful, yet he sees us and our small problems. Praise God for some aspect of his vastness. Talk to him about something that's troubling you in your life. Thank him for noticing.

Day 6. God is our Father - sovereignty and free will

Watch/read: <https://globalnews.ca/news/10000175/lake-winnipeg-algae-bloom/>

As the new article shows, Lake Winnipeg suffers from gross and potentially destructive algae blooms.

Winnipeg's faulty sewage plants play a big role. However, the waterways in our area are also hotspots for phosphorus, the nutrient that overfeeds the algae into a green slime-monster. The concentration of barns and field crops in our area is likely a key factor as water carries nutrients from manure and fertilizer into the streams that eventually flow into Lake Winnipeg.

Over the years people have also filled up many swamps and wetlands. In old times those would've held the water here and allowed the water and nutrients to filter slowly back into the soil.

As a result, Lake Winnipeg 'blooms.' The fish and other water creatures, the people who fish for fun or for a living, beach communities like Winnipeg Beach and cottagers all suffer. This illustrates a mystery of God's character. God is all-powerful, yet he gives us free will. How much free will? That has been debated for centuries and I would be quite skeptical of anyone who says they've figured it out. Whatever the case, God often lets us reap the consequences of our actions.

Even more mysterious to me - God seems to let others reap the consequences of our actions. The fish, the First Nations who live along the lake, and the cottagers have little to do with the raw sewage that sometimes leaks into the Red River.

Christian climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe writes: "*I often hear this from other Christians. 'God is in control, 'they say ... Each time I wonder, haven't they read what the Bible says about reaping what you sow? God never promised to rescue us from the results of our bad decisions. Quite the opposite: the book of Proverbs warns, "whoever sows injustice will reap calamity."*

To be clear, not all hardships are our fault. Some result from others' sin. Some come from living in a world that has been broken by sin.

The best I can discern is that God is our Father. He offers us guidance through the Bible and his Holy Spirit. Sometimes he protects us by his mercy. Other times, he lets us feel the consequences of our actions. With his help, we can learn from our mistakes.

- Today's ambience: <https://youtu.be/4NG30BMPqn8?si=UZkOYxlBdNoIDrJ0>
- Read: Hebrews 12:4-13
- Reflect: How else does human destruction of nature demonstrate God's character?
- Reflect: Where have you experienced the consequences of your sin? Did you learn from them?
- Pray: Ask God to give you faith to submit to his discipline and learn from it. Thank him for treating you as his beloved child.

Day 7. God wants to be known

What can we conclude from a week of observing nature? I suggest it shows God's desire for us to know him. If he was only "findable" in the Bible, people who can't read or don't have the Bible in their language would be in trouble. He makes himself available and observable

through both the wonders and more troubling mysteries in nature and says “reach out to me and find me - I’m not far away.”

- Today’s ambience: https://youtu.be/dR_3g5WCdHs?si=YsQW9B55OUGEiKUI
- Read Romans 1:18-25, Acts 17:24-31
- Reflect: how has nature allowed you to know God more?
- Reflect: how could you use nature to encourage others to have a relationship with God?
- Pray: thank God for revealing himself through nature. Ask him to show you new aspects of his character.