

CELEBRATING THE WONDER OF A TREE

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A world without trees would be a vastly different place. Neighborhoods without trees, fields without woods, and continents without forests would mean the end of life as we know it.

As RBC staff writer Dean Ohlman points out in the following pages, in a world without trees the Bible would also be a different book.

Beginning in Genesis we find the story of trees that define the spiritual nature of our existence and survival.

May the wisdom of these pages renew our ability to see the wonder and the significance of one of God's great gifts to us.

Martin R. De Haan II

THE “BUTTERFLY” TREE

On December 10, 1997, Julia “Butterfly” Hill climbed a tree. Her climb and subsequent “tree sit” were eventually to receive worldwide attention and cause a firestorm of controversy. Julia’s feet didn’t touch the ground again for 738 days. The tree she climbed was a redwood almost 200 feet high and nearly 1,000 years old. It had been selected by the “Earth First!” environmental protection group as a token redwood to represent the threatened old-growth forests of California. The tree was named “Luna” because the group found it in the light of the moon while they were trespassing on the land owned by Pacific Lumber Company. They

were there to protest the cutting of some of the last of the remaining redwoods, which are down to three percent of their original number. The plan was to have someone sit in the tree to prevent the lumber company from cutting it down. That someone turned out to be Julia Hill.

Julia, whose childhood nickname was “Butterfly,” is the daughter of an itinerant preacher. Julia recalls that her “childhood was very, very hard. I had no idea how to laugh or have fun. When I finally went to school, when I was 15, I had to learn that it was not so terrible to have a friend, and be light-hearted and just be happy.” Eventually her preacher father burned out spiritually, and the family settled down in Arkansas. Julia explains: “After all those years, my dad finally decided that he doubted the existence of

God. So he stopped preaching.”

A few years later, Julia suffered serious injury in an automobile accident. After a long and difficult period of recuperation, she decided to re-examine her purpose for living; so she headed west on a journey of self-discovery that eventually led her to

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“Earth First!”—and to Luna. What was supposed to be a couple weeks of protest on a 6' x 8' tarp-covered, plywood platform 15 stories above the ground turned out to be more than 2 years! During

that time she became an icon for environmental protection, giving hundreds of interviews both in person and by cell phone. Her tree-sitting was reported by the major news media all around the world. By the end of her first year, she had even been nominated as one of *Good Housekeeping* magazine's most admired women.

Julia endured rain, snow, 90 mph winds, 10° F cold, and legal challenges by the lumber company. The activist explains what compelled her to become the world's best-known tree hugger: “When I entered the majestic cathedral of the redwood forest for the first time, my spirit knew it had found what it was searching for. I dropped to my knees and began to cry because I was so overwhelmed by the wisdom, energy, and spirituality housed in this holiest of temples.”

TREES AND WORSHIP

What is it about trees that compels people to worship? Perhaps it's that some trees seem bigger than life as the tallest and oldest living things that occupy our natural landscape. As such they symbolize vitality, growth, strength, endurance, fruitfulness, and even eternal life. Because of the many benefits of trees to mankind, we treasure them. This is especially true in the more arid regions of the world like northern Africa and the Middle East—which make up what has been called the Fertile Crescent, the nursery of modern civilization. Symbols, pictographs, writings, and art objects from the ancient cultures that occupied these areas are replete with trees, tree forms, and tree references—providing

evidence that those lands were more forested a few thousand years ago.

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The account of Eden's paradise in the Bible's first book includes reference to the first specific tree: the tree of life (Gen. 2:9). And the last book of the Bible, the Revelation, includes reference again to the tree of life—this time as a major feature in the Paradise of God (Rev. 22:2,14). How fitting it is that the tree, this

magnificent gift from the Creator, provides the bookends of the Word of God, the writing of which spans some 1,500 years.

Between these bookends, we learn much about trees and worship. First, and extremely significant, is that trees were never worshiped by true children of God. Nonetheless, trees were highly valued, both for their beauty and their utility (Gen. 2:9).

Since the Genesis account of creation seems to indicate that the fruit of trees and other plants were the food of all the early peoples and animals, trees were obviously the linchpin of life and health for the entire creation—and they still are. Early in the second narrative of the creation (Gen. 2), the Holy Spirit speaks specifically of two types of life occupying the Garden of Eden virtually in

tandem: first man, then trees. While it is clear that God intended for man and trees to live in harmony and in mutual support, we discover that man's relationship to the tree becomes troubled very quickly—trouble that has affected all of creation's history.

As this story unfolds, we find some 550 references to trees, or wood, in the Bible. At least 26 different kinds of trees are specifically mentioned. While there are a number of verses speaking of the beauty of trees, most deal with the tree's utility. Specific mention is made of trees as a source of food and healing substances; fuel for cooking, heating, and altar sacrifices; shade, landmarks, burial markers, furniture (especially temple furnishings); and lumber for buildings, ships, carriages, and chariots. Other

practical wooden things are staves for walking and herding, carrier poles, flagstuffs, buckets, ox yokes, tools, musical instruments, and even scarecrows.

More sinister uses for trees and wood mentioned in the Bible are spears, war clubs, bows, and arrows. And perhaps most gruesome is the use of trees as gallows—racks to hang and display the bodies of criminals and unfortunate victims of hatred. This use of the tree is given special mention in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy:

You must not leave [a man's] body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse (21:23 NIV).

This passage brings us closer to the issue of trees and worship. Throughout

history, when a culture turns from God to follow its own way (as did Adam and Eve), it essentially turns its back on the very Creator of mankind. But because of the inherent need of people to worship, we look for a substitute God. If one turns away from the Creator, however, the only things left to worship are the things God has made. Granted, some of those things are awe-inspiring, like the sun, moon, and stars. The powerful forces and basic elements of nature not only compel us to wonder, they cause us to fear, which is an emotion akin to worship.

Perhaps less compelling, yet something to marvel at, are the other created things that have been found in the pantheon of creature-gods through the ages: mountains, rivers, trees, and animals of all sorts. The religions of the Greeks and Romans

amply demonstrate that man too has often elevated himself to godlike status and worship—not only for his appearance, powers, and abilities, but also for his capacity for murder and virtually unlimited wickedness. This turning from the Creator to nature as the object of worship was described by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Roman Christians:

Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts

of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Rom. 1:21-25).

Perhaps even more dramatic is the prophet Isaiah's parody of one who worships wooden idols:

He cuts down cedars for himself, and takes the cypress and the oak; he secures it for himself among the trees of the forest. He plants a pine, and the rain nourishes it. Then it shall be for a man to burn, for he will take some of it and warm himself; yes, he kindles it and bakes bread; indeed he makes a god and worships it; he makes it a carved image, and falls down to it. He burns half of it in the fire; with

this half he eats meat; he roasts a roast, and is satisfied. He even warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm, I have seen the fire." And the rest of it he makes into a god, his carved image. He falls down before it and worships it, prays to it, and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!" They do not know nor understand; for [God] has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. And no one considers in his heart, nor is there knowledge nor understanding to say, "I have burned half of it in the fire; yes, I have also baked bread on its coals; I have roasted meat and eaten it; and shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" He feeds on ashes; a deceived heart

has turned him aside; and he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?" (Isa. 44:14-20).

The Bible, a book that was written in the midst of peoples and cultures that chose to worship the created thing instead of the Creator, stood out among ancient scriptures as a beacon of light in the darkness of animism and paganism. And the children of God themselves, when they were faithful and penitent, by their very actions proclaimed the truth about the one true God by destroying the sacred groves, Asherah poles, and idols of the pagan worshipers.

The Bible speaks of the desecration of God's creation by the designation of high places and groves of trees as sacred places where religious prostitution was practiced. Those

performing these degrading fertility rites ignored the divine source of life in the Creator Himself and considered earthly places and objects more effective in granting them their needs and catering to their pleasures (Isa. 1:29; Jer. 2:20; 3:6; Ezek. 6:13).

Nothing in the Bible or in the Christian faith condones the worship of trees—or any other created thing. So do we conclude that Julia Hill was acting like a pagan when she dropped to her knees and worshiped in the “cathedral” of the redwood forest? Was she detracting from the truth about God when she felt “overwhelmed by the wisdom, energy, and spirituality housed in this holiest of temples”? We’ll need to dig a little deeper into the Bible to find a complete and balanced answer to those questions.

LET’S CLIMB HIGHER

How high does the God of heaven want us to climb in our view of the tree and the forest? It’s clear that we are not to worship trees, but how much respect does the Bible teach us to show for non-human expressions of God’s creation?

Since the birth of the age of science, Western civilization has more or less thought of the elements of the material creation as little more than resources for human consumption. This attitude has helped create many crises within the natural environment. Deforestation and disregard for the forest ecosystem are just a couple of the many problems created by a purely utilitarian view of nature.

Certainly God made trees for our enjoyment and

our use. The Bible clearly puts the life of man above the life of the creation itself. But have we lost sight of God's affection for field and forest by exalting our human needs? Listen to the heart of the psalmist:

[God] sends the springs into the valleys; they flow among the hills. They

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give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. By them the birds of the heavens have their home; they sing among the branches. He waters the hills from His upper chambers; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of

Your works. He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the service of man, that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine that makes glad the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread which strengthens man's heart. The trees of the Lord are full of sap, the cedars of Lebanon which He planted, where the birds make their nests; the stork has her home in the fir trees. The high hills are for the wild goats; the cliffs are a refuge for the rock badgers. . . . O Lord, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all. The earth is full of Your possessions (Ps. 104:10-18,24).

The psalmist went on to exclaim, "May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in His works" (Ps. 104:31).

David told us even more about God's attitude toward His creation when he wrote:

*The Lord is good to all;
He has compassion on all
He has made. . . . The
Lord is faithful to all His
promises and loving
toward all He has made
(Ps. 145:9,13 NIV).*

The book of Psalms ends with five songs that form a great musical crescendo of praise. We could assume that only people can give praise, but the Bible speaks of all nature giving praise to the Creator of the universe. Psalm 148 exults:

*Praise the Lord from
the earth, you great sea
creatures and all the
depths; fire and hail,
snow and clouds; stormy
wind, fulfilling His word;
mountains and all hills;
fruitful trees and all
cedars; beasts and all
cattle; creeping things
and flying fowl; kings of
the earth and all peoples;*

*princes and all judges of
the earth; both young men
and maidens; old men
and children (vv.7-12).*

From this we understand that God cares for, rejoices over, is good to, has compassion on, and loves what He has created. When we enter the woods or merely rest in the shade of a tree, do we sense God's pleasure? Do we have the same experience our forefathers had when they were surrounded by God's material creation? Martin Luther wrote:

In the true nature of things, if we rightly consider, every green tree is far more glorious than if it were made of gold and silver. . . . God writes the gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.

Jonathan Edwards is considered to be America's first true intellectual. While

Edwards studied the Word of God with great fervency, he also studied almost as intensely the works of God in the creation. As a scientist and servant of God, Edwards explained the meaning of the creation:

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. So the green trees and fields, and singing of birds are the emanations of His infinite joy and benignity [kindness, graciousness]. The easiness and naturalness of trees and vines are shadows of His beauty and loveliness. The crystal rivers and murmuring streams are the footsteps of His

favor, grace, and beauty (*Observations*, p.94).

In commenting on Psalm 148:9, the great English preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote:

Fruit trees and forest trees, trees deciduous or evergreen, are equally full of benevolent design, and alike subserve some purpose of love; therefore, for all and by all, let the great Designer be praised. There are many species of cedar, but they all reveal the wisdom of their Maker. When kings fell them, that they may make beams for their palaces, they do but confess their obligation to the King of trees, and to the King of kings, whose trees they are. Varieties in the landscape are produced by the rising and falling of the soil, and by the many kinds of trees which adorn the land.

Let all, and all alike,
glorify their one Lord.
When the trees clap
their hands in the wind,
or their leaves rustle in
the gentle breath of
Zephyr, they do to their
best ability sing out unto
the Lord (*The Treasury
Of David*).

Would it be unthinkable
to imagine these great men
of God dropping to their
knees if they had had the
privilege of entering the
awe-inspiring redwood
forest? Although they
didn't share the theology
of Julia Hill, they might
have joined her in
recognizing that some
of the greatest cathedrals
in the world can be found
in the moonlight of an awe-
inspiring natural world.

As in ancient times,
many today fail to
distinguish between
the tree and the tree's
Creator. Towering redwoods
are not part of God—that's

pantheism. The
redwoods were not
made to be worshiped,
but they do help us in our
worship. When we walk
into a forest, we are
properly awed to be

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our worship.***

surrounded by all the other
creatures God loves, cares
for, and rejoices in. And
they in turn praise Him
merely by doing what He
made them to do. Wherever
His work is being faithfully
carried out, wherever
His will is honored and
respected, wherever praise
is flowing forth in honor of
the Creator, there is indeed
a cathedral.

TREES AS A REVELATION OF GOD

Perhaps the reason some of us fail to respect the great gifts of the Creator is that we have not fully grasped the fact that the creation is a major part of God's introduction of Himself. What God says about

What God says about Himself through the natural world is foundational to a biblical understanding of life.

Himself through the natural world is foundational to a biblical understanding of life. The Bible itself teaches

us to read “two books” that reveal truth about God to us. Historically, theologians have labeled these two books as the “special revelation” and the “general revelation.” The special revelation is the Word of God speaking to us primarily in the Bible. The general revelation is the handiwork of God speaking to us from the world He created. The psalmist David put it lyrically:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard (Ps. 19:1-3).

Later the psalmist wrote:

I will meditate on the glorious splendor of Your majesty, and on Your wondrous works (Ps. 145:5).

Hundreds of years later, the apostle Paul voiced a similar view:

Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead (Rom. 1:20).

Because the idea of truth about God being revealed in His creation was so significant in Scripture, Augustine of Hippo in the third century after Christ characterized the two revelations as the “book of God’s Word” and the “book of God’s Works.” Francis Bacon (called the father of modern science) declared it again in the fifteenth century. Bacon admonished, “Let no man think or maintain that a man can search too far or be too well studied in the book of God’s Word or in the book of God’s Works.” Thoroughly cementing the concept of

the two books into the foundational mindset of the church at that time was the Belgic Confession, an important affirmation of the Reformers. This confession asks by what means can people know God. Here is the answer:

We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: His eternal power and His divinity Second, He makes Himself known to us more openly by His holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for His glory and for the salvation of His own.

Let’s examine Paul’s observation in Romans 1:20

a little more closely. He told us there are two things about God that are revealed by the material creation: His eternal power and His Godhead. “Godhead” is often translated as “divinity.” A dictionary definition of something divine is “that which is superhuman, godlike, supremely good, magnificent, or compels a person to worship.” It’s significant for a biblical writer to say that the creation itself is wonderful enough to make us want to worship. But Paul also said that we can see in nature God’s eternal power.

Now add to that what David saw in the creation: the wonder, glory, and majesty of the Creator’s handiwork. If we take this impressive list and apply it to the natural world around us, what is it that we might “clearly see” and “understand” from the material creation? Here’s

a partial list of what the material world reveals:

- Light and matter, which continue to defy human definition and understanding
- Seemingly endless time (no clearly apparent beginning or end)
- Seemingly endless space (eternality seen in the microscope and the telescope)
- Astronomical abundance and magnitude (“billions and billions”)
- Wonderful life (inexplicable in its essence and origin—and apparently existing on earth alone)
- Fearsome death (which God has marvelously linked to life and its perpetuation)
- Unfathomable complexity
- Profound mystery
- Unfailing orderliness (out of seeming chaos)
- Awesome power (far exceeding our own)

- Incredibly intelligent design (absolutely beyond human replication)
- Virtually endless variety (biodiversity)
- Amazing adaptability (micro-evolution)
- Overwhelming beauty
- Unlimited sensory stimulation (“candy” for the five senses)
- A vast chasm between people made in God’s image and the other created things (people alone having the capacity for creative thinking, abstract reasoning, and symbolic language, and having innate morality and the instinct to worship)

Is it any wonder that through the ages mankind has found in the natural world a reason to worship? Let’s consider a little further what it is about trees in particular that moves us to give our Creator praise.

THE WONDER OF TREES

Without question, many of the superlatives in the previous list are seen in the tree. Their variety seems endless, with new species and sub-species continually being discovered. For those of us who live in the temperate zones, it seems unlikely that new tree varieties are still being found. In the US there are about 850 tree species—and there are more species in the Appalachian Mountains of the US than in all of Europe. However, there are more varieties of trees in a few acres of a Malaysian rainforest than in the entire United States! In the temperate forests of North America there are about 400 tree species, but on the island of Madagascar alone there are more than 2,000.

Trees are not only impressive in their variety, they are the tallest, largest, and oldest living things on the planet. A eucalyptus tree at Watts River in Victoria, Australia, was close to 500 feet before it fell in the late 1800s. The tallest living tree known today is a coast redwood near Ukiah, California. Known as the “Mendocino Tree,” it measures 367.5 feet. Its diameter is almost 11 feet and its age is over 1,000 years. A bristlecone pine tree in California’s White Mountains is thought to be the oldest tree at 4,600 years. To think that something lives today that was alive when the Egyptians were building the pyramids is still hard for us to grasp. No wonder that the tree is a virtually universal symbol for long life.

The tree is also unmatched in its size.

The largest known tree living today is the “General Sherman” sequoia tree in California’s Sequoia National Park. It stands 275 feet tall, has a diameter of 28 feet, has a volume of 52,500 cubic feet, and weighs an estimated 2.7 million pounds. Clearly the General Sherman tree could provide comfortable quarters for several Swiss Family Robinsons!

While these superlatives about a few rare individual trees are impressive, perhaps more impressive is the work that all trees accomplish and the benefits they provide for the remainder of the earth’s biosphere (the realm in which the living things of the earth exist).

Understanding how important trees are to all of life, we may decide to reject the old adage that a dog is man’s best friend. Here’s a list of

some of the things trees do for us:

- Provide oxygen
- Moderate temperature
- Enhance rainfall
- Collect and absorb dust and other atmospheric pollutants
- Protect the earth from rapid climate change
- Produce and protect healthy soil
- Provide food
- Provide shelter and/or cover for many animals and birds
- Provide protection for thousands of species of sun-sensitive plants
- Provide healing products
- Provide building products
- Provide paper products
- Provide wood
- Provide fuel
- Provide sensory stimulation and the experience of beauty
- Provide living fences that hold back drifting sand and snow

- Reduce light intensity from the sun
- Provide privacy
- Protect watersheds for communities
- Produce a sense of rootedness and community

One of the joys of examining the book of God's Works is discovering the evidence of the Creator's unmatched intelligence and incredible ingenuity. When one examines the miracle of the tree and its function, it's hard to believe there are scientists who deny the existence of a Creator.

The first amazing fact about the tree's physiology is its critical part in the carbon cycle. In essence, the tree takes in sunlight, gases from the air, and water, and it produces wood, leaves, fruit, and other elements critical for all life on earth.

This process is called

“photosynthesis,” a scientific term from Latin, which means “to put together with light.” And that’s exactly what happens in trees. They’re put together with light!

A greatly simplified description of the process is this: Tree leaves are green because they contain a vital substance called chlorophyll. This chlorophyll receives sunlight and mixes it with carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and water that has been drawn up from the ground through the roots, trunk, branches, and stems. This mix is turned into the carbohydrate glucose, a simple sugar. This sugar becomes the food for the tree, which through its God-given mechanisms manufactures all its critical structures—mostly wood and leaves. In the process of doing all this work, the living factory happens to produce atmospheric

oxygen as a byproduct. Blessed be the tree!

So as we putter through each day breathing out carbon dioxide and flooding the air with it from our motorized vehicles, factories, and stoves, the trees and other green plants are

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“breathing” it in and then “exhaling” oxygen. In a sense, trees and you and I are a team that, through give and take, support each other in our work—work that can give praise to our Creator.

Trees also demonstrate

God's lavish provision. Not only do they build their own structure and give all living things oxygen, they also produce a surplus of carbohydrates in the form of sweet sap, healing leaves and oils, and nourishing fruit, nuts, and seeds. The wood we use for our homes, our furniture, our fireplaces, our paper, and thousands of other products is the result of the work of this amazing living machine. According to *Encarta*, these gifts from the tree and other photosynthesizing organisms are so abundant that about 170 billion metric tons of extra carbohydrates are produced each year. That's a total of 30 metric tons for every person on earth! Included in this is the approximately 100 billion cubic feet of wood harvested annually from the world's forests.

THE TREES THAT WERE ENTRUSTED TO US

We might think that with all this divine abundance, people would never be able to overuse—indeed abuse—this great gift from the Creator. But that's not the case. Many areas of the world that once were clothed and carpeted by trees and forests are now denuded and desertified. One reason is that we have forgotten what has been entrusted to us.

The principle of responsible care of the earth is found first in the words of the Old Testament. There we find that God is the Creator of the earth (Gen. 1), He is the owner of the earth (Ps. 24:1), and He loves the earth (Ps. 145:9,13). Further, God clearly delegated to us

the responsibility of dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:27-28; Ps. 8). However, as theologian Francis Schaeffer pointed out early in the 1970s, while God has put the earth in our hands, such oversight is still under His greater dominion and care.

The logical conclusion of these truths from Scripture is that God, who made, owns, and loves what He created, has in His love permitted people to manage and use the material creation. He is the Landlord; we are His caretakers. That role is pictured beautifully by the Greek word for “steward”: *oikonomeo*. This is the same word from which we get the word *economy*. Economics was originally considered to be the practical operations of a household in which the steward oversaw the production, distribution, and consumption on the landlord’s estate. If we

recovered that same understanding of the personal relationship of the steward to the landlord, and the steward’s responsibility to the landlord, we’d more likely handle our Landlord’s material goods in a much more responsible manner.

The Bible is unique among virtually all other ancient scriptures, partly because its beginning chapters so clearly state the foundational purposes for mankind (Gen. 1:26–2:15). One can paraphrase the mandate like this: The creation was very good (Gen. 1:31), and it was perfectly prepared by God to be given over to people so they could develop all its potentialities to the glory of God and to the benefit of all creatures in keeping with the will of God. More specific direction was given in Genesis 2:15 where Adam was instructed to “tend” and “keep” the Garden of Eden.

The extended meaning of the two Hebrew words used here is extremely rich and telling: “Tend” (*abad*) means to till, work, serve, work for, and/or make self the servant of. “Keep” (*shamar*) means to have charge of, guard, save life, protect, preserve, observe, refrain, abstain, and/or celebrate. While this command was given in relationship to the Garden,

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most Christian theologians emphasize that such control was to be extended by Adam and Eve and their descendants to the whole earth. In essence, the

Genesis mandates clearly spell out our role as keepers of the earth—stewards of the true Landlord. One could say that we are to be “good earthkeepers.”

How have we done as earthkeepers? In many ways and places, not too well. Consider the unique island of Madagascar off the east coast of southern Africa as it was described by G. Tyler Miller, adjunct professor of human ecology at St. Andrews Presbyterian College. In his book *Living In The Environment*, Miller writes the following:

Because of [Madagascar’s] astounding biological diversity, this Texas-sized island is considered a crown jewel among Earth’s ecosystems—a biological superpower. . . . An estimated 160,000 species [are] unique to this island, mostly in its vanishing eastern

rainforests. Unique species include 80% of its 10,000 flowering plants (including 1,000 orchids), 66% of the world's species of chameleons, 800 butterfly species, half of the island's birds, and all its reptiles and mammals. Madagascar's plant and animal species are also among the world's most endangered, mostly because of loss of habitat from slash-and-burn agriculture on poor soils fueled by rapid population growth. Since humans arrived about 1,500 years ago, 84% of its tropical seasonal forests and over 66% of its rainforests have been cut for cropland, fuelwood, and lumber, leaving blood-red gullies and streams and vast eroded fields and hillsides. Madagascar is now the world's most eroded country.

This picture of loss could be added to hundreds more that would graphically illustrate how we have failed to care for the natural world our God has entrusted to us. Even though there are many instances in which people

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have become aware of the damage they were doing to forests and have dramatically reversed harmful deforestation, the broad picture is still one of serious forest degradation worldwide. It may not be surprising to followers of Christ that the world in general disregards biblical mandates and foundational principles, but the truth is that the church is also

responsible for the care and protection of God's good earth.

This often-ignored responsibility was first popularly noted among evangelical Christians by Francis Schaeffer, who wrote a significant book about the issue in 1970. It was titled *Pollution And The Death Of Man: A Christian View Of Ecology*. It was a challenge to the church to apply biblical principles to the world's environmental crises—including the state of our forests. Here are some of Schaeffer's insights:

A truly biblical Christianity has a real answer to the ecological crisis. It offers a balanced and healthy attitude toward nature, arising from the truth of its creation by God; it offers the hope here and now of a *substantial healing* in nature of some of the results of

the Fall arising from the truth of redemption in Christ. In each of the alienations arising from the Fall, the Christians, individually and corporately, should consciously in practice be a healing, redemptive factor—in the separation of man from God, of man from himself, of man from man, of man from nature, and of nature from nature. A Christian-based science and technology should consciously try to see nature substantially healed, while waiting for the future complete healing at Christ's return.

While the worldwide church is still slow in recovering our understanding of our lost stewardship mandate, there are some effective things being done by a number of people, organizations, and institutions that are taking

both revelations of God (His Word and His works) more seriously these days.

Realizing our stewardship role as children of God, how then should we live in relation to the earth's trees and forests? I don't think it's out of order to suggest these activities for followers of God's Word:

- Learn more about trees in order to appreciate their role in your life.
- Remember the trees' relationship to people as mutual creations of God.
- Remind yourself regularly of your responsibility to be a good earthkeeper.
- As a voter, be more aware of your government's forest policies.
- As a consumer and/or stockholder, become informed about corporate practices regarding your nation's forests.
- Join with the trees in praise of your Creator.

JOY TO THE WORLD

Earlier we read these startling words from Martin Luther: "God writes the gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars." Is this just a man who got a little too sentimental on a walk in the woods, or was Luther drawing a legitimate theological conclusion?

The Bible itself shows us that Luther was on to something. The care and love of God for His creation is reflected in all that He has made. Just as certainly, the environment in which we live shows us that human wrongs have damaged not only our relationships with one another but our relationship to the good earth entrusted to us.

The same damaged earth, however, also bears witness to the redeeming

heart of God. The good news that God can restore broken, dying people is seen in every new dawn and in the spring that thaws frozen ground and brings new life to winter's death.

“God writes the gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.”

—Martin Luther

No, Luther was not merely being carried away by the beauty of a warm summer's day. He was commenting on what some have termed the “lost fundamental” of the biblical worldview. The earth itself is a witness to our Creator's care for us. The natural world talks to us about our

own wrongs. And the world around us also witnesses to a God who cares not only for us but for all that He made and called good (Gen. 1:31).

The last part of this foundational belief—that God also cares about the world He made for us—was obscured by the Enlightenment and the subsequent Industrial Revolution. Yet the Scriptures themselves say clearly that Jesus' death on Calvary's tree provided not only for the redemption of people but also for the restoration of creation from the grip of sin and from the burden of the curse. This is the reason for the story of joy told in Isaac Watt's hymn “Joy To The World.” The third stanza of this beloved Christmas carol says:

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;

He comes to make His
blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

We might wonder what Watts was referring to if we make the mistake of thinking that the songwriter is referring only to the first coming of Jesus Christ. We know that sins, sorrows, and thorns are still our lot. But “Joy To The World” encompasses all of earth’s history from the creation to the consummation. This wonderful song ought to be sung all year long as a celebration of the joy that will be complete only in the full realization of both the first and second comings of Christ.

As we sing this song, let’s not forget the story of the four trees that explain the need and potential of such a restoration.

THE BIBLICAL STORY OF THE FOUR TREES

In the original Garden of creation, God gave special attention to the first two trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The third tree was placed in the center of human history by God—a tree that shouldered the Creator Himself as He bore the eternal weight of our sin.

At the far end of this present age is the fourth tree, the tree of life planted in a future paradise. There this tree will be for the healing of the nations in what had been known as paradise lost.

Let’s take a closer look at these four trees:

Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating of the forbidden tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They were looking

for the knowledge of evil by experience, instead of by trust in and obedience to the Creator. Their wrong decision resulted in their death. Not only that, the consequence of death became their legacy.

To keep them from living forever in a fallen spiritual condition, God barred them from access to the paradise of Eden and specifically from its tree of life.

A further penalty was that God cursed the ground, making the earth resist the efforts of man to make his living—an act of discipline that reminds every one of us every day that things are not right. One sign of the curse was the appearance of thorns and thistles on the land. Hear the words of God's ominous judgment:

*In the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread till
you return to the ground,
for out of it you were
taken; for dust you are,*

*and to dust you shall
return (Gen. 3:19).*

This series of events is called the Fall (Gen. 3). Theologically, then, we can consider the tree of life to be the symbol of the creation—with its promise of eternal life and fellowship with God. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then, becomes a tree of death and serves as the symbol of the Fall.

This resulted in an earth that was full of “sins and sorrows.” Yet God, with great love for His creation, was grieved by these circumstances. So He made a way not only for people but for His entire creation to be reconciled to Him (Acts 3:19-21; Col. 1:20). He sent Jesus, His only Son, to earth to experience the full weight of this sin and sorrow and then to die a sacrificial death on a tree (the cross of Calvary) to make atonement for Adam

and Eve's devastating act of disobedience.

Not only was Jesus' death eternally significant for sinful humanity, it provided for the ultimate restoration of the creation to its original state of peace and harmony (*shalom* in Hebrew, and *salaam* in Arabic). This truth is powerfully illustrated by the fact that Jesus was executed on a tree, which we have already learned was a curse (Gal. 3:13). Further, His pain was increased by the curse on the earth—represented by the crown of thorns that was pressed down upon His brow.

But wonder of all wonders, the cross, the second tree of death, actually became a promise of life. We got our first hint of that when Jesus promised the penitent thief crucified with Him, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Lk. 23:43).

When Christ was taken down from the cross to be placed in the tomb, nearly everyone expected His body to eventually return to dust, just like the bodies of all people who had come before. Scripture tells us,

***The cross,
the second
tree of death,
actually became
a promise
of life.***

however, that Jesus' body did not suffer such corruption (Acts 2:31). God preserved it and Jesus was resurrected. This great event signaled the defeat of death and the lifting of the curse.

That part of the story occurred in the past. We who are alive today remain in a period between the

initial provision of our ultimate salvation from the curse of sin and death and the consummation when we will actually see the “day of salvation.” We look back with utmost gratitude to the time when Jesus Christ bore the penalty of our sin, and we celebrate that act in the taking of the Lord’s Supper. In this period between the cross and the consummation, however, all of creation continues to suffer from the effects of the Fall and the curse. The apostle Paul described our circumstances:

In my opinion whatever we may have to go through now is less than nothing compared with the magnificent future God has planned for us. The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the [children] of God coming into their own. The world of creation cannot as yet

see reality, not because it chooses to be blind, but because in God’s purpose it has been so limited—yet it has been given hope. And the hope is that in the end the whole of created life will be rescued from the tyranny of change and decay, and have its share in that magnificent liberty which can only belong to the children of God! It is plain to anyone with eyes to see that at the present time all created life groans in a sort of universal travail. And it is plain, too, that we who have a foretaste of the Spirit are in a state of painful tension, while we wait for that redemption of our bodies which will mean that at last we have realized our full [rights as His children]” (Rom. 8:18-23 J. B. PHILLIPS). Now we see what Luther was saying about

the gospel written in the book of nature. What a fantastic future for all of us! See how it is pictured in the Revelation. In chapter 2 of John's vision we hear the promise of Jesus Christ to those who repent of their sin and then persevere in the faith: "To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7). Ah, there it is again—that wonderful tree, the tree of life. We see it finally as the great bookend of the Bible:

He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the

healing of the nations (Rev. 22:1-2).

There we have the biblical story of the four trees:

- *creation*—the tree of life
- *fall*—the tree of death
- *redemption*—the tree of atonement
- *restoration*—the tree of life

Here in fact is the entire gospel—the "good news" for all people and for the entire creation. What a story of great hope it is for you and me, and even for the redwoods. And may God's Holy Spirit touch the hearts of Julia "Butterfly" Hill and her father with the truth that will bring their troubled pilgrimage to a joyful end. If they think the old redwood forest is awesome, I can't help but wonder about their response to the restored one!

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