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HOMESICK FOR HEAVEN: A STORY TO SHARE WITH NON-CHRISTIANS

by Dan Story

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Throughout several decades of marriage, my wife and I have been privileged to live in four houses close to natural environments. Our present home was new when we purchased it, and located only a short walk from a beautiful grove of ancient live oaks. Within minutes, we can hike under their massive sheltering branches and then plunge into an “elfin forest” of native chaparral. Still, we wanted nature even closer. So within days after moving in, we began the backbreaking labor of planting groundcover, shrubs, and trees to cover the barren earth. We put out birdfeeders and birdbaths and planted flowers that attract butterflies and hummingbirds. We wanted nature at our doorstep; we wanted to look out our windows and see greenery; we wanted birds and other animals to feed in our yard. The hard work paid off. So far we have identified nearly forty different species of birds just looking out our living room windows. We’ve had raccoons, opossums, squirrels, rabbits, and lizards find nourishment in our yard.

The desire my wife and I have to maintain contact with nature is a trait common to man. It’s especially evident with people who live in urban and suburban environments—people isolated from daily contact with natural outdoor settings. This can be seen in numerous ways besides landscaping our individual homes. Millions of people flock to Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and other national and state parks every year. Millions more visit zoos, aquariums, natural history museums, wildlife preserves, and botanical gardens. Cities set aside parks and nature preserves and prohibit development in exceptionally beautiful open space. Most Americans willingly support federal and state laws that protect wild habitats so that wolves, bears,

mountain lions, bighorn sheep, and other animals can prosper — animals that few people will see in the wild.

What's going on here? For many years I've pondered this phenomenon: the developed world desires to maintain at least some contact with nature. There is something about the wilderness, wild animals, and even our gardens and pets that humans intuitively find gratifying. Clearly, deep within the human soul, entrenched in the recesses of our minds, something beckons us to nature. But why? And, as a Christian apologist, how can I use this yearning as a point of contact with unbelievers? I've concluded there are two ways.

GOD IN THE WILDERNESS

God's felt presence in nature has long captured the imaginations and stirred the creative geniuses of artists, poets, and wilderness sojourners. Poets such as William Wordsworth; transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau; wilderness wanderers such as John Muir; and a wide variety of religious writers have sought to capture the spiritual dimensions of nature. Although I do not endorse all his views, John Eldredge in his book *Waking the Dead* expressed such a sentiment when he wrote:

Like many pilgrims down through the ages, I discovered my spiritual life in the desert. I found solitude and silence in the Mojave of southern California, far from the numbing sameness and suffocating density of the suburbs that warehouse millions of people. The desert awakened my heart, and I discovered freedom of spirit walking across the arroyos for hours upon end, haunted by stark beauty and the thin veil of heaven there. No wonder Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist spent their free time in the desert.¹

So the first apologetic point of contact is to help non-Christians understand that God created human beings to know Him, and His self-revelation in nature can be an avenue to initiate that relationship. Nature brings all people into the presence of the Creator; it testifies to an innate knowledge that God exists, an awareness He has placed in every human heart, even if it's suppressed (Rom. 1:18–20). Scripture tells us that God wordlessly reveals Himself to the entire human race through creation (Ps. 19:1–4). This “general revelation” is accessible to every human being and includes enough information about God so that people are “without excuse” if they reject it (Rom. 1:20). On the other hand, people who *do* respond to God in creation and truly seek to find Him *will* find Him (Acts 17:24–27).

If someone would have pointed this out to me in the 1970s, when I was active in the environmental movement, I might have become a Christian years earlier.

THE DREAM THAT WILL COME TRUE

In addition to experiencing God's felt presence in creation, there is another reason why virtually all people are drawn to nature. And it provides a second apologetic point of contact.

I believe a persuasive case can be made that the human race possesses a latent, subconscious memory of the garden of Eden—and a compelling desire to return. Intrinsic to every human heart is a longing to live in a place of beauty and serenity; a place free of evil, suffering, and sorrow; a place where humans, the animal kingdom, and all of nature can coexist in peace. Eden was such a place, and nature provides a glimpse (albeit imperfect) of this home God originally intended for us. Nature is a link to Paradise lost, and I believe a major reason for mankind's corporate longing for contact with nature.

C. S. Lewis and other scholars have pointed out that every natural desire human beings possess reflects a real and necessary human need—and will have an actual fulfillment. God has created us with many desires that this world *can* fulfill, such as for food, sex, companionship, and meaningful work. But what if we have natural desires for something this world *can't* fulfill?

Lewis provides the answer. He writes in his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists....If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."² If Lewis is correct, our desire for Eden must also have an actual fulfillment—but in "another world."

HOMESICK FOR HEAVEN

I began to contemplate people's subconscious longing for a return to Eden when I chanced upon C. S. Lewis' book, *The Weight of Glory*. In this book, Lewis used the word "nostalgia" as a way to describe mankind's natural "desire for our own far-off country," that is, for "Paradise."³ I liked the word because it helped me to understand how our human desire for an Edenic paradise is actually linked to its potential fulfillment.

The word nostalgia has its origin in the late eighteenth century, during the Romantic Period. This was an era when American artists, poets, and writers increasingly sought to reconnect physically and spiritually with nature. Nostalgia

carries the idea of a wistful or sentimental longing for the past, typically for a time or place with happy, personal memories—but a time or place to which we can never return.

At a deeper level, in terms of the entire human race, the powerful nostalgic urge to reconnect with our “past” is far more intuitive and deep-rooted than pleasant reminiscences of bygone days. It reveals a subconscious homesickness for something more distant than the span of one’s life—or even the span of recorded history. As Lewis suggested, feelings of nostalgia reflect a distinct, if shadowy, craving for *Paradise*—a homesickness for the idyllic world that existed long before living memory. It is a yearning for our *intended* home, but one lost to us in the fall—a world to which we long to return but never can.

As Lewis pointed out, however, God has not given the human race any desire that does not have a fulfillment, so our shared longing for Eden must have the potential to be satisfied. The Bible reveals how. Our desire to return to Eden will be fulfilled in a future, prophesied “new heaven and earth” (Isa. 65:17; 2 Pet. 3:10–13), when Jesus returns at the end of this age to establish His eternal kingdom (Rev. 21:1–4). Nostalgia, then, as it relates to our longing for a return to Eden, actually looks forward, not backward. It’s a yearning for a *new* Paradise where nature is renewed and where God will once again walk in fellowship with His people (Rev. 21:3). Thus, our collective longing for Eden is in reality a desire for heaven. “Homesickness for Heaven,” writes Quaker scholar Arthur Roberts, “pervades stories and rituals of all human cultures, often with no indication of cross-cultural exchanges.”⁴

MAKING AN APOLOGETIC CONNECTION

In the meantime, people’s “homesickness for heaven” can be partially satisfied in *this* life through nature. Although predators, poisonous snakes, and stinging insects dwell in the wilderness, the beauty and ecological harmony of nature still show a remnant of the peace and tranquility of Eden—and the presence of our Creator.

As an apologetic point of contact, this is the message non-Christians need to hear. Wild nature is a privileged peek through earthly shutters to a garden of Eden reborn; a future Paradise with all the joy and peace and unspoiled beauty of Eden—and more! In God’s timing, the wilderness—indeed, all of creation—will be transformed (Rom. 8:19–23). The dim memory of Eden hovering in the recesses of our minds will someday become a living reality. “We must see nature,” Oxford scholar Alister McGrath teaches, “as a continual reminder and symbol of a future renewed creation, a world that we do not yet know but believe to lie over the horizons of our human existence. It is as if we are homesick for a lost Eden, longing for a fulfillment that we

know lies ahead of us but have not yet found....We must learn to see the present beauty of nature as a sign and a promise of the coming glory of God, its creator.”⁵

The idea of nature as a precursor or foretaste of heaven is a concept McGrath reflects on in several of his books. In *A Brief History of Heaven*, McGrath writes: “For writers such as Augustine and Lewis, the memory of Eden lingers, haunting humanity with its longing to regain entrance to this forbidden realm. Nature itself becomes a parable, charged with a divinely imbued potential to recreate the memory of Eden, and make us long to return to its now-deserted meadows.”⁶

The wonderful, breathtaking good news is that, at the end of this age, Jesus will return to gather His people to spend eternity with Him in heaven (1 Thess. 4:16–18). But there is also a tragic side to this. The future new earth is reserved only for people who have received Jesus Christ as God’s acceptable substitute for their sins and rebellion against Him (Rom. 5:8; 8:1). Jesus said in John 3:17 that God did not send Him into the world to condemn it, but to save it. But then He adds this somber warning: people who do not believe in Him *already* “stand condemned.” Why? Because they have rejected Jesus (v. 18).

Everyone has the opportunity to move toward or away from God, because He has revealed Himself to everyone in nature (Rom. 1:18–20). But it requires a decision. The prophet Jeremiah wrote more than twenty-five centuries ago: “[We] stand at the crossroads and look; Ask for the ancient paths, Ask where the good way is, and walk in it, And you will find rest for your souls” (Jer. 6:16 NIV).

People who choose the path to Jesus Christ will find eternal “rest for their souls” in a new heaven and earth far more wonderful than anything they can possibly imagine or experience in this world. This is the story embedded in mankind’s homesickness for heaven. This is the story we want to share with our nature-loving friends and family. Help them to see that God may be calling *them* through creation. Gently but firmly encourage them to respond.

Dan Story is a Christian apologist and the author of many apologetic books, booklets, and articles. He explores the biblical perspective on nature in his book, *Should Christians Be Environmentalists?* (Kregel, 2012).

NOTES

- 1 John Eldredge, *Waking the Dead; The Glory of a Heart Fully Alive* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 206.

- 2 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1952), 120.
- 3 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1980), 29–30.
- 4 Arthur O. Roberts, *Exploring Heaven: What Great Christian Thinkers Tell Us about Our Afterlife with God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 66.
- 5 Alister McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature: The Denial of Religion and the Ecological Crisis* (New York: Doubleday/Galilee, 2003), 183–84.
- 6 Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 78.