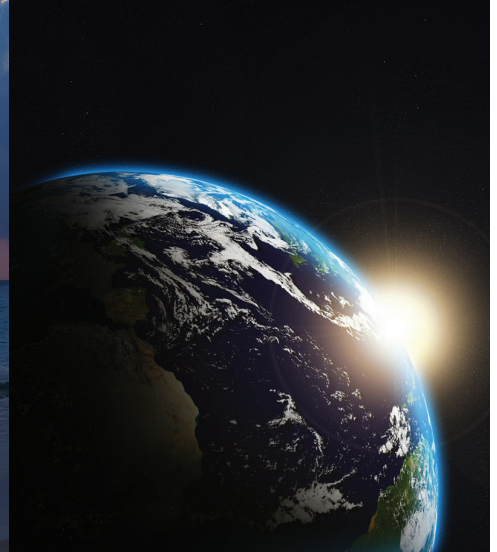
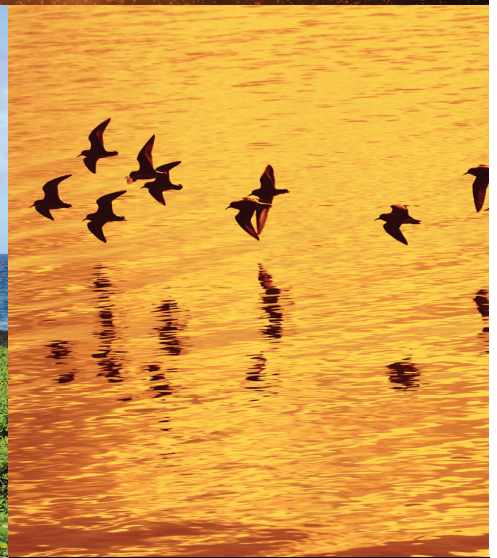




The Evangelical Covenant Church

Praying through the
Creation Story:
Finding Our Story in God's



Week of Prayer A GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUALS AND SMALL GROUPS

About the Week of Prayer


For more than 60 years, the Evangelical Covenant Church has provided materials for a week of prayer during the month of January. Whether you choose to use this resource at the beginning of the year or at some other time, we want to both challenge and equip followers of Jesus to live a life of prayer and to continually seek new ways to develop those practices. The Week of Prayer can be used by individuals or groups, over one week or over the course of seven weeks. Each day/week of the resource includes reflection and prayer prompts, but we encourage you to use these as starting points. Feel free to customize the resource for your purposes—adding your own prompts to further enhance the discussion and enrich the time of prayer. The Week of Prayer is in English, Spanish, and Korean. You can download from CovChurch.org/resources or order copies at CovBooks.com.



Praying through the Creation Story: Finding Our Story in God's

The ways people pursue God, or even pray, can be as different as the very people who pursue God. Spiritual writers and mentors have long appreciated these varieties of pathways that pilgrims have followed in their prayer journey. Many are led to deep devotion through such mediums as music or contemplation. Others have found that the beauty and mystery of the natural, created world leads them to an inspiring and humbling encounter of praise and prayer with their Creator God. Of course, these pathways mix to varying degrees according to our personalities and interests.

Those who find nature one of their important spiritual pathways can see their own faith story unfold in the creation story of Genesis 1 and 2. Being mindful not to worship creation but only the Creator, a consideration of the natural world helps them do that. This guide for a week of prayer focuses on the pathway of nature as a conduit into the presence and praise of God.



*Then God said, "Let there
be light..."* Genesis 1:3

DAY ONE: Enlightened

Read: Genesis 1:1-5; John 1:1-5; Acts 9:1-9

God created the heavens and the earth. At a time when all was formless and empty, God created light, light for us. God *is* light (1 John 1:5).

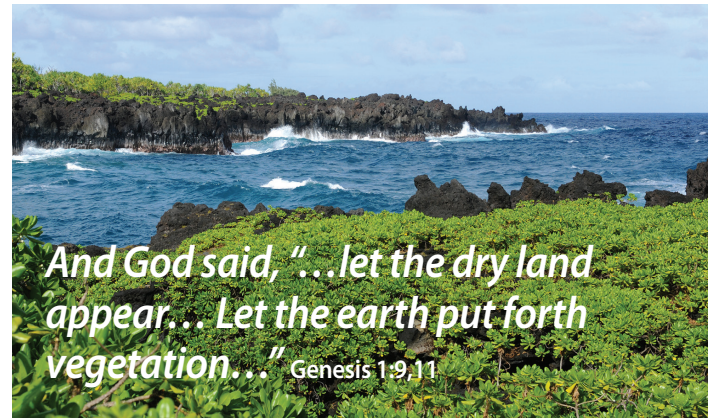
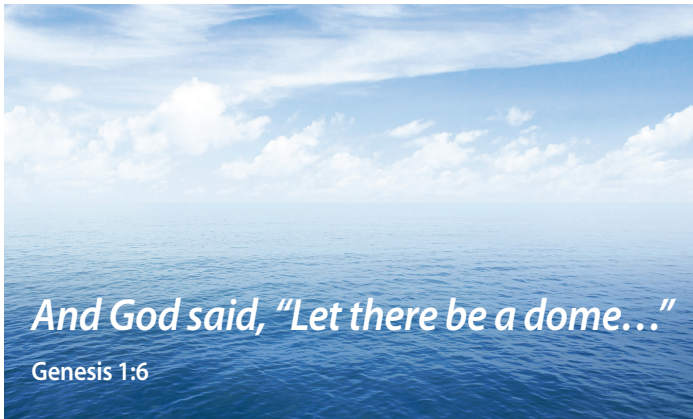
Prior to this, the scriptures say that "...a wind from God swept over..." the pre-creation formlessness. The Hebrew word for 'swept over' can also be 'hovered' or 'brooded'. To brood can be to think about something, for good or ill. To brood can be, literally, to incubate, as do birds upon their nests. God did both of these before creating the most basic of all necessities, light.

How we need light! In Acts 9, we are given the account of Saul's encounter with God on the Damascus Road before he became a Christ follower. Verse 3 says, "...suddenly a light..." Knocked to the ground by a blinding brilliance, he heard a voice. And in a single, momentary, dazzling flash, the entire prior direction of Saul's life was revealed to him as a complete and utter mistake. Can you imagine? It was light that made the difference, for the Spirit had been brooding over Saul as well. And by the time the experience was over several days later, Saul himself would have some brooding to do before the light eventually came.

Often, to pray well is to brood well, bringing our circumstances completely before the Lord. Sometimes we find ourselves in unexpected places, places we never planned to be, places we perhaps never wanted to be. In critical times like these we must do as Saul did and allow the light to penetrate, illuminate and guide us. Like him, we will find in the process that Jesus Christ is all the Light we'll ever need (John 1:5). For God broods over us, too.

Reflect: Go to the darkest closet or cupboard in your home or church, and open the door. What happens? Does the darkness come creeping into the room in which you stand? No, the opposite holds true. Light trumps darkness. Always. Thank God for this, either alone or in your group.

Pray: Lord, I need your light. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for creating it, not only the light by which I see but also the spiritual light by which I can understand. Help me to walk always in the light of Jesus Christ. Amen.



DAY TWO: BELOVED

Read: Genesis 1:1, 6-8; Psalm 36:5-10 and 108:3-6

Now that light has been created and things may be seen, the Scripture notes that God separates the waters from the firmament. And just like that, formlessness moves further to form. As our story within God's creation story continues to unfold, we simply and most critically see the actions of a personal God—a God whose love, beauty and order are revealed in the midst of chaos.

In Psalm 36 and 108, the psalmist David goes so far as to say that it is these very, astounding and expansive skies that best show God's loving-kindness and faithfulness. The phrase 'steadfast love' used in both texts is from the Hebrew *chesed*. It is a term rarely used in the Scripture in reference to anyone but God. When it is used of humans, it is usually translated 'kindness,' something for which we may also praise God. But when translators use it to describe God they struggle to communicate the richness and uniqueness of the concept, showing it also as 'tender mercy' or 'loving-kindness.' In its near defying translation, it is therefore perhaps deserving of such a reference to the Almighty.

Psalm 19:1 says, *"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."* Our human condition too often causes us to look down as we pace ourselves and check our steps. Yet the holy Scriptures implore us also to look up and see the mastery and mystery of our Creator God. It is here that a whole different dimension of prayer can begin. Praise God for this larger perspective, this great blessing!

Reflect: How long has it been since you truly sat back for a while and looked up at the sky? What incredible things to behold it contains! Take five minutes today to do just that. What do you see for which you can give God thanks? Then, go deeper. Ask yourself: for me, in what ways *does* God's loving-kindness extend to the heavens? In what ways *does* God's faithfulness reach the clouds? If in a group, share your testimonies about this together.

Pray:

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father. There is no shadow of turning with thee.

Thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not. As thou hast been, thou forever wilt be.

Great is thy faithfulness! Amen.

(From the hymn, "Great is Thy Faithfulness," written by Thomas Chisholm.)

DAY THREE: AWED

Read: Genesis 1:1, 9-13; Isaiah 55:6-13; Luke 19:35-40

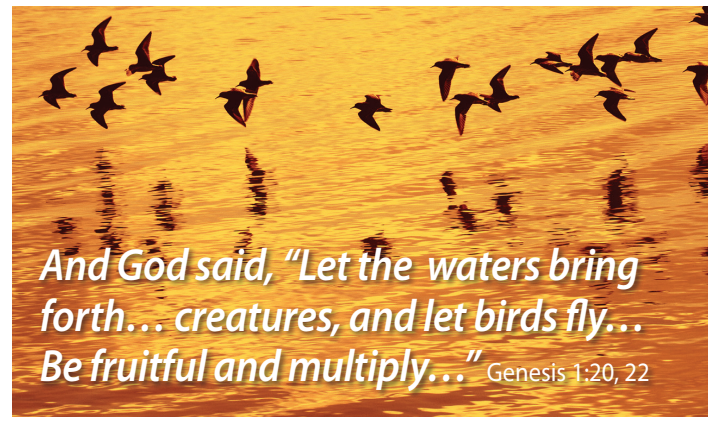
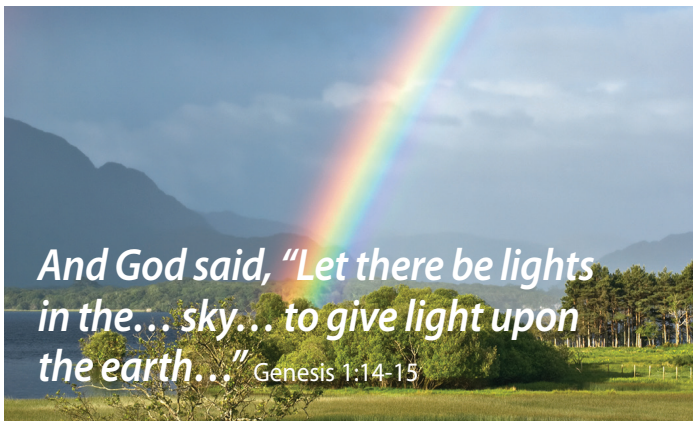
In God's perfect timing, a good and beautiful world comes majestically into being—forests and flowers and plains, mountains and lakes and oceans. It's a world created for God's good pleasure even before God gifts it to us for ours.

But what if God had stopped at this point in creation? Interestingly, the scriptures infer God's creation *still* had the capacity to give God praise even without human action! From mountains that sing and trees that clap their hands in praise (Isaiah 55:12) to stones that could cry out adulation to Jesus Christ (Luke 19:40), God makes it abundantly clear that all of creation bows to him. Do I? Do you? Completely and unequivocally?

Nature is one of God's most elemental and basic teachers, yet one overlooked by many in our sophisticated, fast-paced culture. One has to do nothing more than consider how often Jesus teaches using examples from nature, constantly illustrating his points by speaking of such things as birds, flowers, weather, luminaries, geological features, trees, seas, fish, and seasons. Do these lead you to praise and prayer? Jesus knew that many faith lessons could be learned more easily by our simple observation of God's created order.

Reflect: Take a sheet of paper and begin by listing 6-8 different flowers God created. Then, reflect on the uniqueness of each and jot down a word that comes to mind in reflecting on the beauty of each flower. Prayerfully think back and remember ways in which God has forgiven or rescued you, or perhaps a special blessing God provided. Which words used to describe the flowers could you also use to describe these personal experiences with God? Share at least one of these memories with someone today. Enjoy!

Pray: Lord, as I number my blessings, I am in awe of your abundance. And yet I still find there are things that hold me back from fully surrendering to you, or completely trusting you for the provision of my needs. Hear my confession. I do not wish to leave my adulation to the stones. Amen.



DAY FOUR: AWARE

Read: Genesis 1:1, 14-19; Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 8; Matthew 16:1-4

Lights in the firmament: Yes, enjoying the glories of the sky—sunrises and sets, rainbows, shooting stars, clouds, sundogs, aurora, glorioles, constellations and planets—is all about being in the right place at the right time. But it's also about something else: awareness. How often have we lifted our eyes to a fading rainbow or gloriole (a ring around the sun) or missed the meteorite because we were too preoccupied to notice them? When that happens, we have not only missed the chance for beauty, but we have also missed the chance for gratitude. One does not need to be an astronomer or meteorologist to enjoy the sky's myriad of simple pleasures.

Oh, to have the curious, wholehearted spirit of King David in Psalm 8, or of John Muir, a 19th century inspiration for Christian naturalists today, who said, "Look at that now. . . And to think that God should plan to bring us feckless creatures here at just the right moment, and then flash such glories at us! Man, we are not worthy of such honor! . . .Praise God from Whom all blessings flow!" We may not even be sure what 'feckless' means, but we can get an idea from Muir's infectious enthusiasm for the wonders of God's creation!

Our awareness of God's constant presence can be as overlooked as our failure to notice or appreciate a rainbow. God said to Noah, when pointing out the rainbow, "...it shall be a sign..." How many other signs of God's presence do we routinely disregard?

Reflect: When you are outdoors today or tomorrow, simply look up several times throughout the day. Use these moments to notice what God has created; but then use that moment to also express your gratitude for God's relentless, brooding presence over you. What is God saying to you?

Pray: Lord, a hymnwriter wrote that your lights in the sky "...join with all nature in manifold witness to thy great faithfulness, mercy and love." I may not regularly notice the glories of the sky as often as you present them, but may I never fail to notice your words to me and activity in my life. Amen.

NOTE: Muir quote taken from S. Hall Young's *Alaska Days with John Muir*.

DAY FIVE: KNOWN

Read: Genesis 1:1, 20-23; Job 12:7-10; Matthew 6:25-34

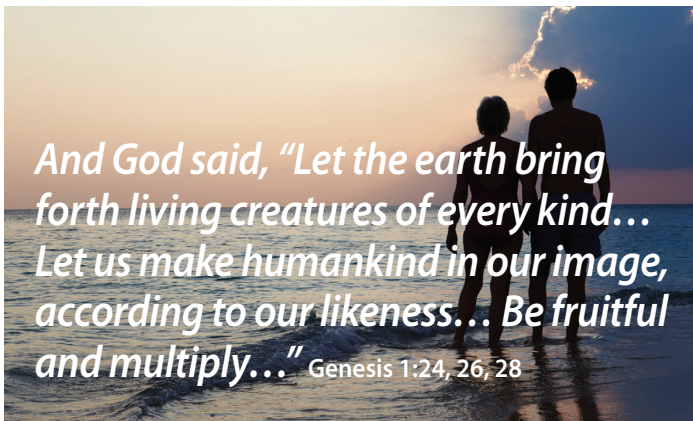
"Be fruitful and multiply," said God. If there is ever any question about God's generosity, that question seems to be answered when considering the veritable abundance of God's creatures. For example, did you know there are about ten thousand known species of birds and thirty thousand fish, in addition to five thousand mammals? It is no wonder primitive peoples were impressed and patterned gods after the natural world.

Yet in spite of their mind-boggling numbers, it is the beasts that Job turns to for encouragement in his suffering. Be sure to read the Job 12 passage; Job needed to know God had not forgotten him, and the animals themselves challenged him to trust God even in the midst of his dilemma. Jesus also refers to birds as proof of God's loving care, not only in the Matthew 6 text but in 10:29, where he says that God takes compassionate notice when even a single, plain sparrow falls to the ground. What a God!

But have you noticed a phrase that has been used often in the Genesis passages we've read? "*And God saw that it was good.*" The Hebrew word for good is *tōv*. *Tov* is more than just a generic "good" as we might think of it. *Tov* is joy, great cheer, the highest of goods, even a sense of well-being in the widest sense. And by the time that animals and humans are created, God even uses a superlative and calls it all *very tov*! God's perspective on things always makes a difference in our lives.

Reflect: Think for a moment: how many birds do you think you'd recognize *by their call alone*? A robin? A crow? A chickadee? Whether alone or in a group, jot down as many as you can come up with in three minutes, even if one is a rooster! Then give thanks to God who knows *your* voice, knows *your* name, knows *your* needs and those of your loved ones. Share with someone today a time when you, like Job, needed to remember God cared for you.

Pray: I am astounded by your creation, God, awed by its complexity and variety. From landforms to animals to the heavenly bodies to human beings, your creative palette is indeed an abundant one. Thank you for the beauty of your earth and your care. Amen.



And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind... Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... Be fruitful and multiply..." Genesis 1:24, 26, 28

DAY SIX: TREASURED

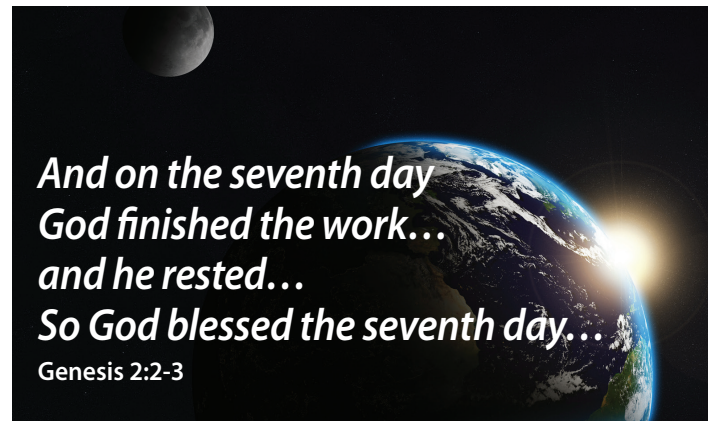
Read: Genesis 1:1, 24-31; Psalm 8; Psalm 139:13-18; Luke 12:4-7

Picture David, a young shepherd, finally lying back at twilight after a day guarding the flocks and musing on the night sky. "...*What are human beings that you are mindful of them...*?" he says. Now, there are two ways this text may be taken, and the choice is ours. We could read it with despair, emphasizing, "*What are humans...*?" In other words we might say, "God, if there is a God, why would you concern yourself with this insignificant speck of a person on this insignificant speck of a planet amidst all your creation?" Or we can read it with a different emphasis, "...*that you are mindful of them...*?" David gets to this latter meaning. He and we can say, "Somehow, you see me and know me, even love me. And you have given me dominion over your works." What else can be done but give praise, "*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*"

But our command to fruitfulness and dominion does not allow us license to abuse the good earth God has given. Along with responsibility and authority must come commensurate accountability. God will hold us answerable as his creation's stewards.

Reflect: Do you "people watch"? At an airport, mall, city center or other congested area? Maybe you do it with only an eye of curiosity. But what if we tried doing it more with a prayerful spirit that says, "There goes a child of God, a beloved crown of God's creation?" Take time today, and each day, to watch the people around you and pray for them.

Pray: How quick I can be, Lord, to make the first choice mentioned above; for there is too much in this world that can lead to despair, including humankind's inhumanity to others and their neglect and abuse of your creation. Forgive me, forgive us. Lead us in a new way, your way, the way of your loving mindfulness toward us, toward others, and toward all that you have made. Amen.



And on the seventh day God finished the work... and he rested... So God blessed the seventh day...
Genesis 2:2-3

DAY SEVEN: GRATEFUL

Read: Genesis 1:1, 2:1-3; Psalm 46; Matthew 11:25-30

"All...all...all..." it says in those three verses of Genesis 2. God's initial tasks were complete, and God rested. Did God need it? No, but as is so often the case, God first models the behavior and action God desires from his children. And as God rested, we can imagine that God also reflected, pleased with the goodness of the creation.

The creation story is one of God's fruitfulness and thoughtful gratitude. Should our story be any different, especially if we are created in God's image? Along with God's spectacular creation, rest and a spirit of thankfulness are gifts to us from our Creator. One replenishes us. The other defines our reason for being. But we must give ourselves time and opportunity to practice and enjoy them both.

How do you feel when you finish something substantial? What about when you complete another day? That, too, is substantial. Some of you may recall the words to the musical piece, *Taps* (lyrics by Horace Lorenzo Trim):

*Day is done. Gone the sun
from the lakes, from the hills, from the sky.
All is well. Safely rest. God is nigh.
Thanks and praise for our days
'neath the sun, 'neath the stars, 'neath the sky.
As we go this we know: God is nigh.*

God reflected. So do we.

Reflect: Make a place this evening or by the next Lord's Day for a special moment. When it comes to spiritual reflection on the Sabbath or any day, people of faith for centuries have enjoyed a practice called an examen. Most often experienced in the evening, it is a time to prayerfully reflect upon our attentiveness to the presence of God in our day. When did God seem most close? When most far? Why? For what am I thankful? When was I most attentive to God? Least attentive? Did I represent Jesus well today, or not? When? What can I do differently tomorrow? Though the questions can vary, a regular examen can be a very important practice in one's ongoing Christian formation.

Pray: Lord, you are ever near, revealing yourself to us through others, through your creation and through your Holy Spirit. Thank you for your creative majesty, for beauty that inspires, for marvels that humble. O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! Amen.

About the author: Rick Mylander is a spiritual director and veteran Covenant pastor and administrator, currently serving in transitional intentional interim work. A Chicago native of Grace Covenant Church, he lives in Colorado with his wife Gail, with whom he celebrates life, four children, three sons-in-laws and seven grandchildren. He is a member of Castle Oaks Covenant in Castle Rock, Colorado. An avid blogger on creation and Christian spirituality (www.rickmylander.com), Rick enjoys family, hiking, camping, and Lou Malnati's pizza.

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