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Bird Watching for the Wise

In Living Color, Part 2

Selected Scripture

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

Last week, we looked at how creation shows us the handiwork of God. This past Sunday, we looked at creation, but more specifically, at birds. Birds teach us valuable lessons about our Creator. Scripture shows us that God watches over birds and provides for them (Matthew 6:26). There are four ways that birds teach us some theological truths. Birds provide an example of being persistent. Everything that we do should be for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). We should work hard and diligently (Eccl. 9:10a). Birds show us how God protects us. We take refuge in God. (Psalm 57:1) Birds also show us the mysterious ways of God. God's ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8). And finally, birds show us a pattern of returning to walk with God. So often, we stray from our Creator and do not have the sense (as birds do) to fly back home.

Discussion Points:

Life can be overwhelming, mundane, demanding, and redundant. We can quickly start to make excuses for our behavior when we allow "life" to control our attitudes. However, the first point was that birds provide an example of being persistent, diligent, and hard-working.

- Are there areas of your life where you feel overwhelmed, bored, overworked, etc.? If so, what are they?
- We often say, "There's not enough time in the day." Is that really true? Why or why not?
- 1 Cor. 10:31 says that we should do all things to the glory of God. How can you implement that truth in your everyday life?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Last week, we talked about being valued and image bearers of God. This week, birds teach us about the protecting care of God.

- Scripture makes it clear that God values and takes care of His own. How have you seen God provide for you this last week?
- What parts of the story of Ruth bring you the most comfort? How does God provide for Ruth and Naomi?
- Look up some passages that talk about God being our refuge, our protector, and our fortress.

Another way that birds teach us about God is that they are an illustration of the mysterious ways of God. So often, we question God because we don't see the bigger picture. We want to know every little detail before we make a decision. But God is so much bigger and more mysterious than we can understand.

- There are so many things about God that we don't understand which should cause us to want to know Him more. What have you learned about God this past week that showed you His ways are not your ways?
- God created all things. How does His creation show His creativity?

Finally, birds shows us a pattern of returning to walk with God. Birds are led by their instincts. They fly south for the winter and return home in the spring because their instinct is to do so. Christians, however, can be led astray and never fly back home.

- What areas of your life are holding you back from walking with the Lord?
- Why are we so quick to make excuses instead of repent?
- What are the joys of giving your heart fully to God and walking daily with Him?

Gospel Connection:

Birds are one part of God's creation, yet they are intricately and purposefully created. When we look at how birds can show us who our God is, we see the need to daily humble ourselves and seek God. To experience the love and protection of God, we need the Gospel. To glorify God in all things and come back to Him when we stray, we need the Gospel. Viewing ourselves the way God does hinges on how we view the Gospel. We are loved, valued, and created with a purpose. The Gospel shows us how much God loves us and values us. He sent His Son to die for us! When we give Him our hearts, our lives are given a new purpose—to glorify and serve our great Creator. We rest in the arms of the One who created us.

Practical Implications:

Think: What truth about birds gives you a greater understanding of God? How do you give glory to God?

Pray: Ask God to help you live for Him. Ask Him for comfort when trials come, for strength to keep going, for purpose when going about your daily routine. Ask Him to help you bring Him glory in all things.

Do: Be thankful that God created you. Be thankful that He is your refuge. Spend time with Him each day this week. Be intentional with bringing Him glory in your everyday routine

Bird Watching for the Wise

In Living Color, Part 2

Selected Scripture

In this series where I am encouraging you to take your binoculars along with your Bibles and begin to take a closer view of the natural world around you – not just to look but truly see; not just to taste but to savor – not just to hear but to listen – I had the passing thought that one of the animals worth looking at together would be dogs.

You know how much I like dogs . . . so much more than those other much more fallen creatures.

But for all of you who love cats – I have to admit it to you, that as I began to cross reference all the texts that referred to dogs, I couldn't find one positive thing about them in the Bible.

- Wicked and violent men are referred to as dogs (*Psalms 22*);
- False religious leaders are also called dogs (*Isaiah 56*);
- Paul warned the Philippian church of false teachers when he wrote Beware of the dogs – the evil workers (*Philippians 3*);
- In fact, in the very last chapter of the Bible – *Revelation 22*, all of unbelieving humanity who will not be allowed into Heaven is categorically referred to as a pack of dogs – John the Apostle writes, *Outside [the gates of the city] are the dogs.*

So I've decided not to spend any time on dogs.

If you're a little older in the faith and you've read through your Bible a few times by now, the animal species that appears over and over again in scripture – almost always with a positive

illustration or analogy to the believer – are different kinds of birds.

Birds literally blanket the earth with their presence – they number in the multiplied millions upon millions today.

In fact, in one Old Testament account, we're given an amazing reference to the omniscience of God (the all-knowingness of God) when we're told that He knows *all the birds of the air.*

Billions of them . . . at any given moment, God knows about every one of them, down to the last detail.

In the New Testament, Jesus makes this even more significant announcement about the care and knowledge of God over even the tiniest of birds in His created world – when Jesus says; Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And yet not a single sparrow falls to the ground [dies] without your Father's knowledge.

Matthew 10:29

If you think about that for a moment – you'll come away as a believer, reassured of God's incredible care for you.

I read recently another incident in the testimony of Joni Eareckson Tada, who – as you may know – broke her neck in a diving accident in the Chesapeake Bay as a teenager. It left her totally and permanently paralyzed from the neck down. 25 years later, serving the Lord full time and a bestselling author, artist – she developed some health problems and had to stay in bed. Hoping to cheer her up, her husband Ken hung a bird feeder outside her window. And at first it only made her more miserable because she envied their freedom and mobility. But then she remembered this text and ended up writing of her change in heart and mind – she wrote, "I can understand Jesus noticing an eagle, but a scrappy sparrow? They're a dime a dozen. Jesus said so Himself. Yet from

thousands of bird species the Lord chose the most insignificant, least-noticed, scruffiest bird of all. A pint-sized thing that even dedicated birdwatchers tend to ignore. And that thought calmed my fears. If the great God of Heaven concerns Himself with a ragtag little sparrow clinging to the bird feeder outside my window, He cares about you . . . and me.”ⁱ

And most fascinating of all, the bird species is the one animal species where Jesus actually delivers a command for us to study them.

The Lord said in Matthew 6:26 to His audience; Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Matthew 6:26

When Jesus says this, He’s doing more than casually saying, “Hey, you can’t help but notice the birds around you, and you . . . why don’t you take a quick glance at them.”

No . . . the verb translated “Look at them” is an imperative verb which can be followed by an exclamation point – and which means – study them; consider them; observe them.”ⁱⁱ

Martin Luther, the Reformer, writing several hundred years ago on this text, said this: The Lord is making the birds our schoolmasters and teachers . . . in the Gospel a helpless sparrow becomes a theologian and a preacher to the wisest of men.

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

So . . . take a closer look at the birds . . . combine a pair of binoculars with your Bible and start studying them . . . they will illustrate theological truths to the wisest Christians among us.

As part of my preparation for this series – where we’ll take a closer look at a number of animals, as well as other elements in God’s creation – I found that one pastor well respected among his peers, was an avid bird watcher.

His name was John Stott and he pastored in London for many years – and passed away just a few years ago. He coined a term for his lifelong observations of birds – he took the word ornithology – which is the study of birds – and coined the term orni-theology.

He wrote a book on his years of fascination with birds – he titled it, *The Birds, our Teachers* – with the subtitle – *Biblical Lessons from a lifelong bird-watcher*.

I came across of photograph of this Anglican church-leader, in his study, surrounded by bookshelves from floor to ceiling, standing near a window with a pair of binoculars in his hands.

In his book, Stott writes; Many Christians have a good doctrine of redemption, but need a better doctrine of creation. We ought to pursue at least one aspect of natural history . . . the study of nature and the scriptures [can go hand in hand].

John Stott (1921-2011)

So let’s apply literally – at least together in this one session – the command of Christ to consider – to take careful note of – to study – the birds of the air.

Watching them provides some lessons for the believer – let me give you 4 of them . . . and hopefully this will whet your appetite to go make more of your own.

First of all, birds provide . . .

1. An example of persistence in our assignments from God

Maybe you’ve arrived here today and, truth be known, you’re tired. Life is redundant . . . tasks are demanding . . . sleep is evasive . . . there’s so much to do and so little time!

I’ve discovered one of the reasons why, by the way, that you might be tired. One author wrote; [So you’re reading my book . . . you need to know that] I’m tired. For several years I’ve been blaming it on middle age, iron poor blood, lack of vitamins, air pollution, water pollution, saccharin, weight, dieting, wax buildup and a dozen other maladies that make you wonder if it’s really worth the effort.

But now I found out, it’s none of those things. I’m tired because I’m overworked . . . and I’ve figured out why.

The population of this country is around 300 million, but 98 million are retired. That leaves 202 million to do the work. But there are 161

million in school, which leaves 41 million to do the work. Of this total, there are 22 million employed by the federal government and another 14,800,000 people employed by state and city governments and none of them are really working, which leaves 4.2 million to do all the work. But four million are serving all around the world in the military, which leaves only 200,000 civilians to do all the work. Of them, 188,000 are sick and in the hospital, so that leaves 12,000 to do the work. But there are 11,998 people in prison, so that leaves just 2 people to do all the work. And you're just standing there reading a book . . . no wonder I'm tired.ⁱⁱⁱ

One of the most amazing birds that has captured our attention at home is the hummingbird. We have a pair that have taken to the flowers in our back yard and they are amazing to watch.

They are miniature helicopters on steroids; able to fly up, down, sideways, backwards, forwards and even upside down as loop around and then suddenly come to a standstill – so to speak – hovering in midair.

I have had them fly 10 inches from my face, hovering – staring – and then zooming away.

Their wings beat on average 25 times a second – and when they're really showing off – 80 times a second. And when they're chasing after a potential mate – their wings can beat 200 times a second – which happens to be the same rate as the housefly.^{iv}

One author wrote that hummingbirds have the highest energy output per unit of weight than any living warm-blooded animal. The average person's output of calories is around 3,500 calories a day – the equivalent for the hummingbird is 155,000 calories a day. A normal person eats 2 ½ pounds of food daily – with the exception of Thanksgiving when we have no idea. If your output of energy daily matched that of a hummingbird, you'd have to eat 370 pounds of food a day.

Which means that gathering food is a constant need for them. And they will consume

what amounts to half their weight in sugar every single day.

They're not our example, in case Krispy crème came to your mind just now. It did mine.

One author writes, Hummingbirds hardly ever stop moving. They might perch when resting, but they don't bother hopping around or walking. They move only by flight and they feed, drink and bathe while flying.

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 9:10, Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.

Ecclesiastes 9:10a

1 Corinthians 10:31 give us a sanctified perspective on the most redundant, repetitive, challenging, difficult chores of life when Paul the Apostle dignified it all as an act of worship with he writes, Whether then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31

Watch the persistent activity of a hummingbird and then get up and tackle the next thing on your list . . . doing it with all your might, as an offering of worship to your creator God.

Let me give you a second lesson from sanctified bird-watching. Birds provide:

2. A picture of the protecting care of God

In the great song of Moses, recorded in *Deuteronomy chapter 32*, the Lord is like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, spreading its wings over them for protection.

Isaiah the prophet used the same analogy when he delivered the promise to a nation fearful of their future that God was hovering over them like birds hovering in the sky – watching all that's going on below (*Isaiah 31:5*).

I've seen bluebirds swooping down on squirrels to keep them from getting too close to their nest; I've listened to the verbal battle in the sky as crows chased away hawks from their young.

I have read that an Eider Duck will sit on her ducklings, shielding them in the open elements without any natural cover – so dedicated to protecting her young that she will sit still even when intruders are lurking around – in fact, she will sit tight until an intruder actually touches her.

Perhaps this is another application of the phrase, a sitting duck. A duck that is – and other birds, for that matter – will shield their young from predators; or from the heat of the tropical sun or the bitter cold of an Arctic blizzard.^v

Several times in the Psalms, David essentially says, if that’s what a bird can do for her young, imagine how much more will God take care of His own. He writes to the Lord in Psalm 61:4 that he longs to take refuge in the shelter of your wings. He writes with a sense of determination in yet another Psalm; My soul takes refuge in You; and in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge.

Psalm 57:1

As if to say – Lord – you are available and faithful to trust and I will place myself in your care.

At one point when David was desperate and in peril in the wilderness of Judah, he wrote a song that reads, get this – For you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

Psalm 63:7

When the widow Naomi returned to Bethlehem with her recently widowed daughter-in-law, there wasn’t much hope for either of them. There only meal would come if they could find a godly farmer who was still obeying the law – even though they were living during the days of the Judges *when everyone did that which was right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25)*.

In other words, the average farmer wasn’t about to leave the corners of his field for the poor; he wasn’t about to leave fallen sheaves of grain on the ground for the widows to come along and gather.

It was every man for himself. But there was this older godly farmer named Boaz who was

still obeying the word of the Lord. And widows were allowed to glean in his fields of grain. And one of the widows would end up getting more than a bushel full of grain. Farmer Boaz found a wife.

And when Boaz first met her in the field, his first words to her were, paraphrased, “I’ve heard about what you’ve done to take care of your mother-in-law and how you’ve left your land and your family and trust in the God of Israel – and then he says this, May the Lord reward your work . . . the God of Israel, under Who’s wings you have come to seek refuge.

Ruth 2:12

And by the way, in the next chapter, Ruth takes those same words sometime later when she sneaks out to the threshing floor to essentially propose to Boaz, and she says to him, “Now spread your covering over your maid.” The word for *covering* is the same word he used months earlier – it’s the word for wings.

Now spread your wings over me in protection and care. As if Ruth said, Listen, I’m glad you’ve been praying that God would cover me with His wings, but I’m convinced that He wants you to take care of it for Him! Marry me and spread your wings over me. And the next verse, Boaz says, May you be blessed of the Lord.

Ruth 3:10

In the Hebrew language that’s all one word and it’s pronounced “Yeecha!” You’ll have to trust me on that.

Birds provide a wonderful picture of the protecting care of God.

Let me give you another theological analogy of birds to the Christian’s understanding of God; third, birds provide;

3. An illustration of the mysterious ways of God

When God finally comes to Job to redeem him from the pit of despair . . . God doesn’t answer Job’s questions. He never enters into a dialogue with Job about Job’s suffering. He never explains the death of his children or the

horrendous physical suffering he's endured – some 20 different ailments are recorded in the Journal of Job.

But when God shows up, He takes Job on a tour of creation . . . and shows him, among other things one particular bird – a bird that I probably would have skipped over in the tour.

But God is speaking as He points out to **Job** the ostrich. It's in **chapter 39** where God says in **verse 13 and following; *The ostriches' wings flap joyously with the pinion and plumage of love. She abandons her eggs to the earth and warms them in the dust, and she forgets that a foot may crush them, or that a wild beast may trample them. She treats her young cruelly, as if they were not hers; though her labor be in vain, she is unconcerned; because God has made her forget wisdom, and has not given her a share of understanding.***

Job 39:13-17

In other words, she's not the brightest bird on the planet! She is an odd bird in so many respects. The ostrich is the largest bird in the world, living today. They can grow as tall as 8 feet, and weigh up to 450 pounds.

Well, in this description, the ostrich has wings but further observation reveals they can't fly. She digs a hole in the sand to lay her eggs because she can't fly up to the top of tree or cliff.

And God mentions here that she forgets where she lays her eggs – or at least, she appears unconcerned, probably due to somewhat limited intelligence.

Pliny, the first century Roman naturalist wrote that he hides its head in the bushes when a dangerous predator is nearby, assuming that they're safe because they can't see the predator.

This is how you play hide and seek with your little kids – they cover their eyes and assume you're no longer there because they can't see you. It'll take a while before their brain cells unite and they figure it out.

But notice here – for all her strange ways and lack of memory and downright ignorance, she is really amazing to watch run.

Verse 18 records, When she lifts herself on high (that is, to run) she laughs at the horse and his rider.

Job 39:18

Lifting her head, extending her small wings for balance, she takes off running. Horses can gallop at 40 miles per hour at top speed for a brief time; but ostriches who've been hunted or chased can reach a speed of 50 miles per hour.^{vi} In other words, an ostrich can run faster than a horse.

Xenophon, the Greek general and historian who lived 400 years before the birth of Christ once wrote that some of his soldiers hunted the bird but no one succeeded in catching it; the horsemen who hunted the bird soon desisted from the pursuit; for it far outstripped them, using its feet for running and its wings, raising them like a sail.^{vii}

If she were to run through this auditorium, one foot would be planted over there by the wall, and another foot planted by the percussion section and another foot planted here in front of the pulpit – in 4 or 5 steps she would span this auditorium. At top speed their footsteps are 20 feet apart.^{viii}

Imagine, Job has endured incredible suffering. He's lost all of his children, his businesses, his cattle, his camels, his field hands, his health . . . and all of it in freak accidents or unexpected cruelty by invading warriors.

Does he really want to listen to God describe an ostrich when it runs? This is God's way of basically telling Job – and us – that he creates stuff we'd never think of creating . . . He even designs creatures and natural wonders that we would never design . . . especially when it doesn't seem to make sense.

You might have been thinking lately, what in the world is God doing? What was God thinking when He allowed that . . . ?”

You might not be saying the words in church, but you've been wondering lately, “Lord what have you created in my world . . . what have you designed to plow through my life

. . . it makes about as much sense as a huge bird that can't fly but can run faster than a horse.

Beloved, there are designs of God's purposes and God's creative ways that have to simply go under the categorical heading of "Unexpected – Impossible to understand – without an explanation from God"

And the Lord reminds us through the prophet Isaiah, "***My ways are not Your ways and my thoughts are obviously not Your thoughts.***" (Isaiah 55:8)

Job, look at the ostrich – can you make sense out of that bird? Is there any reason that you can imagine that it can run 45 miles an hour – and for what? To do nothing more perhaps than provide an illustration of the mystery of creative ways of God.

Let me provide one more lesson in this study; number 4 – birds provide;

4. A pattern of returning to walk with God

John Stott had an entire chapter entitled Repentance . . . and on the first page of that chapter he included a photograph he had taken of a White Stork on top of her nest.

And I'll admit to you that at this point I thought, "Okay, he's gone a little too far on this analogy . . . birds don't repent . . . in fact, animals don't sin.

Animals don't willfully, morally violate the law of God – they've never once been overwhelmed with guilt at being selfish in stealing another animal's food; they've never been guilty over biting people or not sharing their food with homeless animals.

So . . . repentance? But then he included in his journal the text by Jeremiah that make a direct analogy between the migration of birds and the disobedient, unrepentant people of Israel.

Here's the text . . . God is being quoted by Jeremiah; I have listened attentively, they have spoken what is not right. No man repented of his wickedness, saying, "What have I done?" Even the stork in the sky knows her appointed

seasons, and the turtledove, and the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration. But my people do not know the ordinance of the Lord.

Jeremiah 8:6-7

During the days of Jeremiah – and to this day – the land of Israel happens to be a corridor of bird migration. It's a literal highway for birds called a flyway.

One author wrote, Many species fly south in the autumn, through the Strait of Istanbul – one of the key regions we're focusing on in our Grace Promise giving as we partner with believers to plant churches there.^{ix}

The birds fly south along this waterway which forms a boundary between Europe and Asia and they travel all over the Middle East, down into the warmer climates even of Africa. When spring arrives they all, without fail return, fanning out in their return into Europe or Asia.

And Jeremiah singles out storks – perhaps because he watched the huge flocks of storks winging their way south and then back home. It's estimated that nearly a half-million storks migrate over the Middle East every spring and summer/

And God speaks through Jeremiah and essentially says, "Look, you've watched all these different birds migrating every year – they go . . . and guess what . . . they return.

The tragedy is in the analogy that God's people are unlike storks in that the people of God stray from their Creator and they don't have the sense of a bird to know they need to fly back home!

In other words, what birds do by inbuilt, inherited, instinctive God-created and implanted navigational skills which scientists haven't been able to understand – we as Christians – as God's people should regularly do by deliberate choice – returning from our self-centered, straying, leaving the flyway of the right path and returning to our forgiving Creator.^x

Jeremiah called the people of God ***incurable in their waywardness.***

Would that we had as strong a homing instinct spiritually as birds have physically.^{xi}

If you're an unbeliever, you're not heading in the right direction until you head toward your Creator God and give your life to Him as Lord and Savior.

If you're a Christian, live a life as predictable as the migration of birds in their seasons – the smallest movement off the flight path brings you to repentant confession . . . you stray . . . but you fly back home to Him. So don't postpone your flight back home.

I guess the birds can teach us something of repentance after all.

Here are some biblical lessons from adding a pair of binoculars to your Bible – you'll discover birds provide;

An example of persistence in our assignments from God.

A picture of the protecting care of God.

An illustration of the mysterious ways of God.

A pattern of returning to walk in fellowship with God.

You know whenever you come back in fellowship with Him . . . you've always come back home.

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ii Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 19
iii Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, Tale of the Tardy Oxcart (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 319.
iv Stott, p. 48
v Stott, p. 70
vi Stott, p. 68
vii Quoted by Stott, p. 68
viii Henry Chichester Hart, The Animals Mentioned in the Bible (Aeterna Press, 2015), p. 89
ix Stott, p. 18
x Adapted from Stott, p. 20
xi Ibid