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Have you ever stood and gazed wonderingly up into the sky? Watched as shooting stars whoosh across a moonlit expanse? Or marvelled as the golden sun set behind a glassy turquoise sea?

It may not be the time of year for laying sprawled out on the grass, cloud watching as they shape-shift and morph into wondrous creatures. But the sky can still inspire...

The other week as I sat with my morning cuppa, Bible in hand, relaxing to the early sounds of the day, I looked out of the window. There was a beautiful palette of pinks and oranges spreading above the rooftops. Birds called out and swooped across the sky. The red tinged clouds glowing in the light burst through my early morning stupor and and I couldn't help but sing.

"Hallelujah!" I cried. "You are good Lord!"

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge." – Ps 19:1-2 (NIV)

The sky is quite simply awe-inspiring. The colours, the shapes, the shadows. The areas of contrast continually changing with the air. Even on a dull day an overcast sky is fascinating when you view it through the lens of curiosity. The heavens are never static and you won't ever see the same vista again.

But you can feel the wonder any time you like. Just look up, observe and appreciate. With God in the mix too... Wow!

There's also science behind this instant wellbeing boost. Studies from the University of California have shown feeling awe can reduce your anxiety and stress, and boost traits like generosity through an increased sense of oneness. It's likely your physical health will improve too thanks to a drop in stress hormones.

So why wouldn't you get out there and give the sky some loving? I'm sure you can get over the "Brr, it's too cold" or "Yuck, it's too wet" feeling and embrace the skies (aka skychology). After all, our ancestors have for years:

"Praise the Lord from the heavens! Praise him from the skies! Praise him, all his angels! Praise him all the armies of heaven! Praise him, sun and moon! Praise him, all you twinkling stars! Praise him, skies above! Praise him, vapours high above the clouds!" – Ps 148:1-4 (NLT)



Creation 2
Magnetic field:
God's protective
barrier

One of my favourite Psalms is no. 121 – it reminds me of the mountains (v. 1) and where my hope comes from (v. 2). But recently these verses have jumped out:

"The Lord watches over you – the Lord is your shade at your right hand; The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night." – Ps. 121:5-6 (NIV) –

The Earth is basically one huge molten furnace with an iron and nickel core. And although we're oblivious to this while going about our lives on the surface, we couldn't survive without it.

The iron and nickel create a magnetic field around our planet that stretches into the atmosphere and beyond, creating an invisible shield that protects us from 98% of the sun's radiation. If it wasn't there we'd be frazzled and fried! No life would survive.

So when Psalm 121 says, "The sun will not harm you by day," it's taken on a new meaning for me. It's not just that we might get sunburned or develop a melanoma from soaking up those rays.

No.

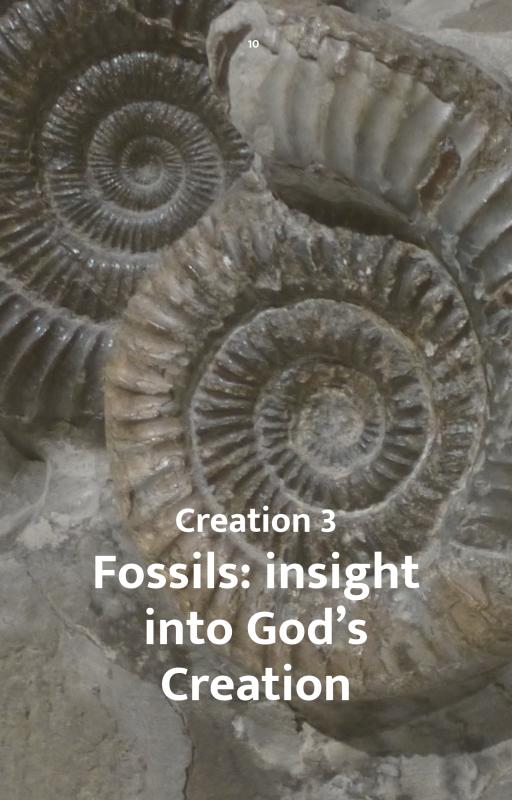
God created this protective shield so we could live.

When the sun's rays hit the magnetic shield, you can sometimes see the radiation dancing across the sky in streaks and flashes of colour – the Aurora (Northern or Southern Lights).

Not only has He supplied protection, but He also made it beautiful. What an awesome God.



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Have you ever found a fossil?

What a privilege to hold something so ancient, something no other human has ever seen before. When I unearthed loads of fossil progymnosperms (ancient plants ancestral to modern seed-bearing plants) as part of my PhD, I couldn't believe how well-preserved their leaves were. How their branches had been held fast in that rock for millions of years to be seen first by my eyes. How even the spores could be found amongst the rock-encased foliage!

I'm constantly astounded by new fossil finds, the insight it gives us into God's Creation and his mighty power. Which got me thinking...

Did God want us to make these discoveries? Did he purposely let His Creation become fossilised then preserved for millions of years so that we'd find them one day?

I believe so.

It speaks to me of his great love for us that He wants to share all He's made with us. He created us to enjoy Him, and this is one way we can do that.

What fossils have you found? How do they speak to you about God's Creation? What has He said to you through it?





As a child one of my jobs was to clean the silver. I remember staring in wonder at the pearl handles on some of my grandma's old knives – so beautiful and shiny. The lustrous, iridescent, colours always caught my eye. Who knew Granny kept rainbows in the kitchen!

But how were they made? Who created something so beautiful? They must have been extremely skilled. Only later did I learn that pearls are one of nature's wonders, formed naturally in oyster shells...

Oysters are sea creatures protected by a bivalved shell (with 2 halves). As the animal grows, its shell also needs to increase in size, so the oyster takes minerals from its food to do this. It lays down sheets of flat, six-sided aragonite crystals interspersed with layers of conchiolin (a protein) secreted between. The result is nacre (or mother-of-pearl) lining the shell, its crystalline structure reflecting light in the unique way I saw on my grandma's knives.

Now the interesting thing about pearls is they only form when an irritant, such as a wayward food particle, slips between the two shells rather than being ingested by the creature. The oyster then covers up the irritant to protect itself, eventually forming a pearl.

The natural protective process creates something of beauty.

God has transformed an irritant into a beautiful jewel.

And He can do that for you and me...

In life, difficult stuff happens, challenges come. But these 'irritants' are so often what God uses to help you grow and thrive. In my life only because I got depression was I forced to deal with some damaged emotions, and it's led to significant healing. God can transform even the most awful situation into something precious.

When we believe in Jesus and entrust our lives to Him, He transforms us into priceless pearls and we're accepted into the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is the most valuable thing of all.



I love walking and have done a lot of it in my life. There were family holidays in the countryside, Duke of Edinburgh expeditions and school scrambling trips, leading groups in the mountains at university and much more besides.

There's nothing like the good dose of fresh air you get from being outside. And the act of walking itself is good for you.

According to Hippocrates, a Greek physician 2400 years ago, "walking is a man's best medicine." And Country Walking Magazine cites it as "the wonder drug". You can even get walks or the outdoors on prescription in some areas of the UK.

Lowering your blood pressure, strengthening your bones, aiding weight loss and boosting your mental health are just a few things walking can do for you. And there's no doubt about it, walking has helped keep my mental health in check over the years and still does.

So why not give it a go?

Some ideas:

1. Choose a slow and deliberate walk, being mindful of your surroundings:

Use your senses to immerse yourself in the experience perhaps touching the bark of a tree as you pass and comparing it to another, smelling the flowers in a garden or the fragrance of freshly baked bread drifting out of someone's window. Listen to the birds all around or watch clouds blow across the sky constantly changing shape.

2. Take a camera with you and really notice what's around:

I find I see so much more when I'm purposefully looking. Beetles scurrying between blades of grass, raindrops balanced delicately on the ends of leaves, frosty patterns on your car windscreen early in the morning as sunlight plays off the glass.

3. 'Collect' random things as you walk or chat to God:

Pointless gates and stiles are two of my favourite random things! And I love walking and talking with God, alone or with others. But you could keep it even simpler and simply walk to the shops/ coffee shop/ work instead of driving.

And of course, if you want to why not arrange a full-on day charging up and down mountains seeing how many new peaks you can do.

It's up to you. Just choose something you'll enjoy.





I've been reading books and listening to a lot of podcasts recently about how our minds and bodies interact. It's fascinating. Did you know, your gut and brain talk to one another?

Yep, really.

What you eat determines what bacteria are present in your gut, and that in turn influences how your brain functions. This can affect your mental health. So it's a good idea to think about what you're putting in your mouth.

'Anxiety is really strange', a comic book by Steve Haines (1), mentions an experiment on mice that shows gut bacteria talk to the brain. An anxious mouse became more outgoing when its faecal microbiota were exchanged with that of another, more confident mouse. Simply, the transplanted gut bacteria from the confident mouse's poo generated signals that helped the anxious mouse chill out!

Sure, this experiment used mice. But there's plenty of research that shows our own gut health affects our overall health too (2), including mental health.

It seems diversity is key (3). So one thing you could do to have a healthier gut, and better overall health, is eat the rainbow. This is a colourful, diverse diet including lots of fruit and veg. But don't worry, a naughty snack every now and then won't usually hurt. My favourite at the moment is cheesy crackers – can't get enough of them!

But I will say this. Since I've been eating a more plant-based diet overall, and purposefully including lots of colour, I have felt healthier. And it's actually rather fun making your meals look pretty.

Have you ever been faced with something impossible? I have. Many times.

There was...

- The broken bridge over a raging torrent in the middle of nowhere with no other way across. And a group of novice walkers to keep calm.
- The time mist closed in when I was alone and, despite lots of navigation experience, the feeling I'd be lost forever on a Scottish moor.
- The walking trip where I found myself stuck on a narrow path with a sheer drop one side and a cliff on the other. There was no way I could climb back the way I'd come and it looked too scary to go forwards. Eek!

Now none of these were truly impossible situations. In each case I was able to stop, think and get around the problem...

- We decided to cross the river upstream where the water was calmer, only knee deep and paddling was safe. Sure, we had to make a massive detour and got cold, wet feet (it was mid-winter!) but we made it. Still smiling.
- In the mist I sat down briefly, ate a snack and reminded myself I had the skills to navigate off the hill. And I'd done it successfully many times before in worse situations.
- On the narrow path my friends and I talked, calmed each other down and helped one another to the end.

Jesus: Lord of the impossible

But I did all this in my own strength.

Yes, I was able to stop, think and execute a plan. But wouldn't it have been better if I'd called on Jesus instead? To stop, PRAY, think and execute THE WISEST PLAN.

Would I still have panicked at the broken bridge? Would I have felt scared and disoriented in the mist? Would I have felt fear on the narrow path?

While praying (talking with Jesus) won't always dispel our difficult feelings or remove challenging circumstances, God can make the impossible possible:

"Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."" – Matt 17:26 (NIV)

It's often only when we're faced with something truly inconceivable (not just a broken bridge you can walk around) that God acts. When there's no choice but to rely on Him. And coming to Him, asking for help, delighting in Him, shouldn't be the last thing we do:

"God will give you all you need from day to day if you live for him and make the kingdom of God your primary concern" – Matt 6:33 (NLT)

So let's surrender everything to Him.

When you do you'll soar on wings like eagles (Is 40:31). There'll be no need for a dodgy bridge diversion, no reason to feel disoriented, no fear to paralyse – because you'll be flying!

No impossible situation can hold you back when you get close to Jesus.

Jesus: Lord of the impossible



Pine forest.

It's one of my favourite scents, evoking memories of woodland wanders in Yorkshire, Cumbria and other northern climes.

There's hush as you step out of the sun and into the darkness, enveloped by another world. The trees' aroma is somehow more pungent for lack of noise.

Tread softly, and breathe...

The fragrance of nature

What you can smell is actually an organic compound called phytoncide that pine trees produce to protect themselves. It's a natural essential oil that hangs about in the air near their branches. And these oils are good for you, reducing stress and increasing immune system function.

The sense of smell is incredibly important in the natural world. While we may be attracted to pine trees and reap the benefits of breathing in their oils, animals and plants use fragrance to their benefit too. Smell can alert animals to danger, lead them to food and help them identify a potential mate.

Flowering plants use scent to attract pollinators and fruit-eating animals, and the more attractive the odour the more likely a plant will be fertilised, their seeds dispersed and their DNA get passed on through the generations.

Fragrance is essential to attract.

The fragrance of Christ

As well as pine forests, an aroma that attracts me is the fragrance of Christ. He's the best food ever. By spending time with Him we can all get nourished and spread his seed far and wide. In fact, we're called to do so:

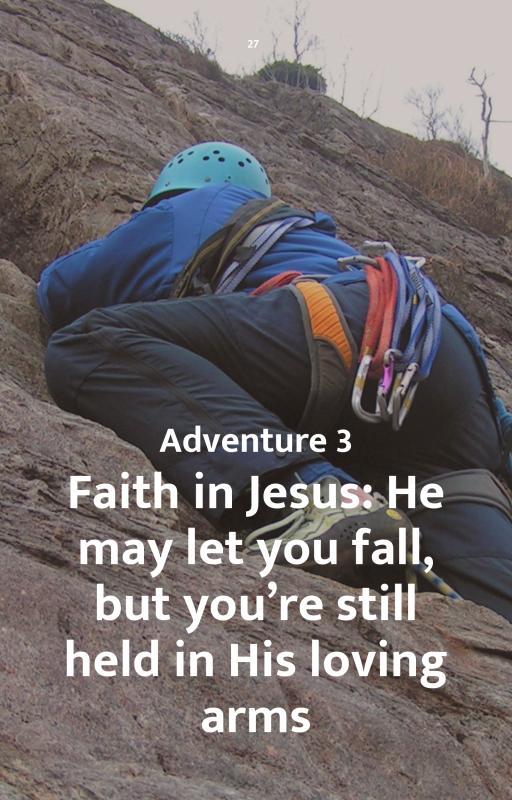
"Wherever we go he uses us to tell others about the Lord and to spread the Good News like a sweet perfume. Our lives are a fragrance presented by Christ to God... We are a life-giving perfume." – 2 Cor 2:14-16 (NLT)

The question is, are you giving out a pleasant aroma, or do you just stink?!

If you do think you're a bit whiffy right now, Jesus will help. He doesn't expect you to do this in your own strength. We've got the Holy Spirit for that:

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." – Acts 1:8 (NIV)

When you draw close to Christ you will overflow with His perfume and others will not be able to resist.



Dangling on the end of a rope... Hugging a cliff unwilling to let go... Legs shaking and jerking uncontrollably... "I'm going to fall! I'm going to die!"

That was me some years ago, lead climbing in Scotland. Too tired to keep going, what was I to do? I couldn't fall because then I'd have to trust my own gear placement and rely on that tiny climbing nut in a crevice to hold me: "Can I really trust it? What if it falls out out? Surely that's going to hurt." These thoughts came despite knowing my climbing teacher wouldn't let me lead unless he was confident in my skills.

Eventually the inevitable happened. I couldn't hold on any more...

And splat!

Or rather I didn't go splat because my gear held.

Yes, it did take a sweet cup of tea, chocolate and a debrief with the team to get over my experience, but I already knew I was stronger overall. And happy to have another go: "Next time," I vowed, "It won't be so scary." And it wasn't.

My first lead-climbing fall had built my faith for getting on with more adventures.

But this was faith in my own ability. Only when you put your faith in someone far greater than yourself, will you be truly unshakeable...

Jesus is your solid foundation. Jesus is your rock (Ps 18:2, 1 Sam 2:2, Eph 2:20) bringing power, life and healing into your situation when you let Him. Even when you don't feel it, God's word declares it's true so you can stand firm.

That said, falling is important if you want to grow. If I hadn't fallen off that rock face I wouldn't have known how strong my gear was or how well I'd placed it.

It's like that with Jesus. When something happens in life you feel you can't manage or persevere with, you may stumble, you may even fall, but Jesus always has your back. He is strong and perfectly placed so you can overcome (1 Jn 5:4-5). Next time you're fearful you can look back on your experience and remember how He helped you last time and know He will do it again.

When I feel I might fall in life, I remember my climbing experience. The first time is always the hardest. You're trusting, hoping, but as the situation has never happened before, it's impossible to know how things will pan out.

But with Jesus as your rock you can stand firm. Your faith will grow in times of adversity (1 Pet 1:7). So embrace the difficulties if you can – push yourself to take the plunge when you're afraid. By trusting Jesus and walking closely with Him, you won't have shaky disco legs any more. Instead your bones will dance with joy:

"Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track.

Don't assume that you know it all. Run to God! Run from evil! Your body will glow with health, your very bones will vibrate with life!" – Prov 3:5-8 (MSG)

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Text, page 20:

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Bible abbreviations:

- NIV (New International Version)
- NLT (New Living Translation)
- MSG (The Message)