

Connecting with God through Birds

'God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore. He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon' – 1 Kings 4.29-34

Birds in the Psalms

Eight distinct species of bird are brought to our attention in the Psalms alone: dove, sparrow, swallow, owl, eagle, stork, raven, and quail. Each one is chosen for its particular characteristics and associations. Each one testifies to the abundant creativity of God. Each one speaks to the psalmist and informs his prayers.

Birds help the psalmist express his feelings to God: I am like an owl in a wilderness, a lonely bird on a rooftop, he laments as he tosses his way through a sleepless night; shelter me in the shadow of your wings, he pleads repeatedly – do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals. But birds also help him to shape his responses. As his prayers are answered, birds enable him to express his relief: 'We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers,' he gasps. 'Your youth is renewed like the eagle's,' he reminds himself as he praises God for his mercies. For the psalmist, birds are a kind of visible language in which God speaks to him, and he speaks to God. The psalmist has learned to speak bird.

Look up the following bird references in the Psalms. Read each one carefully. What is this bird helping the Psalmist to hear or to say? Can you use these examples to help you express your own prayers to God?

Dove

- 55.6 - 'O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest'
- 74.19 - 'Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals'

Eagle

- 103.5 - 'your youth is renewed like the eagle's'

Owl

- 102.6 - 'I am like an owl of the wilderness, a little owl of the waste places; I lie awake like a lonely bird on the housetop'

Quail

- 105.40 - 'They asked, and he brought quails, and gave them food from heaven in abundance.'

Raven

- 147.9 - 'he gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry'

Sparrow & Swallow

- 84.3 - 'even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars'

Stork

- 104.17 - 'the stork has its home in the fir trees'



Birds in the Gospels

Like Solomon and the Psalmists, Jesus knew that birds could help us draw closer to God.

- "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? Matthew 6.25-27



- “So do not be afraid... What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.’ Matthew 10.26-31

Learning God’s language

- ‘Only those who can read and write can read the pages of scripture, whereas anyone can read from the book of the universe.’ Augustine (Commentary to Psalm 45)
- ‘Is it possible that the universe sings? Is it possible that God is the song of the universe? ... When we confront phenomena as enigmatic and tenacious as bird song, no single one of our faculties is enough. The beautiful songs of life are older than our entire species, and they will continue long after all human music has dissolved. If the words of God are to be heard on Earth, there is no better place to find them than in the deep intricacies of incomprehensible bird song.’ Roger Payne, in David Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing*, Allen Lane 2005
- ‘I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.’ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1970
- This is a thoroughfare for migrants. ... Once on a day in October, after the gales had stripped it, it was alive with goldcrests. The air purred with their small wings. .. Everywhere their needle-sharp cries stitched at the silence. Was I invisible? Their seed-bright eyes regarded me from three feet off. Had I put forth an arm, they might have perched on it. I became a tree, part of that bare spinney where silently the light was splintered, and for a timeless moment the birds thronged me, filigreeing me with shadow, moving to an immemorial rhythm on their way south. Then suddenly they were gone, leaving other realities to return. ... Where had I been? Who was I? What did it all mean? While it was happening, I was not. Now that the birds had gone, here I was once again. ... It was when I returned to myself that I .. was able to stand back and comprehend it by means of the imagination, and so by this act of creation to recognize myself not as lived by, but as part of the infinite I AM.’ RS Thomas, *A Thicket in Lleyn*
- ‘I discovered that I could sit for hours in wild places, alone, in stillness, and there was nothing more I could want. Except then the birds turned up, a kind of divine intervention or so it seemed. A sudden song, a flight formation or a detail of plumage awakened, a sense of something I couldn’t name. The moments when I first saw a crane, or a ptarmigan, or a wood warbler, all sense of time and self dissolved. However freezing the feet and hands, the potency of the experienced was more than the sum of its parts.’ Rosamund Richardson, *Waiting for the Albino Dunnock – How birds can change your life*, Weidenfield & Nicolson 2017
- ‘Life is full of moments: to live a life of moments is to live a life which reaches beyond the tyranny of the immediate; a life in which we can, in our ragged incompleteness, strain towards the bigger truth of a reality which stretches beyond us – something we did not create, something we did not earn or buy. It is not in the moments themselves that meaning lies. The moments merely offer an invitation – the chance to step aside, to look at life in a different way. To be open to moments is to be open to the chance to reflect on how we might weave the threads of our own lives into the cloth of the universe, to integrate our own stories into the bigger story of a life which is more complex, more painful but also more wonderful than we had imagined.’ Alison Morgan, *World Turned Upside Down – The Psalms and the Spirituality of Pain*, BRF 2023



How about you? Are you open to moments?