

Book Review:

Reforesting Faith: What Trees Teach Us About the Nature of God and His Love for Us

Matthew Sleeth, MD (Hardcover, 2019)

In regard to personal testimony, there are some striking similarities between the author Matthew Sleeth of *Reforesting Faith* and the physician-geneticist Francis Collins who discovered the genes associated with a number of diseases and whose book, *The Language of God*, we reviewed here in August. Each of these distinguished authors won places to study science and medicine in spite of an unconventional earlier education; each was brought up in a home where religion was absent; each was touched or haunted by patients asking them what they believed and each was converted from atheism to faith in Jesus Christ.

Matthew Sleeth suffered from dyslexia as a boy but his perseverance along the way to become a doctor resulted in offers from three medical schools. Graduation from medical school, early promotion, a happy marriage, beautiful children and a firm faith in the future of science established a solid foundation upon which to keep building his gifted future.

And then, suddenly, in 2001, *'life stopped flowing from one good thing to another'*. First, on the family's annual beach escape, his wife Nancy's brother was swimming in the ocean when he was pulled down by an undertow and drowned. Sleeth's children witnessed it happening. Nancy became seriously depressed. About the same time a mentally ill patient stalked Sleeth and was stopped only when police discovered the patient had murdered his mother and hid her body in a closet.

Finally, there came the clear September morning when Sleeth got a call from his neighbor. Her son was the same age as the Sleeth children. The neighbor was calling to ask for help telling her son that his father was in the first plane that crashed into the Twin Towers.

Sleeth discovered *'the harder I tried to pull things together, the more our lives unraveled. The darkness would not lift. My supply of optimism ran dry . . . for the first time I woke up to the fact that evil exists in the world'*.

Sleeth made the deduction that evil is not a scientific concept; it does not lend itself to measurement. It is a spiritual concept. Up until that point, he writes,

'I had faith only in things that could be qualified, tested and reproduced. I didn't believe in God. If someone had pressed me about God's existence, I would have pointed to television preachers caught in scandals or the church trial of Galileo.'

If a patient asked him about his faith, he would reply, *'I believe in the healing power of third-generation antibiotics'*. But science was failing him. He began a spiritual search tackling sacred texts right and left. Then one Sunday on duty at the hospital, in an idle moment, he picked up a Bible he found in the midst of all the magazines littering a coffee table in the waiting room. He had never read one. There were thousands of books in his home, but no Bible.

Here is what he found in the Bible:

I started reading the book of Matthew. Within a few pages I was presented not with answers but with the Bible's great question: "What say you of Jesus?"

Right away I recognized that Jesus was unlike any person I'd ever met. He was both more human and more godly than anyone I'd known. Although my coming to faith was a process—more like Peter's than Paul's—it soon began transforming every area of my life.

By this point in the review, if you are moved by Matthew Sleeth's testimony (as I was), you might rightly ask, "where do the trees come into this story?"

Matthew Sleeth simply loved nature and trees from an early age with a passion. This love affair with trees was happening in his life as an atheist and continued as foundational in his newly found Christian life.

Not long before his conversion, on a holiday on an island off the southwest coast of Florida, sitting outdoors in the night, after the children were tucked into bed, Nancy turned to him and asked, *'What do you think is the biggest problem on the earth?'*

Her question came out of nowhere but after thinking for a moment he replied, *'The world is dying. There aren't any Elms left on Elm Street . . . I don't think humanity can do business as usual for the next hundred years and expect that things are going to turn out all right.'*

He had no immediate answer to Nancy's follow-up question: *'If the world is dying, what are you going to do about it?'*

An answer did come two years following his conversion to Christianity. When the answer came he told his wife he wanted to quit his job as chief of staff and head of the emergency department and spend the rest of his life serving God and helping to save the planet.

And so Matthew's present journey began with selling the family's home, giving away half of their possessions, and moving to a house the size of their former garage. It also involved starting to go to a church where the congregation became like family and where they remain to this day.

Since that life changing decision, Matthew Sleeth has travelled the country attending more than 1,000 events, campuses and churches with the message that the Bible calls us to be good stewards of the earth.

Matthew Sleeth's book is a personal testimony that vividly conveys the warm spirit of a loving God and one man's desire to preach God's love of our planet and especially the trees that literally are our breath of life here on earth. It is also full of wholesome theology, suggestive Scriptural passages and splendid anecdotes. Read *Reforesting Faith* and you will be looking around your backyard or garden for a spot to plant a tree.

Douglas Dupree
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