



Some of you may have heard of author Barbara Kingsolver. I don't know Barbara, but Jill has read some of her books.

In our first pastorate, the First Baptist Church of Carlisle, Kentucky, Barbara's father was our physician. Wendell's office was right across the street from the church on the town square, and he seemed to greatly enjoy the role of being a country doctor.

Having been city-bred in Atlanta, small-town and country life was a new experience for me, and I thought it a little weird that Wendell and

Jenny were avid birdwatchers, traveling the world in pursuit of this passion. I'd never known anyone who was a "birder" before.

Now fast-forward several decades, when the "birding bug" bit me. I'm not sure how I was bitten, but now I have two sets of birding binoculars, a "birding camera," birding field guides, birding apps, and lots of birding books. I haven't traveled the world as Wendell and Jenny did, but I have been birding up and down both sides of the Chesapeake and as far away as Delaware Bay.

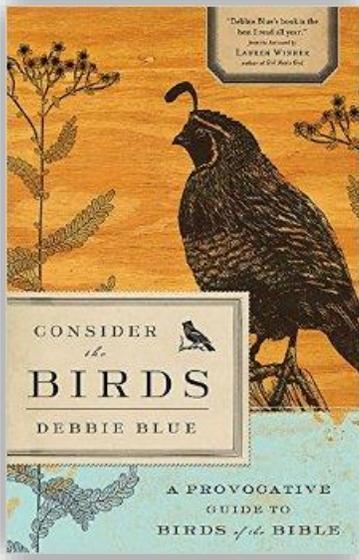
I'm very much a novice birder, but I'm enjoying this new awareness of the world. I'm looking forward to the departure of the snow and the arrival of the spring migration, as birds make their way north for the summer season from their wintering grounds in Central and South America.

You may not have noticed, but birds are everywhere in the Bible, from start to finish. God hovers over the face of the water in Genesis . . . like a bird. Birds gorge on the flesh of the defeated armies in Revelation. Birds are the currency of mercy in the sacrificial system. They bring bread to the prophets. Abraham has to shoo them away from his offering, and a pigeon goes with Jesus on His first visit to the temple. God appears in the Bible as a bird who carries Israel on her wings, as a bird under whose feathers we find refuge. Jesus compares Himself to a hen, and He told us to "consider the birds of the air."



Given all that background, I was interested to discover that a Minnesota pastor named Debbie Blue has written a well-reviewed book called *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to the Birds of the Bible*. Debbie's book examines the spiritual implications of pigeons, pelicans, quail, vultures, eagles, ostriches, sparrow, cocks, hens, and ravens, each of which is indeed both interesting and provocative. I'd like to tell you just a little bit of what she says about vultures.

The two most common vultures in North America are the Black Vulture and the Turkey Vulture. As you probably know, these are BIG birds, ugly at close range but quite elegant on



the wing. Our house in Bristol was apparently on a migration route, and I once counted over 150 vultures sunning themselves in a neighbor's trees (I was very glad they weren't in my trees!).

Debbie points out the fairly obvious fact that vultures don't generally inspire "sweet feelings of bird wonder." They are emblems of death and destruction because they eat dead things. They don't actually participate in the killing. Death is not their fault, but they remind us of it.

Here's where things get interesting. Debbie points out that the Hebrew word, "nesher," which is generally translated into English as "eagle," may in fact refer to the griffon-vulture. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon, a standard for biblical study, actually shows "griffon-vulture" as the first definition of "nesher," before "eagle."

We're talking about a big bird, here, with a wingspan of 7-9 feet. And consider how our mental images change if we make this

alteration in the text:

- *"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on [vultures'] wings and brought you to myself" (Exodus 19:4).*
- *"He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, like a [vulture] that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft" (Deuteronomy 32:10b-11).*
- *"Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases . . . who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the [vulture's]" (Psalm 103:1-3, 5).*
- *"Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like [vultures]; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:31).*



That puts rather a different face on things, doesn't it? Here are some of Debbie's reflections on the change . . . .

"What might it be like to be carried on the wings of a vulture, the great protective mother bird? Vulture's wings are huge, but not powerful in the same way an eagle's are. Vultures fly higher than almost every bird on earth, but not by their mighty personal strength as much as by a more communal energy. The sun warms the ground, which in turn warms

the air. The warmer air expands, becoming less dense than the surrounding air mass—and the mass of light air rises.

“Many birds ride thermals, but the vulture is like a thermal radical. Most birds fly below five hundred feet. Vultures glide effortlessly on the winds at 10,000 feet. In 1973, a griffon vulture collided with a commercial airliner over Africa at 37,900 feet, the highest altitude ever recorded for a bird.

“What if Isaiah really meant to be saying that those who wait shall mount up with wings like vultures, not eagles. In that case, faith would be more like circling than like seizing. It would be more like being lifted by thermals than flying by the power of our own wings. We’ve formed some of our ideas about God and about faith with the predator eagle in mind. A ‘vulture God’ might give us some different perspectives.

“We are, after all, a species that eats dead meat, too, and often meat that has been inhumanely raised on factory farms. Unlike us, the vulture rarely ever hurts a living thing. Most creatures have to kill to eat, but not vultures. Vultures stare death in the face and fear it not at all. It goes through their bodies and comes out harmless. They cleanse the world.

“Maybe God is something like that—not so much like an eagle—not a fierce warrior god swooping in for the kill, but a God who can take everything in and make it clean—a God who can make even death nontoxic.”

What if Debbie’s right? I invite you to consider *Consider the Birds . . .* and to keep your eyes on the skies as the spring migration begins.

Dave

