

## **2021 Pew Research Proposal for Beth Madison**

### **Title of the project:**

*Well-Grounded: Unearthing Joy in Eden's Rhythms*

### **Statement of the end product:**

20,000-30,000 word (100-120 pages) book titled *Well-Grounded: Unearthing Joy in Eden's Rhythms*

### **Explanation of the scholarly activity:**

#### **I. Statement of the scholarly activity:**

Researching questions I am seeing as a soil scientist about the Garden of Eden, intimacy with God, my role as caretaker and classifier, and daily habits and spiritual disciplines. These questions focus on Genesis chapters 1-3 alongside other passages from Scripture.

#### **II. Description of the activity and its goals:**

"He will do with you what He never did before the call came; He will do with you what He is not doing with other people. Let Him have His way." (Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, from reading for October 25<sup>th</sup>.)

When I began asking and exploring these questions from Scripture as a soil scientist, I was a bit wary of where they might take me. Yet as I continue to ask these questions, I'm discovering threads of new thoughts that not only lead me to Christ but bind me closer to Him.

Concrete answers aren't my goal or destination but rather, increased communion with my Creator God and that which He created, along with the resource of a book leading others to do the same. Thus, this quote from Chambers helps me be brave and strong like Joshua to move into exploring a new land set before me in these ideas so that others might benefit in the journey (see Joshua 1:9).

As far as I can find, there is nothing quite like *Well-Grounded* in the literature in its natural theology approach to intimacy with Creator God and His creation through looking at the Garden of Eden in view of the spiritual disciplines. Other texts approach this idea (as seen below) but don't arrive at the same end of seeing the beauty in soil science when seen through Scripture as a part of our everyday rhythms and choices. This book is meant for those who yearn to connect with God in creation but aren't classically trained in the sciences or theology. *Well-Grounded* isn't meant to be a traditional academic text but rather an inspirational venture into a personal study of how creation points to our need for intimacy with our Creator God. Or in other words, how the soil underneath our feet points to our need to be focused on Him all the way down to the soil of our souls.

With this in mind, each chapter will be framed on a question arising from Scripture while using agronomic scientific principles to highlight the need for practice of a specific spiritual discipline in the rhythms of our days. Some of the spiritual disciplines to be addressed include meditation, charity, prayer, solitude/silence, and gratitude. Each chapter will also include a series of thought-provoking questions or exercises involving nature as to promote incorporation of the spiritual disciplines and creation care into daily routines. Practical application of the principles discussed from Scripture and creation is integral to the process of integrating the disciplines into the readers' lives.

### III. Theoretical framework:

Genesis 2:7 *then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.*

As a Christian, my first instinct to learn more about a question about my God is to start researching, in Scripture and in prayer. As a scientist, my first instinct to learn more about a question about my world is to start researching, in the library and field or laboratory. As a teacher, my first instinct to help my students learn more about our God and our world is to model how to ask questions and search for their answers, both about God and about science.

Thus, when I started seeing new questions in Genesis about the world under my feet, I started praying, researching Scripture, and talking with trusted theologians. Since I can't perform a regular scientific experiment to answer these questions, I'm using a common physics research tool – a thought experiment\*. Like Einstein formulating the theory of relativity\*\*, I'm asking questions about Adam, soil, plants, daily rhythms and choices, and creation care in the laboratory of my mind as guided by the guard rails of Scripture and qualified Hebrew scholars. Scripture doesn't definitively answer these questions but can give us glimpses into the relationships implicit in the answers to the questions. And the explicit delight and joy in exploring these relationships can be another way for us *to taste and see that God is good* as in Psalm 34:8.

The outcome of this project is a book, *Well-Grounded: Unearthing Joy in Eden's Rhythms*. This book is designed to bring a new nature-focused approach to the spiritual disciplines through the lens of agronomy as viewed by a Christian who is a soil scientist. Instead of being an academic text written for Christians who are scientists or theologians, *Well-Grounded* is targeted to Christians yearning for something new and different to awaken a fresh

intimacy with their Creator and His creation. This book will guide readers through an exploration of questions such as:

Could Adam's name be a constant reminder of soil and the innate fragility of both him and the soil underneath his feet?

Could Adam's link to the soil and the curse upon it be more than first thought?

Could Adam have always mourned the loss of Eden in the separation of him from God and from the soil from which he was formed?

Is there more to the concept of *dust to dust* when considered in light of soil science?

Could there be more to Scripture's references to us as *living stones* in view of geology and soil science?, along with many other questions that can point us straight to our Creator and our Christ.

Soil and plant sciences and Scripture will be studied alongside each other to dig deeper into the beauty of their intersections. I've begun this journey for readers with prior books, *Good Ground: Biblical Illustrations from a Soil Scientist*, Parts 1 and 2 (publication dates: Summer 2022 and Fall/Winter 2022, respectively) and *Above Ground: Biblical Illustrations from an Agronomist*, Parts 1 and 2 (potential publication dates: Summer 2023 and Fall/Winter 2023, respectively). Yet this book will drill much further into the wonderfully intricate connections between Eden, Adam, us, spiritual disciplines, creation care, and the *adamah* ("fertile soil") underneath our feet and in our souls.

Since much of our culture in the Western world is disconnected from agronomy, many don't have a direct link to soil like Adam did. Less than three percent of the U.S. population is

actively involved in agriculture while an alarmingly large amount of our school-aged children (and daresay, adults) have no idea of where their food comes from before it is on their plates. Keeping this in mind, even if we might not consciously realize it, we could be yearning to connect with that from which we came. Therefore, I propose that we yearn for intimacy with that from which we were created, like Adam could've known after Eden. Therefore, questions such as the following arise naturally from this yearning for intimacy with our Creator and His creation: Could that yearning be a call to greater intimacy with knowing creation better as a means of worshipping our Creator?; Could that yearning be a call to making daily deliberate choices to make space for knowing more of our Creator and His creation?; Could that yearning be a call to more intentional creation care in our daily lives as an offering to our Creator?; and others.

If so, when we begin to reconnect with the natural world in pursuit of following God in the daily choices of spiritual disciplines emphasizing intimacy with Him and His creation, we can find joy. This joy can then spur us onwards to greater affection for our God, His creation, and the beauty of both. And as we unearth this beauty, we move closer in communion with Christ and embracing our role as caretakers of all of God's creation, including the world underneath our feet.

*Psalm 103:14 For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.*

\*Please know that I don't ever want to stray from what is Biblically sound into the ether of what might sound appealing to me.

\*\*Einstein's elegant and beautiful results of his thought experiments in the early 1900's still can't be fully tested even with today's technology. Yet they provide an amazing framework for a lot of our world today. I can only hope for a Planck length's worth of such with my questions. I pray that such questions might help connect Christians yearning for joy to finding it in daily intimacy with God and His creation.

#### IV. Brief examination of scholarly literature:

1. Norman Wirzba's *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*, Oxford University Press, Inc., 2003, ISBN: 978-0195333503 (and some other books by him) address the science of soil science in a faith-based approach but his book are intended to be an academic text to promote Christian resource stewardship, not as a tool for Bible study or inspirational read for incorporating the spiritual disciplines and creation care into daily life.
2. Fred Bahnson's *Soil and Sacrament: A Spiritual Memoir of Food and Faith*, Simon and Schuster, 2013, ISBN: 978-1451-6633-03 addresses some aspects of soil science with a more academic and broader view of the importance of soil stewardship in the larger genre of Christian environmentalism without targeted personal application to daily Christian living.
3. Ellen Davis' *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, ISBN 10: 0521732239 addresses our role as caretakers of creation in an academic genre with emphasis on our culture's disconnect from agriculture and our need for ownership of this role in obedience to God, both personally and culturally. It differs from *Well-Grounded* in lack of application to everyday choices in regards to creation care as a means of practicing the spiritual disciplines.
4. W. Phillip Keller's, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Zondervan, 1970, ISBN: 0-310-26797-8 and *A Gardener Looks at the Fruits of the Spirit*, Word Book, 1979, ISBN: 10: 0849901448. These books (and others by Keller) are the closest to *Well-Grounded* in style and approach. However, his books differ in that they compare Biblical principles for Christian living to everyday agricultural practices without delving into the science of the principles discussed.
5. J.C. Polkinghorne's *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-up Thinker*, Princeton University Press, 2016, ISBN: 978-0691-6334-97 has a strong science

application to faith but differs in that the science of physics can be intimidating to a non-physicist, unlike soil science which can be applied to many daily and familiar applications, including the spiritual disciplines.

**500-1000 word essay describing how the Christian faith relates to your understanding of your discipline and how it relates to this scholarly endeavor:**

*Genesis 3:19. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

Do I dare venture to say that Adam was the first agronomist? He literally had to learn about plants and soils from the ground up (pun fully intended). Or at least that was one of the ways that my first plant and soil science teacher (my father) explained it to me when we were working and worshipping together in the garden at home. Thus, it is natural for me to abide with delight in the niche of the many interrelationships of Scripture and soil science.

To me, soil is not just a resource from which to feed, clothe, heal, or remediate the world. It's not just something I walk on or educate others about the need to care for it. Soil is where I come from and to where I'll return – the home now of my family farm and a picture of the new earth to come. I identify in position and placement to and with soil, both physically and spiritually like Adam could've done. I don't worship soil, much less the study of it, but working with it leads me to a closer, deeper adoration of the One Who created it and me. Psalm 111:2 captures my thoughts with *The Lord's works are great, studied by all who delight in them.*

There are many signposts in agronomy pointing straight to our Creator and our Christ, if we stop to look at them. Signposts ranging from the atomic level of the water molecule being

adsorbed by a plant root hair to the huge green canopy of a maple tree actively participating in photosynthesis high overhead. These signposts shine bright to those of us who know the Savior and the plant and soil sciences. Since I've been given the privilege of teaching science with faith here at Union, drawing a map to God in faith highlighting these signposts is a gift I can share with my students in and out of the classroom. The students are hungry for the joy found in unearthing such treasures of soil science and Scripture working symbiotically. They yearn for a yet unknown passion for intimacy with Creator God through knowing more of His creation, including that amazing world underneath our feet. Hence, the reason for my application for this grant – the opportunity to share some of these signposts in the map of a book with potentially far more people than I might encounter here at Union in my classes. And in the doing, I am praying for good soil in the souls of those who might read this book, just like we read about in Matthew 13: 23 *As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.*

**Time frame for the completion and a plan for the dissemination of the project:**

1. Expected completion of *Well-Grounded* by November 2022
2. Since I am currently contracted with Northeast Baptist Press (NEBP) for two books (soil science and faith interactions) and in discussion with them about two more books (plant science and faith interactions), I am hopeful they will accept this book as well. These four books have established the audience and felt need for *Well-Grounded*. If NEBP doesn't

accept this book, I am hopeful that the prior books will give me the necessary credentialing as an author for another Christian publisher.

3. I also plan to write a paper from parts of these ideas to submit to the American Scientific Affiliation for publication in Summer 2022. I have published with them before and thus, am optimistic for acceptance of this paper as well.

**Brief budget and explanation of need:**

The germ of the idea framing *Well-Grounded* has been accepted as a paper to be presented in July 2022 at the Inklings Conference in Oxford, England. (1) Therefore, monies from the Pew Research Grant would meet a need for travel expenses to this conference, which are not entirely covered by Provost funding. Attending this conference will be a great opportunity for feedback from other scholars, along with access to the amazing resources of the Bodleian Libraries at Oxford. Also, additional time spent in England prior to the conference will provide a dedicated time and a quiet place for researching and writing on *Well-Grounded*. I had the privilege of attending the same conference at Oxford in 2019 which was where the seed of the *Good Ground*, *Above Ground*, and now *Well-Grounded* books was planted. Thus, I look forward to new ideas from this conference and where they might lead for the future. (2) Monies from the Pew Research Grant will provide opportunity for travel for further collaboration with other Hebrew scholars and potential research at their libraries. (3) Finally, monies from this grant will cover costs associated with the limitations of my health which pose the need to work from home in the writing of *Well-Grounded* without direct access to being able to print, scan, make copies, etc. at Union's campus.

**Budget:**

1. Inklings conference at Oxford, England - \$2,600
2. Travel for collaboration with other Hebrew scholars and research in their libraries - \$1,000
3. Book budget for research - \$300
4. Expenses for writing at home (including a printer, paper, ink cartridges, ergonomic office chair etc.) - \$600
5. Total = \$4,500

Dear Pew Grant Review Committee:

Thank you for your time and effort into reviewing this application. Independent of your decision, please know I have been and am praying for you and your families. May God favor you with fresh joy and hope today as you trust Him for whatever lies before you today. And if your soul feels dusty today, may you be refreshed and renewed by Him at work in you and the world around you.

Gratefully,

Beth