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RAVEN'S PLAY

*The joy of the LORD is your strength.
Nehemiah 8:10 b*

Nothing in nature “just happens” on its own. *Christ Jesus is in control of everything at all times*, “for God is the King of all the earth” (Psalm 47:7 a).¹ When ravens play with one another (oh, yes, ravens do play!), they proclaim something about our Creator’s character. But what is it about Jesus they reveal?

The same is true of quarreling crows. When two noisy crows squabble over a french fry dropped on a sidewalk by a three-year-old child, they tell us something about God *and ourselves*. In this case, the fight over forgotten fast food mirrors the *sin of mankind* and demonstrates the incredible patience of our Creator in the face of these bickering birds. (He could easily destroy the crows for being so foolish to mimic our sin, couldn’t He?)

But let’s not dwell on why animals fight. Rather, let’s explore why animals, like ravens, play (that sounds like more fun anyway). When animals romp and rollick they reveal a unique aspect of Christ’s personality, because He made them.²

Editor’s Note: *We now join an imaginary conversation between two birds at the zoo: a cranky hornbill and a gregarious raven.*

Hornbill: “You’re just saying *that* because you want to justify your childish behavior. . . . Would you please stop poking me with that stick!”

Editor’s Note: *The raven promptly drops the stick he is holding in his mouth.*

Raven: “Oh, you never want to have any fun.”

Hornbill: “Fun?! When I lived in the wild, monkeys chased us hornbills. Do you call that fun?”

Raven: “Well, it sounds like the monkeys were enjoying themselves.”

Hornbill: [Sigh] “I don’t think our Creator put us here on Earth to waste time . . . we have nests to build and food to gather.”



Raven

¹ In other words, Jesus is absolutely sovereign (pronounced SAHV - rin).
² God’s character is revealed by creation (Romans 1:20). The personality of an artist can be seen in his painting—so, too, Christ’s glory is revealed in the things He has created.



Hornbill

Raven: “Yes, He does want us to work hard, because He is a God who works night and day.³ But He also wants us to express *His joy*, because His glory surrounds us.”

Hornbill: “You need to face facts, Raven, very few animals play. You ravens are unusual in that regard. You’re . . . you’re just a bunch of silly birds!”

Raven: “Flock.”

Hornbill: “Huh?”

Raven: “We’re a *flock* of silly birds. You need to work on your vocabulary.”

Hornbill: “See, see, there you go again, being silly.”

Raven: “I don’t deny that we ravens are very playful. Jesus made us that way. But we’re hardly alone. Most mammals and birds like to play. I hate to say it, my precious friend, but you’re the exception, not the rule.”

Hornbill: “Really? Name some other animals that play then.”

Raven: “OK, where do I start? The Tasmanian devil has been observed on more than one occasion using a tree or hollow log to play hide-and-seek with its brothers and sisters. The mongoose also enjoys chasing and hiding from its own kind.”

Hornbill: “Well, that’s mammals for you!”

3 John 5:17

Raven: “It’s not just mammals. Jesus gave a type of parrot in New Zealand the same desire to play hide-and-seek. And peacocks enjoy playing tag with one another.”

“Marmosets and tamarins are monkeys that also enjoy playing tag. So do Roe deer. It’s not uncommon for young deer to run around early in the morning just as the sun begins to rise. They love to chase each other through trees at break-neck speeds.”

Hornbill: “Well, I suppose the Creator wants young animals to *exercise* so that they develop their lungs and their legs.”

Raven: “Yes, that’s true, because the joy of the Lord is our strength! Creator Jesus designed unique ways for us to build up our muscles so that we can survive in the wild. If there’s no work to be done, young beavers frequently frolic in the water with one another, rolling and somersaulting as they go. I’m certain this improves their



swimming skills. Wolf pups are known to chase and ambush each other—this may prepare them for hunting as adults. By the way, the wolf—not the raven—holds the world record for play. Young wolves were once observed chasing each other and roughhousing for five hours nonstop!

“Juvenile weasels and mink regularly

practice stalking one another—just for fun. They hone their hunting skills that way.”

Hornbill: “Well, I’ll concede that young animals do play, but we adults have more important things to do.”

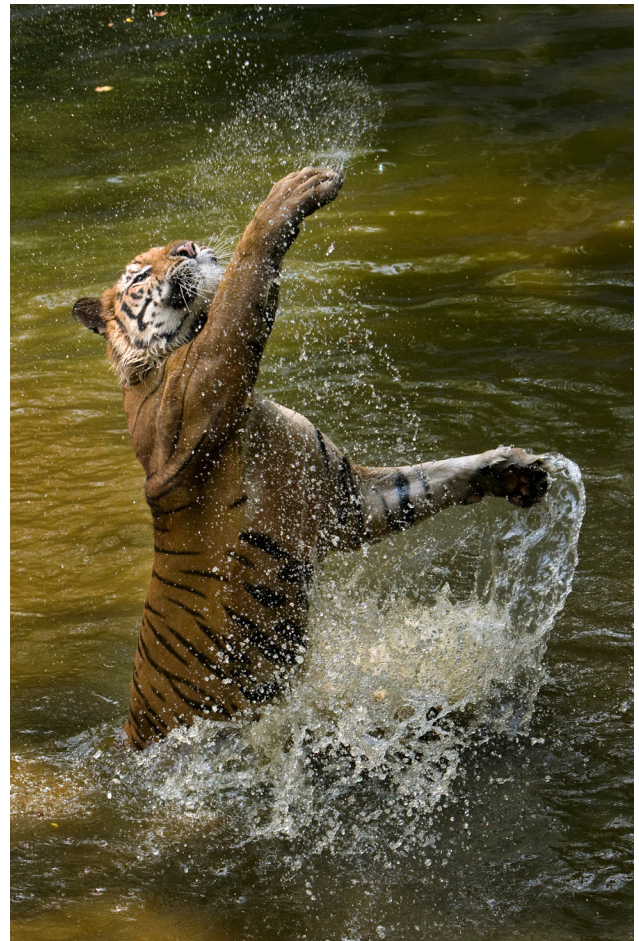
Raven: “But immature animals are not the only ones who play, Hornbill. Full-grown tigers experience great joy swimming and splashing around in the water. Many adult animals run and gallup to stay strong and nimble. I honestly think, however, that most of God’s creatures play simply because they’re glad to be alive!”

Hornbill: “What do you mean?”

Raven: “Some animals play intensely just after escaping danger. It’s called *play of relief*. And how can we explain the fact that young goats have been observed dancing at the sight of a butterfly?”

Editor’s Note: *When God’s creatures feel safe under His wings, they will experience joy. . . . This is the word picture presented in Psalm 91.*

Raven: “There are monkeys that carry rocks up a tree and then fling them to the ground, only to retrieve the stones and take them up the tree again. What does that accomplish for the monkeys? The only purpose seems to be that they enjoy dropping rocks from a tree! Gorilla fathers and chimpanzee mothers like to tickle their children. I hate to sound sarcastic,



but what survival skill does that teach their young? BEWARE OF THE HIDEOUS TICKLE MONSTER?!

“A captive dolphin seems to enjoy balancing objects on its nose, and wild dolphins frequently ride the waves near the bow of a fast-moving ship. Like those human children staring at us right now, ermine—a type of weasel—have been observed leaping into piles of leaves, then rolling around in them. In winter, river otters climb up the sides of a stream for the sole purpose of sliding down its snowy banks. That sounds like fun to me!

“There’s more: Sea lions often grab long pieces of kelp in their mouths and then chase each other. Young horses

frequently jump straight up into the air for no apparent reason . . . so do many other animals. Hornbill, again, I don't want to sound sarcastic, but why would these animals do that? Creator Jesus doesn't expect these creatures to sprout wings and fly, does He?"

Editor's note: *The hornbill appears somewhat embarrassed and has nothing to say.*

Raven: "They're leaping for joy, Hornbill, they're leaping for *the joy of the Lord!*"

"Let me run another thought by you. God even allows some animals to have fun with other species. We ravens especially like to play pranks on wolves. We have nothing against wolves—we just enjoy teasing them."

Hornbill: "I'm certain it's not very common for animals to play with other species."

Raven: "Well, I'm not sure you're right about that. Like *you* said, monkeys enjoy running after you hornbills because they seem to get a kick out of scaring you. The whole idea kind of reminds me of dogs chasing pigeons in the park."

Hornbill: "Oh, great, now you think of me as a pigeon!"

Raven: "No, my friend, but you need to be less anxious and trust God who created you and daily cares for you."

Editor's Note: *There's silence as Hornbill thinks. The raven picks up the stick again and gently pokes the hornbill. He then quickly drops the stick.*

Raven: "Baboons have been observed playing with at least five other species of animals: impalas, bushbuck, gelada, chimpanzee, and vervet monkeys. Blackbuck antelope enjoy teasing birds, and . . ."

Hornbill: "I think I understand now. Would it be appropriate to compare the

play of animals to the activities of those human children, who, by the way, are still staring at us? I wish they would stop doing that—it makes me nervous."

Raven: "Oh, Hornbill, they look like sweet kids—they're just curious. And it's true that human children are not animals, but their Lord is our Lord and His joy is our joy—it permeates throughout life. Consider Columbian ground squirrels—when they have free time, they frequently leap frog over one another, as do badgers. Badgers also engage in tug-of-war games, jackals enjoy blind man's bluff, spotted hyenas use sticks to play keep-away, (as do we ravens), and goats have been seen playing king-



of-the-mountain. Who taught us animals these games, games also played by human children? Surely people didn't teach us? No, Hornbill, Creator Jesus did!"

Hornbill: "Well, if that's true, then it would seem that all this roughhousing should be properly monitored. After all, our Creator is a God of order."

Raven: "Oh, God monitors it all right. In many animal families, He has Mom and Dad, or older Brother and Sister, oversee the activities of the youngest members of



the clan. Adult animals, for instance, often prevent the youngsters from goofing around when danger is nearby. It's as if the adults are saying to their children, 'Now is not the time for fun!' And if lion cubs get too rough with one another, Mom often intervenes.

"When two elephants trunk-wrestle, Creator Jesus expects the stronger elephant to be careful with his weaker playmate. The stronger elephant matches his strength to whomever he is wrestling with. Isn't that amazing? Isn't God amazing?!"

"So, you see, Hornbill, everything is under Christ's control and the glory of His hand leading His creation is what produces joy! We playful animals are simply expressing the joy of our Lord as we reveal His glorious life working in us."

*The hills are clothed with gladness . . .
they shout for joy and sing.
Psalm 65:12 b, 13 b*



CHRIST'S SWEETNESS

*O taste and see that the LORD is good;
How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!
Psalm 34:8 ⁴*

Editor's Note: Professor Seismo⁵ and his three grandchildren are visiting the zoo today. They go there often, but today is extra special because their first stop is the zoo nursery. They want to see what baby animals have been born recently.

Kelsey: "Ooo, puppies!"

Professor Seismo: "Those are baby wolves, Kelsey."

Kelsey: "Ooo, looky, what's those, Gampa?"

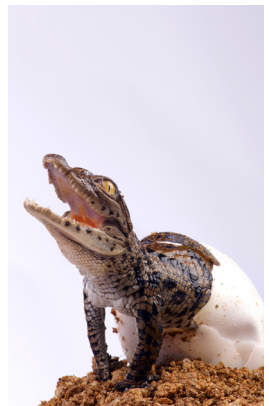
Professor Seismo: "They're baby raccoons. Say, did you kids know that baby raccoons often live high in a tree? Sometimes they fall two stories from their home to the ground. It's not really a problem though, because Mom simply carries her babies back up to the family den."

Rick: "Don't the babies get hurt, Grampa?"

Professor Seismo: "No, because Jesus made their bones and bodies very soft."

Josh: "What's in this tank, Grampa—alligators?"

Professor Seismo: "No, Josh, they're baby crocodiles. Believe it or not, crocodiles are quite feeble as babies. When they're ready to hatch from their eggs, they cry out to God for help. Jesus sends the mother crocodile to the nest to gently break open their



⁴ Scripture reference are from the New American Standard Bible, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation.

⁵ Professor Seismo (pronounced SIZE - mo) is a fictitious character.



eggs, using her teeth. The baby crocodiles then climb into her mouth for a ride down to the river. Once in the water, they stay close to Mom. If danger appears, the babies again rush into Mom's mouth for safety.

"Many baby animals need their parents to be near them at all times. The Lord Jesus uses the mother manatee, for instance, to keep the baby manatee from drowning after it's born."

Rick: "What's a manatee, Grampa Seismo?"

Professor Seismo: "A manatee is a large mammal that lives in water.⁶ Kind of like a walrus without tusks. But it's not a fish, so it can't breathe underwater—it has to come to the surface to get air. The problem is that the newborn manatee doesn't know how to swim. So Jesus directs Mom to gingerly lift her baby to the surface every three or four minutes. She continues to do this faithfully until it learns how to surface on its own. That might take six or seven days."

Rick: "I bet she doesn't get much sleep that first week after her baby is born."

Professor Seismo: "That's wonderful insight, Rick!"

Editor's Note: *Professor Seismo and the kids finish visiting the nursery, and decide to check out the zoo's bird exhibit. They pause in front of the hornbill habitat, which is located next to the raven enclosure. Josh looks up.*

Josh: "Hey, Grampa, it almost looks like those two birds are talking to each other!"

Professor Seismo: "Hmm, it does at that."

Four-day-old
tiger cub



Editor's Note: *Rick is still thinking about the animals in the nursery.*

Rick: "Grampa, why are baby animals so cute?"

Professor Seismo: "Oh, there are lots of reasons, I suppose. They're cute because they have really soft fur or feathers, and oftentimes Jesus paints baby animals in pretty colors and stripes. Also, most young creatures have more delicate features than their parents—their noses, ears, and legs are usually smaller or thinner. Babies frequently give out helpless cries, and they're often curious and playful. But the main reason I think baby animals are so sweet is that they helplessly depend on our Lord Jesus and they reflect His sweetness."

"Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God . . . ?" Job 38:41

⁶ Another name for the manatee is sea cow. "Sea cow" can also refer to a dugong, which is an animal very similar to the manatee.



Josh: “Whaddaya mean, Grampa?”

Professor Seismo: “Those who love Jesus know that He is sweet because He is stronger than everyone, but He was willing to become weak like us. This tenderness is seen in the baby animals He created.”

Rick: “I’m not weak, Grampa! See my big muscles?”

Professor Seismo: Yes, you have very strong muscles, Rick. But, compared to God, even the strongest man in the world is very weak.”

Kelsey: “Ohhh!”

Professor Seismo: “Jesus is the King of all creation and no one is stronger than He is. Yet He made Himself weak like us. As God, Jesus is the most powerful being in the universe, but He humbled Himself to become poor for our sake.” ⁷

Rick: “Why’d He do that, Grampa?”

Professor Seismo: “Why did Jesus become poor for our sake? So that we might be made rich! Rich toward God in being reconciled to Him; rich in righteousness having the righteousness of Christ given to us; rich in having the image of God restored in us; rich for eternity in being united to Jesus who is Everlasting Life, and rich in fellowship with God and all of God’s people—a fellowship that will have no end.

“Jesus died for the sins of His people. He is sweet because He showed us the way to escape from all the bad things we do. Christ is sweet because He willingly became weak and suffered for our sins.⁸ He died on a cross because He loves us a lot.”

Josh: “Then why are baby animals so sweet, Grampa Seismo?”

Professor Seismo: “Well, how could our super-powerful God make something so gentle, so helpless, so innocent-looking,

if He wasn’t able to understand what it means to be weak, weak like the people and animals He created?”

“How could Jesus, who is God, save us from our sins unless He was willing to give up everything Himself and show us the way? ⁹ He’s sweet because, though He’s God, He did not hesitate to reach down to us here on Earth and get hurt for our sake.”

Rick: “Oh, kinda like when you bend down and pick us up, Grampa? Sometimes you hurt your back, but you always have a smile on your face.”

Professor Seismo: “Well, in a very small way, Rick, I suppose you’re right. Only Jesus didn’t just hurt His back, He bled and died for those He loves. And He was glad to do it! The Bible says that for the joy set before Him, [Jesus] endured the cross.¹⁰ You see, kids, sweetness is the joy of our all-powerful God revealed in the things that are humble and weak.¹¹ When a baby raven cries out to our all-powerful God for food, we see sweetness.¹² That’s why baby animals give us a glimpse into the sweet and tender heart of our Creator. Jesus is able to make cute, helpless animals because He is the God of Grace. With His great Father’s approval, Jesus became



7 Read 2 Corinthians 8:9.
8 Read 2 Corinthians 13:4.
9 Read Philippians 2:6-11.

10 Read Hebrews 12:2 b
11 Read 2 Corinthians 12:9.
12 Read Job 38:41



weak for us and suffered the punishment we should have received—this is grace. That’s why He’s so sweet! *When weakness joyfully and humbly submits to greatness, sweetness will be the result.* When we kneel before God, we are sweet to His eyes and we experience the sweetness of Christ!

“The whines and whimpers of baby animals are actually cries to Jesus for help (Psalm 147:9). God cares for them through their mothers and fathers. And that’s why baby animals are so sweet—weakness and greatness come together—they are weak, but the great hand of Jesus gives them life and sustains them.”

Rick: “Yeah, I think we understand now.”

Do you understand? Do you understand that there is strength in humility and this is where true joy originates? The only way to know the joy of God is to recognize that you are weak in your sins. And it is only through the humility and strength that Jesus showed on the cross, in dying for our sins, that you can be forgiven. If you are willing to humbly repent and, by God’s strength, commit yourself to become like Jesus, then you will know the sweetness of salvation. . . . “[Jesus] called a little child and had him stand among them. And He said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.



Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:2-4)!



*Rejoice in that day and leap for joy,
because great is your reward in heaven.*
Luke 6:23 a



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