

“The World and the Word”

Psalm 19

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I’ve taught a lot of art courses in college, and whether I’m teaching drawing or design or painting, I always say, it’s not about apprehending a set of particular skills, it’s about learning to really see. Seems to me you could say that about Psalm 19; David says, we need to learn to see beyond the stuff of our world to see God’s purpose behind it.

Psalm 19 is great poetry, and it’s great theology. It helps us understand that God loves to make himself known, to show his glory in what he does and in what he says—in his work and in his word. Psalm 19 is what we call a wisdom psalm; it tells you how to be wise, or to see what’s going on around you and how God is in it. As we think about it together, I’d like to reflect on four themes: God’s creation, God’s word, our need, and God’s forgiveness.

The testimony of God’s creation. (19:1-7)

The first part praises God for his mighty work in nature. Just by existing, the world shouts to God’s glory. Now, this is Hebrew poetry, it’s a poetry of parallel ideas and images. When you have a repeating line, it helps amplify the meaning of the first, so David says,

The heavens are recounting God’s glory (19:1a)

And then he repeats the idea,

and the firmament is declaring the work of his hands. (19:1b)

Both mean the same thing—the majesty, beauty, and intricacy of creation, witness to the power of the designer behind it. To ignore the fantastic display of God’s craftsmanship is ludicrous. We see God’s glory above us and around us, so we see it always and everywhere.

Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night makes known knowledge. (19:2)

Natural revelation is the evidence that someone intended this to be. Like if you leave your house in a mess in the morning, and when you get back for dinner everything is cleaned up, the rooms straightened, the food and dishes put away and the dishwasher runner, you know someone has been there. You don’t think, “Hmm, the house cleaned itself up again.”

There are no human voices coming from the skies. But the great irony is, the skies *do* speak nonetheless. It’s an inaudible noise. There’s no sound, no voice, nothing you can literally hear. But the voice is there, and here’s the point—some people hear it and some don’t. Verse 3 says,

There is no speech and there are no words; their voice is inaudible. (v. 3)

If you're spiritually aware, it's because God's opened your heart, and you're overwhelmed with God's glory that radiates all around you. David's point in Psalm 19 isn't just to help us appreciate the greatness of creation, but to look beyond it to the Creator. So, Psalm 19 is telling us, "Look up!" Read the sky above your head.

See, night and day, everywhere on earth, God is talking to people, showing himself to them. He's not simply revealing nature to them. Nature displays God's power and purpose, but it isn't God, it's under God. Like in Genesis says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). When we reflect on the vastness of heaven, our minds can wake up to the knowledge of God the Creator. *His* hands, *his* mind, *his* will created a glory beyond what we can fathom. And the testimony of creation goes out to the whole earth. David says the message:

[The voice of day and night] has gone forth into all the earth, and their words to the extremity of the world. For the sun, he pitched a tent in them, so it is like a bridegroom going forth from his chamber; it rejoices like a warrior to run his course. (vv. 4-5)

Nobody escapes the sun. Even if you're blind, you live by its heat. Even though it doesn't have an audible voice, people still know it's there, and you have to ask at some point, "How did it get there?" The image of God pitching a tent for the sun is a picture of the sun returning at night to its resting place, and returning from there each dawn. Every morning, the sun reappears in glory on the eastern horizon, like a groom emerging after the wedding ceremony. The picture of the bridegroom suggests joy, and the warrior suggests power, because in his strength the hero rejoices to display his strength. And during the day, the sun puts its heat on everyone under its path.

One more thing about what God communicates: the message in the sky is the glory of God. And that glory is beautiful. It means splendor, majesty, beauty, perfection, awesome in his power and wisdom.

It's powerful to come over a mountain ridge, and suddenly you see for miles, or to see the great expanse of the sea. If you drive west across the Los Angeles basin on the 10 Freeway, you drive through a population area of maybe 17 million people. Then you pass 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, Santa Monica, and go into the tunnel, and suddenly you emerge from the darkness onto Pacific Coast Highway and into the blinding light. You can see the sun gleaming off the waves off Santa Monica State Beach. All the weight of humanity and a continent behind you, and in front of you nothing but an endless expanse of blue. It's an awesome thing to see, and it makes you say "Wow," and maybe "Thank you!" We think, "There's more to life about here and now and me and you, and there's a designer that made this." When that happens, God's talking to us. He's telling us about his power and our finiteness.

It's why there's no excuse for not believing in God. In the book of Romans, Paul reflects on this passage when he writes,

But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who push the truth away from themselves. For the truth about God is known to them instinctively, because God has put this knowledge in their hearts. From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. They can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God. (Romans 1:18-20)

God has revealed himself in creation to *all* people, but we choose not to pay attention.

That leads to the transition in the psalm.

The testimony of God's word. (19:7-10)

God's word points to danger to warn us, and to success to guide us. And like with the testimony of creation, if your spiritual ears are open, you hear it, but if you're spiritually deaf, you cannot hear God's voice. It's why Jesus said,

You are permitted to understand the secret about the Kingdom of God. But I am using these stories to conceal everything about it from outsiders, so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled:

They see what I do, but they don't perceive its meaning. They hear my words, but they don't understand. So they will not turn from their sins and be forgiven. (Mark 4:11-12)

Some people don't understand the truth about God because they're not ready to receive it in faith.

So nature witnesses all the time, to all people, about the beauty and power and wisdom of God. But it only goes so far. It speaks about God in a general way, but Scripture speaks in a specific way. Nature points to God's existence, but the Bible tells us God has a plan to save us. It says he loves us so much that he came to earth in the person of his Son Jesus, and he died so he wouldn't have to lose us. Nature speaks about God, but people still need a specific message about his grace, love, and mercy. David says we get that in the Law of God, or his word—that means, the Bible. It's so important, David has six phrases that describe the word.

In verse 7 he says, the "law of the LORD" and the "testimony of the LORD." In verse 8 he says, "precepts of the LORD" and "commandment of the LORD." In verse 9 he says, the "fear of the LORD" and "precepts of the LORD." Six times, he uses the phrase "of the LORD," because he's telling us this is the very words of God. Nothing else speaks to us in such power and perfection. This is the one true God, the one who made heaven and earth and everything in them, the one who holds all things together, who knows all things. This God has been pleased to speak, and he has done it in his laws.

A lot of times, we think of the law as something confining or stifling, maybe just to keep us from having fun. That wasn't the way David sees it. He sees God's law revives us, makes us whole, convicts us, and gives us life. It gives light for our path, Psalm 119 says, not chains for our feet. And in the New Testament, Paul says,

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. It is God's way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing god wants us to do. (2 Timothy 3:16)

Look at how David describes the benefit of meditating on God's word in six phrases that are parallel, so they describe the same general thing. In verse 7 he says God's laws are perfect, "making wise the simple." In verse 8 he says God's laws bring "joy to the heart," and give "insight to life." In verse 9 he says the laws of the LORD are "true" and "fair." All of these fit under the phrase in verse 7, "reviving the soul." God's word perfectly accomplishes what he ordains, and that is salvation for everyone who delights in his word, or receives it in faith.

Then, David gives an overarching description of the preciousness of Scripture when he says, the words of the LORD "are more to be desired than gold, even much fine gold" (verse 10). Then in verse 11 he says, "in keeping them is great reward." He's saying, nothing in life is more valuable. It's why he says in Psalm 119, "I have hidden your word in my heart." The benefits of knowing God, of doing his will, are better than everything gold can buy. It's why Jesus said,

Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, "People need more than bread for their life, they must feed on every word of God." (Matthew 4:4)

It's why Paul said,

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, for the Jew first, and also for the Greek. (Romans 1:16)

That leads to the next thing.

The reality of our need. 19:12-13)

Suddenly, the tenor of the psalm shifts from the excellence of God's word, to the darkness in our own hearts. Why does David do that? I think it's because that's a natural movement. When you contemplate the holiness and perfection of God, you're naturally convicted about how you fall short. It's why God tells the people through the prophet Isaiah the stain of their sins is like filthy rags (1:18). It's also why in the movement in the service of worship, we move from a hymn of praise, where we get in touch with God's majesty, to a prayer of confession. We've come to sense we need to come clean. So David says,

How can I know all the sins lurking in my heart? Cleanse me from these hidden faults. (19:12)

This comes through in the new movie, “The Dark Knight,” the latest in the Batman series. It’s the story of three good guys, Police Commissioner Gordon, District Attorney Harvey Dent, and Batman, who fight to protect Gotham City from a psychotic killer named the Joker. Dent tells his colleagues, ““You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain.” He’s seen the potential darkness in everybody’s heart.

David’s saying, who knows the depth of hurt and selfishness I’m capable of? I can’t trust my own heart apart from God’s help.

It’s easy for us to put on our best face when we come to church. It’s like the set designs on the Hollywood back lot—the front of the building looks a whole lot fancier than the back. We clean up pretty well, but meanwhile we hide a lot of stuff, and wonder if our friends would like us as much if they knew everything about us. God says that’s spiritually dangerous to try to make ourselves look better than we are. You fall into that, and I do, too. What’s the way out of it? It’s to test ourselves against the word of God, to come clean before him.

So David prays, first for forgiveness, and then for God’s power to live a different kind of life. He says, “acquit me,” or “keep me” from hidden sins. Then he says, “don’t let them control me,” or “rule over me.”

Last, the assurance of God’s forgiveness. (19:12b-14)

Our hearts are convicted of sin and also are given peace in God’s forgiveness by the very same Holy Spirit, because it’s two sides of one work, to help us see ourselves as we are, weak, and sinful, but precious to God, created in his image and redeemed in his blood, and freed to live as a new creation in him. It’s why the Holy Spirit makes proud people humble, weak people strong, foolish people wise, dead people alive, and he fills sad people with joy.

David has moved in this psalm from the really big focus, the universe, to the really close focus, on the individual, on you and me bowed down before God. And the climax isn’t the roar of praise from creation, but it’s the song in your heart, because you have a place in the great scheme of things. Look at how David concludes his prayer:

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (19:14)

I like that juxtaposition. A rock is a part of creation, a piece of natural revelation that speaks to the reality of God. But a Redeemer, that’s not something we can figure out, and it’s sure not something we can provide for ourselves. We cannot save ourselves. But Jesus is our great Redeemer, and because of him we have a solid place to stand.