

God's Works and God's Word

Psalm 19

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We can see brilliant sunrises. Throughout the day, the sun is at some point in the sky, giving light and warmth. We've seen some amazing sunsets recently. Then, as the sun settles down beyond the horizon the stars begin coming out. All that we see each day and night bears witness to the Creator who made the sun and moon and stars and us—with our eyes to see and our ability to appreciate the beauty and wonder of creation.

Now we know that the sun is stationary and doesn't literally rise and set, but we still talk that way. So we can appreciate the psalm's description of day and night, sun and stars declaring God's glory as they move through the sky.

This psalm has three movements: 1) God's works in creation praise and point to God the Creator, 2) God's word in the law guides and gives life to God's people, and 3) the human response to these witnesses.

In vv 1-6, we see some of the "sign language" of creation, especially of the objects in the sky. The heavens, that is the skies, declare God's glory through the rhythm of day and night and the sun's steadiness and power. To those who believe, these are affirmations of God as Creator. Creation itself praises God and so points to the Creator. For those who don't believe, all these wonders are hints of God and glimpses of glory that invite you to discover more.

All our pets have been rescue animals. We once had a big old tomcat named Thomas. Very early one morning Thomas was jumping around our room. So I put him outside. As I opened the east door, I saw brilliant stars low over the horizon. But before I could really appreciate them, a car's headlights shone in my eyes. I also had to shut the door quickly to keep Thomas from coming back in. But that glimpse of stars impressed me. I experienced awe, even while I was sleepy and annoyed (at the car and the cat). That made me think that God is great and transcendent, but also mixed up in the stuff where I live. Later that morning, I read Psalm 147 and noticed v. 4: "He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by

name." I wrote a prayer: "I am in awe of you, O Lord. You are great and glorious—kindler of brilliant stars. And you are good and gracious—present here with me."

So the stars, in their beauty, can fill us with awe and help us appreciate the one who made them. Then the psalm turns to consider the nearest star, our sun. This description of the sun's daily journey across the sky may borrow from popular mythology of the time. But while the psalmist may glance at mythology, he quickly looks beyond it. Because the sun is not a deity; it's part of creation, made by the one true God. The creation story in Genesis 1 makes a similar point. The sun, moon and stars are not to be worshipped because they were made by God. They are creatures of God, not gods themselves.

Notice the last phrase in this section about the skies telling of God's glory. Speaking of the sun, it says "nothing is hid from its heat." The writer of this psalm knew the brightness and searing heat of the desert sun in the Middle East. There was nowhere to hide from that. Here in Oklahoma we know something about that. There was an email going around a few years ago titled "You Must Be from OK If." One of the lines was, "You must be from Oklahoma if you know that the true value of a parking space is not determined by the distance to the door, but by the availability of shade." But sometimes there's just no hiding from the sun's searching rays and scorching heat.

Now, abruptly, in v. 7 the psalmist moves to talking about God's law. This second section seems so different from the first that many scholars think Psalm 19 was originally two psalms that were joined together. But there is a connection here. The sun's inescapable brilliance and heat give us a picture of God's word. C. S. Lewis said that the key phrase is "nothing is hid from its [the sun's] heat" (*Reflections on the Psalms* 64). Another commentator follows up on this and says that the two parts of the psalm belong together. The sun dominates the daytime sky. In a similar way, Torah (God's instruction) dominates human life. The sun can be welcome in giving warmth and terrifying with its unrelenting heat. God's direction and instruction gives life, but it can also scorch, test, and purify. We need the sun. We need God's word. "There could be no life on this planet without the

sun; there can be no true human life without the revealed word of God in the Torah" (Peter C. Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 19: *Psalms 1-50*, accessed on Prolepsis 1 Oct. 2008).

We need to think about that word *Torah*. When we looked at Psalm 1, we saw how important Torah is. It's the Hebrew word translated "law." But Torah is more than regulations and restrictions. It's guidance and instruction in God's way of life. It's the wisdom of the Lord. That's what thrills the psalmist. And it can thrill us if we're open and obedient to it.

The writer is so captured by God's word that he uses six different words for it here: law, statutes, precepts, commands, fear of the LORD, decrees of the Lord. These could all be synonyms, but they also show the completeness of Torah. In every way, the Lord's Torah is good: it's perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure, and firm. We can also see the goodness of the Lord's Torah in the effect it has on us:

- "reviving the life": it's the basic force that restores full strength and vitality to faltering human spirits and gives us the inner food that we can't really live without.
- "making wise the simple": it gives us wisdom that keeps life from ending in disasters of foolishness.
- "making the heart rejoice": it creates the rejoicing that springs up from a life of uprightness before God.
- "enlightening the eyes": it reveals the dimensions of truth and reality in human existence, because it is given by God, the giver of life.
- "enduring forever": Torah guides us into reverence for the Lord that becomes a permanent foundation for life.
- "they are entirely righteous": this sums up the Torah. It is righteous because it comes from God and it is righteous in its effects on us. (Craigie)

Notice in v. 10 how valued and prized God's word/law/way is. It's more precious than gold. God's word and way of life are more important than money. We need to remember that. Realizing that money and

possessions are not the most important things reminds us that we are more than just producers and consumers. Work is good and earning a living is honorable. Material things are part of God's good creation. Money and possessions are gifts of God to be used for God's glory and the good of people. But if we think only money and possessions are real and acquiring them is all we're good for, we're in trouble. God's instruction is more valuable. Knowing and following God's way is more important. Pursuing God's way and following God's direction free us up to be generous with our time and money and all the resources God entrusts to us.

Our confidence is in God who creates and makes himself known. We have a witness to God in creation. We have God's own revelation in the Torah. But both of those are incomplete. We need to go to the New Testament to see the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. There are some interesting connections between this psalm and the first chapter of John, which introduces Jesus in a powerful way. Let's look at them.

Creation: "In the beginning was the Word.... He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him" (Jn 1:1a, 2-3a).

Light and darkness: "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ...The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (1:4-5, 9).

Witness: "[John] came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him" (1:7).

Glory: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (1:14).

Torah: "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17).

Invisible/Visible: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (1:18). (Greg Earwood, "Two Languages," *Moral Landscape of Creation*, 34-35. www.christianethics.ws).

The third movement in the psalm is our response. The psalm writer knows that God's law warns him. But he also knows that sin is deceitful and

sometimes hard to detect. "How can I know the sins lurking in my heart?" (v. 12, New Living Translation). So he asks God to forgive him for hidden faults. The shining brightness of God's word searches our hearts, then scourges and cleanses them. He also prays for God to keep him from deliberate sins so they won't rule over him. We want the Lord God, and not any sin, to rule our lives. With God's help, through Jesus' death for us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be blameless and innocent.

Then the psalm closes with a prayer of trust, commitment, and assurance. The psalm began with a description of the speech of the heavens, declaring God's glory. It concludes with a prayer that our own speech may be acceptable to God. The heavens praise God by their very existence. May we join that chorus of praise in ways that are acceptable to God our rock and redeemer. The glory of God that creation witnesses to becomes "the glory of an intimate relationship between a human being and God, who offers solidarity and redemption" (Craigie). Let's put our trust in God and praise God who is our rock, our strength, our shelter; our God who redeems us, sets us free, and makes us his own.