

KCC March 2016

Two Messages
Psalm 19

Turn to Psalm 19. What do the heavens and God's teachings have in common? Answer: they both show the glory of God. That's the answer of Psalm 19. It is a mind-bender, in my opinion, it's hard to get such different things, the stars and the commandments, into the same container.

But Psalm 19 is a psalm about two messages that show God at his best, and in Psalm 19 the heavens and the commands belong together because both speak, and both show the perfect God.

The psalm divides fairly naturally into three parts, and we'll read it like that. First there's the glory of the heavens (19:1-6), and then the glory of the law (19:7-10), and last there's a heart-searching response (19:11-14).

Voice without Sound, Speech without Words (vv1-4a)

¹ *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

² *Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.*

³ *They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them.*

⁴ *Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.*

We're talking here about the sun and the moon, the stars and the planets. Whatever we see, day or night, when the sky is clear. The ancient world did not have telescopes, but they had eyes and they paid attention on clear nights, and they knew quite a bit about stars and planets.

In this psalm, what we see on a clear day, and what we see on a clear night, announces God's glory. What's in the sky is urging us to listen. The sun and moon, planets and stars, are telling us something. They are declaring, proclaiming. A message is pouring out from them

There is of course no actual sound, no actual words. But still, the heavens urge us to listen. They are talking about God, singing about God, teaching us about God, making announcements about God. This voice pours out continually, to every square meter of this planet.

It never stops, day or night. If the sky is clear, the heavens want us to listen to what they are saying about God. The sun and the moon, the stars and the planets: their voice is never silent.

Remember that this is a prayer to God, a song to God. Psalm 19 is not here simply to teach us about the heavens. In a Psalm, we will say this back to God.

By means of Psalm 19 we tell God that we listened to the heavens, we heard them, we learned from them, we got the message. "O God, the heavens show us your glory. They proclaim the work of your hands, O God."

This has never been automatic. Without actually knowing God this almost never works. To the ancient people there was obviously deity in the heavens. They all knew that. But they understood the sun itself to be a god, and the moon was a god, and stars and planets. They worshiped all these.

The modern world does not see any deity in the heavens. It all just happened. The modern world thinks the ancient world was foolish to see gods in the heavens. The ancient world would think the modern world was blind *not* to see gods in the heavens.

And we join the ancient Israelites to worship the invisible God of Abraham who made it all.

The Sun: Main Character of the Heavens (Vv4b-6)

In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.

⁵ *It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.*

⁶ *It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other;
nothing is deprived of its warmth.*

The picture of the sun is of a strong vigorous man getting ready to charge into the day. At night, when it is dark, the sun rests in a tent that God made for it, that's the poetic image here. Then it gets up in the morning for its long journey east to west, right across the heavens to the far edge of the sky.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and much of that glory is wrapped up in the sun itself, since the sun shapes life on earth far more than any of the rest.

Warmth and growth and light, with coolness and darkness at night to rest, and then warmth and light and growth again, day after day after day, for everyone. The sun declares God to us.

The Second Message: The Law Declares the Glory of God (vv7-10)

And then, with complete abruptness, the psalm moves from the heavens and the sun to the law of the LORD. "The heavens declare the glory of God." And almost in the same breath: "the law of the LORD is perfect." In a moment we switch from message one to message two.

There is more in common between the heavens and the commandments than that both declare the glory of God. They are also both speech, they both have words, they both teach. The heavens reveal knowledge, it says in v2, and in v7 the statues of God make wise the simple.

So we don't just have two *objects* that declare God's glory, the heavens and the law, we have two *messages* that declare God's glory, the message of the heavens and the message of the law.

Let's back up. Humans do not know how to live. We never did know how to live. Even in the Garden, God needed to tell Adam and Eve, "you can eat from all these trees, but not that one, that's a bad tree, leave it alone, the rest are all good."

Even in perfect creation, people didn't know how to live, or what to choose. Not knowing is the normal human state. That was God's plan from the start. He would tell us how to live, what was good to do and what was not. Let's read vv7-10.

⁷ *The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul.*

The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

⁸ *The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.*

The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

⁹ *The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.*

The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous.

¹⁰ *They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;*

they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.

If it makes you uneasy to sing the praises of Moses' Law, then think about the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, and other teachings in the Gospels and NT letters about what God's people should do and not do.

At the end of Matthew, Jesus told the Eleven Disciples, "teach the nations to obey all that I commanded you." Jesus updated the Moses' law for us, but the basic call is generally the same.

God has told his people how to live, what is good and what is bad. Most things are not covered of course, most things are normal and good, but there are some clear teachings about what is right and what is wrong.

There are two ways to understand the commands of God, and they are both true. One, these teachings of God come out of his own character.

When God calls us to live one way and not another, he's asking us to imitate him. He made us, in his own image and likeness, and we are his children. And if we rebel we rebel against him.

That's the first. The second is what this psalm has in mind: God's commands, about what people should do and not to, are the best thing that could possibly have happened to people.

God's ways are good for people. They revive our soul, they make us wise, they give joy to the heart, they give light to the eyes, they are more precious than gold and sweeter than honey.

God's laws and decrees are the gateway into blessing and life. God's greatest kindness was to show us the right way to live. Psalm 1 already covered this. If we live in God's ways, our life will be a healthy tree that always has water and bears fruit when it is time for fruit.

It is a jump for you to see God's decrees and commands like this? Do you find them an unpleasant burden? At least some of them? Do they seem not good for you but bad for you? Why can't we just do what we want? The answer of Psalm 19 is: it is best *for you* to live God's way.

Let's take an obvious example, the command not to steal and the command not to murder.

Would you like to live in a town where people regularly stole from each other and killed each other? Or in a town where people respected each other's property, and did not injure each other. We can all see that the second town seems a better place to live.

But someone will say, "the way I break God's laws does not hurt anyone. What's wrong with that?" Then Scriptures will take us back to the starting point: people do not know how to live, we never have been good at deciding what's best for us.

Verse 7b says, "*The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.*" The Scriptures say, "people, you don't know about right and wrong. As far as right and wrong goes, we are all children, we are naïve and easily misguided.

The only way to be wise about life is the statutes of the LORD. If you want to be wise about right and wrong, learn the LORD's ways. "*The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, the LORD's teachings about right and wrong are trustworthy.*" That's the question: Will we trust them?

Psalm 19 was written by David. David had his own struggles with sin, some of which we know about from Scripture. But on this day at least David could see that God's teachings to people about how we should live were as wonderful as the heavens. Two glorious messages.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and so do his laws and commands.

Humble Heart-Searching (vv11-14)

¹¹ *By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*

¹² *But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults.*

¹³ *Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me.*

Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴ *May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.*

Some people see this whole psalm as a poetic echo of the first few chapters of Genesis. Verses 1-6, about the heavens, describe the first day of creation. In Genesis 1 we do not read the name of God, Yahweh, just Elohim, God. Ps 19:1-6 mentions "God" twice, not "Yahweh."

But in Genesis 2-4 the writer switches to Yahweh, God's name. From verse 7 on, Psalm 19 uses only Yahweh. And if this is true, then the law of the LORD replaces the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That was the one tree in the garden of Eden that God said they should avoid.

But the serpent tempted her. Eve looked at the tree and saw that it was good for food, and pleasing to the eye (Gen 3:6). Psalm 19 says the law refreshes our life, it gives joy to the heart, it is sweeter than honey.

The woman saw that the fruit of the tree was desirable for gaining wisdom. Psalm 19 says that God's teachings make wise the simple.

After Eve and Adam ate, it says that their eyes were opened (Gen 3:7). Psalm 19:8 says the commands of the LORD give light to the eyes.

But there is also contrast between Genesis 3 and Psalm 19. The first people believed a lie, and it brought them death. In Ps 19 the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever, the decrees of the LORD are firm and righteous.

Whether or not there is an intended parallel going on between the tree in Genesis 3 and the law in Psalm 19, the basic truth holds.

Do you want to *look* at something beautiful that brings you joy? Do you want to *eat* something delicious? Do you want to *own* something more valuable than gold? That's how Psalm 19 describes God's standards about right and wrong.

It has the very attractions that make us chase sin instead. Psalm 19 uses the language of temptation – this will bring you joy, it will refresh you, better than gold, sweeter than honey.

He's using the words that are used to take us *away* from God's teaching, except he's using them *of* God's teachings. He's saying, "you leave God's ways because sin is attractive. Open your eyes. God's teachings are every bit as attractive, desirable, and enjoyable.

¹¹ *By these standards is your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*

¹² *But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults.*

¹³ *Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me.*

Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴ *May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.*

In Genesis 4, Cain became very angry with his brother Abel. God said to Cain, "*Sin is crouching at your door [like a predator]; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it*" (Gen 4:7). Cain did not listen, he killed his brother.

Ps 19:13 *LORD, Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression.*

At the end of the psalm we realize that although God's law is perfect and firm and righteous, we are not any of those, not perfect, not firm, not righteous.

So we ask for forgiveness, and we ask God that sin would not rule over us. My will is shaky, keep your servant from wilful sins, may they not rule over me. We think when we sin, we're making our own choice, but in this psalm it is sin ruling over us.

These are the words of the Lord's prayer: "*Don't lead us into testing or temptation, Father, we don't do well. Rescue us from evil and the evil one, we need your help.*"

And it ends with confidence and warm trust in God. “LORD, be pleased with my prayer, you are my Rock and my Redeemer.

Two messages from God. One, every minute of the day or night that the sky is clear, the heavens are pouring out announcements of God’s glory, they are teaching us about God, urging us to listen to their soundless voice.

Two, God’s message of right and wrong, his teaching on how humans should live on earth, is a desirable message, an attractive and priceless message, the only way to be wise, by them are we warned, and in keeping them there is great reward.

Father in heaven, the heavens declare you. Sun and moon, stars and planets, these all show us your perfection, they teach us about your power and your wisdom and your majesty. Father, give us ears to hear more and more this voice without sound and this speech without words.

Your message about right and what is wrong is the way to life. It is a trustworthy message, it brings joy and light and wisdom. It shows us your wisdom, it shows us your love and care for us every day, just as the sun shows us your love and care for us every day.

We are your servants, Father. Forgive the sins we don’t even know about. Keep your servants also from willful sins. May they not rule over us. We need your help with this. We put our trust in you, LORD God, may our whole lives be pleasing in your sight. Our Rock and our Redeemer, you are the one we want, we put our trust in you. Amen.