

The Good God

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[0 : 00] Well, if you would take your Bible and turn to Psalm 19, that would be great, on page 456. And you might have noticed on the front and back of the bulletin that we begin a seven-week series today, tracking beside a new course of videos and discussions.

It's called Life Explored. It's the front cover. And some of our groups are going to be using this material. It's designed to be shared with friends who really have no experience of Christianity or the church as an outreach tool.

And it's based around a series of questions that point to the goodness of God. And before we use it in the fall term as a church, we wanted to give our groups a chance to run it, to see if they trust it. And each week there are Bible passages for discussion. And this week's passage is Psalm 19, and they're going to be the bases for the sermons. And this passage, Psalm 19, is a brilliant place to start.

Because it shows us that God is a God who delights to reveal himself. Which is just as well.

Because if God didn't reveal himself, we would be left with our opinions and guesswork.

[1 : 27] I mean, if you think about it, if you're an atheist, you cannot prove your point of view. If you're an agnostic, you don't want to prove your point of view. If you're a Christian believer, you may have good reason to believe.

But in the end, God is not someone you can put at the end of a microscope or a telescope or dissect him or grill him or ask him questions. So apart from him revealing himself, we're in the dark. And how does God tell us anything? And I don't know if there's a better passage in the whole Bible to tell us this. And it nicely falls into three parts. Three separate parts, which is nice for a preacher. And the first part tells us about the sky and creation, which speaks about God as creator with soundless words. The middle part is about scriptures, the written scriptures, how they're perfect and taste like honeycomb.

And then there's a deeply searching response in the third part to the reality of having God speak with you. And the whole thing is written in lovely poetry and breathes the spirit of amazement.

[2 : 32] So let's look at the third of the passage, the Psalm, verses 1 to 6, the revelation of God in nature. So these are so familiar, these words.

But despite the fact that rocks and water and trees and topsoil cannot speak, all of nature constantly communicates. Just look at the verbs there.

Declares, speaks the glory of God. Verse 1. The heavens declare the glory of God. The sky above proclaims his handiwork. You can't hear a sound.

But the heavens and the sky and the clouds and the rain and the ocean and the mountains and the deserts and the icebergs, constantly and wonderfully declaring the glory of God. Verse 2. Day to day pours forth speech.

Night to night reveals knowledge. The idea of pouring forth is that it's something, it's a spring of water. It just bubbles up all the time. And it bubbles up with rich diversity and amazing abundance.

[3 : 32] And he's saying as though each day picks up the same old song or the song that was sung yesterday and adds new verses that have never been sung before.

New, rich, diverse. And each night sings new words or it sings in a different key, if you will, revealing the knowledge of God, which I think is fabulous, because without the nature singing, we'd be completely in the dark.

Some time in the last century, I went to university. And it was in the last half of the century, I just want to point out.

I studied astronomy. And we had access at that university to some of the most advanced telescopes. I remember the first time going up to this telescope, which was way out of the city,

behind a mountain, so we didn't have ambient light.

And we looked at the Magellanic Clouds. Magellanic Cloud is this, it's a couple of galaxies revolving around our galaxy. It's hundreds of times larger than our galaxy.

[4 : 34] And when you look at it with the naked eye, when you look at it through the telescope, it's brilliant green and blue and red. And of all the science profs we had when I was doing that degree, the ones who taught astronomy were the most humble.

They would often teach a unit, then they would say, we now come to the frontier of our knowledge. I was just glad they said that. Anyway, let's get back here.

This is poetry. And King David is writing this psalm. He's using this image. He knows they're not actually saying words, verse 3. There is no speech.

There are no words. Their voice is not heard. Because the words of nature are non-verbal. And yet they're heard by every single person. Verse 4.

Their voice goes out through all the world and their words to the end of the world. Hearing this voice of creation does not depend on where you live. Although if you live in Vancouver, you have to be very dull not to hear it.

[5 : 36] It doesn't depend on your intelligence or your skill set. It doesn't depend on your language or your background. It doesn't depend on whether you've heard or understood the beginnings of relativity or not.

It doesn't depend on your age or cleverness. The voice goes out throughout all the earth. And then in verse 5, David pictures the sun as like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, ready to get married.

He's a happy man. He's eager, full of vigor. The desire of his heart is before him. It's a new day. It's a new life. And he's conscious of God's blessing. And it warms and enables us to see what we can see and hear the glory of God.

And if you listen very carefully to the sun, he's saying something like, you are not your own. You belong to him. He is God. You are not. He is the source of life.

Now, I know this is very familiar, but there are all sorts of implications of this. And I just want to point out two before we move to the next section. Here's the first implication. If this is right, it explains that sense of awe that we have when we stand for something we've never seen before in nature.

[6 : 49] I remember the first time we heard killer whales. We were over on one of the islands, and it was dusk, and we heard that sound. You know the sound they make? I'll do it. We thought, what is that?

And there was a whole pod of killer whales staring at us. If you've seen the stars of the southern hemisphere or snow falling gently or hummingbird hovering, you get this sense of awe.

I don't know if any of you have seen the BBC series that David Attenborough produces. I mean, they're sermons, really, but they filmed penguins feeding under the ice caps and tigers looking for their young and these crazy-coloured tropical birds and their mating dances.

And last time I watched one, halfway through, I realised my mouth was open. Years ago, we had a holiday in Australia, and I went swimming in the ocean.

As I walked out, I stepped on a stingray, and the little ones are electrical, like the Guatemalan.

Truly, these are electrical. It gave me a bit of a shock, and I thought nothing of it.

[8 : 05] And then the next day, I walked out into the sea at exactly the same spot, and I trod on another one. It might have been the same one. And I thought, I haven't learnt my lesson. So it wasn't awe exactly, but you know what I mean.

You get this sense of there's an otherness there. I remember the first time I saw the Rockies in Alberta. I could barely take it in. In Swahili, there's a phrase for when you see a sight that is overwhelming and takes your breath away.

It's chakula chamacha. It means food for the eyes. And I know they're just rocks, and I know they're just trees, but there's more. They are declaring the glory of God, and we want to write poems and songs about them.

And the reason for this is in verse 1. It is because the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

Everything in creation is God's handiwork.

And even if everything is going wrong and you're not sure what you believe, the stars and the moon say to us, you're not an accident. You're made with purpose and design, and so are we.

[9 : 11] You're a work of art, just like we are. And when the psalm was written, down in Egypt, they were worshipping the sun, which is equivalent to worshipping a painting or a tree.

In Hinduism, the natural world is Maya. It's an illusion. In Buddhism, it's an illusion of our senses.

And if you're a secularist, the natural world is the product of impersonal forces.

There's nothing sacred about it. But the Bible view gives us a humility before our fellow works of art and explains, I think, our wonder and gives us enough to believe that there is a God and not to worship creation nor to exploit creation.

That's the first implication. The second implication is that since the words of creation are nonverbal, then the communication is limited and unclear.

Do you know the first time I saw a baseball game? I'd never seen a baseball game before I came to Canada. I thought the base coaches had ear infections. This is an in-joke for those of you who are baseball people.

[10 : 20] They kept touching and scratching their ears. I didn't understand they were trying to send signals. And I asked a guy next to me, and he told me. You know, it's like when you try and play charades. You know what fun it is trying to communicate without words.

Because we've been introduced to a game of charades which has five rounds. And the last, we go through the same clues. And the last round, you're not allowed to say anything or act anything.

You just have to make an inarticulate sound. I'll explain that to you later. Here is the limitation.

Nature can tell us that there is a God, but it cannot tell us what God is like. We do not know by looking at nature whether God is thoroughly good or not. You know, there are earthquakes and tsunamis and floods.

There's plenty of awe to go around. But we can't be certain of how God feels toward us. Or whether even there's one God or many gods. Is he just? Is he kind?

[11 : 20] Is he powerful? Does he care about me? What does he want from me? Does he want anything from me? Because the message of creation has no saving power. And it cannot answer questions that we put to it.

That's why the person who says, I prefer to worship God on a mountain or the golf course and come to church, is not really interested in worshipping God. They just don't want to hear what God says. And then there is this dramatic change at the end of verse 6, to the middle part of the psalm. And we move from the language of awe and wonder to the language of personal desire. From power to the personal expression of God's will.

From his works to his word. So we move from the revelation of God in creation to the revelation of God in Scripture, verses 7 to 11. And the change is marked, notice please, by how David speaks about God.

How he refers to God himself. In the first six verses, David only mentions God once, in verse 1, as God. But from verse 7 onwards, he refers to God by his personal name.

[12 : 28] The name Lord, the Hebrew word Yahweh. Seven times this personal name David uses. Because there's a vast difference between the natural revelation of God in creation and the special revelation of God as Redeemer.

And the difference between God's works and God's words are that in his words he reveals who he is and what he desires for us. So as we read through this section, you'll pick up, God's not after our awe and wonder here.

He's after you and me. That's why he starts in verse 7 by saying, The law of the Lord is perfect. Creation is not perfect.

It's somehow caught up in our sin and it groans and longs for the day of redemption when it'll be set free from this cycle to decay and death. But the law of Yahweh, the Lord, is perfect.

And the word law is not just the Ten Commandments. It's all of God's words that we have in the Old Testament, David referring to, and now the New Testament. Narrative, poetry, wisdom, covenant promises, Levitical sacrifices.

[13 : 42] It's a comprehensive term that speaks of prophecy and history. Let's look at the different ways David describes it in the next verses. He calls it law and testimony and precepts and commands and rules.

It's God who is speaking. But the interest is not so much in what they are in themselves. The interest is practical in what they do.

See verse 7, The law of the Lord is perfect. What does it do? It revives the soul. The soul, very important, The soul is who you are.

It's your identity. It's how you think about yourself. David is saying the word of God has the power to show you who you really are. To restore and to revive your identity.

Do you not find that amazing? I mean, it assumes there's something wrong with our identity. That it needs reviving. But you might expect the word of God to come along and teach us something.

[14:43] But instead it goes straight to the heart and it doesn't just teach, it revives. It gives life. Something that I can't do and you and I can't do for each other. See, when we stand in front of Mount Everest, which I never have, or Grand Canyon, we place our hands on our mouths in admiration.

But it cannot change my heart. In fact, the Bible says, I suppress that knowledge of God and who he is. If the scriptures alone can come along and diagnose what's happening in my heart and expose the distortions and distractions and delusions and can show the mess I'm making and the love of God and the grace of God and the kindness of God and his desire to be united with us. That is why the word of God makes wise the simple, verse 7. It can change our minds so that we understand things we were blind to before. They rejoice the heart.

We hear the voice of God. We hear the voice of the one who's infinitely good and gracious and generous. Verse 7, The rules of the law are true and righteous altogether.

Because apart from the word of God, we really would not know, we could not come to agreement on what is right and wrong. I mean, we live in a culture where the consensus on what is right and wrong hasn't disappeared, but it's certainly disappearing.

[16:10] And what you're left with is what the majority believe or what is expedient or the loudest voices or what the leaders tell us. It's like this scam, the ethical investment funds.

My question is, whose ethics? I mean, the government committees that looking at the ethics of euthanasia, I mean, they're pretty well doomed from the start because there is no agreement on what is right and wrong.

What we need is a word from outside ourselves. We need a word from God where God can reveal his mind to us and save us from our opinions. That's why God's words are more to be desired than gold.

They not only revive and give joy and wisdom, they endure like gold. They get more and more valuable because they're eternal. Remember Jesus said, Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

And they're sweeter than the honeycomb because they're no good to you until you've taken them in inwardly. That's when they begin to affect us. But above all, the sweetness of the word of God is because God reveals himself to us as our rock and our redeemer.

[17:25] That's what he says in the last line. The law of the Lord is perfect, but we're not. But it's here that God reveals himself as our rock and our redeemer. The rock, the only place of safety, the redeemer, the one who will rescue and save us.

So we turn to the last little bit quite quickly now. How does this sweetness come into our lives? Verses 11 to 14.

And now we move to the individual. The language of desire changes. It becomes the language of prayer. It turns in verse 11, where David speaks of himself for the very first time.

He says, Moreover, by them is your servant warned. In keeping them there's great reward. And then he begins with three prayers.

Because the only real way to come to know ourselves is in relation with others and this relation with God. See, the three prayers, one is in verse 12, one is in verse 13, one is in verse 14.

[18:29] Let me just look at them quickly. Look at the second one, verse 13. David is talking about big sins. He prays, Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins.

Let them not have dominion over me. Deliberate sins are sins that I know are wrong. They're self-destructive sins. Pretending I know better than God. It's sin that's planned and intentional and they quickly gain dominion over us.

David says, Keep me back from those. But there's the first prayer that comes is before the big sins and it's verse 12 and I think it's placed there for a reason.

Verse 12, Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. These are not big open sins. These are sins of the heart.

These are sins of impatience or self-righteousness or defensiveness. The need to be right.

[19 : 31] Looking for fault in others. Withholding love. Greed or jealousy. Constantly judging yourself too harshly. Or living for the approval of others. David says, They're hidden faults.

They're not hidden from God and they're not hidden from others. They're hidden from me. My faults are hidden from me and yours are from you. They're so normal for us. We're blind to them.

They're so characteristic. They just don't come up on my radar. And that's why we need the Word of God. Our problems are not that our brains are too small but our hearts are too dark.

The Bible says, Who can fathom our own hearts? The God alone searches our hearts and he shows us what's in our hearts through his Word.

So, The Word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

[20 : 33] And no creature is hidden from his sight but are all naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. But the lovely thing is David prays in that verse, Declare me innocent from hidden faults.

It's full of hope. That God would pronounce David, would declare David not just forgiven, not just off the hook, but innocent from the faults that he's blind to.

David knows that he's guilty of heart sin. But God is such a redeemer that he's able to find a way to declare the guilty innocent.

Thank you. Don't be alarmed. That was, I think verse 12 is almost too good to be true. The God who searches our hearts, cleanses us and forgives us and accepts us into his family.

And if God hadn't made this promise in his word, you know, you'd have to make it up. And the third and final prayer is in verse 14. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight.

[21 : 43] Oh Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Acceptable is a lame translation. It's delight, pleasure, what God desires. David's praying, please help my mind and my words and my life not to just barely scrape across the line, but to be a life that gives you happiness and joy, God.

And the reason is because, Lord, you are my rock and my redeemer. My rock. All the power that was on display in creation is now brought to bear on my life to make me delightful to you.

And you're my redeemer as well. And the question that was asked this week in the Life Explored study is what's the best gift that God could give you? And Psalm 19 shows us a God who's not just sovereign and powerful, but he's full of goodness and he's full of pleasure who made this world for us and delights in it and wants us to delight in him.

And then he reveals himself, not just for the sake of revealing himself, but to show his love, to draw us into fellowship and friendship and communion with him and the relationship, the picture of the relationship in this psalm is one of mutual delight, inward and outward, because he's not only our creator, he is our rock and our redeemer as well.

Amen. Amen.