

How Can We Know God?

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Date: 25 October 2020

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[0 : 0 0] You may be seated. This morning we're looking at Psalm 19. Psalm 19, as we continue in our series through the Psalms this fall, looking at these ancient songs and prayers of the people of Israel that have helped the people of Israel and the church for centuries, for millennia, to pray. I'm going to read Psalm 19. Let me read these words to us.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The rules of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold. Sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover, by them is your servant warned. In keeping them there is great reward. Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins. Let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Is there a God? And if so, how can we know God? For centuries, human beings have looked around and asked this question, whether it's farmers in rural areas, hikers in the wilderness, or remote tribes gazing up at the night sky in wonder, or college students hashing out the meaning of life until 4 a.m. in their dorm rooms, or scientists marveling at the vastness of the universe and the complexity of microscopic life, or philosophers crafting treatises about the epistemology of religion, how can we know things, or children who ask as they grow up, how did I get here? How did this whole world get here? Throughout human history, across all different times and cultures and places, human beings have continued to ask this question, is there a God?

And if so, how can we know? Now, by definition, if God is really out there, we can only know God if God chooses to show himself to us. It's like a game of hide and seek. If God is infinite and we are finite, he can always find somewhere to hide that we would never find him on our own. He could leave us in the dark and we would be wandering and uncertain forever. We'll only find an infinite God if that God has chosen to show himself to us in one way or another. And the good news of the Bible is that the one true and living God has chosen to do just that. And that's what this psalm celebrates, that God has revealed himself and that we can know him. Now, this psalm is not a philosophical argument attempting to prove the existence of God. There's a place for philosophical arguments, but that's not what we're dealing with here. We're looking at a poem, a song, celebrating how the one true and living God has revealed himself to the world. Now, the first way that this psalm tells us that God has revealed himself is in verses 1 through 6, is through the heavens. The heavens declare the glory of God. The sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech and night to night reveals knowledge. This is grand, majestic, exuberant language. Notice the verbs in verses 1 and 2. Declare, proclaim, pour out, reveal these powerful communicative verbs. It's saying the heavens bear witness to God continually, abundantly, and everywhere. Continually, day to day, night to night. Even the verb tenses express a sort of ongoing, never-ending action. Abundantly pouring forth like a stream of water and everywhere.

[5 : 49] Verse 4 talks about it going into all the earth, to the ends of the world. Romans chapter 1 verse 20, which we read earlier, says that God's eternal power and his divine nature have been clearly seen in what has been made. John Calvin wrote that the universe is a theater of the glory of God. In other words, an ongoing display of his power and wisdom and beauty and vastness. Immanuel Kant wrote, two things fill the mind with ever-increasing admiration and awe.

The starry heavens above and the moral law within. Have you felt that sense of ever-increasing admiration and awe? Perhaps looking up at the stars on a clear night away from the city lights or watching the sun as it rises or sets, bathing the sky and the earth in brilliant color.

David poetically describes the sun in verses 5 and 6. He compares it to a bridegroom leaving his chamber, emerging from his tent. You know, both then and now, Jewish weddings traditionally took place under a tent where the bride and groom would make their vows to one another, and they would come forth, sort of like a married couple would process out down the center aisle of a church or of the wedding venue, beaming with pride and joy. Either way, this is an image of youthful energy and joyful anticipation. The sun is also compared to a strong man, to a valiant soldier, fearlessly rushing into battle, triumphantly sweeping from one end of the heavens to the other, burning away fog and clouds and shining upon the world. It says there's nothing hidden from its heat. Especially those who lived in the desert would have felt that unrelenting heat of the sun. One commentator says the sun is penetrating, warming, warming, and life-giving to the world while also searching, testing, and purifying.

Now, some of you might say, well, that's a nice poem from the ancient world, but, you know, I'm a modern person, and I believe in science. You know, back in the day, ancient people didn't really understand how the world worked, and so they were inclined to attribute everything they didn't understand to a god or gods. But today we know a lot more than they did. I mean, sure, the sun is beautiful, it keeps us alive, you know, it's nice to sit in the sun on a cool day like today, but we know now that the sun is basically a ball of fire that formed billions of years ago when a cloud of dust and gas collapsed in on itself as the universe continued expanding. I mean, that's really what it is, after all.

But, you know, it's not just ancient people, pre-scientific people, who have expressed awe and wonder at the heavens above. You know, in the early 20th century, and actually for some time before that, the prevailing theory of the universe was called the steady state theory. And basically what that theory said is that the universe, the physical universe that we live in, has been around forever, pretty much as it is today. Maybe fluctuating a little bit here and there. But basically the universe is here, and it's always been here, and so it doesn't really need any further explanation.

[9 : 32] And so non-religious scientists were very comfortable with that theory. But then in the mid-20th century, that theory began to be seriously questioned by scientists. Astrophysicists began measuring cosmic background radiation and found that the universe was gradually expanding and concluded that the universe that we live in today has not been around forever, just like it is now, but rather it had a definite beginning long ago. And that finding deeply troubled many scientists who are convinced atheists. And some of them desperately tried to rescue the steady state theory and find sort of workarounds and ways to compensate for this new evidence that was coming forward. But those attempts have been soundly rejected. You see, what troubled them is if this universe of ours had a definite beginning, then it doesn't just explain itself so easily. If it all started with a big bang, well, who or what caused that beginning? And why is there something rather than nothing if the something that is here can't justify itself and hasn't always been here the way it is now?

Another question that you could ask is, why are we able to do scientific research at all? Why are we able to study the world that we live in and identify meaningful patterns and how it operates?

I mean, the whole of modern science assumes three things. It assumes that the universe is orderly and not completely chaotic. It assumes that the universe is intelligible to human beings, that we can understand something about how it works. It's not complete gibberish to us and that it's contingent. That means it doesn't have to be the way that it is. It could be some other way. That's why we have to do experiments rather than just reason it out from deductive principles. You see, if the world wasn't this way, if the world was completely chaotic or unintelligible to humans, or if it had to be the way it is, then scientific experiments wouldn't make any sense. We wouldn't be able to discern any patterns or regularities.

Or, which, but here's the thing. Without a creator God, there is no reason that we should expect the physical universe to be orderly, intelligible, and contingent.

[12 : 05] And yet, that's exactly how the Bible describes the physical universe that we live in. That it's orderly because God made it. That it's intelligible to human beings, partly because God has made us in his image and made the universe so that we can explore and understand it better.

And that it's contingent rather than necessary because God could have made it a different way. So the biblical worldview makes sense, or science makes sense within the biblical worldview.

The 17th century chemist Robert Boyle said, God would not have made the universe as it is unless he intended for us to understand it. You see, faith and science are not enemies. They are friends. In other words, standing in awe of the works of God, looking at the heavens, and saying they declare the glory of God goes hand in hand with exploring and understanding how it all works. The pioneering astronomer Nicholas Copernicus wrote about 500 years ago, he wrote this, to know the mighty works of God. To comprehend his wisdom and majesty and power, to appreciate in degree the wonderful workings of his laws.

[13 : 19] Surely all this must be a pleasing and acceptable mode of worship. The contemporary biologist Francis Collins wrote, the God of the Bible is also the God of the genome.

He can be worshipped in the cathedral or in the laboratory. So that's the first way that God has revealed himself to the world, is through his creation, through the heavens.

But the psalm goes on to speak of another way that God has revealed himself in verses 7 through 11. And that is through the scriptures. Ever since the early church, theologians have talked about God's revelation coming to us in two volumes, or two books.

The book of nature, which is described in verses 1 through 6, and the book of scripture, described in verses 7 through 11. So Tertullian put it this way, we conclude that God is known first by nature in his works, but then he says more particularly, God is known by the teaching of his revealed word. Now what we see in verses 7 through 11, is that while God's revelation in nature is broadcast widely to the ends of the world, right?

[14 : 27] Everybody can see it, whether or not they've ever had access to the Bible. God's revelation in scripture penetrates more deeply. It penetrates to the depths of the human soul.

The word for God, in verse 1, is the general word for the divine being that was used not only among the people of Israel, but also by the surrounding nations.

It's a word that sort of means the creator of everything, or the high God. But the word in verses 7 through 9, that's repeated six times, is the Lord.

And in most Bibles, it's written in small capitals. And that means it's the word Yahweh. It's the personal name by which God revealed himself specifically to Moses and to the people of Israel and said, I am your Lord.

I'm not just the God way out there, way out there. I'm your God, your Lord. You see, when we look at nature, we can see a God of glory, terrifying power, matchless beauty, inscrutable wisdom, all those things you can see in the created order.

[15 : 42] But you know, if you just look at nature, it doesn't tell you whether that God is a personal being who would want to interact with his creation. And it doesn't give you clear moral guidance for living.

I mean, you look at nature, there's some pretty terrifying things. It doesn't give you a clear sense of what's right and wrong or if there is a God who cares about right and wrong.

But the scripture does clearly show us that. When God revealed himself to Moses, he said, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty. In other words, God is saying, I am the Lord of mercy and justice. Not only the God of glory, but the Lord of mercy and justice.

You see, looking at beautiful sunsets, going for long walks in the woods, gazing up at the night sky, studying astronomy and biology and physics and chemistry, you may see the glory of God. You may be filled with admiration and awe, but those things alone will not save your soul.

[16 : 58] Those things alone will not transform you personally from the inside out. They will not bring you into personal communion with the living God and they will not give you clear moral guidance for living in a deeply broken world.

But the word of God can do all of those things. Look at what the word of God does in verses 7 and 8. First it says, the word of God can revive the soul.

In other words, God's word brings us to life. That verb revive can also be translated return or bring back. In other words, God's word brings us back from our wandering and disobedience to a place of repentance and to the path of life.

And you know, every follower of Jesus Christ has experienced this reviving power of God's word. You know, it happens in various ways. Maybe it was through hearing a sermon.

Maybe it was through reading the Bible for yourself. Maybe it was through a friend or a parent who told you about Jesus. But one way or another, if you are a follower of Christ today, you have encountered God's word and your heart has been brought to life.

[18 : 08] That's one reason why we love to invite people to share some of their stories, some of their testimony, as Jeff and Nicole did earlier, of how God has brought them to life through his word, through the word of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But God's word doesn't stop there. It brings us to life, but it also helps us grow up. It says it makes wise the simple. Now, a simple person in the Bible, the word simple means somebody who is immature or naive or gullible.

Occasionally, the word's used in a positive sense for someone who's sincere or teachable or open-minded. But either way, God's word helps simple people grow up into mature people, people with spiritual understanding and discernment who can navigate the temptations and distractions of a fallen world and keep their focus.

John Bunyan wrote, speaking of the Bible, this book will keep you from sin or sin will keep you from this book.

In other words, God's word makes wise the simple. But God's word doesn't stop there. It brings us to life, it helps us grow up, and it also sustains and energizes us throughout our life.

[19 : 32] It gives joy to our heart, rejoicing the heart and enlightening the eyes. In that way, God's word is like the sun, penetrating, warming, and life-giving, but also searching, testing, and purifying.

And while the sun does that to our physical bodies and to the earth, God's word penetrates it to our hearts, it illuminates our minds, it renews our perspective, it energizes our whole being.

Hebrews 4 says, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart, and nothing is hidden from God's sight.

God's word penetrates into the depths of our soul, bringing us to life, helping us grow up, sustaining and energizing us, and it can do all those things because of what it is by its very nature.

Look at the nouns at the beginning of the sentences in verses 7-9. There are several terms used.

[20 : 42] God's law, that is his teaching or instruction, God's testimonies, that is his statements or reminders, God's precepts, that is his orders or his commandment, his rules or verdicts.

These are all words that carry a sense of authority. They're not just referring to the laws in the Bible like the Ten Commandments, but they're indicating that all of Scripture carries God's authority.

It is God's authoritative message to us. And it's not just authoritative, it's also reliable. Look at the adjectives at the end of the phrases, again, in verses 7-9.

There are these symmetrical phrases, right, with a noun, an adjective, and then an action, right?

But if you look at the adjectives, perfect. It's a word that means complete or whole, sure.

It means trustworthy, right. It's a word that means level or straight, not crooked or deceptive. Pure, clean, true, and righteous altogether. All those words are saying God's word is reliable.

[21 : 51] It's not just authoritative, it's reliable and trustworthy. And finally, verse 10 shows us it's desirable. More to be desired than gold.

It's inherently valuable and precious. It's sweeter than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. It's experientially satisfying. Have you experienced the word of God in that way?

Some verse in the Bible or story in the Bible or message from the Bible that has been sweet to your soul that you have found precious and that you've held, that you can hold on to and that's sustained you or warned you or corrected you or guided you.

Verse 11, the psalmist says, begins to talk about the effect of the word of God, that it warns us and also that it rewards us.

You see, the invitation of these verses is to receive and treasure God's revelation in the scriptures. Several years ago, John Lennox, who is an emeritus professor from Oxford University in England, a mathematician, he came to speak here in New Haven and he came to preach at our church.

[23 : 03] And you can find his sermon on the, if you go into the sermon archive on our website, it was a great sermon, but he gave a specific challenge to the students in our congregation. He said,

think about how much time and energy and money and brain power you are investing or you have invested in your studies, studying in your field.

And of course, he's saying this as someone who has been a professor for probably 30, 40 years, right? He's written all these books and he's an expert on all kinds of things. But he says, think about all the energy that we've all put into this, gaining knowledge, asking questions, considering implications, evaluating theories, writing papers, reading papers, conducting experiments, putting into practice all that you've learned.

He says, the Bible is worth that and much more of your energy and ambition and diligent study. He said, think about all that motivates you to study in your field and apply that same energy and diligence to your study of God's word.

It will be worth it. The Apostle Paul said, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. So, so far, we've seen God's revelation through the heavens, through his creation, God's revelation through the scriptures, through his written word.

And third, in verses 12 through 14, we see the response of God's servant, an honest and humble prayer. You see, until verse 11, the psalmist has talked about things outside himself, the heavens above and the scriptures.

[24 : 47] But then starting in verse 11 and for the rest of the psalm, it gets much more personal. He begins to speak in the first person. He's personally responding to this God who has revealed himself.

And that's what the scriptures are intended to do. Not just to fill our, not just to increase our knowledge, not just to fill our mind with grand ideas or fill our heart with grand feelings, but to lead us to pray with honesty and humility.

Look at how David prays in verses 12 through 14. Verse 12, who can discern his errors?

Declare me innocent from hidden faults. David faces his flaws and prays for forgiveness. You see, in the pure light of God's word, David sees more clearly his own propensity to error.

It's sort of like if you get dressed in a dark room and then you go out into the light of day and you see that your shirt is on backwards and your pants are stained. And you think, ah!

[25 : 57] Right? The verse is saying we're all prone to fall short, to mess up, to go off track, to get out of line even without realizing it, even without intending to. Often our own faults are hidden from us because they're so deeply ingrained in our personality or in the way we were raised or in our habitual ways of thinking.

That's why David says who can discern his own errors? The only way we can become aware of our errors and hidden faults is by getting help from the outside. Now sometimes we get this help through other people.

If you're growing up in a family and you have parents or brothers and sisters, sometimes your parents or your siblings can identify some of your flaws as well as some of your strengths better than you can.

If you're married, your spouse can probably identify some of your flaws as well as your strengths better than you can. Have they ever done that? It's a good thing.

Proverbs says that a good friend will do the same. Will help us see both our own flaws and weaknesses that we're blind to as well as our strengths and gifts that we might neglect or be ashamed of.

[27 : 13] God has put other people in our lives to help us see our strengths and gifts as well as our errors and hidden faults more clearly. But you know, more than anyone or anything else because you know what, other people can have their own opinions that are influenced by their own hidden faults.

more than anyone or anything else, the pure light of God's word brings us face to face with our errors and hidden faults and leads us to cry out to God for forgiveness as the psalmist does.

Declare me innocent Lord. Forgive me. So David faces his flaws and prays for forgiveness. But second, in verse 13, he faces his temptations and prays for freedom.

Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins. Let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression. You see, in verse 12, David knows that he needs forgiveness for unintentional sins, errors, hidden faults that he's blind to.

But he also prays that God would preserve him from even greater spiritual dangers, what he calls presumptuous sins or what we might call willful sins or great transgressions, expressions of

hard-hearted rebellion against God.

[28 : 29] You know, every once in a while we hear about a Christian leader who gets caught doing something horrible, something shameful, something deeply destructive, blatantly hypocritical.

And you know, it can be tempting to look at people like that and say, well, I would never be like that. How terrible. But what this psalm invites us to do, rather, is to pray, Lord, keep us.

Lord, keep me. Because I'm a sinner too, and I could get there even if, even if it seems like the temptation that's far away at the moment.

Jesus taught us to pray, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. And David goes on to say, then I shall be blameless. As a forgiven and free person, he prays that he would be blameless. And that word translated blameless in verse 13 is the same word translated perfect in verse 7. It's a word that means complete and whole, healthy and sound, without blemish.

[29 : 44] David's prayer is that by God's grace, he would become as pure and complete and whole as the word of the Lord itself. Isn't that an amazing prayer?

That our lives would be as pure and complete and unblemished as God's very word. That should be our prayer too.

The Apostle Paul prayed for the Thessalonian Christians, may your spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus has died to grant us forgiveness from our sin and freedom from the power of sin.

And so, and he has called us to be holy and blameless in God's sight. So David faces his flaws and prays for forgiveness. He praises his temptations and prays for freedom.

And finally, verse 14, he prays that he might join in the chorus of praise. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

[30 : 47] You see, in one sense, this last section of the psalm shows us the proper human response to God's revelation in the heavens and in the scriptures. But it's more than that. We're not only responding to God's revelation, we're also joining in and giving testimony to who the real God is.

The heavens are declaring God's power and glory and the scriptures testify to the Lord's mercy and justice, but in verse 14, a third voice chimes in the chorus and joins in the song, the voice of a forgiven sinner who is now the Lord's servant who calls upon my rock, my redeemer.

Now our voices can join with the proclamation of the heavens and with the testimony of the scriptures declaring the praises of God who has called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

And we can say he is our rock, our unchanging source of stability. He's our redeemer who has come to rescue us when we were lost and helpless and who has paid the price to set us free from our sin and has taken hold of us and promised to never leave us and always love us.

Perhaps you're asking the question we started with, is there a God? If so, how can I know him? This psalm tells you look to the heavens where the power and glory of God is displayed.

[32 : 15] Consider the scriptures where the mercy and justice of God has revealed and listen to the honest and humble prayers of those of us who have found him to be our rock, our redeemer.

This psalm is an invitation to you to join in the song. Let's pray. God, we praise you for the witness of the created order, the beauty and power and wisdom that we see reflected in the skies above. We praise you for the clear testimony of your scriptures to your mercy and your justice and your desire to have relationship with us.

Oh, Lord, we pray that we might know you and treasure you and proclaim and bear witness to you as our rock and our redeemer. we thank you, Jesus, for all that you have accomplished on our behalf.

We pray that our voices would join in to give you praise in your name. Amen. Amen.