

THE HEAVENS DECLARE

Psalm 19

A sermon by Peter Budd

Sunday 4th August 2019, St. Andrew's Church, Cheadle Hulme

How do we learn about God?
What convinces us there is a God?
How do we understand what God expects of us; desires for us?
And how do we respond?

Psalm 19 opens on a grand scale,
 looking upwards to the vast expanse of the skies above,
 exploring what we may learn – what every human being may learn – about God
 from what we see of the universe we inhabit.
The book of Nature.

And then the focus turns inwards,
 to what refreshes us to the very core,
 to how we can find wisdom and joy and brightness and purity,
 and all that's truly precious.
Through words from God, written down for us and passed on to us.
The book of Scripture.

And if we grasp the message of these two books,
 Nature and Scripture,
 we surely must respond.
So that, along with the psalmist,
 we'll seek for our words and our thoughts to be pleasing in God's sight.
So that, like the psalmist,
 we'll praise our Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

So let's explore what this psalm has to say,
 about how we can learn from Nature and from Scripture.
And let's be prepared to respond,
 perhaps in new and unexpected ways.

In our imagination, let's join the psalmist.
Let's leave this building, leave this city, travel out into the wild country.
Let's lie back on a hilltop, the sheep munching on the grass around us.
Let's lie and look upwards and appreciate the great blue dome of the sky,
 watch as the clouds drift past,
 and wonder what lies beyond.

Let's keep watching as the daylight fades,
 and bright spots appear in the darkness.
A thousand stars. Two thousand stars. More and more stars.
 It's awesome.
 It's magnificent.
 We realise we're just a speck in the universe.

The air may be still. The night may be quiet.
But there's something for us to hear.
No speech. No words. No sound.
And yet it seems the universe is shouting to us.
There's something we must know.
And not just us, but everyone.
Everyone who's ever looked up to the skies, and marveled.

As the night takes hold, it gets chillier.
We're shivering.
And then, in the east, there's a hint of light.
It brightens with a rosy glow.
A red arc appears, and rises into a golden orb,
that makes its way across the sky, bringing warmth and light and life.
Pouring out its goodness on everyone, everywhere.
Just as it did yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that, and every day.
Reliable. Regular. Dependable. Unfailing.
Marking out time for us.
Speaking of a pattern, of order in our universe.

Some may look at that life-sustaining orb – the sun – and say it is a god.
But no, it's just a part of something greater, that speaks of something greater still.
Sun, stars, skies,
proclaim the work of One to which all things owe their existence.
Sun, stars, skies,
declare the glory of the one great creator God.

Let's fast forward a thousand years or so.
The Apostle Paul understood that everyone could learn something of God
from the natural world.
In Romans 1:20 he wrote:
"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities
– his eternal power and divine nature –
have been clearly seen,
being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."

And when Paul addressed a pagan audience in Athens, as recorded in Acts 17, he began:
"The God who made the world and everything in it
is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.
And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything.
Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else."

Another two thousand years on,
and we have more tools with which to explore God's creation.
As a scientist, I see science as an act of worship.
Declaring God's worth through our appreciation of the work of his hands.
Learning a little of the mind of God,
in the wonder and complexity of all he's made.

And still today, as we ponder the grandeur and the extent of the Universe,

we have to ask “Why?”
Why is there a universe? Why is there anything?

Some people will say the universe doesn't need a cause.
They'll say it just happens to be.

In other words, it's self-existent.
But there are enormous philosophical difficulties with that way of thinking.
We can imagine a self-existent universe that's infinite and unchanging,
but the universe revealed by science just isn't like that.
It has at least the appearance of a beginning, a big bang,
even if that may not be an absolute beginning.
And it's changing, there's a sense of direction,
driven by time and entropy.
It takes phenomenal intellectual contortions,
a quite astonishing willingness to believe the exceedingly unlikely,
to claim that our universe is self-existent.

But something must be self-existent, if anything exists at all,
which brings us to the idea of God.
Just as for the psalmist long ago, when we look, really look, at the universe,
it points us to a creator God.

But once we recognize that it's at least highly probable there's some kind of creator,
that raises even bigger questions.
If there's a being so powerful, so awesome,
it can imagine our whole universe and cause it to be...
What does that mean for us?
Why are we here?
Is there a reason for our existence?
A purpose?

If there is.
If there's even the faintest chance there's a purpose in us being here.
Then that's something we really should explore.
That's something we really need to know about.
Because that changes everything.
Everything about how we see ourselves and about how we see the universe.
Everything about how we think and about how we behave.
Everything.

But how do we find out more?
There's only so much we can learn just by looking at the world around us.
If there is a God, and if there is a purpose to our existence.
We need God to tell us more.
We need more to be revealed – a revelation.

Of course, many people will claim to have words from God.
So how do we distinguish what might truly be God's words,
amidst all the conflicting claims we may encounter?

Surely, if God is to speak, it must be in a way that speaks to everyone.

Not just to one culture or time.

And perhaps the most universal form of communication is through the telling of a story.

A story such as of how God works through generations of a nation.

And surely, if God is to speak, it must be consistent with what we see in the world around us.

It must describe the world, and the people within it, with absolute honesty.

Recognising human faults, as well as human potential.

And surely if God is to speak, it must be consistent with what we find within us.

It must resonate with our emotions, as expressed in Ecclesiastes 3:11

“He has also set eternity in the human heart.”

And surely, if God is to speak, it must be recorded,

and carefully transmitted through the ages.

A collection of books we can refer to,

analyse objectively, and learn from.

In our imagination, let's rejoin the psalmist.

Lying on a hilltop, appreciating the warmth of the sunshine.

Pondering how it reaches to every part of the planet.

And that leads us to think about what reaches to every part of us.

What refreshes our soul.

It's what the psalmist describes in various ways:

The law of the Lord.

The statutes of the Lord.

The precepts of the Lord.

The commands of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord.

The decrees of the Lord.

The law of the Lord.

Torah.

God's guidance, instruction, teaching.

Not just a set of rules, but the full gamut of God's teaching.

As played out in the real-life story of the psalmist's ancestors.

As recorded in five books.

The first five books of what we now call “The Bible”.

This law is perfect,

not necessarily nice, because it's honest, realistic,

but nevertheless perfect,

resonating with our emotions,

refreshing the soul.

The statutes, or testimony, of the Lord.

Totally trustworthy.

Here is the route to wisdom.

The precepts of the Lord.

Correct, straight, right.
The perfect guide for life.
The source of joy.

The commands of the Lord.
Clean, pure, bright.
Enabling us to see clearly.

And then a surprising twist.
The fear of the Lord.
Yes, fear. Dread. Awe. Reverence.
Because this is a God of awesome power,
beyond anything we can truly comprehend.
But this fear is clean, pure.
Cleansing.
And that which is clean and pure, endures.
It stands for ever.

And that brings us back to God's words.
The decrees, or judgments, of the Lord.
Firm, faithful, true.
And altogether right.

God's words.
God's law, God's statutes, God's precepts, God's commands, God's decrees.
They're valuable and precious.
What do we regard as having value?
Gold? Pure gold? Mounds of pure gold?
God's words are far more precious than that.
And if God's words are so precious, we'll treasure them.
We'll treat them with respect and care.
We won't disregard them.
Or tarnish them with our own accretions.
We won't distort them.
Or twist them to suit our own prejudices and predispositions.
We won't strangle them with a harsh legalism.
But we'll let them shine with full brightness.
We'll value them beyond all else.

God's words.
God's law, God's statutes, God's precepts, God's commands, God's decrees.
They're sweet, tasty, desirable.
What's the sweetest thing we can taste?
Honey? Fresh honey dripping from the honeycomb?
God's words are far tastier than that.
So we'll feed on them.
We'll take them in and chew them over.
We'll appreciate their subtle scents and their rich flavours.
We'll be sustained by them.
Grow through them.

God's words.
God's law, God's statutes, God's precepts, God's commands, God's decrees.
They penetrate to our core.
They show us where we're wrong.
 And what we need to change.
They make us aware of our shortcomings
 Our need for God's forgiveness.
Our need for forgiveness for the mistakes we make.
 For the faults we try to hide, or don't even know we have.
They make us aware of our tendency to go wrong.
 Our need for God's help to break the rule of sin.
God's help, if we're ever to appear blameless before him.

God's words.
 More precious than gold.
 Sweeter than honey.
And the psalmist had just a few books of God's words.
We have so much more.
For we have the full story of what God does,
 so we can have forgiveness of sins.
The full story of what God does,
 so we may appear blameless before him.
The full story of what God does to redeem us.

It's a perfect story.
Not a nice story, because it's honest, realistic.
 A story of hate, blood, pain, and an agonising death.
But nevertheless it's a perfect story,
 meeting our deepest needs.
So we have even more reason than the psalmist,
 to praise our Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

© 2019 Peter Budd

*Biblical quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, © 1979, 1984, 2011
by Biblica*