

God's Creation is Telling His Glory

Psalm 19

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“The heavens are telling the glory of God...”

Two weeks ago my son Matt and I had the good fortune to spend a few days over in northern Arizona. I very much enjoyed the luxury of this father/son time together. One of the most memorable things we did together (we shared in this with my brother and his son, the four of us) was to look up one night before going indoors. We were at altitude, with few city lights or smog or clouds to block our view.

There were some lights in the complex where we were looking so we walked a little ways out into the darkness, ducking through an open gate and into someone's field. Once I quit thinking about silent alarm systems or Dobermans, it became very clear: “the heavens sure were telling the glory of God.” The backlit glow of the Milky Way; the stars numerous beyond counting. We even saw more than our share of shooting stars, approaching as we were the Perseid meteor showers which peaked August 12 and 13.

I

The Psalmist, in Psalm 19, speaks of three ways in which the glory of God is revealed. The first of these is captured in the first six verses. He speaks of “the firmament” proclaiming God's handiwork as if the skies were an overhead dome. (Back then he had no way of beginning to comprehend the vastness of space which we have now begun to measure.

Perhaps you remember the scale of heavenly bodies. If the sun were a very large grapefruit, then planet earth would be the size of a grain of sand 19 yards away. (Jupiter would be the size of a marble, 101 yards away—about at the counter of the Starbucks on Goldenrod.) Pluto, at the edge of our solar system, would be orbiting half a mile away from the grapefruit—near where the Five Crowns sits on the corner of Poppy and PCH.

The closest star to our sun, Proxima Centauri, lies 4.3 light years away. If our solar system extended from here to the Five Crowns, this neighbor star would be in Nova Scotia, and it would take 70,000 years for our fastest rocket ship to get there, apart from the gravitational drag of the sun.

Beyond Proxima Centauri in our own galactic backyard, distances and numbers start getting very large. Our host Milky Way galaxy is estimated to contain 200 billion stars

and to extend 100,000 light years across. (It is posited to be one of hundreds of billions of galaxies in the universe—the Hubble deep field telescope can “see” about 10,000 galaxies, and the images are mind-boggling.) According to our original scale, if the sun were the large grapefruit here in the chancel and planet earth were a grain of sand almost to the entryway, then even the scale model of the Milky Way would extend about 70 million miles—three quarters of the way to the actual sun.

David the Psalmist did not have benefit of the Hubble spacecraft beaming him down these photos—but he got the main point: “the heavens are telling the glory of God.”

Using four different verbs in the first two verses, he repeats the main point: though the skies are silent, (“there is no speech, nor are there words” [v 3]) sure enough their voice cries out to the ends of the earth [v 4]. Their grandeur is plainly to be seen by everyone who can see: religious or not, Jewish or not, educated or not.

The skies, the stars, the galaxies are all shouting out in their silence to the glory of God, the Creator of them all. They are signs which point the attention of all persons to the One behind and before and above them. The sun gets particular mention: from the equator to the North Pole or South Pole, everyone can go out and observe the light and the warmth of the sun.

There's a problem with signs, however. Signs are not foolproof. The sign is distinct from what it signifies, and it always needs to be interpreted. Presumably a Siamese cat can observe a red octagonal traffic sign which says “STOP”—but it would just keep walking. The images sent back by the Hubble telescope do not interpret themselves, but astronomers explain to us what they mean.

It's even trickier with us humans than with telescopes. As long as its lenses are clean, a telescope will remain effective. Maybe you've heard that expression: “We see with who we are.” We humans are more than inanimate instruments: our eyes or our ears may work just fine, but we've no guarantee we will understand or interpret the heavens—for that matter, our kids or our wife or our colleague—correctly. (“He who has ears, let him hear; she who has hears, let her hear...”)

We can all go outside and look up; we can all appreciate the warmth of the sun and the majesty of the heavens at night. But there's no guarantee we all of us connect the

dots and fall to our knees to worship and to ascribe glory to the Creator. I admit I go through spells—do you?

When it comes to interpreting these vast numbers and distances in the universe, sometimes I get overwhelmed. I do not go directly to worshipping God the Creator, the Intelligence behind the pattern of the universe. I tend to want to think about it, and understand it, and that cannot happen—my calculator is not that fast or that smart.

When I get assailed by doubt, sometimes I go with my brain and sometimes I go with my spirit. Sometimes I just go with all of you. (My brain appreciates the fact that a great percentage of our finest astronomers and natural scientists have given their lives to Jesus as a result of what they have observed. For example, the Rev. John Polkinghorne, who occupied the same chair of Science as Sir Isaac Newton at Cambridge, was perhaps the leading authority on quarks and subatomic particles in the world when at the age of 47 he quit formal Science to become an Anglican priest and theologian. I have heard him say that nothing he believes as a scientist contradicts what he believes as a Christian; on the contrary, good faith and good science come at truth from two complementary vantage points and each complements the other. He has written several somewhat daunting books on that complementarity. [The Physical Scientist Dr Henry F Schaefer, a five time nominee for the Nobel Prize, has written *Science and Christianity: Conflict or Coherence?* with chapters devoted to the religious faith of many of our most prominent scientists. (Univ. of Georgia Press, 5th edition 2008.)

Francis S Collins, the project manager of the Human Genome Project which mapped out each of 3.1 billion gene pairs began as a militant atheist—he too has written a book describing how the evidence for the Intelligence behind nature, the Creator behind the organization of the creation—aided by the abiding, personal trust in Jesus he observed in many in his care when he was still a practicing physician—came to far outweigh the materialist philosophy he had casually picked up without inquiry or investigation.

You already know that God is near to all who call upon His name; that we are always encouraged to pray. But sometimes that's just the problem. We look at the heavens and don't immediately fall to our knees in worship. We pray to God, and we keep praying to God, but I have found that sometimes it seems altogether too quiet on the return end of the line: but then only an idol answers us all the time.

Doubt is not your enemy; the silence of God is not your enemy. (There is an enemy, who wants you to turn away

and give up; who wants you to trust in yourself and forget about God.) The quality of your faith will never exceed the quality of your doubt.

Keep worshipping, keep meeting in your small groups and with your mentor and with your friends in the faith family. It's OK to rely on the faith of those around you when you're maybe not "feeling it;" this is part of God's design for Christ's Church—this church and any local church. We do not gather because we all have it together and we all got gold stars in Prayer 101 and God is always overwhelmingly near to each of us—but because sometimes we struggle and we falter and we twinkle in and out and we need (and come to enjoy) one other on the journey. What is your best strategy when it feels like your faith is blanking out, or it's hard for you to sense the presence of God, or when you feel separated and alone?

II

The first of three sections of Psalm 19 [vv 1-6] show us how the sun and the night skies shout out to us about the glory of God: only a fool, or sometimes me and maybe you, could ever miss it. The second section [vv 7-11] comes at it very differently: the glory of God is revealed by the perfection of the Law He has given: the Torah, the "Instruction," or the "Way."

To the Psalmist, the completeness of the Law given to Moses for the covenant people Israel apparently equates with the universal witness available to everyone who will pay attention to the heavens. (That is, the whole world can see the skies and the sun; the covenant people benefit from the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Old Testament Law. Both reveal the greatness of the Creator, the God of covenant faithfulness.)

"The Law of the LORD is perfect, all-encompassing, complete; it revives human life." [v 7] This is the first of six descriptions of the virtues and benefits of the Law. It goes against our human nature to embrace anybody's "Law" but our own, because we are apt to view any external law as a set of handcuffs limiting our freedom or an insulting document maligning our intelligence. (Francis S Collins, the Genome Project director I just mentioned, was honest enough, in one interview, to admit that as a graduate school student in physical chemistry it was simple to dismiss the possibility of any reality outside the natural world. So by default, he says, "I became a committed materialist and an obnoxious atheist, and it sounded very convenient to be so, because it meant I didn't have to be responsible to anybody other than myself."

God's Law having some authority over us—even the concept of God's Law—means we may have to be responsible to someone other than ourselves. This is

bad enough—but the Psalmist then concludes that the precepts and commandments of the LORD's Law are more valuable than much fine gold; sweeter than honey.

We could understand if it said God's precepts and statutes are a necessary evil like a barbed wire fence, or like a speed limit or the IRS: something necessary for the common whole, without which the whole experiment would come to a crashing end. But no: David is clearly saying we love the Law its own positive good—like we love a hot dog and beer at the Angel's game or like we everything in the display case at the Cheesecake Factory or maybe Mother's Market deli (if your tastes are more healthful.)

His point is that energy and freedom and focus are released when we orient our lives around One beyond ourselves; when we give up our pettiness, our self-absorption, and fully accept our role as a creature in God's good creation. The Way of God, the revealed Law, is finer than even much gold because money, even great wealth, can never free me from myself.

The Psalmist delighted in God's Law as a recovering alcoholic now living in sobriety delights in the rigorous program which helped to control a life destructive to itself and loved ones. As the Lakers who couldn't win very much before Coach Phil Jackson arrived came to delight in his disciplines and his drills, his limits and his outlook. They may have tried just as hard before he came—but they delighted in being able to win championships.

Paul tells us Christians (in Galatians) that this Jewish Law served for centuries as a helpful provision and preparation. It helped prepare God's people for the freedom which finally appeared in Jesus Christ the Son—and He came offering His followers the freedom to follow the Way more fully and more obediently. ("For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished." [Matthew 5:17])

III

As gloriously as the galaxies and the interstellar reaches—and God's Law, the Torah—tell of the glory of God, this psalm continues on to its only fitting conclusion. It is ultimately about God, and our response to God. The grandeur "out there" becomes personal, "in here." (Because every one of us falls short in our ability to respond to the Lord of Glory, the Creator. Every one of us falls short in keeping the Law, even to our advantage. Every one of us falls short.)

And so, inevitably, the final third of Psalm 19 [vv 12-14] concludes as a prayer: an outcry to the God behind the stars and the Law. And who would have guessed: David's

culminating prayer, these last few verses, has to do with sin. Maybe if the Creator did mediocre work a mediocre attitude would suffice. Maybe if the Law were not so clear and so effective, when observed, then living in indifference to the Lawgiver would not seem so disagreeable. We do not hear for sure—all the Psalmist says is that we are rightly instructed by God's Law. There's a great reward in following the Law, the Way of life.

David closes with a humility; an openness and a plea before God: "But who can detect his own errors? Who can be aware of her unwitting sins?" [v 12a] "OK God, I get it. You are the intelligence behind the universe. Your ways are better than my ways, and Your thoughts are higher than mine. I so appreciate Your handiwork and Your Law...and yet I still can't seem to get out of my own way. For all my appreciation of You, something is wrong. Sometimes I feel so far from You, and sometimes that burden of darkness and quiet suffocates me; it almost kills me. But worse than that...sometimes I am far from You and I keep on drifting. I keep on not caring—or not caring enough to change my patterns. Help me, O God! I cannot care when I don't care; I cannot change my habits when I have already tried and failed so many times..."

Specifically, two kinds of sin are mentioned, and they represent the full range. "Keep me clear of my secret sins, O God, and acquit me when I am guilty—because always, sometimes, I will be." But also, O God, protect me from my willful sins, from my proud thoughts. They can take over and change me for the worse.

This first sin has not gone away in three millennia. Today we still talk about "denial," which can be the trickiest part of any illness or sin. "If I refuse to see how my unkindness hurts my wife, I guess I don't have to change my style." "If I simply act as if my gluttony and has nothing to do with God—it's strictly my own business, I guess I won't have to change my approach."

But classic denial is even more subtle than this: "I am not unkind; I am not a glutton. And anyway, why are you to be giving me such a hard time?" (Remember sin, at its core, carries a deception: remember the first sin in the Garden of Eden.) We have a number of reasons why we can get away with our secret sin, and with a fairly straight face—at least at the beginning. I may be fully aware of what I'm doing—and simply unaware that it leads me away from life, away from closeness with God and others. Unaware it's sinful. If I pay more attention to the popular culture than I do studying the Scriptures, how could the popular norms not color my standards? (Many couples choosing to come here to be married have no idea which of their behaviors will help or hurt their chances of a great

marriage. How would they—the only “Normal” they know is what they observe all around them...but still they will end up suffering the consequences if they have gotten into hurtful habits. Ignorance, or denial, is not going to help in the end. If I am at all open to God, it becomes God's business to correct me—and according to God's own standards and God's own agenda.)

(This is why I don't often preach overtly about sin: if we abide in Christ, and keep offering ourselves in prayer to the Holy Spirit, then God Himself will convict us; God will begin to transform us: God will give us a holy discontent with whatever keeps us away from the abundant Life. I don't have to rant and rave and judge and point fingers; besides, I have my own work to do. My own work, and yours, is to abide so closely with Jesus that I keep more and more attuned to His guidance, His “Normal.” Over time, we keep praying and studying His Scriptures, His Way, the Spirit Himself will surely convict us—and in a way which just as surely leads to transformation.)

I cannot fail to sin; I cannot keep myself safe; I cannot keep my spirit open and myself fully alive. I cannot outwit or outwait the Enemy. I need God's protection and shielding. I cannot keep myself blameless; I need to keep asking God for cleansing and forgiveness. I cannot satisfy the hunger inside for more of Him; I cannot even keep myself attuned to His glory and majesty; I cannot always hear His Voice or feel His embrace.

But I can ask for the sense of His Presence. I can ask for perseverance. I don't have to beg; I could not get away from His Holy Spirit (even if for some reason I wanted to) if I were to go to the farthest edge of the horizons or the deepest trench at the bottom of the ocean. I can pray that my heartfelt confession, my aloneness, my honest need and hunger for and before God will be acceptable to Him, our Rock and our Redeemer. And I can continue to trust that God answers our deepest prayers.

You've probably seen the time-lapse photography of the heavens here in the Northern Hemisphere whose focal point is Polaris, the North Star. Every other star circles around, at 15 degrees per hour; over time, each one traces a luminous arc whose center is the one Constant in the sky at night. Wait enough hours, or come back out just before dawn—and some stars, some constellations have dipped under the horizon while others rise in the east. One has not moved in relation to us: the North Star.

Our sense of gratitude to God may grow strong or grow faint; our sense of wonderment before the Creator may come and go. Our resolutions and initiatives come and go like the stars: sometimes right there twinkling so starkly in front of us—sometimes out of sight, out of mind, out

of conscience. How quickly we can forget the glory of God!

Jesus is God's response to our heart and our hunger and our prayer; Jesus is our sure Redeemer; Jesus is the One who has gone to the Cross, high and lifted up above us all to show us that God's answer to our need, our separation, our sin, is always “Yes.”

In Christ is always mercy and forgiveness. In Him is always the possibility of new life.

Psalm 19

1 The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

2 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

3 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

7 The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; 8 the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;

9 the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

11 Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

12 But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

13 Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.