

15 August 2021

How Do We Know God? Clear Thou Me of Hidden Faults

Psalm 19:7-10; Romans 8:9-11, 26-27

One last time, Psalm 19:

*¹⁹ 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 them he has set a tent for the sun,

*⁵ which comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,
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 there is nothing hid from its heat.*

*⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure,
making wise the simple;*

*⁸ the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes;*

*⁹ the fear of the Lord is clean,
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 thy servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

*¹² But who can discern his errors?
Clear thou me from hidden faults.*

*¹³ Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins;
let them not 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 in thy sight,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

In our question this month – How can we, creatures, know the Creator? – we have used this psalm to talk about two different ways so far. From the first section of the psalm – “The heavens are telling the glory of God” – we talked about what we can surmise about God through observation and reason. From the glory of creation and from the traces of moral ideals we still find within ourselves, we hypothesized a glorious and good God. That was great, but it was pretty vague and ambiguous. Then, from the second section of the psalm – “The law of the Lord is perfect” – we talked about scripture, and its description of the God of love and covenant. That was even better, but scripture has the opposite problem from vagueness: it can be sometimes confusingly specific. We ended last week by taking the heart of the New Testament, the gospel of Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, as the core of God’s revelation to us. If we want to know eternal God, I said, then we must come to know the person that God became in human flesh.

But how do we do that? That human expression of God is no longer on earth. To approach that question, let’s look at the third and final section of Psalm 19. Verses 11 and 12: Referring to the commandments of scripture, it says, *Moreover by them is thy servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. But who can discern his errors? Clear thou me from hidden faults.* There’s a dramatic change that takes place in these verses. Did you notice? It’s “thy,” or “your.” In the first ten verses, the psalmist refers to God as “he,” but in verse 11, the pronoun shifts to “you.” He’s no longer talking *about* God but talking *to* God. To put it another way, in verses 1-6, the psalmist is speaking as a philosopher, trying to discern patterns in nature and draw rational conclusions about God. In verses 7-10, the psalmist is speaking as a theologian, looking for God in revealed scripture. But in v. 11, the psalmist turns away from nature, lifts his eyes from the Bible, and speaks to God as a person, a friend, someone with whom he has a relationship. This is a huge shift. This is the difference between trying to know *about* God and trying to know God.

I’ve been at this church for four years so by this time, most of you know that I was not raised United Methodist but in the conservative evangelical world – I was a Southern Baptist. I left that world sixteen years ago and haven’t looked back. For the most part, I have experienced my crossing to Methodism as a homecoming to a family I didn’t know I belonged to. But from this side of the crossing I can now look back over to my old people and see at least a few things that they got right. One of those things is exactly the shift that we’re talking about right now in the middle of Psalm 19. Evangelicals are not content with knowing *about* God: they want everyone to know God in the context of a relationship. Even on this side of the divide, you’re probably familiar with that evangelical language: “Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?” “Have you asked Jesus into your heart?” The need to know God in a relational way infuses nearly everything that our evangelical brothers and sisters do and say.

And yes, I know: that idea of a personal, relational salvation can be and often is abused. It can lead to emotional manipulation and excruciating altar calls, among other things that I gladly washed my hands of. But just because something can be abused doesn’t mean it must be rejected. I think the evangelical world is right to push for us to go beyond head knowledge to a deeper kind of knowing in our search for God. Too often we mainline churches give the impression that being able to talk fluently *about* God is adequate, but it is not – any more than memorizing someone’s Facebook profile means you know that person. Psalm 19 recognizes this, and at the

end of the poem, it turns away from external sources of knowledge and addresses God directly. And what does the psalmist say to God? *Clear thou me of hidden faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins. Let them not have dominion over me.* “Lord, studying scripture is helpful, but it isn’t enough. I’m not yet the person I feel I’m supposed to be. Can you help? Can you show me my hidden sins? And can you give me strength to overcome them?” This is a different kind of knowledge – a knowledge that expresses itself in relationship – and it is less about what we understand than about how we behave. It’s less about right ideas than right actions. It’s less about what we are able to explain about God than about whether we are willing to listen to God explaining us.

But, again, how do we do that? Jesus isn’t on earth any more, and God is, like, awesome and all-powerful and scary. How can we ever have a relationship with God?

We read from Romans chapter 8, verses 9-11 and then 26-27:

⁹ But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

The Christian answer to the question, “how can we know God in relationship?” is the Holy Spirit. By putting off divinity and becoming a human being, Christ opened a wormhole between God and humanity. Then, through that opening, God implanted in us an ember of the fire that we were created in. We carry within us a lodestone, a magnet that is always drawing us toward God and pointing the way to our true north. That spark, ember, breath, magnet, wind has many names, but we call her the Holy Spirit, and she is the force working to open our eyes to glimpses of God, to strengthen our weakness in following God, and even to interpret our prayers to God. As Paul puts it, *we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.* We are so deeply separated from God that we can’t even pray right, so the Spirit translates.

(By the way, this is how I picture that process: “[Deep sigh] God, this one thinks that a bigger house will make him happy. Yeah, I know. Good thing we don’t love him for his brains. Look, can we give him a new friend instead, someone without any of that crap and who is happy anyway? Well, he *might* get a clue!”)

As Paul describes the Spirit, she is the voice of God that is able to get through our hardheaded resistance and our deepest voice of prayer back to God. She is the source and the medium of all our understanding and all our growth toward Christ. We can know Christ because Christ’s Spirit is within us. We encounter God by turning away from the world, even looking up from our pious Bible study, and praying.

How do we know God? Well, reason can give us a head start by pointing toward the possibility of a God that is worth knowing. Scripture can fill in the blanks and describe God in

more fullness, especially in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Christ, we can see who God is. And how do we go beyond seeing to knowing? Do what the psalmist did. Stop talking about God, and start talking to God.

That's it. That's all I got. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.