

How Do We Know God? The Heavens Are Telling

Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 2:14-16

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.*

*¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in thy sight,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

In my high school youth group, we often sang a song entitled simply, “Psalm 19.” It started like this: “Don’t you wonder why / the stars are in the sky / they’re telling you and I / of the glory of God.” I loved that song, and it remains one of my favorite ungrammatical praise choruses. (Against strong competition, too.) Anyway, when I began a discipline of memorizing whole psalms a while back, this was one of the first ones I went to, largely because of that song and its call to see God’s glory in creation. But when you memorize something, you have to pay close attention to it, and it struck me forcefully that after that beginning section about God’s creation, this psalm takes two sharp turns into completely different territory. The disjuncture between the three parts is so striking that I’m sure some 19th century biblical scholar has proposed that these are fragments of three separate psalms, clumsily stuck together – because scholars often assume that anything they can’t understand must be broken. But you don’t have to do that. If you look more closely, you see that this isn’t just a nature psalm. This is a psalm praising God for all the ways that God appears to us. For the next few weeks I want to look at that, thinking about God’s self-revelation or, from our perspective, “How do we know God?”

And the first thing I have to say is that we don’t. By definition, God is One Beyond Our Understanding. Or, to put it another way, any God that you completely understand is a God that you invented for yourself. The Bible calls those idols. God will always elude our understanding. And yet . . . we can’t help but try. Given the breadth and persistence of religion, humanity is apparently hard-wired to look for God, even if God is ultimately beyond us. And here’s the good news: even as we know we cannot fully grasp God, we *can* catch glimpses. Today, looking at the first part of Psalm 19, I want to think about what we can glimpse of God through the natural world around us.

The first thing is that there *is* a God. From time immemorial, humans have done what the psalmist does and have looked at the wonders of nature, the earth and the heavens, the sun’s dance across our view each day, and have said, “This didn’t just happen. Someone did this. Someone far more powerful than I can imagine.” Now, I know that that automatic response doesn’t prove anything. It’s not a scientific statement; it’s intuitive. It wouldn’t stand in court, and it can’t be tested in a laboratory. I can no more scientifically prove that the world has a creator than I can scientifically prove that I love my children, but I am equally sure of both. And so has been nearly every human being on earth, in every time and every land. We see the heavens and the earth and are filled with wonder. That wonder prompts the human mind to picture some power, some force, beyond our own, beyond our imagination. Indeed, we default into conclusion so quickly that it almost feels as if our minds were designed to do so. If you can imagine.

Not *every* human sees it this way, of course. There are those who look on the wonder of creation and see only lucky happenstance, who choose to believe that there is no conscious power behind that happenstance, that nothing exists beyond what can be demonstrated by science. I won’t argue, because I try not to argue with other people’s faith statements; I will only say again that, considering history and anthropology, the God hypothesis seems to be the most natural to the human mind. Which it would be, if it’s correct.

I would add one more thing, though, beyond just the fact that there is a world, and that it is amazing, I would add that it is beautiful. And how do I know that? I have not the faintest clue.

Where did this idea of “beauty” come from? This notion that something is of value just because it is the way it is, apart from its usefulness. We can use evolution to explain why a tiger has stripes, but I know of no explanation for why we can watch that tiger walk past (from safety, mind you) and be filled with awe at such grace and beauty. Or, pressing on to the next step, why we ourselves feel driven not just to appreciate beauty but to try to create it. What is the first thing we know of our most ancient ancestors doing? They painted pictures on the wall. Appreciation of beauty and the creation of art make no sense, unless something within us is stretching for more than this world offers, something that we don’t understand but can sometimes glimpse.

But even if you accept the conclusion that there is a Creator, we still have to ask what that Creator is like, and to be honest, it’s not completely clear from just looking at creation. Yes, the world is awe-inspiring, incredibly intricate, and beautiful, but it’s also a world of terrible things : venomous snakes and tornadoes and second-grade violin recitals, and some of those humans who have extrapolated the idea of God from nature have come up with a cruel and vindictive deity. Is there any other way to glimpse God from the world around us?

We read from Romans, chapter 2, verses 14-16:

¹⁴When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. ¹⁵They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them ¹⁶on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

The context of this passage in Romans is that Paul is trying to explain that although God chose the Jewish people for a specific revelation, God has always been self-revealing to all human beings, and the thing that Paul keys in on is “conscience” – that there are those who have never heard of the Law of Moses who nevertheless instinctively keep that law’s central tenets better than some Jews he could name.

Is that true? Can God be seen at work in the moral convictions of humans? Is there some moral code “written on our hearts”? I think so. Not only has every human society had a moral code, but those moral codes are remarkably similar and not always logically explainable. That is, you can easily explain why every society has some form of Thou Shalt Not Kill and Thou Shalt Not Steal – people couldn’t function together without some basic ground rules – but why does every culture honor those who care selflessly for the weak? We do. It’s why we call the nurses going into Covid wards heroes instead of idiots. Why do we honor self-sacrifice and courage and mercy, *especially* when people show those traits against their own self-interest? Someone donates a kidney to a stranger, and we are stirred with a half-remembered sense that that’s what we all *ought* to be like. But why? Where did we come up with this idea of *ought*? It’s as incomprehensible as the idea of beauty. Neither one makes sense, but there they are, and we all have this sense that embracing both will bring us closer to being the people we are supposed to be. And where does *that* idea come from, that we’re supposed to be something more than we usually are? Once again, the human mind slips automatically into thoughts of some sort of God – whom we now define as a God of compassion and mercy and love and self-sacrifice precisely because those are the traits that inspire us with awe when we encounter them.

Now, I know. We humans are *not* particularly moral, at least not in action. It would not be hard to prove based on the history of human behavior that we are basically evil, that we have

done more harm than good: genocides, tortures, rapes, lynchings, the whole sordid history of colonialism and slavery, you name it. But the thing is that we still call those things that characterize us “evil.” At a deep level, we agree that they are horrible, that they should *not* happen. But not everyone thinks that way, right? Aren’t there people without conscience? Yes, of course. And we call those people sociopaths. But the fact that we have that name for such people, identifying them as pathological, seeing their lack of moral judgment as a horrible deficit, and thinking of them as somehow *inhuman*, indicates that we feel that to be truly human is to be kind and courageous and merciful and just and honest. Whether we actually live that way or not, something inside us continues to tell us that we should. What is that thing inside us? Where did it come from? The answer that most of humanity has independently arrived at is “from beyond this world.” In our language, from God.

So, to summarize, I have suggested today that we *can* know some things about God just from observing the world around us and examining ourselves. We can hypothesize that there is a God, and that that God created this world and us. We can further imagine that God as an artist – one who creates just for the joy of creating – because we find vestiges of that same illogical joy within ourselves, an inherited tendency, as it were. We can further say that that creative God is marked by justice and mercy and compassion for the weak, because those traits, too, have been transmitted to us – although imperfectly – and it is when we exercise those traits that we instinctively know that we are being the people we were created to be.

I have not set out today to *prove* the existence of God, nor will I ever attempt to do so. My own belief is that God has intentionally made such proof impossible. God wants more from us than acknowledgement. What I did hope to do is to show that the conclusion that most of humanity has come to – that there is a divine power beyond this world, and that that divinity is good – is not unreasonable. It makes at least as much sense as any other conclusion I have heard. Modern atheist fundamentalists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have acted as if only their point of view is possible, and anyone who disagrees in the slightest is just stupid (which is always the attitude of fundamentalists), but that’s clearly not the case. We can, in fact, reasonably conclude from observing the world and ourselves that a good and creative God is behind it all. It’s not enough, but that’s an excellent place to start. *The heavens are telling the glory of God.*

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A final word. Today we have spoken of pictures of God that are available to all. In that spirit, let us close with a prayer from the Islamic mystic Rumi. As he usually does, Rumi simply refers to God as “Love.”

What a World! What rare arrangement and ordering, that casts a thousand confusions into
well-ordered things!
Beggar of Love, for all the joys that the world contains, reckon that Love is the gold-mine, and
those things but gilded. . .
I desire to mention you, Love, with gratitude; but I am distraught with you, and my thought and
reason are confused.
Were I to praise Love in a hundred thousand languages, Love’s beauty far surpasses all such
stammerings. Amen.