

8 August 2021

How Do We Know God? The Law of the Lord Is Perfect

Psalm 19:7-10; Philippians 2:5-11

Psalm 19, again:

*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 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 last week's sermon, we looked at the first six verses of this psalm in terms of the question, "How do we know God?" Those verses exclaim with wonder at the glories of the earth, and with the psalmist we hypothesized from that glory that there is a Creator. Then we made some guesses as to what that Creator is like. By looking at the traits and qualities that we regard as the best things about humans, we suggested that this God is compassionate, creative, just, trustworthy, and loving. Since these are the things that we feel are most divine when we find them in each other, we suggested that some deep part of us recognizes those as the qualities of God – residual traces of our Maker. None of this reasoning rises to the level of *proof*, but neither is it unreasonable. And so we ended last week with the hypothesis of a good and creative and merciful creator, whom we simply call God.

All good, but it's not enough. While it's true that people all through time and in lands all over the world have independently come to similar conclusions, even more have come to different conclusions from the same evidence. It is true that most of us see nature and assume that some supernatural force is behind it, but not everyone imagines that power the same way. We and Psalm 19 observed the wonder of nature and imagined a God *behind* it, but it is more common for people to imagine that nature *is* a god – or many gods. Thus, where Psalm 19 describes the movement of the sun across the sky as a sign of the One God's glory, others have decided that the sun is itself a god: Amon-Re, Apollo, and so on. And where we imagined God as the embodiment of the best things about humanity, others have imagined gods as just more powerful versions of our usual selves. Thus in various mythologies we find gods that are selfish, moody, vindictive, covetous, petty, and easy to bribe. When you have gods like that, worship ends up being a transaction, offering gifts to the gods to buy favors. As I said, this expression of religion is more common than the picture of a moral god that we came up with. You could even call it humanity's default religion. So we have at least two different ways to understand God through the world. Is there any clear reason to choose one over the other?

That leads us to the second section of Psalm 19. After describing the glory of the sun's journey across the sky, it suddenly changes subject matter and starts off with: *The law of the Lord is perfect*. From there, it goes on to praise God's testimonies, precepts, commandments, ordinances, and so on. What the psalmist is talking about here is not the general revelation of God that is given to all people but rather a very specific revelation given by God to one people, who preserved that revelation in a book: the Torah. Now we have two ways to know God – by examining the world and by studying scripture – and at this point we have left the realm of reason and philosophy. When we claim that a book in some way either is or contains a direct revelation from God, we're not making a reasoned argument; we're making a faith statement.

By the way, this is a fairly new claim for the psalmist to make for his time. In our time, we're used to every religion having its own scripture, but the notion of there being one book that communicates God in a way that no other book does began with the Hebrew people, and the first part of the Bible seen that way was the Torah. So let's do a two-minute survey of what that book says. It is, at heart, a story. It tells how a good and loving God created all that is, giving a special blessing to human beings, in hopes of having a relationship with them. It tells how that relationship was breached and went from bad to worse so that each succeeding generation

invented new cruelties and injustices, until finally that God decided to back off and start over. This God did with one man, named Abraham, who was chosen to become a beacon of God's love and a blessing to all people. With Abraham and his descendants, God established a covenant, which Abraham's descendants regularly broke, but God was faithful. God delivered that people from slavery in Egypt, brought them to a holy mountain and there reaffirmed their covenant, and spelled it out in specific laws for them to follow. Those laws included the Ten Commandments, which call for worship of God and respect for other people. The Torah also gives repeated and emphatic commands to care for the poor, the orphaned, the widowed, and the exiled. Also in those laws, God specifically rejects humanity's default religion. For instance, there is to be no worship as *quid pro quo*. Abraham's descendants are not to offer sacrifices to God in return for expected favors but simply out of gratitude for God's goodness.

In other words, what the specific revelation of the Torah does is fill in the blanks. While we can learn some things about God from the observation of nature, those conclusions can be vague and ambiguous. What the Torah does is point us toward the hypothesis of a good God. It says that God is a God of covenant and steadfast love, not a fickle deity on the take, as humanity's default religion suggests. God expects us to be faithful and merciful and to heed the cry of the oppressed – because that's what God is like. This is good news. No wonder Psalm 19 rejoices in the Law.

There's a problem with written revelation, though. Scripture sometimes feels a little *too* specific. That is, it isn't just specific: it's *specific to the time that it was written*. Thus in the Torah we also have instructions for festivals that we no longer observe, procedures for animal sacrifices that are no longer a part of our worship, dimensions for a tabernacle that no longer exists, stories set in an ancient cosmology that we now know is incorrect, and specific instructions regarding disease and sexuality that are based on assumptions that science has invalidated. So, where you could say that the problem with general revelation is that it's too ambiguous, you could turn around and say that the problem with a written revelation is that it can be too specific. It feels as if having God's revelation written out in black and white should make things easy, but even with the Torah, we have to use our judgment as to what to emphasize.

This is where the rest of the Bible comes in. The rest of scripture – Old and New Testaments – offer further guidance on which parts of the Torah truly express the mind of God. The prophets call with one loud voice for compassion, justice, and mercy for the oppressed rather than getting caught up in details of the sacrificial law. Then the New Testament – with its heart in the gospel of Jesus Christ, reaffirms that prophetic message and offers a clincher. God does not just love us, God loved us enough to become one of us, to suffer as we suffer, so as to make a new covenant with us that is based on the certainty of God's love instead of the clearly undependable nature of ours. Perhaps the most perfectly phrased summary of the New Testament's addition to scripture is found in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

We read from Philippians chapter 2, verses 5-11:

⁵*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*

⁶*who, though he was in the form of God,*

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

⁷*but emptied himself,*

*taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

*⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,*

*¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

*¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

The gospel of Jesus Christ is, for us Christians, the final word and the heart of the Bible's revelation. We can learn much about God by using our own minds in studying the world that God created, but that "general revelation" is slippery and can be taken in various ways. We can come much closer to God through faithful study of scripture, which presents to us a God of steadfast, stubborn love that will not give up on us. But those ancient writings themselves can be difficult to understand and can sound contradictory at times. So we have one more step: in that scripture we find the incarnation and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God was made in our likeness, so that we could eventually remember that we were made in God's, and through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, we could be healed and restored to relationship with our Maker. How do we know God? Ultimately the answer is to know Christ. He is the end of our search.

And yet I still have one more sermon in this series. What am I going to do with that? Well, we still have to ask, "And how do we know Christ?" See you next week.

We close with a prayer.

God, thank you for scripture. It is a gift of gifts, a treasure that grows as we do.

But like all your best gifts, we have ignored it. Forgive us.

Forgive us when we have offered it lip service, claiming to revere a book we never open.

when we have set it on a pedestal on our altars only to let it gather dust in our homes.

When we have been content to let preachers tell us what's in it without ever questioning them.

When we have used it for our own comfort while skipping over its challenges.

And like all your best gifts, we have abused it. Forgive us.

Forgive us when we have worshiped the gift instead of the giver,

when we have pored over it for answers instead of listening to its questions,

when we have studied it to appear clever before others, instead of to appear humbly before you

when we have weaponized it and hurled pieces of it at opponents.

Thank you for your gift. Now give us courage to read it,
and to let it read us. Amen.