

Sermon for Sunday, May 22, 2011
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Sweeter Than Honey: God's Word
Psalm 19

The experience: We hear two arguments, arguing opposite positions, each totally persuasive: College education is absolutely mandatory. The economic value of college is grossly exaggerated.... We think: I wish I weren't so easily swayed. I wish I had a firm foundation for making decisions.

Much more for daily life: What should we do when a friend asks, "Can you keep a secret?" and (before we can answer, but assuming that we did) launches into something that must be reported? Or, what should we do when a friend happily tells me she is pregnant and she's not married?

Psalm 19:7 addresses these situations. Psalm 19:7 says, "The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple." The simple man or woman is one who has no firm commitment to wisdom or folly. "A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps" (Prov. 14:15). For the simple, the most recent voice is totally persuasive. The simple need discipline, so they can distinguish truth from error. Then they can organize their minds and lives.

Psalm 19 describes God's speech to mankind, speech that orients us to life in this world, so we can live wisely and joyfully. It has two parts, parts so distinct that people occasionally wonder if David wrote songs and later combined them - as we sometimes do today. But the Bible gives us one psalm, whether composed at once or separately, in two parts. Part one describes God's self-revelation in the big book of nature (19:1-6). Part two describe God's self-revelation in Scripture (19:7-14). The second half of the psalm also teaches how to read Scripture for our profit.

1. God reveals himself in creation

Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." The sun, moon, and stars, even clouds and rain, declare that God exists and has great power. Creation is the "work of his hands," his craftsmanship. Creation is a visible manifestation of God's invisible character, his power, wisdom.

Creation is now fallen, disordered: Like a fine soldier who is, at this moment, drunk. Therefore creation, as we see it, doesn't fully reveal the goodness of God – his love, justice, or mercy. It declares that a mighty God exists and that we should seek Him and thank Him (Rom. 1:20-21). This revelation has several marks:

First, it is continuous. "Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge" (19:2). Day and night, grasslands and farmlands, deserts and hills, lakes and oceans, declare the goodness and power of God.

Second, the revelation is abundant; it gushes or bubbles or spouts out of creation. The image: a place David knew, En Gedi, where a stream burst out of a barren hillside. The longer we look, the more we find. Physicist and astronomer Robert Jastrow said of the big bang theory, "For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance, he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by

a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries." ¹

Third, the revelation is universal, "Their voice goes out into all the earth" (19:4). That voice speaks both to God – declaring his glory - and to us. There is no speech, yet creation's voice penetrates every part of the world. The sensitive listener hears. The power of the voice can be overwhelming. Yet the insensitive hear nothing. The stars are mere stars. The sky is just the sky, a brilliant blue or glowering gray, but it points nowhere, it signifies nothing.

This word brings both an affirmation and a correction. Not many people find the right view of nature by themselves. The ancients were tempted to worship creation: sun, moon, stars, and fields. They offered sacrifices to gain the favor of the sun and the weather, fertile animals and fields.

Moderns are tempted to explain everything away as a matter of chance. Scientists know that roughly ninety-nine percent of the atoms in the universe are hydrogen or helium. But life as we know it first requires (in order) oxygen and carbon – then hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus, potassium, sulfur, chlorine, sodium, magnesium, iron, cobalt, copper, zinc, iodine, selenium, manganese, etc. How did these rare elements collect on earth? Answer: a star collapsed on itself, so that hydrogen atoms fused into heavier elements. The star became a supernova, exploded into space, and the heavier elements *happened to collect here*. We have no need to deny the existence of supernovas, but we do deny that chance governs the universe. Life exists because God created it.

The universe declares that God created it (19:4). Yet if we hope to know God, we need more. He must act and speak, to explain what he did. The Lord did speak – and he recorded and preserved it in Scripture.

David also mentions the sun (19:4-6). It dominates the sky; nothing hides from its heat. The sun's dominance of the sky and earth represents God's dominance of life. As the sun governs life on earth, so God's law governs human life.² Nothing hides from the sun and, the New Testament says, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb 4:13).

So we turn from "general revelation" in nature to "special revelation" in Scripture. The transcendent God comes down to us and speaks. The cosmic God is a merciful Lord.³ The vastness of earth and sky declare God's praise, but the word reveals *our place* in God's scheme.

2. God reveals himself in Scripture

Psalm 19 is poetry, of the highest order. Hebrew poetry uses parallelism, where one line has the same structure and pattern as the next. The lines may contrast or complement each other. For example Proverbs likes contrast. The same truth is expressed positively, then negatively.

Whoever walks with the wise	grows wise
But a companion of fools	suffers harm

¹ God and the Astronomers.

² Craigie, Psalms, 183

³ Fishbane, 1979, 87

Psalm 19:7-9 is unusual for it has six consecutive lines. Each line is similar but each deepens and modifies the other, so the theme becomes clear.

The law	of the LORD is <i>perfect</i> ,	reviving the soul.
The statutes	of the LORD are <i>trustworthy</i>	making wise the simple.
The precepts	of the LORD are <i>right</i> ,	giving joy to the heart.
The commands	of the LORD are <i>radiant</i> ,	giving light to the eyes.
The fear	of the LORD is <i>pure</i> ,	enduring forever.
The ordinances	of the LORD are sure and	altogether righteous.

The lines reveal a pattern. The six lines begin with six words for God's instruction: law, statute, precept, command, *fear* and ordinances. The term "law" means "instruction." Add precept, command, etc. and it's clear that God instructs and we are supposed to obey.

"Fear of the Lord" stands out, as somewhat distinct. In the psalms fear usually means reverence for God. Here it means that the law teaches us how to revere God. The law tells us that we should fear God and how to do so.

David describes God's word as law, his commands and will, which must be obeyed. Yet the law is more than raw command. It is a personal command, given by the God who acts. He led His people out of the house of bondage. He made a covenant with his people, pledged Himself to be loyal to us. Therefore we honor and obey Him. He sent Jesus, Christ, his Son, our Lord, to die in our place, for our sin, and to rise to vanquish death and declare us righteous, by faith. Therefore, we love, fear, and follow Him.

After the first term, we read "of the LORD." LORD in all caps signifies that this is not a generic term for God, the divine king. LORD is the covenant name of God, Yahweh. We have the law of Yahweh. He always exists and He enters history to redeem His people. He makes covenants. He binds himself to us, as husband and binds themselves together by vows. The LORD pledges Himself to us.

Next, six adjectives: The law of the LORD is perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure, radiant, and sure. There is no flaw, no failure in God's law.

Finally, we have six resulting statements. The perfect word of God does things. It revives or refreshes the soul. It gives joy to the heart, gives light to the eyes, makes the simple wise. In all the law good that the law does, it does it forever. Finally, it is "altogether righteous." It is good in itself.

Then David appraises God's word. It is more precious than gold, sweeter than honey. Why is it so valuable? Because obedience to the word brings great reward. Because the word allows us to discern our errors in obedience and Scripture warns about sin. Reward: extrinsic [obey God and get a car!] or intrinsic [follow God's laws for relationships and you should see better relationships]?

The word also warns, pointing out hidden errors and faults – faults we would not readily see in ourselves. The law is a little like the spouse in a good marriage. They can tell you things you would never see yourself, things you need to hear. Once, hundreds and hundreds of years ago, in a far country, I was down because someone had accused me of something absurd, like stock price manipulation.

I said, "I have a lot of faults, but *that* isn't one of them." She said, "Right. That's actually a strength of yours." There was a moment of silence, then she said in a soft voice, "But sometimes you can be a little pessimistic." We were sitting side by side on our sofa and her head was in a book as she said it. But it hit

me like a slender bullet of truth; a needle, an injection of truth. It penetrated my flesh so carefully, yet it slammed into my mind, in the best way: a jarring but necessary truth, the gentle rebuke – a minimalist presentation, an outline she knew I could fill in. I needed it because I'm not a pessimist, but I can impersonate one at times.

That's what friends and family do. It's what the word of God does. It point out our faults, reveals our errors, so we can repent and find God's forgiveness.

That's how it's supposed to work. David knows that it's also possible to see an action is sin and choose to continue. Deliberate sin is especially destructive, so David prays, "Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression" (19:13).

The result: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. How does it work?

3. Gaining life, seeing light, and becoming wise through the word

Truly listen

In 2009, during the H1N1 flu panic, people hoped scientists might develop a flu vaccine at least for the aged and infirm. Studies claimed that a flu vaccine could reduce the likelihood of death in the elderly by fifty percent. An eminent researcher declared, "For a vaccine to reduce mortality by fifty percent... means it has to prevent deaths not just from influenza, but also from falls, fires, heart disease, strokes, and car accidents. That's not a vaccine, that's a miracle." Surely, some researchers said, the vaccinated and unvaccinated must differ in lifestyle, income, or general health. When a senior researcher named Lisa Jackson began to investigate, the response was hardly scientific. Scientist told her not to ask such questions. It could damage her career. They declared, "We know vaccines work." But Jackson persisted. She determined, through a series of meticulous studies, that the benefit of flu vaccines could be explained by the "healthy user effect." Researchers judged her work to be beautifully constructed. But most scientists refused to believe her. She had come to the wrong conclusions, so they refused to listen to her.⁴

I believe we can read the Bible the same way – rejecting things that are unsettling. Further, men and women who hold orthodox views on, for example, divorce or abortion can suddenly change their position when "something happens." When a marriage grows cold... I know the laws about divorce, but doesn't the Bible say God wants to bless us and I'm sure a divorce would bless me. When a sixteen or forty-four year-old gets pregnant, people suddenly ask, "But do we *know* when life begins?"

This isn't a surprise. Paul says: "The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather... teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Tim 4:3).

The Bible can be hard to understand, but there is a spiritual aspect to reading too. Peter links the two when he says Paul's letters "contain some things that are hard to understand," which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3:16).

First, Scripture can be hard to understand – therefore work to read well. Second, but people distort it, to suit their own purposes, but that brings destruction.

⁴ Kuhn, *Scientific Revolutions*

So how do you read the Bible? Are you willing to read carefully and faithfully, eager to understand? Gathering resources? Study Bibles are so helpful and easy to find – English Standard Version and New International Version study Bibles are both outstanding.

Do you accept what you hear? Do you rejoice, give thanks, praise God as you read of his goodness and grace? Do you repent when you hear a rebuke? Do you love a rebuke, knowing it can lead you to justice, love, faithfulness?

Unbelievers typically resist Scripture unless God is drawing them: "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Rom. 8:7, cf. John 6:37). For, "the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is unable to understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). By contrast, Jesus tells his disciples, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you" (Mt. 13:11).

True profit comes when God opens our eyes and ears so we can hear. A pastor's fear: We will teach about the faith and people will hear snippets: "Love your neighbor! God is gracious. Eternal life" and not hear the whole gospel. On the other hand, people surprise us by saying they just did hear!

"I've been going to churches for ten years and I never heard that before."

"Really, where did you go to church?"

"Churches 1, 2, 3." I think "I know two of the pastors; you *did* hear it before. But praise God that his Spirit opened your ears to hear it today.

Paradox: We cannot open our ears, but we can pray. We can pray – the Lord may be prompting you to pray, "Lord I want to hear with open ears." Know that the Lord hears every sincere prayer and expect your ears to start to open.

Look for Jesus

The Bible does tell us what to listen for – how to find the main point in its sprawling pages. We begin with the call of Abraham. Genesis 12 says that God called Abraham that he might be blessed and bless the nations. God chose Abraham and Israel by grace alone (Exod. 19-20, Deut. 6-7). Because he first loved us, we should love him with heart, soul, mind and strength and hold fast to him and pass our faith to our children. One day all the nations shall know "that the LORD is God and there is no other" (1 Kings. 8:60, Isa. 45:5-22, Acts 13:47).

The story of salvation is the drama of a loving Father seeking his lost children. After Adam's rebellion, God promises a child who will crush the deceiver. As son of Abraham he will bless the nations. As Son of David he will rule forever. The Lord says, "You will be my people, and I will be your God" (Jer. 11:4, Ezek 36:28).

In Jesus the promises are fulfilled. He ransoms people from every nation and reconciles them to himself. His death and resurrection, his suffering and glory, constitute the climax of redemption (Luke 24, Rom. 8:17). John wrote "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). Then "the righteous will live by faith" (Rom. 1:17). There is a personal, creating and redeeming God. He expects us to respond in faith. Then, Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

Heed the warnings

Above all, we must hear that God has offered his grace and mercy through the person and work of Jesus. But God is holy, just, loving and good and he wants us to be loving and good too. Therefore he gives commands and expects us to obey. James 1:22 tersely said, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

Scripture reveals sin, confronts idols, lays our secrets bare (Heb. 4:12-13). Proverbs 9:8 says, "Rebuke a wise man and he will love you." But not everyone is wise. Many hate a rebuke. Worse, the people who most need to repent often refuse to listen. They disregard the message and punish the messenger (Ezek. 3:1-27, Rev. 11:3-10, Jer. 20). What about you? Do you love correction?

Meditate

I saw the importance of meditation while guest teaching at a seminary in northern India. One day we had some free time, so our hosts, Americans who had lived in India for decades, took us to visit a deserted British cemetery in the southern Himalayas. After we had walked around for a while, a custodian rushed at us, shouting, "What are you doing here? Trespassers! Grave robbers! How did you break in? This cemetery is closed. Get out of here! I'll set my dogs on you!"

To my astonishment, our polite, soft-spoken host bellowed right back. They stood inches apart shouting on top of each other, spraying each other with saliva. After a minute the clamor diminished, though both men still yelled. In another minute, the tone became quite mild, even genial. What's happening? "Now they are inviting us to have tea." When we were alone again, I asked my friend to explain why he had shouted at the custodian and how, it seemed, the yelling had calmed him. He explained: "The caretaker doesn't have much to do; it's his job to shout a little. I yelled back because that's how you establish sincerity and innocence here. If I backed down, he would have decided that we were trespassers."

I hesitated to approve his action. I instinctively felt that it was wrong to shout – parents at children, bosses at employees, coaches at players. But does the Bible ever say "Shouting is sinful"? No. I was thinking of the Proverb, "A gentle answer turns away wrath." But my host's loud protest did turn away wrath. It was a "gentling" answer. He also knew Paul's words in Rom. 12:18: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

My friend was not a shouter. Anything but! Yet as he meditated on God's word, and the best way to apply it in his life, his society, he had trained himself to yell to turn away wrath and make peace. As he meditated he realized: A quiet comment can be inflammatory, and a shout can turn away wrath and bring peace.

Reading that promotes life – *lectio divina*

Eugene Peterson rightly says: We pick up the Bible and find that we have God's word in our hands, *our* hands. We can now handle it. But it's dangerous to suppose that we are in control of it, that we can use it, that we are in charge of applying it wherever, whenever, and to whomever we wish....⁵

⁵ " E Peterson, Eat this Book 81-117

People have been aware of this for a long time. There is now age-old advice on meditation. I invite you to jot down the highlights. Meditation has four elements: Read the text. Meditate on the text. Pray the text. Live the text. While there is a natural progression from one to the next, you may not move through these in order. We read, pray, read again, meditate, try to live, fail pray again, read again.

So we read, pray and meditate. As we enter God's world and word, we realize, "God has spoken to me! Therefore, I must answer" even in the noisy demands and dull duties of life. OK, how do we do it?

How to meditate – 4 steps

1. Hear the Teaching.

What does this passage say about God? Jesus? Me?
What commands or promises are here?

2. Pick one or two key ideas or truths and ask these questions:

How would I change if this truth were fully, explosively present in my life?
Why might God have sent me this word today? *Take your time with this one.*

3. Then pray: Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication.

How does this truth, promise or command lead me to praise God? How great is God to say this to his people?
What sin does it reveal? What shall I confess to God?
How might I thank God for what Jesus did? What God still does?
What must I do because of this? What person do I need to become? Lord remake me.

4. Do this for thirty days as you work through a book of the Bible.

Pray morning and evening. Once a day, meditate on Scripture. As you do, write down one or two ideas that grip you. This may be the Spirit speaking you. Pray through it.

Conclusion: So the Lord reveals his power and might and creation, then reveals his truth and grace in Jesus, whose ministry is captured in Scripture, which foretells, tells and interprets his work. So listen to the word, look for Jesus, heed the warnings, meditate on the truth and find the word of God to be more valuable than gold, sweeter than honey.