

## “The Sun of Righteousness”

Psalm 19  
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### INTRODUCTION

Suppose you go for a visit and in Washington, DC’s National Gallery of Art and you behold Leonardo da Vinci’s portrait titled ***Ginevra de’ Benci***, c. 1474/1478. And while there you overhear two art students talking in a knowing way about the angle of vision the painter chose and the colors he used and the way the light brings forward certain features—and you want to say to them, “*Hush, just stand back and enjoy.*” Knowing a little about art, of course, can enhance your ability to appreciate a painting. Still, apprehending a great painting or a symphony or a poem, requires a measure of humility in one who gazes or listens or reads.

A famous writer named C. S. Lewis once called the 19<sup>th</sup> psalm “*the greatest poem in the psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.*” So how do we approach this Hebrew poem and inspired prayer? We come to study with the right attitude—one of humble and expectant reverence.

### Preliminary Thoughts on PSALM 19

- \*a psalm of David
- \*its two themes echo both Psalm 1 (torah or way) and Psalm 8 (creation)
- \*a smaller version of Psalm 119
- \*reminiscent of several psalms extolling God’s marvelous creation; e.g. Psalm 104, Psalm 24, and also Isaiah 40 and Job 37, 38...

The poem’s structure is simple: six verses about Creation, five verses about Law (torah) and four verses of personal prayer. David the psalmist passes abruptly from the first section or stanza to the second one. Many scholars speculate that these were two poetic fragments the poet or an editor brought together. I think, however, there is a strong thematic connection between *creation* and *law* and perhaps the psalmist moved almost unconsciously from seeing one (the heavens) and then thinking of the other (God’s word).

**Part One:** (1-2) cosmic splendor is HIS handiwork! Cf. Hopkins poem, “*The world is charged with the grandeur of God!*”

Creation has a double declaration: praise to God and revealer of knowledge to mankind; cf. Romans 1 and 10:18 (psalm 19 cited)

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above<sup>[a]</sup> proclaims his handiwork.
- 2 Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.

**Part two:** paradox of inaudible voice (3-4)

- 3 There is no speech, nor are there words,  
whose voice is not heard.
- 4 Their voice<sup>[b]</sup> goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

**Part three:** creation's chief **image** is the **sun** (5-6)

- In them he has set a tent for the sun,
- 5 which comes out 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 hidden from its heat.

\*the sun is the crowning act of cosmos creation. God has pitched a tent (sky, heavens, firmament) and the sun emerges like a bridegroom or warrior from the tent each sunrise, runs a mighty circuit and then returns each sunset. Is this image a borrowed one from Egyptian mythology? The Hebrews, unlike their neighbors, never *deified* the sun but *personified* it instead. And notice that Someone has set the tent for the sun. The sun represents the handiwork of God and praises Him like all of creation.

Then there is a shift from the theme of God glorified in Creation to a 2<sup>nd</sup> theme: The Praise of the LORD in Torah (**Part four**).

- 7 The *law* of the LORD is *perfect*,<sup>[c]</sup>  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 *rules*<sup>[d]</sup> of the LORD are *true*,  and righteous altogether.

Torah is described with six synonyms or aspects of torah law. In every dimension the Lord's *torah* is *good* (e.g. perfect, sure, right...); instruction offers multiple **benefits** (e.g. reviving, enlightening, rejoicing...).

The ancient Hebrews were people of the Book. This book is both *story* and *poetry*. And in that story, often expressed with images and metaphors, God is the main subject. And *torah* is that part of the revelation that draws us to be like Him, to please Him and to obey Him. Of course, the idea that God is the One who speaks his word to us, reaches a dramatic revelatory climax in the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us.

**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.

Having praised God for his word/torah which is perfect; the psalmist also describes this word in more personal terms: more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey. This is a move from *respect* to *affection*.

**Story:** respect authority; can you love him a father figure-**Tolstoy**?

The final and briefest section of the Psalm 19 (**Part Five**) poem contains four verses of petitionary prayer. Although the transition is sharp it is entirely natural. The psalmist who has gazed upon the heavens and reflected upon divine law naturally breaks out in praise. But in a move reminiscent of Psalm 8 (*what is man that Thou art mindful of him*) David becomes **aware** of his own insignificance and unworthiness. So he prays for forgiveness; he asks to be protected from sins both unwitting and presumptuous—“*O Lord, forgive us for what we have done that we ought not to have done AND for what we have left undone that we ought to have done.*”

**12** Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. □ **13** Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! □ Then I shall be blameless, □ and innocent of great transgression.

Even with good intentions a sinful person can never be sure of not violating one of the Lord's commands, or that we have acted with poor motives.

**14** Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart □ be

acceptable in your sight, □ O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

This final and familiar petition asks the Lord to find acceptable the entire psalm-prayer. Here is my own paraphrase: “*May my words and thoughts and, of course, my deeds, conform to your will and may I walk in your way—your torah way forever. Help me to do so Lord and forgive me when I fall short of your mark; indeed, even when I turn to my own path and do what is pleasing in my sight, even then, Lord, please pardon my sins.*”

Notice how the sun image ties these sections together. It was reading C. S. Lewis that helped me see that v. 7 is the key clause that holds all of the parts of this psalm together. “*There is none hidden from its (the sun’s) heat (hamah=the term for heat and also is a synonym for sun).*” Just as the *sun* dominates the daytime sky so Torah dominates human life.

Just as the sun gives light so we can see where we are going so the light of God’s Word illumines our path. And its searching light and heat, from which none can escape in the desert (no shade, no hiding place), is like the two-edged sword of the word. It exposes our hidden faults and identifies our true intentions.

The sun can be both *welcome*, in giving warmth, and *forbidding* in its unrelenting heat. So too can Torah be both **life-imparting** but also **testing** and **purifying**. It is “*the sun or light of righteousness.*”

Through the written word, the *world* is revealed and interpreted as the theatre of God’s glory. And the *word* is seen also as a catalyst of creation, both old and new, the genesis of cosmos and community. In Christ, the living word, we are invited to participate in the new creation.

Torah, God’s word, invites us to be addressed and shaped by God the Father, Son and Spirit. It is a *personal* message to *persons*. But people **read** books and Scripture in various ways. What is your approach?

Some **read** for information and truths (*intellectual* approach). Some read for counsel and directions (*practical* approach). Some read for comfort or enjoyment (*inspirational* approach)

I've read the Scriptures as a willing member of all three camps so I'm not going to be too critical of them. Except to lament that modern people are trained in schools to read and *evaluate*; to *dissect* and to *analyze*. To unwittingly stand as *judge* over what we digest. But in such an approach there is the danger that you will be using your Bible for your purposes and such purposes do not necessarily require anything of you *relationally*. In other words it is possible to read God's words respectfully but without ever dealing with God who reveals Himself personally and authoritatively as Father, Son and Spirit.

To put it bluntly in Eugene Peterson's memorable words, it is possible to get interested and even excited about the Bible without wanting to get involved with God. And that, my friends, would be missing the point. Can you read God's word inviting it to address you? Can you and do you submit to this Book—that is, let it have its way with you?

**God** is what the good book is all about. C. S. Lewis, in his final book (*Experiment in Criticism*) wrote of *receiving* a work of art rather than *using* it. *Using* it is bringing it into your purposes and agenda. **Receiving** it is allowing it to speak to you and move you and even order your life.

## CONCLUSION

Some will say when you apprehend one of the world's classic masterpieces, your response to it, ultimately, does not judge it as much as it judges you. The reputations of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony or Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal* or Milton's *Paradise Lost* are secure. Neither my opinion nor yours hardly adds or detracts to their established reputations. My or your apprehension of these great works and our ability to appreciate them—that is what is on trial, you might say. The great art judges us as much or more than do we sit in judgment upon them.

So it is with Scripture. Except behind God's Word is the Almighty himself, addressing us and inviting us by grace and through faith into a relationship—in which He calls us by name and in which we say in return, "*Heavenly Father, Gracious Lord, have mercy upon me.*"