

Learning to See: A Reflection on Psalm 19

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Reflections Reflections Not stated (delivered 19 July 2009, inferred)

Psalm 19:1 (quoted)

Psalm 19:7-8 (quoted)

Psalm 19:11-13 (quoted)

Psalm 19:14 (quoted)

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. (Psalm 19:1, KJV)

Psalm 19 is attributed to David, and moves in two connected movements. In its first half (verses 1 to 6), creation itself testifies to the glory of God, without a single word being spoken. In its second half (verses 7 to 14), David turns from the silent testimony of the skies to the spoken testimony of God's own law — and finds it, if anything, still more to be desired. The two halves are not, as they might first appear, two different subjects loosely joined together. They are one and the same conviction, seen from two sides: that everything which comes from God, whether the work of His hands or the word of His mouth, tells us the truth about Him, and is altogether to be trusted.

I did not always know how to read the first half of that testimony.

The picture that comes to mind is a photograph I took, a few years ago now, of St. Joseph's Boys' School in Tellicherry — the small Catholic school I attended more than fifty years ago, built on a rise of high ground jutting out into the sea, so that from every single classroom one looks straight out over the water. This was the pastime of most students whenever a lesson grew tedious, and I confess it was mine especially during Hindi periods — an aside which may go some way towards explaining the state of my Hindi to this day. But when I looked out to sea as a boy, I was not really seeing it at all. My mind would already be racing ahead to the evening: a game of football, perhaps, or Cadet Corps parade, or practice at the shooting range, or slipping away for a spell of fishing, or, failing all else, simply hanging about — harmlessly, of course — near the girls' convent across the road. There was no shortage of distractions for a schoolboy's eye.

It was many years later, on a visit back to Tellicherry, that I saw the sea differently. I would sit and watch it for hours at a stretch. I saw it swell with something like pride, and then settle into a great tranquillity, and, at other times, grow dark and uproarious. I noticed the rhythm of the waves, and the particular sounds they made. I watched the water lighten and darken with the changing light, and sea creatures breaking

the surface here and there, playfully. At sunset, the sky would take on colours I had never troubled to notice as a boy. Ever since, whenever I have been back to Tellicherry, the sea has been my one destination. I learnt, that time, to understand the glory of God's creation by looking at the sea — and I have often wondered since how much I missed, all those years I spent at St. Joseph's looking at the very same water without truly seeing it.

That, I think, is what the first half of this Psalm is asking of us: not merely to glance at what God has made, but to look — to let the heavens actually declare something to us, rather than passing over them as scenery. Appreciating the greatness of His creation, in this way, is itself a step towards true worship: it draws us closer to God, and deepens our communion with Him. It might be a stretch of sea, as it was for me; it might be a mountainside, of the kind so many of us have known at our own family camps at Himalayan Torch Bearers; it might be nothing more than a flower, or a change in the sky. Whatever we notice, worship then becomes an ongoing activity, not something confined to the inside of a church building.

But David does not stop with the silence of the skies. Having praised God's handiwork in creation, he turns, without any real change of subject, to praise God's law:

The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. (Psalm 19:7-8, KJV)

Only the Word of God, David tells us, can convert a soul that is dead in sin, and make it truly alive; only the Word of God can make wise the simple, rejoice the heart, and enlighten the eyes to see what they could not see before. This is an inward change, not an outward performance — the very same change, in fact, that turned an idly wandering schoolboy's gaze into something that could, in time, recognise the hand of God upon the water.

David goes on:

Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward. Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression. (Psalm 19:11-13, KJV)

Charles Spurgeon, preaching on this same verse, put the matter plainly: "All sins are great sins, but yet some sins are greater than others. Every

sin has in it the very venom of rebellion, and is full of the essential marrow of traitorous rejection of God. But there be some sins which have in them a greater development of the essential mischief of rebellion, and which wear upon their faces more of the brazen pride which defies the Most High. It is wrong to suppose that because all sins will condemn us, that therefore one sin is not greater than another." What David asks for, in these verses, is not merely to be forgiven for what he has already done, but to be kept — kept back, held, restrained — from the particular sin of presumption: the sin that sets itself up against God knowingly, rather than stumbling into Him in weakness.

David closes the Psalm with a single verse that has become, for many believers since, a prayer in its own right:

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.
(Psalm 19:14, KJV)

There are two tests here, not one: our words, which anyone can hear, and the meditation of our heart, which only God can see. When I catch myself speaking unkindly, or find that my thoughts have quietly filled up with the things of this world, I know that God's Word is not yet having its free course in me. It is a fair question to put to ourselves, from time to time: is God's Word changing us — our speech and our secret thoughts alike — or have we simply grown used to carrying both, unchanged?

The last word of the Psalm is "redeemer", and it is the word that holds the whole thing together. We begin with a vision of creation, however faintly we may have first read it, and end with a vision of a God who has redeemed all that He has made — my own slow-dawning sight of Him on the shore at Tellicherry, no less than David's sight of Him in the stars over his sheep. We do not live in a merely elegant universe, admired from a safe distance. We live in a redeemed one, and hope is everywhere in it, for anyone who is willing, at last, to look.

Amen.