

# “O LORD, My Rock and My Redeemer”

## A Sermon on Psalm 19

*Texts: Psalm 19:1-14; Romans 1:18-25*

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Psalm 19 is well-known for the sheer beauty of its Hebrew poetry. C. S. Lewis once said of Psalm 19: “I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.”<sup>1</sup> One commentator argues that the beauty of this particular Psalm puts the Psalmist’s artistic skills on a par with such great creative geniuses as Goethe, Haydn, and Beethoven.<sup>2</sup> While this particular Psalm is indeed beautiful poetry, the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm’s literary beauty does not (or at least should) not obscure the fact that this particular Psalm is packed with important biblical-theological themes. The 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm speaks directly to the two ways in which God reveals himself—through the created order in which he shows forth his glory, and in his law, through which he demonstrates his divine perfections.

The self-revelation of God—the two ways in which God reveals himself to all his creatures—is such an important topic that article two of the Belgic Confession (the confession of faith of the Reformed churches) deals with these two ways (or two books) immediately following a discussion of the nature of God in article one. The Confession speaks of these two books of revelation—the natural order and Holy Scripture—as follows:

We know God by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict men and to leave them without excuse. Second, he makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own.

In addition to quoting from Paul (Romans 1:20), the chief biblical proof-text underlying article two of the Belgic Confession is Psalm 19:1-4. In fact, in our New Testament lesson (Romans 1:18-25), Paul repeatedly alludes to the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm as Paul makes his case that there is no such thing as a true atheist—although there are many who call themselves atheists, from a biblical point of view these are people who sinfully suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Despite the fact that God’s self-revelation gets through to them—Paul is clear that it does, and the Psalmist also makes this point—people do not want to accept those things which God reveals. If they acknowledge God, then they owe him faith and repentance, which is the last thing such people wish to do. The reason why people inevitably reject the two books of revelation is because, as Jesus says, “*people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil*” (John 3:19).

The 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm is found in Book One of the Psalter and is attributed to David. This Psalm is quoted but once in the New Testament in Romans 10:18, where Paul writes about God’s revelation of himself in

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958), 63

<sup>2</sup> Cited in, VanGemeran, Psalms, Vol. 5., 213.

nature (general revelation) as the necessary background for the preaching of the gospel (special revelation). “*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for `Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.*” Many think this particular Psalm is a further exposition of several of the themes found in Psalm 18, in which David speaks in several places of God’s redemption as coming from heaven. In Psalm 18:9, we read of YHWH, “*he bowed the heavens and came down; thick darkness was under his feet.*” Similarly in verse 13, of Psalm 18, “*the LORD also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice, hailstones and coals of fire.*” Also in verse 16. “*He sent from on high, he took me; he drew me out of many waters.*” The focus on things heavenly in Psalm 18 then, quite naturally leads to the first six verses of Psalm 19, which recount the glories of God revealed in the heavens.

Psalm 18 also connects the revelation of God to the wisdom and the necessity of living “uprightly” before the Lord. In verse 20 of Psalm 18, David speaks of this. “*The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me.*” Yet in verses 12-13 of the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm, David petitions YHWH for the grace to live uprightly before the Lord. “*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.*” In light of these impressive connections between the two Psalms, in Psalm 19, David is reflecting upon the themes of Psalm 18 by pointing out that creation reveals the glory of God, while God’s law reveals his wisdom and perfections.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm is divided into three stanzas. Verses 1-6 (the first stanza of the poem) deal with the revelation of God through the natural order. Verses 7-11 (the second stanza) deal with the revelation of God through his law. While verses 12-14 (a petition) are David’s prayer of reflection upon the beauty of creation, and the perfection of God’s law.

Several commentators point out that Psalm 19 uses eight different Hebrew words for God’s self-revelation, and each one focuses upon a particular aspect of God’s perfection and majesty. First, David speaks of the law of God (torah) as perfect, reviving the soul. Second, he speaks of God’s “word” (dabar) as speech which comes from the mouth of God. Third, he speaks of God’s “laws” (mispatim) which reveal God’s decisions on various issues, and which is closely related to a fourth term, “statutes” (God’s rules). Fifth, the Psalmist speaks of God’s commands (miswa), things ordained by the Lord. Sixth, David speaks of God’s decrees, his royal command. Seventh, David refers to “precepts” as God’s way of revealing his will as tied to covenant blessings and curses. Finally, we read of YHWH’s promise.<sup>3</sup> The use of these varied terms for God’s self-revelation throughout this Psalm indicates that God’s law is his word. This indicates that the commandments of God are not arbitrary, but reflect God’s own perfections. In other words, his words reveal both his will and his holiness. If nature reveals his glory—as Paul puts it in Romans 1, “*his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature*”—then his law reveals his perfections and his will for us, his people. These then, are the two books—the natural order and the written word.

As we turn to the text of the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm, we begin with the first stanza and verse 1. “*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*” These opening words reflect the creation account in Genesis 1, as God placed the sun, moon, and stars in place to fill the heavens, which he created as the place where his glory is revealed. The beauty and magnificence of the heavens tempt us to worship the heavenly bodies created to fill them (sun, moon, stars), not the one who created them. The

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<sup>3</sup> VanGemeren, Psalms, Vol. 5., 221-222.

ancients worshiped the sun god, the moon or the stars—as do, ironically, many of our contemporaries who speak of mother earth, or who consider the earth as the source of life. A great deal of ancient paganism resurfaces in contemporary earth worship and environmentalism.

As the Psalmist points out, the beauty and wonder of the created order reflect the power and glory of the one who created them—YHWH, Israel’s God. It is important to keep in mind that since Israel dwells in the midst of the Canaanites, every assertion about Israel’s God—who he is and the things he has created—is a polemic against Canaanite paganism. The Psalmist is well aware that it is quite natural to observe the created order and be moved (intellectually and/or emotionally), so as to then work backwards to the one who created all things. Indeed, Paul says in Romans 1:19-20, that as divine image-bearers we are all hard-wired to do this. *“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.”*

Because we are created to receive the revelation God gives through the book of nature, according to the Psalmist creation preaches to its creatures. The heavens proclaim. The sky above “proclaims.” When God’s people contemplate the world around us (created things), our thoughts go back to the creator. The glory of created things tell us much about the glory of the creator. Yet even as the heavens and sky preach to the earth’s creatures, the effects of sin upon the human race soon become evident. In Romans 1:21-25, Paul tells us, *“for although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”* It is human sin which turns the continual proclamation of the skies into an excuse to worship the earth and/or its creatures, while ignoring the one who created these things.

In fact, this preaching of the natural order goes on continuously—increasing the wonder and joy of those who worship the creator, while at the same time increasing the guilt of those who do not. In verse 2, the Psalmist says, that the skies and heavens *“day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.”* God continuously reveals himself in the created order. The things he has made “speak” to us, and “reveal” the knowledge of the creator. Yet, apart from faith in Jesus Christ, human sin causes this knowledge to be suppressed, which is why, as Paul says in Romans 1:18, a final judgment is inevitable. *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”* The heavens preach and the earth’s inhabitants know God—yet, because of human sin, this truth is suppressed and rejected, only to inevitably surface elsewhere as false religion—which is why John Calvin correctly describes the mind of fallen men and women as “idol factories.”

Although the creation preaches without using human speech, nevertheless, its words are heard by all, even to the ends of the earth. All are without excuse. *“There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”* As we can see when reading these two passages together, Paul’s words in Romans 1:18-25 resound with echoes from the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm, where the great paradox is set forth by the Psalmist—wordless speech which is heard by all the earth’s inhabitants. Wordless speech which moves those who are Christ’s to praise their creator-redeemer, and wordless speech which moves those without faith in Jesus Christ to worship the earth, its creatures, or themselves—although no one who is in the process of suppressing the truth in

unrighteousness would ever put it this way.

Apart from any knowledge of the solar system, by mere observation, the Psalmist knows that all life on earth depends upon and is dominated by the rising and setting of the sun. We read in verses 4c through verse 6, “*In [the skies] he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. 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 festive imagery of a wedding is appropriate in David’s age to capture the joyful moment when the groom claims his bride as his own. The sun is also like a champion setting out to run a race which he will inevitably win. Just like the heaven’s wordless speech which is heard by all, so too the sun’s heat is felt by all.<sup>4</sup>

As we move into the second stanza (vv. 7-11), the Psalmist changes subjects—moving away from the glories of the heavens, to a consideration of the perfection of God’s law. If the heavens declare God’s glory, then the revelation of God in and through his law is much greater. This form of revelation (special revelation) is given by YHWH, who made a covenant with Israel, and called David to be Israel’s king. Seven times in this stanza, YHWH’s name is mentioned. The creator of all things is the personal God who speaks. Nature reveals God’s glory (and certain attributes), but not God’s name, his triune essence, nor the knowledge of God’s will as seen in the eight Hebrew words used of God’s revelation through his law (mentioned previously). The words of God explain his glory which is revealed in nature. This is why they are precious to his people, revealing the perfections of the speaker (YHWH).

In verse 7, we read, “*the law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.*” God’s law is not arbitrary—as though God could have decreed “thou shall kill.” The commandments reflect the nature and perfections of God, who gives his creatures life. Because God is the author of life, sinful humans are commanded not to take it—“thou shalt not murder” reflects the very nature of God. This is why the Psalmist can say that God’s words give “life,” in the sense that they revive the soul. More than that, his word brings wisdom to those who are simple. His word also proves that YHWH always keeps his promises, so that his words are altogether sure. To put it simply—God can be trusted to do as he says he will do.

In verse 8, the Psalmist continues to unpack his list of blessings which come to us through God’s self-revelation in his law. “*The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.*” God, who is truth, and who always does what is right, commands the same of us in his word. His ways bring us joy, seen in the eyes of those who receive these words as from YHWH. As Paul tells us in Romans 7:12, “*so the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good,*” again echoing the Psalmist, not only here, but especially in Psalm 119. The commandments of God give joy to those who obey them, wisdom to those who meditate upon them, as well as enlightening those who look to God’s word for answers to the most pressing questions of life.

But the still the Psalmist is not done. In verse 9, he says “*the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.*” The fear of the Lord refers to the consideration of who God is, which produces a proper reverence for him. When David speaks of this reverence as “clean” he means “pure” as in Psalm 12:6. “*The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.*” God’s words not only endure forever, but his words are “true” (absolutely dependable) and “righteous” (they reflect the holy character of God).

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 68.

To those who fear God and trust his promise, these words are more desirable than wealth, possessions, fame, or great military or political power. The Psalmist says of God's words in verse 10, "*more to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.*" These are the words which give meaning to life. These are the words which determine what is right and what is wrong. These are the words which reflect who God is, and inform us of what he expects of us, his creatures. These words show us where danger is found, and they show us what things place our souls in jeopardy. These are the words which guide us, and when we obey them, bring us lasting and profound satisfaction—a satisfaction which material wealth and fame can never give.

Such words are like the guardrails on a freeway, or a road sign which warns of a hazard ahead. God's words protect us. The Psalmist says of them in verse 11, "*moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*" As king over Israel, David acknowledges that he is YHWH's servant, and that he must do YHWH's will. The theme of blessing and curse now surfaces as the Psalmist speaks of reward for obedience, and in these words we find warnings of what will bring curse. These are the words which reveals to us the will of God. It is here that the key to understanding the meaning of life will be found. The creator of the heavens, who made us, reveals to us *his* perfections, *his* will, and *his* demands.

The very consideration of such things brings the Psalmist to a point of self-reflection upon the meaning of God's revelation of his glory and his perfection. When he considers what God has done as well as God's perfections, David humbles himself. Yet, there is a reason why so many fail to see the creator behind his creation, or the perfect nature and holy character of the giver of the law. If you merely observe the creation, and consider the stipulations of the law apart from faith, and without any consideration of human sin and need of grace, then you will inevitably end up in the same place as the famed German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant speaks of the two books in a way quite unlike the Belgic Confession. "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe . . . the starry night above and the moral law within."<sup>5</sup>

Kant, who was raised in a Christian home is obviously alluding to the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm. Yet, even as the heavens preach to him, and the law points him back to the perfections of its author, Kant sees neither the creator, nor a redeemer. Kant sees the effects (the starry skies and the moral law), but never does see the cause of either. Without faith, Kant lauds the beauties of the skies but fails to hear the words they preach. Without faith, Kant marvels at the moral law, without realizing that same law demands his personal perfect obedience. Yet Kant, as with countless others, foolishly thought of himself as a good and moral person who needs no redemption. Kant had no fear of the Lord, no reverence for him.

But David fears YHWH, and trusts in YHWH's promise. Therefore when he contemplates the beauty of the skies and considers the perfection of the God who speaks, David realizes his own sinfulness, and the necessity of obedience to his creator. In verse 12 he cries out, "*who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults.*" When God speaks and reveals his perfections in his law (specially, the law of Moses, i.e., the Ten Commandments), David becomes aware of his sinfulness. God's law not only tells David who God is, those same words tell him who he is, a creature who has sinned against God. This is why David prays that he will become aware of his hidden sins so that he can confess them and then seek forgiveness. He knows that satisfaction must be made for his sins along the lines prescribed for unintentional sins in Numbers 15:22-31, so that YHWH's wrath will be turned aside and that he (David)

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<sup>5</sup> Kant, Dialectic of Pure and practical Reason, conclusion.

will be blameless (forgiven and counted righteous) yet again. When God speaks reveals both his perfections and demands, we are undone. We see the gravity of our sin only against the backdrop of the holiness of God.

David pleads with YHWH in verse 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.*” Without the fear of the Lord, and apart from faith in his promise, people never will see their sins as anything but mistakes or natural shortcomings, which really are not all that big a deal. But the one who fears YHWH, who trusts his word, and who understands when YHWH’s perfections are revealed through his law—these perfections actually expose as sin all human failure to keep those laws—they can only respond as the Psalmist does here. If continuing in sin increases guilt, then those who fear God (like David) know that their sins must be confessed, and satisfaction must be made, before forgiveness can be enjoyed.

This is why the Psalmist pleads that YHWH keep him from presumptuous sins—sins in which God’s holiness is never even considered by the sinner. The sinner who fears God knows that only God himself can break the dominion of sin which holds all sinners captive. Only if YHWH intervenes can the sinner ever be found blameless and innocent—forgiven by God. Only then will the arrogance of the sinner give way to humility, faith, and repentance.

Having considered the glory of God seen in the heavens and earth, and having considered God’s perfections as revealed in his law, the Psalmist is moved to offer God the proper sacrifice of a humble sinner in need of God’s grace and forgiveness—praise and thanksgiving. In verse 14, he pleads, “*let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*” If God’s creation reveals his glory and his word reveals his perfections, then David’s words reflect the grateful heart of someone who—through faith in YHWH’s promise—desires that his own thoughts and words would find acceptance with his creator-redeemer.

As Christians who reflect upon the glory of creation and the perfections of God revealed in his words, we know what David did not—the great descendant promised to him, and who would reign on David’s throne is none other than the word made flesh—God incarnate. It is Jesus Christ—Israel’s Messiah and heir to David’s throne—in whom the two books of nature and Scripture find their common author. The New Testament tells us that Jesus Christ created all things, and that in him, all things hold together (John 1:1-4; Colossians 1:15-17). It is Jesus Christ who speaks forth the words of God, and whose words give life and reveal the will of God (John 17:8). David marvels at God’s glory and the perfections of his word. Christians know that Jesus Christ is the creator of all things and the promised redeemer who fulfills God’s law by perfectly obeying it, and in whom all sinners (even Old Testament sinners, such as David) find that a satisfaction has been rendered to the holy God (Christ’s cross) which removes the guilt of sin and effects reconciliation with God.

When we contemplate the glories of God in the heavens, when we see his handiwork throughout the earth, and when we understand that his perfections are revealed in his word, we see something much more than mere starry skies and the moral law within. We see the glorious and perfect work of our creator-redeemer, Jesus Christ, God in human flesh. And with David we cry out, “*let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*”