

“Praise God”

Sermon for 18 June 2017

Text: Psalm 19:1-7; Ephesians 1:3-14

To the praise of His glory so ends the sentence which began in verse 3 with **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.** Paul’s writing here is enveloped in a spirit of worship! As we hold that thought in mind, I want us to hear the glorious praise to which Paul’s opening words, after the salutation, extend; namely, to Psalm 19:1-4:

The heavens(a) are telling (declaring/expressing) **the glory of God and the firmament** (the sky above?) **is displaying or proclaiming His handiwork.**

Day to day (each day instructeth the day following) **uttereth speech** (pours forth speech) **and night to night breathes out** (whispereth/revealeth) **knowledge.**

There is no speech, nor are there words whose voice is not heard. (universally audible)

And the line of their measurement (either written speech, or voice) **extends through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.** (everywhere)

Footnote: a. the heavens are likened to “a magnificent woven piece of fabric, every feature of which bespeaks the skill and skill of its Creator.”

Tone. To the rich, deep and nuanced meanings of this psalm of praise we may certainly turn but not before we have *experienced the praise* behind and within the words. If we are “deaf” to the tone of the passage—to which the language points, the very words—we will miss what colors the meaning. Without a grasp of its tone, we miss the authorial intent, along with the meaning and point. Language may move us even as it informs us. David would move us to a place of awe and wonder to abet our worship of God! Likewise Paul praises Christ in Ephesians 1 so as to put us in the frame of mind, the receptive frame of mind, that we might worship Christ above all else.

I have written this more “literal translation” of the original Hebrew for the purpose of our mutual edification as well as in the hope to move us to deeper worship. There is so much to “hear” here, just in Paul’s opening sentence alone! It is a tumble of exultant, exuberant **praise out of the second book of divine self-disclosure.** Psalm 19, by contrast, is out of the first book, the book of nature, of the created world! The first book, available to all people everywhere.

Universus mundus nihil aliud est quam Deus explicatus, “the whole world is nothing but God expressed.”

Aren’t you glad that I don’t overuse my Latin! I can hardly wrap my mind around the idea that whole sermons were historically written in the precise, legal language of Latin *prior to being rendered in the vernacular!* However, that linguistic discipline was practiced in centuries past *without harm to logic or rhetoric.* In the middle ages this made more sense because the Holy Scriptures, the Vulgate, were in Latin—translated

from Latin manuscripts and Greek documents! Additionally, Latin appears to sing well—it surpasses Anglo-Saxon and Middle-English in musicality and sound.

The heavens are voicing, declaring the glory of God, exults David. The “heavens” are plural because we are describing the heaven of heaven, or **the firmament** of Creation fame—the stuff that God was working with in the very beginning—*when by His awesome power and commanding speech He was* shaping, forming, framing, measuring, setting in place, balancing the earth, the moon, and all the starry hosts. All of creation bears witness to the power of God, *by His Word* speaking all that is into existence, **a created order**, inexhaustible in depth and detail, infinite in expanse and reach—limitless, worlds upon worlds without end—all managed, working together in exquisite interdependence and good order. **Marvelous, fantastic, wonderfully wonderful.**

That, too, is praise. And the “object” of this praise is our God as Creator. From the book of nature no less. Yes, from the book of nature, in which we study and read to learn of God—*then we re-study, reconsider, refine and revise our “knowledge.”* In that book, there once appeared “the simple, single cell” which, upon closer observation and serious analysis, turns out to be more of a factory, irreducibly complex, than a blob of protoplasm with a replicating nucleus in a zip-lock sack! In one generation, with the explication of DNA, and microbiology pushing the frontier of our cellular knowledge, we are positioned to describe some of our prior understandings of the cell as “childlike in comprehension”! *We have seen things not observable to previous generations—the more primitive concepts are scientifically replaced.*

Zooming out, as opposed to zooming in, the astronomers inform us, with great humility and embarrassment, that with regard to “dark matter,” that we know very, very little about 85% of what is out there *in the universe*. There is a crisis in overconfidence, if not confidence across the board among astro-physicists. The farther we go, the deeper we look, the more that appears to strike us with wonder. What kind of being, or god, would it take to pull something this vast, intricate and supervised creation off? The answer to that question lies outside the first book of divine self-disclosure and in the second book, known, properly as the Scriptures. The God who created the heavens and the earth and all the starry span of what’s out there is revealed to us in Scripture as *the kind of Being who could do such a thing.*

And, frankly, it’s better than that because the God who reveals Himself in the Scriptures, is the same God who chose to disclose Himself most fully, most plainly, in the Person of Jesus Christ on this earth, in human history. *This, too, occurred in the open and we have documentary evidence of that life!* That same Jesus is the object of Paul’s praise/worship in Ephesians 1.

Jesus Christ is the object of our worship. That object shapes the life of our worship. The God of Creation is worthy of praise, Father Son and Holy Spirit, whose cooperative engagement in the process is revealed in Scripture *but are not knowledge explicitly disclosed in the leaves of trees, geology, geography or even climatology.* Paul speaks to this division of things in Romans 1 where he argues, *both passionately and persuasively* that the first book, the book which expresses the eternal power of the Godhead in nature, His invisible attributes even, are there for all to “read and discover.”

Everyone knows the truth of God's existence, and some of His attributes by virtue of this first book being open to one and all—across all language barriers, in every place at every time—people can know and acknowledge the reality of God either saving-ly, or damningly, accurately or misshapenly.

THEN, they can affirm the truth, or suppress it. And those who suppress it in unrighteousness are guilty sinners, children of wrath and sons of disobedience who not only deserve hell, but show in this life, that they prefer it. And whether or not, a person gets to the age of discretion and consciously believes, or to disbelieves in God, regardless there is nothing, since the fall of man, to exclude him from our common guilt attributable to our fallenness—no one is born either good, or innocent. Therefore no one goes innocently to hell—it is the sheer mercy of God which prevents any from going to hell. We are all born children of wrath, we all start out from the wrong side of the tracks. Although God has taken step to remedy this spiritually disastrous condition, we plainly are not out of the woods yet, not as a race. Yes, individuals are saved, yes the saved are gathered into the family of God in His church but the purpose of the church is to **establish and promote the redemptive purposes of God**. In the end, only the church will be standing.

Now great debates between science and religion have occurred and some voices are convinced that the warfare between them is inevitable. I don't. It is worthy of note that many of the imminent saints of the early modern period (of Western civilization) interposed no unbending natural laws between the Creator and His works. They certainly did not convey inherent power to those laws so as to remove God from consideration in the workings of His Creation. And some of these saints were even "scientists." The philosophical "banishment" of God (in the Age of Reason) from so-called "scientific" studies resulted *partially* in the adoption of the "absent-minded, grandfatherly gentleman" in the ethereal, extra-mundane sphere of repose named "heaven." *It is worthy to pause and note that if this ineffectual being is what we should define as God—I would be an atheist, too!* This concept is not biblical or intellectually compelling.

Deus Absconditus (the hidden god, one indifferent to human suffering) or a *Deus Otiosus* (the idle god, no longer engaged in human affairs)—were both major tenets of Deism in the 18th century rationalist circles. Others, who rejected the exile of God, asserted that natural law simply represented God's usual, ordinary and uniform mode of operation—not that He was limited by them. Indeed, for them, the efficiency of natural law was not presupposed; indeed it was believed to be non-existent. **Laws only describe; "they" don't do, or effect anything!** *To the biblically minded, the energy of God, which keeps everything going, was believed to be foundational to the entire natural order. Yes, the earth orbits around the sun, but Who moves the sun?* This kind of thinking is congruent with the biblical notions of God's deliberate, direct and immediate intervention in the course of human history whether the matter/incident/event was cultural or natural in nature. The thought that He brings about every event is clearly in line with divine sovereignty and natural occurrences were basically accommodated to that thought.

The proto-scientific construct of creation as a "great machine"—and the laws of nature as being *mechanical* laws is still with us. This is very much at odds with the idea

of God as a personal being and the companion thought of moral order as inherent, as part of the structure of the entire universe, is also outside the pale! Well, thinking persons still think and they have learned to watch those presuppositions!

If the God of creation is personal, loving and just God as Scripture declares—it makes sense that those created in His image would be energized by these things. They would be relational beings, motivated by love and eager to pursue equality and justice. Godlikeness is something quite different from Darwinian survivalist tendencies (chiefly concerned with propagation and the survival of one's gene pool) and the reduction of emotions to chemistry. Skeptics do not see Jehovah in these matters because they start from a different place and are consumed with advancing an alternative narrative! Harmonizing two such opposing points of view is futile and neither party wants that outcome anyway.

Paul is not conflicted in Ephesians 1. His praise is confident and boldly stated. The idea of two books, one of nature and one of revelation, is not original to this preacher. Even Aristotle keep two books. His writings *exoterical* were written for his "common auditors," or public schoolers; but his *acromatical* writings were for his private scholars and more familiar acquaintances. Even Greek philosophers like Plutarch envisioned the "world to resemble a divinity school." Early Christians would have embraced this idea but asserted that as Scripture tells us, Christ is our doctor/instructor. He teaches us all things by His works and by His words. Jesus, with His disciples, appears to have followed the Aristotelian method, teaching in parables to the public and tutoring in private as to the real meaning and purpose of things. Just so, God maintains two books, the book of His creatures (a common place book, for all men) and the book of Scripture (the statute book for for His domestic hearers). *It is no wonder that when the world tries to "read" the Scriptures as "outsiders" they are prone to misuse and abuse it!!* What would we expect? However, we must not forget to "take it from whom it comes."

Stated positively, those of us who belong to Jesus should be **heavenly-minded** and that is because we have been blessed **with every spiritual blessing**. Every means all. So we have been chosen **in him before the foundation of the world** and the hope of that election is that **we would be holy and blameless before him**. There's a gem! We were personally chosen **in Him** and, forgiven and justified, to live **before him**. We discern this late in the game—after our redemption **through him**. God saved us through His Son so that He might adopt us **as sons . . . according to the purpose of his will**. All of this is from heaven. God is the initiator and the One who out of His own love and in His own mercy chose and sought and saved us. **To the praise of his glorious grace**. So a chief feature of being **heavenly-minded** is being *God-sourced*. God sent His own Son, **the Beloved**, into the world to save whom He would have saved. No-one deserved it, no-one earned it. That **in Him we have redemption through His blood: even the forgives of our trespasses**, our sins, transgressions. When the cross is erected in the very place what our self-centeredness previously reigned, *we become heavenly-centered as well as heavily-minded*. Everything changes: our thoughts, our desires, our plans and our ambitions; they are all subsumed under His will, confirmed to His purposes. And that brings us to our equipping for obedience, **out of the lavish riches of His grace**. Whatever our scarcity and want here below, we are a people of abundance, of surplus not mere surfeit. We have more than enough grace to make it through. I know it may feel like barely enough. That doesn't change the Word which

says, super-abundant, lavish, excessive provision. We have enough power to change course and not just putter along, getting by. The future beckons to us, with its vast grand vision—quite the draw! **To unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth.** This is the in-gathering to come and, again, it is all God’s work: He gathers whom He will as He will when He wills to do so. But seeings that this is the current of things, the grain in the wood, the structure in the stone—seeings how this is how things are headed, we can choose to row with the flow.

Those of you who have gone on canoe trips know, you can idle and float down stream (fishing for supper excepted!); or you can put the paddle to it and see how fast you can go! The former is pleasant, the latter is exhilarating! If you work it, you can have camp set up when the others arrive, the fire started and a meal on the way. In the kingdom of God things work in a similar way. Let those of us who have this inner urgency¹ strenuously pursue the goal. They tend to outrun the storm, they find a suitable site where others, following, may find welcome shelter. Some come through wet and some come through dry. I am not thinking of just our generation, but also of the saints who have gone before. In this great adventure of the faith, let’s have both the joy and the fun.

Amen.

¹ There is some controversy over the final words uttered by Hugh Latimer to Nicolas Ridley. In the first edition of Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, 1563, it was recorded as “I can learn from no man.” This being directed at the human council which had tried the two for the “Protestant” heresy, *sola scriptura*. In the second edition, Foxe recorded another saying: “Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.” The second sounds more epic as would follow in lionization of the Oxford martyrs (shortly after these two were burned at the stake—Bishop Cranmer also was executed, having fallen out with the king. Cranmer edited the first two editions of “Book of Common Prayer.” (1548) That work contained the full liturgy of the Anglican communion. He also oversaw the collection of sermons, the Homilies, which shaped the reformed theology of mid-16th century England. In the spirit of veracity, the first saying is probably the authentic one.