

“When Error Is Detected”
 Pastor Sam Richards
 14 January 2024
 Text: Psalm 119:19

**119:19 I am a stranger in the earth;
 Do not hide Your commandments from me.**

Abraham Herschel, a notable rabbi, wrote: “The words “I am a stranger on earth” (Psalm 119:19) have been attributed to God (so that ‘God is a stranger in the world.’) our task is to bring God back into the world, into our lives.” (In his book, God in search of Man, A Philosophy of Judaism, 1955) He committed a theological/exegetical error. The correct attribution would be to the Psalmist himself, and this according to the majority opinion of biblical scholars. **It is an error to attribute verse 19 to God**; that is to shift the referent of verses 17-19 from the Psalmist: **Deal bountifully with thy servant . . . open thou mine eyes**. These are two petitions addressed to God (as the understood subject). Requests are not attributes! And the first person found in verse 19: **I am a stranger in the earth** represents a radical shift in focus—it is a description of the Psalmist’s condition, not God’s. It is tied to the third request: **hide not thy commandments from me**. This is the natural, unforced reading of the text. And the preponderance of scriptural references to **stranger**, from a brief scriptural overview, seem to designate the status of human persons, rather than the divine. Aliens, foreigners and sinful man, yes, but not of God.

A. Maclaren in his sermon, “A Stranger In the Earth,” approached the same verse differently: “He (the Palmist) looks all around and everywhere sees the signature of a loving divine hand. The earth is full to brimming of Thy mercy. It takes faith to see that. It takes a deeper and firmer hold of the thought of a present God than most men have *to feel that*. [It really irritates me that Maclaren includes this subjective phrase! It is an unwarranted aside to human subjectivity.] For most of us, the world has got to be very empty of God now.”

To what should we attribute this noted sense of “emptiness?” The absence of God, the death of God, atheism or “the emptiness of the cosmos,” is spot on with “the world has got to be very empty of God now.” I would suggest that the “scientific mind” has something to do with a general *secularization of the universe*—a human projection. The “enlightened,” scientific mindset apparently prefers a “bio-technological machine,; a biological model of the mechanistic universe—a theory advanced by rationalists. Or they warm to “the workings of a blind impersonal force”¹—or something like *chance plus time*, or *natural adaptation* and *mutation* which are abstract, philosophical categories! And with these naturalistic models they displace God—a kind of *cancellation*, culturally speaking, on a par with prohibiting prayer in school and bible banning.

Maclean laments the absence of “the sense of a deeper, larger truth—the living purpose and will of God.” That sense has been filtered out; God is no longer neither

¹ There is nothing inherently offensive with the effort to describe the material universe without reference to God. However this scientific convention does not establish either the existence, or non-existence of God. It simply is a setting aside of theological considerations by those who may well have no theological expertise to offer. It can be a honest avoidance of meddling!

great, nor good; He is irrelevant. An unnecessary hypothesis! I think that this development is what some writers have described as the “disenchantment of the universe.” Of course, there are many who have not bought into this shift, this godless paradigm. Gerald Manley Hopkins, a contemporary of Maclaren, in “God’s Grandeur” (written 1877, published 1889) voices this sentiment:

For all this, nature is not spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things:
 And though the last lights off the black west went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—

Many believers affirm *this deep, down thing*, which is “the living purpose and will of God” as something evident in all creation! This religious perspective embraces the thought of “the rejoicing earth, full of God’s mercy as some cup is full of rich wine, or as the flowers in the morning are filled with dew. The Bible does not look at the external world; the material universe from a scientific point of view, nor does it look at it from a poetical point of view, but from a simply religious one.” (Maclaren) **“The thought is intended to exclude man and man’s ways and all connected with him.”** The Psalmist takes in the whole of creation and asserts two things: 1. Surely, all of it is full of divine mercy—God is directly at work throughout! And 2. Everything about creation is the object of God’s loving thought and provision. The Genesis blessing, **And God saw that it was good**, is the equivalent of His benign smile—His delight in every part and particle of it.

Herschel’s error is rooted, I think, in his *man-centeredness*². God is no stranger to the earth because He is Creator. We do not need to “bring God back” because he never left. What is lacking is the sense of “a present God,” Maclaren’s phrase. And I want to extrapolate on that idea: of a present God. It is next door to, say, an incarnate God! Or God as immanent in all this. Incarnation is specifically God taking on flesh, coming to and dwelling amongst us—*one can hardly be more present than that!* When we cite **The heavens are telling the glory of God**, part of our meaning is this idea of a present God—God is present in His works, manifest in Creation—it is His creation and has His fingerprints all over it. This perspective is a God-centered approach (theocentric).

When we affirm/assert that God is *directly at work in the entire Creation*, we are talking about matters of governance, providence—and design. Furthermore God as the “Lord of history” is consistent with the present God as Creator and both seek to capture the direct involvement of a living God. *This, of course, is diametrically opposed to man-centeredness.* It is an article of faith to say: **God is no stranger in the earth.**

But, I am. Alienation. **I am a stranger in the earth** the verse continues. That is part of the human condition, at least for the unredeemed, and for unbelievers. The picture presented in Genesis is that everything, as created, is admirably adapted for the place they are designed to fill; everything is harmoniously joined together. Lions, we would say, are content to be lions, they don’t identify as giraffes, or . . . as pythons. They are content to hunt and devour gazelles—if they can catch them, and the gazelles are

² This is termed “anthropomorphism.” The Humanist endeavor is mostly man-centered,

happy to outrun them and survive the hunt. *There was no discernible envy, or discontent until, well, until sin was introduced—and it was our peculiar problem.*

Suddenly Eve was not content with her divine provision; she was persuaded that the fruit was desirable and would, or so the serpent said, would make her wise. I wonder if she ever questioned why God didn't put this kind of wisdom straight into her diet? Was God withholding something awesome . . . setting the stage for salvation history . . . or protecting her (us) from something disastrous. Probably the latter. Anyway, from that point in time on, we, humans, seem to have been beset with the idea that we are "odd man out," we just don't fit in naturally anymore. We imagine that we don't belong to "this goodly fellowship of creature hood;" that we are exceptional.

Every other creature seems content; we are not. They are filled to the brim, to their fullest capacity and we lament our emptiness, our limited incapacities! We introduced grief, and sadness and solitariness when we cut off our spiritual life and fellowship with God in Eden—His ever presence, the daily walks, the close communication—even the collaboration **keeping the garden and in the naming of the animals**. (Both acts of dominion and stewardship as responsible beings!) As created, we were **vice-regents with God** and we cast it away on the false hoping of becoming more godly than we were already created to be! Pride and ambition were in our blind spots—if not actually being our blind spots. It was Satan's work for sure.

We learned much that other creatures are happily ignorant of: the burdens of toil and care, the capacity to project, forecast and anticipate; we gained memory and inherited guilt, shame and regret—they were more than we could ignore, or shrug off! We became driven by desires and addicted to pleasure, misconstruing pain and consigned to suffering consciously plagued by questions, self-doubt and self-deception. And if God had not chosen to rescue us, we would have been condemned to hopelessness forever.

Part of that rescue/mercy mission was the gift and provision of His word, an operation of grace. Psalm 119 is all about **the preciousness of God's word—the grace that it embodies**. And that is where the second line aptly comes in: **Do not hide Your commandments from me**. Because **Thy commandments** are our "food," they are what we need most, they are the one thing that can bring us comfort and peace!; we must have not merely a Bible handy, but we must so live with it so that the will of God, our knowledge of the love and purposes of God are inscribed on our hearts. God has promised to do this, we must cooperate with Him in the process! Until we can declare, **I delight to do Thy will**. . . until we can happily commit our whole being to "lay itself beneath the molded of Thy impressing purpose," we have not attained to it fully yet!

So what are we to make of thee request: **Do not hide Your commandments?** Does this refer to a divine refusal to disclose them? Is that likely, possible? Of course, the answer is that He has not done so, but has openly both revealed them and is willing to imprint them on every willing heart! If that is our possession, if we have a firm desire to apply ourselves to doing it, then toil becomes easy—then work becomes a blessing. Sadness will evaporate and we, seeking a **better country**, will be energized and excited to serve Him. Restlessness and discontent will join with that departing sorrow. If we have His statues, His commandments, His ordinances, we have all we need—and that provision is our mercy! May it fill us to the brim. As surely as God feeds the young

ravens, as He will supply our needs—He does not neglect any part of His glorious creation. Immortal souls surely count for as much as the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air. Did not our Lord says as much?!

The law, the will of God, and the power to perform it are braided together in inextricable union, in Jesus Christ Himself—in Him are grace, and truth and mercy conjoined. Praise be to God.

Amen.