



PSALMS

The Prayer Book of the Bible

Triggers to the Praise of God

Psalm 19

June 22, 2008

First Presbyterian Church - Colorado Springs, CO

Jim Singleton

Preface

Today we continue in a sermon series on the Psalms. We are still studying Psalms that are (1) about the issue of wonder and (2) that trigger praise. So I want to take you to Psalm 19. C.S. Lewis said of this Psalm, "I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."

Introduction

It is so easy to jump to conclusions based on the data before you. Yet, we will often find that our conclusions are not quite right. It happened to me this week when a letter arrived unexpectedly. Initially I felt that it was quite undeserved, but at least I finally got the letter. The letter was from the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY. The minute I saw it I knew what it was about. My hunch was that it was a kind of apology. The Hall was writing me to express that they knew that if some major league team had signed me years ago, then I would have been inducted into the hall this summer along with Goose Gossage. My second thought was to wonder if maybe they were opening a new wing for those who would have loved to have been in the Hall of Fame but are not. The clues were all there. It was a real envelope from the Baseball Hall of Fame. My name was printed correctly. It was postmarked Cooperstown. All the clues were pointing in one direction – until I opened the envelope. Sadly, I was merely being invited to subscribe to a new magazine produced by the Hall of Fame. There was no mention of my curve ball. There was no mention of the one time I did get called upon to relieve the pitcher in a little league game, but as I warmed up I threw the ball over the fence, and the coach told me to sit down. Now I don't want to subscribe to the magazine.

Sometimes there are clues in our lives that we line up incorrectly. You remember how the girl in chemistry class smiled at you and you thought she must have a crush on you. You began to think through when you should call her and where you should take her to dinner. She was smiling at you all during class. After class you decided to say something to her and ask her what her smile was about, only to discover that she was smiling because you had dried toothpaste on your cheek. You can miss all the clues.

I read recently that if you offer a little child a dime or a penny, the child will often take the penny because it is larger than the dime and seems more valuable. We can miss all the right clues to meaning in this life.

Lots of people from lots of backgrounds put together clues from nature, from relationships, from wisdom, and come up with a picture of God. But do they know that is really God? You can fail to praise the true God because you get the clues wrong.

Exposition

Getting the clues wrong happened a lot in the ancient Near East. Let me give you one example. In ancient Mesopotamia, in what is now Iraq, Shamash was the name of the Sun-god. In most ancient cultures, the Sun was regarded as so powerful it was concluded that it must be a god. In addition, they decided that Shamash was the upholder of justice and righteousness. In the Code of Hammurabi, Shamash is pictured as giving the law. They believed that each night the sun god rested in the sea in the arms of its lover god. And that each morning it would be released and resume its circuit across the sky. There are lots of clues in the story of Shamash that are right – there is a god who is over the sun and over the law. But is it Shamash? Would we praise Shamash? That is where Psalm 19 comes in. The writer is helping us to understand our triggers to praise God. Sure enough the first one is creation.

1) Trigger #1 – Creation (vs. 1-6)

*"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words. No sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the earth."*

The Psalmist begins by telling us that creation is, in effect, speaking – it is saying something. The Psalmist tells us that it is telling us of the glory of God. The first part of this Psalm is quite eloquent in letting us know that Creation is speaking. In the reading from Romans 1 we heard that creation does tell us lots of things. But what does it tell us?

Creation leaves us some tracks to follow. But to be a tracker you have to understand tracks. For instance, if you are on a walk anywhere around here, you might see the tracks of a black bear or of a lion. If you see the tracks side by side you would know which is larger. But if you saw them alone ... maybe not. Often when I am out on a walk any track of a dog or a house cat begins to look like a black bear to me. Yet, if you saw only the track, but had never seen a bear, you would not know what you are really seeing. Seeing only creation you could be missing a clue. And creation looks different in different places.

Being in London recently brought that home to me. I am not a city guy at heart. Going around London caused me to have difficulty seeing the creation declaring the glory of God. But London has big parks and lots of trees in those parks. Houston is an even tougher place to see the glory of God. Humidity and mosquitoes and expressways get in my way of seeing God's creation. On the other hand, Colorado offers nearly nothing but spectacular views. Yet, many people in Colorado do not know what creation means.

So when this one Psalm starts out, "The Heavens declare the glory of God," that is saying something very significant. Notice in this Psalm that the sun is not a god but is a little thing passing through the tent of God. This may have been saying something to other cultures – that our God is really big.

I was recently in the British Gallery of Art, where I saw some of the world's greatest paintings. I am really slow and really late to the story of art in the world, but it is growing. Yet, as I rounded a corner I saw a picture that caused me to say it was something Rembrandt had done. And when I got close enough to read the little tag – sure enough it was. I think I would recognize the really famous ones by Rembrandt – like The Prodigal Son. But his self-portrait was less famous – and yet I knew it was him Don't give me a test yet – but one day.

When you see the general revelation that comes from creation you are filled with wonder and you want to praise – but we need some clues to know who we are praising.

2) Trigger #2 – The Law (vs. 7-11)

To really praise God you need something more – another clue.

*“The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.”*

The Psalmist seems to jump to a whole new subject beginning in vs. 7. Yet here the Psalmist is praising God for the giving of his word. In the first half of each phrase he is describing the character of Scripture.

a) The character of scripture – perfect, sure, right, pure, clear, true, righteous, desirable, and perfect (meaning, without blemish).

In the second part of the verse he is describing the impact scripture has.

b) Impact of scripture – revives the soul, breaks through darkness in our thinking, makes wise the simple, lifts despair that dulls our judgment, rejoices the heart. The impact of the word is “sweeter than honey from a honeycomb” and better than much fine gold.

The creation is like one book – but you need the clues in the other book for creation to make sense. You have to open the letter to read what is really on the inside.

Star Trek: The Next Generation is a show that depicts the adventures of the crew of the starship Enterprise in the 24th century. In one episode, the crew goes back in time to the old west, and the captain meets Mark Twain. After a series of adventures, as the captain bids farewell to Mr. Twain, he says “I wish I had more time — I have so many questions I have to ask you.” The character of Mark Twain replies “Just read my books — everything you need to know about me is in there.” God could say that about the Word.

Francis Schaeffer, one of the great thinkers of the 20th century, explained the relationship of revelation in creation and revelation in Scripture this way:

Finite man in the external universe, being finite, has no sufficient reference point if he begins absolutely and autonomously from himself and thus needs certain knowledge. God gives us this in the Scriptures. . . . In other words, because we are finite creatures, we cannot grasp the foundational truths of the universe without God’s direct help.

Scripture is the compass to provide the clues to what we are seeing. Ferdinand Magellan is often celebrated as one of the best navigators in history. But when he circumnavigated the globe, he had 35 compasses on his five ships. That is what the scripture does for us. To truly praise our God we need to know who he is. We praise God with two books – the book of creation and the book of scriptures.

3) Trigger #3 – Our Hearts

But there is a third clue. With creation and the word together we have the right clues to praise God. But those two clues also point to something in our own hearts. Here the Psalmist asks, “who can discern his errors?” He continues, “Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression.”

The Psalmist wants to praise this great God with his life. He does not want to go astray. He seems to know there are dangers lurking in his heart.

He concludes with a request – *“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”*

Knowing God is our Rock is something creation can teach. But knowing God as our Redeemer is something only scripture teaches. And we only know we need the Redeemer when the word shows us our sin. Creation does not show us that – only seeing into God’s word will help us to see our need of a Redeemer. And the word of God also shows us the solution to our sin problem.

Conclusion

Psalm 19 shows that God’s revelation in creation is enough to show that He exists and He is glorious. It also shows that God’s revelation in Scripture is trustworthy and is our guide for life. When the clues of God’s revelation in nature and God’s revelation of himself in the Word come together – we see ourselves as needing a Savior. And all that comes together in praise. We discover Jesus as sufficient for our need. And we can’t quit praising this God – whose heavens declare the glory of God.

Let me close with the story of Emile Caillet, who was a French philosopher and who eventually taught at Princeton Seminary. Caillet had received a naturalistic education – meaning there was no supernatural in it. He felt that he was missing something. He came to decide that what he needed was a book that would understand him. He was highly educated but found no such book. So he determined to write one for himself. He started a file of inspirational things and decided to put it all together. Once he had everything written into a book he took his wife and they went to a small town in France, where Caillet sat down under a tree to read the book that would understand him. A feeling of disappointment came over him for the book did not work – it was something of his own making. Dejected, he returned the book to his pocket. At that very moment his wife came up to him with a Bible. He had never seen a Bible in his life. His wife was almost afraid to give it to him – for he had been insistent that he never wanted one in his house. But that morning she had stumbled upon a small Protestant chapel and, much to her own surprise, had asked for one. Caillet snatched up the book greedily and began to read it. He wrote this, “I read and read and read – now aloud with an indescribable warmth surging within . . . I could not find words to express my awe and wonder. And suddenly the realization dawned upon me: ‘This was the Book that would understand me! I needed it so much, yet, unaware.’” (in Boice, Ephesians, 254-255)