

Psalm 19:1-6

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[0 : 00] We are committed to a Scotland that is fair and equal, and that is why we intend to proceed with plans to allow same-sex marriage. We believe that this is the right thing to do.

With these words, Nicola Sturgeon announced the predictable intentions of the Scottish government following the recent consultation on the matter to hand. As I listened to her speak just a few days ago, I was particularly drawn by the basis that she provided for proceeding in the particular direction indicated. It was, she assured us, the right thing to do.

Now, I applaud her concern to do the right thing. But is it the right thing? Well, who decides? Does Nicola Sturgeon decide what the right thing to do is? Does Mr. Salmon and his avant-garde cutting-edge ministers? Do they decide? If I were to have a wee chat with Nicola, an opportunity I don't anticipate being provided, I would, I hope, be gracious enough to congratulate her for wanting to do the right thing. But I would respectfully contend that the Scottish government is proposing to do is not the right thing. The right thing would be to maintain and defend the institution of marriage as historically and presently constituted, the lifelong union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others. Now, at this point in our wee chat, we would, of course, be met by an impasse. You see, Nicola would say white, and I would say white, and I would say black, she would say yay, and I would say nay. So, who is right?

How are we to establish? What is the right thing to do? We can be agreed that it's important to do the right thing. On that we are agreed. But what is the right thing? How are we to know what is the right thing to do?

[2 : 33] As Christians, we have a clear answer, and all that I'm going to say is unashamedly grounded on our convictions as Christians. And as Christians, we do have a clear answer to that question, well, what is the right thing to do? Who decides? It's not for Nicola Sturgeon or for David McPherson to decide. It's not our call to independently determine what is right and wrong. As Christians, we believe that the Creator has both the prerogative and has exercised the prerogative to make that call.

It is God who decides. But how can we know what He has decided concerning marriage or any other subject for that matter? Well, we believe that God is a revealing God. He is a God who has chosen to make Himself and His determinations known. How does He do that? Well, that is the matter that we wish to consider today as we explore Psalm 19. The very question posed in the context of the current marriage debate is addressed by this psalm. What is the right thing to do, and how are we to know? Well, what does the psalm say? In verse 8, we are told very clearly and unequivocally, the precepts of the Lord are right.

What is the right thing to do? Well, what we need to do is establish what God has determined, because His determinations, His precepts are right. The precepts of the Lord are right, not the doubtlessly well-intentioned proposals of Nicola and her buddies, or the deemed homophobic rants of free church ministers.

Rather, the precepts of the Lord are right. The question that must always be asked is, what saith the Lord?

What does God say? Of course, that is a question that shines by its absence in the debate. Now, it's not my intention, and this will be a great relief to some, I would imagine, it's not my intention to ask that question, what is the right thing to do in relation to the issue of marriage, with which we have introduced the whole theme. My views on that are in the public domain and boringly predictable. My purpose is broader and, I think, more fundamental. It concerns how God reveals Himself and His will to us. How does God speak? You see, what we are claiming as Christians is that the right thing to do is what God determines, and we need to know what God has determined. Well, how do we know what God has determined? How can we know what God is like and what He

thinks about anything? The psalm before us describes the two principal means by which God speaks. God speaks by creation, and God speaks by His spoken Word. To use the theological language that is sometimes used, we can speak of general and special revelation. General revelation encompasses creation and providence, and special revelation concerns God's Word as it is found in the Bible, and very especially in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh revealed to us in the Bible. Now, this morning, we will consider how the psalm describes general revelation, creation very particularly, and this evening, we will see what it has to say about what we're calling special revelation, or God's spoken Word. Indeed, if things go according to plan, we will leave the final section of the psalm, possibly for next Lord's Day. The first six verses of the psalm deal with what we are calling a general revelation. We can order or structure our consideration of the verses in the following way. In these verses, we are presented with, first of all, the messenger of God's revelation, the messenger of God's revelation, but we're also given an insight into the manner of delivery of the message. So, you have the messenger presented to us, but also a description of the manner in which the message is delivered. And then, of course, what we also have, very importantly, is the message itself. What is the message that this messenger delivers in a particular way? So, let's think of these verses using that general structure. First of all, then, the messenger.

[7 : 52] Who is the messenger? Well, the messenger is God's very own creation. In verse 1, we read, the heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of His hands. The language is clear. The heavens declare. They announce. They reveal. They make known. In verse 2, the same truth continues to be described for us. Day after day, they pour forth speech. Night after night, they display knowledge, knowledge, knowledge, knowledge, where the they is a reference in all probability to the heavens and the skies already mentioned, though it could be a more general reference to creation in all its broadness and in its entirety. Creation pours forth speech. Creation displays knowledge.

The messenger, then, very clearly is identified by the psalmist as creation itself. Creation speaks. Creation reveals. Creation is the messenger. And the psalmist develops this truth with particular reference to the Son in verses 4 to 6. He continues to present to us this messenger of God's revelation. It is creation in all its breadth. But he narrows in to give us one particular, if you wish, example. And he speaks of the Son and describes how the Son fulfills that revelatory function. The Son is afforded by the psalmist a special place in the creation choir that sings its song of revelation. Notice the language that is used, and notice the truths that are identified there from verse 4. Notice how explicit reference is made to God assigning the Son a place to occupy and a course to run. In the heavens, He has pitched a tent for the Son. And then it speaks of how the Son makes its circuit from one end to the other. And so, God provides a place to occupy and a mission to fulfill for the Son.

The whole firmament provides the Son both its tent and its track. What an arena that God has provided for the Son, much more magnificent than the Olympic Stadium or the streets of central London peppered with iconic backdrops that are impressive as the marathon runners or the triathlon runners run through the streets of London. And we see all these famous landmarks. What an arena! Well, the arena that God has provided for the Son to perform its function, how much more majestic and glorious. Indeed, as an aside, really, but one that comes to my mind, the idea of God placing the Son with such care and purpose brings to my own mind what we know of the importance for human existence of the Son occupying precisely the place it does occupy. Those who know more of these things tell us how the Son is placed so precisely, exactly what it has to be that we might enjoy life and flourish. But God has placed the Son there. God has placed the Son. He has pitched a tent for the Son. He has determined its course. The psalmist then compares the Son to a bridegroom and an athlete.

[11 : 45] The picture of an athlete, particularly topical, a champion rejoicing to run its course, and doing so with the purpose of making known truth, of delivering a message. The Son in all creation is identified by the psalmist as God's messenger. It's worth just making the point, though it isn't, I imagine, an issue that would concern most of us. But there are those who would look at a psalm like this, and indeed the Bible in its entirety, and be quick to mock and to scoff the so-called primitive language that is employed, and how that reveals just a complete lack of understanding of the cosmos and of science. And here, of course, we have the language of the sun rising and setting, of running its course. And there would be those who would look on and say, well, what a piece of

nonsense. We who are enlightened know that that's not what actually happens. But such criticism is futile and petty because the language here is the language of observation, the language of description. The psalmist describes what he observes, and he does so accurately.

The psalmist observes the daily course of the sun from dawn to dusk. It's not his purpose to be scientifically precise, any more than a modern-day poet is required to be so, any more than we are required to be so when we speak of the sun rising and the sun setting. But leaving that to one side, the main point at issue here as we consider these verses, and as we consider the messenger who is identified for us, is the messenger assigned by the creator, the task of revealing truth to us. But I said that we would also consider not only who the messenger is, but the manner in which the message is delivered. We want to do that before looking at what is really fundamental or central, and that is the message itself. But just briefly, notice some features or some aspects of the manner in which this message is delivered. The first thing we can notice in our passage is that it is what we could call wordless. Verses 3 and 4, there is no speech or language where their voice is not heard, their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the end of the world. Now, the manner in which the NIV chooses to translate these verses is not altogether helpful. There's a seemingly unnecessary or gratuitous addition of the word where in verse 3. Just bear with me as we consider the implications of that. Let's read verse 3 again, removing the word where, which is not in the original, but which is inserted because it's thought that that helps us to better understand what is being said. But listen to what is said when we remove the word. There is no speech or language, their voice is not heard, their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the end of the world. See, when you remove the word where, what you have is a declaration that the manner of revelation is without words. This is much better captured, and to the credit of those who are responsible, by sing psalms. Let's just read the manner in which that verse is constructed, translated, and constructed in sing psalms. Sing psalms. You can look in your blue psalm book and you'll find it there. Verse 3, there we read, there is no language used or any spoken word. No sound is made by them, and yet their voice is heard. You see, this is the idea. What the psalmist is saying is that creation doesn't use words.

That's not the mode of communication used by creation. It doesn't use words. No words, no speech, no language. Their voice in that sense is not heard by the vehicle of words, and yet the voice of creation does go out into all the earth, and the words of creation, if you wish, to the ends of the world. So, in terms of the manner of communication, it is wordless communication. But though words are neither used nor written documents delivered, it is nonetheless, the psalmist declares confidently, a voice that can be and is heard.

[16 : 41] It is wordless, but it is eloquent. But the psalmist says more concerning the manner in which creation speaks. Rather surprisingly, we might think, the psalmist describes the manner of communication as exuberant.

In verse 2, the words there that are translated day after day, they pour forth speech, that is, the heavens or the skies, or indeed all of creation pours forth speech, translates a verb that can mean to bubble forth. If you could imagine a fountain of water bubbling forth water. And the picture is of a creation that cannot contain itself. It has so much to say, and it declares its message with great exuberance.

So much to say, so many verses to sing in honor of its Creator. The picture is of exuberant proclamation, and this picture of exuberant proclamation is reinforced very especially by the language used to describe the sun. In the heavens He has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from His pavilion. What a picture of exuberant joy, like a champion rejoicing to run His course. Just imagine that beaming smile of Jessica Ennis as she crossed the line at the end of the 800 meters last night.

What joy, what excitement, what enthusiasm! And here the psalmist describes creation in the sun, exuberantly fulfilling its revealing role assigned to it by the Creator.

The manner in which the message is delivered, wordless, exuberant. But notice also that it is obedient. The sun, and we focus on what is said of the sun very particularly, the sun knows and delights in the place it has been assigned and in the task it has been given and obediently and joyfully goes about its business. Even now as we are gathered here, the sun is going about its business. It is running its course assigned to it by God, and it does so with exuberance and with obedience.

[19 : 06] The sun never wakes up and says, well, I'm not going to rise today. I'm not going to set this evening. No, it obediently performs the role that it has been given, a role that is intended to reveal truth concerning its Creator.

Let's move on to what is of particular or central concern, and that is the message delivered. What is the message? We've identified the messenger, the psalmist does so very clearly for us, creation itself, the heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of His hands.

We thought something of what the psalmist says concerning the manner in which the message is delivered, but what about the message itself? Well, before we consider the content of the message, we do want to just note the scope and reach of the message. Do all hear the message?

I don't know how many tuned in to the opening ceremony of the Olympics. Different figures were quoted at the upper end of the scale, four billion. Now, I don't know who's counting, but there you go.

That's the figure that was quoted as to the worldwide audience for the opening ceremony. Now, that's a lot of people, but it still leaves a couple of billion oblivious to the goings-on at Olympic Park. Now, it's hard to credit, but there are people in the world who know nothing of Bradley Wiggins' sideburns.

[20 : 41] Or, and this is astonishing, nearly shocking, some have never heard of Jessica Enns. Well, there you go. There are such poor souls in this planet of ours. But what of the message that creation delivers?

What is its reach or scope? Well, the psalmist is eloquently and powerfully clear. He says, the message is seen and heard by all. I wonder, and I only wonder, but I wonder if this is perhaps why the psalmist chooses to identify the heavens and the skies and the sun as being the particular representatives of creation in revealing to us, rather than the mountains or the oceans. You see, there are people who don't see mountains. There are some people who have never seen an ocean, but the skies and the heavens and the sun, well, everybody sees the heavens and the skies and the sun. All enjoy the heat of the sun.

But more explicitly, as regards the reach of this message, we have the declarations in verse 4 and in verse 6. In verse 4 particularly, we're told, their voice, this voice of creation, their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. This is all-inclusive language.

Everybody hears. And then in verse 6, speaking of the sun, we're told that nothing is hidden from its heat. Nothing, no one, hidden from its heat. So that's with regard to the reach or the scope of the message, but what of the message itself? What of this song that creation sings that is heard by all? What is the message of the song?

Well, the song tells us about the Creator. And what does creation tell us about God? Well, if we limit ourselves to what the psalmist identifies, which I'm sure is not intended to be exhaustive, but nonetheless helpful, what does the psalmist say about the message that creation communicates?

[23 : 04] Well, we return to verse 1. The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of His hands, or His handiwork. And if we begin there, because it's in a sense it's the most obvious message of creation. Creation declares the handiwork of God.

It declares and reveals to us God's creative power. It reveals to us something of His unparalleled genius. His handiwork is revealed by creation. Now, I know some of us have had the opportunity of spending some holiday time in these past few weeks. We were across on the west coast, in a cottage overlooking Loch Brum. And on an evening, looking across the mense as the sun would set, or or after a time of rain, and a rainbow, a full rainbow right in front of us over Loch Brum. Were we not able to hear the message of creation? Were we not able to recognize and admire God's handiwork in what was before us? But the psalmist says more. He speaks of the heavens, declaring the glory of God. Creation reveals a God who is glorious and majestic and awesome. A word that is used often today, rather trivially, not quibbling. Language evolves and words change their meanings. But when we think of that word, this is a word that is fitting for what creation declares concerning God. He is an awesome God, a majestic, a glorious God. And this is something we can know, something that is revealed to us by creation. And can we not go further and say that creation reveals a God before whom we must bow in grateful reverence and adoration and awe? The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of His hands. But creation also reveals to us, limiting ourselves to what the psalmist says in these verses, it reveals to us God's beneficence, His kindness. When the psalmist speaks of the sun, and we thought of how the sun is placed by God and the course that it runs, but there's another element in the language

used, where the psalmist speaks of nothing being hidden from its heat. And there I think it's not only a case that we're conscious of the sun's presence, we feel its heat, but we are blessed by that heat. We are provided for by the light and the heat and the life-giving light that the sun gives. The sun is evidence of

God's kindness to us, indeed of His kindness to all, for the sun shines when it does on all. Now, these are significant truths about God that creation reveals to us. There is more, no doubt, but these are ones that we find in these verses. To recap, as we would draw things to a close, creation is the messenger. Or perhaps if we take a further step back, at the very beginning we recognized or we made the claim that God speaks generally in one of two ways, or there are two vehicles of revelation, creation and His spoken word. And in regard to this first means that He uses, the message of God's word, the message of God's word, and the message of God's word, and the message of God is delivered in a wordless form and yet eloquently. It is delivered with joyful exuberance and humble obedience by the messenger. The message is delivered to all and is a message about God, a God who is powerful and beautiful and wise, a God who is glorious and awesome, a God who is beneficent and kind.

But there are two questions that need to be posed and briefly considered. The first is this, is the message heard? Or we could maybe phrase it in this way, is the message understood?

[27 : 32] The psalmist certainly contends that the message is available to all and at one level heard by all. But do all really hear and grasp what is being said? Or we could maybe put the question in this way, all hear, but do all listen? The apostle Paul gives us a sobering answer to that question in his letter to the Romans. And we are going to limit ourselves simply to reading what he says in Romans chapter 1, where it's reasonable to suggest at any rate that Paul, in what he says, has in the backdrop of his mind this very psalm and what this psalm declares. But listen to what Paul says in relation to this question. Is the message heard or is it understood? Romans chapter 1 and verse 18, The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities,

His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, been understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. We read on, For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. And so, Paul continues his rather sober line of argument.

These truths concerning God have been made plain since and by and through creation. They are available to all at one level, all here, but evidently all do not listen, all do not grasp, all do not understand. Now, the fault lies not with the messenger or with the message, but with those to whom the message is delivered. And that fault problem, a very grievous problem, is one that can only be dealt with by special revelation, which we will come on to this evening.

So, that's one question we need to pose and give some thought to, is the message heard or understood? But there's another question, which will also lead us on to what we have to say this evening. Is the message enough? Creation is the messenger. Creation delivers its message exuberantly and obediently and faithfully. But is it enough? Is the message enough? Does the message tell us all we need to know about God and His character and His purposes? Now, in answering that question, we shouldn't precipitately make the mistake of disparaging the message of general revelation, because the truth that it reveals is significant. But we also recognize its limitations.

Creation provides true knowledge, but not saving knowledge. It reveals that God is worthy to be worshiped, but not how He should be worshiped. It reveals God as creator and provider, but not God as Father and Savior. And creation tells us nothing about Jesus. Or certainly in the mere act of observing and admiring creation, we do not discover truth about Jesus. I could admire the sunset over the minch. I could stand in awe at the full rainbow in front of the door of the cottage over Loch Brum, but that didn't tell me anything about Jesus. Now, this is not a failing of general revelation, but simply to recognize that it was not God's intention that creation alone should serve to reveal all that God wants us to know, and particularly what we need to know that we might be right with God and live lives in friendship with God.

[31 : 47] For that, we need the spoken word. For that, we need special revelation. We need words. We need the words of God, which is precisely what the psalmist moves on to describe in the following verses from verse 7.

And this morning, we must not dive into what will occupy us this evening, but equally, we cannot remain altogether silent concerning this greater revelation required and given by God. And let me close by, if you wish, allowing you with me to ponder on whether there may be some merit in the suggestion that even in these first verses, the psalmist, or in what the psalmist says, there is a hint as to that greater and brighter light of that greater and fuller revelation, very particularly in what the psalmist says concerning the sun. Notice how the sun is described, and ponder whether there is not an intriguing finger being pointed forward to something or someone greater. Notice how we are told that God has pitched a tent for the sun. Now, I ask the question, and it may be best to put it simply in terms of a question, where are we also presented with the reality of a tent being pitched for the purpose of revealing truth? Well, we find that in the passage that we read in John's Gospel. In John and in chapter 1 and in verse 14, what do we read? Concerning the coming of Jesus, the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. And as greater minds have made clear the language here, the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, pitched His tent among us. God pitched a tent for the sun that the sun would reveal a measure of truth concerning Himself. But in the fullness of time, the Son of God pitched His tent among us, that the Word would shine more brightly and clearly.

What else does the psalmist say of the sun? Describes the sun like a bridegroom coming forth from its pavilion, and who is presented to us in the Bible as the glorious bridegroom of the church. The psalmist speaks of the sun as a champion rejoicing to run its course, who is the champion of our salvation, who for the joy set before us, ran His course, and was joyfully obedient even to death and death on a cross. Well, I leave these thoughts for you. Might it be that in these words of the psalmist, even in this first part of the psalm, there is a finger pointing forward. The sun speaks, but the sun points forward to one coming who will speak with an eloquence and clarity and power that will place the sun itself very much in the shade. Let us pray.