

A Devotional Life

Jonathan K. Dodson | Psalm 19 | February 6, 2022

Last week we considered the heart of rest: how to swap out an ambitious heart for an awestruck heart. But how do we nurture that heart when we have kids to raise and work to do? We can't retreat into monastic cells when we have responsibilities in life. Psalm 19 shows us how by bringing together two seemingly unrelated things: the world around us and God's word *to* us, creation and revelation. What's the connection? How does this psalm show us how to live a devotional life? Creation, Revelation, Response.

Creation

Creation *speaks!* The heavens declare; the sky proclaims; the day pours forth speech; the night reveals knowledge. Creation has a voice. It pours forth, the word means to gush, overflow like a fountain. Creation's speech is not intermittent but *constant*. It's message so good, it's like hitting repeat on your favorite Spotify song. Creation's tune is on heavy rotation, and it's no dirge. In verses 4-6, the poet lingers on the expansive witness of the heavens, drawn back to its brightest feature, the sun: *which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy (5)*. Have you witnessed a spouse on their wedding day, the bride gliding down the aisle, the groom standing there quivering for joy? An Olympic athlete running a race with fierce determination until they cross the finish line arms shoot up in elation? Who doesn't want that joy? Creation speaks *joyfully*, continually. *What* is it bonkers about? *What* is so magnificent it's worth repeating every single day? Well, that's the problem. Creation's song is *inaudible*: *There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard (3)*. We can't hear its refrain. We don't know why it's happy. Some people say, I don't need to go to church; nature is where I worship. Creation is where I'm renewed. I see God in culture. I love creation and culture as much as the next person, *but what are they saying?* God exists? But what kind of God? This is the problem with purely creational approach to spiritual renewal. There are no words; there's no interpreter. Getting poison ivy you might conclude God is mean-spirited; bitten by snake that he is vengeful. Seeing a red-orange sunset that he is an artist, a mountain that he is unshakeable. We just don't know what to believe. When I ask my 10 year old why she likes Dua Lipa's "Levitate," she doesn't comment on the

lyrics. She doesn't know what they mean. She just likes the music. Worshiping in creation, without revelation, is like fangirling a song when you don't know the meaning. It's seeking *experience* over substance. And we bring that experience addiction into the church, reducing church to one more event (the worship was good, the preacher is ok, no one talked to me). We line church up next to brunch, movies, concerts, hiking, and *miss creation's praise*. Its song falls on deaf ears. The cosmos is conducting a continual worship service, but without the lyrics we remain on the outside of its praise. We need someone to hand us the liner notes so we can sing!

Scripture Speaks

The second half of psalm hands us the words to creation's praise: The law of the LORD is perfect...the testimony of the Lord is sure...the precepts of the Lord are right...(7-9). The *law, testimony, precepts, commandments, rules* what do each of these mean? No sharp theological distinctions are implied. It's a poetic parallelism to rivet our attention onto the importance of God's word. We are often more preoccupied with human words. Think about how many words you take in a day (text, IG, FB, emails, ads, conversations, movies), but how many of God's words do we take in? Why should we pay attention to his words? They are: *perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, true*. You can't say that of all the other words. Perfect means *whole, complete*. Do you feel unwhole? Here's where you want to be. Sure means not only firm but *verified*. It passes the fact-check, every single time. Beats Fox and CNN, easy. Right—righteous, *good*. Want some good news? Doesn't get any better than this. Clean, pure. You can trust the speaker's motives every single time. True, *true*. In a world of spin and hype, outrage and cancel culture, you'd think we'd be obsessing over these words, but we're not. We're anxious, fearful, bored, exhausted. Christians should be among the most joyful, lively, encouraging, hopeful people on the planet. Why? The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. Do you want joy, do you desire happiness, do you need revival of heart?—*attend to God's perfect word. But it's so boring. That's because you're used prioritizing experience over substance, dopamine over depth.* We've scorched our appetite for God. I'm already familiar with God's *word* but are you familiar with his *speech*? Do you know his *voice*? We may know the verses, the stories, the letters, and yet be entirely unfamiliar with the timber of his voice. So how do we overcome this familiar yet unfamiliar

boredom dilemma? Several things. First, **preparation**. Think about how you prepare to see a movie. Buy the ticket in advance, anticipate the film by watching a trailer, talk about it with a friend, set aside a couple hours, get there, settle comfortably into your seat, and glue your eyes to the screen. You prepare. Eliminate distraction. Focus your attention and time on the movie. *How much more should we prepare to hear God's word, hear his speech?* Set aside time, anticipate hearing from him. Start with 20 minutes. A familiar place, a quiet place. Second, **immersion**. We give ourselves entirely over to the movie. Open ourselves up to the characters, the story, the message. We're absorbed into the film. What if we immersed ourselves in God's word? Turned on our imagination, thought about Jesus "walking beside the sea of Galilee" (he enjoyed creation), plunged into his water into wine story (Lord over creation), reflected on its meaning (king of wine, lord of the banquet). Immerse yourself. Third, **meditation**. This word occurs 19 times in the psalms, half referring to God's word. Read slowly. The word meditate means to murmur, mutter, work the words over and over in your mind *until they seize your heart. What do they mean? What do they tell me about God? How does he want me to respond?* Remember God's words are *trustworthy, pure, true. If so, it's much more important for us to hear God than for God to hear us.* His words are prior to our words, purer than our words, weightier than our words. Meditation is response not initiative: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.* It's his sight and his words that matter most. Meditation. Thomas Watson reminds us: *too often we walk away from the word of God cold hearted because we fail to warm our souls at the fires of meditation.* But prepare, immerse, and meditate and it will *revive the soul.*

Our Response

Creation, Revelation, Response. How should we respond? The final set of verses 12-14 describe a response that is: humble, hopeful, devotional. *Humble: Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!* Each of these is a plea. Here is a person in touch with God's voice, acquainted with his holy presence, asking to be spared of God-belittling sins. Each day I ask the Lord to deliver me from temptations I'm facing in that season: lust, pride, false guilt, control and to reveal unseen sins. I need to do it more.

The humble *plead* with God. He is also *hopeful*. He *expects* to be declared innocent: *Declare me innocent from hidden faults...Then I shall be blameless (perfect), and innocent of great transgression* (12-13). How can he presume this? He knows God's voice; he's acquainted with his mercy in the Scriptures. God's desire to declare innocent, to make blameless. How might he do it? If we're declared blameless, someone has to take the blame! Jesus is wrapped in our blame in order to wrap us in his innocence, clothed in our ugliness to clothe us with his beauty, killed for our sin that we might live in his righteousness. This is Christ for you. His interest for our disinterest. Jesus did not get bored with us! All of this is *devotional*. *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.* Everything straining forward to God: mouth, heart, words, desires. He wants God's sight over his own perspective; God's words over his words, his deepest self—my heart—to be pleasing to God. And this, this Word-prompted joy, this Revelation-shaped response unlocks creation's praise. Now he can see the glory of God in creation. A rock is no longer a rock *but a metaphor for God's sturdy and unchanging nature*. A sunset is no longer a flash of fading color *but a reminder of God's unwaning joy*. A film like *Nightmare Alley* no longer a temporary distraction but a reminder we are all born for an insufferable role from which we need deliverance. *The War on Drugs* not just experience but pointing to substance. Adam sings: *we're all just walking through this darkness all alone*, but revelation sings *the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes*, reviving the soul. God's word unlocks creation's praise, reveals his truth, unveils his beauty, and unfurls his goodness. But, to get beyond experience to substance, to break through the boredom, *we must* prepare, immerse, meditate on God's word and *listen for God's voice*. With the book of Scripture in one hand, and the book of nature in the other, here is a devotional life.