

GOD BEHIND THE MASK

Third in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Let's Look at God*, from Psalm 19:1-14

"The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands."

Psalm 19:1

Do you remember the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion, and Toto return to the City of Oz after destroying the Wicked Witch? They are ushered into the throne room of the Great and Terrible Oz to claim their promised rewards. The huge face of Oz thunders and smokes and belches fire and booms at them with his terrifying voice. Dorothy and her friends quake before him, but that's when Toto slips from Dorothy's arms and tugs at a curtain which, which reveals a small man busily working levers and speaking into a microphone. The voice of Oz bellows, "Ignore that man behind the curtain!" But the game is up. The Great and Terrible Oz is merely a façade. The reality behind the mask is, in the words of the little fellow at the controls, "a very good man, but a very bad wizard."

I remind you of this scene from a very good movie because there is a sense in which you and I, when it comes to God, see only a mask. For the last couple of weeks we've been taking a fresh look at God, trying to discover who or what he really is. We've seen that the true God is One we cannot fully comprehend, for he is an infinite and holy Being who is far beyond our poor power to understand. We must realize that if God did not choose to reveal himself to us, we could know nothing about him. All we have to work with, so to speak, is a mask. And we have no Toto to pull the curtain back. Today we will discover what we can know about the God behind the mask, by examining the mask. Is he a humbug, a charlatan, like the Wizard of Oz? Some people think that. Or is God is someone great and wonderful?

Turn with me to Psalm 19. This is a psalm written by David about 3000 years ago. In this psalm David says there are two ways God reveals himself to us. The first is through nature. We call that *natural revelation*. The second way is called *special revelation*. God has spoken to us. I'd like us to examine both of these today and find out what they tell us about the God we cannot see.

The first way that God reveals himself to us is through nature. Nature hides God, and yet nature tells us a great many things about God. David begins in verse 1, "*The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.*" In the 19th century many philosophers and scientists—people like Charles Darwin—proposed a materialistic view of the universe. Materialism has become the dominant consensus of our time. Essentially, the materialistic view of the universe says that the universe has always existed and therefore we don't need to discuss the question of origins. The universe operates by certain laws—laws like natural selection, for example—and all we need to do is study them. This is why today we often hear the put-down against Creationism, that Creationism is religion and not science, and schools must only teach our kids "science." However, the materialists are a little behind the times. In the first half of the 20th century, Edwin Hubble—remember him? He was the renowned astronomer after whom the Hubble telescope is named. Hubble discovered that the

universe is expanding, that it came into existence in the finite past, that it has age. It doesn't take a great leap to realize that if there was a time when the universe didn't exist, there must be some Being, some Cause, who created it. "*The heavens are telling of the glory of God,*" says David, "*and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.*"

In verse 2 David says, "*Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.*" Men have long gazed into the heavens straining to see the planets and to learn what they have to tell us. The Greeks, building on assumptions they drew from their pagan gods, regarded the heavens as perfect and the circle as the perfect shape. Therefore, they said, the planets must move in circular orbits. Their view prevailed for nearly 2000 years. But around the year 1600 the great astronomer, Johannes Kepler, discovered a problem with the orbit of the planet Mars. According to his observations, the most accurate circle he could construct left an error of eight arc minutes. Kepler was a Christian. He believed God makes no mistakes. If he wanted a circle, Mars' orbit would be a circle. If that orbit was not a circle, that was how God wanted it. This conviction sustained Kepler through six years of intellectual struggle and thousands of pages of mathematical calculations. Finally he came up with the idea of ellipses. When he discovered the third law of planetary motion everything came together perfectly, and Kepler's reaction was one of worship. He said, "[I was] *carried away by unutterable rapture at the divine spectacle of heavenly harmony.*"

Many of you will remember Apollo 13, or you've seen Ron Howard's movie about Apollo 13's flight. It was 1969. The Apollo 13 spacecraft lifted off from Cape Canaveral with a mission to land on the Moon. But the craft was damaged in space and NASA scrambled to work out a way of bringing its wounded bird back to earth. The whole world held its breath. Computers were fairly primitive in 1969, and Apollo 13 had hardly any computer power on board. You have more capacity in your cell phone than Apollo 13 had. Everything had to be worked out by slide rule and experiment. But what made it all possible was the absolute mathematical precision of the laws that govern the movement of the planets and the Sun and the Moon. That tells us something about the God who put those laws into place and who holds the planets in their orbits.

In verses 3-4 David writes, "*There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world. In them He has placed a tent for the sun.*" In the 1960s and 70s physicists noticed that the universal constraints of physics—for example, gravity and electromagnetism—seemed to be "finely tuned" for the existence of complex life. Those laws require a "superintellect" to set it all up and keep it running. Then biologists deciphered DNA, which is like an extraordinarily sophisticated "computer code" for producing proteins, the 3D building blocks of life. DNA is able to produce and reproduce complex biological machines that can never be explained by Darwinian determinism. In other words, these systems are so complex that they may only be accounted for by an intelligent agent who can see a future function and actualize it. So we learn something more about God.

David writes about the Sun in verse 6, “*Its rising is from one end of the heavens, and its circuit to the other end of them; and there is nothing hidden from its heat.*” Complex life requires an innumerable amount of things to go right in order to produce such life. For example, there must be a rocky, terrestrial planet similar in size and composition to the earth. This planet must have plate tectonics to recycle nutrients. It must have the right kind of atmosphere. It needs a large and well placed moon that produces tides and which stabilizes the tilt of the planet’s axis. This planet must be the right distance from the right kind of single star, and a nearly circular orbit to maintain liquid water on the surface. The planet capable of sustaining complex life must have a home within a stable planetary system with outlying giant planets to protect the inner system from too many deadly comet impacts. It must exist in a safe “neighborhood” in the right kind of galaxy with enough heavy elements to build terrestrial planets, and the life sustaining planet needs to form within a narrow habitable window of cosmic history. This tells us not only something about the Mind behind such a life system, but that that Mind is a good God who has produced all of this for the benefit of the creatures who inhabit his planet.

Most scientists today follow the “Copernican Principle” that our solar system is typical, and that therefore the origin and evolution of life elsewhere is quite likely, given the vast size and great age of the universe. Do you know how many stars there are, that we are able to see? Write down a ten, and then follow it with 22 zeroes. Surely then, the majority assumption today must be correct, that the universe must be teeming with complex, intelligent life. But not so fast! Imagine a room full of monkeys, each holding a cardboard box that contains all the parts necessary to construct and program a computer like you have at home. Do you really believe that if those monkeys sat there shaking the box for a thousand years, or ten thousand years, or a million years, or a hundred million years, that the computer parts would somehow slide together and produce your computer, complete with Roadrunner and high speed internet capacity? Since the mid 1950s astronomers have been able to detect planets around other sun-stars. They’ve learned that planetary systems are not all alike. In fact, they haven’t found any that are like ours. They are concluding that the conditions necessary for complex life to exist are exceedingly rare, and maybe, just maybe, what we have here on earth is altogether unique. (For a fuller discussion see *Areopagus Journal*, January/February 2005)

So nature reveals a great many things about the One who exists behind the mask of nature. He is intelligent, he is powerful, he is wise, he is personal—for we ourselves are personal beings and personality does not spring from inert rocks or chemicals. He is a good God, for he has provided all things necessary to make life pleasant. He is loving, for he has given us the capacity to love and to experience happiness. But we may also deduce that God is righteous and moral and just. We can easily see that something has gone wrong on this planet, and that we are the source of that wrong. I am not speaking here about global warming. It has yet to be proven that the so-called climate change has ranged beyond the normal boundaries of the atmospheric systems, or that climate can be influenced on a large scale for good or bad by human activity. Instead, I am speaking about the sorrows of life, about broken human relationships, about wars and the wrongs that people inflict upon one another. And I am speaking about death and how out of

character it is with what we know about life and the God who created life. We can discover all these things by studying nature and looking at ourselves. We can conclude that we have offended the Creator and we suffer the consequences of it.

There is much more we wish we knew about the Creator, but nature doesn't tell us. If we are going to know more, God must provide us with some sort of special revelation, and that is what David discusses next. We find it in the Word of God. The Bible alone is credible as the special revelation we need so much. In verses 7-11 David speaks about the benefits we gain from God's special revelation. In discussing these benefits, however, David tells us something we need to know about God and about ourselves. For example, in verse 7 David begins, "*The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul.*" First of all, notice what David calls God. He is *the LORD*. If you have your Bible handy, notice that the word Lord is written with smaller font capital letters. This is the way translators of the Old Testament write the name of God. In the original Hebrew we simply find four consonants here—YHWH, usually pronounced Yahweh, or sometimes in English, Jehovah. We already learned from nature that the Creator was a personal God, but here he has a name, and that means he has created us with the capacity to have a relationship with him.

Second, notice the reference to our souls. We are not just created as intelligent beasts. We have a soul. And that makes us qualitatively different from the animals. Yesterday as I was preparing for this morning, our English Springer Spaniel, Lizzie, came strolling up to me with a red ball in her mouth. She laid her head on my lap and looked up at me with her big brown eyes, wagging her tail. I reached over and petted her and told her what a nice dog she is. That's all she wanted. Then she wandered off. You can have a kind of relationship with a dog, but it's limited. If Lizzie does something to offend me or her mistress, I scold her by saying, "Bad dog!" and her ears droop and she slinks away to a corner. But that is conditioning. She doesn't really feel guilt. There is nothing moral or immoral in her behavior for the simple reason that she has no soul.

But you and I are different. Because we have a soul it matters what we do or don't do. There is moral guilt involved in disobeying God. Our offenses put a barrier between us and God. Sin, for that is what we call it, affects our souls. It pollutes them. It corrupts them. David says that Obeying God's law restores our souls in the sense that obedience creates harmony with God. When we obey, we relate to God as he intended when he created us. God's law makes us wise, David says in verse 7. God's laws allow us to rejoice, he says in verse 8, and enable us to perceive things clearly. God's laws help clean up our lives, according to verse 9. His truth makes us righteous. God's laws, far from being odious or a burden, are sweet and desirable, David says in verse 10. They warn us of moral dangers. They carry a reward, David says in verse 11. So the bottom line is that if your life is full of problems, if you're unhappy, if you're dissatisfied, if you're feeling guilty, start paying attention to God's Word. It can heal you.

I had a Christian friend some years ago who came from a very messed up background that left him scarred and broken inside. He took David's instructions seriously. Whenever he was filled with anger, when he was struggling with his attitudes

or behavior, I noticed that he quietly disappeared. Someone might ask “Where is he?” And no one knew. But he was off alone with his Bible. He remained reading God’s Word and praying until he had committed his struggles to God and God’s peace had taken hold of him again. Then he’d reappear and without a word he resumed his daily activities. Over time I began to notice a change in him. He’s not completely healed, but he’s nicer to be around. God’s love fills him. His life is happier because God’s special revelation has restored his soul. You might try that if your life is marked by problems or sinful behavior that is etched in your heart.

David reminds us in verse 12 that you and I have an amazing capacity for self deception. “*Who can discern his errors?*” David asks. God’s Word has the capacity to strip away our excuses. It exposes our false justifications. In the movie, *The Blues Brothers*, Carrie Fisher plays the resentful girlfriend that Jake Blues, played by John Belushi, used and jilted. She ambushes him and opens up on him with an assault rifle. He picks himself up from the mud, kneels before her, and says something to the effect, “My alarm clock didn’t go off, my car wouldn’t start, I ran out of gas, I got a flat tire. It’s not my fault!” She looks at him with love in her eyes and says, “Oh, Jake.” He stands up, roughly shoves her out of the way, and runs off. She turns and fires another burst from her gun. To a certain extent we are each like Jake Blues as we relate to one another and to God. David suggests a prayer to pray. “*Acquit me of hidden faults. Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not rule over me; Then I shall be blameless, and I shall be acquitted of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight; O Lord....*” (v 12-14)

The big, big thing, however, that nature can never tell us is how we may be reconciled to God. You and I can never gain God’s acceptance by keeping his laws or by a flurry of good works. Even if we know what God expects of us and what his commandments are, we are not capable of obeying them perfectly. And then there is the problem of the past. How may we be forgiven for sins we did perhaps long ago? In short, how may we be saved? David alludes to it in the last phrase of Psalm 19. He calls God, “*My rock and my Redeemer.*” (v 14) A Redeemer is one who buys back. The picture is of a slave market. We are slaves of sin, bound by chains of guilt. But a savior comes and purchases our freedom. His payment is not made in silver or gold, not in bearer bonds or stock certificates. Here’s the shocker: God himself, the second Person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ, went to the cross and redeemed sinners like you and me with his own life. He took the judgment we deserve. When you or I repent of our sins and place our trust in Christ to save us, God forgives us and transfers our record of sin to Jesus. Then he transfers Jesus’ record of perfect obedience to us so we stand before God perfectly righteous. Now it is Christ, the God who loves us, who owns us. Have you accepted Christ’s offer of salvation? You’d never know it was possible if God had not told us and revealed his love for us through his special revelation. That’s why your Bible is so valuable. That’s why you and I should read it regularly and study it and teach it to our children. Because that’s how you get to know God.

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