

Summer in the Psalms Psalm 19 - Wisdom Psalms

1. Works reveal God's glory (vs. 1-6)

2. Word revives the soul (vs. 7-12)

3. Wise respond in prayer (vs. 12-14)

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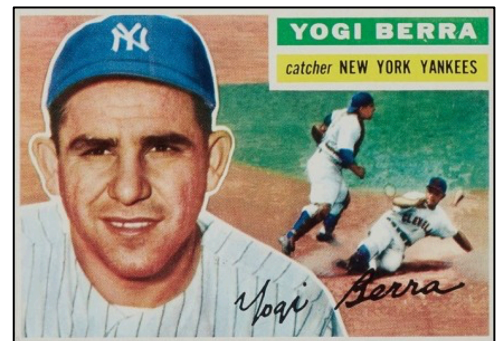


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Summer in the Psalms Psalm 19 – Wisdom Psalms¹

Some of you know that I've still got thousands of baseball cards from when I collected them as a kid; I have cards from the fifties to the early 80's. Someday they might be worth money again, but they probably won't ever be worth what the values were like before the bubble burst in the 1990s. Cards that once were worth as much as \$100 a piece are now worth \$5 or \$10. Still, I've got my favorites, and it's not because of what their monetary values are but because of who they are – heroes of my youth, like Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Mickey Mantle, Ted Williams, Roberto Clemente, Nolan Ryan, Roger Maris, and this guy: Yogi Berra. This is his 1956 card – this is one of the cards I have. How many of you have heard of him?

He was a catcher for 19 seasons through the fifties and sixties, almost all of them with the New York Yankees, playing with all the greats like Mickey Mantle and Joe Dimaggio. He's in the Baseball Hall of Fame. He was known for his ability as a ball player, but also almost as much for his "yogiisms" – his words of wisdom, making statements with all kinds of linguistic gymnastics. For example, when he spoke to graduates at Montclair State University, he gave them this advice:



- First, never give up, because it ain't over 'til it's over.
- Second, when you come to a fork in the road, take it.
- Third, don't always follow the crowd. Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded.
- Fourth, stay alert. You can observe a lot just by watching.
- Fifth, and last, remember that whatever you do in your life, 90 percent of it is half mental.

¹ Sources of research:

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- John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Ps 19
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You always know Yogi's wisdom when you see it: it's funny when you first read it because it doesn't make sense, but then the more you think about it, the more you realize that maybe it really does make sense.

Well, today we are going to talk about wisdom. This is the fifth Sunday of our sermon series called "Summer in the Psalms." There is incredible depth and richness in the Psalms that for many of us has remained undiscovered and untouched.

We started out this series by looking at an overview of the entire book of Psalms and how it is organized, and why it is organized that way. If you weren't with us, I encourage you to go to our website or on our church app and find the first sermon in this series and listen to it or read it because it will give you important background information and a context for this series.

We learned that the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament is designed for this purpose:

Psalms is a book of prayers to help you obey God's Word and stay faithful to the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

That's what it is going to help us do this summer and hopefully for the rest of our Christian lives. Our goal is that, by the time we are through, you will have a greater ability to pray with more depth and authenticity, no matter what it is you are praying about or what you are going through.

Then we talked about the different types of Psalms – there are different styles or types that we recognize and can group them in. You can see them on the list there. We've talked about "Praise and Thanksgiving" Psalms, we've looked at an example of "Royal/Messianic" Psalms, last week we looked at "Liturgical" Psalms, and today the type we are looking at is the "Wisdom" Psalms. We will look at the others through the rest of the summer.

So what's about "wisdom" Psalms from the others?

Well, the gold standard of wisdom literature is the book of Proverbs – that book is the one that any other Bible books are compared to when deciding if they should be considered "wisdom" literature. So besides Proverbs, the "wisdom" books of the Bible are Job, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes, and then there are some of the Psalms that fit into that category, too. Here's what makes the Wisdom literature unique:

- **The word "wisdom" or some variation occurs a lot** (*makes sense!*)
- **It doesn't have a lot of narrative about the story of Israel or her heroes** (*Job is sort of an exception.*)
- **They focus a lot on the "Law" as given in the first five books of the Bible**
- **They tend to present life choices, contrasting the "wise" from the "foolish."**
- **They are written in a teaching style** (*as opposed to teaching by example – Abraham, Joseph, Esther – or telling about God's mighty power and love*).
- **They indicate living wisely results in God's blessing; living foolishly results in judgment and ultimate failure.** (*Principals, not rules*)

Does that make sense? So there are some Psalms that fit fully into this category, and we're going to look at one of those today – Psalm 19. King David wrote Psalm 19, and it makes some sense that he's the author. Remember, King Solomon was David's son, and he is considered the wisest person to ever have lived. Solomon is credited with writing most of the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. So many of the proverbs that Solomon writes, and that style of writing, probably find their roots in the ways Solomon's dad taught him as he was growing up – ways that we can see in David's writing of this and other wisdom Psalms.

Psalm 19 is a beautiful example of a wisdom Psalm. It also has some elements of other styles, like "Praise and Thanksgiving," but you'll see it's primarily a "wisdom" style.

I want to read it to us before we take a look at how it is organized and what it means. So would you be willing to stand with me, please, as I read it to us?

- ¹ The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
- ² Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
- ³ They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
- ⁴ Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.
In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.
- ⁵ It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
- ⁶ It rises at one end of the heavens
and makes its circuit to the other;
nothing is deprived of its warmth.
- ⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.
- ⁸ The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
- ⁹ The fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever.
The decrees of the Lord are firm,
and all of them are righteous.
- ¹⁰ They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the honeycomb.

- 11 By them your servant is warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
- 12 But who can discern their own errors?
Forgive my hidden faults.
- 13 Keep your servant also from willful sins;
may they not rule over me.
Then I will be blameless,
innocent of great transgression.
- 14 May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19, niv)

May God bless the reading of his Word to our hearts. Thank you; you can have a seat.

Like all Psalms, this one is organized around certain themes and writing styles, and I think, if you remember the list of characteristics of wisdom psalms that I listed, you'll see that this very much fits into wisdom literature.

Christian writer CS Lewis considered Psalm 19 to be the finest poem in all of the Psalms, and one of the finest poems in the world. It's really beautiful, in ways that you don't always see in our translations.

So let's start by seeing that this Psalm first shows us that God's...

1. ***Works*** reveal ***God's glory*** (vs 1-6)

In the original language, this Psalm is written beautifully with what's called a "chiastic" style. Chiastic poetry, put simply, is like this: you have two things – "A" and "B", and so you compare them by writing about them in this order: "A,B,B,A." That's kind of an oversimplification, but I tell you that to point out that this is an incredibly intelligent, intentional, and beautifully written poem.

It starts out by turning our eyes toward the heavens. It doesn't call our attention to any *one* single celestial body, but the entire sky – including the sun, moon, stars, planets, and the backdrop in which they are set in motion. These incredible things reveal God's glory, because they are his creation. You might remember that we referenced this last week when we talked about how God's creation reveals his glory, and that Psalm 136 talks about how God created everything with great intelligence and wisdom. Today we would call it "intelligent design."

So in some ways, this starts out like a praise and thanksgiving psalm. But it is doing *way more* than that. It is actually making a direct statement against the false and foolish beliefs of the culture and people around them. This Psalm takes a bold stand for the supremacy of God over all the false gods.

Many of the surrounding nations worshiped the sun, the moon, the planets and the stars, and in fact some of that practice has carried over all the way to today with the practice of worshipping horoscopes through astrology. People who use astrology might say that they don't "worship" it, but by every definition that is *exactly* what it

is – worship of the stars, and seeking direction for our lives from them, and that practice goes all the way back to Old Testament Bible times. But this Psalm says that the heavens are way *less* than things to be worshiped; they in fact are only the incredible evidence of the ONE who should be worshiped, God himself. That’s why God explicitly says:

“And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the Lord your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven.” (Deuteronomy 4:19, niv)

Worship of the sun and moon and planets and stars might seem crazy to us today, because we know that they are nothing more than hot gas and cold matter. But while this psalm says they are not gods, this psalm also says that they ***are way more than hot gas and cold matter; they are the visible and undeniable evidence of God’s greatness.*** And the heavens could not shout that to us any louder if God had given them mouths and lips. This Psalm says that, even though the heavens can’t speak, they “pour forth speech,” non-stop. The original language creates a kind of word-picture of a bubbling spring that continuously overflows.

Then David writes that God has pitched a tent for the sun. This reflects the ancient understanding of the cosmos: they believed that the sky was a dome like structure, stretched out between the earth and the heavens. David writes in a way that “personifies” the sun, but doesn’t “deify” the sun. That is an important distinction between what the Psalm says and what the culture did. David’s saying the sun is *like* a person, but he’s not saying it ought to be worshiped.

He writes that the sun itself breaks into the dawn like a bridegroom coming out of his tent. Let me try to state what maybe you’ve already figured out: Here’s a young stud, that has married his gorgeous, foxy wife, and last night was their first night together. So the next morning he emerges bounding out of the tent, like a guy in an Old Spice commercial, having had the best night of his life, full of energy and ready for another day. Got it? *That* is the word-picture that David is creating to describe how amazingly God has created the sun to rise on each new day. Another image David uses to describe the sun is that of a strong man running a race; think of Usain Bolt out of the starting blocks. After the sun’s initial appearance, it moves through the sky with the graceful stride of a world-class runner. No corner of the world is left untouched by its rays; no person, animal or object is unaffected by its light and heat. Like the rest of the heavens, it provides continual, undeniable proof of the greatness of God.² Those are the images that David uses to describe the radiance, the glow, and the power of the sun, which is only a *reflection* of the God who created it.

So while this first section is a beautiful poem that praises God, it is also wisdom literature, because it leaves the reader with a *choice*: either clearly see God reflected in his creation and so believe in him, or foolishly reject what creation so clearly tells you about God, and be condemned. This is what the Apostle Paul was talking about in Romans: “But I ask: Did they (*talking about unbelievers*) not hear? Of course they

² Lennox, 69–70.

did: “Their voice (*creation*) has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.” (Romans 10:18, niv) Paul is reminding the reader of the very first things he wrote, ten chapters earlier, in Romans one:

“They (*again, talking about unbelievers*) know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.” (Romans 1:19-20, nlt)

Paul went on to say:

“Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools.” (Romans 1:21-22, nlt)

So you see, this is already about wisdom; about being wise enough to see what creation tells you so obviously.

When I was in college at Northwest Nazarene University (College), one night there was a thunder and lightning storm, so a friend and I drove out to Lake Lowell – a reservoir not far from campus – to sit on the dock and watch the storm at about one in the morning. I didn’t say I was smart. I was a sophomore. Do you know what the word “sophomoric” means? It comes from the word “sophomore,” and it means “overconfident of knowledge but poorly informed and immature.”³ Do we have college students here today who will be going back for their sophomore year? Well, if the shoe fits.... It certainly fit me, going out to the dock in a lightning storm. Fortunately, we survived. And it was incredible. I felt like we heard God coming; like we saw him coming in the distant flickers of lightning. Then as the storm got closer, I thought that it felt like God was walking right past us – huge wind coming before the thunder and finally the lightning, exploding everything around us with white hot light, like everywhere God looked lit up. Then it all happened in reverse order, until finally it was so still and silent, and I felt bad for the people who chose to sleep through it; that God walked through and they missed it. (Plus, they weren’t ignorant enough to go sit on a dock in the middle of it). But *that’s* kind of the feeling that David leaves us with when he writes this section.

Then David shifts gears and shows us something else that God has given us to make us wise – much more significant than creation, and that is God’s...

2. ***Word*** (that) **revives the *soul*** (vs 7-11)

David makes a series of statements using different Hebrew terms for the Law or Torah (as recorded in the first five books of the Bible). For us, we would rightfully expand this term to mean the entire Bible. David uses several words to describe **God’s Word**; he calls it **the law (*torah*)**, **the statutes (*eduth*)**, **precepts (*piqqudim*)**,

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sophomoric>

the commands (*mitswah*), decrees (*mishpat*), and the fear (*yir'ah*) of Yahweh.

That last one might seem kind of strange, as if we should be afraid of God, and in a way that *is* what it means. But it means a *healthy* fear; that God is so immense and so powerful that he deserves our respect, our awe, and our submission. So David calls the Bible “the fear of Yahweh” or the fear of God because the Bible reveals to us how awesome our God is, and that he is “chesed” – remember? He loves us, and so we should submit to him.

David also describes the effect of God’s Law to revive, give wisdom, cause rejoicing, and enlighten us.⁴ He writes that the law is perfect, not only because it originates from God, but also because of *why* God gave it to us: for us to live very best lives.

As majestic and permanent as *creation* is, God’s Word does *much, much more* than the heavens do. Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah when he said:

“Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear.”
(Matthew 24:35, Isaiah 40:8, nlt)

The value of the Word of God and what it does for us will *never ever* disappear.

Only God’s Word can make wise the simple (19:7b) and can warn us and reward us (19:11). The sun can’t reveal hidden faults; only God’s Word can do that (19:12). Only God’s Word can create the desire in our hearts for purity, and only God’s Word can lead us to confession, and can bring us to our need to give and receive forgiveness (19:12–13).

Creation can reveal God’s glory, but only God’s Word can make possible a personal knowledge of the Creator.

This point is made subtly but unmistakably in the uses of God’s name in the two sections of Psalm 19.⁵ David intentionally writes into his poem a powerful distinction between these first two sections. The first section of this Psalm (vs 1-6) that deals with creation uses the generic name for God “Elohim,” and it uses that name only once. In this next section that is about God’s Word (7-11), God’s holy name—Yahweh—is used to refer to God, and it’s used more than once; in fact, it’s used a certain number of times...guess how many? *Seven* times⁶ - a number that indicates perfection. Creation reveals God, but God’s Word itself perfectly revives or restores us.

So, having seen that God’s works reveal God’s glory, and that God’s Word can revive the soul, then the...

3. *Wise* (will) respond in *prayer* (vs 12-14)

Because God has spoken through his creation, and because God has spoken to us through his Word, *because and only because God spoke* can we then speak to God in

⁴ John D. Barry et al.

⁵ Stephen J. Lennox

⁶ *ibid*

prayer (19:12–14) and praise (19:14). God has spoken through those means because he loves us and wants a conversation with us. So this Psalm expects us to respond to God.

David wrote about how obeying God’s Word brings great reward (in vs. 11), and because of God’s Word he realizes his own great transgression or sin (in vs. 13). So the only wise response is to move from worshiper to servant; from being in awe *of* God, to being in submission *to* God. God’s creation and God’s Word have done what they were supposed to do in David’s life: they’ve led him to his knees in confession and to ask for forgiveness. He acknowledges that he needs God’s Word to point out his faults, since his own arrogance or willfulness to sin would keep him from seeing his own sin. He begs God to help him to be blameless: for God to forgive him, and for him to live obediently and completely for God. That’s the only wise response. That should be the conclusion we come to, also. God, through Christ, has ultimately and completely made all this kind of life possible for *you*:

“For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross.

This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault. But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it.” (Colossians 1:19-23, nlt)

Because God spoke through creation and His Word, especially through THE WORD, Jesus Christ who was present at creation (Colossians 1:16), and only because God spoke can we in turn speak personally about the Creator God as ***my Rock and my Redeemer*** (19:14).

Are you listening to God’s Word today? Have you been listening to creation speaking to you? Are you responding with wisdom, by humbling yourself, confessing, asking for his forgiveness (which he will freely give you if you ask for it), and inviting him to help you live for him? Having come to know Him through His Living Word, we too can take our place with the voiceless heavens to declare the glory of God with our very lives.⁷

Prayer

Here’s how to pray this Psalm every day this week (write these down):

1. Think of something in creation that turns your attention to God. Dwell on that and praise and thank God for it. *Ocean, mountains, trees, etc.* Got it?
2. Spend some time reading a section of God’s Word. Watch for how God is revealed in it. Got it?

⁷ Lennox

3. Humble yourself, search your heart and confess anything you find. Commit to follow him and ask him to work in you to live out God's Word. Got it?

May God "pour forth speech" through *your* very life!