# **Psalm 19**

Martin Ansdell-Smith / General

Psalms / Ps 19:1–14

Creation and the law.

# [Psalm 19](https://ref.ly/logosref/Bible.Ps19)

This psalm brings together the themes of creation’s revelation of God, also found in other psalms, primarily psalms 8 and 148, and the need for attentiveness to the Lord’s verbal revelation, his teaching in words, also found in many psalms but primarily [Psalms 1](https://ref.ly/logosref/Bible.Ps1) and 119.

C S Lewis described [Psalm 19](https://ref.ly/logosref/Bible.Ps19) as “the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.” Its scope is immense: from the creation and the cosmos; through God’s covenant and dealings with Israel, to the response of the individual. The creator God is the God of Israel, the Lord of the Church. Creation and covenant in balance are beautifully reflected in this psalm, though the psalmist knew less than us about the wonders of creation and was without most of the Bible.

## [Psalm 19:1](https://ref.ly/logosref/Bible.Ps19.1)-6

**Psalm 19:1–2 NRSV**

The heavens are telling the glory of God;

and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

Day to day pours forth speech,

and night to night declares knowledge.

The cosmos gives a clear message about God but does not get far. The first section starts with this assertion that the cosmos shows God’s handiwork, discusses how it shows it and then ends with lines about the heavens, but does not say more about God. Its message is clear but limited. The right response to creation is not to worship or idolise it, or to use for fortune-telling or greed, but to think of and respond to its maker with joy and awe.

**Psalm 19:3–4 NRSV**

There is no speech, nor are there words;

their voice is not heard;

yet their voice goes out through all the earth,

and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

**Psalm 19:5–6 NRSV**

which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,

and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

Its rising is from the end of the heavens,

and its circuit to the end of them;

and nothing is hid from its heat.

Immanuel Kant wrote, [in his Critique of Practical Reason,] “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within.”

His first point agrees with [Psalm 19](https://ref.ly/logosref/Bible.Ps19) but his second neglects that our own hearts and minds are not naturally in line with God. For us to know what is right and what is wrong, how we should think and live, what our motives should be, whom we should serve: for these we need God to reveal himself to us. This He did, primarily through his dealings with the nation of Israel, through the life on earth of God the Son, Jesus the Messiah, and the apostolic church. This is in the Bible we have today, preserved over thousands of years and diligently translated so we can all own, read, remember, and understand this most precious of all documents. To quote from our monarch’s Coronation Service, when she was presented with a Bible:

Our gracious Queen:

to keep your Majesty ever mindful of the law and the Gospel of God

as the Rule for the whole life and government of Christian Princes,

we present you with this Book,

the most valuable thing that this world affords.

Here is Wisdom;

This is the royal Law;

These are the lively Oracles of God.

That is the message of the middle verses of [Psalm 19](https://ref.ly/logosref/Bible.Ps19).

##  [Psalm 19:7-10](https://ref.ly/logosref/Bible.Ps19.7-10)

The music Paul played that set these verses to music. This year is 50 years since I started following Christ. In those early days I was greatly helped by the ministry of the University Christian Union, especially two students attending the same church as me. They both became Bible college lecturers. One suggested I would benefit from joining an Church team over the summer of ‘72. I applied, was accepted,and started preparing with another Sheffield student. Sandie was a fine cellist and singer and performed a setting of these middle verses from [Psalm 19](https://ref.ly/logosref/Bible.Ps19). What makes the trip even more memorable is that, when it was time to return to Sheffield after the time away, I was introduced to a member of the church’s congregation who was also a student at Sheffield University and she gave me a lift home over the Pennines. That was the first time I met Margaret, who was to become my wife. Margaret later shared a house with Sandie and two other girls from the CU. When Margaret and I finished our full-time University careers four years later, we began going out together and two years later were married. This week is two years since Margaret died and went to be lost in love and wonder in the presence of her Lord and God. Margaret and I had over forty years together. There were good days and hard days--some days were both--but through them all, God was and still is unfailingly, totally, faithful.

**Psalm 19:7 ESV**

The law of the Lord is perfect,

reviving the soul;

the testimony of the Lord is sure,

making wise the simple;

Just as the sun can search out what is on the earth, so God’s law, His word and testimony, can search out what is in our hearts.

The Law, torah תּוֹרָה, has a wide range of meaning. At its narrowest it is rules and regulations. Even with this restriction it is still valuable. As examples, it may reflect God’s character, reveal our sin (as the apostle Paul explains in Romans chapter 7), teach about the need for blood atonement, and guide civil and Christian behaviour. Widening the meaning, the Jews to this day use Torah to describe the Pentateuch: the first five books of the Bible, Genesis to Deuteronomy. These books contain a great deal more than rules and regulations. Torah includes law but also direction and instruction. “The law of God is that which points out or indicates His will to man. It is not an arbitrary rule. … it is … a course of guidance from above.” [Girdlestone]. We can reasonably apply it to the whole Bible. The apostle Paul, writing about what we would call the Old Testament, writes,

**2 Timothy 3:16–17 NRSV**

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

**Romans 15:4 NRSV**

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

The testimony or decrees of the Lord are God’s testimony about Himself: his nature, and his attributes, as found in the whole of Scripture.

This section repays study and meditation and excellently introduces the beauty and elegant complexity of [Psalm 119](https://ref.ly/logosref/Bible.Ps119).

**Psalm 19:8 NRSV**

the precepts of the Lord are right,

rejoicing the heart;

the commandment of the Lord is clear,

enlightening the eyes;

**Psalm 19:9 NRSV**

the fear of the Lord is pure,

enduring forever;

the ordinances of the Lord are true

and righteous altogether.

I have summarised these in the next slide.

law of the LORD perfect reviving the soul;

decrees of the LORD sure making wise the simple;

precepts of the LORD right rejoicing the heart;

commandment of the LORD clear enlightening the eyes;

fear of the LORD pure enduring forever;

ordinances of the LORD true righteous altogether.

(NRSV)

The synonyms emphasise the comprehensiveness of God’s self-revelation. This includes Torah which, as already mentioned, can be a wide term. It can be convenient to divide the law as rules into three categories, though the boundaries and the words used for each, are fluid.

1. commandments or precepts מִצְוָה [illustration: bar\_mitsvah] v8b, the moral law. Applies to all humans throughout time and without limitations;

2. the ceremonial law, applying to the church of the Old Testament awaiting its Messiah;

3. judgements or ordinances, legal or judicial rulings, מִשְׁפָּט v9b, applying to the ancient nation of Israel living in Canaan.

Natural revelation is available to us every day but the revelation in the law is personal and complete.

An assumption can be that the law is only rules: this may lead to morbid introspection, to trying to earn favours from God. The attitude we see in the Pharisees and scribes in Jesus’ time. We must get this the right way round. The law, decrees, precepts, commandments, reverence, and ordinances are not what we do to be accepted by God.

Rather, ...

**1 John 4:19 NRSV**

We love because he first loved us.

We are reconciled with God through His free grace, not through anything we do. The law, the whole self-revelation of God, displays the character of God and his expectations of his people, for his people are to be like him: holy and perfect. Rules sets out what must be done and, sometimes, why. They do not deal with how the rules can be kept. That completion of the law and its synonyms here and in [Psalm 119](https://ref.ly/logosref/Bible.Ps119), came later through the words of the Bible’s prophets and thinkers, the life, words, and work of Jesus, the writings of the apostles, the continuing work of the God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We covered this on Tuesday’s Bible Study so suffice to say the law does not call us to follow a scheme of outward behaviour: to keep the law requires reconciliation with God and a change of heart, a new heart, new life: things we can never achieve ourselves. To understand sin solely as behaving wrongly is insufficient: the root of our problem is not our behaviour but our heart. The wrong we do, the good we fail to do, is the outworking of the inner desires of the heart, showing us the truth about ourselves.

Going back to the summary slide:

law of the LORD perfect reviving the soul;

decrees of the LORD sure making wise the simple;

precepts of the LORD right rejoicing the heart;

commandment of the LORD clear enlightening the eyes;

fear of the LORD pure enduring forever;

ordinances of the LORD true righteous altogether.

(NRSV)

A change in behaviour without a change of heart does not revive the soul, make wise the simple, rejoice the heart, and brighten the eyes. Those come from reconciliation with God and others, being made alive in the spirit, a change of heart: all changes brought about by the grace of God through the work of Christ. This is available to anyone: as Richard Sibbes repeatedly writes, there is more mercy in Christ than sin in us.

Our response to this is gratitude and obedience, springing from a growing love of Christ, of God. As we behold Christ ([2 Cor 3:7ff](https://ref.ly/logosref/Bible.2Co3.7ff)), as we abide in him, as his Spirit abides in us, our love for him grows and we are changed to be more like him. Our love for his word increases and we desire to know and to do God’s will more than our own. We want to serve God and others, to fulfil the spirit of the law, the commandments, the ordinances, the decrees, the precepts of the Law as laid out for us in the books of law, the prophets, wisdom, gospels and writings of the apostolic church. Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to complete it. The law was not for us to build a fence beyond which ones behaviour should not transgress. The law reveals the human heart in rebellion against God. Only through God’s free, unearned grace and mercy can we be put right. Then we share in what Christ has achieved, are co-heirs with him. The same grace and mercy through which we become part of God’s people, continues to bring us to maturity in Christ. To quote Richard Sibbes again, “We cannot please Christ more than by a cheerful taking part of His rich provision.” The change of heart opens up the possibility, the expectation, that we will grow and mature in Christ as we hear his word and do it, becoming people with the same descriptions as the law, the word, of the Lord: perfect, sure, right, clear, pure, and true.

**Psalm 19:10 NRSV**

More to be desired are they than gold,

even much fine gold;

sweeter also than honey,

and drippings of the honeycomb.

The Bible is the most precious thing this world affords: let us not neglect it. If you need help to get started with reading and understanding it, I am sure that any of our leaders would be pleased to help you.

The Bible as we have it is authoritative, clear, necessary, and sufficient.

The Bible comes to us from the person who loves us most, who is utterly dependable, who gave up his life for us, but whom death could not hold for he is the Alpha and the Omega: he was before all things and will be after them. Why would we not read his testimony, Christ’s testimony, and be enlightened by it, find life and joy forever through it in the love of God.

## [Psalm 19:11-14](https://ref.ly/logosref/Bible.Ps19.11-14)

The psalm ends with four verses dealing with the individual believer. It sets out benefits of meditating on the word of the Lord. It offers us warnings, rewards from keeping it, uncovers errors and faults we may not realise we have, and moves us towards our words and thoughts being acceptable to God.

**Psalm 19:11 NRSV**

Moreover by them is your servant warned;

in keeping them there is great reward.

**Psalm 19:12 NRSV**

But who can detect their errors?

Clear me from hidden faults.

**Psalm 19:13 ESV**

Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins;

let them not have dominion over me!

Then I shall be blameless,

and innocent of great transgression.

**Psalm 19:14 NRSV**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart

be acceptable to you,

O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

**Amen.**

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