

The Heavens Declare Gods Glory

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Date: 23 August 2026

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[0:00] Well, I would like us for a short while, well, tonight we're going to look at both our passages that we read, but we can read again from Psalm 19, what we just sung.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. Over the next two to three services, we're going to do a short series called Glory, Goodness, Guilt, Grace.

And the main thing that we're going to be trying to do in this series is to think about all the ways in which the world around us speaks to us about God. So Psalm 19 speaks about the voice of the sky and the stars above us. The passage we read in Acts chapter 14, Paul speaks about the witness of the created world around us.

It's all reminding us that all the time, all the time, the world around us is speaking to us about God. And what I hope we'll see is that the message that the world around us is proclaiming is one of glory, goodness, and guilt.

[1:30] And we're going to look at each of those three in detail, connecting them together, but focusing on each one in turn over the next three services.

But you'll have noticed, I'm sure, that grace is in a wee section of its own, that the line between guilt and grace on our slide is thicker.

That's because grace is in a category of its own, and I'll explain why at the end of the sermon. What we're looking at in this series then, the whole idea that the world around us is speaking to us about God, this has often been called natural theology.

So if you read theology books, you'll often find a section that talks about natural theology. And it's easy to misunderstand that statement because it's not so much referring to what the Bible says about nature.

It's not like a theology of nature in that sense. And that will be part of our doctrine of creation as we think about what the Bible says about the world around us. Natural theology, rather, is referring to what nature says about God.

[2:37] What nature says about the God of the Bible. And so we're going to think a little bit about that together. Here's a quote from William Cunningham that just defines it for us kind of briefly.

Natural theology is the information that may be obtained concerning God from the natural exercise of our own powers upon ourselves and upon the objects around us.

In other words, what do we learn about God when we think about ourselves and think about the environment that we live in? That's what we're talking about when we think about natural theology. In other words, it just means listening to what the heavens are declaring.

Listening to what the stars and the sky and the environment around us is saying about God. Now, over the years, theologians have had a bit of a kind of love-hate relationship with this whole category of natural theology.

[3:45] So some theologians love it. And one very famous example is a medieval theologian called Thomas Aquinas. So Thomas Aquinas is like one of the biggest names in the history of theology.

He was a theologian in the 13th century. He lived from 1225 to 1274. And at the start of one of his most famous books, his most famous books is called the Summa Theologica.

And at the start of that, he presents five ways that we can prove that God exists. And Aquinas' five ways have become very, very famous. And they are an example of natural theology.

He looks at the world around, and he says that I can show you five ways that the world around us proves that there is a God. I won't go then into great detail. I'll just summarize.

His way number one is the argument from motion, the idea that things are moving. And so if something is moving, then there needs to be a prime mover.

[4:47] And this idea that you can't have an infinite chain. If you imagine the idea of dominoes knocking, one knocking the other over and the other over. There has to be one that started it. And so the whole idea of movement, of motion, of change, there must be a first mover.

He also, his second argument is the argument from causation. And that's the idea that one cause leads on to an event. Cause and effect are all connected. So, you know, we think about the different things.

Well, why are you here tonight? Well, you came here because you got in a car. How did you get in a car? Because somebody made that car. How did someone make that car? Because someone invented that car. How did someone invent that car? Etc, etc, etc.

All the way back, all the way back, all the way back. There has to be a first cause. Third argument is from contingency. The idea of that is the idea of dependence.

So we depend, I depend, my existence depends on my parents. And their existence on their parents, and on their parents, and on their parents. And again, it's a chain that goes back, and goes back, and goes back, and goes back.

[5:46] Everything is a contingent, a dependent being, apart from one necessary being, is what Aquinas calls it. And that has to be God.

And so again, that idea of dependence has to have a starting point. His fourth argument is from gradation, he says, which is basically like degrees in perfection. So it's like, we see stuff that's good, there must be something that's perfect.

It must be God. And then the final argument is the argument, what he calls the final cause. It's the idea that the universe has a purpose. It has design, and that implies a designer.

Don't worry if you don't remember what they are. I have learned them and forgotten them dozens of times in my life. The big thing to remember is that Aquinas has these very famous five ways to prove the existence of God.

They're a big example of natural theology. Another example from history is from a theologian called William Paley. I forgot to note when he lived, it was like 1700-ish, I think.

[6:48] You'll have to Google it when you get home. I forgot to write it down. He used a famous image of like, if you imagine you found a watch on the ground, would you think to yourself, well, has that watch just been there forever?

Or does that watch have a maker? And so that's another famous example of natural theology. So some people love it. Other theologians don't like it at all.

And some have argued that looking at the natural world has got nothing to say to us about God. We have to instead, the only way that we can know about God is through what is being revealed in Jesus through the Bible.

And so there's this kind of Bible-only, absolutely nothing else in terms of learning about God. A big example of that was a famous 20th century theologian called Karl Barth. He's also like super famous Swiss theologian.

And he didn't like this idea of natural theology at all. So he didn't like Aquinas' arguments. He didn't think that that was the right thing to do at all. And lots of philosophers have done the same thing.

[7:53] They've said, you know, you can't prove the existence of God at all from what exists around us. And some scientists in the previous century and just now, like Richard Dawkins, would really jump on board with that.

And they would say this whole idea, watch, watch me, because that doesn't prove anything. So the big point is some people love it. Some people hate it. And there's danger on both sides.

Because if you're too confident in natural theology, then you can think, well, we don't need the Bible. And lots of people think like that today.

Lots of people around the world and in our country are like, I believe in God, but I don't need the Bible. And so you have this kind of faith that has no direction at all.

But they see the world and they think there must be something more than this. They believe in God. But that's that kind of overconfidence in natural theology. And that can be dangerous to think, well, yeah, I believe in God, but I don't need the Bible at all.

[8:53] Well, other times, though, we can be so skeptical about this idea of natural theology that we're saying, well, the heavens don't declare anything at all. And there's nothing, nothing beyond

what we can see.

The heavens are just declaring, the stars are just declaring that there are stars up there. That's all they're saying. And the beauty of the world around us is not really beauty. It's just the way it is. And that kind of mindset is what lies behind what we call a naturalistic worldview, that there's nothing beyond the universe, nothing supernatural.

And from that standpoint, natural theology has no effect at all. So some people think natural theology is brilliant. It's foolproof. Other people think it's useless. I think the truth is in the middle. Natural theology doesn't tell us everything. But it does tell us something. And it tells us about glory, goodness, and guilt.

And that's all captured very well at the very start of the Westminster Confession of Faith. We often refer to the Westminster Confession of Faith. Our church subscribes to the Westminster Confession of Faith just as a summary of what we believe the Bible says.

[10:12] And so it's a very important document for us as a church, not because we think the Westminster Confession of Faith is perfect, but because we think that it points to the fact that the Bible is perfect, and it explains very clearly what's in the Bible.

And at the very start, it says here that this passage, this paragraph is talking about why we need the Bible, but it's just a little bit at the start I want to highlight. It says that the light of nature, the works of creation and providence, that's the stuff all around us, manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God as to leave men inexcusable.

And in those words, we've just seen the whole idea of glory, goodness, and guilt. And we're going to be learning a little bit more about that over the next couple of services.

So that's the kind of introduction. We're trying to think about what the world is saying to us about God. And all of this is often described as natural theology.

Now, one final introductory point. I should have warned you, this is like the longest introduction ever. My points won't be as long as usual because of that. One other important thing to remember is that natural theology is not neutral theology.

[11:26] Natural theology is not neutral theology. And that's very important to recognize. And it's not neutral for two crucial reasons. First of all, natural theology is not neutral theology because in terms of theology, we are never neutral.

We can never operate neutrally in regard to theology. And that is such an easy mistake to make. And people make this mistake all the time. We think that we can approach the whole area of thinking about God and particularly thinking about natural theology as though it's neutral ground. And so theologians, philosophers, even scientists look at the world around us and they think that we're just looking at that and we are gathering evidence clearly and we're evaluating that evidence neutrally and we are coming to conclusions objectively.

And you can leave the Bible to one side and you can leave the church to one side because all of that's biased. And instead, we can just look at things neutrally and from that neutral position, we can come to clear conclusions about the biggest questions of life and death and time and eternity.

Countless people across the ages of history, of the history of thought, right up to today, think that we approach this kind of thing neutrally. And it sounds like a good idea, but it's a huge mistake.

[12:51] And the reason it's a huge mistake is because in terms of our understanding of the world around us and in terms of wrestling with the biggest questions of life, we are never, ever neutral.

And it's so important that we recognize that. So many people think about God and they think that I am just trying to think about God neutrally. I'm trying to think, you know, is there a God? Isn't there a God?

What should I do with God? What shouldn't I do? I'm neutral. And we think there's this neutral ground. There's like unbeliever here, believer here, and neutral ground in the middle. Not true. There is no neutral ground before God.

And that whole idea of neutrality in terms of our human knowledge is a myth. And that neutrality is a myth because we're all biased.

And sometimes our biases might be good. Sometimes they might be bad. Some of them might be somewhere in between. But they're inescapable. We're all affected by things like our environment, our upbringing, our preferences, our fears, our history.

[13:54] They're all going to shape the way we think. They're all going to affect the way we judge things. Neutrality is also a myth because we're finite. We can't understand everything. We can't

process everything.

We cannot take in everything that there is to know about any particular topic. And neutrality is a myth because we're sinful. And this is so important to recognize.

Sin has affected the way we think. And so when we're trying to make judgments about the biggest questions of life, we don't do that on neutral ground. Sin affects the way we think. That's known, theologians call that the noetic effect of sin.

The fact that it's had an effect on our minds. And that affects the way we observe and evaluate the world around us. And so that means that the heavens might be declaring, but we're not listening. And even if we are, we can't understand it perfectly. And I read a great quote the other day from Samuel Rutherford, a famous Scottish theologian, which I thought captured this really well.

[15:00] He said, All is seen wrong where the light whereby we see is wrong. And what he means by that is that if our view and our understanding of the world is wrong, if our vision, if our light, if there's something wrong with that, then we are never going to see and understand things perfectly.

All is seen wrong where the light whereby we see is wrong. And so we're not neutral. Natural theology is not neutral theology. I'm going to give you a silly example that I hope will clarify everything that I'm saying because I'm bombarding you with information.

So here's a silly illustration that I hope will make it clear. So question for you. Do spiders declare the glory of God? Well, do they?

Do spiders declare the glory of God? Well, how do you react to that? So some of you might immediately react to that with a bias. And that might be a good bias or it might be a bad bias. So you might like spiders and think, absolutely, spiders are the coolest thing ever.

Or you might be like, spiders? Ooh, like no. And you might have a bias or you might suspect a bias in somebody else.

[16:16] Whatever it might be, it's likely that some history with spiders is going to affect the way you react to that question. At the same time, our understanding of spiders is limited by our finitude.

We do not know everything that we need to know about spiders in order to answer that question accurately. And all of us are affected by sin. Maybe we're scared of spiders. And that might be an inappropriate fear whereby we're kind of petrified of them, even though we don't know why.

That just confirms the noetic effect of sin. Or we might actually have had a bad experience of spiders in the past. Or maybe we know somebody who's been bitten or had something that was awful that they experienced.

That just confirms that we live in a fallen, broken, sinful world. All of it confirms that we can never look at the biggest issues of life with perfect neutrality.

And this explains something really important. I said a wee while ago, I said a wee while ago that Aquinas had these famous five proofs for the existence of God.

[17:17] Lots of other people have tried to produce these proofs for the existence of God. And so many people talk and say, I would just believe in God if you could give me proof. And it doesn't really work, does it?

It's not like ever since Aquinas. It's like, case closed. No more atheists. These arguments are foolproof. And other arguments have been made since. And many of them are superb philosophical arguments.

You get other superb scientific arguments. But none of them are foolproof in confirming to everybody out there that God exists. Why? Because we're not neutral. No one is neutral.

Instead, we're kind of, we're biased, we're finite, and we're led astray by sin.

And coupled to that is the second reason why natural theology is not neutral theology. And this is a much more positive way of looking at it. The key thing we have to remember is that in the creation around us, God is always speaking.

[18:23] He's always speaking. And that's why we refer to it as revelation. God is revealing himself to us in his creation.

We call it general revelation. And that means that nature is not this neutral realm of autonomous reason where we can just come to settled, secure conclusions on our own.

That's not what the environment around us is. It's not this kind of neutral territory. It's the realm of divine revelation where we need to listen for the voice of God.

In other words, there's never a moment when God is not speaking to us. And if God is speaking, then our response to his voice has huge implications.

And so what's that voice saying? What is God saying to us through the world around us? Well, he's giving us a message of glory, goodness, and guilt.

[19:27] And we're going to look at them together. And we're going to look especially at this tonight. And we're going to have two very short headings because I'm running out of time already. One of my headings is good.

One of my headings is bad. Both of them are short. The world around us is an object of wonder. And it's become an object of worship. And as I'm sure you can tell, that's the good one.

That's the bad one. First of all, the world around us is an object of wonder. That's captured in the stunning words at the start of Psalm 19. We read them, we sang them.

The heavens declare the glory of God. Same emphasis in Acts 14. God's not left himself without witness. You can see that there at the start of verse 17.

There's so much that we can see here. The thing I want to highlight is that this declaring of glory, this witnessing to God, that is happening from the furthest galaxies in the universe all the way to the core of your heart.

[20:31] And so Psalm 19 gets us to think about the universe in all its mind-blowing vastness. You're standing under a star-filled night and there are, from what we can see, thousands upon thousands of stars.

What we can't see is that there's billions more beyond them. And the distances are immeasurable. The energy is immense. The whole thing is colossal.

And it's all crying out to us about the glory of God. The psalm goes on to speak about the sun. You have the idea of the sun rising, the sun setting.

Psalm 113, which we sang, has got the same emphasis from the rising of the sun to where it sets. God's name is to be praised. And there's a beautiful emphasis there that you have the sun rising and setting over all the different parts of the world.

It means every location on earth and at every moment of the day, every tick of the clock, God's name is to be praised.

[21:36] God's glory is being declared. Acts 14 does something fascinating. It emphasizes that rain actually does the same thing. We've struggled to see that, to be honest.

Rain belongs in the same category as spiders for declaring God's glory. But for the Middle East, the ancient Near East, where they were so dependent on rain for their crops, rain was such a beautiful blessing when it came.

And that's just one aspect of the environment we live in. Trees, animals, mountains, rivers, all of it declaring God's glory.

And you know that that's true. You know that's true when you go for a walk on a summer's evening in Lewis. You know that that's true when you drive down the A9 through the highlands of Scotland. You know that it's true when you see the rolling farmland of Perthshire. You know that it's true when you see the sun glistening in the sea in Harris. You even know that it's true when you see the wind sending massive waves crashing onto our shore.

[22:41] And those of you who've traveled to other parts of the world will have seen it through in many other places as well. What I want you to recognize alongside that is that you are also part of that general revelation.

You also declare the glory of God. And that happens in lots of ways. It happens because we bear God's image and we do that in knowledge, righteousness, holiness. So many things that we're capable of doing are God-like qualities that he's given to humanity.

And that makes us unique. But alongside that, the very creatures that you are, the very creature you are, both physically and spiritually, that's also declaring the glory of God.

So your physical heart in your body declares the glory of God. So does every other organ in your body. So does every cell in your body. So does every DNA chain that you're made of.

All of it declares the glory of God. Your spiritual heart is also speaking to you. Ecclesiastes 3 speaks about God putting eternity on our hearts.

[23:42] John Calvin, the famous reformer, spoke about the sense of the divine that is there in every human heart. Paul speaks about this a couple of chapters later in Act 17.

I'm just going to read it. I know I'm running out of time, but we're going to read it anyway because it's important. Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, which is the gathering of the kind of intellectual elites of Athens, he said to the men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you're very

religious.

But as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription to the unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you, the God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

Yet he's actually not far from each one of us, but in him we live and move and have our being, even as some of your own poets have said, for we indeed are his offspring.

[24 : 56] All of it's a reminder that whether we gaze into a star-filled sky at night, or whether we look at the landscape and the wildlife around us, or whether we even look at ourselves in the mirror or under the microscope, all of it is a stunning source of wonder.

And all of it is crying out that there's a glorious God behind it all. And the big point of application for us here to think about is, is this the way you view the world?

Is this the way you view the world? Is this the way you view yourself? As you open your eyes every morning, you feel the warmth of the sun, or more likely you hear the pounding of the rain, every flower you see or smell, every bird you hear singing, every fruit that you taste so sweet, every time you speak or laugh or sing, every friendship you enjoy, every step you take, every time your heart beats and blood runs through your veins, at every single moment, you are surrounded by amazing things.

And all of them are telling you about the glory of God. And that's the way we need to view the world that we live in.

And one of the things I love most about Psalm 19 is that it reminds us that actually, you know, if we want to see the glory of God declared, it's only the universe itself that comes close to being big enough.

[26 : 42] The world around us is an object of wonder. It shows us the glory of God. But at the same time, the world around us has frequently become an object of worship.

And so the precious and beautiful world that God's given us, that's also become a huge source of problems for us because we've turned an object of wonder into an object of worship. And that was a constant problem in the Old Testament.

The sun and the moon that declared God's glory became an object of worship themselves.

Jeremiah 8 speaks about that, describing how the kings and the officials and the priests, that their bones would be spread out before the inhabitants of Jerusalem and before the sun and the moon and the host of heaven, which they have loved and served and gone after, which they've sought and worshipped.

The people started to worship the created realm. And that's the sin of idolatry. The creation gets worshipped instead of the creator. Isaiah 44 is another example of that.

I won't read it all, but it's just this kind of devastating critique where it describes a carpenter chopping down a tree. He's got a log. He cuts it in half. With one half of it, he burns it in the fire and makes his dinner. And with the other half, he carves a statue and worships it.

[28 : 07] And Isaiah is saying it's the same tree. And one half of it, you're chucking in the fire. The other half of it, you're bowing before. And it shows the absurdity of idolatry.

The same problem continues into the New Testament. That's what we read about in Acts 14. This time, the people want to worship Paul and Barnabas. And that's what you see so powerfully before us there in Acts 14.

And we read a passage like that, and we read about the priest who comes out with his oxen and his garlands, and he wants to make this sacrifice so they can bow down and worship Barnabas and Paul. And we think to ourselves, that's crazy.

But we are probably worse. Because the people of Lystra wanted to worship Paul and Barnabas because they had just seen them perform a miracle.

But today, you only have to be good looking, or good at singing, or good at football, and millions and millions of people will come and bow down before you.

[29 : 15] And again, it's all emphasizing that natural theology is not neutral theology, because the truth is we're always looking for something to worship. And if we're not worshipping God, then we'll

be worshiping something else.

And this is where we start to see that the three headings that we're looking at, they fit together. So natural theology, the world around us, is pointing us to God's glory.

It's showing us that God is glorious. And so much of what he's made is glorious. The stars, the sky, sun, moon, hills, landscape, trees, plants, everything.

So much of that is good, which is why we've got this arrow here. And so what's glorious, we see that it's good. But our sin has affected our hearts and distorted our thinking.

And so we see the glory, and we marvel at the goodness. But instead of looking back to God, we end up worshiping the creature instead of the creator.

[30 : 20] And that means that we're guilty. And one of the key things we have to notice is that the guilt doesn't mean that God is not glorious.

Guilt doesn't mean that God is no longer glorious. That's not true. It's the opposite. Guilt confirms that God is glorious. Because only he should be worshipped.

And idolatry is a sin because he's glorious. And he alone is the source of every other glimpse of glory. And idolatry is confirming two things, that he alone is God and that we've made a massive mistake in turning away from him.

And all of this is showing us that this cycle that I tried to draw on that diagram is both glorious and devastating.

It's glorious because it confirms the glory of God. It's devastating because it also guarantees our guilt. And that's exactly what the Westminster Confession of Faith was trying to summarize, that we see in the creation around us the power and goodness and majesty of God, but also that leaves us inexcusable.

[31 : 33] And so we're kind of caught in this devastating cycle where God's glory reveals his goodness. We see and enjoy his goodness, but instead of worshipping him, we worship the stuff that he's made us, that he's made and given to us.

That leaves us guilty. That confirms his glory. The cycle continues and there's no solution. There's no remedy and there's no escape except for one.

Grace. But grace is in a category of its own. Because the grace that we need for salvation is not revealed in the heavens and it's not revealed in the hills and the sea and the flowers and the trees. It's not revealed in general revelation. It's revealed in the Bible. General revelation, natural theology teaches us the glory, the goodness and the guilt.

Special revelation, the Bible teaches us about grace. And that's where we see that natural theology is so powerful but it's always limited.

[32 : 47] And it confirms to us that we need more than what just the world around us is saying. We need the message of the gospel revealed through Jesus Christ and recorded on the pages of Scripture.

And the message that we discover on those pages is just how much God has done for us through the Lord Jesus Christ. That he has sent his son to come into the created realm to be one of us, to stand alongside us, to die in place of us, to take our sin upon his shoulders and to rise again in glory for our salvation.

And this is where we discover something amazing. That to see grace, we need more than what the natural world around us can tell us.

In other words, it means that God is even more glorious than the universe is capable of declaring. Because from the universe all the way to the cells in your heart, you can see the glory of God's power.

But God wants us to know more than that. And something very, very interesting happens when you move from the Old Testament into the New Testament. In the Old Testament, the big emphasis is that if you want to see God's glory, look at the universe.

[34 : 11] Psalm 19. But when you come to the New Testament in terms of seeing God's glory, it stops speaking about the universe. And the New Testament stops pointing you to the heavens above or to the worlds around in order to see God's glory.

And instead, the New Testament points you somewhere else. The New Testament points you to the cross. Because it's on the cross that you see the unspeakable glory of God's grace.

Because it's there that broken, guilty sinners who have turned away from God find grace. And that's why Jesus says in John 17, Father, the hour has come.

Glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you. Since you've given him all authority over all flesh to give eternal life to all whom you've given him. This is eternal life that they know the only through God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

The hour has come. Glorify your Son. And in order to glorify the Son, God did not place him at the center of the universe. Instead, he was nailed to the cross so that we could find grace.

[35 : 43] And so yes, the heavens declare the glory of God, but we need even more than that. And in the grace of the gospel, we see even more of God's glory declared as he comes to save sinners and as he comes to bring us home.

And so I want you to look at the world around you and to see and marvel at the glory that is being revealed. But at the same time, I want you to remember that that's not enough.

We have to get to the cross and there we see the miracle of grace and the fullness of God's love for you. Amen. Let's pray.

Amen. may may may! may may may!