

Metaphysics And Me (Part 2)

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[0 : 00] This evening, I want us to turn back to Psalm 19, and let me read again from verse 1. Psalm 19, verse 1, the heavens declare the glory of God, the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

On our Sunday evenings, just now in August, we're doing a short series that's called Metaphysics and Me, which is a bit of a complicated title, and maybe a bit of a complicated topic, but hopefully it's one that can be a huge encouragement to us.

So, these evening series, evening sermons throughout August are taking us into areas that are going to stretch us, and maybe stretch us more than we normally would, so maybe we're going into a little bit more depth on things that we would, more than we would normally on a Sunday evening. But that's a good thing to do from time to time, because sometimes it's only by stretching ourselves that we'll see things that we couldn't see before. So, we've got this weird title, Metaphysics and Me, and it's always raising the question, well, what exactly do we mean by that word, metaphysics? Well, basically, it's a fancy word to describe the biggest questions of life and reality. So, metaphysics is the discipline, the philosophical discipline that's exploring questions of being, of first principles, of ultimate reality.

[1 : 28] So, we're asking, what is the universe? Where does it come from? What's time? What's space? What's matter? What's information? What is ultimate reality?

Metaphysics is thinking about all these kind of questions. So, metaphysics is the stuff beyond physics. And so, physics will take you to the very depths of outer space, and it'll teach us all sorts of amazing things.

Because metaphysics is taking us beyond that, and it's taking us into the realm of philosophy, into questions of absolutes, of ultimates. And that affects every one of us, because we're all going through this thing called life, and we all need to think about, what is it that we're part of? What is all this about? Where does it come from? Where is it going? What's going on? And so, metaphysics is dealing with these massive questions, and these massive questions matter to every single one of us, because you and I are part of whatever is true metaphysically. And so, your metaphysics is going to affect you. Metaphysics and me are two inseparable subjects. And as we said last week, that title is also capturing two topics that we find quite hard to understand.

[2 : 59] So, metaphysics is stretching us. It's hard to understand metaphysics. But it's also hard to understand ourselves. And very often, we can go through life, and we feel confused about who we are, about what we're doing.

And often, the thing that we struggle to make sense of most of all is us. As we think about these topics, we're going to be exploring two big theological topics.

Creation and providence. Now, I said last week that we were going to do two weeks on creation and two weeks on providence. I think I'm going to stretch it once, and I think we're going to do three weeks on creation, and then two weeks on providence.

And even then, we're only scratching the surface. So, that means that tonight, we're continuing to think about creation, but I don't think I'm going to say everything I want to say. So, we'll have to say a bit more next week. But tonight, we're going to start with Psalm 19.

We're thinking about how the heavens declare the glory of God. Last week, we looked about how the Bible teaches us that God is our creator.

[4 : 07] He is the one who has made absolutely everything else that exists. And we highlighted this little diagram that's quite famous now among theologians.

It's called the creator-creation distinction. I can't fit creation into the circle. But that two-circle diagram is highlighting the fact that God is the creator of everything else.

He alone is uncreated. He alone is unique. God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Everything else. The universe, time, space, matter.

Everything else is created by him, and it's in the small circle. There's a distinction between the creator and the creation, but there's also a relationship between the two. And we unpacked that a little bit more last week.

This week, I want us to think a little bit more about how the creation around us is teaching us about God. And we're going to explore that under two headings.

[5 : 07] We're going to think about creation talking, and then we're going to say a little bit about how we can talk about the creation. So starting here, all theological study, everything that we do in terms of theology, is relying on the fact that God is revealing himself to us.

In fact, all knowledge of metaphysical truth is totally reliant on the fact that God is revealing himself to us, because he's the metaphysical absolute. And so anything that we're going to know about that is only through him revealing himself to us.

And in theology, we're studying that revelation that God has given to us in order to know him. And that revelation has two aspects, what we tend to call general revelation and special revelation.

And I'll just call these GR and SR on the screen. General revelation is the world around you that God has made and that is pointing us to him.

So John Calvin, a famous theologian from 500 years ago, said that the world is like a mirror in which we ought to behold God. And so whether we're seeing a beautiful sunset, whether we're seeing the power of the wind like we have last week, whether we're seeing the intricacy of the petal of a flower, all of it is pointing us to God and it's revealing him.

[6 : 33] So general revelation, the world around you, and you and I are included in that as well. Special revelation is referring to the Bible. And that's a unique revelation that God has given to us.

And that's what makes the Bible the most unique and most important book in the whole world. And these two, general revelation and special revelation, work together. And so general revelation actually shows us why we need special revelation.

Because although the general revelation is pointing us to the fact that there is a God, it doesn't tell us how to find him. And for that, we need special revelation.

And so we saw this last week and we'll mention it again and again. The world around us reveals the attributes of God. His eternal power, his divine nature, they've been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

And that leaves us without excuse before God. And so we know there's a God, but we need to know more. General revelation is not enough on its own.

[7 : 40] And that's captured in the statement in the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is a summary of the theology that our church believes. And it says that general revelation is not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of his will, which is necessary for salvation.

And so we need something more. We need special revelation to teach us what we need to know that we might be saved.

And it's the Bible that reveals it. The Bible reveals the truth about the seriousness of our condition, our urgent need of salvation, and the fullness of God's provision through his Son.

And as we read the Bible, God the Holy Spirit helps us to see and understand this. So the Bible, the world around us is pointing us to the fact that there's a God, but yet we need more in order to come to know him.

But at the same time, we want to recognize that as the Holy Spirit helps us to understand Scripture, we also get a clearer and more accurate understanding of the world around us.

[8 : 45] So if you think on the one hand, general revelation guides us towards special revelation to help us to come to know God. But the movement is also in the other direction. What we learn from special revelation helps us to understand the world around us more clearly.

And John Calvin used the illustration of spectacles to highlight that. Now, I put this quote up last week, but I was running out of time, so I raced through it. This week, I want to read it just a little bit more slowly.

Calvin wrote in his commentary on Genesis, Now, in describing the world as a mirror in which we ought to behold God, I would not be understood to assert either that our eyes are sufficiently clear-sighted to discern what the fabric of heaven and earth represents, or that the knowledge to be hence attained is sufficient for salvation.

So that's in making the point that what we see around us is not enough in order to be saved. We do need the Bible. And whereas the Lord invites us to himself by the means of created things, and with no other effect than that of thereby rendering us inexcusable, that's from Romans, he has added, as was necessary, a new remedy, or at least by a new aid, as he assisted the ignorance of our minds. For by the scripture as our guide and teacher, he not only makes those things plain, which would have otherwise escaped our notice, but almost compels us to behold them, as if he'd assisted our dull sight with spectacles.

[10:10] And so this idea that the Holy Spirit is helping us to see and understand things. That helps us see and understand what we need to do to be saved, but it also helps us to understand more of the truth of the world around us.

Coupled to that is something that Calvin called the *sensus divinitatis*, which is a fancy Latin word, which just means the divine sense, or the sense of the divine.

In other words, basically what that means is that, what he means by that is that in every single person, there's a sense within us that there is a God, a sense of the divine that everyone is created with.

And one of the ways that that divine, that sense of the divine will show itself is through our conscience, our awareness of right and wrong. And so these two great emphases of revelation work together.

And there's a consistency between the two. What God has made and revealed through general revelation is going to be consistent with what he reveals in special revelation and vice versa.

[11:25] The two work hand in hand and both convey the ultimate metaphysical truth that God is our maker and all reality is his creation.

Now, one of the things I want to highlight and just reinforce is captured in this quotation by another theologian called Cornelius Van Til. He's the guy who did the two-circle diagram. He lived in the 20th century.

And he said this. He said, there is nothing in this universe on which human beings can have a full and true information unless they take the Bible into account.

There's nothing in this universe on which human beings can have full and true information unless they take the Bible into account.

Now, that's a massive claim, but it's actually a very, very logical one. And if you think about it, say you're looking to study physics and you want to learn more about massive high-energy stuff in the depths of the galaxies of space, you can learn a huge amount about what's going on there.

[12:38] But ultimate truth, an ultimate explanation of what you're seeing is only going to come if you look at that through the lens of what the Bible is teaching us so that we see and understand that all the astonishing elements and reactions and powers and forces and energy that's in play is all the creation of God.

It comes from Him and it glorifies Him. Everything, everything, everything is made by Him.

And if we remove that from our understanding of the world, then our understanding of the world is going to fall short of ultimate truth. All this means that creation around us is functioning as an aspect of revelation.

In other words, the creation is talking to us. It's talking to us all the time. And one of the things that it's doing is that it's showing us God's power, His wisdom, and His goodness.

That's one of the big claims of the Westminster Confession of Faith. When it describes creation, it says that God created the world and that that was a manifestation of His eternal power, wisdom, and goodness.

[13:58] And then there are various verses that get referred to by the confession which capture this. Jeremiah 10, 12. It is He who made the earth by His power and who established the world by His wisdom.

Because Psalm 33, He loves righteousness and justice. The earth is full of steadfast love. By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made. By the breath of His mouth, all their host.

The world that God has made is full of His steadfast love. That's pointing us to the manifestation of God's goodness. And then the same emphases in Psalm 104, it's in wisdom that God has made everything.

The earth is full of His creatures. And all of that summed up perfectly in Psalm 19, the heavens, the universe around us, declare the glory of God.

And that word, declare, is a brilliant word for us to think about because it's conveying the fact that the world around us is speaking, it's talking, it's recounting, it is proclaiming the glory of God.
[15 : 05] And so the creation around us declares to us God's power. And this is where you see that science is definitely our friend.

A lot of people like to make science and faith enemies not true. This is where science is definitely our friend because the vastness of the universe, the incomprehensible vastness of the universe, the magnitude of energy and gravity, the intricacy of atoms, molecules and cells is stunning. And it's all speaking to you. It's speaking to you about the power of God. And creation also speaks to you about God's wisdom.

And so you look at the world around you, you look at anything, you go outside and you pick one of the trillions of blades of grass that there is in Carlway, you pick one of them up and put it under the microscope and you see astonishing order and balance and beauty.

It's talking to you. It's declaring to you the wisdom of God. And that creation, it's important to remember as well, creation doesn't just include physical stuff that you can see and touch.

[16 : 18] It also includes the invisible wonders of thought, of speech, of emotion, of truth, of justice and most of all of love.

All of that finds its origin in the wisdom of God. And creation declares God's goodness. It's declaring to you His power, His wisdom, His goodness.

In a million and one ways every day the world around you is telling you that God is so good. And we need to remember that everything that is good in your life and mine finds its source in God.

That's where metaphysics is such a helpful thing to think about. If you think about metaphysically, what is the ultimate source of good? There's only one answer to that question. God. everything that's good in your life comes from God.

From the beautiful colors that you see around you to the warm fire that you sit beside at home, the comfort of your chair, the laughter of a joke, whatever it might be, it all comes from God.

[17 : 34] As Christians, we can very often be afraid to talk about creation. And sometimes it can be the kind of area where we feel that are most threatened and that's where Christianity has sometimes frequently been under attack and there's just been this sort of scene that the Bible and the discoveries of science are incompatible.

There is absolutely no need to think like that at all and we absolutely do not need to be afraid about talking about creation. And it's a tragedy if we are because if we're afraid to talk about creation, we are missing the chance to speak about the breathtaking power, the supreme wisdom and the astounding goodness of God.

And so we should be confident and excited about creation. It's talking to us and revealing to us the glory of God.

And so that means that we want to talk about it ourselves but that raises the question what should we say how should we understand creation? What should we say about it?

Well what I want us to do as we think about this I want us to talk about three things. I want us to think about categories. I want us to think about adjectives and I want us to think about nouns.

[18 : 55] Okay? So first of all thinking about categories. Theologians have often categorized God's work in two headings. works of nature and grace.

And so you'll sometimes see that if you read theology books especially older ones they'll talk about God's work of nature and of grace. Sometimes they'll have three categories works of nature grace and glory. Now the works of nature tend to get divided into two parts.

Creation which we're talking about at the moment in our sermons and providence which we're going to be talking about in a couple of weeks time. And these are the works whereby God has made everything and whereby God sustains everything and they get called the works of nature.

And then the works of grace refer to his work of salvation his great purposes in relation to humanity and our supernatural ends.

The goal the eschatological goal of the gospel God's work not just to make us but to save us. And these headings are very very helpful. And I think nature and grace one simple way to remember it is that nature is where Christ meets us and grace is where Christ will take us.

[20 : 09] And these categories sit side by side in the wonderful works that God is doing. It's important though not to press the distinctions too far and this has sometimes happened in the history of theology and of Christianity that people focus too much on one on one of these.

So for some people nature swallows up grace and what I mean by that is the fact that people tend to want to minimize any supernatural aspects of the gospel sometimes they want to abandon any concept of the supernatural things like miracles and things like that become are rejected people become skeptical about them and in many ways at its worst example salvation just becomes all about now and there's no eternal hope in terms of the gospel.

So for some people nature swallows up grace but for other people grace can swallow up nature and what I mean by that is that people are so focused on Jesus in heaven and on the truth that's proclaimed in God's word there's a kind of disregard for the world around us and we don't really see that as important the soul becomes infinitely more important than the body and you can fall into the trap that the Greeks fell into where you have this dualism whereby spiritual stuff is good physical stuff is bad and when that happens grace is at risk of swallowing up nature and we want to avoid that kind of mistake as well because in the gospel these two stand side by side it's crucial to maintain a connection between nature and grace and in fact in the gospel one of the great promises is that in the gospel grace restores nature because sin has had the effect of damaging this nature has become damaged because of sin and the great restoring work of the gospel is that by grace all that damage gets undone and that's incredibly important for us to remember that when we think of glory that involves both nature and grace the universe will be restored and we will be brought into an eternal into the God into the presence of God for all eternity so these two categories are helpful when we think about creation we're thinking about nature and grace the two stand side by side adjectives

I want to give you a couple of adjectives to remember in terms of creation I'm going to give you a pair and then I'm going to give you one on its own the first pair is we say that creation is organic and systematic so what do we mean by that organic and systematic these are in many ways very closely related terms there may be like two sides of the same coin organic is basically saying that there is unity and diversity in our creation and so the creation around us contains a profound and majestic diversity you've got sun moon and stars they all have their unique task you've got plants animals humans all with their distinct nature and you've got the resources and the activities and the operations of the various parts of creation that are magnificently varied and yet across that diversity there is overarching unity and let me give you a quote from another theologian he's from the Netherlands he lived about a hundred years ago he's called Herman Bavinck and he said this heaven and earth man and animal soul and body truth and life art and science religion and morality state and church family and society and so on though they are all distinct are not separated there's a wide range of connections between them an organic if you will an ethical bond holds them all together and this is very important to recognize because that concept of unity and diversity where does that come from it comes from God he is one God he is three Persians father son and holy spirit that concept of unity and diversity is part of the nature of the creator the metaphysical absolute of all existence and so the organic nature of the creation around us is another way in which the glory of God is reflected at the same time we want to say that creation is systematic and what we mean by that is the fact that within this organic connection there is integration order coherence and interdependence and so on the one hand we don't want to just have a merely mechanical view of the universe lots of people do that they say well there's no God the universe is just all mechanisms and that's what we call a naturalistic worldview we don't want to fall into that trap but at the same time we do not want to overlook the fact that there are glorious mechanisms that God has established and as he upholds the world he maintains these and so what God decreed from all eternity has now become a reality it corresponds perfectly to what he has made and we see that within the creation there is just a mind-blowing balance of order and interconnection and it's reminding us that God is the arranger of all mathematics he's the designer of all logic he's the planner of all causality he's the architect of structure he's the composer of sound he's the writer of all science you do anything in this room pick up one of those instruments play it put that pillar in place that holds up the balcony choose a color to paint the wall connect wires and generate electricity producing light in bulbs arrange the LEDs in these screens touch the fabric in front of you all of that finds its origin in God and everything that holds that together is part of the system the majestic system that he has created and so creation is organic and systematic and all of that points us to the extraordinary glory of God so those are two very important adjectives in relation to creation but there's a more important adjective in relation to creation and it's the

[27 : 28] Bible's adjective and that's it there that creation is very good God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good and in those words God is declaring a truth to us so that we

would know that it's true it's not that God made the world and then thought oh wow it's very good he knew it would be very good and he's declaring to us what he has accomplished by his good word and so it's important in our understanding of the world around us that at a foundational level creation is very good and that's crucial for a biblical metaphysic we are taught that creation is good before it is ever marred and so yes sin has caused a lot of damage and we know that and we'll say a little bit more about that in a minute but at its starting point it is good and that means that very good is utterly normal not normal in a mediocre sense but normal in terms of normative the way things should be that is the way

God has made things to be now sin has meant that now everything falls short of that good or corrupts that good and everything that wars against that which is good is a hideous intrusion because in the beginning when it was made it was made good and everything that has been created stands on a foundation of goodness so the environment around us the resources that God has given us culture that's been developed across the world things like art and music and sport and science all of these things arise from that good foundation that God has made and that's teaching us that ultimately metaphysically goodness is bigger than us it's not actually defined by us it's not this subjective individualistic thing that we can pick and choose what we think is good and what isn't on our own we will get that wrong and on our own as Romans 1 will tell us we will actually approve of things that are actually bad we'll say that bad things are good and that good things are bad we will get it wrong goodness is ultimately bigger than us goodness comes from God and goodness is woven into the fabric of creation that he's made so goodness is bigger than us but crucially it is not beyond us and God has in his incredible kindness shared goodness with us so that it can be experienced by us in fact the Bible makes it absolutely clear that goodness is our original condition original sin is not our original condition original goodness was how we were first made in other words all of this means that goodness is real metaphysically now you might think well big deal that is so important that metaphysically in terms of the biggest stuff in the world goodness is real goodness is real and so that means that according to the gospel ultimate reality does not leave goodness behind every other world view does so you go to a world view that has no God and that you know the stuff that's there around us material stuff is all that there is you go to the logical conclusion of that world view you stretch to the ends of the physical universe or whatever other universes there might be you've left goodness behind a long long time ago but the biblical metaphysic you stretch as far as you possibly can to the gate of heaven so that you can see the face of God and you will find perfect goodness metaphysically goodness is real and that means that happiness is real it means that delight endures eternally for all those who know God your happiest moments are not just a brief moment of pleasure that's going to disappear into obliteration they're a glimpse of eternity of the goodness that God wants to pour into you and it also means that badness is real and again that's the even bigger problem that other world views have because if you push them to their logical conclusion well you don't actually have a framework to say that something is bad that something is wrong the gospel means that we can look at all the suffering and injustice and cruelty in the world and we can say that is metaphysically wrong it's always wrong and that's why in God you see you see this perfect balance forever of justice and goodness and so all of these things are reminding us that with the gospel concepts like order and delight and purpose and values and harmony and potential and beauty they're real they're foundational and they're good but without the bible's world view all of these things just become an illusion they're just a blip in the vast machine that we're part of and that needs to shape the way we view every single day of our lives Paul reminds Timothy everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it's received with thanksgiving now that's written in the context of those who are forbidding marriage and those who are requiring abstinence from certain foods but it's a principle that applies more widely in the natural world around us there's so many good things we want to appreciate and delight in the functioning of our society there are so many good things that we want to appreciate and delight in and in the people that you will meet this week there are so many good things for us to delight in and to thank God for the world that he has made is very good last of all nouns last of all nouns what is the creation that's our question what is it you look at the world around what is it different theologians have given different answers to that question

John Calvin described it as a theatre theatre of God's glory and others have echoed that and that's really really helpful it is a theatre where God's glory is displayed others maybe use more technical terms we'll call it the cosmos some will refer to it as a temple and in many ways the Garden of Eden

did function as a temple some have described it as a cathedral a place where God is worshipped and honoured these are all good and helpful terms but I want to suggest to you a different noun look at the world around you the creation and ask the question what is it I want to suggest to you that it's a homeland and I've chosen that word carefully because I don't just mean like a home like a house I mean a homeland and a homeland is a home it's a place for us to dwell a place made for us to live in it's also a place where we work and the universe is a place where God has placed us to work and to achieve things a homeland is a place of community and the universe is a place for human friendship and relationship to thrive a homeland is a place of adventure it's where you can do amazing things and experience the wonders of the world that God has made a homeland is a place where we worship many many people will worship idols in their homeland but the homeland was originally created to be the place where we worship our creator the one who's provided this homeland for us and most and most importantly a homeland is a place where we belong and that's what

[36 : 35] God's creation is it's a place where God has made us where we can be with him where we can be with each other where we can all belong there's a beautiful verse in Isaiah 45 that says this for thus says the Lord who created the heavens he is God who formed the earth and made it he established it he did not create it empty he formed it to be inhabited to be lived in I am the Lord and there is no other the universe is a homeland created by God sustained by God and given by God to you given by God to you and and this is where we see that the heavens really do declare the glory of God not just his power in making things but his extraordinary generosity in providing for us and the promise of the gospel is that for eternity we will enjoy a new creation a restored creation a creation that will never again be marred and broken by sin and this is where we discover that that you know if if the billions and billions of stars that are in space declare the glory of

God when God's displaying that who's he doing it for he's not doing it for the rocks he's not doing it for the fish he's not doing it for the trees he's doing it for you so when you stand outside and you see a stunning starlit sky God saying to you look at this I want you to see it when you stand on the shore in the Hebrides and you see a glorious sunset God saying look at this I want you to see it when you walk through a summer's garden and you smell flowers and you see them in your beauty God saying I want you to experience this when you stand outside and you feel the wind blowing God saying I want you to feel this and all of it is a glimpse of just how much

God wants to provide for you it's all showing you his power his wisdom and his goodness but the incredible thing is this all of that was provided for us in the beginning and we lost it by sinning and the whole gospel is so that we could get it back and get so much more and all of that's possible because Jesus came and died for us and rose again and that's why we can sum it all up this way in the beginning God declared let there be light and he did that to give you a home and on the cross he declared it is finished and he did that to bring you home amen let's pray