

Study 3. The Glory of God in Creation (Romans 1:18-23)

Our purpose in this series of studies is to see the glory of God, that is, to know God himself in all the ways that he shines on us. 'Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you (Is. 60:1)! Our purpose is also that we would reflect God's glory because his purpose is to be glorified, not only in himself, but also, *in us*.

God reveals his glory in creation—'his eternal power and deity', 'the glory of the incorruptible God'. 'What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them' (Rom. 1:18-23). This is close to saying that everything we need to know about God is evident to everyone.

The creation itself is full of many glorious elements. Poets, geographers, scientists, and then biographers and anthropologists, and again, just ordinary people on vacation, all have their particular way of enjoying it! But then again, for many, it is a place of shame. See how harsh it can be, or how we pollute it, or fill it with injustice and wars! In many respects, the creation itself is inglorious, and waits to share the coming glory of God's family (Rom. 8:20-23' cf. Is. 24:4-6). So what then should we see in this creation?

Some have assumed, from this statement, that we *can* know God through the creation itself, but this is not Paul's point. God is not locked inside his universe as its dynamic force, waiting to be discovered. Rather, his honour is greater than the universe itself (Ps. 148:13); the only way to see the glory of God revealed in the creation is to see or recognise *him*. This is precisely what sinners do not want to do.

Knowing God in the creation guards us against having a overly spiritual view of God and his glory. The Psalmist (Ps. 29) tells us about a violent storm surging in from the Mediterranean and down the length of Israel, thunder, lightning and a flood making playthings of mountains and trees. He imagines angels crying, 'Glory!' The writer sees this glory and calls on the Lord to give his people strength and peace. It is the source of the nation's confidence and joy. It would be good for us to have this view of the creation, not as untamed forces to be feared but as evidence of the greatness of our God and Father.

For Paul, this is a very dear truth. When he is confronted with idolatry at Athens, he explains that God has made all peoples, and directed their history and geography with the specific objective of their finding him as their Father (Acts 17:24-29). He says to pagans in Lystra, that God 'did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful season, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness' (Acts 14:17). God is being good to everyone. 'The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord' (Ps. 33:5; 119:64).

This is the truth of creation, the glory of God in creation. We may say that he has 'poured himself into it'. He has certainly poured himself out for it. He continues to direct it to the goal he has planned for it. All of this we know by special revelation, but given that it is so, we can be sure that, while living in this creation, we are always being confronted by the eternal power and deity of God. The fact that this is true only makes our ignorance of it the more culpable.

It must be evident already that the glory of God revealed in creation is moral glory. He has displayed his own character in making creation the way it is, and he calls upon us to behave consistently with the way things are. If God makes his creation, not out of necessity but in love, then nothing can be expected to work well without love. If God is Father, everything he does will have a familial feel to it. It is not just the fact of God that is denied, but the law of his being is rejected.

This point helps us understand the unity of Psalm 19. The heavens *do* declare the glory of God, and the sky above *does* proclaim his handiwork. The following verses suggest an ambiguity: 'There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard...', but, even so, 'their voice goes out throughout the earth'. The description of the sun rising and setting illustrates that nothing avoids God's penetrating address. But with this truth of creation is the same truth, clearly articulated—the instruction or law of the Lord. The creation does not say something different to the law. Both are calling us to live responsibly before God.

This moral glory of God, registers in the conscience of every person (Rom. 2:14-16). Wherever Paul encounters Gentiles, he assumes the actual guilt they have because of God's glory being evident in the creation.

Because the glory of God is being suppressed, by unrighteousness, God is revealing his wrath by giving people over to the dysfunctionality and corruption involved in worshipping the creation rather than the Creator. The creation cannot be truly functional without the glory of its Creator, and God determines the course of events to manifest this truth.

But then, he also is revealing his righteousness for all who believe, through the preaching of the gospel of Christ. This must be proclaimed, because it is God's glorious answer to the rejection of his glory being revealed in the creation. In fact, the glory of God we *can* now see in this creation, we have come to see by grace. This is how Israel knew their Creator, and it how we come to know the glory of God. 'The God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness" has shone in our hearts...' (2 Cor. 4:6).

If the glory of God is already expressed in the creation, how should we then regard it? We should receive it gladly, along with all its gifts (1 Tim. 4:1-5). Christian thankfulness to the God of glory revealed in creation is part of the testimony we have to the world. We should work in harmony with the purpose of God we see working out in the creation, in our families and workplaces and civic life. In particular, we should be grieve with the creation itself about its present, and necessary, shame, and long for the day when it, together with ourselves, will shine in all its glory (Rom. 8:22-23).

The following quote from Carl E. Braaten is useful:

'We do not meet the human face of the gracious God outside of Jesus Christ, but there is a divine revelation... the knowledge of ... the backside of God. I believe that this presupposition of the gospel sets the framework of theology and needs to be worked out afresh in a contemporary theology of religious experience and of the world religions. In the light of justification there is a *preparatio evangelica* mediated through the law written on the hearts of all people working universally through the conscience of people who know not Christ. Although the understanding of this law may be dark and confusing apart from Christ, its fundamental content is the same as the law given to Israel, in relation to which Christ is announced as its end and fulfillment' (Carl E. Braaten, *Justification* p. 73).