**BIBLE READING 101**

**WHY WE READ SCRIPTURE**

**Psalm 19**

**INTRODUCTION**

As we begin a new year, I would like to push the pause button on our series in Luke until March for three reasons. The first is that we are approaching Jesus’ suffering and crucifixion in Luke. I want to save those portions of Luke for March so that they will give us an extended period of time to prepare for our April celebrations of Good Friday and Easter. The second reason is that we will be having a number of other topics and speakers over the next few months that would break up our Luke series quite a bit if we jumped back in right now.

My third reason for pushing the pause button is the most important one. I want to try to take advantage of the fact that people are more likely to be willing to commit themselves to changing their habits at the beginning of a new year. We call this “making resolutions”. Most of the time, resolutions have to do with fitness, or spending, or relationships. What I want to do is help you consider making the most important *spiritual* resolution you could ever make, and that is to read your Bible more faithfully and prayerfully than ever before.

If you’re a Christian, you know that reading the Bible is important. In fact, I think it’s fair to say that you know that reading the Bible is *essential*. You know that if you want to grow spiritually, you need to read the Bible. It’s like your spiritual food. A healthy spiritual life only comes from a healthy spiritual diet. If you don’t take in the Word regularly, your spiritual muscles will weaken and waste away until you no longer have a taste for the things of God and only have a taste for this world.

As Christians, we know these things, and yet regular Bible reading is often one of the first things that disappears from our schedules. There are a number of reasons why this is so. Two of the more common ones are busyness and fatigue. We get so busy that we feel that we don’t have time for it, or if we do have time for it, we always feel too tired. But as common as these reasons are, I don’t think that either of them are the main problems. In fact, I think they’re only symptoms of a greater problem, which is this: people just don’t feel like they get a lot out of their Bible reading.

That’s the difference between physical food and spiritual food. You don’t have to enjoy physical food to receive the benefit. You can hate brussel sprouts with all your might, but if you grit your teeth, shove it in your mouth, and tolerate the taste for a few short seconds, it’ll still be good for you. That’s not how the Bible works. If you try to read the Bible by gritting your teeth and just tolerating it, it’s not going to benefit you at all.

That’s why I want to spend my next few sermons teaching you about this simple discipline of regularly reading your Bible. I want to help you see Bible reading as less like tolerating brussel sprouts and more like savouring steak, or tasting honey, or eating chocolate cake. I know that many of you already experience Bible reading like this, and I’m thankful for that, but I trust that this short series will help you cherish the Scriptures even more. And for those who have always struggled with regular Bible reading, my prayer is that these sermons will give you such a grand vision of the Scriptures that your Bible reading will never be the same.

I’m calling this series **Bible Reading 101**. The title of this message is **Why We Read Scripture**. My aim today is to show you that **The Ultimate Aim of Reading Scripture is to Worship God.** We will have three points today:

1. The Purpose of Scripture
2. The Benefits of Scripture
3. The Application of Scripture

(1) **THE PURPOSE OF SCRIPTURE**

Psalm 19 was written by King David and is one of the most well-known and dearly-loved Psalms in the Bible. C.S. Lewis called it

“…the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.”

Another commentator said that this Psalm

“…combines the most beautiful poetry with some of the most profound of biblical theology.” (Peter Craigie).

I’m not a poet, so I won’t be able to give you much assistance in appreciating this Psalm as a poem, but I will do my best to show you the beautiful truth contained within.

There is little in the Scriptures that will inspire you to read and love the bible more than Psalm 19, and yet, what we see in verses 1-6 is that the Psalm doesn’t start with the Word. It starts with a reflection on creation.

Verse 1: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” These two lines are what’s called a *chiasm*, a poetic structure where elements of the first line correspond with elements of the second so that we reach a greater understanding of both lines. Here, we see an “ABAB” pattern, where “the heavens” correspond with “the skies”, and “the glory of God” corresponds with “the work of his hands”. These two lines are telling us that God’s *glory* – that is, his incomparable beauty, power, and excellence – is displayed in the vast, ever-changing tapestry that we call the “skies”.

I remember when I was in university I used to spend prolonged periods of time just gazing at the sky. Sometimes it would be on my way from class to class. Other times it would be when I was studying on a bench, or sitting on the grass by the lake. I never grew tired of the sky, and one can imagine that David felt the same. David was a man who spent much of his youth as a shepherd, so he would have spent hours every day enjoying the same sky that we see every day. Sometimes it’s covered in fluffy white clouds, other times it’s so clear that it looks like the world is inside a big blue dome. Sometimes the light is strong and fierce like on a hot summer day. Other times it’s soft and golden like in the Fall or Winter. Depending on the day and the time of day, it can be grey, blue, yellow, orange, red, purple, indigo, and black. People are willing to travel across the world to see the beauty of nature, but we quickly forget that we have one of the most beautiful things in creation right above our heads at every moment of every day.

Psalm 19 tells us that, not only is the sky beautiful. It’s *eloquent* as well. It *preaches* to us. Verse 1 says that it “declares” and “proclaims”. Verse 2 says that it “pours out” speech, literally “bubbling forth” words like rushing water, and the tense of all these verbs is one of continual action. The sky is declar*ing*. It’s proclaim*ing*. And what is its message? “God is glorious! God is beautiful! God is *powerful*. Look at what he made. He made *me*, and he remakes me every single day. Look at me, see *his* glory, and worship *him*.” That’s the message. Night and day, the sky preaches to us that God is glorious and worthy to be praised. It doesn’t use actual speech or words, as verse 3 says, and yet in verse 4, its message “goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world”. The sky speaks in the universal language of beauty, testifying to the entire world that God, who fashioned it by the wisdom of his might, is glorious and worthy to be worshipped.

David then turns our attention to the crown jewel of the sky in verses 4b-6: the sun. The sun is what really makes the sky beautiful. Without the sun, the sky would be nothing but a perpetual black expanse. The sun is what gives the sky its colour. The sun is what gives the sky its *life*. That’s why David calls the sky a mere “tent” for the sun in verse 4. Without the sun, the sky is plain and unassuming. But when the sun comes out, it’s glorious, like a bridegroom leaving his chamber the morning after his wedding, or like a strong man running with joy. It rises at one end of the heavens and sets at the other, touching everything on earth with its heat. The heavens have a sermon to preach, and it’s about the glory of God’s power and wisdom.

Now, in verses 7-10, David has his own sermon to preach. Like the sermon of the sky, David’s sermon is also about God’s glory, but there’s one key difference: his sermon doesn’t point us to God’s glory as revealed in creation. It points us to God’s glory as revealed in the Scriptures.

In verses 7-9, David uses six different words for the Scriptures. “Law”, “Testimony”, Precepts”, “Commandment”, “Fear”, and “rules”. Many of these words are synonyms of one another. They mean essentially the same things, so we’re not meant to examine each one in detail so much as we are to get the single, unified sense from them all that the Scriptures are the very words of God. The Scriptures are the law *of the LORD*, meaning that they contain *his* laws and rules. The Scriptures are *the testimony of the LORD*, which means that they are *his* testimony of who he is and what he is doing in the world. They are *his* preceptsand *his* rules, leading us to fear *him*.

David doesn’t explicitly say that the Scriptures “declare the glory of God” like he said the heavens do in verse 1, but he says it implicitly by the way he praises them. “The law of the LORD is *perfect*.” “The testimony of the LORD is *sure*.” “The precepts of the LORD are *right*.” “The commandment of the LORD is *pure*.” “The fear of the LORD is *clean*.” “The rules of the LORD are *true*.” David is using his response to the Scriptures to show us what our response to them will be when we see God’s glory in them. We will declare them to be perfect and without flaw. Sure, steady, and reliable. Right in all that they declare. Pure and without flaw. Clean and without defilement. Completely true without a drop of deception or error.

This is the ultimate purpose of God’s Word. It’s to reveal the glory of God, and seeing that glory must be our aim every time we open the Bible. This makes all the difference in the world in how we read our Bibles. I think a lot of people feel that they don’t get much from their Bible reading because it’s not “speaking into their lives”. They want the Bible to speak directly into their specific struggles and trials, and when it doesn’t, they feel like they’re just wasting their time. Perhaps that’s been you. Perhaps you were feeling anxious one day about the future but you spent the morning reading about God’s judgment on the nations. Or perhaps you’re struggling with your marriage, or your singleness, or the dead-end job you have, or the burden of a wayward child, but you just keep reading about Israel and its patterns of idolatry and you start to wonder, “What’s the point? Why do I even try? I need someone to fix my life, not give me a history lesson.”

The wonderful thing about the Bible is that it has so much to say about our real-life problems. As we will see a little later on, it has a wealth of wisdom for those who don’t know the way forward. It comforts those who are distressed. It empowers those who are weak. But if we come to the Scriptures with a “me-centered” perspective (“they’re all about *me* and *my* life”), we’ve missed the point. *God* is the point. God and his glory are the ultimate aims of Scripture. We open up the pages of Scripture to behold God. To see *him*, behold *him*, and worship *him*. We want to grow into the kinds of people who echo David in declaring that the Scriptures are perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, and true, because the God who inspired them is perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, and true.

(2) **THE BENEFITS OF SCRIPTURE**

Some of you may be thrilled at this precious truth. You’ve seen God’s glory. You’ve *rejoiced* in God’s glory. And now, hearing that the purpose of the Word is to reveal God’s glory more fully to you gets you excited. Others, however, may feel a little disappointed. Perhaps you feel confused. “Why should I care about God’s glory? That doesn’t give me motivation to read my Bible. In fact, it gives me less.” If that describes you, then I believe that our next section will help you to see the true value of seeing God’s glory in Scripture. This leads to our second point: The Benefits of the Word.

David clearly tells us that the Scriptures give us a number of benefits – reviving the soul, making wise the simple, rejoicing the heart, and enlightening the eyes – but these aren’t the main benefits of reading Scripture. The main benefit is a little subtler, and serves as the source of all these other benefits, the fountainhead of God’s rich blessings that flow to us through Scripture.

What is that benefit? Notice what David writes in verse 7: “The law of the *LORD* is perfect, reviving the soul”. Compare that with verse 1, which said, “The heavens declare the glory of *God*.” Verse 1 talks about “God”. Verse 7 talks about “the LORD”. Two words that both refer to the same God. What’s the difference?

The Hebrew word for “God” here is *El*, which was a generic word for deity. It’s similar to the word “God” in English. In English, “God” can refer to the one, true, and living God, the God that we worship, but not necessarily so. We can use the word in other contexts as well, such as “the god of Islam”, or the “ancient Greek gods” or “the god of this world” (i.e. Satan). In those contexts, we’re using the word “god”, but we’re not referring to our God. The same is true in the Hebrew. At times, *El* refers to the one, true, and living God, but sometimes it doesn’t.

What about “LORD”? Remember that, whenever our English Bible translations write LORD in capital letters, it’s telling us that the Hebrew word behind it is *Yahweh*. *Yahweh* was the name God gave for himself to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. When Moses asked God what he should tell the Israelites when they asked him for the name of the God who sent him, God gave him this name: “I Am Who I Am. *Yahweh*, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” *Yahweh* is God’s covenant name with Israel, the name he gave to them to reveal his unique, covenantal relationship with them.

And who is *Yahweh*?

* “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” (Exodus 20:1)
* “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin…” (Exodus 34:6-7)
* “Bless the LORD, O my soul…He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” (Psalm 103:1, 10)

In other words, David is telling us in this Psalm that the Scriptures declare the glory of God in a different way than creation. Creation reveals the glory of God’s power (verses 1-6), but the Scriptures reveal the glory of God’s grace (verses 7-11). Yes, we can learn much from creation about who God is as the heavens declare his glory and the skies proclaim his handiwork, but we can’t learn everything about him. Nature doesn’t know how to preach God’s grace. The skies can’t proclaim his love. We need *Scripture* to learn those things about God. As scholar Alec Motyer put it,

“The silent word of Nature declares ‘God’; behind the word of Scripture stands Yahweh, the covenant God of grace and redemption.”

This is the most fundamental benefit of reading Scripture. It reveals who God is in *all* his attributes, not just his wisdom and power, but his grace, mercy, and love. Staring at the skies may give you an appreciation for God’s power, but it will never give you an appreciation for God’s love. Not apart from Scripture. The Scriptures, and the Scriptures alone, reveal *Yahweh*, the covenant God of mercy, who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

And it is in the Scriptures that we learn about what *Yahweh* did in his mercy and love to save us from his judgment. Every one of us deserves God’s judgment, because every one of us is a sinner. Our hearts are so distorted that, apart from the grace of God, we worship the creation rather than the Creator. The heavens are declaring the glory of God, but we’re not hearing their message. Yes, we see creation’s glory, but we fail to see beyond it the glory of the one who spoke it into existence. In some cultures, this takes the form of worshipping actual physical idols. People fashion false gods with their hands that represent the sun, or the moon, or animals. In cultures like ours, our idols are subtler. We don’t worship the sun, the moon, or animals. We worship other created things like money, careers, people, *ourselves –* idols that are hidden in our hearts but are no less real than the physical statues that people bow down to every day.

When we consider that God made us to worship him, but we chose to worship other things instead, we see why we deserve God’s judgment. We are like rebels in a kingdom who refuse to honour their king, and we all know that rebels deserve judgment. But in his mercy and love, *Yahweh*, the God of Scripture, sent his only Son into the world to die as our substitute. He suffered and died on the cross in our place, so that rebellious, false worshippers like us could be saved from his judgment, reconciled to him in love, and restored as true worshippers of the one, true, living God.

That is the best news the world has ever known. It’s the gospel, and it can only be found in Scripture. You can study the skies all you want. You’ll never learn the gospel, because you’ll never know *Yahweh*. But when we open the pages of Scripture, we don’t just see the glory of God like we do when we gaze into the heavens. We see the glory of *Yahweh*. That’s why we need the Bible. That’s why we need to read it. We read it to know the covenant God of mercy, that we might trust him and love him more.

There's nothing more important than this. Even in the midst of all our real-life problems, what we need is more of God: who he is, what he has done, and what he continues to do to save us. We tend to think that the most important thing we need to do in the midst of our problems is to stare at them. To give them more attention. To focus all our energy on solving them and removing them from our lives. Psalm 19 reminds us that we need to spend less time staring at our problems and more time staring at God by encountering him in the Scriptures. The bigger our problems, the bigger our need for *him*.

That’s how the other benefits in Psalm 19 flow to us. They don’t come to us merely by reading Scripture. They come to us when we read to behold *Yahweh* in his glory and his grace. When we do, that’s when our souls are revived (verse 7). That’s something we desperately need, isn’t it? In a culture as busy, as rushed, and as tired as ours, our weary souls need reviving so that we’re not dragging our heels from day to day but full of vitality and strength no matter the season we’re in. Sleep can’t do that. Entertainment can’t do that. Only God can do that. True, deep revival of the soul only comes from beholding the glory of God’s grace in the sacred pages of Scripture.

Verse 7 also tells us that the Scriptures make the simple wise. When we read the Bible, we become people who truly understand how life works, and how to live within that life in such a way that we honour God in what we say and do. We learn how to wisely navigate through the difficult decisions we face every day, from our families and friendships to our money and our work. We grow wise as we get to know the only wise God.

Verse 8 tells us that the Scripture give joy to the heart. This isn’t talking about the fleeting happiness of vain pleasures. It’s talking about a true, enduring, and deep joy that perseveres through sorrows and sufferings. This is the joy of our salvation, the joy that comes from knowing that God rejoices over us in Christ.

Lastly, verse 8 says that the Scriptures enlighten the eyes. They help us see life from a different perspective, not with the darkened eyes of this world, but the enlightened eyes of heaven, so that even if everything doesn’t make sense to us, we will have peace in our hearts knowing that our great God is sovereign over all.

These are the sweet benefits that lead David to end this section in verse 10 by saying this about the Scriptures: “More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.” Why are they more to be desired than fine gold? And why are they sweeter than honey? Because they bring us *Yahweh*, our great God of grace and redemption. May David's words about the Scriptures be our words as well as we come to worship God like David did.

(3) **THE APPLICATION OF SCRIPTURE**

David has considered the heavens. He has considered the Scriptures. And now, he considers his own heart, which is where our thoughts should go as well whenever we open the Scriptures. This is what we call *application*, when the truths of Scripture lead us to consider how those truths come to bear in our own lives. Once again, David teaches us by his own example that we should never read Scripture without also considering how it is calling us to change the way we live. This leads to our third point: The Application of Scripture.

As David has spent time in the Scriptures, he has become deeply impressed by two fundamental truths, which are both reflected in verse 11: “Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.” In other words, those who obey God are rewarded; those who don’t obey God are judged.

Not everyone will care about God’s word. You can point them to the Scriptures and warn them a hundred times about their sinful course of life or promise them the greatest rewards for obedience, and they’ll respond with a shrug of their shoulders and a “So what?” But that’s not how David responded.

David responds in verses 12-13 with a desperate cry for God to keep him from all sin, both subtle and blatant, known and unknown. In verse 12, he prays that God would declare him “innocent from hidden faults”, the sins that he might commit without him even knowing it. Then in verse 13, he prays that God would keep him back from “presumptuous sins”, the sins you commit when you know what God desires, but you stare him in the face and say, “No!” Only then, when he is free from both hidden faults and presumptuous sins, can he confidently say that he is blameless and innocent of great transgression.

There are countless ways in which the Bible applies to our lives. It teaches us how to relate to our spouses in a godly way. It frees us from the bitterness of anger and enables us to forgive. It shows us how to love our neighbours as ourselves. But if we would boil all this application down to its most basic principle, it would be this: it inspires and empowers *holiness*. The Scriptures make us want to live holy lives, and they give us the power to actually do so. As we encounter the Holy God of Scripture, we become Holy as well. Every application comes back to our growth in holiness. The holiness of our thoughts. The holiness of our affections. The holiness of our words. The holiness of our lives.

That’s where we need to go every time we open up the Bible. We need to see a glimpse of the glory of God’s holiness, and then press into our hearts to consider how that glory would make our lives holy.

David ends the Psalm in verse 14 with this beautiful prayer: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.” David wants God’s Word to transform *his* words. He wants the glory of God that emanates from the pages of Scripture to shine so brightly into his heart that it dominates what he thinks about and what he talks about, because the LORD isn’t just the powerful God of creation. He is our rock, and our redeemer, the One who saves us from our sins.

**CONCLUSION**

In summary, every time we open the Bible, we want to pursue three things, captured in this acronym I created to help us to remember:

S ee God’s glory

E njoy God’s glory

A pply God’s glory

When we sit down to read our Bibles, we want to come to God with the expectation and prayer that we will *see* his glory as he reveals more of himself to us. We want to come to God with faith, believing that we will encounter not just God, but *Yahweh*, the covenant-keeping God of grace who forgives the sins of all who trust in Christ and receives us into his family. This is the most important thing we can do, even in the midst of life’s difficulties, because what we need most in those times is more of God himself.

As we encounter God, we want to stoke the affections of our hearts to *enjoy* him. A lot of people call private Bible-reading and prayer times “Quiet Time”. I think that’s an unfortunate name, because it doesn’t tell you anything about what you’re supposed to be doing during that time. A better name is “private worship”. We don’t come to God just to be quiet before him. We come to him to *worship* him, and we do so by enjoying his glory as we encounter him in the Scriptures.

Lastly, we want to *apply* what we have learned about God and his glory to our own lives. I think this is the most neglected part of reading Scripture, at least it is in my life. I love to see God’s glory and to enjoy God’s glory, but I often fail to consider how God’s glory is meant to change my life. If that’s us, then we are guilty of what James describes as looking into a mirror and then going away and at once forgetting what we look like. We need to be doers of the word, not hearers only, and that means being conformed to God’s glory.