

# Sky Talk

by John Piper

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*John Piper's sermon 'Sky Talk' emphasizes the glory of God revealed through nature and the importance of actively perceiving this divine communication.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 19, Romans 1:19

**Topics:** "Natural Revelation", "Gods Glory"

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## Description

John Piper preaches on Psalm 19, highlighting how nature reveals the glory of God day and night, emphasizing the visual knowledge available to all, and the accountability to acknowledge God's creation. He delves into the eternal attributes of God as the glorious creator, encouraging active seeing of God's handiwork. Piper also explores the poetic expressions in verses 5 and 6, showcasing the joy and delight found in beholding God's creation and the importance of expressing that joy. He concludes with practical steps to stay attuned to the beauty of God's world, urging a deeper appreciation for the wonders of nature and the divine intelligence behind it.

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## Transcript

Psalm 19

The heavens are telling of the glory of God;

And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.

Day to day pours forth speech,

And night to night reveals knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words;

Their voice is not heard.

Their line has gone out through all the earth,

And their utterances to the end of the world.

In them He has placed a tent for the sun,

Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber;

It rejoices as a strong man to run his course.

Its rising is from one end of the heavens,

And its circuit to the other end of them;

And there is nothing hidden from its heat.

Verses 1-4 are quite different than verses 5 and 6. In fact, verses 5 and 6 are so different that they beckoned me irresistibly to do something other than just try to explain them. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's look first at verses 1-4 and see if we can sharpen the focus of David's vision here. It came into clearest focus for me when I detected four observations David has made.

1. First, from verse 2, "Day unto day pours forth speech, and night unto night declares knowledge." The observation here very simply is that knowledge comes through nature, day and night. At night the night sky speaks. In the day the day sky speaks. Or to be precise, speech pours forth. Nature does not whisper, it shouts and it shouts continually. We were all impressed with cinerama when the curved screen gave such a lifelike impression. And now you can walk into the Omnitheatre at the St. Paul Science Museum and hear all of the oooh's and ahhh's as people recline and see themselves enveloped in a domed screen, and then an hour later walk outside into a dome and a three dimensional drama ten million times bigger, more unpredictable and suspenseful, and hear not a single exclamation. Why?

Clyde Kilby, a literature teacher at Wheaton, gave this answer:

The fall of man can hardly be more forcefully felt than simply in noting what we all do with a fresh snowfall or the first buds of spring. On Monday they fill us with delight and meaning and on Tuesday we ignore them. No amount of shouting to us that this is all wrong changes the fact for very long ... Only some aesthetic power which is akin to God's own creativity has the capability for renewal, for giving us the power to see.

He thinks the reason we pay so little attention to God's omnitheatre is that we are fallen, sinful creatures. And I agree, because I cannot imagine that the angels in heaven get tired of God's beauty or that God Himself grows weary of the beauty of His Son. There is in heaven an ever renewed energy of perception and enjoyment. But fallen man is plagued with the proverb: "Familiarity breeds contempt."

But surely redemption means that we will be freed from that proverb. If we aren't, there can be no such thing as heaven but only a hell of increasing contemptuousness. And since our redemption has already begun in this age Christians ought to have better eyes than people in general for seeing the knowledge that every day and night pours forth. We ought to be the kind of people who walk out of the house in the morning with the same sense of suspense and expectancy with which we enter a new performance at the Omnitheatre.

2. The second observation of David's I want us to see is in verse 3, "There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard." In other words, the knowledge which pours forth from days and nights is visual not verbal. We know from verses 7 and following that David loved the verbal revelation of God, so he is not belittling that. But he also delights in the visual revelation of God and puts it first probably because it is completed by the verbal but also because it comes first not only in the order of creation (God

made things for man before He spoke to man) but also in the order of every life (a child learns by seeing the world before he can understand languages).

We are told today that we live in a visual age instead of a verbal one. People need pictures not lectures. Television and movies have conspired to make us disenchanted with reasoning and enamor us with films. This is mostly true I think but partly misleading. Our minds have been weakened, but I am not sure our eyes have been strengthened. That you have been conditioned to crave to do something does not mean you are better at it. To be sure we are more visually dependent and hungry but I doubt that we are better at seeing than our forefathers.

There are at least two kinds of seeing: one is active and one is passive. Seeing actively means construing what you see, working on it with your mind to find meaning - not necessarily verbal meaning - but all the pattern and design the artist (whether God or man) intended. When a trained eye looks at Rembrandt's Paul in Prison he sees more than an untrained eye because his eyes are active and construe while the untrained eye is passive.

Well, My suspicion is that television in general does not train active seeing but rather encourages passive watching. Nobody goes to the Minneapolis Institute of Art to watch a painting; you go to see, to look at, to inspect. But you go home to watch T.V. Therefore, I am not very encouraged by our culture, because even though we are more visually dependent today I don't think we are more visually acute, or perceptive. Our skill in active seeing is no better and perhaps weaker than in the pre-T.V. days.

The upshot of this is that we all have a long way to go in becoming more adept at seeing the voiceless speech of nature. We need to apply ourselves to form the habits of active seeing rather than passive watching. More on just how to do this later.

3. The third observation I want us to see is in verse 4, "Yet their voice (or line) goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." In other words, the voiceless knowledge poured forth by days and nights is available to everyone on the globe who is not physically blind. This is not a private or secret knowledge. The moon you see tonight is the same moon that shines down on Shanghai and Moscow and London. And not only that, it is the same moon that Shakespeare looked at when he wrote some of his sonnets. Nature is a transgeographical and trans-temporal language. The result of this is that all men can be held accountable for acknowledging the truth of what nature communicates. What does nature communicate?

4. That leads to observation number 4 which is found in verse 1: "The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament declares His handiwork." The voiceless, visual, universally available knowledge is that behind it all is a glorious God as maker of the world. The world is His handiwork and He is glorious. From this I have been taught three things. First, nature should lead us to belief in God and His glory as creator and therefore every man who can perceive nature is accountable to honor God and thank Him. Romans 1:19-20 says, "What can be known about God is plain to man because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature, namely His eternal power and deity, have been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse... "

If I did not have the witness of Scripture and the historical evidence of Jesus' life and resurrection I do not know if nature would be a sufficient argument to cause me to believe in God. But I think that in my most lucid and rational moments the existence of persons with consciences and reason and the existence of such an intricate and orderly scheme of nature would witness overwhelmingly to a personal, reasonable

maker behind the universe. But we can be very glad we have the historical and verbal revelation of God, because most of us would be too stubborn I think to acknowledge God by nature alone.

The second thing verse one has shown me is that even after we believe in God it is nature that enables us to really know some of His attributes. C.S. Lewis (whom you all should read) put it like this: "Nature never taught me that there exists a God of glory and of infinite majesty. I had to learn that in other ways. But nature gave the word glory a meaning for me. I still do not know where else I could have found one. I do not see (either) how the 'fear' of 'God could have ever meant to me anything but the lowest, prudential efforts to be safe, if I had never seen certain ominous ravines and unapproachable crags." (The Four Loves, chapter 2)

For myself, I think I can say that I never really felt what it meant to love God until I had the experience of delighting in some awesome natural phenomena - a night sky, a waterfall in the mountain woods, and a sunrise through an Appalachian mist. I believe nature is the prep-school of our affections, readying them to delight in God.

The third thing that verse one has done for me is give me a keen sense of the eternity of God. If God made the universe, then there was a time when only God existed. That in itself begins to stagger my mind. I am tempted to say, besides God there was only nothingness. But that may create the picture of a large space with God by Himself in the center. But that is all wrong. Once there was only God. God was all there was. There was no room for anything else, not even nothingness, for all that was was God.

But then I am driven one step further and I realize that this God never had a beginning. He never came into being. And the effect that has on me is to make me tremble at His character. Every aspect of your character or personality is explainable as the result of some genetic trait or environmental or spiritual influence. You became the person you are. You grew and learned and changed and matured. But not God. He is good, long-suffering, reliable, honest, righteous, merciful, but he never became that way. He never learned anything from anybody; He never grew; He never changed; He never matured. He simply always was what He is from eternity before eternity before eternity. As unimaginable as it is, it says to me: He is sure. He is a rock. He cannot cease to be what He has been from all eternity, because there are no forces at work on Him which did not have their ultimate origin in Him and are limited by Him. So my faith in God's future is greatly strengthened by pondering the fact that He is the eternal, glorious creator.

To sum up the observations in verses 1 - 4: 1) Nature pours forth knowledge day and night (v. 2). 2) This knowledge is not verbal but visual (v. 3). 3) This visual knowledge is available for people all over the world to perceive, not just for some. 4) The knowledge imported is that God is a glorious creator.

Now we turn to verses 5 and 6 to find something very different. "In them He has placed a tent for the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber; it rejoices as a strong man to run his course. Its rising is from one end of the heavens, and its circuit to the other end of them; and there is nothing hidden from its heat." What is the Psalmist doing in these two verses? Noel read to me one of the Doonesbury cartoon strips by Gary Trudeau a while back. In it a fellow had just moved to California and was trying to fit in and learn mellow talk. So he read a few lines of poetry: "My heart can scarce contain the joy that cascades from the silver crescent cradling the stars." And the mellow talk translator said, "O, that would come out something like, 'O, wow, look at the moon!'"

The human heart will not be satisfied with mellow talk. The psalmist saw the sun rising and something happened inside of him. A joy that had to get out into words for others to enjoy but "O, wow, look at the

sun," would not do. Instead he finds an analogy. The rising sun is like a bridegroom leaving his chamber on his way to get his lover. Verses 5 and 6 come as close as anything in Scripture to what Wordsworth called the "powerful overflow of spontaneous feeling recollected in tranquillity." They are simply a poetic expression of the joy that comes from beholding God's creation. They are not teaching, they are exulting. They don't so much inform as they do delight.

And the best thing to do with such poetry is to enjoy it and copy as well as our weak powers will allow us. Perhaps the best thing I can do to honor the intention of verses 5 and 6 is to show that I have tried, too, to find words for some of the joys I've had in God's creation. Maybe you'll get the bug. A joy unexpressed is probably only half as great.

## THE GIFT OF SNOW

I tried to follow the advice

I gave my wife:

"Don't put your full weight down";

But, for my life,

I couldn't stay atop the snow.

Every fourth or fifth step

The fickle layer of ice would crunch, and in I'd go

Half way to the ground

In three feet of snow --

Like when you climb a stair

And inadvertently add a step in the air.

But there's a mystery in such stumbling

If a heart is given to mystery

More than to grumbling.

How odd that, with every jolt,

My head should be thrown back

To see the sky.

The fickle snow by giving way

Would have me face the heavens;

I wonder why.

At the time I thought it strange  
My fall did not pert me to itself;  
Now, my mind is turned to guesses:  
Could it be--  
Is there a possibility  
The snow, knowing the heavens  
From which it came,  
And being gently laid to the earth  
For a short and silent life,  
Desires to point me to its early home  
Where once it knew a hurling freedom  
That I have never known?  
Could it have known some good  
That it would share with me;  
That in its death beneath my feet  
Would still pulge  
As if it loved me more than life?  
Is it more wise than I  
To know that falling is an utter death  
Unless one turns again  
To that from which it fell?--  
And more kind  
That it should teach me, as I kill,  
The lesson it must die to learn?  
I have misnamed it, fickle snow:  
Should I expect the words of the dying  
So easily to flow, as of the living?

Its random crunch is not mere giving way,  
It is a way of giving.  
SUMMER, 1968  
I was a surveyor then,  
It was the summer of '68  
And college joys were still  
as lively as the wren  
Who 'woke me early for those days;  
And seminary lay ahead  
And marriage in December,  
So my work was to raise  
Enough for two to get a start.  
But looking back upon those weeks,  
It's not the memories of school  
I had, nor that my heart  
Was filled with joy, which pleases now.  
No, my pleasure now springs from  
A lonely image in my mind  
Of one rare day and in it how  
The sun and wind and farming land  
Conspired to stir my soul.  
A railroad was the border  
Of the farm and Wayne's command  
Was that I wait and hold the rod  
While he and Jim walked to the truck  
Then drove down to the trestle  
So they could set the tripod

And mount the gun with care to shoot  
The farmer's northern boundary.  
There I was alone, standing  
Between the shiny tracks, mute,  
As they lay in wait for a noisy freight:  
A lengthy solitude known only  
To an elevated, unbent track  
Which stretched its merging rails straight  
Out of sight to east and west;  
A broad and lofty solitude  
Soothing my soul's cramped longing for  
Expanse. I felt a biting zest  
For all the shapes, color and motion  
That stretched my eyes across  
The brilliant, earthy fields.  
One quarter was a golden ocean  
Streaming and shifting its tides  
In shimmering variations of light  
And dark. Another, to the west,  
Was where the family resides  
Amid a grove a giant oaks  
Along a shady stream:  
A busy farming family,  
Tawny and strong, the kind of folks  
Who know the joys of evening rest.  
The quarters to the north were shaped  
And separated by a brook

Which with its laughing flow gave jest  
By shaping two pianos out  
Of a spreading bean field  
Whose long green chords  
Vibrated with a song about  
The great musician Aeolus.

The happy fields and peopled grove  
Engaged my soul in quiet joy  
And left my body tremulous,  
Tingling in solitude,  
Until a yellow flag  
From the distant Railroad trestle  
Announced my duty with a rude  
Distraction, calling me again  
To hold my rod erect  
And be a good surveyor--  
As if I hadn't been.

#### CIENAGA

These beautiful forms  
Through a long absence have not been to me  
As a landscape to a blind man's eye:  
But oft in lonely rooms and mid the din  
Of towns and cities I have owed to them  
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood and felt along the heart. . .

William Wordsworth

Three wooded canyons meet, two bringing streams,

The other taking both; or I might say,  
Looking back a thousand years, two streams  
Converged and trickled off together,  
And slowly brought their canyons to the spot.  
Small streams, I thought, to have such boulders  
On their banks; but as I sat and listened,  
The steady trickle seemed to giggle  
At my incredulity: the laughter,  
Ever passing, ever present, echoed  
An ancient power.  
The mountains rising from the joining streams  
enclosed a convoluted bowl, the hollow  
Where we camped. One ridge was almost barren  
Where fire had stripped away its surface life,  
But hearty desert bushes were pushing  
Out already from unscorched roots and seeds.  
Nothing tall grows on the mountain slopes  
But in the hollow there were trees, and here,  
Under a lonely one of these, we pitched  
Our tent. The hollow and the hills were ours;  
What there we felt we've just begun to feel:  
Surrounded by the hills, the lengthened time  
Between the first light of the morning and  
The seeing of the sun . . .  
The early morning fog cradled in the canyons,  
Slowly burned away by the rising sun . . .  
The freezing sound of a morning stream

And a splash in your waking face . . .

Wherever we walked the slither of lizards  
From under foot . . .

The green, dark dampness of an old well site  
And a rusty old well pump, and a trickle of water  
As brown as the pump, and the smiles of,  
"We might have known" . . .

A small outhouse or the great outdoors  
Depending on which is more sensitive:  
Your nose or your pride . . .

The whirl of a hundred bees in a tree  
Like the sound of a million on the slope. .  
With an unexpectedly angry sound  
A harmless hummingbird  
Like a muffle machine gun or giant beetle. . .  
Miniature flies and tiny gnats  
Which must have learned their trade at the Fall . . .

Thick small leaves of tough desert plants  
And yellow and purple hills . . .  
Climbing . . .

The slow ascent to where the wind,  
Which once was only pleasant, begins  
Gently to threaten the balance of our weight. . .

The permeating tremble of our muscles  
From the effort and the height . . .

The sudden helplessness  
Of a sliding foothold and breaking branch . . .

The knot in the stomach  
And utterly unique weakness in the knees  
From stepping close to a cliff . . .  
The summit: unmatched applause of a thundering heart  
As I stand on the slender point . . .  
The carbon marks on a lover's face  
As she wins the ridge and my hand . . .  
The renewed sensation from earlier springs  
Of a burning sun and a biting breeze . . .  
The humbling illusion of distance when my stone,  
Assuredly heaved for the creek below,  
Plummets somehow ingloriously to the earth  
Half way down the mountain . . .  
A mountain meal of peanut butter sandwiches  
And some lazy rest in the sun . . .  
The slow descent on the other side, and later,  
The fearful, joyful pride of often glancing  
At the distant peak on which I'd set my feet . . .  
The discovery of a cool, running pool,  
Then her hair let down and her pants rolled up,  
And her sore red toes in the sand of the stream . . .  
The twinkling eye of a child  
Who with one less year  
Would have sat right down in the pool . . .  
Campsite, and rest, and hot beef stew  
As the evening cool closes a day of hiking . . .  
Praying hand in hand from the center

Of God's imaginings . . .

Playing a game to see who will find

The first five stars and putting the goal at ten

When I lose . . .

The coming of dark and the crickets,

And the laying to sleep of our bodies . . .

Waking at three to a sky so white with stars

As to make your heart beat faster . . .

The slipping back in Peace.

Let me conclude now by reading eleven practical steps used by W former teacher Clyde Kilby to stay alive to the beauty of God's world.

1. At least once every day I shall look steadily up at the sky and remember that I, a consciousness with a conscience, am on a planet traveling in space with wonderfully mysterious things above me and about me.

2. Instead of the accustomed idea of a mindless and endless evolutionary change to which we can neither add nor subtract, I shall suppose the universe guided by an Intelligence which, as Aristotle said of Greek drama, requires a beginning, a middle and an end. I think this will save me from the cynicism expressed by Bertrand Russell before his death, when he said: "There is darkness without and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendour, no vastness anywhere, only triviality for a moment, and then nothing."

3. I shall not fall into the falsehood that this day, or any day, is merely another ambiguous and plodding twenty-four hours, but rather a unique event filled, if I so wish, with worthy potentialities. I shall not be fool enough to suppose that trouble and pain are wholly evil parentheses in my existence but just as likely ladders to be climbed toward moral and spiritual manhood.

4. I shall not turn my life into a thin straight line which prefers abstractions to reality. I shall know what I am doing when I abstract, which of course I shall often have to do.

5. I shall not demean my own uniqueness by envy of others. I shall stop boring into myself to discover what psychological or social categories I might belong to. Mostly I shall simply forget about myself and do my work.

6. I shall open my eyes and ears. Once every day I shall simply stare at a tree, a flower, a cloud, or a person. I shall not then be concerned at all to ask what they are but simply be glad that they are. I shall joyfully allow them the mystery of what Lewis calls their "divine, magical, terrifying and ecstatic" existence.

7. I shall sometimes look back at the freshness of vision I had in childhood and try, at least for a little while, to be, in the words of Lewis Carroll, the "child of the pure unclouded brow, and dreaming eyes of wonder."

8. I shall follow Darwin's advice and turn frequently to imaginative things such as good literature and good music, preferably, as Lewis suggests, an old book and timeless music.

9. I shall not allow the devilish onrush of this century to usurp all my energies but will instead, as Charles Williams suggested, "fulfill the moment as the moment." I shall try to live well just now because the only time that exists is just now.

10. If for nothing more than the sake of a change of view, I shall assume my ancestry to be from the heavens rather than from the caves.

11. Even if I turn out to be wrong, I shall bet my life in the assumption that this world is not idiotic, neither run by an absentee landlord, but that today, this very day, some stroke is being added to the cosmic canvas that in due course I shall understand with joy as a stroke made by the architect who calls Himself Alpha and Omega.

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