

The Psalm 19 test (Psalm 19)

How do we wade through the vast morass of different teachings and beliefs about the God of the Bible?

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October 6, 2023

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What are God's timeless instructions for humanity? Does such a thing exist? And if so, how do we understand these instructions in our current times and places? Different Christians—and different streams of Christianity—carry so many different conceptions of what God's will is and how to live it out. How do we wade through the vast morass of different teachings and beliefs, all of them claiming to serve the God revealed in the Bible?

I think about these things as I read Psalm 19. And I wonder: What if we employed verses 7-8 as a sort of test? When we're considering a set of teachings, we could ask these questions:

- Is this message refreshing the souls of all who hear it? To draw on alternate translations of the Hebrew word often translated as "refreshing": Does it feel restorative? Is there a sense of being rescued? Does it repair something that was broken?
- Is this theology making wise the simple? That is, does it support every person's growth in wisdom? Drawing on alternate translations of the word for "simple," does it effectively teach those who may seem naive or silly? Does it take these people seriously and invite them to walk in ways of wisdom?

- Is this guidance giving joy to the hearts of all the people? Is it something to celebrate, together? Does it brighten people's faces in the most genuine way possible? Does it make people feel deeply glad, the way we feel when we know we are safe and cared for?
- Is this counsel giving light to the eyes? Do people find it enlightening? Illuminating? Does it make them feel luminous and shining with life from the inside out?

These sorts of questions are not always front and center as Christians discuss beliefs, doctrines, theologies, rules, or practices. But they could be. They are all different ways of asking: How does this rule affect people's real lives? Who will this change impact the most, and how can we make sure we're hearing honest input from these people? Are there any groups of people who would not experience this practice as joyful and refreshing? And if this is the case, what do we need to do differently?

Poor People's Campaign leader Solita Alexander Riley puts it powerfully: "No community or society can stand unless all lives are honored, are deemed sacred, are valued." Every life valued: Surely this is the intention of the ten commandments—and of all God's laws as recorded in the scriptures. Yet sometimes they are understood in ways that do not honor, deem sacred, and value every life.

From this view—asking the questions above, inspired by Psalm 19—God's authentic words are the words that refresh the soul of the Black Lives Matter activist. God's true teachings are the teachings that open the way for all people to have access to quality, truth-telling education. God's genuine edicts are the edicts that brighten the faces of women who continue to struggle for bodily autonomy, of queer folks who have been abused and denied basic rights. God's real communication is the communication that makes room for people with disabilities to shine, recognizing that they're brimming with gifts to offer.

Psalm 19 expects nothing less, and neither should we.