

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Light for Dark Times

Psalm 119:129-136

Francis Collins is the director of the National Institutes of Health, one of the world's foremost medical research centers. Collins is the longest-serving NIH director, having been appointed by President Obama in 2008 and asked to remain by President Trump. Like so many others, during the pandemic, Collins has been working from his home office in Maryland, where he keeps a printed copy of Psalm 46 on his desk: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."

That verse is not only an expression of Francis Collins's faith, but also a reminder of his ongoing public engagement around matters of faith and science. He has become one of the leading voices in the effort to integrate scientific and spiritual perspectives. About two decades ago, when he was heading up the Human Genome Project, Collins said:

I think of God as the greatest scientist. We human scientists have an opportunity to understand the elegance and wisdom of God's creation in a way that is truly exhilarating. When a scientist discovers something that no human knew before, but God did—that is both an occasion for scientific excitement and, for a believer, also an occasion for worship. It makes me sad that we have slipped into a polarized stance between science and religion that implies that a thinking human being could not believe in the value of both. There is no rational basis for that polarization. I find it completely comfortable to be both a rigorous scientist, who demands to see the data before accepting anybody's conclusions about the natural world, and also a believer whose life is profoundly influenced by the relationship I have with God.¹

In an atmosphere where faith and science seem to clash on a regular basis, Francis Collins's life and pursuits demonstrate that rigorous scientific work and the knowledge of God can be integrated in fruitful and meaningful ways. During an interview earlier this month, Collins was asked, "When you lie in bed at night, what gives you hope for the next 50 or 100 years for humanity? What are the really hard problems that test your optimism and your faith?" Collins answered, "Boy, that's a big one. What is our future? I don't want to see a future where this science-versus-faith conflict leads to a winner and a loser."²

What better place to test that theory than during a pandemic. In one respect, we hear a lot about the value and necessity of science. Public officials, medical experts, and news reporters urge us to "follow the science." In other words, the ways that we respond to COVID-19, individually and collectively, need to be shaped and guided by the data, the trends, and the projections generated by scientific research and analysis. We need to pay attention to what the experts tell us about the coronavirus. And a lot of the experts work in science-related fields. So if we're going to make it through and out of this situation, we'll need the contributions of science.

But from a Christian standpoint, science alone isn't enough to help us navigate the pandemic. We also need the resources of faith. We need to draw upon the beliefs,

traditions, and practices that constitute our reliance on the presence and power of God. And one of those resources is the word of God.

God's word is the focus of Psalm 119. Our text today is one section of this lengthy psalm. The psalmist opens our passage by saying, "Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them" (v. 129). It's interesting to hear the psalmist describe God's word as "wonderful." The Hebrew term has to do with something at which you marvel, something that fills you with wonder, something miraculous. The same word is used numerous other times in the psalms to refer to God's wonder-filled work in delivering Israel out of Egypt. So God's word is wonder-filled. It's how God comes to us to redeem us and work upon us, enabling us to live into our new identity as his people. We heed God's instructions and are obedient to his ways not because God says, "Here are the rules, now follow them," but because God's word has wonder-working power in our lives.

Christians are people who have a sense of wonder about God, and about how God is present, acting in our lives and in the world. This in itself should put us in a posture of openness toward scientific exploration, which often generates a sense of wonder among those who pursue it. Author Andy Crouch, whose wife is a physicist, writes, "If there is one personality characteristic of the vast majority of scientists I have met, it is delight. There is something about science that attracts people who are fascinated and thrilled by the world." Crouch goes on to say, "In many scientists, delight is matched by wonder—a sense of astonishment at the beautiful, ingenious complexity to be found in the world."³ Even many scientists who don't adhere to a particular religious faith marvel at the world's breathtaking structure and intricacy.

What's more, you don't have to be a scientist to be fascinated by the world. Tend to the flowers in your garden. Watch the deer in the field along the road. Listen to the rhythm of the waves at the beach. Stare at the night sky. In some parts of the world, the coronavirus lockdown brought about a drop in air pollution and revealed awe-inspiring stars that many people would not have seen otherwise. Or maybe you were among the folks who rose early or stayed up late to get a glimpse of Comet Neowise, which won't return for another 6,800 years. As one astronomer put it, "In spite of the really difficult times right now, it's a reminder that we're part of a bigger universe. And there are some really wonderful and beautiful things in it."⁴

Whether your looking through a microscope in a university lab or staring through a telescope in your backyard, wonder and awe may not be far away. The same is true when you open the Scriptures. The psalmist reminds us that we're called to a sense of wonder when we consider the reality of God, revealing himself, his will, and his way to us. God's word isn't primarily about God transmitting divine information and heavenly ideas to us. It's about God disclosing himself to us, involving himself in loving, faithful relationship with what he has made. God's word is God's way of being presence to us and giving himself to us, and in the process, transforming us into what he intends us to be.

The supreme manifestation of that is Jesus himself, who is God's word enfleshed. Recall some of the words I read earlier from Colossians: "He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (1:15-17). That's a pretty vast description of who Christ is and the scope of what Christ does. His work embraces all of creation. And our understanding of creation is enhanced, enriched, and deepened by science. Science sheds incredible light on the

structures, patterns, and mysteries of the creation that God is reconciling to himself through Christ.

Some of you here today have backgrounds and careers in science. Some of you are or will be studying in various fields of science when the school year begins. One of the ways that Christian congregations can promote a more fruitful dialogue between faith and science is by affirming and encouraging those in the pews who study or work in scientific fields. David Bradstreet is an award-winning scientist and astronomy professor who describes how his church helped him find his calling in science. He talks about how as a boy he would spend winter nights in the backyard of his family's Massachusetts home looking through a telescope with a cheap cardboard tube and a rickety aluminum tripod. He says:

Fortunately, both my family and my bigger church family at First Baptist Church lovingly embraced the somewhat obsessive "junior astronomer" in their midst. It wasn't until years later that I realized how different things might have been for me had I grown up in a church that condemned science and discouraged believers from working in astronomy. I still can't understand why some Christians turn their backs on a discipline that powerfully demonstrates the majesty of our Creator.⁵

Even if you're not a scientist, or have little interest in science, or are skeptical toward science, all of us benefit from science in a multitude of ways every day. The devices we use, the foods we eat, the medicines we take, the cars we drive, the homes we now spend more time in—all these things, and many more, are at least partially the fruit of scientific research and exploration. Science is woven into our daily lives in more ways than we realize. We look to it for knowledge, for understanding, for guidance, and for answers.

But in addition to its potential, science also has its limits. We've experienced some of this during the coronavirus pandemic. Not all the scientists agree with one another. Different medical studies arrive at different results. Research sometimes yields conflicting data. We call it the novel coronavirus because it's new, which means that we've been learning, and are still learning, a great deal about what it is and how it works. Science is shedding more and more light on these kinds of questions, and will likely eventually lead us to a vaccine. But even then, we'll not be in a position to say that science answers all our questions or solves all our problems. The fact is, not all the light we need during dark times like these can come from science alone.

The psalmist says, "The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple" (v. 130). We give thanks for the insights and gifts that come from science. But the world, and the life we live in it, is a reality with many layers and multiple dimensions. And to navigate our way through this reality, especially in times like this, we also need the resources of faith, in particular the word of God. God's revealed will, and God's ways, shown to us most of all through Jesus Christ, illuminate our lives and give us a kind of understanding that goes beyond data, digits, and devices. When it comes to matters of meaning, purpose, and morality, we need the knowledge of God, a kind of knowing that takes us outside the lab and into the experience of God's love for the world he has made.

I like the way two scientists have put it when they write, "Our ultimate significance in life, the inner sense of the infinite that we possess, our final purpose and destiny: These are topics on which science is silent, but our faith is loud."⁶ As the coronavirus pandemic continues, may our faith continue to be loud. Not loud as in abrasive and constantly combative with the insights of science. But loud as in strong yet humble, ready to explore and learn and welcome the light that science offers us. And most of all, open to the wonder of God's word, and the light and understanding he gives us.

¹ "The Genome Doctor." Christianity Today website. October 1, 2001. Accessed July 22, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/october1/2.42.html>>.

² Jebediah Reed, "A Long Talk with Anthony Fauci's Boss About the Pandemic, Vaccines, and Faith." *Intelligencer* website. July 1, 2020. Accessed July 23, 2020 <<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/07/anthony-faucis-boss-on-why-things-could-be-much-better-soon.html>>.

³ Andy Crouch, "What I Wish My Pastor Knew About the Life of a Scientist." *BioLogos* website. September 12, 2018. Accessed July 23, 2020 <<https://biologos.org/articles/what-i-wish-my-pastor-knew-about-the-life-of-a-scientist>>.

⁴ Amy Mainzer,, quoted in Geoff Brumfiel, "Good News: This Comet Won't Cause a Mass Extinction in 2020. Also, It's Really Pretty." *NPR* website. July 15, 2020. Accessed July 23, 2020 <<https://www.npr.org/2020/07/15/891536360/good-news-this-comet-wont-cause-a-mass-extinction-in-2020-also-it-s-really-pretty>>.

⁵ David H. Bradstreet, *Star Struck* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016) 14-16.

⁶ Katharine Hayhoe and W. Douglas Hayhoe, "The Competencies and Limitations of Science." In *When God and Science Meet: Surprising Discoveries of Agreement* (National Association of Evangelicals, 2015) 23.