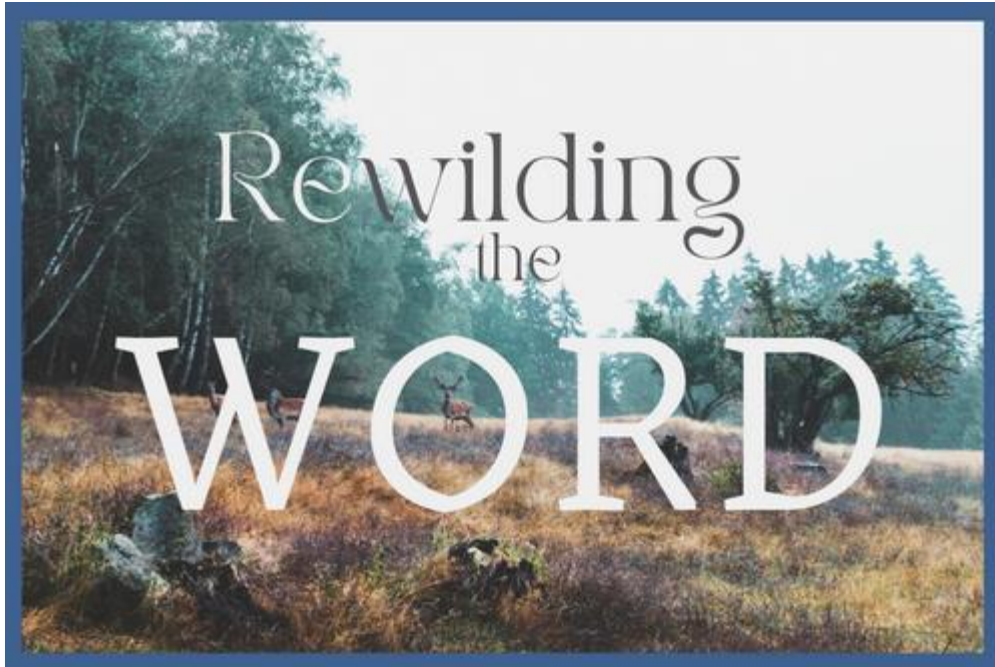

GANZ - #22 - REWILDING THE WORD (SEPTEMBER 2026)



C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, p. 73: "I take this [Psalm 19] to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."

Joseph Addison (1672-1719), "The Spacious Firmament on High" (1712)¹ –

4 While all the stars that round her burn,
And all the planets in their turn,
Confirm the tidings as they roll,
And spread the truth from pole to pole.

5 What though in solemn silence all
Move round this dark terrestrial ball;

¹ See: https://hymnary.org/text/the_spacious_firmament_on_high.

What though no real voice nor sound
Amidst their radiant orbs be found:

6 In reason's ear they all rejoice,
And utter forth a glorious voice,
Forever singing as they shine:
"The hand that made us is divine!"

Bishop Erik Varden, *The Shattering of Loneliness: On Christian Remembrance* (2018)

p. 154 – In these examples, we trace a growing susceptibility to 'beauty'. Beauty awakens a person from the stupor of cynicism, conferring insight that no human life can be contained by an abstraction. It has an astonishing impact on the experience of time, which turns out to be, not an absolute value, but something relative and, yes, temporary: once alert to beauty, human beings find they are bearers of a *greater* reality that, when it catches an echo of itself in the universe, defeats time, introducing a dimension in which only the word endures. *Beauty finally forges communion among people by indicating a universal realm in which individual solitude ceases although personhood endures. In that world, beyond life and death, love has its home.* And that 'there' can be accessed 'here'. We can meet eternity 'now'. Without an ounce of sentimentality, Andreï Makin  (b. 1957) opens the most intimate recesses of the heart. On reading him, one is left feeling vulnerable. [My emphases.]

A Story

Years ago, I heeded a call from the desert – not a particular one but any desert. How did this make sense for me, for a man whose soul longed for forests and mountains and to be near rushing streams? Yet over the course of some months, I could not un-hear this call; I could not un-feel something *pulling me* into the desert. To which one? I remembered the line from the life of Jesus, just after his Baptism – Mark 1: ¹² And at once the Spirit drove him into the desert ¹³ and he remained there for forty days and was put to the test by Satan.²

I cannot recall how I ended up choosing to seek lodging at Saint Andrew's Abbey³ (Benedictine), near Valyermo, CA, out in the Mojave Desert, and from which location I could see the complex of buildings twenty or thirty miles to the north that was

² [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mk 1:12-13.

³ See: <https://saintandrewsabbey.com>.

Edward's Air Force Base.⁴ But to Saint Andrew's Abbey I drove, a pilgrim going, who went not knowing why. In fact, I trusted this impetus precisely because I could not understand it – it felt to me very much how I had often experienced the Holy Spirit. Perhaps I and Abraham (and Sarah) shared this experience: "Yahweh said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house for a country which I shall show you.'"⁵ Abram demanded no explanation. He went. I went that mid-summer day, driving the 1,175 miles to get to the Abbey's compound.

I was in silence there for eight days. But I was resolved that I would not leave the desert until it revealed to me why I was there, even if I had to remain there longer. The monks set me up in a trailer, which was set apart from the Abbey about a quarter mile, not far from the knoll where the monks buried their dead.

In silence I waited and prayed. I kept outside in the desert enduring as much of the summer heat as I could bear. I *had* to be outside. It was the Mojave Desert itself (the name of an ancient people, whose name means "along or beside the water") not the trailer or the Abbey in the desert that mattered.

What most I remember from that spell⁶ in the desert was the intensity of the light. Even in the little shade that I could find, that transient darkness was constantly under attack by the light. I thought of people who have the capacity, and who understand the courtesy required, to ask searching questions of someone.⁷ The light of the Mojave was like that. It went after everything that was not light. It came for me:

⁷ Where shall I go to escape your spirit?

⁴ ChatGPT Luna notes: "**Edwards Air Force Base (AFB)** – is a major U.S. Air Force installation in Southern California's Mojave Desert, about 100 miles north of Los Angeles." And **Mojave Desert**: "a desert in southeastern California and parts of Nevada, Arizona, and Utah – 47,900 square miles in magnitude; the smallest of North America's four deserts: the Great Basin Desert, the Mojave Desert, the Sonoran Desert, and the Chihuahuan Desert.

⁵ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ge 12:1.

⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**spell**" – **4.a.** – **1728** – A period or space of time of indefinite length; usually with adjectives denoting duration, as *long*, *short*, etc. **4.b.** – **1827** – A period having a certain character or spent in a particular way.

⁷ Those who ask searching questions of others, but who overlook the delicate courtesy required, are what we call "meddlers", a kind of person for whom Plato felt a particular revulsion. A "meddler" being: "A person who meddles or interferes in something; a nuisance, a troublemaker." Think here of a "nosey" person.

Where shall I flee from your presence?⁸

I wanted to be found.

A Text – Psalm 19 (V 18)

A note to the reader: Before you direct your attention to a line or word or part of this Psalm that I have chosen to explore, it is important that you read the whole Psalm, in which we can encounter the word of God, if you read with a desire to be taught by God. Let the magic of this beautiful contemplation by the Psalmist open your appreciation of what the author perceives, and how those perceptions fill the author with wonder and reverence.⁹ Then, turn to my comments to see if there might be something in them that opens you in others ways, letting God do His good work in you.

For the choirmaster Psalm of David

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God,
the vault of heaven proclaims his handiwork,
² day discourses of it to day,
night to night hands on the knowledge.

³ No utterance at all, no speech,
not a sound to be heard
⁴ but from the entire earth the design stands out,
this message reaches the whole world.

High above, he pitched a tent for the sun,
⁵ who comes forth from his pavilion like a bridegroom,
delights like a champion in the course to be run.

⁶ Rising on the one horizon
he runs his circuit to the other,
and nothing can escape his heat.

⁷ The Law of Yahweh is perfect,

⁸ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ps 139:7.

⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**reverence**” – **1.b.** – **c1300** – Deep respect, veneration, or admiration for someone or something, esp. a person or thing regarded as sacred or holy.” **St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)** states, succinctly, the ultimate purpose of our existence as human beings: “The human person is created to praise, **reverence**, and serve God our Lord, and by so doing save his or her soul.”

refreshment to the soul;
the decree of Yahweh is trustworthy,
wisdom for the simple.

⁸ The precepts of Yahweh are honest,
joy for the heart;
the commandment of Yahweh is pure,
light for the eyes.

⁹ The fear of Yahweh is pure,
lasting for ever;
the judgements of Yahweh are true,
upright, every one,

¹⁰ more desirable than gold,
even than the finest gold;
his words are sweeter than honey,
that drips from the comb.

¹¹ Thus your servant is formed by them;
observing them brings great reward.

¹² But who can detect his own failings?
Wash away my hidden faults.

¹³ And from pride preserve your servant,
never let it be my master.
So shall I be above reproach,
free from grave sin.

¹⁴ May the words of my mouth always find favour,
and the whispering of my heart,
in your presence, Yahweh,
my rock, my redeemer. ¹⁰

A Close Reading of the Text

The heavens declare the glory of God – There is a definition of prayer that reads: “Prayer is raising your mind and heart to God”.¹¹ Notice that there is nothing in this definition that indicates what to pray, what techniques to use, or that specifies when one should pray and for how long. This is important, because almost everyone I have

¹⁰ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ps 19.

¹¹ St. John Damascene, also called John of Damascus (c. 675–749 CE), a Doctor of the Church.

met in conversation about his or her prayer practice is worried about such things. It is simple: “raise your mind and heart to God”. Period.¹²

Matthew 6: ⁷ ‘In your prayers do not babble as the gentiles do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard. ⁸ Do not be like them; your Father knows what you need before you ask him.¹³

It took me decades finally to grasp that prayer is almost entirely something that God does; how God comes near when we open our undivided attention to Him, letting Him do whatever He wishes in us. “Speak, Lord, your servant listens.”

In this Psalm, the author literally raises his mind and heart upwards – “the heavens declare the glory of God”. Notice that *he* is not declaring something (as if saying just the right words). He is *noticing* and by grace is given the ability to receive what *the heavens* declare. He is flooded with *elemental wonder* – something God is doing in him – which then opens his language that becomes poetry of great beauty. Prayer is something *God* does. Our “prayer practices” must only be about us letting God do as He wishes in us.

The precepts of Yahweh are honest, joy for the heart; the commandment of Yahweh is pure, light for the eyes – Here is an example of Hebrew parallelism, where the first half of this line is not *repeated* but *developed*/deepened in the second half. We could embrace “pure” as a deepening of the idea of “honest”, and “joy for the heart” as developed further as “light for the eyes.” When you consider this stanza don’t you feel a longing for *honest* people, which is how we describe a person who serves the *truth* (who knows how to work it out, who will not settle until it is established)? “Truth” is another name for *reality*; “honest” is what we call a man or woman who abides in the truth, who has a deep-set revulsion for those who game reality, who find lies useful to them, who feel disdain for people who let truth bind them, keeping them from getting what they want. *God is honest* – joy for the heart, light for the eyes.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**honest**” – **1.b.** - **1340–1771** - † Worthy of honour, honourable, commendable; (also) that confers honour, that does a

¹² Very often I have found people find this definition too spare – “So what do I do?”, they plead. Perhaps the very best solution is what this Psalm demonstrates. It teaches us that a *primary reason* for the natural world – what God created and never ceases to continue to re-create it – is to teach us to know the Creator. The Psalmist identifies “raising one’s mind and heart to God” with *paying attention* to the natural world, with a habit each day of watching, hearing, smelling, touching the natural world. Doing so will naturally/supernaturally “raise our minds and hearts to God”.

¹³ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mt 6:7–8.

person credit. *Obsolete*. ... expressive of truthfulness, fairness, or integrity of character or intention; free from deceit; genuine, sincere.

But who can detect his own failings? Wash away my hidden faults – St. John Henry Newman, a Doctor of the Church, preached on this line in Sermon IV in Book One of his *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. He called it “On Secret Faults.” He writes:

Self-knowledge is the key to the precepts and doctrines of Scripture. The very utmost any outward notices of religion can do, is to startle us and make us turn inward and search our hearts; and then, when we have experienced what it is to read ourselves, we shall profit by the doctrines of the Church and the Bible.¹⁴

Consider two types of “hidden” faults.

There are faults (what earlier traditions have referred to as “venial”¹⁵ sins) that *we let ourselves get used to indulging*. Long ago we quit paying attention to the “sting” of our conscience activated by these faults – “Hey, it’s not that big a deal”. And we know that a sting of conscience that we regularly ignore will eventually cease to warn us when we are tempted to indulge them. Those faults become “hidden” or “secret”.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* – **1733** The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to “the slavery of sin (Romans 6:7).”¹⁶

But there exist other faults, our faults, that are far more difficult for us to perceive. I believe that this is what the Psalmist is addressing here – “And from pride preserve your servant, never let it be my master”. One form that may be particularly significant in our American moment is how in the time *before* we enter a group or clique or political group or special interest group or social class or a particular church community or religious community, there are distortions of the human good, of the common good, that are already part of the identity of the group. When we become “members” or associates of this group, we may not notice – “hidden faults” – how some unworthy, or even very bad, meanings have been *regularized*, part of the “normal” of that group, part

¹⁴ John Henry Newman, [*Parochial and Plain Sermons*](#), vol. 1 (London; Oxford; Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1868), 42–43. This is Newman at his best. A sermon well worth reading.

¹⁵ “**venial**” – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adjective “venial” – **1**. Worthy or admitting of pardon, forgiveness, or remission; not grave or heinous; pardonable, light: **1.a.** – **a1300** – Of sin; *spec.* in *Theology* as opposed to *deadly* or *mortal*.

¹⁶ Catholic Church, [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 430.

of “the way of doing business” of that group. Because the group articulates a purpose, a goal, that appeals to us, we cannot see the dark (distorted, self-serving, even hateful) means it deploys to get to that goal. In the spirit we cry out to God, when associated with any group: “Wash away my hidden faults ... So shall I be above reproach, free me from grave sin.” What we pray to be given by the Holy Spirit is the gift of *discernment*.

1 John 4 (NJB): ¹ My dear friends, not every spirit is to be trusted, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets are at large in the world.¹⁷

A Prayer

St. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407 CE, Doctor of the Church) – You have laid on me, O Christ, a spell of longing, you have charmed me with an *eros* all divine: consume, therefore, my sins with immaterial fire; be pleased to fill me with your sweet delights. Then I shall magnify your advent in the past and the one we still await with joy, O gracious God.

¹⁷ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), 1 Jn 4:1.