

Psalm 139

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[0 : 01] Let's turn now to the passage of scripture we read, the book of Psalms, Psalm 139. Psalm 139 on page 628.

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. Now when I was a lot younger, that's quite a good long time ago now, although not quite ancient history yet, I used to have a problem with this psalm.

I used to find it a bit threatening. God seemed to be searching me out to find all my weaknesses and sins and to accuse me.

The psalmist himself seemed to want to escape from God's prying presence, but couldn't because God pursued him to the heights and to the depths.

Look at verses 2 to 4. You know when I sit and when I rise. You perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and lying down.

[1 : 21] You're familiar with all my ways before a word is on my tongue, you know it. Notice all the different aspects of life of which God has intimate knowledge. In verses 7 and 8, again, he seems to want to escape from God, or at least to hide from God under a cover of darkness.

Look at verse 7. Where can I go from your spirit? Can I flee from your presence up to the heavens or in the depths? If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there, your hand will lead me.

He seems to want to escape. He seemed to me at one time to want to escape. Then later on, later on in my life, as I grew a bit older, I began to notice other things in the psalm, things I hadn't seen before.

Perhaps it was that I just didn't want to see them. That's very likely. For example, at verse 6, such knowledge is too wonderful for me.

And your right hand will guide me. Your hand will guide me. Your right hand will hold me fast.

[2 : 33] Verse 10. Verse 13. You knit me together in my mother's womb. And in verse 17. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God.

So I began to realize that however awesome and mysterious God's omnipresence is to the psalmist, and however minutely aware he is of everything that is going on in David's life, these are not the thoughts of a man who feels trapped, like a hare or a rabbit caught in the headlights of your car.

He is actually glad that God is able to penetrate the depths of his personality. God is able to understand his thoughts and his misgivings, his doubts, even his anger.

God knows the worst about him and still is willing to know him, to love him. Still willing to guide him in the right way. God's intimate knowledge is in fact the intensest love.

God is pursuing David in order to have a relationship with him. Well, it was good for me to recognize that.

[3 : 54] Well, that was one problem out of the way. But what about another one? What about, O God, if only you would slay the wicked? That was my next problem.

Look at verse 19. If only you would slay the wicked, O God. Do I not hate those who hate you? I have nothing but hatred for them. Isn't this horrible?

Isn't it vindictive? Is this the attitude we are called to have if we are followers of Christ? Well, that was something I had to think about carefully as well.

And if we have a problem with that, it may be a little helpful to think of perhaps some of the items we've had in the news recently.

Think, for example, of the anguished parents of the girl who was murdered by her boyfriend. A man who had murdered a previous girlfriend and been released from prison early only to kill again.

[4 : 59] Thirty years, they said. It's not enough. That was how they felt. We may have feelings like that.

And it isn't as well for us to be honest about them. You see, what we have here in the psalm is space created for us. And in other imprecatory psalms, space created for us to express our anger, our outrage, our monstrous evil, not to man, but to God himself.

And this can be so relieving by receiving these words from David and giving them to us to use with him in prayer.

God is saying to us, I understand you. I understand how you feel. I knew you when you were being formed in the womb. Bring it to me.

Bring your anger to me. It is a painful mystery why God allows such things to happen in his world. But we are allowed to bring our anger to him and cry out to him against evil.

[6 : 19] David wants to align himself with God in the fight against evil. And he realizes that this must begin with himself in his own inner life. And that's why he goes on in verse 19, if only you would slay the wicked.

But in verse 23, he goes on, examine me, O God, and know my thoughts. Watch me lest I follow any path that grieves you. lead me in the everlasting way.

It may also be helpful to us in this connection to remember that in the New Testament, God himself comes into the world in the person of his son to be mutilated and murdered.

It was his way of drawing the sting of sin and evil. It was God's greatest demonstration of his love for us. So yes, God is pursuing us.

But this takes on a new significance when you realize that it's love that's pursuing you. You realize, as Francis Thompson does in his poem, The Hound of Heaven, that it's foolishness to hide and run from God.

[7 : 28] Let me just quote to you a wee bit of that poem. Francis Thompson says, I fled him down the nights and down the days. I fled him down the arches of the years.

I fled him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind. And in the midst of tears, I hid from him and under running laughter.

Up Vistad hopes I sped and shot precipitated adown titanic blooms of chasmid fears from those strong feet that followed after.

It was foolish, but he discovered that it was foolish for him to run away from God. And that's not what David is doing in the psalm. But it's sometimes what we do.

We do, we're like the prodigal son. We run away from God, our father. We've all done this by nature. In the psalm, Psalm 139, David is glad that God graciously pursues him and that God knows him intimately.

[8 : 43] It's how he wants it to be. And Francis Thompson at the end of the poem is glad in the end that God graciously kept pursuing him until he gave in and stopped trying to shut God out of his life.

But it took time and it was hard for him to learn the things that the things in which he longed for love and satisfaction just could not satisfy.

He says at one point, nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my druth. Never did any milk of hers once bless my thirsty mouth. And finally, he admits that God cornered him in the end.

And the closing words are, Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, I am he whom thou seekest. Thou dravest love from thee who dravest me.

So behind David's words in Psalm 139, there lies some basic truths which we should look at. First of all, there is the truth of God's omniscience.

[9 : 52] Verses 1 to 5. You have searched me and you know me, my thoughts, my going out, my lying down, all my ways.

Before a word is on my tongue, you know it. You hem me in behind and before. God's omniscience. Then secondly, behind the Psalm lies the truth of God's omnipresence.

Verses 8 and 9. If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. So, the heavens, the depths, the east, the west, God is everywhere.

Now preparing this, I thought I might tell you about an experience I had myself at a height of 7 miles over the South Atlantic Ocean on my way to Peru, experience of God's presence.

I once went on a foreign missions board trip and I had to take malaria tablets as a protection against the possibility of catching the disease.

[10:59] And it was a tablet that was known to cause certain, what they called, the experts called, neuropsychiatric side effects. Well, in the middle of the flight, I began having serious panic attacks.

I began alternately sweating and shivering, just like you do with malaria, I suppose. And these panic attacks, it was that most awful feeling. And I loved flying. It wasn't a problem with flying at all.

Well, my companion who was with me said, I said, I think I have to get a doctor. He said, read Psalm 46. So I read Psalm 46. I read through a lot of the Psalms. And I read through the whole of Isaiah.

And I read several books of the New Testament. And I found a statement that Paul makes in Galatians. It's to the effect that we should be for the praise of his glory.

God is working in our lives. I can't remember how the beginning of it goes, but it was that we should be for the praise of his glory. And I said, well, there's a purpose in what's happening to me here.

[12:03] And here was God's word reaching me. And I was able to hang on to that. And I found comfort for it. My panic attacks didn't suddenly disappear. But I had something, a kind of anchor to hold on to.

And I got to the end of the journey and got down. But it was a bad thing. I had to come home soon. My companion had to do the delegate's work. But I found God's presence.

God met with me there. In that remote corner. God can meet with you in the farthest places because he's everywhere.

So God, the psalmist tells us about God's omnipresence here. And then thirdly, behind this truth, this psalm, lies the truth of God's omnipotent providence. Look at verse 12.

Even the darkness will not be dark to you. Night will shine like the day. Darkness is nothing to God. You created my inmost being.

[13:07] You knit me together in my mother's womb. I think the thought of the darkest place leads him, being unable to hide from God there, leads him to think of God's power at work in the secret place of his conception.

God's power is in all, even in all the amazing embryonic, microscopic processes that take place at conception and in the development of an embryo in the womb.

God is even there. God's power extends, he says, from there to all the days of his life. See, your eyes saw my unformed body, verse 16, in all the days ordained for me were written in your book.

God's power extends from conception to all the days. God's sovereign providence. And also then, behind this psalm lies the truth of God's love and faithfulness.

And this runs through the whole psalm. God is all of this because he wants to love and will not be put off. That's what he's like.

[14:21] God knew him, God knew David in love from when he was only a tiny speck of life in his mother's womb. And in verse 17, David shows that this thoughtfulness of God is precious to him.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God. God has come so close to him. God mowed him so intimately and this thought is precious. So then, how should we respond this morning to the message of this part of God's word?

Well, I want to mention to you three or four areas of application to our own lives which we may notice. The first is, remember, this is a prayer to God.

So, we should use it and be guided by it in our own praying. First of all, in praying for yourself, we should use this psalm and all the psalms for that matter, they're all prayers, all addressed to God.

In praying for yourself, you should use this psalm. We should ask God to search and know us. And, when you ask God to search and know you, what will he do?

[15:48] Well, he'll show you yourself. He'll show you yourself and what's inside you, what's in your heart, in the light of his holiness. He'll show you yourself in the light of his law and in the light of Jesus' character.

You'll have some objective, real, true standard with which to compare yourself. God will show you yourself when you ask him to search and know you. And, he'll also send you some difficult or challenging experiences that will show you how much you need him.

It will show you how weak you are, how human you are. He'll show you that. And it will be a means of grace to you. show you how much you need him.

And we need to ask him to lead us in his everlasting way. What's that? Well, God leads you in his way.

He's leading you to have faith in Christ as your saviour in the first instance. And then, he's leading you to grow to be more like Christ. You know, you could express this prayer in a different way. [17:02] Lead me in your everlasting way. You could say, Oh Lord, let there be nothing in my life. Take away everything out of my life that is contrary to your nature. That conflicts with your nature, your holiness.

Your will, your law. Lead me in your way. And when you pray this, God will also direct you. He will direct your steps and show you how to follow.

He will guide you. So, we should use the psalm in praying for ourselves. We should also use the psalm in praying for our children if we've got children.

Or maybe we will have, some of us will have children in the years to come. Put this in the can and keep it for future reference. Use the psalm in praying for your children. If you don't have children, pray for your neighbour's children or the children of the church or your nieces and nephews.

Look at verse 13. You created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb. See, this shows us that God is concerned for our children from the moment of conception.

[18:17] Now, the Bible teaches that God is a covenant God. He said to Abraham, the promises are to you and to your children. My promises are for you and your children. And Peter repeated that promise to all the crowds in Jerusalem he was preaching to on the day of Pentecost.

The promises are to you and to your children. God's promises. This is a covenant God here who's meeting us. So pray to God to remember his covenant for your children.

Appeal to him on the basis of the promises that he has made concerning your children. And there are lots of them in the Bible. Isaiah 54 is a verse that says all your children will be taught by the Lord.

Pray for that and ask the Lord to help you to bring them up to work with them to interact with them at all points in such a way that will encourage them to go with the Lord to trust him for themselves. So, pray this for your children. Use the psalm to guide you to pray to God for your children. It's a difficult and perilous age we're living in especially for bringing up kids.

[19:27] But God is willing to be with us in this because he's demonstrating his concern for our children. Why try doing this in your own strength? God is willing to help.

Count on his help in this and make sure that you do it in his way. Now, there's the first thing. This psalm should guide us in our prayers.

Secondly, if we may be feeling threatened, sometimes we feel threatened, maybe you don't today but maybe at other times, it may be tempting to be resentful of the fact that God sees and knows that God is one from whom you can hide nothing and you feel threatened.

You say to yourself, my private life's my own business. No one has the right to tell me what I do with my time or my money.

That's exactly typical of a humanistic way of thinking. God has no rights. According to humanistic ways of thinking, it's only man who has rights.

[20:38] God has no rights. So how is it with yourself? Do you find the thought of God's omniscience a comforting thought or a threatening one?

If you feel threatened by God, ask yourself that. Am I right to feel this? And study the psalm closely and bring your thoughts to God.

Bring your feelings to him and ask him to deal with them. And then thirdly, we find guidance in the psalm here about our attitude to those who oppose God.

Now we read in verse 19, David says to God, if only you would slay the wicked. I hate those who hate you, O God.

what I'd like to ask and look at is what thought process leads David from verse 17 to verse 19.

[21:52] How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! When I took count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you. If only you would slay the wicked, O God!

what thought process is at work here? I think it's that David seems to have found such confidence in God's loving knowledge of him that he is not afraid, he is confident to bring up the deepest thoughts of his heart, sentiments that he would not expose to anyone else.

Remember, David was the king. And of course, kings were always having to contend with corruption and political intrigues and unscrupulous enemies all around.

David had his share of them. You can read all about David's kingdom in the Old Testament. David had to stand up, he had to stand apart from people like this, he had to stand as a person of godliness and integrity.

But you see, this is how you may well feel. This is how you may well feel. If, for example, you are wrongfully blamed for something, or if you are unjustly judged, or if you're discouraged and defeated by the stratagems of those who oppose God.

[23 : 20] Think, for example, of the members of Christian unions that have recently been disaffiliated from the students' unions, Christians, because they require their members to sign the CU statement of faith.

How easy it is to be made to feel small and ugly in the face of the exultant and hegemonistic humanism that pervades everywhere nowadays.

The humanism of those who oppose God. So verse 21 is how you may well feel. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?

Now, the point is, this is not an attitude that we are called upon to express to man, but as David does to God for his ears only.

We are called in this New Testament to increase and abound in love toward one another and toward all men. That's what we are called to. Now, let me make clear why I think this is what we are to take from these words.

[24 : 38] See, if David were saying, self-righteously saying, I hate these people and I'm honouring God by hating them and my religion demands that I hate them, and that I tell them so, then the logic would be that David would go on from then on to say, so destroy them, O God, show them your wrath, but instead of that, he says, deal with me, O God.

You see, do I not hate those who hate you? I count them my enemies, verse 22 and verse 23, search me, O God, and know my heart. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

Deal with me, O God. That's what he prays. We hate sin, but we are called to love the sinner. We struggle to love him, we struggle to love him, and we are allowed to bring our struggles to God in prayer, and if we do so, we will find grace to help in our time of need.

God. And the last thing I want to mention in the practical area of application is about making ourselves accountable to God.

And we are called, of course, to make ourselves accountable to one another as well. James 5, 16, confess your faults to one another, and pray for one another that you may be healed.

[26 : 14] Now, if you take up the attitude, I won't admit fault, I won't admit fault. Don't ever admit fault. That's not honoring to God.

We are called to confess our faults to one another. If you've fallen out with somebody, this is a good text for relationship problems, James 5, 16, confess your faults to one.

Not just a blanket apology, but confess your faults to one another. Now, behind this is the necessity to be honest with God.

That's our basic accountability. Every one of us, we're accountable to God. He's our judge, and he knows us. He knows already, but he wants to hear from you. He wants you to tell him.

He wants me to tell him. Being honest with God is basic to this. So, have you confessed your sins to God? Not just in a generalized sort of way, but, as I think the confession says, mentioning particular sins particularly.

[27 : 26] We don't have to confess every single detail. We can't remember them all. That was a problem Martin Luther had. He tried to confess everything. He could never get to the end of the list. but we have to be honest with God and confess what we know.

Confess yourself. We confess our sins. He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Have you repented of them? How do you repent when you can ask for repentance?

Repentance is actually a gift. When God brings somebody to himself he grants repentance. He creates as David asked for in Psalm 51 he creates a clean heart and renews a right spirit in you. That's the spirit of repentance. And you know I think it's true to say that because God grants that spirit of repentance you actually can take some satisfaction in your sincerity in your repentance. The person who forgives has to find some satisfaction in the sincerity in the repentance of the person they forgive.

[28 : 35] It's even the case with God. So ask for repentance. Pray to God to grant you repentance of your sins. It's a liberating thing to ask God for.

Do you ask God to convert you? Have you asked God to convert you if you're not a Christian today? Do you ask God to deepen your conversion? Lead me in the everlasting way.

That's what it means. So ask God to search and know you. The amazing thing is that God who is of purer eyes than to behold evil is willing to look into the murky depths of our hearts.

Isn't that amazing? But he's willing to see and to come in and change the whole place. Make it clean. That's why he sent Jesus.

That's why he came himself in the person of his son to transform human hearts and to take up residence in them by his Holy Spirit and to forgive and change us. So this is a prayer then that God has graciously given us to use with God.

[29 : 41] Search me oh God and know my thoughts. Lead me in the everlasting way. Leave these thoughts with you. let us pray. Let us pray.

Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray.,