

Search Me, O God

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 18th of January 2004. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, Search Me, O God, and is based on Psalm 139. Picture God.

Picture God. What sort of picture in the art gallery do you picture when you picture God? And which mistake will you fall into when you picture God?

Is your picture of God like Michelangelo's God, the creator, creating Adam? An old bearded man, yet still muscly and strong?

Or is your picture perhaps a work of modern art, a blank canvas, empty, unknowable?

[1 : 07] Make of it what you will. A complete mystery. See, if we try to imagine, picture, define God, one of two traps we often fall into.

One trap is that we picture God so well defined, so well described in our mind and our perception, that we've actually limited God.

We believe that God is fully known by us. But the other extreme and the other error is to think that there's nothing, a blank canvas, that God is total mystery, totally unknown and totally unknowable.

The Bible falls into neither error. Neither error that God is totally unknowable or that God is totally defined.

So, the Bible shows us that God does reveal himself, that we can know God sufficiently and clearly, that we can't define God in any old way because God has shown himself to us sufficiently clearly and yet not totally.

[2 : 22] The description of God as we understand it is not exhausted. There is more yet of God that is unknown, but that God is not totally unknown.

That we actually strike, in a sense, a medium between the two extremes, that God is known and known sufficiently and clearly in the Scriptures, but not totally.

There is more that is incomprehensible and undefined for us. And that's the sort of picture that this psalm gives us so clearly, a poetic masterpiece in the book of Psalms of something of the nature of God.

We mustn't neglect the fact, from the beginning, that this is a psalm of praise of God. It is not an abstract piece of art just hanging on a wall.

It is rather a personal statement of David, of praise and wonder and awe at God and at the nature of God.

[3 : 29] It's not abstract, it's not remote, it's not theoretical, but it's personal and it's full of praise. It's full of praise at the nature of God.

A God who is known and known well, but a God who's bigger than what is known, as we'll see. The psalm's got 24 verses and it actually falls neatly into four stanzas of six verses in each stanza.

And in verses one to six, there is wonder at God's knowledge of David, the writer of the psalm. In fact, the first six verses give us almost like a thesaurus, a list of words of God knowing, discerning, searching, being acquainted with David.

It's as though the psalmist is writing about God, knowing him and looks up his thesaurus to find a few more words that mean pretty much the same thing to give a bit of variety to these first six verses.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. There's the basic truth of verse one, which is built on in the verses that follow. You know when I sit down and when I rise up.

[4 : 50] But the psalmist David is not saying there, these are the only two times you know me. Because in the Hebrew language, you would often use two opposites to mean everything.

So here, when I sit down and when I rise up are if you like opposites. And what David is in effect saying is you know whatever I do from my sitting down to my getting up.

We have an expression in English that functions in the same way. If you've lost something, you might say, I've searched high and low for it and can't find it. Well, nobody will ever say to you, we'll search in the middle if you've searched high and low.

That is, when we say, I've searched high and low, we mean, I've searched everywhere I can think. Well, so it is here. You know when I sit down and when I rise up means you know me everywhere and all the time.

Whatever I'm doing, God, you know me. You discern my thoughts from far away. That is, even God who's transcendent and vast knows even David's thoughts from a distance in a sense.

[5 : 58] And then the next verse says, similarly, you search out my path and my lying down. My path, meaning when I'm walking, doing things, my lying down when I'm not.

Again, he's saying, you search me out all the time and everywhere. There's no thing that I do that is not beyond your knowledge and your searching of me.

But not only actions and thoughts but words as well. Verse 4, God knows David's words. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

That is, God knows the words that we're about to say as we're forming them in our mind. Maybe even this verse is saying before that even, God knows even our words. He knows our actions, every one of them.

He knows our thoughts, every one of them. He knows our words, every one of them, even before they're uttered by our tongue. You hem me in, verse 5 says, behind and before or in front of me, on both sides, if you like, or all around me is really what it's saying.

[7 : 13] You hem me in behind and before and lay your hand upon me. Now some people might read this mistakenly as thinking somehow that God is being oppressive here, hemming him, David in, somehow trying to box him up or crowd him out.

But that's not actually what's being meant here in this psalm. David is giving thanks to God that whatever he is doing, wherever he is, whatever he says, whatever he thinks, God is surrounding him with his protection.

God is in front of him to protect him for what may come in front of him. But God is behind him to protect him for whatever might come from behind to attack.

And his hand is on me not to squash and oppress but to protect, to guard, to provide, to keep. It is the hand of God's love not a hand of hostility.

And David is giving thanks to God that wherever and whenever and whatever God is there who knows David intimately and well and provides and protects it every time.

[8 : 28] And David marvels at this knowledge of God. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is so high that I cannot attain it.

The word wonderful has probably got two senses. One is it's too vast for me to understand. Too big. That is, he knows many things of God as he's described them in the first five verses.

It's not that God is a blank canvas, totally unknowable. But that David's knowledge of God is not exhausted by what he knows. He knows sufficient to be confident in God.

But this knowledge of God is too wonderful, too big for me, but it's too big in a positive sense. It's too wonderful. It is fantastic that wherever, whatever, whenever, God is there to provide and protect King David.

David. It's a bit like the TV program that captured so many imaginations, Big Brother, but not so, in a sense, intrusive or impersonal.

[9 : 34] God's knowledge of David is personal for David's care and protection. Not an intruder unknown looking in on a security camera, but God who knows everything there is to know about David, for David's own benefit and care and protection.

Well, the second stanza, verses 7 to 12, builds on the first. If the first is about God's infinite knowledge of David, we might say the technical word is his omniscience, his all-knowing, now the aspect of the next stanza is God's omnipresence, his presence everywhere.

So, where can I go from your spirit or where can I flee from your presence? This stanza begins with those rhetorical questions. towards the JB and determine his miracles and with theence