

Psalm 139

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[0:00] Let us pray as we stand. Oh Lord, thank you for gathering us and we pray that you would speak now by the power of your Holy Spirit.

Give us ears to hear, minds to know, and hearts to receive all that you have for us in the Lord Jesus. And we pray this in his name. Amen.

You may be seated. You may be seated. Wasn't last night something to behold? You know what I'm talking about?

My house was shaking at one point. It was just shaking from the lightning and peals of thunder. And I thought, surely my eight-year-old boy is scared out of his wits.

And so I go into his room and he's just snoring. He doesn't even know that a lightning and thunderstorm happened. It's incredible. So I wish I had his superpower. But it reminded me of this image.

[0:59] It's a good thing for us to feel a sense of awesome power. There's one point that I went and stood out on my front porch just to feel it.

Scripture talks about God's voice coming from his throne, sounding like peals of thunder, rippling through the world and resonating in our hearts and minds.

And the psalm that we're going to be looking at today, Psalm 139. So turn there with me if you are able. Psalm 139 is a wonderfully powerful psalm.

It is powerful and it is precious. Because God speaks to us today as he's spoken it to people for thousands of years. And as God speaks this psalm into our lives, he does two things.

He smashes all of our small thoughts of him. And he smashes all of our impersonal thoughts of him. And he shows us that he is much greater than we thought he was.

[1:58] And he shows us that he is much closer and more personal than we thought he was. And both at the same time. So it's a marvelous psalm. So we're going to take Psalm 139 in two parts. The first part is, the first half, the reality of God in your life.

And then the second part is, asking God to work in your life. That make sense? The reality of God in your life and asking God to work in your life.

So let's start with the reality. Because the reality is that there's some people who actually don't think God is real, right? Don't think God exists.

We can call those philosophical atheists. Let's just go there. And then there are a lot of other people, more people, who think that God exists. They think he's real.

There's some higher power that exists. But he's not really all that interested and involved in our day-to-day. And doesn't really make that much of a difference. You can call that second group kind of practical atheists.

[2:56] So you have philosophical atheists and practical atheists. And either way you go, it really affects the way that you see yourself. If you're a philosophical atheist, God's not real, then you have to be convinced that in some sense, our existence in the world is just a random chance.

It doesn't have given purpose or intention. Now, if you're a practical atheist, on the other hand, you may not believe that your life is a random chance. Like somebody actually brought you here, but that somebody who brought you here has got you going like a watch and then taken his hands off. So you're really just left to manage life on your own. And the meaning of your life is basically about the choices you make and what you can make of it by yourself.

So if you're a philosophical atheist, then it leads to nihilism. My life is meaningless and I kind of have a meaningless self. But if you're a practical atheist, it leads to moralism.

I am a self-made self. My meaning is just what I can make myself into. And what's so lovely about Psalm 139 is it just is shot through with conviction that God is real.

[4:07] And it's shot through with conviction not just that God is real, but that God is interested in you. And not just that God is interested in you, but that God is invested in you. And not just that God is invested in you, that God is present to you.

And not just that God is present to you, but he is actively working in your heart and mind every single moment of every single time in your life. It's incredible. And so Psalm 139 invites us to inhabit a world where we have to come to grips with the reality of God in our lives and see how that changes everything about how we view ourselves.

And there's three aspects of the reality of God in our lives that Psalm 139 brings us into. It's God's knowledge of us, God's presence with us, and God's power toward us. So let's start with knowledge. These are the first six verses are all about God's knowledge of you and me. And the key words are searched and known. Look at verse one. Oh Lord, you have searched me and you have known me.

It's intensely personal experience of God's knowledge. His all-knowing gaze is directed at every aspect of our lives, our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. So look at verse two. It's our thoughts. God knows everything about us. You know when I sit down, you know when I rise up, you discern my thoughts from afar. God knows every thought that's on our lips, that's in our mind about what we may or may not do before we actually do that thing. God knows that I think the way in which the order in which my wife brushes her teeth and then flosses her teeth is the wrong order. You're supposed to floss your teeth first and then brush. Yeah, thank you. I appreciate this. Oh no, see, is this an international difference?

[6:00] But God knows that about me. And God doesn't only know my thoughts, God also knows my words before I even speak them. So if you look at verse four, even before a word is on my tongue, behold, oh Lord, you know it all together. And not just my thoughts and words, but sandwich in between them every action that I do. Verse three, you search out my path and my lying down and you are acquainted with all my ways.

So God knows you and he knows everything about you in every aspect of your life, thought, words, and deeds. And I like to describe it as a terrifying comfort. On the one hand, it's comforting to know that I am fully known and nothing is hidden. Like when nobody else gets it, God gets it.

On the other hand, it's terrifying. It's terrifying to know that I am fully known and nothing is hidden and God sees when nobody else sees. And God's knowledge of me is not just some distant knowledge.

It's not just the knowledge I have when I look up at Grouse Grind and I know I do not want to walk up that. It's not just the knowledge that I have of looking at my garden outside and admiring the beautiful flowers, as wonderful that is. It's a different sort of intimate acquaintance and personal investment that is included in knowledge. Look at verse five. It's this imagery of you hem me in before and behind. So it's like God's got you with both hands and you lay your hand upon me. It's this hands-on investment in our lives. And this is important because in the biblical world, knowing that verb to know somebody is a whole person investment and experience. It's not just an intellectual download of information. So the verb to know is used in the Old Testament in a myriad of ways of studying something, to have sex with someone, to show concern for someone, to enter into a binding covenant and oath and relationship with someone, to be familiar with someone with their likes and their dislikes, and also to understand the gravity and weight of someone's reputation. So it's a really significant sort of thing that we're talking about here is God knowing us. And brothers and sisters, part of the tragedy of our fallen world is how many people feel unknown, unseen, misunderstood.

[8:37] So I read a novel called Wonderful Fool about a month ago. It's a cool novel. And it's a story about a man named Gaston who is kind of a clumsy young Frenchman. Sorry if you're French. Who travels to Japan, to Tokyo in particular, to visit his Japanese pen pal. And the only thing that the Japanese pen pal knows about him is that he's a descendant of Napoleon. So they're all thinking this guy's going to be legit. He's going to be super legit.

They're expecting this strapping, handsome, strong guy. And he shows up and he's, and the first thing they notice is he's super ugly. They say he has a face like a horse. And so he's, he's not, he's not what they, they expected. They expected somebody that would be really savvy with people. And, and, and instead of being savvy with people, they, they discover that he seems foolish. He's not really foolish. He's just so innocent that he believes whatever people say, and he gets himself in really tricky situations. They thought it'd be somebody who would be powerful and be able to defend

himself and fight. But every time a fight comes his way, he just takes a blow after blow and he doesn't fight back. And they say he's a coward, even though it's really, he wants to be a peacemaker. And so the whole, the whole story, we could go on and on, is about him traveling through Japan, being constantly misunderstood, feeling like a perpetual foreigner in this land. You ever felt that way? Feeling like a perpetual foreigner. There's also a book called *Fierce Attachments* by a Woman Named Vivian Gornick. And it's a story of a mother and a daughter. They're living together. They've spent decades of their life together in, you would think they know each other quite well. But it's the story of how both of them have really messed up lives and they're blaming each other for the mess that they're in. So, and they're so focused on blaming the other person for the mess that they're in, that they, they don't actually take time to get to know the other person in the perspective that they're coming from. And so the book at the end, it's really interesting. The daughter says of her mother, it's as if she sees me, but she doesn't even know that I'm here. It's an interesting juxtaposition. It's a description of being physically seen, but not truly being seen and known.

Have you ever experienced that before? See, what Psalm 139 is saying is that there is someone who knows you, who doesn't just see you, but who knows you and who understands you. And this is the first great reality of God that you have to come to grips with in your life. God's knowledge of you, his investment in you. And the second thing our Psalm goes on to talk about is the reality of God's presence with you. And this is in verses seven through 12. Verses seven and eight are about the fact of God's presence and verses nine to 12 are about the character of God's presence. And once again, it's deeply personal. It's not God's presence is just this vague, abstract, ethereal reality. It is an encounter with the person of the Holy Spirit. So look at verse seven, where shall I go from your spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? There's this understanding in the Old Testament that the spirit of God is active in every nook and cranny of creation, that the third person of the Holy Trinity permeates the whole world. And so no matter where you go in the world, however good or bad it is, you cannot avoid the presence of God. So if you look at verse eight with me, for example, if I ascend to heaven, like the best possible place I could imagine, there you are. Or verse eight, if I make my bed in Sheol, like the worst possible place I could be imagined, there you are. And then in verse nine and 10, he says, even if I try to run away from you, God, I try to go as far away as I possibly can from you. I can't run away from you because I discover that wherever I go, you are there to lead me and to hold me. And the image of verse 10 is a wonderful one. It's like the image of a shepherd leading and stabilizing a sheep as he's walking along a rocky precipice. Or think of a parent guiding a child along walking along a tree branch.

Or maybe a more modern thing is think about a physical therapist who is helping someone learn to walk again after having a major surgery. It's not a passive presence of God in our lives. God is intensely active in the way he's in our lives. He's not like a dad who sits on the couch and watches TV.

[13:28] He's in your house, but he's not engaging you. He's like a dad who's helping you with your homework and giving you wise perspective in life and your relationships and right there with you as you take the next step that you have to take. And we're told in verses 11 and 12 that even the darkness cannot hide God, hide us from God. Like the darkness of the evil in the world and the darkness of our distress over the evil in the world and the darkness of our own hearts and thoughts and the darkness of our sense of insecurity and uncertainty, any form of darkness, God's presence permeates even that.

It was a number of years ago, I got a phone call after being a pastor at a church for one month. I got a phone call from a woman whose voice was shaking and she said, my husband just attempted to take his own life. I knew nothing about these people. And I said, what's your address? I wrote it down. I got on my knees and prayed and I went straight over to the house. Months later, after lots of help and medical attention, different things, the husband actually returned to church, but the wife surprisingly didn't. And I only saw her maybe one or two times in the next few years. But when I did see her, I noticed she couldn't look me in the eyes and she would actively avoid me. Why? I think it's because I had been there in her family's darkest moment. And to face me would mean facing the pain and shame of the worst moment in her life.

And it was a weight and a vulnerability that she couldn't bear. And so she would hide. It's one of the tensions that's right in the middle of Psalm 139 is that God's presence is not simply this wonderful gift that David is joyfully welcoming, although that's true. God's presence is also being depicted as a

reality that David cannot avoid or evade even if he wanted to.

You hear what I'm saying? So even when he tries to run from God and hide from God and the darkness feels too dark for God to get to him, he still discovers God in that place. He encounters God and comes face to face with God and wrestles with God because God is not just a passive presence. God is actively pursuing him and laying hold of him. It's like Job who meets God in the storm. Or Jacob who wrestles with God in the night, this Jacob. Or Jonah in the sea. See, the very first reality of God that we have to come to grips with in our life is his personal knowledge of us. But the second is his active, intentional, and intense presence with us. And the third reality we got to come to grips with is, oh my goodness, is this God powerful? He is very, very powerful, like beyond peals of thunder, powerful. And this is what verses 13 to 16 are all about. The key words are formed and made. So if you look at verse 13 with me, for you formed my inward parts. You knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. It's what Jacob was talking about during the children's talk.

[16:54] It's an image of a God as an artist who specializes in textiles and tapestries. So you get the verb knitted in verse 13 and the verb woven in verse 15. And it's this description of an artist engaging in creating a piece of work, a piece of art in a sustained, detailed work of creation over time.

As he takes bones and flesh and sinew and veins and knits them together in the womb. As he takes body and soul and weaves them together in something beautiful and wonderful. And so what David is experiencing, is describing, is the fact that his existence, his very existence is who he is, is only here because God is an artist who has made him. And it's a beautiful thing because David doesn't just see this at the beginning of his life. David sees that God's creative capacity determines every day of his life. So if you look at verse 16, your eyes saw my unformed substance. In your book were written every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was not one of them.

So whether you live 90 days or 90 years, every single day that the Lord gives you is a gift. And it's a gift that he knew he was going to give you from the very beginning of your life when you were in the womb. That doesn't mean every single day feels like a gift.

Do any of you know Ben Sass? Does that name ring a bell to any of you? He was the senator of Nebraska. How do you not know him?

Come on, guys. Nebraska is a very big state and it makes the news headlines all the time. No, seriously, he was a young senator. He's in his 50s now and he's been dying for the last year of cancer. And he's got three kids who are like in university age. And it's been interesting because he was a politician, all these people are interviewing him all the time about like, so how are you thinking about life now that you're dying? And he talks so much about death is this cruel enemy. And yet he talks about it with a smile on his face somehow. And the reason why is he keeps bringing everybody back. And this is just a live audience. He brings people back to the sovereignty of God. And he says, look, this is a surprise to me and my family, but this isn't a surprise to God.

[19:28] For some reason in the mystery of God's ways, he's allowed this to happen. And this is the life that has been formed for me. And this is the life that's been given to me. And this is the life that I can live for his glory. And so there's this wonderful way in which Ben Sass is pointing Nebraska and the world to the strong view of God's sovereignty that our lives and our days are like clay in a potter's hands.

And they're like silk threads in a weaver's hands. And those hands are skillful and faithful and powerful and good. So that's the reality of God in your life, his knowledge of you, his presence with you, and his power towards you. Are you with me so far?

So what do we do with this? How does experiencing this God's reality in your life change things?

Now, I have about three sermons I want to preach at this point. And I tried preaching all three at the 730 service. And somebody came up to me afterwards and said, please don't do that to the other two services. So the first sermon I was going to talk about, you know, when you're going through those dark times, about how important it is to think about the way in which God thinks of you.

Because so often we're so consumed with how others think about us or how we think about ourselves, or even what we think about God. But what would it look like to live a life where we're thinking constantly about what God thinks about us? I'm not going to preach that sermon right now because I was told not to. There's another sermon that I would love to preach, which is all about this hatred language that we see here. We call that an imprecatory prayer, where he says, God, get the

enemies. I hate those that hate you. Like, Lord, do something about the evil in the world. What's going on?

And it raises a whole bunch of questions for us, right? Especially in light of the fact that Jesus is like, you should love your enemies and pray for them. And I would love to talk about how God actually invites us in prayer to be really honest about the hatred in our heart. And we're not supposed to take it out on our enemies because vengeance belongs to God. But what do we do with it when we really have it is we bring it to God and we express it to him. And there's a whole lot that could really touch down in our lives in that. And I would love to preach that sermon, but I'm not going to because I was told I shouldn't. But where I want to land is verses 23 and 24.

[21:57] Because this is where the psalm lands. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts.

And see if there be any grievous way in me. And lead me in the way everlasting. Do you see how it circles back to the very first verse? But the very first verse was the psalmist saying, God, you have done this. You have searched me and know me. You have worked in my life this way.

And now the very last verse is the psalmist saying, God, do it again. In other words, the psalmist isn't content with just experiencing God yesterday. The psalmist wants to experience God doing the work again today.

And every single day in his life. Lord, search me and know me. Try me and know my thoughts. Remember what I said earlier about it being a terrifying comfort? I mean, this is a pretty bold prayer. I mean, how many of us are scared to even share some of our deepest things in our lives with our best friend? How many of us has struggled knowing, should I share this with my spouse? What's going on in my life, in my heart and mind?

And how many of us, maybe if we're in a season of loneliness, that feel like, man, I wish I had somebody to talk to, but I don't even know where to go with the deep things in my life.

[23:23] To ask God to search us and to know us and to test us in order to see if there's anything in us that grieves him. To see if there's anything in us that's misaligned with him and his purposes.

So it's an exposing work that we're asking for. And I think the only reason that we can possibly pray this and be honest about it is if we believe that God, when he exposes the things in our lives that need to be exposed, is going to be gracious to us when they're exposed. Right? And like, think about, for example, I'm getting pulled over by a cop or at the border patrol. And if any of you have been pulled over at the American border lately, I'm sorry. I apologize. But if you've committed a crime or you have something you shouldn't have, you don't want to ask the person to search you, right?

Because you're afraid of what the consequences will be. Now, if you haven't done anything wrong and you don't have anything that you shouldn't have, then you're kind of like, this is a bother, but I'm not that worried because I'm innocent.

But if you know that you're not innocent, which is every single one of us, then you know you're in for trouble unless the person who is searching you is someone who is not going to give you what you deserve. Unless the person who's searching you is more interested in restoring you and having mercy on you than judging you and condemning you.

And that's who God is in this psalm. It's the only reason why the psalmist can cry out with this sort of honesty, because he believes that when God exposes those things in his heart, he is talking to the God who will expose those things because he wants to save him and he wants to sanctify him and he wants to shepherd him into fullness of life. And this is, we know this because God sent Jesus. You know, in the gospels, it says that when Jesus came, he knew what was in the heart of humanity. He was not unaware. And yet he went and laid down his life, taking the sin and the judgment and the suffering that we all deserve. And when he rose from the dead, he showed up to his fearful disciples and he showed him the scars in his hands and he said, peace be with you.

[25:45] In other words, you have peace with God now because of what I've done for you. You don't have to be afraid. And so there's this wonderful truth here that because we know God is for us, because we know his grace in the Lord Jesus Christ, we can say, God, would you highlight anything in my life that grieves you and needs to be dealt with so that I can be more like you and experience more of your grace in my life? And Lord, would you do that work in me? And so brothers and sisters, Psalm 139 is such a precious Psalm because it shows us that God is real, that his power and his knowledge and his presence is at work in our lives. And we can bring anything that we've brought here tonight to him and ask him to do a mighty work in it. Brothers and sisters, I

Speak these things to you in Jesus' name. Amen.