

Psalm 139 AM

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[0 : 0 0] Let us pray. Father, may the riches of your grace shine through the poverty of my words, so that the words of my mouth and the many meditations of our hearts may be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Maker and our Redeemer.

Amen. You may be seated. If you would turn with me to Psalm 139, it can be found on page 521 of your pew Bible.

And if you're joining us online, you'll have to find what page that is in your own Bible. This is our second week of a sermon series where we are asking a very simple question.

What does it mean to be human? It doesn't get any simpler than that. And we're looking at this for six weeks. We're looking for answers in the book of Psalms. It's an interesting place to be, because the Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible.

It's the hymnal, too. So the implicit assumption in the way that we're going about this sermon series and seeking to ask this really big question about what it means to be human is this. Who I am can only be discovered in prayer to and praise of the one who made me.

[1 : 1 5] See, the Psalms are a very unique part of Scripture.

They're God's word to us in the form of human words to God. And last week in Psalm 8, we began with a big picture view of humanity as a whole. We were told how humanity fits into this vast creation that God has made.

The nobility and the dignity of the human person, just a little bit lower than the angels, and yet above the birds and the beasts and the fish, crowned with glory and honor. And so we saw that human dignity is this marvelous thing that God's majesty gives to us.

But this week, things get a little more up close and personal in Psalm 139. It's not humanity as a whole, but it is one human being that's being talked about. It's not God the creator of the whole entire universe.

It's God the creator of you and me and each individual person. It's not where do I fit into the whole vast cosmos and world. It's how am I in direct relationship to God here and now.

[2 : 2 7] And so Psalm 139, as we go through it, is personal through and through. It is a direct, heartfelt, and heart-searching conversation with the Lord that begins and ends on the same note.

Look at verse 1 with me. It begins with an experience, a looking back. Oh Lord, you have searched me. You have known me.

And it ends in verse 23 with a prayer of desire, looking forward. 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. So the purpose of the prayer for David is quite simple.

Number one, he wants to grow in his awareness of God. And number two, he wants to grow in his openness to God. Now, some of us come here today and we are open to God.

[3 : 28] We're seeking. We're searching. We're asking questions. We're looking. But we may not be very aware of who God is. We may not know him in the nature of his relationship to us.

So we are open, but we're not yet aware. And then there may be others of us who come here aware of God. We know who he is. We know what his scriptures say. We think we understand how he relates to us, but we are not very open to him.

Something in us keeps us from coming to him. It keeps us from running to him and relying on him and entrusting ourselves and our lives to him. We are very aware of him, but we are not very open to him yet.

See, the first is openness with ignorance. And the second is awareness with resistance. And both hinder us from flourishing as human beings made in the image of God.

Because to be fully human according to the Bible, to be fully alive as we were created to be and as God is redeeming us to be, we need God's grace to make us both fully aware of God and fully open to God.

[4 : 31] So that's what Psalm 139 is going to help us with this morning. Growing in our awareness of God, verses 1 to 18. And growing in our openness to God, verses 19 to 24.

Growing in awareness. We could spend a whole lot of time here. There are three aspects of God of which David is keenly aware.

God's knowledge of him, number one. God's presence to him, number two. And God's creative power for him, number three.

It's what theologians call God's omniscience. He is all-knowing. God's omnipresence. He is everywhere present. And God's omnipotence. He is all-powerful. And yet, notice in this Psalm, Paul's not talking, I mean, David's not just talking about pie-in-the-sky abstraction.

He's saying, God is more personal and active and connected to us. Than anything else and anyone else in the entire universe. To pray Psalm 139 is to nurture an awareness of the Lord as the total environment of our lives.

[5 : 43] He is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. So three aspects that David is meditating upon. This awareness of God's knowledge. Notice this in verses two through six.

Glance over it with me. God knows his thoughts first in verse two. You know when I sit down and you know when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from afar.

And then verse four. God knows his words. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. And then God knows his deeds, verse three.

You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. So we have thoughts, words, and deeds. There is nothing about my life that God does not know.

And you get this sense here that God thinks a lot more about me than I think about God. The Lord is the total environment of David's life, of your life, of my life.

[6 : 43] My waking and my sleeping happen in his knowledge. My wondering and my working are very present to him. My arguing and my hurting, he understands it perfectly. God's knowledge of each and every person he has made is perfect in every respect.

God's knowledge of us cannot grow. It does not grow. And it cannot diminish. It never diminishes because it is perfect. We're told here that he knows us from the beginning to the end.

He knows us internal and external. He knows us public and private. And he simply knows us better than we know ourselves. That's why verse five is so brilliant and beautiful.

What does God do with his knowledge of us? Well, he uses it to bless us and surround us with his grace. Verse five. You hem me in, before and behind, and you lay your hand upon me.

In other words, I think David is saying you minister to me in just the right place, in just the right time, in just the right way. And this image of laying on of hands in the Bible is an image of intimacy and active involvement in the liberating and redemptive power of God.

[8 : 02] God not only knows, but he gets actively involved. He gets his hands dirty, so to speak. I like to work in the garden without gloves. It normally backfires.

I'm bleeding to thorns and splinters and blisters. And my wife is constantly telling me I need to wear gloves, and I'm constantly resisting it. There's something about the connection I feel when I'm bare hands.

There's no barrier. I like to get to know the garden, the leaves and the flowers and the dirt and the slugs more intimately, if I use my hands, you know.

You see, in the scriptures, God's hands are normally a symbol of his active involvement, his personal presence, his redemptive power in our lives, clearing away the weeds, uprooting the idols, tilling the soil so it be receptive to his word, warning of thorns and thistles, watering and nurturing the new life that he is bringing to bear in us.

And all of this leads, David, to this moment of awestruck wonder where he realizes the limits of his own knowledge of himself. Verse 6, such knowledge is too wonderful for me.

[9 : 13] It is high, I cannot attain it. David is aware of God's infinite and intimate knowledge of him, and it is greater than his knowledge of himself.

And then David moves on to God's presence from his knowledge, and this is verses 7 to 12. God not only knows, but God is near. And he begins this meditation in verse 7 with a question, where can I go from your spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence? And then he describes three situations, three ifs, that give the answer. Verse 8, situation number 1.

If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. Basically, no matter how high I go in life or how low I go, you are there.

Wherever I go, you are there. Situation number 2, verses 9 and 10. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me.

[10 : 21] Even there your right hand shall hold me. So not only wherever I go, you are there, but wherever I go, you will lead me and you will hold me. It's not a passive presence.

It's an active presence. And the situation number 3, verses 11 to 12. If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me and the light about me be night, which of us has not felt that the darkness is going to win the day.

Verse 12, even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is as bright as day to you, for darkness is as light with you. So not only wherever I go, you are there.

Not only wherever I go, you will be actively involved in leading me and holding me. But wherever I go, you will not let the darkness overcome me. David essentially says, you are everywhere, God, and there is nothing about me and my humanity and my fears and my darknesses or my situation that is dark or unknown to you.

I am never alone. I am never abandoned. I am never forgotten. I cannot get away from God. Situations may seem impossibly dark and irredeemable to me, but they are not that way to God.

[11 : 38] Aspects of my life may be seen impossibly dark and irredeemable to me, but they are not that way to God. First, God knows me.

Second, God is very near to me. And third, David meditates on God's creative power. He is very aware of God's creative power.

Verse 13, David is essentially saying, you know me as a creator, not a spectator.

How the weaver knows the tapestry and how the painter knows the painting. See, God knows the individual colors and strands of silk and wool that he has woven together to make up the whole of who we are.

God knows the pigments and the layers of color that lie behind the surface of the painting. He is the maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. God's loving gaze not only sees the invisible, but his personal presence penetrates the inaccessible, and his creative power is the author of every detail of our lives.

[13 : 04] Verse 15 and 16, My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unforced substance. In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.

So what's the upshot of all this? I mean, we just glanced over in about 8 to 10 minutes a vast amount. We talked about God's knowledge and his presence and his power, and what's the upshot of all of this?

It comes in verses 17 and 18, How precious to me are your thoughts, O God. Notice here, it's not our thoughts of God, it's rather God's thoughts of us.

I imagine it's a bit like how my kids feel when my wife Susie and I look at their baby books with them. You know, they love doing this about every 3 to 6 months.

[14 : 04] They say, Can we look at my baby book, you know? And we show them pictures, and we share stories, and we gush about how wonderful it was to raise them, normally through rose-colored glasses, you know, that comes about 5, 6, 7 years later when your sleep deprivation is over.

For those of you that are in that, may the Lord have mercy on you. But it's wonderful to see how they light up. There's something about our knowledge and experience and attentiveness and joy in them, even from their earliest days, that shapes their sense of who they are in relation to us now.

Our thoughts of them become precious to them, and they become formative for them and who they are becoming. See, when we become aware of God's knowledge and His presence and His power, God's thoughts become very precious to us because they actually become the core of our identity in our sense of who we are.

But it does not mean that God's thoughts all of a sudden become very simple and understandable to us. there's nothing in this passage that talks about that. He goes on in verse 17, how vast is the sum of them.

They are immense. And if I were to count them, they would be more than the sand. They are mysteriously immense. And so David, he sees God's thoughts as incredibly precious to him, but he also realizes that his little mind can only comprehend the smallest sliver of the infinite mind of God.

[15 : 35] that God's knowledge of him and his presence to God is far deeper than his little mind can grasp. In the spring of 1758, after her husband died, this is Jonathan Edwards.

He was a great philosopher and theologian and preacher in America. And after he died, he died as the principal of Princeton University. Sarah Edwards was asked to summarize his life. And she thought for a moment and then she uttered one simple sentence.

She said, Jonathan lived with a constant awareness of God's nearness to him and his dearness to God. Jonathan lived with a constant awareness of God's nearness to him and his dearness to God.

And that, my brothers and sisters, is what I want to submit to you is what Psalm 139 is all about. It's living in constant awareness of God's nearness to us and our dearness to God.

And it's really important that we keep those things together. Notice how God's nearness to us is not good news unless it is accompanied with our dearness to God. And this is precisely what the gospel of Jesus Christ comes to bring us.

[16 : 53] In Jesus Christ, God comes nearer than we could ever imagine. He becomes one of us. He is Emmanuel. He is God with us, never to leave us, always to be with us as the human being, as the God-man, as the one who will redeem us and save us before the Lord.

God comes very near in the Lord Jesus Christ. But the whole purpose of Jesus' mission is to take those that were far from God and to bring them through his death and resurrection into a forgiven and adopted relationship in God's family so that we would experience our dearness to God.

And it is those two things that Jesus brings us together that we have to have in order to move on to the second movement of the psalm, which is growing in personal openness to God.

Because if we are not fully aware and fully convinced that God is both near to us and that we are dear to him and the Lord Jesus Christ, then we will never become fully personally open to God.

We will always fear that we need to hold something back. And so this is the second part of the psalm, verses 19 to 24. There's this sharp and sudden turn as David moves from meditation to petition and he prays two things.

[18 : 05] He prays that God would slay the wicked and he prays that God would search his heart. So he expresses open hatred and then he expresses an open heart.

First, open hatred. Verse 19. Oh, that you would slay the wicked, O God. O men of blood, depart from me.

They speak against you with malicious intent. Your enemies take your name in vain. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

I hate them with complete hatred. I count them my enemies. David doesn't mince his words here.

I'm like, what are we to make of this? Are we to pray this as Christians? Here are a few thoughts, probably very muddled, so take them with a grain of thought, a grain of salt.

[19 : 12] First, David is honest about his hatred. David does not hide what we so often hide, especially in Canada.

If I may speak as an American, my dear Canadians, you have anger too. David, it normally comes out when you're in the car.

David, instead of hiding his anger, he brings it to God. He offers it to God. He entrusts it to God. That's number one. Number two, David is God's chosen king.

Don't forget that. He is a man after God's own heart, and that involves hating the things that are said against God and his kingdom. But in David's day, there was a national aspect to this that there is not anymore in our day.

So Israel was God's chosen nation. It was established to be a light among the nations, and David was God's chosen king of his chosen nation. So if anyone opposed Israel as a nation in the Old Testament, it was fundamentally opposing God's plans for redemption of the whole world.

[20 : 26] God's chosen means of blessing the world and of preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. So to resist God's nation, to resist his chosen king, was to resist God's grace for the world and to make oneself an enemy of God.

So it's very important to understand the Old Testament context. God is, or David, is a chosen king. And that leads, number three, to David is a messianic figure. He points us to Christ, the greater son of David.

And I think Christ is actually the definitive divine answer to David's human prayer. Because Christ came to wage war against all that wages war against humanity, sin and death and the devil.

And when you get to the New Testament, it redefines the enemies of God spiritually rather than nationally. Christ came to set the spiritual captives free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And so we have to realize that David is not only the chosen king, he is a messianic figure pointing us to the Lord Jesus Christ. And fourth and finally, we are not David. Jesus taught us to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, and to pray for those who persecute us.

[21 : 42] Now, does that mean that we cannot pray these words? I don't think so. I think we should pray these words. Because I think we can still, it helps us be honest.

It helps us remember that there's nothing that God does not know about us. And when God searches us, it reveals and releases what is really inside of us. Notice he says, search me, O Lord, right after this.

When God searches us, anger and hatred and loathing and resentment and vindictiveness and wanting to get rid of our enemies are things that will arise and be revealed eventually. And David's prayer, although it primarily points us to Christ, I think it also teaches us how we are to be honest with God.

The point is not that we should pray for the eradication of our enemies, but that we should be this brutally honest with God about how we really feel about our enemies. In other words, we should let it all out.

Because I think expressing open hatred is often a necessary step to expressing an open heart to God. And that's where David then goes in verses 23 to 24.

[22 : 55] He turns from the evil around him to the evil within him. He wants to know if there's anything in his heart that grieves God's heart. Verse 23, 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. David asks God to do now in the future what he has already seen God do in the past in verse 1.

And there are two images of God that were given here. It's the image of God as a judge who assesses and it's the image of God as a shepherd who leads. So you get the language of try, trying.

So God sifts through the evidence and he tests the truthfulness and he knows the verdict. And then you get the image of a shepherd leading. And I love the way that one author put it. He said, the psalmist wants God to be his judge so that God may be his shepherd too.

Such is the experience of God and confidence in God that he does not fear a judgment that leads to punishment. But he prays for a searching and a testing that leads to pastoral care.

[24 : 10] This is the experience of God and confidence in God that I think ultimately the gospel of Jesus Christ brings us. It's what Paul celebrated in his letter to the Christians in Rome when he said, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

It's what John wrote to his struggling spiritual children when he said, if anyone does sin we have an advocate with the Father. Jesus Christ the righteous. I think what we're learning here is that to be fully human in a fallen world requires confidence in God's love for us because it is only in that confidence that we will dare to pray with David, search me oh God and know my heart.

We know all too well what God will discover if we genuinely pray that. So my question for you brothers and sisters today is are you praying this prayer?

Search me and know me. Are you asking God to search your heart? Do you really want him to go there? Or are you hiding?

Are you fleeing? Are you resisting? Are you distracting? Are you hesitating? Is there some aspect of my life that I do not want God to search out and know?

[25 : 35] And why is that? See, I believe that it's probably that exact place where God wants to do battle with his enemy, Satan, who loves when sin remains hidden.

And it's probably the exact place where God wants to convince you that even there his grace covers your sin, his light reaches your darkness, and his love outbids your fear. And it's probably in that exact place where God wants you to grow in your confidence in Jesus and your awareness of his spirit and your openness to his cleansing.

And it's probably in that exact place where God wants you to come forward, hands open, knees bent, and receive his body and blood for you. That's why we prayed this prayer at the beginning of this wonderful dance that is Holy Communion.

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.