

# God and His presence

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[ 0 : 00 ] If you'd like to turn then in your Bibles to Psalm 139, and while there could have been many other verses in Scripture to reflect on God and His presence, Psalm 139 is one that I think quickly comes to mind for most of us.

In order to do this, we're going to read the first eight verses. That is not to ignore the rest, but it's simply to have your concentration on these first eight in particular.

We'll reflect on the others as we go, but sometimes a shorter amount and easier to remember can do us equally as good as large chunks.

Now hear God's word. O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from afar.

You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it all together.

[ 1 : 15 ] You hem me in behind and before and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high, I cannot attain it.

Wish shall I go from your spirit or wish shall I flee from your presence. If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed and show you are there.

In fact, let me just read verse nine because we're going, if I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me.

We could read on. In fact, I'm sure many of you are aware, but if you're not, when the Bible was written, it was never written with chapters and numbers.

And sometimes we can feel, or if we haven't read the complete chapter, we've done an injustice to the word of God. But when the Bible was actually written originally, it had names like Jeremiah or Psalms, but it was over time, in fact, it was actually, if I remember correctly, it was two men riding on a horse to France that decided to come up with this idea of why don't we put chapters and verses in to make it easier to people to navigate through God's word.

[ 2 : 39 ] So never feel that if you don't make it all the way through a chapter that it's somehow you've done injustice to that chapter. Remember, the original word of God never had chapters and verses. So sections have their meanings.

In fact, in the New Testament, a section is normally between five and twenty verses of meaning. I'm diverging, but there you go.

There you go. So never feel that if you don't make it through Psalm 119 in one go, that somehow you're a bad Christian. You're not. You're not, okay? One verse at a time will be good.

Well, may God bless his word to us and to our hearts, but we'll come back to that after this next hymn. If you'd like to turn to Psalm 139.

At the same time, we're going to be moving over a familiar ground. So I'm going to be reflecting on certain parts of scripture, which I think to many of you will be familiar.

[ 3 : 55 ] If they're not, then I can direct your attention to them perhaps at a later time. With that said, it may not be surprising to you at all that we have ended up here after the last two sermons over the last couple of mornings, Sunday mornings that is.

We began by looking at the importance of understanding that God's grace enables. It doesn't, it's not just there, but it actually enables the believer to do something they could not do without it.

And we took a focus from James and asking God for wisdom in order to be able to cope with trials and temptations and all other kinds of various trials that there are.

And, but to ask in faith in God's enabling grace of wisdom would be then granted to us. Of course, the doubter would not receive because that's not an act of faith.

And therefore, God's enabling grace would be withheld from him. But God's grace enables. And that was a key focus. Then last week, we looked at the importance of understanding that in all things, whatever we are dealing with in life, we are always dealing with God.

[ 5 : 16 ] You can't get away from that fact. Now, it is true that there are three ways to understand how God deals with people. And it is also true that God does leave people well alone.

But these are people who have decided to go their own way. And to go their own way to such an extent that God doesn't just say, fine, go your own way, but actually encourages them in it. Only for them to learn, finally when they meet God, the decision, the result of the decision that they have actually made. So, hopefully, for those who have perhaps understood what we've been listening to over the last couple of weeks, it shouldn't be surprising at all that we now come to a passage of Scripture that reflects heavily on the presence of God.

In Psalm 139 is David reflecting on the presence of God. And if you've, again, reflected over the last two sermons, you would recognize by now that God's presence is something that you cannot get away from.

Okay? God's presence is something that you cannot get away from. And so it is both comforting and challenging. God's presence cannot be simply understood in the same way your presence can as by being sat where you are or my presence by standing where I am.

[ 6 : 44 ] You're able to notice that I'm present because you can see me standing here. When we speak of God's presence, we have to understand it in a different kind of way.

But the same things apply. The basic truth here is that wherever we are, God is. Okay? Wherever we are, God is.

So here's the summary of Psalm 139, or at least the part that we reflected on. David understands that God understands a person perfectly.

And that's the first thing you need to get into your head and your heart. God knows you better than you know yourself. God understands you perfectly, and you understand yourself imperfectly.

The reason why David throws himself onto God to be searched out, which is what you find at the very last verse of Psalm 139, is because he realizes these two truths, that God understands him perfectly.

[ 7 : 47 ] In fact, he understands all humanity perfectly. But humanity, man, woman, themselves, don't understand them as clearly, or even close to as clearly, as God does.

The conclusion that David comes to then in verse 6 is that when he takes all of this into consideration, that such knowledge is just too wonderful for him. It's just too far beyond him to be able to comprehend.

He is trying to take all this in, and he's unable to function with that level of information. He doesn't know what to do with it all. And sometimes, many people, when they have too much knowledge, too much information, they're then unable to sort it.

And it takes a great skill in learning over long periods of time to be able to sift it out, to filter it through into its right order.

So here you are, sat this morning, thinking that you have a fairly good knowledge of yourself, and God is saying, careful where you go. It's not as knowledgeable as you think.

[ 8 : 56 ] The reason you need to be here is for God to do a searching out on you. You think that you've got it all figured out, and God's, no, you haven't.

You need God to figure it out for you, and then God to reveal it in your life over time, or even at one moment. That is absolutely fundamental, is absolutely necessary.

The very basis of wisdom is not only to understand God, but to understand yourself. And because you can't, at least not without God, you throw yourself on God in order for that to happen.

So David says, I can't attain it. I can't get there, but you can send it to me. Okay? David understands that his limitation is not God's limitation. Just because he can't get to it doesn't mean, it doesn't follow from that, that God can't give it.

That's, so he understands where the limitations are. Not on God's side, but on his side. Now, one of the things here that should be fairly easy to see after this is that it doesn't matter where David is in the psalm, or where he explains wherever he goes, God is always with him.

[ 10 : 08 ] God is the one, verse 23, who will search his heart, try his thoughts, to see, verse 24, if there's any grievous way within him. Wherever he goes, okay, wherever he is in the world, wherever he is spiritually, only God is able to tell him where he truly is.

Okay? And the conclusion that he comes to is this, that wherever I am, God's there. Wherever I am, God is there. And we saw that last week with Joseph, okay?

Whatever Joseph was dealing with in life, whatever his brothers were dealing with in life, at the end of the day, they were always dealing with God. Why? Because God is sovereign over all.

We're never to think that if you go out into the workplace or into the home or wherever, God's not got a hand-on approach here. God's got a hand-on approach to everything that you do.

God is involved in everything that you do. Now, it may be true that you may not be sensitive to that, and therefore you don't recognize it. That could be true, but it doesn't follow from that that God isn't got a hands-on presence.

[11:19] So what does it mean, then, to actually understand the presence of God? Okay? We speak about the presence of God, but what does it actually mean to understand being in the presence of God?

If I'm making the point, which I am, that wherever you are, God is there, what does it mean, then, to be in his presence? Well, if you look at verse 7 in particular, David points out that where can he go from your spirit?

The answer to the question is nowhere, or where can I flee from your presence? He goes on to say, if I go up or down or in or out, it doesn't matter where I go, you are always going to be there.

But this verse can be understood in a couple of different ways, depending on the spiritual condition of the person asking the question. Okay?

And this is what it means. When a person says, the Lord is my shepherd, something is true about where they are. They're walking through, perhaps, the valley of the shadow of death, and God is with them.

[12:31] God is the shepherd who is with them. Or when Jesus says, I am with you even to the end of the age, we recognize the presence of Jesus with us right this very moment.

Or there are other verses, God is with us, Matthew 28. He is around us, Psalm 34. He is in us, John 14. He is behind us and before us, Psalm 139.

Okay? Scripture testifies to the fact that it doesn't matter where you are, God is going to be there. God is going to be everywhere. And verses like these remind us that God is a comforting God.

That God stands by his people. Okay? God is standing by you wherever you are. And God is standing by you even when you may feel that God isn't there.

God is most definitely there. There's so many verses that testify the fact that God is with you, standing by you, strengthening you, enabling you, comforting you.

[13:38] He's never going to let you out of his sight. Okay? That's the kind of protection that God has over your life. Okay? You are never so far away from him that he cannot grab you by his hand, metaphorically speaking, and bring you back into absolute safety.

This is the image that you are meant to have of the God that you belong to. God is present in that way. He is above you, below you, around you, beside you. Wherever you are, God is there.

He is your shepherd. He is with you even to the end of the age. The source of your confidence is this, that God is with you, that God stands by you every single day.

So when you hear verses like, the Lord is my shepherd, you can understand the type of comfort that that brings. Okay? The Lord strengthens those who wait upon him.

You know, that's a comforting truth. Of course, waiting upon him is something you must do. But the presence of God has a flip side. Well, not so much a flip side, but we have the flip side.

[14:49] And then God's presence works an entirely different way. Jonah, as we saw last week, was a man that couldn't get away from the will of God, God's presence, however much he tried.

Jonah was very much in the presence of God, going in the opposite direction. He got on a boat to go in the opposite direction away from God. And God is there.

He even asked to be thrown into the sea so that he could get away from God. I mean, if he really reconciled himself to the will of God, why didn't he ask the sailors to turn the boat around?

Let's just turn the boat around and I'll go to Nineveh. Okay? Okay? Let's get out of this storm. Let's sail back and let me go to Nineveh. No, he said, throw me overboard. I'm trying to get away.

And in trying to get away there, God sent a big fish. Okay? And then spat him up on dry land. Jonah never, ever reconciled himself to the fact of God's will.

[15:50] What he reconciled was the conclusion that whatever he did, he couldn't get away from God. He tried. And he tried pretty hard. I don't think many of us have tried that hard.

But the conclusion he came to is that even when he was sat by the tree, miserable as anything, he still had to conclude that wherever he is, God was.

That wherever he was, God was with him. Okay? Whether he was on the boat, fast asleep, whether he was. But there's another thing that Christians who say, well, I have peace about doing this.

That's not a good indication. Jonah was fast asleep peacefully on a boat going in the opposite direction to God's will. Peace is not a good indicator of thinking that somehow you're in the presence of God's will.

Look at Jonah. He's, okay, fast asleep, not doing the very thing that he's meant to do. And I've often found that Christians are always at peace when they do what they want to do.

[16:52] Okay? No one says, I'm going to do this unpeacefully. Right? Whatever you do, you're normally at peace about it. God has to bring the disturbance.

In fact, one minister once said that it's impossible for God, not impossible, he was using hyperbole, to move a comfortable minister on. So what God must first do is unsettle him.

Okay? And God does that. God's presence is able to comfort and unsettle. What does God do with Jonah? Well, the query ends up.

The point here is to recognize that in both the case of David, the Lord is my shepherd. And in Jonah, God's there. But it's where we are that depends how we experience the presence of God.

Not where God is, but where we are. Okay? When David's down in the pit and he needs God's comfort, God is there comforting him. When Jonah is going in the opposite direction to the will of God than he should be, God is there, but he's there in an entirely different way.

[18:04] It's not that God isn't there. God is there. But he's there in a different way. There's no rest or comfort for Jonah. He's trying to get away, and God is bringing him back.

And that's the testimony of Scripture. It doesn't matter where you are, God is there. But where you are spiritually, practically concerning the will of God will determine entirely, it seems, how God will deal with you.

And how God will deal with you will depend, of course, on his will for you, which the word of God speaks about. So when we're told that God is a very present help in time of need, that's true.

Okay? When you're in need, God's not going to say, well, no, you got yourself into this trouble. No, God's going to reach down and pull you out. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is going to be there with you.

That's the promise made. And he's going to be there with you as a shepherd leading you through. When the disciples are told that they're going to have to go and speak, or that they will speak of Jesus, they're told that God the Spirit will be with them to give them the very words so that they know what to say.

[19:23] God stands by his people. God stands by his people, and he enables his people to do the things that he wants them to do.

God stood by Jonah, but in an entirely different way. Because Jonah was not in the place where he wanted to do what God wanted to do. In fact, he wanted to do the very opposite of what God was asking him to do.

God's grace enables. God's presence can both enable, comfort, and challenge. So we can learn that those who draw near to God, God will draw near to.

That those who are down, God can lift up. That those who wait can renew their strength. We get to experience comfort, strengthening, encouragement. All these other blessings come from the hand of God.

But sometimes, just sometimes, we get to experience the difficult challenges like Jonah did. The point to recognize here is that wherever you are, God is.

[20:33] But where you are will determine on how you experience the presence of God. Okay? I'm going to say that again. Wherever you are, God is. But where you are, that is, before him spiritually, will determine how you experience the presence of God.

Therefore, God can be with you, but not bless you. And God can be with you and bless you. These are how we experience the presence of God.

Well, what then do we make of absence? Well, if I'm claiming like I am, that God is always present, how do we reconcile the feeling of a distant Jesus?

That God doesn't seem to be with me. Well, because God does withdraw. But what he withdraws is not himself, but rather these enabling blessings.

And he does it for different reasons. For Jonah, he had a terrible time, but he never had a terrible time with God's presence not being there. It was in the presence of God he had a terrible time. [ 21 : 43 ] Because God was getting him back to do the very will that he had called him to do. Think of Adam in the Garden of Eden, enjoying the presence of God, but enjoying the presence of God in the garden.

All the other blessings came with it. When Adam is sent out of the garden because of disobedience, it's not as if he's out in a place where God isn't. No, God is out there as well.

But now he doesn't enjoy the blessings that he once did. He enjoys the presence of God in a different setting because of sin. Sin has separated him from particular blessings that come with the presence of God in a place where there is no sin.

And this is how you're meant to think about God's presence. It's always there, but sometimes blessings are withdrawn. And they are often withdrawn because of ongoing sin.

Or lessons need to be learned, like in the case of Jonah. You think about Samson and Delilah. Think about the trouble that Samson got himself into.

[ 22 : 50 ] Here's a man who decided to go ahead and do great things, as it appears, taking for granted God's help. And out he goes.

And the only thing was is that God didn't bless him with the necessary help. And the reason he didn't bless him was because of that presumptuous sin of, well, I belong to God.

Wherever I am, God is. That's true. But wherever you are does not mean that the presence of God's blessings are with you. And you take the sin of Achan.

Exactly the same situation. You know, Israel go out to fight a battle unaware of the sin committed by one person. And they suffer defeat.

Okay? And this is true because God withdraws certain blessings because sin interrupts that presence that they used to enjoy when sin was in a problem.

[ 23 : 51 ] This is, again, the testimony of Scripture from beginning to end. But in Isaiah, we have those comforting words, that the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save.

He may withdraw. He may pull back. But he doesn't pull back so far that he can't reach out and save you. He may pull back to such a way that you would learn your lesson and hopefully learn your lesson.

But he doesn't let you get so far away that his hand cannot reach out and save you. Because God's desire is to seek and to save, of course. He does withdraw certain blessings, but he doesn't withdraw himself.

He is there. So the issue here is not about God's presence, but rather about your presence before the Lord. Is it one where you are seeking and asking God to search you out so that you can do his will?

Or is it more in line with Jonah? Trying to be peaceful in doing what you want to do. Because you get to experience the presence of God in a different way.

[ 25 : 01 ] Think about it in a slightly more perhaps modern setting. You take a mother at home with all the children around her. And just imagine for a moment that wherever the children are in the house, the mother's there.

Okay? And that's generally true. She may be in a different room, granted, but she's there. And she is perfectly free to say to her children, Okay, this is how it's going to be.

This is what's going to happen today. This is how we're going to proceed this week. Okay? You're off school. We're going to go ahead and do this. We're going to do that.

Okay? This is what it's going to be. And the children sort of understand the guidelines. And then the mom decides, says, Well, yeah, you can have this, but now I'm taking it away from you.

Okay? I'm taking it away from you because, you know, you're misbehaving. You're pulling your sister's hair out. You know, I've told you not to. You know, those type of things.

[ 26 : 01 ] And because of that disruption with you, you now no longer get to enjoy the blessings that come with my presence. I can withdraw those blessings as well as give them, even though the mother's still around all week.

So children can learn from a very early age that mom and dad can be around in the room, and they can receive both good things and have good things withdrawn from them, depending on their behavior before their mom and dad.

That's how God deals with his children in exactly the same kind of way. There are blessings for obedience. In fact, the covenant of blessings and curses explains this abundantly.

And, of course, in the New Testament, we tend to think that all of these are flatlined, that because grace has come, none of these conditions no longer apply. The grace in salvation is particularly for salvation, that God seeks you, saves you, and does it all through the Lord Jesus Christ.

But blessings and withdrawal and presence is something that God's people have always experienced, and might I add, that God's salvation has always been by grace alone, through faith alone, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

[ 27 : 20 ] It was the Pharisees in the New Testament that got the Old Testament wrong, hence why Jesus had to say, you've heard it said, but I say unto you. He's correcting them because of their misunderstanding of God's grace and salvation.

So think of a mother who can say to her children, okay, if you're good, you get it, and if you're not, I'm going to take it away. Nothing wrong there. The mother is always present, but the blessings can be given or withdrawn.

And in the same way, we must, I've preached at length in this church on how to protect the blessings of God. Whether or not you feel that you've taken that in, time and truth will determine it. But the truth is, is that this is how God deals with his people. So here we are as Christians, and one other thing now we have to consider is God's will, because this is all part of God dealing with us. If we are to follow God, which we do, then we're to follow God submissively. We're asked to God to search us out and to find any way in us that gets in the way of following God.

[ 28 : 36 ] This is what David is saying. Search me out. Find that grievous way within me. Let's deal with it and let's move on. But some people are a little bit afraid of that kind of work to be done in their heart.

Jonah didn't want it. Jonah made himself quite clear to God how he felt, but he was wrong. He was in the wrong, and God pointed it out to him in quite a spectacular way.

So one of the ways that a Christian should be able to define the will of God is through grace, is through being saved, it's through the renewal of the mind, Romans chapter 12.

But one of the ways that God's presence is felt in the Christian life is sometimes exactly the same as a parent teaching their child to walk. At some point, the parent lets go of the child's hand, and that is never ever seen as a negative withdrawal, but actually a positive one.

The parent that lets go of her child's hand so that the child can take the first couple of steps on their own, that's not the parent going, I hope you fall, but it's, I'm hoping you're going to walk.

[ 29 : 50 ] Okay? I'm doing it in order for you to walk on your own. So when you feel that God sometimes is withdrawing, don't think, what have I done wrong, but necessarily understand that God is looking down on you like a mother would look down on her child.

I hope you, I hope you make it this time. I hope you're able to step up. That's maturity, and that's growth. Okay? That kind of withdrawal is to encourage us on and build us up and strengthen us, not as a way of, I hope you fall.

That's not the intention. The intention is for you to reach out and trust in God and rely on the enabling grace that he has given you.

And God gives you enabling grace to be able to do these things. So here's the considerations, I feel, as we finish. It's important to realize that God always has a hands-on approach.

They don't feel that you're somehow not in the presence of God's sovereign hand. Now, you may feel that, but that doesn't do anything to the truth to make it somehow different.

[ 31 : 06 ] We need to be settled, absolutely settled, with the fact that we're always in the presence of God. And we also need to be settled with the fact that our role is to have that submission because we don't know ourselves well enough.

Okay? This submission to God and his will is not a dictatorial submission laid upon us, but actually one where we don't know where we're going.

And we don't know ourselves that well. The reason we submit to God is because God knows us perfectly. The reason why we throw ourselves on God is for God to search us out and do good by us because we don't know ourselves that well.

Okay? You know, the person who thinks they just know it all, well, of course, they're going to have great difficulty turning around at this point. So the truth remains that wherever you are, God is, but where you are will determine how God deals with you.

Okay? And remember to make the very important distinction that peace may be peace from God that passes all understanding, but it could also be the peace of you doing what you want to do. [ 32 : 24 ] And so you have to be spiritually sensitive enough to be able to determine which is which. Remember, Jonah was fast asleep on a boat going in the opposite direction to God's will.

Okay? Never forget that. And you have to be able to determine and define that type of peace from the peace that passes all understanding. Okay?

There are different kinds of peace for different reasons. So here's the exhortation. We ought to know, and hopefully we do, that God's presence is both comforting, God stands by you, and challenging because God stands by you.

Comforting because God is always there, challenging because God is always there. It follows then, as we said last week, that whatever we're dealing with in life, we are always dealing with God.

But that doesn't mean that we've actually learned that. Even though I've said it, it doesn't mean that you've actually learned it. Neither does it mean that you have actually learned what it means to be sensitive to how God deals with you.

[ 33 : 35 ] But this is something that we must learn. One of the things that we must appreciate here is that as we sit here this morning, God is dealing with us at this very moment.

God knows that you're hearing this, and God knows that I'm saying it. Hence why my judgment is stricter upon me, hence because I teach it, than you because you hear it.

But we all fall under the same weight of the word, that we're to both hear it and do it. So remember David and Jonah and Samson and others and Adam.

Okay? They all experience God's presence their whole life. But they all experience God's presence differently throughout their whole life.

Not because God was different, he's the same yesterday, today, and forever, but because throughout their life, they were different. And so God must deal with them differently.

[ 34 : 40 ] So here we sit and here we leave, we can go home and do our own thing. And so whether we're here or there, like David says, God is there. So I ask you this morning to perhaps remember the words that Corrie Ten Boone once said.

At least I'm hoping it was her. I'm trying to find the reference, but in my head I've got it somewhere saying it was definitely Corrie Ten Boone who said it. And she says this, that God has no problems, he only has plans.

Okay? God has no problems, he only has plans. And that's what you experience as you experience the presence of God. Okay? You're not experiencing problems, you're experiencing God's plan. Amen.