

Thinking About God

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Preacher: David Court

[0 : 00] Let's read, friends, Psalm 139 together. I'm actually going to read the whole of Psalm 139 for us. And this is 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 altogether. 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. Where shall I go from your spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take up the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the seas, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me and the light about me be night, even the darkness is not dark to you.

[1 : 09] The night is bright as the day. For darkness is as light with you. 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. Wonderful are your works. My soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depth of the earth.

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 none of them. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!

How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake and I am still with you. O 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?

[2 : 11] And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred. I count them my enemies. 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. This is God's Word. Good evening. And welcome.

My name is David Court. I'm the associate minister here. And we're going to be looking together at the psalm that we just read, a part of which we just sung, Psalm 139.

It's in the bulletin printed there. It's also in the church Bibles there, page 521. Now, a long time ago, not long after I became a Christian, I read a book called Knowing God by Anglican theologian Jim Packer.

And in the book, the introduction to the book, Packer quotes words from the Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, back in the Victorian age.

[3 : 23] And they're taken from a sermon that Spurgeon preached, January the 7th, 1855. And he was just 20 years of age.

I don't have time to quote the whole thing, but here's a couple of excerpts. He says, He then goes on, Would you lose your sorrow?

Would you drown your cares? Then go plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea. Be lost in His immensity, and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated.

I know nothing which can so comfort the soul, so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief. So speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing on the subject of the Godhead.

I thought that was a good title for Psalm 139, A Devout Musing on the Subject of the Godhead. I thought about calling this sermon A Devout Musing on the Subject of the Godhead, but I thought

maybe just thinking about God was a little simpler.

[5 : 00] Because this psalm of David is, in essence, I think, a reflection on the character of God. It's a moving meditation on the nature of God.

David is reflecting and rejoicing in Yahweh, his God. And the question arises, Why? Why has David composed this psalm?

Why is he seeking to... What is he seeking to share with us? What has he learned about God? And what does he want us to know? I think one of the things that's important to understand about this psalm is that it was not composed in days of leisure and ease.

David was not, you know, he was lounging, relaxing by the pool with his harp or lyre, trying to knock out a few good tunes. Here, and we'll see this later in the psalm, David is actually a man under pressure.

He's stressed. Things are not going well. He's filled with all manner of anxieties and worries. Life is not easy. He's fearful for the future and what might happen to him.

[6 : 15] And frequently, in such circumstances, our natural response is to kind of turn in on ourselves, to look within, to brood over our problems, to focus on our wounds and worries, to go over everything in our minds again and again and again.

How often? Anxious thoughts, sleepless nights can be almost a kind of nocturnal routine. And David's response here to the troubles that he faces is very different.

Amid all his troubles, he lifts his eyes to heaven and he looks to God. His response to all the turmoil in his life is a devout music on the subject of the Godhead.

And this is the biblical answer, I think, to times of great stress and pressure. It is not to look within, but rather to look to God.

We're not to become kind of navel gazers, consumed by introspection. That's a huge temptation, especially in a culture that often tends to obsess and almost deify the self.

[7 : 34] To think that all the answers are to be found within us. I remember a good friend of ours sharing some advice, advice often given by James Philip from the pulpit of Holyrood Abbey many years ago here in Edinburgh.

And the advice was this, don't look in, look up. Don't look in, look up. And that is what David is doing here.

How should we respond in anxious and difficult times? Let's take our cue from David. Let's look away from ourselves towards God Himself.

Let's not seek to evade Him or run from Him, but instead look to Him and trust Him. You'll notice as you look at this, Psalm 139, it consists really of four stanzas, each with six verses.

And in them, David reflects, as I said, on the nature of God's relationship with His people. He muses on God's omniscience and omnipresence and indeed omnipotence.

[8 : 47] But he doesn't do it in a kind of abstract, theoretical way. He thinks through how these great characteristics of God's nature impress and impact on his life, his problems, his worries.

And they are, in a very real sense, I think, a healing balm to his soul. So, let's look this evening at each of these stanzas in turn and see what they have to tell us about the God we worship.

First stanza, verses 1 through 6, we'll call this the God who knows. The God who knows. The root of the word to know appears, I think, four times in this opening section.

And it's, of course, a statement of God's omniscience. The fact that He knows all things. Although, I think that the thrust of the text is more personal.

Not so much God knows everything, although He does know everything, as God knows me. Yes, God knows every human being.

[9 : 54] No creature is hidden from God's sight. All are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. Hebrews 4.13, Corey read earlier.

Yet, even so, God knows His own people in a more personal, intimate sense. There's a relationship. Oh, Lord, You have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down, when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path, my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

Not just some. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, oh Lord, You know it altogether. It's interesting.

David is reflecting here not on his knowledge of God, but rather upon God's knowledge of Him. And this is what strengthens his faith. This is what leads him to praise God.

[10 : 52] Here is the Lord who knows and searches His people. And the Hebrew word there for searched conveys the idea of a thorough investigation or examination.

Rather, like something that's been buried and hidden away and then is diligently sought after and then uncovered. Here is the God from whom nothing can be concealed or hidden.

He searches, knows every aspect of our lives, knows us completely, uncovers all. What we hide from other people, sometimes even from those closest to us, cannot be concealed from God.

He's the God who knows, who knows every hidden area of our lives, who's able to discern our thoughts and motives, who's acquainted with all our ways. Nothing can be hidden from Him.

David says, before even our words have taken shape on our tongues, He knows our intent. He knows us better than we know ourselves. To quote Jim Packer, he writes this, I'm graven on the palm of His hands, I'm never out of His mind.

[12 : 07] All my knowledge of Him depends on His sustained initiative in knowing me. I know Him because He first knew me and continues to know me.

He knows me as a friend, one who loves me, and there is no moment when His eye is off me or His attention distracted from me. And no moment, therefore, when His care falters.

This God is close and He's close to His people. He's so close, David says, that His very hand is upon us. You hem me in behind and before.

You lay your hand upon me. I recall many years ago, I was a young Christian, in our church prayer meeting, and I can't remember all the issues, but for some reason, I got, and this is not like me, I got quite emotional or upset while I was praying.

I didn't cry, but I was upset. And I was obviously upset. And when I finished praying, there was an older saint who was sitting behind me, stood up to pray.

[13 : 23] And as he did that, he just put his hand on my shoulder as he prayed. I recall that to this day. And it was a touch that simply said, I'm with you.

You're not alone. I understand. And sometimes, that is all we need to know, that we're not on our own. Our minds are riddled with anxious thoughts.

We're stressed out. We feel emotionally distanced from others. We long for someone to understand. And the psalmist says that in such circumstances, the Lord understands.

For the Lord's hand is on His people. At times, we can go through periods of anxiety and stress, and we long, sometimes, for the understanding of other people, those around us.

It can be true in our teenage years. Often, people can feel that they're alone. No one really understands them. It can be true when there are difficulties in a marriage or in other relationships.

[14 : 27] It can be true in later years as our physical and mental powers start to be on the wane. It can be true when we face challenges and difficulties at work and that they're hard to share and speak about with other people.

But, when even those closest to us cannot really understand, there is one who does understand. God knows. He understands.

Jesus Christ was Himself touched by the feeling of our infirmities, tested in every way, yet without sin. And so, I can say to you tonight that in every dark and difficult pathway of life, He has gone before us.

His footprints are ahead of us. And He knows exactly what we're going through. because God's omniscience is not merely a theological doctrine that belongs in some volume of systematic theology.

It is rather a truth to live by. It's a truth that needs to grip our hearts and minds. And that's what we see here. David says, such knowledge is too wonderful for me.

[15 : 38] It's high. I cannot attain it. He says, this is absolutely amazing. That God should be so close to His people that He knows all about us, that He should rest His hand upon our lives, that He should understand us better even though we understand ourselves, that He should love us.

That is a matter for praise and adoration and worship. Here's the God who knows us. We sang those words, didn't we? We ponder anew what the Almighty can do, who with His love does befriend you.

The God who knows. And then secondly, in the second stanza, let's call it the God who is present, verses 7 through 12. You'll notice verse 7, the second stanza begins with these two rhetorical questions.

Where shall I go from your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? And these words are not, as some suggest, the words of someone trying to flee from God.

They're rather an expression of someone resting and relying upon the Lord. It's not that David actually wants to flee from God's presence. Rather that he understands that even if he did, there could be no escape.

[16:57] There is no hiding place from this God. There is no corner of the universe where God cannot be found. Where could I go where you are not? If I ascend to heaven, you're there.

If I make my bed in Sheol, you're there. If I take the wings of the morning, dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there, your hand shall lead me. Your right hand shall hold me.

David knows that wherever he goes, he cannot remove himself from God's presence. Travels to the heights of heaven, God is there. Plums the depths of the underworld, God is there.

There is no escape from God's Spirit. Hermann Bavinck, the Dutch theologian, writes these words, the strength of God comes not from afar, but from nearby.

It's an omnipresent strength. God is present with all his excellencies and with his whole being in the whole world and in all of his creatures. In him, we live and move and have our being.

[18:03] He is not far from any one of us. He is God at hand and not God afar off. I like that.

He is God at hand, not God afar off. Maybe that's what someone here tonight needs to hear. He's the God who is present. He's the God at hand.

He's not the God who is far off. Many of the pagan religions of the time, the underworld, Sheol, the abode of the dead, was considered a place that really was out of reach, even for the gods.

But not for Yahweh. Even in the place of death, his presence is felt. God is there wherever we go. His hand shall lead us and his hand shall hold us.

He is with us even through the valley of the deep shadow, such that we need fear, no evil. Psalm 23, David says that this absence of fear is all down to what?

[19:08] It's down to the covenant presence of God with his people. It's his presence that brings us comfort, even in the darkest valleys of this life.

Verse 11, Even in that darkness that sometimes can envelop our lives, that occasions, that darkness that sometimes on occasions threatens to swallow us up, even that cannot hide us from God.

Even in the dark places of fear and suffering and pain and bereavement, God knows and sees.

Even there, his light shines. His people cannot be cut off from his presence.

And the good news, friends, is that there is no dark corner of this world where God cannot be known and found and enjoyed. About five years ago, somewhere around Easter 2020, the wife of a friend and colleague who was dying of cancer and nearing the end of his life, wrote these words in their blog.

They kind of journaled through their experience of cancer. And this is what she wrote. As we have watched recent events, it was really at the beginning of the kind of COVID years.

[20:44] And as we reflect on our own journey, I offer wonder what life would be like facing these evils without faith. The evils themselves are no different whether you have faith or not, but how you read them and react to them is very different.

I would want to say this, that faith doesn't change COVID or cancer, but faith does help you walk through the valley. It connects you to the God who will be with you through every moment of it. Even when nobody else is with you, whether in hospital, in isolation, or in the dark, sleepless hours of the night, He is with you.

that's what makes the difference. And friends, the omnipresence of God means that no circumstance will separate us from His care.

He makes all the difference in the world. As Paul will declare at the end of Romans 8, that nothing in all creation can separate His people from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[22:01] He is the God who knows us personally. Here is the God who is with us wherever we are and whatever we have to go through. The God who knows.

The God who is present. And then thirdly here, the God who cares. Third stanza, verses 13 through 18. We have these words, 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. Wonderful are your works. My soul knows it very well.

My frame wasn't hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. 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 none of them.

It's an astonishing, really, piece of writing. Amazing description of God's knowledge and care. David's strength of conviction arises because he knows that God has been involved in his life from the very beginning.

[23 : 13] He looks back to his own prenatal existence and acknowledges that God was present there even before he was aware of it. God was caring for him from the very conception of his life, even hidden away in his mother's womb.

He was seen and known by God. And David traces the very beginnings of his personal existence not to the moment of his birth or some notion of viability, but all the way back to conception. You formed my inward parts. You knitted me together in my mother's womb. And as he thinks back to his existence as an embryo, he understands that he is the same person who is now able to look back and say, that was me.

That was me. Just as each one of us in this building can do tonight. And the language that he uses, you'll notice it's very hands-on. He speaks of being knitted, woven together like a beautiful tapestry in his mother's womb.

That language conveys the ideas of care, attention to detail, creative skill, artistry. David says, of God, you were looking over and caring for me long before I ever realized that.

[24 : 43] And these famous verses, of course, underpin the Christian perspective of life in the womb as something or someone to be valued and protected.

The very earliest Christian writing outside of the New Testament, the Didache, written around 90 to 95 AD, states this, you shall not kill by abortion the fruit of the womb and you shall not murder the infant already born.

And the reason for that statement was, of course, that abortion and infanticide were widely practiced in the Roman Empire. And that kind of outlook and worldview, it seems, is making a comeback here in the West as we retreat from our Christian foundations.

Changes in legislation that now permit abortion up to birth have just been passed here in the UK as I'm sure many of you know. And it appears a lot of people think that's a good thing.

It's an enlightened path for our society to take. One where the unborn are of little or no value and certainly not worthy of protection and care.

[25 : 54] Just a clump of cells to be treated any way we choose. But friends, is that really the case? Do we really think that is true?

I'm sure some of you parents will remember seeing the first pictures of your children taken in the womb by ultrasound. I recall just last year my eldest son and his wife showing us the picture of our latest grandson in the womb.

Just amazing. You look at the detail, it's something staggeringly beautiful. Wonderful. The beauty and intricacy of human life and existence doesn't begin at birth.

It comes into being long before. We are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made. And that's why for many of us our hearts break when we read of thousands upon thousands of delicately woven little lives being crushed and destroyed.

Sometimes that's hard to fathom. I know you may be here this evening, maybe you're someone who's compassionately committed to abortion.

[27 : 09] I've spoken with many people over the years who are. But let me ask you to stop and think about that commitment and what is actually involved in it.

Are such vulnerable little ones not deserving of our love and care and protection? Maybe you're someone for whom all of this is very close to home.

Contrary to what many like to think abortion often brings in its wake feelings of guilt and shame. Miscarriage brings with it great pain. And so let me also say that there is forgiveness and healing to be found even for the darkest of sins and the deepest of hurts in a relationship with Jesus Christ who makes all things new.

And the good news for all of us tonight no matter who we are no matter our circumstances no matter our past is that Jesus' blood the blood of the cross is able to wash clean all our guilty stains. The point that David is making here is that the God who made us who wove us together in the womb is the God who knows us and is with us and whose hand is upon our lives.

[28 : 28] Every detail of who you are your personality your gifts your physical frame was crafted by the hand of God. You are not an accident.

You are not a mistake. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Your life has purpose and meaning and significance because you have a creator.

By God's grace tonight many of us I hope can testify that the hands that knitted us together in our mother's wombs are the hands that are still upon our lives.

Loving hands trusted hands caring hands hands that will not allow us to perish. What did Jesus say? No one can snatch them from my hand.

And as David ponders these things he's led to praise and worship and wonder. How precious to me are your thoughts O God.

[29 : 33] How vast is the sum of them that if I could count them they are more than the sand. I am awake and I'm still with you. He's the God who cares. I recall an old children's hymn of bygone age and I'll never be sung now but God who made all things on earth and air and sea who changing seasons brings he cares for me.

God who sent his son to die on Calvary he if I lean on him will care for me. The God who knows the God who's present the God who cares.

And finally quickly here in the final stanza the God who confronts because this psalm closes doesn't it with some extraordinary perhaps we might even say shocking words really an imprecatory prayer David calls upon God to mete out swift justice to his enemies and we're reminded here of the God who confronts and challenges evil and wickedness oh that you would slay the wicked oh God 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 oh Lord do I not loathe those who rise up against you I hate them with a complete hatred count them my enemies and maybe like some commentators we might be tempted just to raise these words or at the very least just ignore them gloss over them but actually

I think these verses are a kind of key that unlocks the psalm in this way because without them we don't really understand what's going on here why was David thinking so deeply about God knowing him and being with him and caring for him this reflection on God's character wasn't formed in an ivory tower or an academic classroom it was shaped by David's experience of life and many hardships you remember David was a man often in trouble he was a man on the move a man on the run man under pressure man with enemies his life was often under threat and that's why this thought of God knowing him being with him and caring for him was so crucial and that's no difference for us no difference for us yes we may not face the same dangers as David did our circumstances very different but nonetheless we too can feel vulnerable and alone fearful for the future we're concerned for our lives we may be gripped by anxieties and worries that threaten to overwhelm us and it's precisely at such times that the knowledge of God's presence is so precious and these somewhat jarring closing lines confront us don't they with the reality of

God's justice and judgment God David calls upon God to vindicate his name to put down his enemies I don't think these are words as you read them they're not words about personal vengeance or retribution rather he's calling upon God to make things right sin and wickedness will not go unpunished that's something that we see right throughout the Bible it's something we see expressed I think by God's people in both the Old and New Testaments Christians you know we still do this when we take upon our lips the words of the Lord's prayer your kingdom come your will be done deliver us from evil the Bible states that God will one day confront all that is evil and wicked there will be a reckoning we are accountable creatures Acts 17 31 he said a day when he will judge the world with justice and so amid the world sometimes great evil great injustice

[33 : 54] David says that divine justice will triumph over all the wrongs that are very much part and parcel of life in the here and now and yet notice how David speaks not only of God confronting the evil in the world he also speaks of God confronting the evil lurking in his own heart he asks that God would confront him personally search me oh God he says know my heart try me know my thoughts see if there be any grievous way in me lead me in the way everlasting it's an intensely personal prayer he longs that God will be at work in his life he longs to be led in paths of righteousness he longs to do God's will he longs that God would have all of his life I wonder if we might take those same words on our lips this evening search me oh God know my heart lead me in the way everlasting

God the Bible is always challenging and confronting us he's not he will not go away he's not going to disappear he can't be avoided forever we cannot escape him and if we had any sense we wouldn't want to he's not the oppressive tyrant that some fear he's our creator he watches over us not to crush our independence but because he loves us he wants to save us he wants to lead us in the way everlasting he wants us to come to him in faith he wants us to know his power and his presence and his loving kindness God dwells in unapproachable light wrote Paul yet Jesus is the image of the invisible God no one has ever seen God says John yet he who has seen Jesus has seen the father in other words if we want to think about God we must think about Jesus there's no other way all our thinking about God ultimately centers on him he has come to take the judgment our sins deserve he's come that we might know God and find that way everlasting and he invites us to come to him with our sins with our fears all our cares and worries and to place our lives in his hands don't look in look up look away from yourself to Jesus Christ trust him and discover that he will place his hand upon you he will light your path he will lead you in the way everlasting trust your life into his hands tonight and know with David that he will hold you fast in his love let us pray Lord our God we stand in awe of you your knowledge your presence your wisdom your love we thank you that you know us better than we know ourselves that you're with us in every moment and that you love us with a love that will never let us go search our hearts oh God this evening and by your grace lead us in the way everlasting and may all glory be to you Father Son and Holy Spirit Amen