

Psalm 139

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[0 : 00] on the way in. Psalm 139, we're looking at Psalm 139 this morning. Psalm 139, it's on page 628.

Now the book of Psalms is often called the hymn book of the Bible. Now whether that's a justified description I'm not sure, but one thing is certain, that of all the Psalms none is more clearly a hymn or a song than this one. Not only are we told at the top that it is a psalm of David, that an psalm means a song, and a song of praise, but it also has a structure which bears a great deal in common with the hymns in our hymn book. If you excuse, I'm going to call what we normally call the verses, the numbered sections, lines, to describe this. And I would describe this psalm as a four verse hymn. Each verse has six lines, each verse deals with a slightly different subject. And even more than that, each verse has the same pattern. There are four lines which are about some aspect of God, this is true certainly the first three verses, and then two lines of reflection. So it is very clearly structured as a song or a hymn like the ones in our hymn book.

And interestingly, this song is not just deeply personal to the author, but like the hymns in our book, most of them, it is written for others to sing. You can see that. It is for the director of music. He is, as it were, to set music to it. And then the congregation, the people of God in Israel in David's day, were intended to sing it.

Now, I've chosen to speak about it this morning because this song has been a great help to me over the last couple of years. It's wonderfully heartwarming and I've found it tremendously instructive and reassuring. What's it about? Well, it's all about God, the Lord. Indeed, of all the psalms, it is uniquely about him. In a way, from beginning to end, it is about the living God. And it is, there is a great deal of teaching about the Lord here, direct teaching about him in this psalm. And it's written by somebody who knows him well. So it is not only personal, but it is accurate picture of the living God. And it reveals the awesome greatness of the Lord who commits himself to those who seek his mercy, to those who serve him wholeheartedly. But I love this psalm for this reason. It's true of most of the psalms.

It also shows us not only this deep truth about God, but it gives us David's fourfold reaction.

[3 : 29] And the reason why that is here as well is because God is telling us how we should respond to the truth about him that we learn here in this psalm. So we look at the psalm under two questions, which I hope will open up its whole teaching. And I mean its whole teaching, including the closing verses. You need to be a bit patient because it will take quite a while to get there, but we will get there. I'm not going to do the kind of preacher's thing where the most difficult bit of the passage is overlooked. No, we're going to get there. So be patient. So what does David tell us about God is my first question. And then how will we feel if we truly grasp what he says is my second question.

How will we feel if we truly grasp what he says? And at the end, I hope you'll begin to grasp why we're to sing it. Not just to study it, to think about it, but why it is for singing this psalm. So first question is this, what does David tell us about God? Well clearly you don't have to read it very carefully to see that he tells us that God is awesomely great. This psalm is turned to as a psalm that teaches mind-stretching, mind-blowing truth about God. It shows us a God who, in the first verse, that's lines one to six, knows everything. That is clear, is it not?

Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise. You perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down. You are familiar. It's all about what God knows. Before a word is on my tongue, Lord, you know it completely. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It's all about what God knows. And what he tells us is that God knows absolutely everything. You perceive my thoughts. They don't have to come out. You know what I'm thinking. And before I speak, you know what I'm going to say. And how many times in our life does

what comes out our mouth is a surprise to us. But it's not a surprise to God. That is extraordinary. And when he gets to the third verse, that is lines 13 to 18, he tells us there in verse 16 that God knows the future. So perhaps some of you write a diary. Not the kind of diary I have. I have a Mr. Forgetful diary. So I have to write things down. Otherwise, I don't remember. Even the things I want to do, I can forget. If I don't write them down. But perhaps you write one of those diaries where at the end of each day, you write down some salient points about your experience of this day. Well, God could have written every day of your diary. From the day you took up doing it to the day you finished doing it.

It could have written in all before your life started. That's what he says here. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. God knows everything. The second verse is about the fact that God is everywhere. He asks the question, where can I go? Where can I flee from your presence? And if he's thinking about heaven and hell, neither of those would take him away from God. If he's thinking of geographically, from the dawn in the east to the far side of the Mediterranean in the far west, wherever he goes, God is there. And if he's thinking about, you know, day and night, God not only is there, God sees everywhere. Now you see, he is saying more to us here, far more than that God sees everything.

[7 : 58] The picture is not the security guy at the factory with all these screens in front of him and sensors in every room. So there's an alarm and he can see immediately what happened in every part of the factory. The picture we have here is far greater than that. It is that wherever he goes, God is already there. God is everywhere. And that is an entirely different scale of reality from the fact that God sees everything. He sees, he knows because wherever we are, he is already there.

That's what the psalmist say. It's not the kind of rationalism of the Jehovah's Witnesses. God is far greater than we can ever imagine. Then in the third verse, he tells us that God is actively involved. This is lines 13 and following. Actively involved in all the natural processes of this world. So we, do we know something about what's going on? A bit more these days about what's going on in the formation of a child God in the womb of the mother. It's an extraordinary thing. You know, all the time when she's just feeling awful, the first three months or if you're unfortunate enough to have hyperemesis, all the whole time.

God knows. God is at work there. God, it's not as if God has wound up the world as the days say. Let it all go and it all works naturally. Nothing is outside of his control. Nothing works without his power and his activity. Indeed, he goes all through this psalm to tell us that God rules and overrules the lives of individuals. Verse 5, you hem me in behind and before you lay your hand upon me. Rather like, you know, when I was a little lad, we used to sometimes go out on Croxley Moor and the grass was about waist high or higher and in those days there were just hundreds and hundreds of butterflies. And if you stood still enough and watched them flutter to and land on some wild flower near enough to you, you could just cut them like that. And that's the image we have here of control. God, under God's control in his hand. And he spells it out more in verses 9 and 10, lines 9 and 10. If I rise on the wings of the door, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there, not only you're there, but even there your hand will guide me. Your right hand will hold me fast. That doesn't make David into a robot. The psalm is all about what David does. He says, I sit, I rise. They're my thoughts. It's my going out, my lying down. It's my ways.

[11 : 22] But mysteriously. Although that is absolutely true. He's not a robot. He's the one making decisions. He's the one acting. He's the one speaking what he comes to his mind, what he wants to say. And yet, mysteriously and gloriously, the sovereign God, his hand is in it all. It's an awesome, mind-blowing picture of God here. But that isn't the main thing here. David is not overwhelmed by God's knowledge, or by God being everywhere, or by God's hand in everything.

What overwhelms David here is God's preoccupation with him, God's commitment to him. It took me years just to see the obvious in this psalm. Because people used to say, oh well, it tells you about God's omniscience, his omniscience, he knows everything. And his omnipresence, he is everywhere. And his omnipotence, that he's all-powerful. Well, it does say that, but that isn't the emphasis of the psalm, is it? The emphasis of the psalm is that all God's great resources are directed to the care out of his, one might even dare to use the word, obsession with individuals. It's David's responses to God's knowledge of him.

You have searched me. You know me. You know everything I do. You know everything I say. When I go somewhere, you are there with me, he says. You created me in my mother's womb.

And what has astonished him is that God is that bothered about him, that committed to him. It's all so personal. He's so interested and concerned for those who, like David, take him as their God and trust in his mercy. That is the truth that David wants his readers to grasp thoroughly. That God uses all his amazing qualities that are outlined here to know and care minutely for each of his people. Now, there are no illustrations that really answer this, are there? Because none compares to God. But here is Grandma. And Grandma just lives for her grandchildren. They are her preoccupation. [14:08] So, for example, she takes them to the swimming baths. Now, at the swimming baths, there's a guy who sits up on that high ladder. And his job, he gets paid to do this, his job is to make sure nobody drowns.

And if somebody's in serious trouble, he will be there, fishing them out. And if necessary, you know, giving them the kiss of life. But when Grandma takes her children, her grandchildren, to the swimming baths, she's the one who cares.

He doesn't care if he sees a child shivering. But Grandma does. And if the child swallows some chlorine or it gets in their eyes, Grandma is the one who cuddles.

Grandma is the one who wipes away away the fluid from the eyes. And that's the image of God here is not the image of the one who's, as it were, sat up, just making sure there's no disaster. But of intimate care. Rather like the care of a grandma. Psalm 139 is the story of God's intense concern for his own, for every one of them.

[15:30] Can you see that? It is mind-blind to David and it is surely mind-blind to everyone who knows and trusts in this God of grace.

Now then, the second thing to ask is how will it, how should it make the Christian feel if we start to grasp what we are told here?

And one of the great values of the book of Psalms is that it not only teaches truth, but it teaches appropriate responses, the response that God looks for. And David reacts in four different ways here to understanding God's intense interest and concern for him.

It sort of comes in by turns these reactions. His first reaction is to be full of awe and wonder. You see that in verse 6.

He says there, such knowledge is too wonderful for me. You can hear his amazement in his words. You get the same thing in verse 14.

[16:42] I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. He stands in awe of God. You feel the astonishment as God's greatness dawns on him.

My friend, have you ever begun to feel like that? See, it's the fruit of beginning to grasp what we're told here, this man's experience, what he's seen of God's intimate care for him.

It's the fruit of taking time to think about what David tells us about God here. So what do you do, my friend, when you can't sleep or when you've got time to relax and to think?

Do you ever think about God? You won't start to feel this sense of amazement at him if you don't give yourself time to reflect upon him.

What we see here in David is belief becoming real, becoming life-changing because he's taken the time to meditate, to ponder what he's learned about God's intimate care for him.

[17:49] So that's the first response is to be full of awe and wonder. And in a sense, if you're just starting to come here or starting to attend church, there's so much as it were to take in.

a place to begin in a sense is to try and learn to grasp more about God but to take the time to think about the things that you're learning about him until you begin to have a sense of awe and wonder at the living God.

But notice the second reaction of David in the second verse, verses seven and following, line seven and following, he's intimidated. His response to God's constant care and knowledge of him is to be rather freaked by, unnerved, spooked, feel claustrophobic about it and to ask, where can I go?

I want to get away. I want to get away from this God. Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? He feels stalked. He feels unnerved.

He feels troubled to be the object of such intense interest. Perhaps you do sometimes just thinking about God's knowledge of you.

[19:21] God's watchfulness can seem overpowering, oppressive, disconcerting, even suffocating. It's a bit like teenagers so often when faced by their parental care and concern.

Even if they recognise that this is because their parents love them, nevertheless they feel sort of suffocated by it. They want to get away.

They long to be free. I have a suspicion, well more than a suspicion, that when I first started courting my suit, I just wanted to be with her all the time.

Fifteen hours a day we were students together in the university in Aberystwyth. It was just such a wonderful experience for me. I'm not sure it was quite so wonderful for her. But there were times when she just wanted to spend time with other people.

Quite rightly so. And sometimes we can feel like that about the living God. Godly people like David feel like that sometimes.

[20 : 32] These songs are real you see. They talk about real experience, the way people really feel. And David first of all he feels awestruck about God, about God's knowledge of him and God's passionate interest in him.

and then the tendency to, he wants to escape, he feels overwhelmed by it. Claustrophobic in the face of it.

The third response though and it's a more settled response is to feel relieved. He gets as the psalm goes on to feel relieved and secure and safe in the love of this God.

Do you see that in verse 17? See how each verse has something about God followed by his reaction. Something about God, his reaction. The second one, the reaction starts from the beginning of the section.

But the third one again, something about God and then his reaction. And his reaction when you come down to verses 17 and 18 is to feel secure and safe.

[21 : 42] How precious and I think the sense is how precious to me are your thoughts about me. That's what he's writing about, that's what he's thinking about, the fact that God has all these thoughts of him.

And if you sat on the beach, this is a pretty momentous observation, isn't it? More thoughts, the Almighty has more thoughts about each one of his children than there are grains of sand on the seashore.

That's a pretty mind-blowing truth. But at this point, you see, he feels safe. How precious. It's a precious thing to me, to realise.

It's a very different spirit from wanting to run away now. It's that, this is the place of peace, this is the place of wonder for him.

It's an expression of delight and amazement. You're always thinking of me. He's amazed that God should be so bothered about him. It gives him a wonderful sense of safety and security, of being loved and cared about, even in the midst of life's great trials and uncertainties.

[22 : 59] He's preceded this comment by saying this, all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. And clearly that is a comfort to him because he knows that whatever happens is not a disaster.

It may look like a tragedy but it isn't. It's not outside of God's plan in control. It's not all going wrong. It's not all going nowhere. The Lord is in control of it all.

Today there to be the loving preoccupation, even obsession of so great a God is an extraordinary blessing. I'm safe in his watchful care. I love the last words of that third verse, line 18.

When I awake, he says, I'm still with you. It's a bit like, here is the child, she's only six, and she's in hospital for a serious operation.

And she's been there now three or four days, and it's still a frightening place to be. do you know what the thing that really makes it bearable, is that when she wakes up in the morning, sat at the bottom of her bed, is still her mother.

[24 : 17] Her mother is still there. It's that kind of image here that we have of the almighty, that sense of delight.

it's so reassuring even to know, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me.

I'm in this strange place, where everything could be frightening, but I know that God's hand will guide me there, and I know in the end your right hand will hold me fast, you will not let me go whatever life throws at me.

That is my experience, my friend. So David feels astonished, he feels by terms then intimidated, he feels relieved, secure in the knowledge of this intense concern of God, watchfulness of God over him, concern for him.

Then finally, he feels heartfelt, intense, devoted love, verses 19 to 24. And somebody is sitting there thinking about love, verses 19 to 24, surely it's about unjustifiable hate towards those who don't think like David does.

[25 : 40] It's the worst of responses, it's typical of religious people, typical of religious people to hate, and it's typical of you to want to paint it as something totally opposite from how it really is.

Hold on a minute my friend. What causes such an intense response to these other people, to these men who thirst for his blood and threaten his life?

Verse 19. Well notice his concern verse 20, it's not how they speak about him, it's how they speak about God.

They speak of you, not they speak of me with evil intent, no that's not his problem, his problem with them is they speak of you Lord with evil intent. Your adversaries misuse your name.

And what does that concern for how they speak about God show? Well it shows it's intense love for God. You don't have to be able fully to justify everything about his attitude to understand that his regard for the almighty is such, it's so personal and heartfelt that he cannot bear it when people scorn and mock and paint stupid pictures of the almighty.

[27 : 06] He cannot stand idly by while puny evil men blaspheme and rebel against his God. It's the same kind of reaction. there's a woman who works in your office, you've known her for many years and she's been a very loyal servant of the firm.

In fact she's got that office out of more than one scrape over the years through her concern and her hard work and her commitment and now all of a sudden the management are pillorying her, are abusing her for something and nothing and it's not fair.

And how do you feel? Will you feel angry? You feel intensely resentful about the way that poor woman has been treated.

It's no way to treat an employee after they've been so faithful and so committed. And you're burning inside, you're steaming about it, you're incensed by what is happening to her and you are right to feel like that.

And David was right to feel an anger, an intense anger that people who were the objects of God's kindness kindness and graciousness simply scorned the name of the Lord in response to all his goodness to them.

[28 : 45] And it's the heart of his love for God that responds in that way. It's the same intense love for God that causes him to pray in the last two verses. Search me O God and know my heart.

Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. He wants to please this God who loves him so, who exercises such an amazing watchfulness towards him.

One who he himself can be so self-deceived and so untrusting of this God. And so he prays Lord. If there is, if my anxieties dishonor you, show me and lead me in a better way. Do you pray like that?

Do you feel like that? This intense love for God, concern for his name and his reputation and concern to please him, concern lest your anxieties actually dishonor him.

[29 : 54] That is David's concern. And it comes from starting to grasp God's amazing care for and commitment to weak and sinful human beings and commitment to you as one who has found peace with him, my Christian friend.

And how much more ought we to be concerned for the Lord's honour when we can see his extraordinary love for us in the gift to us of his beloved son.

Who cannot, what Christian can ever look at the cross and at least ask the question, does God love me more than he loves his son? Does not the cross force us to ask that question, that bewildering question?

Well, there you have Psalm 139, the honest meditation of man who's learned to think clearly and carefully about his God and what it really means to be cared for by so great a God.

Psalm 139 is both one man's account of the experience of God's care and an amazing revelation of God's concern for his own.

[31 : 14] And as such, it is a song that challenges us all as we sing it or as we think about it. Have you really learned to think about this God? That's what this psalm shouts.

Have you really learned to think about this God? Surely you cannot ignore so obtrusive a God. He sees and knows everything about you.

Before that is ever comforting, my friend, it is alarming. That's why always one has to begin with the gospel. How can I possibly face a God who knows everything there is to know about me?

There is no way I can pretend to be righteous. There is no way I can pretend that I don't need a saviour. One of the great things about becoming a Christian is that you no longer have to pretend to yourself or to anybody else that you're a nice person.

It's a glorious thing to be able to face and begin to grasp the truth about yourself and to know that because your hope is in Christ, by trusting in the saviour that God has provided, then your acceptance with God doesn't depend on what you are, it depends on what he is and what he has done.

[32 : 33] And that is gloriously liberating. Have you learned to think about this God? At least to the point where you've come to him for mercy and for pardon, to take seriously the message of forgiveness through Christ.

And if you have made peace with him, knowing all that David tells us about him, challenges our anxieties. No wonder he prays at the end, search me, oh God, know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts, my anxieties.

Some Christians are dominated by anxiety, but they trouble us all who love and know him. What are its challenges? Well let me put these four questions in closing.

Is your God big enough? Anxieties, challenges. Are we worried because we haven't got a big enough view of God? Are we constantly underestimating him?

Is your God personal enough? Because this psalm is all about God's personal care for the individual follower, the individual believer. His love for David is the love he has for each one of his children, including those who are nobodies.

[33 : 57] Third question. Are you really believing and applying your theology? The answer is seen in your emotional responses. Are you like David, astounded by God's personal care for you, sometimes even intimidated by it, but generally brought to peace and security?

And has it fired you to love him intensely so that you do hate it when God is painted as far different from how he really is?

And so that you long to be more pleasing to him. And then finally, do you really read and think about him enough?

Is he constantly in your thoughts? Why did David want this psalm to be sung well, probably you're like me. I was a child of the swinging 60s and I still have all kinds of songs of that era that go round in my mind.

There was a song sung by Ralph Mottel called Streets of London. I became very fond of it because Susie wasn't quite a cockney but she was brought up.

[35 : 31] She went to school within the sound of bow bells. Brought up in the east end of London. The song is about let me take you by the hand and lead you through the streets of London.

Let me tell you something that will help to change your mind. He wants to change the mind of the person to whom he's singing the song. because that person thinks they're lonely.

How do you tell me? He says you're lonely. He says I'm going to show you what loneliness is. He paints a picture of four people who literally live on the streets in London who have no contact no social relationship with anybody at all.

He says that's what loneliness is. This song goes around my mind. I do lots of other songs. The great thing you see about singing. If you sing psalms, if you sing God's truth, then it starts to lodge in your mind.

You remember it. You remember the lines of hymns and if they are hymns which reflect passages of scripture, then it's a great way to learn and to remember and to think more and more about the living God.

[36 : 49] Well, it's been a great blessing to me of Psalm 139. I just hope that for some people at least I've managed to share something of that with you. Let's sing our closing praise, which is a reflection of what we've been thinking about 606, 606.

a sovereign protector I have unseen yet forever at hand, unchangeably faithful to save, almighty to rule and command. He smiles and my comforts abound, his grace as the Jews shall descend, wars of salvation surround the soul he delights to defend.

Can I say this to those of you who are young, it's not so easy when you get to my age, but when I was at university I learnt loads and loads of hymns, good hymns including this one, and they've

been a great blessing to me all my life to be able to sing them and to remember God's truth.
So let me encourage you to think about doing that. We'll stand to sing 606. Thank you.
Thank you.