

Psalms 139:13-18

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 February 2018

Preacher: Chris Roberts

[0 : 00] It's a big question worth thinking about. What is it that makes you, you? What is it that makes you a person?

! When does a something start being a someone? David has been bamboozled, hasn't he, by the immense character of God. The God who knows all things. The God who is in all places, at all times. He's omnipresent.

But it's not just been a cold study of God's attributes, has it, Psalm 139? It's a doxological outpouring of praise. And a picture of intimacy has been building up, hasn't it, between David and his Lord. A closeness, a dependence on God.

And that picture builds because he doesn't just think of God who knows everything and who is everywhere, but a God who knows everything about him. And a God who is everywhere that he should imagine going himself.

But it becomes even more profound in the verses that we're going to look at tonight, in verse 13 to 18. Because he sees the Lord as one in whom the answer to that question lies.

[1 : 37] What makes me, me? He realises an important truth, actually, that he is somebody in himself, because of someone outside of himself.

Because of the Lord. Let's just listen to these verses again, verse 13 to 18. 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. Wonderfully 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 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 were 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 am still with you.

[2 : 40] He sees, first of all, that God is creator. God is creator. It was George Bernard Shaw who confessed, I'm a self-made man.

I'm a self-made man who worships his own creator. It was an honest confession, wasn't it? We fool ourselves, like him, about our origins.

About where we've come from. About how we got here. And about what makes me, me. Modern science has changed our outlook on that question, hasn't it?

You know, under a microscope now, scientists can watch in HD the very moment that a human egg is fertilised. We have such a grasp on science, don't we?

But like the old adage goes, if all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. And we have such a grasp on science, and such a reliance on it, that we think that every problem can be solved with it.

[3 : 51] And every question answered with it, we think that's all there is. Science is an amazing thing, isn't it? But computer chips and microscopes have got us thinking.

They've got us thinking that we can find out what anything is, simply by reducing it down to its smallest parts. By reducing it down to its DNA, to its Lego bricks, to its atoms or molecules or chemical compounds.

And now we know about genes and biology, and how embryos work or some of that. We know it to such a level.

We know what we're made from. We know who we are then. One famous scientist said, we are survival machine robot vehicles, blindly programmed, to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.

The body you get, the mind you have, who you are, is just fate. Just a lottery.

[5 : 06] Just a lottery of molecules coming together. Professor Dawkins describes human life in this way. It is the blind, unconscious, automatic process which Darwin discovered.

It has no purpose in mind. It has no mind. And no mind's eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all.

We live in the world, don't we, of the ultrasound scan and of the microscope. So what can this ancient song teach us about who we are? Written so many years ago.

It's important that we realise that David, as he thinks about his conception and his birth, is not writing science here, is he? We shouldn't pretend that. But actually, his words are far more authoritative.

They are divine revelation, aren't they? And God tells us that just because we are made up of chemicals, that does not mean that we are nothing but chemicals.

[6 : 20] Here, David pictures his own existence, his own person. And he pictures that from moments before he was born and known in the womb to a later point in time.

If you look at verse 18, he says there, doesn't he, I awake and I am still with you. Could mean a few things like that. It could be a resurrection idea that he's thinking of there or simply to this point in the present.

He scopes out his whole existence, doesn't he? And the whole project is kept and knitted together with a personal, immense, designing creator behind it all.

A God who plans, who weaves, who stitches. He calls him a weaver, doesn't he? He has knitted him together in his mother's womb.

this colourful embroidery of a life. In verse 13, he says to God, to the Lord, you formed my inward parts.

[7 : 30] That word, you there, is emphatic. He's saying, you, yourself, did this, Lord. He is the Lord who creates.

He is the one, we know, who makes something out of nothing, who speaks the universe into being. The Apostle John says in Revelation, the Lord, he created all things and by his will they exist and were created.

It is by his will, by his decision, by his inclination, by his choice, that human beings are created. His will is the momentum, it is the, the life-giving force behind you tonight.

And the Lord is creator not just of a world with a capacity to procreate and to keep going. He's actively involved in the creation of each individual person.

David is not an anonymous, anonymous, biological mechanism here, is he? He is shaped by a personal, intentional act of creation by the creator God.

[8 : 51] So God is creator. Let's dive in a bit more here because there are two specific things David mentions. God is creator, first of all, of my unformed substance.

God is creator of my unformed substance. presence. What is it that makes you you? The philosopher René Descartes famously said, I think, therefore I am.

Now, you know that I'm not a philosopher, so you can correct me if I'm wrong about René Descartes, but I think what he's saying here is that one of the biggest proofs that you are a somebody tonight is that you have thoughts about yourself, that you are conscious of yourself, that you are self-aware.

I think, therefore I am a person. But Descartes Descartes maybe has never seen baby photos.

Baby photos tell us, don't they, of a time when we were alive, when we were someone and we didn't know it.

[10 : 09] The ultrasound scan shows us a picture of us when we were a person and we were not conscious of it. my parents kept slides as we grew up as a family and once in a while when we got together they would get the projector out, this was the thing, get the projector out, blow the dust off it, this old fashioned thing, and get the slides, put them in the projector and watch the family activity.

And they would love to look back at a time that only they remembered, at a time that they knew, at the children that they knew, and they would tell us about ourselves.

This was you when you were six months, this was you when you had your first bottle, your first word. They knew us as kids at a time when we didn't know ourselves.

Presenting before us as the projector clicked on the lives we had, even before we were conscious of them. It's my parents' consciousness that matters, isn't it, to make me a person in that time.

This is what David says about God. We are swept off our self-deterministic feet, and the foundations of who we think we are just disappear when we realise with David that there have been times in our lives where we have been someone without knowing it.

[11 : 51] That I and you have been someone who was unknown even to yourself. He was unconscious of who he was in the past, knitted together in his mother's womb.

His frame, his substance was what? Unknown. Hidden even from his parents, but known to the Lord. And he realises, doesn't he, how little grasp he has on himself.

Because even in his most formative years, or months, or days even, when he was being conceived and knitted together in the womb, he was totally passive, and completely unconscious, and has no memory of it, he determines nothing of himself.

How tiny his consciousness is of who he has been, and who he will be. He was unconscious, he was unseen, his frame, his inward parts, his bones, his tissue, his features, his DNA, were made, verse 15, in secret, hidden, unconscious, passive.

He did not pick and mix his features, did he? He had no part in it. His being does not come from his own rational ability.

[13 : 32] His being does not come from the fact that he is conscious of himself. But that he is in God's consciousness. That he was not hidden from God.

That he was thought up by God. The process he describes is really intricate, isn't it? The language of knitting. God knit me together, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Needle, threads, fabric, stitching, colours, shapes. Go round to the miner's place and watch Liz knit if you want a good illustration.

We think of his body, don't we, of his unformed substance being threaded together. In the vast detail of his body, all of that has come from the mind of God.

And all that was about him was only known to God. verse 14, I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

[14 : 41] Wonderfully all works, my soul knows it really very well. It's a really hard verse to translate. I think there's a footnote at the bottom of your Bibles, yes.

Footnote one there. It could be for I am fearfully set apart. I think that is closer to the original Hebrew.

I praise you for I am fearfully set apart. In the consciousness of God and in the thoughts of God he is distinct in his body.

Week five he has a heartbeat. Week ten he has his own fingerprints. Week thirteen he sticks his tongue out.

even before anyone else is conscious of him he says Lord your eyes saw my unformed substance there in deepest concealment in the depths of the earth.

[15 : 45] It teaches us doesn't it that our substance is special to God. Your body is special knitted together.

Your physical limited dust like frail body is special. It is special to God. It is why these verses can apply to God himself in the incarnation.

It is a description of what happened in the womb that the Holy Spirit conceived in the womb of Mary and God himself is weave the human body and give a name Jesus.

Why? So that your substance would be raised. Because your fingernails matter to God. Your hair matters to God.

Your elbows matter to God. The particular way that your face is knitted together, the way your nose sticks out, your gender, your biology matters to God.

[16 : 59] All have been knitted together. He is not just interested in your soul tonight. Your unique embroidered body, this substance is created and it will be raised in glory.

It is not I think therefore I am so much. Rather God saw, God set apart, God thought, therefore I am.

We want to be really careful about using texts like this to answer problems that David was not thinking about, issues that David was not addressing.

But there are just obvious applications aren't there to some very difficult and painful questions.

Issues that I know that many of you have faced and are facing, have maybe dealt with in the past, you've been hurt by or you feel torn by.

God's preeminence in this creation process of a human being makes it clear, doesn't it, that even when a person is unconscious of themselves, they are still a person.

[18:18] even when they lack rational ability to know they are a someone, they are a someone. When they are rejected by others and unwanted by others or even unknown to others, they are a someone.

David's body is set apart in the womb. He is an individual in the mind of God, not merely an extension of his mother's body.

I don't know if you came to one of those Saturday night talks. Do you remember the talk with John Wyatt? It was great, wasn't it? It was John Wyatt. He's a consultant neonatalist at University College Hospital and he spoke so warmly and wisely about some of these issues of life and death. Get hold of the talk, it's really good. And he's written a book called Matters of Life and Death, and he comments on this psalm, he comments on these verses, he says, the wonder it expresses at the growth of a fetus and at the Lord's involvement in this process is grounds for reckoning that a decision to cause a woman to miscarry is not merely one involving a decision about what happens to her body.

It involves terminating a project that the Lord is involved in and one would need special reasons to do that. This is not a sermon on abortion.

[19:50] Sorry if you weren't expecting this. But it is something actually I think we instinctively know about. There is a popular intuition.

There is something in us that strikes a chord with what David is saying here. Princess Charlotte was commonly known as the royal baby when she was only 12 weeks old in the womb.

We knew instinctively didn't we that she was a someone even before anyone had met her. Ingrid Cohn and Perry Lynn Moffat have written a book called A Silent Sorrow.

And it's a secular book so it doesn't come from a biblical point of view. It actually comes from a pro-choice leaning. But it's interesting in the foreword how they explain the words they choose to use in the book.

They say this. To all parents who have experienced an unwanted pregnancy loss including those who have ended an impaired pregnancy we considered using terms such as fetus and embryo when discussing abnormal pregnancies and abortions realising this language was more in keeping with a pro-choice stance.

[21:13] In the end though we continued to refer to the unborn baby we felt compelled to acknowledge this common grief no matter what the cause of their loss bereaved parents mourn for someone.

Someone who was dear to them. Someone who was supposed to be their baby. If the words we chose are imperfect they still represent our sincerest attempts to give expression to this universal sorrow.

There is something in us isn't there even at a popular level that says that just because we are made of chemicals it doesn't mean we are nothing but chemicals.

That God is the creator of my unformed substance. Second thing to see here God is creator of my unformed substance.

Second and last point God is creator of my unformed days. God is creator of my unformed days.

David has considered the limits of his own consciousness of himself hasn't he?

[22:26] His own body has been unknown to him in the past. And the baby photos tell us the same. You don't recognise yourself do you? Looking back you don't recognise yourself.

You don't remember yourself. And in the same way the days of your future life are spanned out before you know them. Each and every day mapped out before your time.

Verse 16 In your book were written every one of them the days that were formed for me when as yet there were none of them. This weaver this divine weaver forms this child and at the same time he forms the days of the child of this person.

There is a sense isn't there here where the shaping of a person in the womb determines the shaping of the person's life. And biology is an important part of who we are.

Boy or girl, tall or short, our gifts, our weaknesses, our dispositions. It's part of what he's saying here.

[23:40] But David is not saying that he's just been pre-programmed like a kind of robot with no decisions to make and no other influences in his life from himself or from others.

No, he's not saying that. If you flip back to verse 2, he says, you know when I sit down and when I rise up, you discern my thoughts from afar.

Lord, I have thoughts, I have intentions, I have plans of my own. The Bible is full as well, isn't it, of commands for us to make decisions, to make right decisions, to change our desires, to love God with all of our heart, to choose right.

But in a way that we struggle to understand, all of those decisions and all of those real choices influences and all of those real influences in our lives are governed and ordained by God.

He has thoughts of his own, but he thinks, doesn't he, in verse 17, of God's thoughts. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God.

[24 : 58] David's thoughts and intentions for his days and plans, they're there, but they are pavilioned and umbrellaed by God's thoughts for his days and for his life.

Aren't they? God creates David, but he doesn't just leave him to sort of work his way through life to do the rest. He continues to rule over him and he continues to rule over each one of us.

He rules over everything that he's made. Proverbs tells us, in our hearts we plan our course, but the Lord establishes our steps.

Jeremiah reflects, I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps. That kind of short circuits our brain, doesn't it?

If we think about this. Our thoughts matter and our decisions matter, but the executive rule over your life and over your days comes from God's mind and his thoughts.

[26 : 10] And each of your days is written down and formed by him before you know them. Now that could freak us out a little bit, couldn't it? But for David, that is not a freaky thought, it is a precious thought.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God. when babies are born, gifts are given, aren't they? And one of the gifts is sometimes a photo album or a diary or a scrapbook so that the parents can record each of the days.

And they are brand new. They are untouched. Nothing is written in them. It would be wrong to write something in a gift like that, wouldn't it? They are unused. You open it and the spine cracks.

They're brand new. But David says, actually when we were all born, we each have a scrapbook. It's God's scrapbook.

It is God's diary. And God has this book. And it's already filled on every page with his handwriting.

[27 : 22] Each day of our lives has an entry and it is filled from top to bottom. Tomorrow has an entry. It is filled Monday the 19th of February 2018.

Already filled with your pictures, with your smiles, with your frowns, with your sadness, with your everything. And the preciousness of that is knowing that we are not self-made people.

We are not the ones to bear our days, to bear our future. The idea of writing in a book has a certain feel about it, doesn't it?

It shows the Lord's attitude. The Lord's attitude is not casual to David's time and his days. The Lord is a planner. He doesn't leave things to chance.

He doesn't just have a rough plan for your life, but he has a detailed itinerary each day. There is a journey marked out for you. Days forged in covenant love and faithfulness to those who trust in him.

[28 : 32] David thinks of the nakedness and the bareness of his own thoughts on the matter, on the detail of the complexities of his own being, on who he is, how little consciousness he has of who he has been and who he will be tomorrow.

And it's the same with us, isn't it? to answer that question, who am I? That is a matter of faith. It is a matter of faith to listen to what God tells us about who we are.

Because he is the one who created our bodies and our days before we knew them. And he is telling us about ourselves.

He is getting the family projector out and showing you who you are and who you belong to. And he says, you are mine. I made you.

Entirely mine. And this is the Christian life, isn't it? It is a constant struggle to know who we are, that we are who God says we are, that he is conscious of an unknown you.

[29 : 56] for we are not conscious of ourselves in some of the most important ways. We're not conscious of ourselves in our mother's wombs, in our future days.

We're not conscious of ourselves in our full sinfulness, are we? And yet God tells us we are. We're not conscious of ourselves sometimes in our justified righteousness in Christ.

We're not conscious of ourselves as born again sometimes. And who we are is unformed to us in so many ways.

And yet we watch the projector, don't we? We listen to God telling us who we are, even when no one else knows it. We listen to him telling us about our salvation, that the imagery of birth is a salvation imagery, isn't it?

All through the Bible. We are not conscious even sometimes of the glories of our own salvation and who we are in Christ, that we are hidden with Christ in God, says Paul.

[31 : 08] We struggle to be conscious of that future day when one day our life will appear with him in glory. And I am held though in his knowledge of who I am, waiting to see what he already sees about myself.

So it is not I think therefore I am, is it? But God thinks and God says therefore I am.

So let's take him at his word. Let's pray. Amen.