

# Psalms 139

*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: 14 February 2017

Preacher: Paul Levy

[ 0 : 00 ] I don't know if you know the preacher's story. There's a little boy painting a picture and the teacher says to him what are you doing?! And the child says I'm painting a picture of God and the teacher says don't be silly nobody knows what God looks like. And the child says well they will when I finish.

Now it's kind of you to laugh you've heard that umpteen times. But we smile at that. But we know don't we that not even Michelangelo can capture God on canvas. If you've been to Rome you've seen the Sistine Chapel with all the other tourists.

And you look at the roof and those magnificent paintings and you have to say they are great works of art but they are shocking theology. That painting of Michelangelo on the roof of the Sistine Chapel is God really like that? A kind of muscular, geriatric, it's what he looks like isn't it?

White hair flowing rather incongruously on the body of an Olympic athlete. That's how Michelangelo pictures God. It's no wonder the second commandment says no pictures please. It's not that God is not photogenic. It's not that God is camera shy.

It's just impossible for us to physically for any artist or cameraman no matter how skilful they may be it's impossible to capture God in that way.

[ 1 : 21 ] Michelangelo is probably the greatest artist of all time isn't he? In the X. It's a disaster what he captures God like. The tragedy is lots of people get their idea of God from those paintings on the Sistine Chapel.

People say one picture is worth a thousand words. That's true in many circumstances but it's not true when you come to talk about God because you cannot convey the greatness of God in pictures.

And if you're going to encounter God which we pray we will this lunchtime it has to be in the Bible. And the Bible is a book without pictures. In the same way that in the wilderness the tabernacle was a tent without windows.

Wasn't it? Because God is mysterious. To kind of quote Churchill and change his subject. There is something mysterious about God. He is a riddle wrapped in a mystery within an enigma.

And the only way that you and I will ever come to know God is by him showing himself to us. And he does it in this marvellous psalm. That when it comes to the being of God the pen of the prophet can communicate what the brush of the artist must inevitably distort.

[ 2 : 36 ] And I think there is nowhere in the Bible. I think there is nowhere in the Bible that describes the being of God like Psalm 139. The Bible says to you that you don't understand yourself until you begin to understand God.

The fear of God. The knowledge of God is the beginning of wisdom. And so I want to look at the psalm on three headings. I'm not sure we'll get to the three but we'll see. I want to see God, the world and me.

And this psalm is all about facing the reality of God. Now I don't know where you're at spiritually. I know some of you. I don't know some of you others. Perhaps you've been dragged along.

Perhaps you just like something to do on a Tuesday lunchtime. But you maybe have never come face to face with the reality of God. You've never known God in a living way.

There are two ways of perceiving reality. There's the Greek way of knowing reality. And there's the Hebrew way. And they're very different. So in the Old Testament scriptures we're told about those who know the loss of children.

[ 3 : 45 ] You can know all about sudden infant death syndrome. You can study that. You can be a world expert on cot death. Without knowing what it is to lose a child.

And when the psalmist talks about knowing God. He's not talking about the existence of God. He takes that for granted. The Bible says you're a fool if you don't believe in the existence of God. He's talking about the experience of God.

And so can you see verse 1. It says, isn't it, in Psalm 139. Oh Lord you have searched me and known me. That's very personal. Theologians talk about the omniscience of God.

And the omnipotence of God. And the omnipresence of God. And you can divide the psalm up like that. Let me show you. Verses 1 to 6. He's omniscient. That means God knows everything there is to know. Verses 6 to 12.

He is omnipresent. That is there's nowhere that God is not. Verses 13 to 16 are a great description of his omnipotence. He's all powerful. There's nothing that he cannot do.

[ 4 : 48 ] But I want to say to you. Those omni words are not in Psalm. They're textbook words aren't they? They're Latin words. They're quite abstract concepts. The psalmist does not talk about the omniscience of God.

The psalmist does not talk about the omnipresence of God. He says oh Lord you have known me. And you've searched me. And that says to you that you don't come to understand God like you study a subject in school.

You can write an essay can't you on the omniscience of God and get a grade for it. You can do theology and be a graduate. You can get a BD and MTH and MDiv and still not know God.

God is not a subject to be studied. He is the living God. Lord you have searched me. And you know me. It's very personal. And Lord you've known me.

You've searched me. It's not just that God knows absolutely everything. Of course he does. But God knows absolutely everything about you. He knows where you've been. He knows what's on your mind.

[ 5 : 53 ] He knows where you're thinking. He knows what you do. He knows where you go. He knows what you've said and what you haven't said. He knows your fears. So let me read you a few of those verses. Verse 2.

You know when I sit and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down. You're acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue. Behold oh Lord you know it all together.

That if you want to know God. That if you want to come to know God. Then you must be willing to be known by him. And I wonder are you willing for that this week.

It's a profoundly intrusive experience. To come to know God. You can't come to know God in a kind of detached academic way. You'll not ever know him like that.

Unless you're prepared to invite his scrutiny. Like the psalmist does. Look at verse 23. Search me oh God. And know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts.

[ 6 : 52 ] It's a profoundly intrusive experience. You cannot keep your precious privacy. And know God. Privacy is very important.

We ought to respect one another's privacy. But you cannot keep God out of your private life. Oh Lord you've searched me and you know me. And I wonder if you're willing for that.

There's an artist called Graham Sutherland. And he painted a portrait of Winston Churchill. The kind of great wartime leader. It was commissioned by the Churchill family. And Graham Sutherland did what any great artist is able to do.

He captured something in Churchill. Which Churchill's family really didn't want to be captured. Churchill was a great man. But there was a streak of cruelty in Winston Churchill.

He was a great man. We owe a great deal to him. But there was a streak of cruelty. There's many funny stories out there. I'm sure you know them. But there was a streak of cruelty. And the family knew that.

[ 7 : 53 ] And Sutherland managed to catch that. Like any great artist is able to do. And captured it. And when the portrait was unveiled. His widow was so upset.

That she took it into the back garden. And she set fire to it. Because she couldn't live with it. And I want to say to you. And I want to say that to myself. We will not be able to do that.

The portrait that will be there on that last day. We will be seen as God sees us as we really are. And we will have to live with it forever.

Unless we have God as our saviour. To cover our sins. Unless we have the Holy Spirit. To change us into Christ's likeness. So it means to become a Christian. It means to face up to the reality of

who God is.

It means to be willing to be searched by him. It's to be willing for God to unveil me. As I really am. What's the alternative? To that.

[ 8 : 51 ] Well you can run away can't you? You can run and hide. But I've got to tell you. There's nowhere to go. God is everywhere. Look at verses 7 to 12. Look at verse 9.

If I take the wings of the morning. And dwell in the earth's most part the sea. If I travel as fast as I can go. If I get on the fastest jet. Faster than the speed of sound. Faster than the speed of light. If I rise on the wings of the dawn.

If I settle on the far side of the sea. Even there. Your hand will guide me. And your right hand will hold me fast. If I fly. Faster than the speed of light. If I take the wings of the dawn.

If I go as far as the east is from the west. Not north from south. You can measure can't you? Add the north from the south. But you can't measure the east from the west. If I keep on going.

And I keep on going as fast as I can. God is still there. There's a man in our village. Where I grew up. I grew up in a little village. In Potsloo.

[ 9 : 46 ] And he went to do the shopping. In Forest Vard. Which is just about two and a half miles away. And the next thing we heard. He was in South America. He did some kind of nervous breakdown. I take my flight today.

Perhaps you feel like that. Isn't it? The workplace is enormously strenuous. Maybe your home life. And you just think. I'd like to get away. Why don't you just drop everything. And leave my family. My job. And I could fly away. You know you still can't get away from God. Wherever you go. If you withdraw into yourself. If you retreat into your own little private world.

Where no one can hurt you. You think. Well look at verse 2. You perceive my thoughts from afar. Look at verse 4. Even before a word is on my tongue. You know it completely. God is there. God is there.

In the space between your thoughts. And your words. While I'm preaching. I don't know what is going on in your head. I can have a good guess with some of you. But God is there. Between the space.

[ 10 : 42 ] Between your thoughts and your words. You say. I'll switch off. I won't listen. God is there. I bury my head in the sand. Like an ostrich. It's funny isn't it? I have a daughter.

Phoebe. And the other kids. And all children when they're little. When you say. Let's play hide and seek. Do you know what they do? They put their hands over their eyes. Because they think. That if you can't. If they can't see you.

You can't see them. Well grown ups do exactly the same. Look at verse 11. Surely the darkness will cover me. And the light about me might be night. Even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is as bright as day.

For darkness is as light to you. It doesn't matter what I do. It doesn't matter where I go. God is there. I cannot escape from God. Even in the dark.

And even in the death. For some people. Death is the great escape. Isn't it? When you're dead. You're dead. Listen to verse 8. If I make my bed in Shale.

[ 11 : 42 ] The place of death. You are there. Bertrand Russell said. When I die. I will rot. And nothing will remain. Of my ego. Well of course.

You've got to believe that. Haven't you? Because if your ego did remain. What would become of you? If you've lived your life. In total indifference to God. And defiance of God.

It's no wonder that people say. Oh when I'm dead. I'm dead. It was Epicurus who said. What men fear most. Is not that death is the end. But that it's not. And that's what the psalmist is saying.

If I take my refuge in the grave. Even if I imagine that when I'm dead. I'm dead. I'm not. God is there. There's no escaping him. Whatever direction I go in.

Whatever dimension I'm in. No matter how determined I am. To shut him out of my life. I can't escape him. He is the one great inescapable reality. Of course. If you had any sense at all.

[ 12 : 43 ] Why would you want to escape him? He's not the interfering oppressive tyrant. That you might think he is. Look at verses 13. There are wonderful verses.

Verse 13. For you formed my inward part. You knitted me together in my mother's womb. You. Did not come off an assembly line. God made you.

In your mother's womb. You are a unique personality. You're not just the meeting of sperm and egg. Or the fruit of evolution.

That's not the case. God made you in your mother's womb. God made you the person that you are. With all your funny little quirks. 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 made in secret. Intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eye you saw my unformed substance. In your body you were written. Every one of them.

[ 13 : 44 ] The days that were formed for me. As yet. As yet there was none of them. He's our creator. He is the one who has mapped out your life. You see some people.

They believe that God is just a product of wishful thinking. That God doesn't exist apart from us. But the Bible is telling us the exact opposite. And the Bible is saying that God does exist apart from us. But we don't exist apart from him. He made us. He knocked out our days for us. There's no getting away from him. And why would you want to? There's only one reason why we want to get away from God.

And that is sin. I love the quote from Augustine. Do you really want to run away from God? Do you want to run away from a God who is angry with you at your sin?

Do you feel threatened by God? This lunchtime. Intimidated by the thought of a God who can read your mind. God who knows your every moment. Do you feel threatened and want to run away and hide from a God like that?

[ 14 : 43 ] Well says Augustine. I'll tell you where to run. That if you want to run away from God. The only place to run away from God is to run to God. Isn't that right?

Where else can you go? He's everywhere. You can't run away from him. He's everything. He's sovereign. Where's the only place you can go?

It's to him. And if you feel this lunchtime you want to run away from God and hide. If you feel you want to run away from him because he's angry because of your sin. That is your conscience.

So listen to your conscience. Your conscience is your best friend. If you feel you need to run away from him and hide from him. Please listen to me. Run to him as he comes to you in Christ.

Remember what the gospel says. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. It's not what the psalmist is telling us here. He's not a fugitive on the run. On the contrary.

[ 15 : 44 ] He's reveling in this new relationship with God. He's not running from God. He's running to him. James Sidney Saunders. The founder of the hospice movement.

She was an amazing woman. She wrote these words. Christianity is not insurance that nothing bad will happen to you. It's an assurance that you will never be alone. Isn't that right?

It's not an assurance that nothing bad will ever happen to you. Of course bad things happen to Christian people. In fact if you're a serious Christian. You live a pretty tough life.

Everybody who loves the Lord Jesus and follows him will be persecuted. That's not getting away from that. But if you are a Christian and you've come to know God. Then you'll know that you'll never be alone. Doesn't matter if you go to the most inaccessible place.

You're on your own. Where there's no emails and no phone signal. No visitors maybe. But God is there. And you may find yourself in a very lonely situation.

[ 16 : 41 ] But God is there. He understands. With people that you know well. Do you find this? So my wife can finish my jokes. Because she's heard them so many times.

And she will say to me. I know what you're thinking. Don't say it to me. And when you have a relationship with that. The more comfortable you are with someone. The more intimate you are with someone. You can anticipate what they're going to say.

That's the kind of relationship that's being described here. Am I terrified of my wife? No I'm not. Occasionally. No I'm not. God you know what I'm thinking before I think it.

God you know what I'm going to say before I say it. And you've got hold of me. That's not terrifying. It says in verse 10. Your right hand holds me fast. You hand me in behind and before we've got little children.

That's what you do isn't it? Sometimes I blunder into situations. And I don't know what the outcome will be. But God is before me. And will be there after me. Don't you want that kind of relationship with God?

[ 17 : 44 ] That's not a textbook. That's not a study relationship. The psalmist has discovered the reality of God. Now how does this fit with my experience of the world?

Verse 19 to 22. Now listen to these verses. Oh that you would slay the wicked. Oh God. Oh man 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 complete hatred. I count them my enemies. I have been in meetings where people have read Psalm 139.

And missed out those verses. And people say well they don't belong in this sun. To be honest I don't know what kind of world those people live in.

Who say that. They don't live in the real world. Where they're surrounded by bloodthirsty men for goodness sake. The real world is not far from verses 19 to 22. Now let me say this.

[ 18 : 42 ] Our understanding of the world is slightly different to David's understanding of the world. We live don't we? This side of Christ. We are not about jihad.

Okay. We're not about holy war. The New Testament tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We have a clearer view in the New Testament of the next world.

Paul says to Timothy. When Christ came he brought light and immortality to life. We know something more of the reality of heaven and hell than David's. It wasn't until Christ came and died and rose again that these things were clear.

For David it wasn't like that. For David there's a sense in which this world was everything. Because Christ had not yet risen from the dead. While we realise that there is another world isn't there?

There is a judgement coming where all wrongs will be righted. And David expected God to do it right there and then. And not only that. We've got a clear commission. To go into this blood, dangerous, thirsty, rebellious world.

[ 19 : 44 ] And take the gospel to the world. David did not have that commission. He saw his time as a time when justice would be established on earth. We see it as a time when God is patiently calling all people to repent before the judgement.

Now we need to make that distinction. But having made that distinction between the old and the new. Nevertheless this cry from David's heart is very very relevant.

Because when you've come to understand that God is sovereign. And God controls absolutely everything and everybody. And God is in control of all things. Well why doesn't God deal with Islam?

Why doesn't God deal with the duplicity and the hypocrisy of our culture? Why don't we get the full story? And so that is a real problem isn't it?

If God is fully and sovereignly in control. Of everything and everybody. Why does he allow his enemies to have such freedom? The Bible calls the devil the prince of this world.

[ 20 : 52 ] Don't you feel that sometimes? When somebody says to you something that is horrific that has happened. Why doesn't God do something? And David wants God to root out evil.

And I think that is right. And he wants God to root out evil wherever it is to be found. Even if it is to be found in him.

And that takes us to our last point. Me. Verses 23 and 24. Because David is no hypocrite. He is called on God to root out evil in the world.

And he looks on God. And he sees how God is so wonderful and glorious and sovereign and powerful. A God who knows everything and is everywhere. And he looks at the world and the mess it is in. And the rebellion and the cruelty and the rejection.

And he sees men and women living in defiance of him. And he cries out to God. Do something about it. Root this evil out of the world. But he doesn't have the view of the world that divides the world up into goodies and baddies.

[ 21 : 51 ] You know those kind of old westerns where you can just spot the goodies and the baddies. Can you straight away? Baddies had stubble. Goodies were clean shaven. But life isn't like that.

Life isn't like that. And as David has come to understand the greatness of God. Who is all knowing and all powerful and everywhere present. He is horrified of the fact that people are hostile to God. And he begins to wake up that actually there is a conflict going on in his own heart too. And David begins to see that he is in a battle. That it is not us and them. He doesn't take it for granted does he?

That he will never join the wicked. He knows even as he prays against the wicked world. That there is a wicked world in his own heart. Verse 23. Search me O God and know my heart.

And see if there be any grievous way in me. And lead me in the way everlasting. There is a way that is offensive. There is a way that is everlasting.

[ 22 : 48 ] Lead me in the way everlasting. And there is a way that is offensive. And David wants to go on that way that is everlasting.

The problem is that. When you choose the way of everlasting. You leave behind the wicked way. But the wicked way doesn't leave you behind does it?

You can take the boy out of Swansea. But you can't take Swansea out of the boy. It's the same with wickedness. And so he prays. Search me O God and know my heart.

Test me and know my anxious thoughts. And see if there be any offensive way in me. He wants to leave the way of the wicked. And if you are a Christian you will want to. Won't you? But you know that it's still there.

Yeah. The human heart is desperately corrupt. And deceitful above all things. Who can know it? Well only God can know it.

[ 23 : 46 ] And so he prays. Search me O God. Don't you hate so much of what is going on in the world?

I can get very hot under the collar. About all sorts of things. About injustice. About fat cats in the city. You took so much money in the good times.

I can get angry. I'm not paid that kind of money. I can get angry about it. But the truth is I'm quite a greedy person myself. Greed and selfishness.

And materialism. Lust and indifference. These things which are so offensive. To us when we see them in others. We have to face up to them in ourselves. And so let me wind this up.

David has seen God. And he's encountered God. Not in a classroom. Not in a textbook. But in his real life experience. And he's experienced God. And that experience has profoundly affected.

[ 24 : 52 ] The way he sees the world. And the way he views himself. And David's world is very much like our own. A world of power politics and corruption. Where godless men have got their agenda.

And plot is downfall. And as he comes out of his quiet time. Out of meditating on the character of God. He's got a choice. Either he must identify with these men. And play their games with them. Or he has to stand out as a man of God. And you and I have the same choice. As we walk out this afternoon. It's not just when we become Christians. But it's every day of our lives.

And every moment of our existence. Will I be a fugitive on the run from a God. Who I cannot escape. Or will I live in fellowship with him. How am I going to live my life.

As if you've never prayed. Verses 23 and 24. Let me plead with you. To pray the moving of our life. Let's pray.