

# PSALMS OF HOPE

@UnitedChurchFerndown

## United Church Ferndown's 2023 Lent Programme

Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> March  
Lent 2

# Sermon+

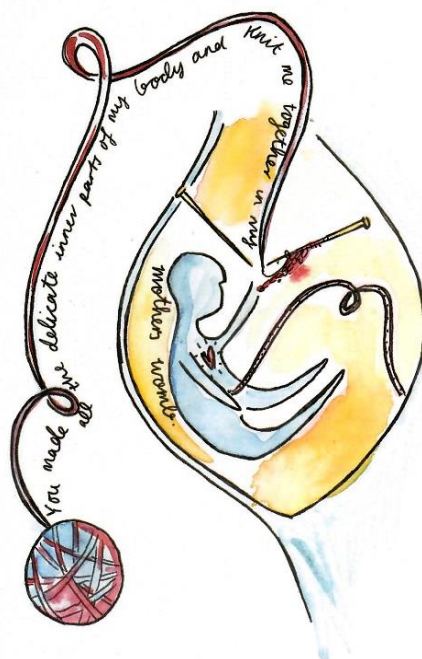
## PSALM 139

### WE HOPE BECAUSE



Pray:

We come before the God who inhabits our world and indwells our lives. We need not look up to find God, we need only to look around: within ourselves, beyond ourselves, into the eyes of another. We need not listen for a distant thunder to find God, we need only listen to the music of life, the words of children, the questions of the curious, the rhythm of a heartbeat, the revelations found in his word. Be with us now as we explore this psalm some more. **Amen.**



Psalm 139 2/10/15

## Introduction:

I was walking home from the supermarket with heavy bags cutting into my fingers. (It was back in the days when we got carrier bags!) We were on our way up the hill to the manse when suddenly I hear 'LOOK!' It's one of my little girls. This of course means she has now stopped right in front of my legs and I, being considerably larger than her and carrying shopping, have to do everything within my power not to fall on her and crush her. Once I've picked myself up off the ground, I look to see what it is that she has seen. What is it that was so important?

'Look Dad! It's a ladybird!' All of that for a ladybird, an ordinary one, red with seven black spots! Not one of the most interesting ones. But she is fascinated. Excited. Enthralled even. When was the last time you took a moment to look at what many call 'creation'? The wonderfully crafted flowers. Fascinating insects. The birds in your garden. The seven-spotted red ladybird. Here, the psalmist considers creation and has such lofty thoughts ...



### Read: Psalm 139 (NIV)

*(Maybe you could look at a couple of other translations)*

You have searched me, Lord,  
and you know me.  
<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit and when I rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from afar.  
<sup>3</sup> You discern my going out and my lying  
down;  
you are familiar with all my ways.  
<sup>4</sup> Before a word is on my tongue  
you, Lord, know it completely.  
<sup>5</sup> You hem me in behind and before,  
and you lay your hand upon me.  
<sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
too lofty for me to attain.  
<sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
<sup>8</sup> If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are  
there.  
<sup>9</sup> If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
<sup>10</sup> even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.  
<sup>11</sup> If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,'  
<sup>12</sup> even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.  
<sup>13</sup> For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
<sup>14</sup> I praise you because I am fearfully and

wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.  
<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place,  
when I was woven together in the depths of  
the earth.  
<sup>16</sup> Your eyes saw my unformed body;  
all the days ordained for me were written in  
your book  
before one of them came to be.  
<sup>17</sup> How precious to me are your  
thoughts, God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
<sup>18</sup> Were I to count them,  
they would outnumber the grains of sand –  
when I awake, I am still with you.  
<sup>19</sup> If only you, God, would slay the wicked!  
Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!  
<sup>20</sup> They speak of you with evil intent;  
your adversaries misuse your name.  
<sup>21</sup> Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord,  
and abhor those who are in rebellion against  
you?  
<sup>22</sup> I have nothing but hatred for them;  
I count them my enemies.  
<sup>23</sup> Search me, God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
<sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.

### A consideration of the psalm:

When you think about it, one of the greatest realities in life that we all know, but which many deny, is that there is *no escape from God*. Like fugitives, we may run, but we cannot ultimately hide from the God who penetrates even the darkness with the gaze of his light. Even if we manage to dodge

him in this life, we must still stand exposed before him on that final day of judgement. There is no place to hide from God. Every one of us will eventually come eye to eye with God.

Happily, once we give up our flight and accept this reality, we discover that his intention is not to harm us but to bless us. He formed us even in our mother's womb for his purpose and ordained all of our days before we ever saw the light of day. With David we must exclaim, 'How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them!' (v17). In coming to know him, we come to know ourselves. In the blinding light of his holiness, we recognise instantly the desperate need we have for inner purity. Since we cannot escape God we cannot escape from the need for holiness. That is the message of this psalm. This is not a generic psalm; it's intensely personal, David's heart poured out to God. We can see this by the way David frequently uses 'I' and 'me'.

The psalm falls into four stanzas (parts). The first three deal with different attributes of this inescapable God as they relate to the individual:

- His omniscience (v1-6)
- His omnipresence (v7-12)
- His omnipotence (v13-18)
- The response (v19-24)

### **1. His omniscience or I can't escape God's knowledge of me (v1-6)**

God knows absolutely everything about me! He knows my *actions*: when I sit down and when I get up (v2); when I go somewhere and when I lie down (v3). He is intimately acquainted with all my ways! He knows my *words*: in fact, he even knows what I am going to say before I say it (v4). He even knows my *thoughts* from afar (v2b). Like a caged bird, he's got me surrounded, with his hand upon me (v5). There is no escape from his thorough, penetrating knowledge. So, David exclaims (v6): 'Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.'

The closest we can get to knowing another human being ought to take place in the marriage relationship. As a man and woman live together in that lifelong commitment, they grow to know one another in a unique way. The Bible uses the verb 'to know' to describe the sexual relationship in marriage (Genesis 4:1). But even so, you can be married for years and still discover new things about your spouse. Even the closest human relationships fall short of total knowledge. In fact, we can't even know ourselves thoroughly. Life is a process of coming to know ourselves. But, as Jeremiah 17:9 says, 'The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately wicked; who can understand it?' We can't know our own motives and inner drives apart from God's revealing it to us through his word. God alone knows us thoroughly. He sees through us.

Your first reaction to that thought is probably, 'Where can I run to hide?' It seems to have been David's thought (v7). Since the human race fell into sin, that kind of total intimacy has been threatening to every person. We fear being totally exposed. But the amazing thing is, this God who knows us so thoroughly, who knows every awful thought we ever have, desires to have a relationship with us. Because of our sin and God's holiness, something had to be done to remove that barrier to our relationship with him. With the first couple, God performed an object lesson that pointed ahead to his ultimate solution. Their fig leaves were not adequate; God slaughtered an animal and clothed them with its skin, showing them that they could not be restored to fellowship with a holy God without the shedding of blood.

I believe excitingly that Christianity is not about following a set of rules or going through a bunch of religious rituals. It is at its heart a personal relationship with the living God who knows you thoroughly. You enter that relationship when you put your trust in the substitute he provided, Jesus, who paid the price for your sin with his death on the cross. The threat of being known so intimately by God provokes the reaction, 'Where can I go to hide?' David pursues that thought in the second stanza.

### **2. His omnipresence or I can't escape God's presence (v7-12).**

Where do you plan to run? Heaven (v8)? God is there! The first Soviet cosmonauts irreverently joked that they didn't see God from their spaceship. But God saw them! He is there! Do you want

to escape God in the place of the dead? He's there, too! Do you want to head east ('wings of the dawn,' v9a) or west ('remotest part of the sea' v9b)? You won't dodge God (v10)! You can hide in the dark, but God is light, and he will find you out (v11-12). Since God is everywhere, you can't get away from him. Again, David is intensely personal about it: God isn't just everywhere; everywhere I go, he lays hold of me (v10)!

### **3. His omnipotence or I can't escape God's power and sovereignty (v13-18).**

The thought that darkness doesn't hide us from God leads David to consider that God formed him in his mother's womb. Though hidden from human eyes in that day before scans, David was not hidden from God's eyes (v16). And not only did God make me through his creative power, but also, he ordained all of my days before any of them came into being (v16)! Considering how fearfully and wonderfully we are made should cause us to thank God (v14).

Consider the miracle of the human body: every second more than 100,000 chemical reactions take place in your brain. It has 10 billion nerve cells to record what you see and hear. That information comes to your brain through the miracle of the eye, which has 100 million receptor cells (rods and cones) in each eye. Your retina also has four other layers of nerve cells. Altogether the system makes the equivalent of 10 billion calculations a second before an image even gets to the optic nerve. Once it reaches your brain, the cerebral cortex has more than a dozen separate vision centres in which to process it. Your tear ducts supply a bacteria-fighting fluid to protect your eyes from infection. The tears that fight irritants differ from the tears of sadness, which contain 24 per cent more proteins. That's just one tiny element of the human body. Just think about all the clever detail that can be in your body right now. I could go on but you might get bored. All of this amazing design and there are still people who believe we are an accident.

When David says (v18), 'when I awake, I am still with you', he may be referring to the fact that each morning the thoughts of God's omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence are still with him, so that he can't escape the overwhelming fact of God in relation to himself. Or he may be referring poetically to God's presence after death, in the resurrection. In that case, David would be referring to God's hand on his life from conception through eternity.

But in any case, the awesome thought that God skilfully made me and ordained the days of my life ought to make me see that I can't escape from his power and sovereignty. By the way, even if you suffer from a disability or a long-term illness (I'm a diabetic), God declares that he made you. When Moses complained to God that he couldn't speak eloquently enough to lead Israel out of Egypt, God said, 'Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?' (Exodus 4:11). That means that God has fashioned and has a purpose in this fallen world even for those whose bodies or minds are not perfectly formed. That God creates and ordains the days of each human life gives significance and value to each and every life.

So, David is saying that you can't escape from God. He knows everything about you; he is with you wherever you go; he has created you and ordained the days of your life. So what's the bottom line? What do you do with a God like this? In the final stanza, David shows that.

### **4. The response or Therefore, I must commit myself to holiness (v19-24).**

The inescapable conclusion of these facts is that we need to respond. As David thinks about God's omniscience, his omnipresence and his omnipotence, he is led first to cry out to God to destroy the wicked, (v19-22); and then quickly to add a prayer that the God who had searched him (v1) would continue the process. This shows us two aspects of holiness which we must develop:

a. Holiness means living apart from the wicked (v19-22).

Does the thought of 'perfect hatred' strike you as odd? Does it seem like a vice rather than a virtue? We have a syrupy, sentimental notion of love in our day. We wrongly think that Christians should not hate anything. But to fear God is to hate evil (Proverbs 8:13). We can't love God properly and be complacent about sin.

This feels like a contradiction. We're all about the being loving but now there's a perfect hatred! How can we love them and hate them at the same time? C. H. Spurgeon helpfully explains the balance: *'To love all men with benevolence is our duty; but to love any wicked man with complacency would be a crime. To hate a man for his own sake, or for any evil done to us, would be wrong; but to hate a man because he is the foe of all goodness and the enemy of all righteousness, is nothing more nor less than an obligation. The more we love God the more indignant shall we grow with those who refuse him their affection.'*

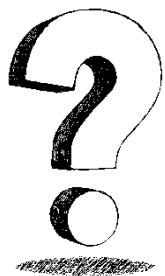
Jude v22-23 reflects this fine line: 'Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.'

b. Holiness means living openly before God (v23-24).

David no sooner mentions the wicked and his hatred for their irreverence than he quickly realises his own need for God's cleansing. This is not so much a prayer that God may know him (which he already does in verse 1), but rather that David might know himself through God's purifying, refining fire. There are two elements to a holy life in these verses:

- i) *I must constantly expose my inner life to God.* 'Search me, try me ...'. David is inviting God to shine his pure light into the inner recesses of his thought life, where all sin originates. If you want to be holy, not just outwardly where you can fake it, but inwardly, you must constantly confront your thinking with God's word.
- ii) *I must constantly yield my whole life to God.* 'Lead me ...'. When God's word exposes where I'm wrong, I must submit to the Lord and walk in his way. Knowledge without obedience leads to deception and pride. I must become a doer of the word, not just a hearer who deludes myself (James 1:22).

David is saying here: look upon God; he knows you thoroughly; he is with you everywhere you go; he has wondrously created you and sovereignly ordained the days of your life. Then, scrutinise yourself by inviting the searchlight of God's word into your innermost thoughts and feelings and by being obedient to God's ways. Since you can't escape from God, you must commit yourself to holiness.



### Questions:

Consider God's word:

1. Why are we afraid to be known thoroughly? How vulnerable should we be? What principles guide how much we share with others?
2. How can a person develop a sense of God's unshakable presence, so as not to sin?
3. How do we work at being more holy or, another way of putting it, how do we become more like Jesus?
4. Does God love everyone equally (Psalm 5:5-6)? Must we (Psalm 139:21-22)? What does this mean practically?



### Pray together:

God, you search me and know me.  
Before I sit, you know when I will rise.  
God, you search me and know me,  
in my joy and despair,  
in my breathing in and breathing out.  
God, you search me and know me.  
Your knowledge is too deep to reach,  
too vast to comprehend.  
God, you search me and know me.  
Search me, O God, and know my heart.  
**Amen.**