

Psalms Playlist

Week 5 | Psalm 139

Lisa Scheffler, author

Have you ever heard some version of this question? “There are six billion people in the world. You really think God cares about me?” People wonder if God sees their struggles and cares about their suffering. Does he offer help or guidance? They also wonder if he sees their sin. Does he care when they do something wrong? Our Psalm for the week assures them that he does.

When scholars write books on systematic theology, they will have chapters on the nature of God. In them, God is often described as omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (all-present), and omnipotent (all-powerful). Psalm 139 allows us to reflect on these attributes in a highly personal way. This is no abstract, academic treatment of God. The Psalmist prays with assurance, as someone who knows God and how he relates to humanity. Yet, this confidence is dipped in wonder at the awesome power of God and the intimacy of our relationship with him.

There is hope and promise to be found in Psalm 139. As the fifth one in our Psalms Playlist, allow Psalm 139 to provide the soundtrack to your week.

Day 1

Read

Psalm 139 (NIV)

For the director of music. Of David. A psalm.

*¹ You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.*

*² You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.*

*³ You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.*

*⁴ Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.*

*⁵ You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.*

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,

too lofty for me to attain.

- 7 Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?*
- 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*
- 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
10 even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.*
- 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
12 even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*
- 13 For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.*
- 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.*
- 15 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.*
- 16 Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.*
- 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!*
- 18 Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you.*
- 19 If only you, God, would slay the wicked!
Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!*
- 20 They speak of you with evil intent;
your adversaries misuse your name.*
- 21 Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord,
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?*
- 22 I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.*
- 23 Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.*
- 24 See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

- When you think about the reality that God is all-knowing, all powerful, and always present, how do you feel? Does his omnipresence and omniscience comfort you? Relieve you? Concern you? Make you feel safe? Guilty? Why?

Reflect

In Psalm 139, David marvels at God’s attention to him. In one of his commentaries, John Goldingay says of this Psalm, “God’s capacity to know all about us and reach us wherever we are can be good news or bad news. Indeed, much of the psalm can be read either way. It’s almost as if the psalm is systematically ambiguous, careful to state the facts about God’s having access to us and leaving it neutral whether this access is good news or bad news. It’s almost as if the psalm is daring us to decide.”¹

This week, let’s decide. Why should God’s presence, focus, and intervention in our lives “good news”? Why do we sometimes want to hide ourselves from his gaze? How should Psalm 139 inspire us to think about God and our relationship to him?

Respond

Psalm 139 ends with a plea that we should regularly ask God, “Search me, 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” (verses 23–24). Take some time to be still before the Lord and invite the Spirit to examine your heart and convict you of sin. Seek his forgiveness and ask him to teach you a better way.

Day 2

Read

Psalm 139:1–12 (NIV)

For the director of music. Of David. A psalm.

¹ *You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.*

² *You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.*

³ *You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.*

⁴ *Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.*

¹ John Goldingay, [*Psalms for Everyone, Part 2: Psalms 73–150*](#), Old Testament for Everyone (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2014), 201.

*⁵ You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.*

*⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?*

*⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

*⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,*

*¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.*

*¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"*

*¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

- What assurances do you find in these verses? How are these verses comforting to one who trusts in Christ?

Reflect

In Psalm 139, David uses poetic language to speak directly to God. He uses God's personal name, Yahweh, (translated here as *LORD*) to describe how he lives constantly under God's watchful gaze. He recognizes that God knows him better than he knows himself and that there is no place where he could go where God wouldn't be. We have no privacy from God.

Right now there are all kinds of debates raging about digital privacy. In some places, cameras with facial recognition software can identify you when you're simply walking down the street. No one likes the idea of strangers invading our privacy, especially when we don't know or trust their motives. Yet, many people find great comfort in knowing that we cannot hide or escape from God. Why? Because we know the Lord. We know that Yahweh loves, cares for, and protects us. We can trust God's motives.

Still, even if we believe that God loves us, we may squirm under his watchful eye and in his powerful presence, particularly if we feel guilty or are trying to escape his will. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, Genesis 3 tells us that they hid from God. When God asked Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh and call the people to repentance, the prophet got on a ship going in the opposite direction to avoid the call.

It's silly, isn't it? Thinking you can run and hide from the Creator of the universe? Yet we do it all the time. We let the lies of the Enemy tempt us into going our own way. We doubt God's love and goodness. We disobey his clear commands, and then hide in shame because we doubt his grace and forgiveness.

Let's not believe the Enemy's lies. Our God only wants the best for us. When his hand is on us, guiding us, let's not resist. Let's rejoice that nothing can separate us from his presence. There is no darkness that can hide us from his loving care. When we mess up, let's turn quickly to God and ask his forgiveness. He is eager to grant it and lead us in the right direction.

- How can you rejoice more in God's presence in your daily life? How can you remember to turn to him and enjoy his presence throughout the day?

Respond

As David says, the knowledge of God's watchful and loving presence is too wonderful for us, and too lofty for us to attain. We cannot fully grasp the mind of God, but we can worship him. Worship him now. Along with David, marvel at who he is and how he watches over you.

Day 3

Read

Psalm 139:13–18

*¹³ For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
¹⁵ 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.
¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.
¹⁷ How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸ Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you.*

- What does this passage tell you about the value and worth of every person?

Reflect

A lot of us struggle with things we don't like about ourselves. It might be something physical — we think our nose is too big or our legs are too short. We might wish we were smarter or more

athletic. Maybe we envy how easily some people make friends or can command an audience. We can become insecure about ourselves, and if we let these negative thoughts control us, they can paralyze us.

Psalm 139 gives us God's perspective on who we are. These verses are no self-help pep talk, but a deep and abiding truth — God has created us and we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Every person is uniquely designed and knitted together by God while still in their mother's womb. All people have immense value and worth. David praises God for this and so should we.

Although we live in a world marred by sin where our bodies and minds are susceptible to violence and disease, God designed us for so much more. One day, in our resurrected bodies, we will experience the fullness of God's design. In the meantime we can rejoice with David in the intimate care of God who knows every cell in our bodies.

In verse 17, David expresses his amazement at God's thoughts. Whereas our thinking is limited and bound, whatever God thinks can become reality. He designed every muscle and bone, every organ and nerve of the human body and from that plan, he gave humanity life. Yet he doesn't just see us collectively as a species, he knows each one of us individually and has a unique plan for our lives.

You matter to God. You were created with purpose and your life is a gift. How will you choose to live today?

- How should knowing that each person is fearfully and wonderfully made guide our treatment of others?

Respond

Join David in praising God because you are fearfully and wonderfully made. And if you find it hard to be truly grateful because of how God created you, ask him to change your perspective.

Day 4

Read

Psalm 139:19–24

- 19 If only you, God, would slay the wicked!
Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!*
- 20 They speak of you with evil intent;
your adversaries misuse your name.*
- 21 Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord,
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?*

*²² I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.
²³ Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

- Verse 19 seems like an abrupt transition. Why do you think David's thoughts moved from praising God for his presence and power to asking him to slay the wicked?
- Why are verses 23–24 good for us to pray daily?

Reflect

The more we ponder God and know him through his work and through his Word, the more we will stand in awe of him. He is too magnificent for us to comprehend, too good for us to deserve, and so wonderful that a million years spent worshipping him would be too little.

David has come to a place in this psalm where the reality of God's presence and power have landed on him with force. What is his response? A rejection of all of those who are wicked and do evil. He knows that God sees them too. Yahweh knows their every thought and deed, even what they do in secret. There is no escape from God for the wicked. God's presence means judgment for them and David wants no part of their rebellion.

David has chosen a side and committed himself to God. He eagerly awaits the end of those who oppose Yahweh. His words may sound harsh to our ears, but he doesn't speak them with spite, but with resolve. David counts the enemies of God as his enemies.

Yet David is not self-righteous. He knows that he has the capacity to rebel and commit the evil that he has chosen to hate. He also knows that only God can root out a person's sinful tendencies. Out of his love and mercy, Yahweh will lead those who commit themselves to him to a better way.

John Goldingay wraps up his thoughts on this Psalm this way: "The psalmist's closing invitation to God to examine him is then an opening of himself to God's checking whether this commitment is real. It is the earlier sections of the psalm that add bite to this self-opening. He has made clear that he understands how serious it is. There is no fooling God about the nature of our commitment to God's ways. There is no escaping God if we pretend to be something other than we are."²

- Be honest with yourself and God, how committed are you to living for God? Do you invite the Spirit to search your heart for any offensive way? Why or why not?

² John Goldingay, [*Psalms for Everyone, Part 2: Psalms 73–150*](#), Old Testament for Everyone (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2014), 202.

Respond

Pray verses 23 and 24. Personalize them for yourself. What is the Spirit bringing to mind?

Day 5

Happy Friday! We'll take one last look at our Psalm for the week and invite the Spirit to speak to us through the Word.

Reflect

Read slowly through Psalm 139. Savor each image that David's words bring to mind. Allow these verses to bring you comfort and assurance.

Psalm 139 (NIV)

For the director of music. Of David. A psalm.

- ¹ *You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.*
- ² *You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.*
- ³ *You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.*
- ⁴ *Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.*
- ⁵ *You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.*
- ⁶ *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.*
- ⁷ *Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?*
- ⁸ *If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*
- ⁹ *If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,*
- ¹⁰ *even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.*
- ¹¹ *If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"*
- ¹² *even the darkness will not be dark to you;*

*the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

- ¹³ For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.*
- ¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.*
- ¹⁵ 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.*
- ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.*
- ¹⁷ How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!*
- ¹⁸ Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you.*
- ¹⁹ If only you, God, would slay the wicked!
Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!*
- ²⁰ They speak of you with evil intent;
your adversaries misuse your name.*
- ²¹ Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord,
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?*
- ²² I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.*
- ²³ Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.*
- ²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

- What phrase or image sticks with you from this Psalm?

Connect

At the start of this week we considered a question that Christians sometimes get asked, “There are six billion people in the world. You really think God cares about me?” After reflecting on Psalm 139 this week, we can answer with a confident “yes.” But even though we understand what David is teaching us, it doesn’t make God’s careful attention to every human being any less mind-blowing. If we really ponder it, it’s not hard to share David’s awe and his desire to worship God.

It’s been a difficult few months for a lot of us, and maybe you’re feeling shaken. Trust that God is right there with you. He goes before you and behind you. You are hemmed in on all sides by his grace and love. No matter what is going on in the world, what mistakes you’ve made or

what shame you feel, you cannot flee from God. He not only pursues you into the dark places where you try to hide, he brings light. You are beautifully and wonderfully made, and God loves you with an unimaginable love.

The more we rest in God's presence and trust in his guidance, the more we will hate evil that brings pain, suffering, oppression, and violence to those around us. And the more we will resist taking any part in the Enemy's schemes. By the power of the Spirit, we will want to bring peace and justice to our world. But we have to start with inviting the Spirit to root out the sin in our own hearts.

It's not a pleasant process, having your dark thoughts dug out and brought into the open air, but it's an immensely freeing one. Knowing that in Christ you are forgiven and redeemed will bring joy and fresh resolve to follow Jesus even more closely. The words of Psalm 139 will bring greater and greater comfort and strength the more we submit to the cleansing power of the Spirit.

Respond

- Consider memorizing verses 23–24 and praying them every day for the next week.
- As God brings any “offensive ways” to mind, ask his forgiveness, repent, and allow him to lead you in a new direction. If it's appropriate, tell a trusted Christian friend your struggle and ask for prayer.