

Good morning everyone, it's great to be with you all again. And it's great to have our Rwanda team back, and our Mexico team back. Some of you have been away already this Summer, and others of you are just heading out on vacation before September hits.

Naomi, Luke, Anna and I will be leaving tomorrow for three weeks. We're off to Whistler first, then to Osoyoos, and finally to Cranbrook to visit my older brother and his family. My running gear is all ready, my bathing suit is packed, and I've got 3 or 4 good books to read; I'm looking forward to a lot of fun on our vacation. And later tonight, Naomi and I are going on a date to celebrate the launch of our vacation: a nice dinner, and a walk on the West Van. seawall...it's going to be great!

But before any of that transpires, I've got one last pastoral responsibility; I have a message to preach from Psalm 139. If you have a Bible with you, please turn there with me; if you will be using the Blue Bible in front of you, you can find our text on page 974.

If you were here last week, you heard me preach on Psalm 88. Psalm 88 is a psalm of lament, in fact, it is the darkest of all of the lament psalms. And there's no fairy-tail-ending to Psalm 88; the author's difficulty isn't neatly wrapped up with a "happily ever after." When the psalm ends, he is surrounded by darkness, but with a faith hanging on by its fingertips, he is still praying, knowing that God is with him.

I said last week that we need Psalm 88 in our Bible, because until Jesus returns, we will experience these kind of moments. And in those moments we need to know how to pray and what we can pray when lament fills our soul.

Already this Summer we've covered some wisdom psalms, some lament psalms, a psalm of reorientation, and a thanksgiving psalm; there are so many different kinds of psalms in the Bible because there are so many different seasons of the soul.

Psalm 139 is likely a favourite for many of you; it's a Psalm that many of us have read devotionally for many years. And because it's so familiar, I want to warn you in advance: you may not hear anything new this morning...but then that's not really the purpose of preaching is it? The purpose of preaching is to faithfully tell and re-tell the story of God.

Psalm 139 is an extended meditation on God's attributes and I'd like to read it to you as we begin.

*You have searched me, Lord, 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 with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.*

*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. 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, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

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

*If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty! They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies. 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.*

Theology, properly defined, is the study of God's nature and character. But unlike other subjects, like biology, or chemistry, the study of God was never meant to take place in a sterile laboratory. In theology, our subject is a Person, the Person from whom all of life continues to flow.

Psalm 139 is theology that breaks out in doxology; that is, study that leads to worship. Psalm 139 is theology expressed through poetry, through song, through prayer. It's beautiful, it's rich with metaphor and merism, it's intensely personal.

To begin, I'd like to briefly outline the structure of this psalm. Psalm 139 divides nicely into four stanzas of six verses each (vs. 1-6, 7-12, 13-18, 19-24), and each of these stanzas communicates one essential attribute about God. What I'd like to do this morning is to walk through this psalm--stanza by stanza--and discover fuel for our worship, and hear a challenge to grow.

**1. Vs. 1-6: God knows all there is to know about us (and He loves us).**

In vs. 1-6, one common attribute appears--God knows all there is to know about us (and He loves us). *"You have searched me, Lord, 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 with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me."*

Merism is a rhetorical device that Hebrew poets were particularly fond of, and we see it all throughout this psalm. *You know when I sit and when I rise; You discern my going out and my lying down.* In merism, an author uses two extremes, in order to communicate that everything in between is also in view. God knows when we sit and when we rise, but He also knows when we're working, playing, resting, reading, running, or tweeting. God even knows our thoughts before we formulate them. There is no limit to God's knowledge.

In vs. 1, David says, *"You have searched me, Lord, and you know me."* This word "search" is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe a

searching out of a city, or the investigation of an issue.<sup>1</sup> But unlike a private investigator, God’s searching, His knowledge of us, is born out of an intense love for us.

God searches us, much like a person in love searches out their beloved--they want to know everything (favourite food, favourite colour, what makes them laugh, what makes them unique). In so many ways, love is in the details, and God is no different: because of His great love for us, He lives with a concentrated attention on us.

Let me ask you, the fact that God knows all there is to know about you, does this make you feel secure, or does it make you nervous? Does this knowledge lead you to peace, or does it make you want to run away?

I would suggest it all depends. It all depends on what you believe about God. But if the thought of an all-knowing God makes you want to bolt, you’re not alone, David’s next stanza pursues this theme.

**2. vs. 7-12: God is present everywhere we go.**

The attribute that emerges from vs. 7-12 is that God is present everywhere we go. *Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. 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, your right hand will hold me fast.*

Francis Thompson, a 19th century French poet, once wrote a poem based on these verses. In it he described God as being the One who pursues, he entitled the poem, “*The Hound of Heaven*”. He writes,

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways, of my own mind;  
and in the mist of tears I hid from Him*

Francis speaks of hearing feet following after him, the feet of God. He writes,

*“But with unhurrying chase, and unperturbéd pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
They beat—and a Voice beat... ‘Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me.’”*

Is it possible to escape God? To find a place where we might live our own lives and do what we like apart from His presence? David pursues this train of thought but comes to the conclusion that no such place exists.

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<sup>1</sup> John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms: Psalms Volume 3: Psalms 90-150*, 629.

The Scriptures teach that God is **infinite** when it comes to space; He's not limited to being in one space at a time. Millard Erickson writes that "it is improper to think of God as confined to space at all...God is the one who brought space into being. **He was** before there **was** space".<sup>2</sup>

And God is also infinite when it comes to time. Erickson writes, "God is the one who always is. He was, he is, he will be."<sup>3</sup> It's not that God is unaware of time, it's that He stands outside of it. And because God stands outside of time, what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen--all of these are present to God simultaneously. He fills every space, every time, in every way.

God knows all there is to know about us and He's present everywhere we go. But once again, does this make you feel secure, or does it make you nervous? It all depends on what you believe about God.

Verse 10 says, "*if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.*" "God's right hand" is a metaphor that is regularly used to convey the idea of strength, guidance, or favour. Whether you realize it or not, God holds on to our lives, He sustains, He guides, He protects.

**Illus:** The first time I got Luke up on a bike without training wheels, he was really afraid. So here's what I did: I grabbed a big handful of his t-shirt, nice and tight, and I told him "*I've got you Luke*". As he

began to pedal, I began to run, the faster he pedaled, the faster I ran; and all the while his t-shirt never slipped from my clenched right hand. Jesus is like that...because of His great love, He holds us fast. *How fast do you think Jesus can run? How strong is His grip?*

We can burry ourselves in other pursuits (work, relationships, pleasure, substances); sometimes we attempt to outrun Jesus, sometimes we simply ignore Him. But when the silence comes and we are finally alone with our thoughts...Jesus is there...He's calling, He's beckoning, He's coming for us.

Make no mistake, Jesus is pursuing you, but it's not to punish; His is the pursuit of love. Psalm 23:6 says, "*Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life*". A more direct translation would read "*Surely your goodness and love will **pursue** me all the days of my life*".

When we are running from Jesus, He's running after us...and He's much faster than we are. The smartest thing we can do is stop running and turn around. Why do we run from the One who loves us most and best?

The fear of intimacy, even intimacy with God, is connected to the fear of rejection. Have you ever thought to yourself, "*if my friend/spouse/parent/boss knew the real me, they would walk away*"? *If my congregation knew that how unfinished I am, if they knew my fears, and doubts, would they want me as their pastor?*

<sup>2</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 299.

<sup>3</sup> Erickson, 300.

The fear of rejection shuts us down and shut others out. We run, we hide, we build walls; we pretend to be something we're not, we present a better version of ourselves...one that we hope others will believe and accept.

The challenge from this stanza is to stop running, stop hiding, stop pretending...it's making us miserable isn't it? *Why resist the One who loves us most and best?* God is the only person in the universe who has no illusions about you; what He sees (everything) is what He gets. He knows all there is to know about you, and He loves you...He's pursuing you, and He'll grab hold of your shirt and hold you fast if you'll let Him.

In the third stanza, David moves to praise. The God who knows everything, the God who is present everywhere, is the same God who has been involved in his life from the very beginning.

**3. vs. 13-18: God has created us with great care and affection.**

The attribute that emerges from vs. 13-18 is that God has created us with great care and affection.

**Illus:** Can I tell you a story? When Naomi was pregnant with Luke, we went in for our 19 week ultrasound. Naomi was ambivalent about finding out whether we were having a boy or a girl, but I really wanted to know.

We didn't have a preference, but I remember Naomi being a little bit nervous about the thought of having a boy. What would she do with a boy? Would she be able to play sports with him? How would she

relate? Would they have anything in common? These are some of the thoughts of a first-time mom.

Our 15 minute appointment with the ultrasound tech, ranks up there among the best moments of my life. I'm not sure I had ever been so grateful to God for science and technology. Before walking in that room, I knew my wife was pregnant; she was great with child and she was stunning.

But the ability to look inside Naomi's womb--to see our child, to behold this miracle of life was simply breathtaking! Science and technology doesn't disprove God, it doesn't make God less incredible, it can reveal just how incredible He is. What a Creator!

As the technician waved her techno-wand over Naomi's womb, we saw the profile of our child, we saw a perfectly formed spine, we saw the four chambers of the heart working in unison, we saw little fingers and toes, we saw that we were having a boy, and we saw something else...something precious, something just for Naomi, something only God could have known she needed to see.

Naomi was nervous about having a boy--would she be able to relate, would they have anything in common? But as we watched this baby boy twist and turn inside her womb, at one point we saw Luke's profile, and he was clearly sucking his thumb...just like Naomi had done when she was a small child. Her heart soared--*he's just like me!* God's gifts can be so personal, so specific.

When I say that God knows all there is to know about you, I'm saying more than you might think. Yes, He knows when you were born, He knows where you've been, where your going, what you will

do and say in every moment. But His knowing of us is so much more personal. He knows our unique personalities, He knows what makes us laugh, He knows our unspoken dreams, He knows what makes us fearful, He knows.

And why wouldn't He? God created us, He's has been involved from the very beginning. In fact, the Bible tells us that God was involved before there was a beginning. Ephesians 1:4 says, "*Even before He made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ*".<sup>4</sup> Before space and time, we were chosen. Doesn't that blow your mind?

Psalm 139:16 says, "*all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*" Verse 16 begins by saying "*Your eyes saw my unformed body,*" and one scholar translates these words creatively, saying "*Your eyes saw me as an embryo*".<sup>5</sup> God sees everything, even inside a mother's womb, and He cares about all that He sees.

There are two words that David uses that I want to draw your attention to, one is in vs. 13 and the other in vs. 15. The two words are "*knit*" and "*woven*;" God knit us together in our mother's womb, our body was woven together. These words don't point to an assembly-line, they point to the personal touch of an Artist. David is not naive about where babies come from but he knows that God stands behind the entire biological process.

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<sup>4</sup> New Living Translation.

<sup>5</sup> Goldingay, 635.

And with the gift of science, we have so much more to marvel at than David did. Think about all that happens between conception and birth. Did you know that there are 120,000 km's of blood vessels inside of us, and at least 50 trillion cells? Did you know that if you unwrapped all the DNA, from all of the cells in your body, it could reach to the moon and back 3000 times? Did you know that 99.9% of our DNA sequencing is exactly the same as every other human being on the planet? That means that only .1% accounts for the massive differences in height, skin colour, the shape of our ears, the size of our feet, etc.

Up until verse 16, David has been thinking thoughts about God, but in vs. 17 he stops abruptly, staggered by the immensity of God's thoughts toward him. If God is this invested in the details of our bodies, how much more in the rest of our lives? God's thoughts towards us are too many to count.

The challenge that comes from this stanza is to give thanks for how we've been made. How often do we wish we were someone else? If only I was taller, shorter, thinner, or thicker? Girls with straight hair pine after curly hair, girls with curly hair pine after straight hair, and bald men would be perfectly happy with either!

You have been knit together, God has woven your life together, you are unique, one of a kind; God has created you with great care and affection.

**4. vs. 19-24: God's purity calls us out of the muck and mire.**

The final attribute emerges in the final stanza; it has to do with God's purity: His purity calls us to set our feet onto His path towards righteousness.

I have to be honest with you, vs. 19-22 make me feel uncomfortable; they are easier to dismiss than to understand. After speaking of the God that knows everything about us, the God that is present everywhere, the God who knit us together...David expresses anger, even hatred, towards those who speak about God with malice in their hearts. His passion and zeal for God come out. Is God not glorious? Is He not worthy of obedience, honour, and worship?

Fortunately, God is not as quick to anger as David; Jesus proved just how persevering God is in His love for us. Jesus came to pursue humanity with His love, friends and enemies alike. Jesus takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked; instead, He rejoices when they turn from their ways and set their feet on His right path.<sup>6</sup>

It would be easy to end this psalm after vs. 18; we could all go home quite happy about the fact that God's knows us, He is with us, and He has created us. But the conclusion of this psalm reminds us that God pursues us with a purpose...that we might know Him, enjoy Him, and follow Him. We are called to a life of obedient purity.

David ends his psalm with an implicit question: *God, what about me...are my feet set on Your path? God search me, sift me, lead me...I want to follow.*

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<sup>6</sup> Ezekiel 18:23.

**The Lord's Supper:** I began this message saying that the purpose of preaching is not to offer something new but to faithfully tell and re-tell God's story; I've tried to do that this morning. And as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper, let me tell you the best story of all...the story that got us here.

When God created the world, everything He made was perfectly ordered and harmonious. But humanity's attempt to live independently from God, went horribly wrong; we rejected God in the name of "freedom" but our rebellion only brought us slavery to sin and death.

But the God who knows all there is to know about us, who fills every space and time in every way, the God who created us, took on our flesh and blood so that He could redeem us and restore the cosmos to the wholeness He planned from the beginning.

Jesus came, He died on the cross, and He rose again to life. When He died, He died bearing our sin; when He rose again to life, He made a way for us to experience new life, eternal life.

Every time we eat this bread, we are reminded that Jesus' body was broken for us; He died in our place. Every time we partake of this cup, we are reminded that His blood was shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

God loves us, and when He pursues us, He goes all the way, even to death. This morning as you come to partake, do so knowing that you were created with purpose and you were saved for a purpose.