

### 3. The God We Cannot Escape: He made us and will finish his work

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[ 0 : 00 ] Let's see if we could turn again to page 521 in the Bibles. This afternoon we're going to be looking at verses 13 to 18 of the psalm, but once again we'll read the whole psalm so that we can see how these verses fit in.

The God We Cannot Escape is the general title, and today the title is He Made Us and Will Finish His Work. So let's read the psalm, Psalm of David. O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high. I cannot attain it. Where shall I go from your spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there.

[ 1 : 13 ] If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.

If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me and the light about me be night, even the darkness is not dark to you. For the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

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. Wonderful are your works.

My soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, but 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.

[ 2 : 15 ] How precious 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 I am still with you.

O that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me! They speak against you with malicious intent. Your enemies take your name in vain. Do not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and do I not loathe those who rise up against you.

I hate them with complete hatred. I count them my enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my thoughts. And see if there be any grievous way in me.

And lead me in the way everlasting. May God bless that reading to our hearts. He made us. And he will finish his work.

Now those of you who have brought up children, or any of you who are bringing up children at the moment, or indeed any of you who are young enough to remember when you were children, there comes an age in children's lives when white-eyed innocence begins to be replaced by a kind of world-weary cynicism.

[ 3 : 27 ]     Around about the age of eight to nine or ten, sometimes even five or six nowadays. And when my own children were that age a long time ago, we took them to visit the Eureka Museum in Halifax in Yorkshire.

And I think they were ten and eight at that time. And they went round the museum with that kind of sophisticated look that only children of that age can have, looking thoroughly bored and wondering when are we going to go home.

Until we came to a particular section of the museum called Me and My Body, which is a wonderfully detailed and intricate and beautifully presented museum on the presentation of how the human body works.

As they looked at the working models, as they looked at the diagrams, they became absolutely fascinated. The cynicism dropped and they became simply absorbed. And so did we.

And I could not help thinking of this verse in Psalm 139, verse 14. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

[ 4 : 41 ]     Wonderful are your works. Now, I am no scientist. I know nothing at all about these kinds of things. But I do remember the fascination of seeing the models of the blood circulating through the human body, how the various bones were joined together, and the various ways in which this intricate estate, I suppose, that we call the human body actually works.

Now, so far in the Psalm, up to verse 12, the Psalmist has been concerned with space, with the vastness of space, the size of the universe, the wonder of the creator.

Now he's turning to time and to the wonder of human life and the human body. And this is at the very heart of the Bible's view of creation.

If you go back to Genesis 1, God created space. God created the universe. Or as the text says, God created the heavens and the earth, which is the Hebrew way of talking about what we would call the universe.

But whatever else the seven days means, it surely means that God also created time. In other words, he made creatures who are to inhabit these twin dimensions of space and time.

[ 5 : 54 ]     And the created order reflects that. And that's one of the major points of the creation stories and the creation passages in Scripture, that they are adapted to people who live in space and time.

We can't know everything. Moses tells in the book of Deuteronomy, the hidden things belong to the Lord our God. There are so many things we don't know. And yet, what this Psalm is saying is that wherever we may be in that vast universe, whatever stage we may be in our human lives, God is there.

And he's speaking to us now in these verses, verses 13 to 18, about our bodies and about time. And indeed beyond this, as we'll see in a moment or two. And really, there's two parts here.

Verses 13 to 16, the psalmist thoughts of God. So let's look at that first of all. Verses 13 to 16, the psalmist thoughts of God.

Now, you may say, well, why begin with the psalmist thoughts of God? But remember, we're not beginning. The psalmist has had revealed to him the greatness and the wonder and the majesty of God in the first 12 verses.

[ 7 : 08 ]     And now he's turning to reflect on that. In the early verses, he's been shown two things, the greatness of God and the vulnerability and fragility of humans.

But more than that, he's been shown that the answer to our vulnerability, the answer to our frailty, is in that greatness and majesty of God. We need a God who is bigger than us.

We need a God who is in charge. We need a God who is in control. Not like what a modern poet, W.A. Henley, wrote. It matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll.

I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul. Now, I would find that terrifying if I thought I were the master of my fate and the captain of my soul.

The mess I would make of it and the disasters that would follow that. But the psalmist knows that's not true. The psalmist knows that God is the master of his fate. God is the captain of his soul.

[ 8 : 13 ] So, as a psalmist thinks of God in verses 13 to 16, there are two particular aspects of God that he draws attention to. And the first one is God's amazing care and amazing attention to detail.

If you like, in verses 1 to 12, we've had the broad brush, the big sweep, the big picture. Now we are turning into the minutiae, the little details.

And the psalmist is answering the question that must often arise. How can a God as great as that possibly care for me? How can he even care for this planet, a remote planet circling a tiny star?

How on earth can he be interested in that? And the psalmist is saying here that God's care for the human being is as great as his care for the galaxies, as great as his care for the whole march of history, and so on.

Now, on a human level, often people are broad brush, but not very concerned with detail. Or on the other hand, they're terribly concerned with detail and don't see the big picture.

[ 9 : 22 ] But even in human terms, you have a really great artist or composer or painter. You get a blend of the two, don't you? A really great author like Shakespeare not only gives you the broad sweep, but the little details as well.

But in God's case, it's a perfect blend. God isn't so concerned about the march of history that he's unconcerned about your job and your relationships and your joys and your sorrows.

A young astronomer who was very gifted at his studies found his faith wavering as he peered into the universe and the galaxies revealed by the powerful radio telescopes and knowing there were galaxies beyond that, which even the most powerful telescopes couldn't penetrate.

His faith wavered. He began to wonder, how can, if there is a God, he be interested in me? Then he turned to the microscope, looked at a drop of water, looked at a grain of sand, and saw in these tiny, tiny little objects another universe as intricate, as detailed, as complicated as the macro universe.

And he realized that that God up there was also the God down here, the God who cared. So, it's his amazing care for detail. And notice verse 16.

[ 10 : 51 ] In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me. Well, as yet there were none of them. A careful and accurate detail. Very often the Bible talks about God's book and God's records.

Indeed, in the last judgment of the book of Revelation, the books are opened. Now, all human records make mistakes. But in this record, there's no missing details, there's no false entries, there's no distortion.

And we're told elsewhere that not only are we written in his book, we're written on his hands and in his heart. You see, this is not the language of philosophy, this is the language of worship.

So, as the psalmist thinks of God, first of all, he thinks of God's amazing care for detail. And secondly, he thinks of God's care over the whole of human existence.

Verse 15. My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the ends of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance. Even before our mothers were fully aware of our existence, God knew all about us.

[ 12 : 04 ] He was at work. The depths of the earth here is a metaphor, a picture for the hiddenness and the mystery of the womb. Now, modern scientists know an awful lot more about the process of birth, the actual description of what happens than the ancient world did.

But it's still a great mystery. A great mystery that life can be created in that way. And sure, this has a great deal to say about debates on abortion and embryology and so on.

When does a human being become a human being? Now, according to this, Sam, according to the Bible, a human being is already a human being as an embryo.

Not just when we're born. It's right from the beginning. It's not... I was going to say from cradle to grave. It's not from cradle to grave. It's from womb to grave that God is concerned with.

And when we think about our biblical response to these ethical questions about abortion and so on, we must remember this is how the Bible speaks about it.

[ 13 : 11 ] It speaks about a human being. The fetus is a human being, same as we are, and as much an object of God's care. That's the first thing then. The first few verses, verses 13 to 16, the psalmist thoughts of God.

And then in verses 17 to 18, God's thoughts of the psalmist. How precious are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! What a piece of work is a man, said Hamlet.

And David is realizing that if God has gone to this trouble to make us, he's going to finish the work. That's why I entitled this, not just he made us, but he will finish his work.

Just as he will finish his work in the whole universe, as he will create a new heaven and a new earth, so he will finish his work with humans. Now first of all, this is not abstract providence.

I talked earlier on about how theologians use words like omniscience and omnipresence, which are all very well, but they suggest that God's a collection of abstract nouns.

[ 14 : 22 ] And similarly, providence, which is a great word, can also suggest that. I think it's Dorothy Sayers in one of her plays. An old lady is consoled for some disaster that has happened to her and said, oh, these are the ways of providence, said the person talking to her.

And she said, I don't know who providence is. I've never heard of providence, but there's one above that will teach providence a thing or two. And I think the psalmist would have understood that. It's not what will be, will be.

This is not an abstract law. We're not on a tram line. Basically, this is a personal God who made us and cares for us.

So it's not abstract promises. If I could count them, they are more than the sand. And I think that's an echo of the earlier promise to Abraham.

Your descendants will be as the sand on the seashore. If you can count the sand, then you can count your descendants. God's thoughts. We need revelation.

[ 15 : 28 ] We need the Bible to tell us about God's thoughts. Isaiah says in chapter 55, your thoughts are not my thoughts, nor your ways my ways. That's why that chapter, which we may look at some other Wednesday lunchtime, that's why that chapter tells us about the word of God which comes down from heaven and works in our hearts and works throughout history and works in the earth so that we can know him.

So that's the first thing. It's not abstract. Providence. But the second thing is it's not simply confined to this life. Look at the last phrase. I awake and I am still with you.

Now, many of the commentators take I awake to mean the daily experience of awakening when life and light come back to us and we jump up happy and ready to face the morning and if you believe that, then anyway.

But, now there is truth in that because we need to thank God for the daily miracle of life and the daily miracle of light after the darkness.

But it seems to me to be far much more than that. When I awake, I am still with you. An earlier Psalm of David, Psalm 17, says this, when I will be satisfied when I awake with your likeness.

[ 16 : 52 ] That didn't happen in this world to David. It won't happen in this world to us. The full likeness belongs to the world to come. And it seems to me that what the Psalmist is saying here is that even beyond this we will wake in the true light of his presence.

And that song we sang at the beginning is really echoing this in verse 4. After death in distant worlds the glorious theme renewed throughout eternity O Lord a joyful song I will raise but O eternities too short to utter all your praise.

So we are looking to the morning of resurrection. We are looking to the time when God will finish his work. Now this is talking about the people whom God is already working in transforming him into his likeness.

We will come back to that next week. Indeed if we simply take verse 18 to mean that you awake every morning and see the light then the last part of the Psalm is simply incomprehensible.

Some people have talked to me already about their unease with verse 22 I hate them with complete hatred they are my enemies. I have something to say about that next week. But you see what I am saying is the Psalmist is now introducing us to the world beyond death.

[ 18 : 16 ] And I think as we finish let me just say this one of the things this Psalmist is saying is that however important this life is and this life is enormously important after all that Psalm makes it clear God takes such care about us about our bodies and our whole lives the task will never be finished in this world but the task will be completed gloriously in the world beyond.

I awake and I am still with you the Apostle John in his first letter puts it in a different way when we see him we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is and at the moment we are journeying towards that full likeness so that's the first thing the world is important but the world to come is more important and the second thing is this whatever stage of life we may be at I think I can safely say we are all between the embryo and the grave but whichever stage we may be at that this God cares equally he cared about you in the past he cares for you now he cares for you in the future he cannot love you any more than he does now and he will never love you less that's a God to trust in is it not?

let's pray how precious to me are your thoughts oh God how vast is the sum of them Father we are amazed as we read this psalm as we think so often of the way in which we very often despise ourselves and despise others and we are humbled and challenged as we think of the way in which you the creator care for us and we pray that we may live the rest of our lives shaped and increasingly made into the likeness of Christ that great conviction in mind Amen Amen