

4. The God We Cannot Escape: He leads us to eternal life

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[0 : 00] Now if you'd like to turn to page 521 in the Bibles please, and we'll read the psalm, Psalm 139. This is our fourth study in this psalm, and I've given it the general title of the God we cannot escape.

And this week we're going to be particularly looking at the last verses, verses 19 to 24, that this God leads us to eternal life. Once again we're going to read the whole psalm so that we can see these verses in their context.

Psalm 139, to the choir master, a 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?

[1 : 13] Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. 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. The night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

For you formed my inward part. 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, and 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. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!

[2 : 20] 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. Oh, 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 will be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. That is the word of God, and that is a splendid and wonderful psalm, which we have been studying over these past weeks.

Many of you will have heard of the great Baptist preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon, who ministered in London in the later part of the 19th century, ministering to many, many thousands of people.

[3 : 25] Indeed, on Sunday morning, it was a very common sight at the Thames to see crowds and crowds and crowds of well-dressed people waiting for the barges to take them across, and the boatman would often say, going over the water to Charlie because he was a well-known institution in London.

Now, in his earlier days, he came from the Cambridge area, and he ministered in the village of Waterbeach, just on the outskirts of Cambridge. In those days, he used to have services in the afternoon, as well as in the morning and the evening.

One afternoon, Spurgeon was preaching in another little village in the Cambridge Fenland. It was a very, very hot day, the kind of day I sometimes remember having experienced before I came to Glasgow.

Very, very, a very, very hot day. The roof, it was a tin chapel they were in, and many of the attendees had lunched rather well.

And Spurgeon, writing characteristically vividly, said, the effects of the roast beef and the stale air worked wonderfully on a large red-faced farmer who was sitting in the front row.

[4 : 39] And not very long into Spurgeon's sermon, this farmer fell asleep and began to snore noisily. Now, Spurgeon was not the kind of man to put up with that, and he stopped and shouted, Fire!

Fire! Fire! And the farmer woke up and said, Where is the fire? In hell, replied Spurgeon, for sinners who slumber when the Saviour is offered to them.

A wake-up call, surely. This man had been slumbering comfortably, probably vaguely aware in the background of Spurgeon's voice. They had probably sung rousing hymns and so on.

Now, these last verses of Psalm 139 are definitely a wake-up call. Oh, that you would slay the wicked, O God.

Verse 19. This is too abrupt for many of the commentators. They don't like it. They don't like either the abrupt change and they don't like what it says. And many say this is an ill-tempered addition to the psalm.

[5 : 43] The psalmist, from thinking wonderful thoughts about God, has now become petty and vindictive, and they particularly dislike verses 21 and 22.

Now, is this a digression? Well, it's clearly not because the psalm hangs together. Verse 1. You have searched and known me. And that's repeated in verse 23.

Search me, O God, and know my heart. This psalm has obviously been composed to flow very naturally from the beginning. You have searched and known me.

And the psalmist is now facing the implications of that and saying, Lord, I want you to do for me what I know that you do. So, clearly, this cannot be a digression.

And the other thing is this. There's a danger of reading this psalm in a kind of dreamlike way. So, you notice the language is beautiful. The language is soothing. The kind of thing you could read with Pekalbel or Nimrod playing in the background and feel very, feel yourself being gently, gently wafted away into some kind of Cloud Cuckoo Land.

[6 : 55] Wonderful phrases about the wings of the morning and so on. In other words, it's something you could read and not actually be challenged by. The problem about that is we are forgetting that the fall has taken place, that humans are sinful, that there is evil in the world.

Now, that's hinted at, of course, in verse 7. Where shall I flee from your spirit or where shall I flee from your presence? Which recalls Genesis 3.

And then I suggested already that last week, that verse 18, I awake and I am still with you, doesn't simply refer to the daily waking every day, but to the waking after death into the world to come.

So, the psalmist has now reached a point where a choice has got to be made. If all these things about God are true, then we've got to do something about it.

In other words, it's not just a theory. As I said already, if all this psalm teaches great truths about God, they've got to be careful not simply to distance themselves from us. God is omnipresent. Oh, that's great.

[8 : 06] That's wonderful. That means, of course, that God is watching me every moment and knows what I do. God is omniscient. Wonderful, once again. But that means God knows all about me.

God cares for me from the embryo to the grave. Now, all these things, these great truths, have to be faced and a decision has to be made.

It, of course, is true. The language is beautiful. The language is wonderful. The language is comforting. But, it's only comforting if we are going to face up to the realities.

I want to talk about two things in these verses. First of all, the psalmist talks about dangers from the outside, verses 19 to 22. Why is it that if all these things about God are true, if creation is so wonderful, if God's care is so persistent and consistent, why is it there is so much suffering and evil in the world?

See, that's the problem about if we stop at verse 18. We've simply got a statement which is true but doesn't always correspond to our experience.

[9 : 17] And, David says, the problem is the wicked. Oh, that you would slay the wicked, O God. Now, who are the wicked?

Now, we first meet these in Psalm 1 at the very beginning of the Psalter where two ways are represented. There is the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked.

Now, that doesn't mean the way of the goody goodies and the way of the ne'er-do-wells. That means that the way of the wicked is those who reject and ignore and despise and disobey the word of God.

The way of the righteous is those who obey, who carry it out in their lives and who speak about it. And those who accept the righteous, Mosemus tells, like trees nourished by flowing water.

In other words, they enjoy this wonderful creation that God has made and they become part of that creation which is going to lead to the new creation. And then the psalmist says in Psalm 1, not so the wicked because the wicked end up like chaff.

[10 : 28] They end up as nothing. They end up in total insignificance and destruction because they are defying God. So that's the background of the wicked. And David, I think, as he talks about the dangers from the outside, outside, says two things.

First of all, we cannot have the blessings of the psalm. We can't have all these wonderful truths in the first 18 verses if the wicked remain unpunished.

It's not just suddenly, oh, you would slay the wicked, oh God, lots of people I don't like and wish you'd get rid of them. That's not the point. The point is, if the wicked, that is to say, those who choose the way of death, those in fact who follow the way of the devil himself, if they remain unpunished, then we are never going to enjoy the new heaven and the new earth.

Oh, men of blood, men of violence, and once again, back in the book of Genesis, which is where so much of the background of this comes, violence is one of the reasons why God sends the judgment of the flood.

We must tremble as we think of the increasing violence of our society, because our society is frightening if you can't walk down the streets without fear.

[11 : 46] And that, of course, doesn't just happen in difficult areas and cities. That happens in many pleasant rural villages. Violence can have no place in the new creation, in the new heaven and the new earth.

It's not just, it's also evil speaking. They speak against you with malicious intent, and they take your name in vain. Taking your name in vain, of course, is an echo of the commandment, you will not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

So you see what's happening here? It's people who are dethroning God. People who are basically, effectively saying, we don't believe God is the kind of God that verses 1 to 18 speaks about.

We don't believe that he cares. We don't believe he judges. We don't believe in God at all, actually. And these people who have turned away from God eventually create hell rather than heaven.

You see, if the present situation of mixed good and ill continues forever, then basically God has failed, hasn't he? God must punish the wicked.

[12 : 55] God must get rid of sin before his wonderful new creation. You can read about that in the book of Revelation. No sin, no suffering, no death, before all these things have to be removed so that the blessings of this great Sam can be experienced without the presence of evil.

There's no place for such attitudes and behavior in the new creation. That's what David is saying. David, as I say, is not being spiteful. He's not being petty. This is nothing personal.

This is basically saying God has set out his laws. God has given us the prospect of salvation.

God calls us to repent. Unless we do so, we're going to be judged. But what about verse 21 and 22, which causes people some uneasiness?

Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? Do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred. I count them my enemies. Now think about that for a minute.

[14 : 02] if what I said about verses 19 and 20 are true, if God hates evil, if God judges sin, then what is our attitude to be?

Are we going to take a more indulgent attitude than God? Are we going to go, I know God doesn't like sin, but we can live with it. It's not too bad. And that tends to be the attitude that many people take.

But do you see what's happening when we do that? We are actually claiming to be more generous than God. We are actually claiming to be kinder than God.

And there is a kind of pseudo-spirituality that likes that. You know, we are kind, we are generous. And the implication is, it's awfully embarrassing the way God uses words like hate and judge and so on.

We don't like it. What the psalmist is saying is not, this is not personal spite. This is seeing the world from God's perspective, realizing that in the end there is no middle ground.

[15:10] Realizing that in the end there are righteous and wicked. And as I say, those who are righteous are those who have accepted the grace of God who have recognized that they are the wicked.

After all, all of us, all of us who are Christian, are part of the wicked. We were, we rebelled against God. We needed to be changed.

And similarly, the wicked, the best way, of course, of defeating the wicked is actually seeing them converted. And that, of course, is part of what, not part of, that is what the church is about.

Bringing the gospel of salvation to those who are outside so that they may become inside. That's the point. It's not personal spite. And right from the beginning of the Bible, right from Genesis 3, right from the fall, there are two ways.

We're either following God's way or we're following the serpent's way. We're following the devil's way. And this is the ultimate response to the earlier part of the psalm.

[16:13] The earlier part of the psalm was so wonderful. The earlier part of the psalm was so beautiful. But if we're truly going to enjoy that, that then we need to make a choice.

Way back in Psalm 1, remember the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. One which leads to life, one which leads to death. We cannot be more generous than God.

See, as Lewis says, that I often used to think if I were God, I would do everything I possibly could to save people from hell.

And then he says, I realize how foolish a thing that was to say, God has already done everything he possibly can. God did not spare his own son.

God sent his son to die for us. God sent his son to rescue us from judgment. And as Paul says in Romans, while we were still sinners, while we were still the wicked, Christ died for us.

[17:14] And if we reject that, there can be nothing but judgment. Because there is a way back to God. There is a way in which the wicked can become the righteous. And there is only one way.

So that's dangers from the outside. The psalmist looks out and basically says, well, the world would be wonderful if it were always like verses 1 to 18. It's not always like that. But one day it will.

And one day it will because what destroys it will be removed. But secondly, there's dangers from within. Verse 23 and 24, dangers from inside. Search me, O God, and know my heart.

And here we return to the opening verses of the psalm. And we recognize that life with God will not happen automatically. We must make a choice.

Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. So two things. First of all, the psalmist wants to be in step with God. That's why he repeats these great truths about God with which he began the psalm.

[18:17] God, I know you search me, but I really want almost, I almost want to cooperate in that search. I don't want to hide things away. I don't want to be reluctant.

I want you to search me and try me, test me, and know my heart. And this word know in the Bible isn't just know about.

The word know in the Bible is the great covenant word. In other words, have a relationship with me, Lord. God in heaven, I want to have a relationship with you.

Try me and know my thoughts. These aren't just abstract ideas. And thoughts here, in a sense, have to do with, particularly with, troubled thoughts.

That's what the Hebrew word means. We'll come back to that in a minute. See what David is saying. David is saying, God, you're totally honest and open with me. You're totally true with me.

[19:16] I desperately want to be open and honest with you. Now, the one place we cannot hide is when we are in prayer before God. But even there, of course, the devil tries to tempt us.

Even there. You know, so often, when we are praying, at least, maybe you're not like me, but I often try to make excuses almost as if God, almost say, well, Lord, if you knew how difficult it was for me, you'd be kinder on me.

We can be absolutely certain that God knows exactly what it is about us. Indeed, he knows certain things that we don't know. That's the first thing. He wants to be in step with God. But the second thing is, he wants to be godly both inside and outside.

In other words, he wants to be godly in his thought life and in his actual behavior. Now, an earlier psalm, Psalm 24, speaks about that, clean hands, which is outward behavior, and a pure heart, which is inward thinking.

The heart in the Bible is the seat of the personality. Basically, he says, God, I want me to be true to you. Not just my heart in the sense of an organ.

[20 : 26] I want to be yours, Lord. I want to be all, basically, all of me given to all of you. That's what he's saying. And my thoughts, the whole gamut of our inner world, our thought life, which is so important for all of us.

Let's say the word here could be translated misgivings, anxious thoughts, which basically means the fears and the worries that we struggle with.

And we noticed this earlier on in the psalm, the fear of darkness, the fear of the unknown, the fear of distance. And the way is the whole of our behavior, our plans, our actions, the things we do in which our thought life expresses itself.

But after all, if we're thinking about something, it will come out sooner or later, won't it? We all know the embarrassing situation where we blurt something out and then say, well, I didn't mean that. Everybody knows what everybody knows exactly, that we did mean that, but we didn't want other people to know it.

That's what we usually mean in these kind of circumstances. And lead me in the way everlasting, and the commentators point out this could simply be the ancient way, in which case he's talking about the Torah, the law of Moses, which guides him, but surely everlasting in the sense that the truths in that law, the truths in scripture, will last into eternity.

[21 : 51] This way will be, this way will last because God's words never fail. So you see how as we come to the end of the psalm, these disturbing little words, very far actually from being a digression, are basically saying, we want this to continue.

We don't want this experience of God simply to be fleeting, partial, and limited. We want to be led in the way everlasting. We want to be part of that glad and glorious new creation.

So as we end, I think if we are Christian, our response to this psalm must be rejoicing in God's love, rejoicing in his protection, rejoicing in his guidance, rejoicing in the glorious future.

If we are not, why not believe in him now and begin that journey that will lead you in the way everlasting. Amen.