

Thanks for the past, hope for the future

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[0 : 00] Page 521, 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? 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.

[1 : 08] 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 as 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 when 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! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand.

[2 : 10] 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 be any grievous way in me.

And lead me in the way everlasting. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to our hearts and our minds. Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at Psalm 139 on page 521.

And we'll ask the Lord's help as we look at this psalm together. Let's pray. O Lord, as we open your word, we pray indeed that you will search us and know us.

[3 : 16] That these words spoken long ago may not come to us simply as an echo of the past, but as the living word you are speaking to us today.

And as we draw near to you, we pray that you will most graciously draw near to us. That you will open your word to our hearts and minds. And that you will open our hearts and minds to your word. In Jesus' name. Amen. The best-selling author Bill Bryson, who has written a number of very readable books, wrote a book called *The Short History of Almost Everything*, the kind of book you can read and then pretend you know more than you do, because there is so much interesting information in the short pages.

This psalm I would describe as a short history, not of almost everything, but of absolutely everything. Some of the commentators say this psalm takes us from the cradle to the grave, from the womb to the tomb.

But he takes us far further than that. It goes back beyond the womb to the moment of conception. And it goes beyond the grave to the eternal world.

[4 : 40] So you see why I call it a short history of absolutely everything. There is no part of life that is untouched in this psalm. It's a very powerful word to us as we begin a new year.

There's no point in beginning the new year with a few resolutions, which will break by Monday or Tuesday. We need to begin the new year with big thoughts about God.

And that's what this psalm does. It gives us gigantic thoughts about God. It's described as the psalm of David. There is no indication in the psalm or in the title when this was written.

In our earlier studies in David, we've sometimes seen how the incidents in his life, particularly when he was hunted by Saul, are reflected in the psalms.

But there's no such incident here. However, this is a universal psalm. This is not just about David. It's about human life, about David's God.

[5 : 43] I would think probably quite late in David's life. These are the thoughts of a mature man reflecting on the goodness of God. Great is thy faithfulness, David would say undoubtedly.

So we're going to look at this psalm. I'm going to call this thanks for the past and hope for the future. Hope not in the sense of vaguely, I hope things will work out.

Hope in the Bible is always faith grasping on to the promises of God, to the certain promises of God. So the great realities of God and how these come down into our lives.

The psalm, I think, develops in four stages, in four acts, if you like. First of all, verses 1 to 6, God knows everything about us.

Lord, you have searched me and known me when I sit down, when I rise up. That's, if you like, the different part, the beginning and the ending of the day and everything in between.

[6 : 52] Both ends of the day, everything in between. The active, when I rise up, and the passive, when I sit down. This is not static.

Lord, you have searched me. The idea is of winnowing and sifting. The idea is of a kind of careful examination, which makes sure that everything is right.

You search at my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. My ways suggest my inner disposition, my temperament, if you like.

God doesn't just only know what you and I do. He knows our motives. He knows our temperament. He knows what makes us who we are, obviously because he made us who we are.

And verse 4 is even more astonishing. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. Now, with people you're close to, you can often anticipate what they're going to say or what they're thinking, even if they don't say it.

[8 : 01] But we can get it wrong, of course. We can make mistakes. But God doesn't get it wrong. God never gets us wrong.

You hem me in behind and before. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. Now, when you think about this, that God knows everything about us, there are two ways we can look at it.

In one sense, it can seem absolutely stifling. Is there nowhere I am? Nothing I do, not even anything I think or anything I say, which God doesn't know about.

And it can seem terribly stifling. It can seem terribly stifling, particularly if we want, actually, to be in places where we don't want God to know we are. Say things we'd rather God didn't hear.

That's one way to look at it. But I don't think that's the way David's looking at it. David is looking at this as enormously liberating. What David is saying is there is nothing in all my life, however trivial, however difficult, however obscure, that God doesn't know about.

[9 : 11] I can trust this God. I may get tired of him. He'll never get tired of me. And think about it. If God knows the words we are going to utter, the deeds we are going to carry out, this God is never going to give up on us, is he?

Sometimes Christians worry. Am I going to do something that's going to turn God away from me? No, says David. That's not going to happen. He knows it all anyway.

He loved you unconditionally in the past. He loves you unconditionally now. And that unconditional love will never leave you. God is faithful.

He will not tire of us. We're totally protected, hemmed in behind and before his hand is laid upon us. That's the first thing. The first great truth about God.

He knows everything about us better than we know ourselves. Because very often we don't understand ourselves, don't we? Very often we look into our hearts, into our motives, into our actions.

[10:18] I don't really understand myself. At least I'm like that anyway. You may be as well. But secondly, this idea is developed into a more active thought.

Verses 7 to 12. He pursues us wherever we are. You see, part of human rationality is to try to reason to God.

Look around at the world and then work out what kind of a God there would be. Now that's not utterly wrong. The heavens declare the glory of God. The sky shows his handiwork, says Psalm 19. But often this leads to fantasy. We have ideas about God which are simply not true. They're projections of our fantasies, projections of our fears, projections of our hopes.

Some of you may remember a program that was on television many years ago called Fantasy Island where the rich and the idol went to this island which was presided over by a sinister and suave figure called Mr. Rourke who promised to fulfill their fantasies.

[11:34] There's always a sting in the tail. Remember one in particular group of people who wanted to have a society that was totally moral and totally upright. And Mr. Rourke offered to give them that.

What happened was they ended up back in Salem, Massachusetts in the middle of witch hunts and found that although they thought they were moral and upright that they were part of the wicked who were being hunted.

There's always a sting in the tail in our fantasies. And the point is what David is saying is it's natural for humans not to seek God but to flee from God.

Where shall I go from your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? Right back in Genesis 3, the impetus, the impulse to flee and to hide from God.

Because we are sinful, we want to hide from him. It's not true that we are seeking God desperately. What is true is that we are often seeking a God who is a projection of our own fantasies.

[12:39] And David is saying nowhere, not even in the unseen realms, can we hide from this God.

Where shall I flee? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, the underworld, the unseen realm, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea.

This beautiful phrase, the light flooding over the oceans and continents as the morning dawns, kind of thing you can sometimes get little glimpses of on a long distance air flight as you're awake when the sun rises and you can see out on the landscape beneath you.

Light sweeping over. Humans flee from God, but God pursues humans. Even there, your hand shall lead me, verse 10, and your right hand shall hold me.

The Samus is saying something more, actually, than just that God pursues us everywhere. The Samus is saying, even when we arrive in these places, God is already there.

[13:52] There's no way we can run ahead of him. Notice the, your hand shall lead me, your right hand shall hold me. The hand of God, the right hand of God in Scripture is the power of God.

The power to save, the power to judge. Total protection. If I say the darkness shall cover me, darkness full of mystery, physical and mental, we cannot see, but God does.

And of course, it's natural to fear darkness and to fear distance. That's part of the, that's part of our vulnerable humanity, isn't it? You lie awake at night, particularly if the wind is howling, and all kinds of irrational fears come into your mind.

If I say, surely the darkness, verse 11, shall cover me, the light about will be night. Even the darkness is not dark to you. It's no accident that John describes the Christian life as walking in the light, where God is in the light.

God knows everything about us. God pursues us, verses 7 to 12. But in this, the Samus now turns from the vastness of space, the vastness of time, and he turns inward now to the, from the immensity of space and time to the inner world of the human body.

[15:17] And in verses 13 to 18, the next thing he says is, he made us, and he will finish his work. The fascinating world of the human body.

A good number of years ago, when our children were at that age, when adolescent, delightful, wide-eyed, wonder in the world was, sorry, juvenile, was beginning to, beginning to become adolescent truculence.

Many parents here will have experienced that stage, when your children no longer think you're wonderful and believe, the world is wonderful. We took them to the Eureka Museum in Halifax, down in Yorkshire, and they went through it feeling very superior and obviously being bored.

Until we came to the section called Me and My Body, which is an utterly fascinating depiction of the human body, of the blood flowing, of the cells, and of the amazing intricate micro-universe that is the human body.

The boredom slipped away, and they were utterly, as we were, utterly fascinated. And as we were there, I was thinking of this verse, and every time I read this psalm, it reminds me of that, the fascinating world of the inner cosmos.

[16:40] Now, you see what the psalmist is doing. The psalmist has established God's greatness and human vulnerability. God is great, and we are small.

God is eternal, and we are mortal. God is wise, and we are foolish. God is holy, and we are sinful. Now, having done that, now the psalmist can safely begin to think of his place in the scheme of things.

I've often said before, we must never begin Bible study with the question, what is this text saying to me? Because if we do, we'll simply pour our own agenda into the text that will be shaped by our needs and our wishes.

But once we've realized that this is God's book about God, then we'll realize that what this God is saying actually is relevant. We're no longer going to say, as the poet Henley did, I am the master of my fate.

I am the captain of my soul. But you see, there is a problem, isn't there? We have established, the psalmist has established, that God is great and splendid, that he holds the planets, the stars, the universe in his hand.

[17:51] Another problem arises, doesn't it? How can such a great God care for a tiny planet circling a minor sun in a remote galaxy on the edge of the Milky Way?

Still less. How can that God care for my concerns? Does it matter to that God whether I've got a job or not? Does it matter to that God about my relationships? Does it matter to that God about my daily problems?

And the psalmist is showing here, as Isaiah does in chapter 40, the words I read at the beginning of the prayer, that this God is not too great to care.

He is too great to fail. Because he is as concerned about the microcosm, the small universe of our inner being, as he is about the galaxies.

And that's what the psalmist is turning to here. As the, not just the regions beyond, but the regions within.

[18:56] I heard about a young astronomer, a guy whose heart failed, and his faith wavered, as he turned the telescopes onto the heavens, and discovered, wondered at the vastness of the regions revealed by the telescopes.

And he asked that question, how can that God care about me? Then he turned to the microscope and saw the minute universe in the grain of sand or in a drop of water.

And he realized, as David realized long ago, this God cares in detail about, it's not just that he generally cares about your life. It's that he cares in detail.

For you formed my inward parts, verse 13, you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works. Not just wonderful are your works in the island universes and the nebulae, but wonderful are your works in this mysterious universe that is our bodies and the organs that keep us alive.

[20:06] My frame was not hidden from you, nor is made in secret in the depths of the earth. And the depths of the earth here means not just the, not just the earth itself, but the mother's womb.

As the embryo grows and develops. And incidentally, that shows the importance of the human embryo. The human embryo is a person.

The human embryo is already a living being. That's so important. In your book, verse, in your book were written careful and totally accurate record.

There are no missing entries. There are no false details in God's book. This is the book that's totally accurate. from embryo, even before the mother is fully aware of the life within her.

God is at work. So the psalmist thoughts of God are expanding here, aren't they? God is great in great things and as, remember, it was said, and very great in small things.

[21:14] But notice, verses 17 and 18, God's thoughts of the psalmist, not just the psalmist thoughts of God. God's, how precious to me are your thoughts, O God.

How vast is the sum of them. If God has gone to this trouble, he is not going to leave the work unfinished. God's not just going to toss aside his work and abandon it.

If I count them, they are more than the sand. I think here a little bit echo to the promise that Abraham, your descendants will be like the sand on the seashore.

I awake and I am still with you. Now, I awake, obviously, the literal surface meaning is daily mercies. As we awake, new mercies greet us.

The sense of being alive and the sense of God caring. But in another way, and I think this is the connection with the final section, it's talking about the day of eternity as well.

[22 : 17] Not just when I awake day by day, but when I awake, as he's already said in earlier psalms, like Psalm 16 and 18, I will be satisfied when I awake in your likeness.

You see how powerful this message is. Well, powerful for every day of the year, but particularly on this Sunday at the beginning of a new year. Not just when we awake in, I'm never sure where to call it 2012 or 2012, whatever you call it, it doesn't matter.

When I awake, the daily mercies, but also beyond that to the day of eternity. That leads on to the final section of the psalm, is God leads us to eternal life.

Verses 19 to 24. We've begun with God knowing all about us. We've continued with God pursuing us actively. We've continued further with God looking inside us, caring for every intricate detail.

Now God leads us to eternal life. Notice how the psalm hangs together. The psalmist had said at the beginning, Lord, you have searched and known me. And now he says, verse 23, Search me, O God, and know.

[23 : 32] In other words, the psalmist is responding to God. It's just a case that God searched me so I can just sit back and do nothing. God's search has led to the psalmist's search. God in the psalmist's heart has led to a response.

And here he's talking, I think, about two dangers. First of all, dangers from outside. O that you would slay the wicked, O God, O men of blood.

Now the wicked are those who reject God. Now some commentators don't like this part of the psalm. They say the beautiful lyrics of verses 1 to 18 have been spoiled by this bad-tempered outburst of David.

Think about it for a moment. If the wicked, if those totally opposed to God's purposes are not dealt with, then we cannot have the blessings of the psalm.

We cannot have the blessings of the new creation unless the wicked are dealt with. And sometimes it's very easy for us to imagine we are more merciful than God.

[24 : 45] We have a better way of dealing with the wicked and with evil than God does. That's a very arrogant way. And I hate them with complete hatred.

I count them my enemies. Sounds a bit uncomfortable. put it this way. Would you rather that you were friends with God's enemies?

Would you, do you think we know better than this God who made the vast universe and sees right into the human heart? And remember, of course, the wicked are those who are called to repent.

After all, the wicked can be part of this as well. We were, after all, all of us who are believers were wicked. While we were yet enemies, Christ died for us.

It's not saying that's it, they're dismissed. It's basically calling on them to repent, which is what the gospel does. So the dangers from outside, and ultimately, remember, this is about one particular enemy, the devil himself, who seeks to thwart God's purpose, about those who ally themselves with him.

[25 : 57] There's also dangers from inside, the dangers of our own weaknesses and our own sins. Return to the opening verses of the psalm as I say, Search me, O God, and know my heart.

Lord, look into me and see what I'm really like. Remember that wonderful passage in one psalm we looked at quite a few months ago, that's when David was anointed.

God looks on the heart. That's a terrifying verse. You can always do something about the outside. You think the outside is not up to much. You really ought to see the heart. Now that's what God sees and God knows.

See, David wants to be godly both inside and outside. See if there would be any grievous way in me. Look at my disposition. See if my temperament, my attitudes are leading me away from you and then lead me home.

Lead me in the way everlasting. This is a great psalm about God, the greatness of God, a great psalm on which to build our lives as we go forward into the new year because ultimately this is a psalm about grace, isn't it?

[27 : 17] The grace that brought us safe thus far and the grace that will lead us home. This is a psalm about the past, the past in which God loved us, cared for us, forgave us, strengthened us and led us.

It's a psalm about the present in which we'll meet that grace day by day, every day. When I wake, as David says, I am still with you.

And it is a psalm about the future, not just our earthly future, but our eternal future. Ultimately, this is a psalm about David's greater son, the one who is the same yesterday and today and forever, the one who saved us, the one who keeps us, the one who will bring us to glory.

And that's a good message to be going into 2012 with. Amen. Let's pray. Search us, O God, and know our hearts.

Try us and know our thoughts. See if there are any grievous ways in us and lead us in the way everlasting. Father, we praise you for that forgiving grace, for that keeping grace, and for that grace which will lead us home.

[28 : 47] we thank you for the great words of the Apostle John. Whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything. Let us assurance we go forward into the unknown, trusting in you, the God who is faithful.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.