

2. The God We Cannot Escape: He surrounds us on every side

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[0 : 00] Now, if you would turn, please, to page 521 in the Bibles. We're going to read the whole psalm again, although we're looking only at verses 7 to 12, under the title of God surrounds us on every side.

So, Psalm 139 is the great 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 and 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.

[1 : 06] If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your right hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me. If I say 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. But 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 could 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!

[2 : 15] O men of blood, depart from me! They speak against you with malicious intent. Your enemies take your name in vain. Do I 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. That is the word of God. And may he bless it to our hearts and our minds.

I mentioned last week the great poem by the Victorian poet Francis Thompson called The Hound of Heaven. And that poem takes its inspiration from the verses we are going to look at just now, verses 7 to 12.

Thompson writes, I fled him down the days and down the nights. I fled him down the arches of the years. And he imagines God pursuing him as a hound pursues its victim.

[3 : 19] He fled on and on and on through the arches of the years. Until he discovered that his only safety, his only security was in his pursuer.

Very powerful poem. Very well worth reading. And it takes its inspiration from here. God surrounds us on every side. Now if you read the commentaries, they'll tell you that verses 1 to 6 talks about the omniscience of God.

God knows everything. And here we have God's omnipresence. God is everywhere. The trouble about these words like omniscience and omnipresence is they're very abstract.

They suggest that God is some kind of remote concept up there. Very different from our ordinary lives. The point is that God does not simply exist.

He is the living God. The Bible doesn't begin with saying, Oh by the way there is a God. The Bible begins with God, the living God, who creates and puts his life into the creatures he has made.

[4 : 21] And not only that he knows about us, not only that he surrounds us and pursues us, he is actively involved in our lives. And that has implications for us.

You see, to say that God is everywhere is more often than not an excuse to avoid him anywhere. And that is what our psalmist is aware of. Because many people will say, particularly intellectuals, that human beings search for God.

Over the years there have been many programs on television which have outlined what's sometimes called the long search. Humanities trying to find out who God is.

Humanity searching for God. Now there is some truth in that. God has placed, as Ecclesiastes says, eternity in our hearts. The God-shaped blank.

The sense that there is something or someone greater than us. But, you usually find in such programs that people are not in fact searching for the true God.

[5 : 25] They are searching for some projection of their own fantasies. They are not looking for the true God who speaks, who judges, who saves, who one day will judge the world in righteousness.

They are speaking about a vague God who makes life comfortable for us. And really, in many ways, it is another example of a human craving for security, for wealth and power.

Who wants to be a millionaire? That kind of attitude. A number of years ago, there was a program on television called Fantasy Island, where a suave and sinister figure in a white suit called Mr. Rourke welcomed the wealthy and bored to that island and promised that he would give them fulfillment of their fantasies.

But the trouble was, there was always a serpent in the paradise. There was always a sting in the tail. One man went out. He wanted a society that was moral, that was upright and godly.

And he was plunged down in Salem, Massachusetts in the 17th century in the middle of a witch hunt and had to be rescued from there. And other people wanted enormous wealth, which they got, but then were struck by cancer or something and couldn't use it.

[6 : 35] So you see, so much of the human search for God is fantasy. It's projecting our own desires onto the screen of the universe.

What the Bible says is that God is actually searching for us. He's pursuing us. C.S. Lewis says, when you talk about man's search for God, you might as well talk about the mouse's search for the cat because we're not truly searching him.

He's searching us. And in these verses, there are two particular things I want to say. That's verses 7 to 12. First of all, in verses 7 to 9, the psalmist tells us that human beings flee from God.

Not so much human beings are searching for God. Where shall I go from your spirit? Where shall I flee? This impulse is as old as Genesis 3, as old as the fall when Adam and Eve hid themselves or tried to hide themselves in the trees of the Garden of Eden.

Because we are sinful, we naturally want to hide from God. We naturally want to shield ourselves from God. And of course, the great story of Jonah illustrates this.

[7 : 46] Jonah fled away from God and discovered that that was impossible. Now, very often, we hide from God by apparently searching for him.

As I say, this kind of vague religion is actually a shielding ourselves to what God actually says and who God actually is. And the psalmist says, verse 7, where shall I go from your spirit?

Or where shall I flee from your presence? Now, the psalmist is doing here what so often happens in the psalms. There are two parallel ideas which balance each other.

They're not exactly repetition. The spirit of God throughout this vast universe and beyond it. The trouble is, if we simply talk about the spirit of God in that way, we almost automatically drift into the idea of God as a kind of gas or a kind of vapor distributed throughout space.

And that's why we use the word, he uses the word presence. Presence, sometimes translated face in the Old Testament to seek the presence of God. This dispels the idea that God is not also locally present.

[8 : 57] This is a great paradox of God. He is everywhere, but he is also locally present. And indeed, one day, his presence, his very self, is going to take flesh and dwell among us.

That's what this psalmist is pointing to. And as the psalmist thinks of everywhere, if you like, just as when he said in the first six verses, God knows everything, and we noticed last week how he splits that up into specific areas.

So here, first of all, he talks about what we might call the unseen realm. Verse 8, If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed and sheol, you are there.

The unseen realm, heaven and sheol, the world of the Godhead, the world of angels, good and evil, and the world of the dead.

That's what he's talking about. Sheol, this Old Testament word, sometimes simply means the grave, other times the world of the dead, other times the life beyond death.

[9 : 57] It's used in all these senses throughout the Old Testament. And of course, one way of fleeing from heaven and sheol is to think and talk vaguely about these realms without, while ignoring what God has revealed.

Every so often, someone produces a book about near-death experiences. And these have some very vivid descriptions of those who left their body and witnessed, as they thought, heaven and hell.

Now, the point is, we're not going to find out about the world beyond, the heavenly realm, or the world beyond the grave that way. The only way we are going to discover about these realms is through faith.

The faith that comes through hearing. The hearing that comes through the word of God. But the letter of the Hebrews says, by faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

The only knowledge we will have of heaven is from the Bible, the word of the living God himself. And similarly, Sheol. Now, if you're a believer, you know that Sheol is paradise for you.

[11 : 12] Remember Jesus' words to the dying thief. Not today, today you will be with me in Sheol. Today you will be with me in paradise. That is, that is the world beyond the grave for the believer.

But as we'll see when we come to the end of the psalm, the world beyond the grave for the unbeliever is terrifying beyond our imagination. Just this paradise is wonderful beyond our imagination.

So, first of all, he thinks of the unseen world. There is nowhere there. Now, you see, some people thought as if God was not active in Sheol, as if his writ did not run there.

The Old Testament scholars say that God, because sometimes the psalmist will say, the dead do not praise you. Now, he's, that's not a statement of theology. That is a statement of observation.

that, and it's usually a call to praise God while we are living, rather than a statement saying the dead, because we know that those who love Christ are now, at this very moment, rejoicing in his presence, in light, and in glory.

[12 : 18] So, the unseen world. Secondly, there is the vast expanse of the physical universe. Verse 9, If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, this wonderful poetic phrase, the wings of the morning, suggesting, I imagine, the morning light as it sweeps over oceans and continents, kind of thing you can sometimes see from a plane, and the idea that in all this vast earth, the wings of the morning, taking to the uttermost parts of the sea, there is nowhere we will not find him.

And the sea, often in the Old Testament, is the haunt of evil, the abode of chaos. But also, but the psalmist often reminds us that the sea is God's sea.

The sea is his, says Psalm 95, because he made it. So there is, once again, this eloquent description of the wonder and the beauty of creation, not to worship creation, but to worship the creator.

As John Calvin says, creation is the theater of God's glory. As we look at that theater, as we observe the great expanse of the visible universe, and the, look up at the night sky, look across the rolling plains, look at the mountains, the beauties of the world, and as we think of the unseen realm, the psalmist says, everywhere there, we will find God.

So that's the first thing. Humans naturally flee from God because we are sinful and therefore we actually don't want to find him all that much.

[14 : 00] But secondly, the second part of this section, verses 10 to 12, God is active in his pursuit of humanity. God is no passive spectator.

As we flee, as we fuss, as we go about our business, as God is not looking at us from a great height, impassive and unconcerned. It's always actually, it's almost too weak to say that God pursues us.

Because not only does he pursue us, he's actually there before we arrive as well. So wherever we go, God will be there waiting, so to speak. In verse 10, even there, your hand and your right hand used in the Bible of the power of God, particularly the power of God to judge and to save.

In the Exodus story, God brings his people out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And of course, the word hand, once again, is so more dramatic and so more personal than the word power, because it does show this is a personal God involved in our lives.

Now, in the seen and in the unseen world, formidable dangers lurk. But, as Paul says in Romans 8, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

[15 : 20] In many ways, Romans 8, that great peroration of who can separate us from the love of Christ, and where Paul says, nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of Christ, God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

And notice once again, there is the active and the passive. Verse 10, Your hand shall lead me. As we go through our lives, God's hand is leading us, but also he is holding us.

There is guidance, but there is also protection. Not that no dangers can ever touch us. That's not what this means. It would be cruel to suggest it. What this means is that the ultimate end of those who believe in God, those who trust in his right hand, will be blessing.

And then he speaks of the darkness. Surely the darkness shall cover me and the light about me be night. Darkness which is full of misery.

Sorry, not misery, mystery. Darkness which is full of mystery, both physical darkness, spiritual darkness, mental darkness. As I said last week, we are afraid of the dark.

[16 : 32] And that's not just a fear in children. It is a fear in everyone. Because we sense in the dark often alien presences and we are afraid.

Fear of distance, fear of the dark. Like a poet who said, I a stranger and afraid in a world I never made.

Sometimes we sense what's nowadays called alienation, sometimes referred to by the word angst. We don't feel at home in the universe. We are afraid of the universe. And the psalmist says, well, darkness may be dark to us, but it is not dark to God.

Remember the first action of God in creation. The first words were, let there be light. And there was light. And John tells us that God is light and in him is no darkness at all.

You see, that's practical in another sense. It gives us a sense of security. It gives us a sense of protection. But it also reminds us that this God sees us everywhere and in every light, so to speak.

[17 : 40] And John further says, if we walk in the light as he is in the light. There's no doubt about him. He is in the light. But he says, if we walk in the light, then we have fellowship with him.

So, darkness and light are not just, as so often in scripture, are both the physical realities, the physical, chemical, natural realities of day and night, of light and darkness.

But they also have this spiritual meaning as well. So, as we come to the end today, there are two things I want to say just as I sum up.

First of all, if we are believers, if we truly know this God, then, as the old hymn says, there's only one thing we can do. Trust and obey. Trust the promises and obey the commands.

But secondly, if we don't know this God, even if we are searching for him, then the important thing is he is searching for us.

[18 : 43] Far more than we are searching for him. This God, this God who made you and loves you, wants to know you. And the question is, do you want to know him?

Amen. Let's pray. God, our Father, as we continue with our lives, as we continue with our business and as we go about everyday life with its joys, its sorrows, its opportunities and its problems, help us truly to trust in you, the living God, and know that every step we tread, every place we arrive in, you are there before us, guiding us, guarding us and loving us.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.