

How Great Thou Art

Psalm 139

Pastor John Miller

Someone called Psalm 139 a short course in theology. I like that. The great A. W. Tozer said, "The most important thing is to think right thoughts about God." I agree. I think that it's so important to think rightly about God and that we understand God and His nature and who He is.

In this psalm, we're going to find four attributes of God. What is an attribute? It is that which can be attributed to God. An attribute is something that can be attributed to God: His very nature and character and what is true of God. The attributes can be put into two categories: attributes that are only true of God, and attributes that can be true of God and can also be true of us. Theologians might call them the "incommunicable attributes," or those only true of God; and the "communicable attributes," that God is, and God can communicate to us.

The first three of these attributes are incommunicable; they are true only of God. The fourth and last attribute is a communicable attribute; an attribute that God wants us to possess and to have, as well.

Let's look at them. In verses 1-6, we see, first of all, that God knows me; He is omniscient. The psalmist says in verses 1-6, "O LORD..."—whenever you have the word "LORD" in all capital letters, that is "Jehovah" or "Yahweh"—"...You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it."

David says, "LORD, Thou hast searched me and know me." In this psalm there are 50 personal pronouns. All the way through the psalm it's "me, me, me, my"; "God, You speak to me. You guide me. You lead me. You know me. You search me. You have Your way in me." It's all about this great and awesome God; this God Who is all knowing. Yet God knows me intimately and very personally.

I want you to notice what God knows. First of all, God knows what I do, verse 2. "You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off." God knows what I do. He knows if you are doing things that are displeasing to God. God knows—right here, right now, everyone listening to this message—what you're doing. Your wife may not know. Your husband may not know. Your kids may not know. Your boss may not know. Your coworkers may not know. Your neighbor may not know. Your family may not know. But God knows. And He brought you here today to hear this sermon. God knows what you're doing.

The reason I say that is because it might be something that is displeasing to God, and you need to stop what you're doing and turn back to following the Lord. God knows what you're doing.

The second thing God knows is God knows what I'm thinking. Notice the end of verse 2: "You understand my thought afar off." This word in the Hebrew means that God knows them in their origin.

I don't know about you, but I sometimes have the most bizarre thoughts. I think, Where did I get that? Why am I thinking that? It's kind of like, "Lord, just cleanse my mind right now!" Thoughts come into your brain, and we need to "bring thoughts into captivity to the obedience of Christ."

God knows what you're going to think even before you think it. I don't know what I'm thinkin' when I'm thinkin', let alone before I think it. God knows my thoughts. In the Hebrew, it's this anxious thought or these worries or these anxieties that God knows.

So God knows what I'm doing—either good or bad; He knows what I'm thinking—either good or bad—"You understand my thought afar off"; and thirdly, in verse 3, God knows where I go. "You comprehend my path..."—or "You put a circle around my path"—"...and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways." So the idea is that in the daytime when I'm walking on the path, You know where I go. In the nighttime when I lie down, You know where I am and where I'm sleeping.

When you're asleep, God is awake. Now I haven't slept much in the last 24 hours. We actually traveled over 20 hours. We went from Tel Aviv to Toronto, Canada and then to L.A. early this morning. We were delayed on that plane for about an hour and a half on the runway before we could take off.

God knows where we are, and God knows what we think. God knows what's going on. Daytimes, night times, good times, bad times. When I'm lying down and when I get up. When I'm sleeping or when I wish I could be sleeping. God knows what's going on in my life.

Fourthly, in verse 4, God knows what I say. "For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, You know it altogether." Now, again, I'm trying to take this great concept of God being omniscient, God knows everything—by the way, because of that, God never says, "Wow! I didn't know that!" He's never shocked. There's nothing that God doesn't know. He knows everything completely and perfectly.

So God knows what I do, God knows where I go, God knows what I think and God knows what I say. There's not a word on my tongue "...but behold, O LORD, You know it altogether." God heard the way you talked to your wife, or God heard the way you talked to your husband. God knows the way you talk to your children. God hears the words that come out of my mouth. The psalmist says, "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer." We want our words to be pleasing unto God.

In verse 5 is the fifth and last thing that God knows. God knows what I need. "You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me." This refers to my past—my

“behind”—; my future—“before”; and the present—“laid Your hand upon me.” In my past, my present and my future, God’s hand has been and will be upon me.

I believe in my own life, as well as in yours, God knows what you need. God knows what you need right now, and God’s knows what you’re going to need. God is with you, providing and guiding you. He knows what I do, what I think, where I go, what I say and what I need.

So what should be my response be? Verse 6 says, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high. I cannot attain it.” What an awesome thought. This is knowledge that I don’t possess, but God does, and I worship God. Worship is based on knowing the attributes of God. We worship a God Who is omniscient and knows everything. There is nothing that we can hide from God. That knowledge brings security and sensitivity—knowing that God’s Word is true, and I must obey it. And it should bring sobriety; I should be sober in wanting to be obedient unto God.

The second attribute I want to point out is found in verses 7-12. God is with me. So number one, God knows me; and number two, God is with me. This is the attribute of God that theologians call the “omnipresence” of God; God is everywhere present at once. Starting with verse 7, it says, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, 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 fall on me,’ even the night shall be light about me; indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You.” You can’t hide from God.

I want you to know that space cannot separate me from God; verse 8, “If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.” There is no way that you can get away from God.

We went to this little seaport village of Joppa. It’s one of the oldest seaports in history. That’s the place that Jonah went to and got on a ship, trying to run from the presence of God to Tarsus. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh. He didn’t want to go to Nineveh, so he went to Joppa, got on a ship, went out into the Mediterranean and was swallowed by a big whale, a big fish. Then as Jonah was in the belly of the big fish and cried out to God, the fish barfed him up onto the beach.

I’ve always wanted to use that for a sermon title. Wouldn’t that be a sweet sermon title? “Barfed up onto the beach.” People are playing volleyball and this prophet comes rolling up onto the beach. “Repent!” “Yeah, whatever you say, man! Anyone who comes out of a whale, I’ll obey!”

Jonah tried to run from God, and he saw how foolish that is. So I can’t flee from God. God is everywhere. Some people try to run away from God. “I’m just going to get a divorce. I’m going to get out of my marriage. I’m going to quit my job. I’m going to move to another town.” Do you

know that God lives in every town that you could ever move to? You cannot run from God. You cannot flee from God. This question in verse 8 expresses the desire to escape but the joyful astonishment that escape is impossible. God's hand is everywhere to guide you and to hold you.

So space cannot separate me from God, nor speed separate me from God. Verse 9 says, "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." This is poetic, Hebrew language. What are "the wings of the morning"? When the sun comes up in the morning, rays of light start to shoot out.

You ever watch the sun rise in the east behind the mountains? We have a beautiful view of the sunrise here in the Murrieta-Temecula Valley. If you look east, you see the sun come up behind the mountain. All of a sudden you see these light rays shooting at 186,282 miles per second, the speed of light. So if I got on a light beam and traveled at the speed of light to the uttermost ends of the earth, God is there. Wherever I go in the universe, God is there. Not only a portion of God, but all of God.

So God knows everything; He never learns anything new. God is everywhere; I cannot escape Him. Speed cannot separate me from God. Nor darkness. Verse 11 says, "If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall fall on me,' even the night shall be light about me." I'm just going to hide in a dark place. Maybe you're in a dark place right now of depression, discouragement, doubt and fears. Maybe you're contemplating suicide.

After second service a young man came up to me with tears running down his face. He said, "Pastor, can you pray for me? My best friend killed himself this week." I can't imagine the pain he is going through. A lot of people just want to end their life. They're living in darkness, and they don't want to go on. But God can bring light into that darkness around you. God can give you purpose, and God can give you meaning. You're important to God. You matter to God. God knows you. He has the very hairs of your head numbered. He ordained them before there were any of them. God knows you and God is with you. You can't escape God. Space or speed or darkness becomes light, verse 12. "Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You."

Application: It's a warning to unbelievers. If you're going where God knows you shouldn't go, or you're thinking what you shouldn't think, God knows, God sees, God knows where you are.

I want you to see the third attribute of God in this psalm. This is the section of the psalm for which it is most famous. God made me. So number one, God knows me—He is omniscient; number two, God is with me—He is omnipresent; and number three, God made me—He is omnipotent. God is all powerful. There are no limits to God's power.

Verse 13 says, "For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb." This is a great description of the growth and development of the fetus in the womb of a mother. The

psalmist says, "I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them. How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand; when I awake, I am still with You."

Each one of these sections could be a sermon in itself. Someday I'd like to go back and spent four weeks going through Psalm 139 talking about God knows me, God's with me and God made me. There is no indication in this psalm, nor anywhere else in the Bible, that we have evolved by accident. Evolution is not only unscriptural and unbiblical, but it runs counter to the teachings of the Bible. I so happen to believe—I'm not here to lecture on it now—that it's scientific, as well. It's a leap of faith that people take that something came out of nothing.

You say, "Well, preacher, do you believe that no one created God?"

"Yes." You either believe in an eternal, all-existent form of matter, or you believe in some kind of eternal, God-creator. You don't have to be a scientist to figure out that something can't come from nothing. In the beginning there was nothing, but the Bible says, "In the beginning God..." That's where I like to start. It starts with God; the eternal God, the all-knowing God, the all-powerful God, the all-loving God.

"In the beginning God created..." In the womb God created us. This is personal. It's not just talking about God's power to create the universe; it's saying that God created me. I didn't evolve; I'm not here by accident. God actually created me and formed me in my mother's womb. Verse 13 says, "For You formed my inward parts; You covered me..."—that word "covered" means "protected me"—"...in my mother's womb."

Isn't it sad that God puts a child in the womb, a place of protection, and we violently go in and take that child out? The implications on abortion in this text are staggering. "You protected me in my mother's womb." A child in the womb of his mother needs to be protected.

It says, "I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" or "I worship You because You made me fearful and wonderful. Marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought..."—this has the idea of "embroider" or God creating me in my mother's womb—"...in the lowest parts of the earth."

It's not just a fetus. It's not just a piece of tissue. It's a human being. It's a life from the moment of conception. It should be protected in the womb. We need to pray for that in our country. It's one of the biggest sins of our nation, the sin of abortion.

Verse 16, "Your eyes saw my substance..."—or "body"—"...being yet unformed..."—or "not yet fully developed." You don't have to have arms to be a human being. You don't have to have

eyes to be a human being. You don't have to have hands to be a human being. What makes a human a human? God puts the spirit of life in a person at the moment of conception. Try to tell an amputee that they aren't human, because they don't have arms or legs; it's insane. That body in the womb belongs to a human being.

"And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them." Another translation says, "All my days were ordained for me, were written in Your book, before any one of them came to be." Wow! What a thought! That little child growing in its mother's womb—all of its days, all of its future God has all planned out. God knows them and charts them all out. It's just an amazing thought.

In verse 17, the psalmist says, "How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them!" This could be taken two ways: my thoughts about God, but in the context, it's God's thoughts about me. Did you know that God actually thinks about you? Sometimes we're impressed when someone we like or look up to is thinking about you.

"I've been thinking about you."

"Oh, really? That's awesome." But did you know that the God of all the universe actually thinks about you 24-7? When you're sleeping at night, He's awake looking at you. What an awesome thought! He says, "Your thoughts toward me are like the sand of the seashore." They're more in number than the sand on the beach. Grab a handful of sand and let each little grain trickle through your fingers. Realize that each one of those grains represents a thought He has for you. God is thinking about you day and night. Not a sparrow falls to the ground but that God knows. God cares for you. Verse 18 says, "If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand; when I awake, I am still with You."

So God's thoughts are personal and God's thoughts are precious. Someone said in a poem:

"Isn't it odd

That a being like God,

Who sees the façade,

Still loves the clod

He made out of sod?

Now isn't that odd?"

Yes, it is; that God would take a clump of dirt and breathe into it the breath of life.

There is a fourth and last attribute of God. This attribute is communicable; we can possess it. It's in verses 19-24. That is that God searches me or that God is holy. Starting with verse 19,

"Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God! Depart from me, therefore, you bloodthirsty men. For they speak against You wickedly; Your enemies take Your name in vain. Do I not hate them, O LORD, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?" This is what's called "righteous indignation." "I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies."

This is what's called the "holiness" of God. If you are going to be like God, you have to be holy. Of all the attributes of God, the number one attribute declared in the Bible is God is holy. God is separate from sinners, and in Him is no wickedness. He is perfectly righteous. He is a holy God. But God can make us holy. He says, "Be ye holy, for I am holy." We can become like God; we can live holy lives.

Jesus died on the Cross, was buried and rose from the dead. When we trust Him as our Savior, God gives to us His righteousness. Jesus takes our sin and gives to us His righteousness. Then He gives us the Holy Spirit to live inside us and to help us live a life that pleases God. We're not going to be perfect. We're not going to be sinless, but we're going to sin less and less, as we walk in the Spirit in our obedience to His Word.

So God's mercy, God's love, God's grace, God's holiness, God's kindness, God's patience and God's forgiveness are attributes that we can possess. We can be holy. We can hate the things that God hates and love the things that God loves. The Bible says, "Ye that fear the Lord, hate evil." So I hate these things, O God.

Then the psalmist closes with a prayer in verses 23-24. This is our closing response to this psalm: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

So God knows everything; I can't fool Him. Are you trying to fool God right now? He knows. God is everywhere; you can't flee from Him. If you're trying to run from God right now, you can't outrun God. He's called The Hound of Heaven. I like that. He can pursue you and bring you back. God can do anything; I can't fight against Him.

What do I need to do? Three things. Number one, I need to pray. "Search me, O God, and know my heart." As you hear this psalm today, what is your response? "Search me, O God. Dig deep into me and know me." Right here, right now, as you listen to me preach, God knows what you're thinking.

I've been preaching for a long time, and I've looked at faces for a long time. As I look at your faces, I don't know what you're thinking. You might be thinking, I'm so bored right now. When will this guy shut up. Sometimes when I look at people I'm thinking, They don't like what I'm saying. They're thinking.... I have all these crazy thoughts. Whatever you're thinking right now, God knows. So if you're thinking that my sermon's boring, you're busted. Maybe God will tell me that when I get to heaven. God knows.

Maybe you're thinking about a relationship that's displeasing to God. Maybe you're thinking about something that's displeasing to God. Maybe it's someplace you've been going that's

displeasing to God. Words you've been saying. Things you've been doing. Thoughts that you've been having that are displeasing to God. God sees. God knows. God understands.

God's saying to you right now that you need to turn away from them and back to me. God brought you here so you can say, "Okay, God. I'm sorry. 'Search me, O God, and know my heart.' Search me and dig down into me and know my heart."

The second petition is in verses 23-24: "Try me, and know my anxieties" or "my thoughts." Know my heart and know my thoughts. The word "thoughts" means "anxious thoughts" or "worries." "And see if there is any wicked way in me."

There are some of you who have anxiety and fears. Last night when we were on the plane pulling away from the gate ready to take off from Toronto, Canada, we had to stop. They said we had some mechanical problems to the plane. Some of the flaps weren't working. You don't want to fly when the flaps aren't working. So we were held up in this plane and then told that we had to go back to the gate, and someone would fix the plane. Some people panicked and wanted off the plane. They started to freak out.

Maybe you have some anxious thoughts. Maybe you're worried about your health. Maybe you're worried about your job. Maybe you're worried about your marriage. Maybe you're worried about your kids. Maybe you're worried about your parents; your parents are aging. You're worried about how you're going to take care of them. What are we going to do with them? What's going to happen to them? It's a challenge to watch your parents grow old and you have to care for them. You worry about all the pressures of life and the anxieties of life and the fears of life that come into your heart.

The psalmist is actually saying here, "Test my anxious thought." In the Bible, Jesus says, "Come to Me all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Do you need rest today? I need rest today, and I'm going to take a nap today. But maybe you need rest for your soul today. Maybe you need to come to Jesus and give Him your anxieties and your fears.

Then the third and last petition is in verse 24: Lead me. So it's search me, test or try me and lead me. "Lead me in the way everlasting." I love that. "God, search me, know me, try me and lead me. Have Your way in me." Amen.