



## Psalm 139 - The Inescapable God

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

### Introduction

In this hymn the closing request <<*Search me, O God, and know my heart*>> echoes the opening statement <<*O Lord, you have searched me and known me*>>. The key word of the psalm is 'know': God knows, and the faithful soul knows. These features highlight the Psalm's theme: God's intimate knowledge of his people, a theme that vv.1-6 begins. Then vv.7-12 declare that there is no place one can go to get away from that knowledge, and vv.13-16 illustrate the point by describing life in a very dark place, i.e. the mother's womb. Verses 17-18 exclaim how delightful this knowledge of God's knowledge is; vv.19-22 affirm the singer's loyalty to the Lord; and vv.23-24 invite God to continue examining the singer's inner life, in order to purge it from all that hinders him from walking in the way everlasting.

It does not come as a surprise that such a significant psalm came from David's pen, who was <<*the sweet psalmist of Israel*>> (2 Samuel 23:1 ESV). The leader or chief musician is thought by some to be the Lord God himself, and others suppose him to be a leader of choirs or musicians in David's time, such as Heman the singer or Asaph; refer to 1 Chronicles 6:33, 16:17, and 25:6.

### Psalm 139:1-6 - The Lord Knows All There Is to Know about Me.

Verse 1 states the theme of the whole psalm: <<*you have searched me and known me*>>, and vv.2-6 develop that further as a general assertion: God knows all of a person's activities, all of their words, even their inmost thoughts. The response (v.6) is that such knowledge is too wonderful for humans to comprehend.

- 1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
- 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

- you discern my thoughts from far away.
- <sup>3</sup> You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.
- <sup>4</sup> Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O Lord, you know it completely.
- <sup>5</sup> You hem me in, behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.
- <sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

### Psalm 139:1-6

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. David prayed to Yahweh, understanding that he had personal knowledge of him. Pagans often thought that their gods were hostile or indifferent to men and women; David knew that the true God cared more than enough to have searched and known each man and woman:

- It is not just that God knows everything, he knows each individual.
- It is not just that God is everywhere, he is everywhere with each of them.
- It is not just that God created everything, he created everyone.

Derek Kidner commented, “Any small thoughts that we may have of God are magnificently transcended by this psalm; yet for all its height and depth it remains intensely personal from first to last.”

You know when I sit down and when I rise up. David used this proverbial phrase to say that God knew everything about him, even the simplest everyday things. As Jesus would later say: <<*even the hairs of your head are all counted*>> (Matthew 10:30). Adam Clarke commented, “Even these inconsiderable and casual things are under your continual notice. I cannot so much as take a seat, or leave it, without being marked by you.”

You discern my thoughts from far away. God not only knew the smallest aspects of David’s everyday life, he also knew his thoughts. God knows each person’s words before they speak them, and there is nothing of them hidden from the all-knowing and all-seeing God. As David wrote, “you are acquainted with all my ways.” Charles Spurgeon commented, “Divine knowledge is perfect, since not a single word is unknown, nay, not even an unspoken word, and each one is ‘altogether’ or wholly known.”

Even before a word is on my tongue. The fact that God knows every word before it is even spoken should affect a person’s speech. Yet there remain those who

claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ who have little care for profanity or impurity of speech; they should remember that God hears and knows every word.

**You hem me in, behind and before.** The normal sense of a hedge in the Bible is of a protective barrier. God hedged David on every side, so that nothing could come to David unless it first passed through God's permission. What was true for David is true for all who trust in the Lord. It can be very uncomfortable to know that each one is always being watched. People may get nervous if they see CCTV cameras monitoring them at all times. Yet their unease is based in the fact that they doubt the good intentions or good will of those who are watching. The child is comforted that a loving parent watches over them; when people are confident in the love and care of God the Father, his constant knowledge of them is a comfort, not a curse.

**Interestingly, even Satan recognises God's protection of his people and knows that he has to have it removed in order to attack the Lord's people:** <<*Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face'*>> (Job 1:9-11).

**Lay your hand upon me** is a gentle gesture giving reassurance: <<*But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands, for Manasseh was the firstborn*>> (Genesis 48:14). As with the hedge mentioned in the previous line, this was an expression of God's love and care for David. This was not the hand of oppression, but the hand of grace.

**Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.** David understood that God knew him better than he knew himself. This is a wonderful and humble place to be. Some people sometimes reject what God and his word says about them and their condition; they should recognise that he knows them better than they know themselves. Spurgeon admitted, "I cannot grasp it. I can hardly endure to think of it. The theme overwhelms me. I am amazed and astounded at it. Such knowledge not only surpasses my comprehension, but even my imagination." Kidner added, "This statement of omniscience is characteristically vivid and concrete: not formulated as a doctrine but, as befits a psalm, confessed in adoration. This divine knowledge is not merely comprehensive, like that of some receptor that misses nothing, capturing everything alike. It is personal and active."

### **Psalm 139:7-12 - There Is No Place I Can Be Hidden from Your View.**

The next section makes it clear that there is no way the singer can escape such knowledge: there is nowhere in the universe that God will not be present to lead and hold the believer (vv.7-10), and nowhere too dark for God to see him (vv.11-12). Some have supposed that the impulse to flee (v.7) comes from a guilty

conscience, or from a desire for independence, but this is unlikely: these verses take delight in the fact that God will lead him, an entirely positive benefit: <<**He leads me in right paths for his name's sake**>> (Psalm 23:3b), <<**You guide me with your counsel, and afterwards you will receive me with honour**>> (Psalm 73:24), and: <<**Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good spirit lead me on a level path**>> (Psalm 143:10); and hold him: <<**Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand**>> (Psalm 73:23). There is no place where he is beyond God's care (v.5).

7 Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
9 If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
10 even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
11 If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night',  
12 even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

### Psalm 139:7-12

Where can I go from your spirit? David considered the truth that God is present everywhere, and there was no corner or dimension of the universe hidden from him. Heaven is not too high or hell is not too low; God is everywhere.

Your spirit, your presence. David probably did not have a deep understanding of Trinitarian theology, but by the inspiration of God he spoke of God's Spirit as an essential aspect of his being and presence. Clarke commented, "*Mippanycha*, 'from your faces.' Why do we meet with this word so frequently in the plural number, when applied to God? And why have we his Spirit, and his appearances or faces, both here? A Trinitarian would at once say, 'The plurality of persons in the Godhead is intended;' and who can prove that he is mistaken?"

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. David did not describe what is normally thought of as hell - *Gehenna* (refer to Matthew 10:28 and 18:9), the lake of fire in

Revelation 20:14-15. The Hebrew word here is *sheol*, which normally has the sense of the grave or by implication the afterlife. Although David did not use the specific word for hell, the sense would be the same. Even in hell, God will be present because there is no place where God cannot be. Yet God's presence in hell will radiate none of his love and grace; only his righteous judgement.

**The wings of the morning.** This may well refer to the spread and speed of light as it fills the morning sky from the east to the west. Light itself cannot outrun God's presence and knowledge.

These verses use two pairs of opposites: **heaven** and **Sheol**; **the wings of the morning**, i.e. the farthest east where the sun rises, and **the farthest limits of the sea**, i.e. the far end of the Mediterranean, to the west of Israel. This rhetorical device, using two polar opposites, indicates that everything in between is included.

Interestingly, it was the farthest ends of the sea that Jonah tried to flee to in order to escape God's will for his life: <<*But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord*>> (Jonah 1:3).

**Even there your hand shall lead me.** David was so assured of the constant presence of God's hand of love and care that not even death and the grave could separate him from God's love - as Paul would later write: <<*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*>> (Romans 8:38-39). In fact, God's **right hand** - his hand of skill and strength - would hold David no matter what may come.

**Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night.** David knew that in the troubles of life even the brightest day seems like a moonless and starless night - only impenetrable darkness. However, he knew that for the Lord everything was light and that God's light would illuminate the passage through life's dark times: <<*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it*>> (John 1:5).

#### **Psalm 139:13-16 - You Even Saw and Loved Me before I Was Born.**

These verses illustrate the point of vv.11-12 by describing a particular 'dark place' where the Lord saw and cared for the singer, namely, his mother's womb. God was active as the unformed substance, grew and developed; indeed he is the one who formed the inward parts of David and knitted him together, describing the process of embryonic development from a spiritual perspective. God saw him, and even had written in his book, every one of the days that were formed for David's life.

The worshipper realises that, even before his mother knew she was pregnant, the Lord was already showing his care for child to be born. His personal life began in the womb and was charted long before, and God had already laid out its course.

- 13 For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.
- 15 My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
- 16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.  
In your book were written  
all the days that were formed for me,  
when none of them as yet existed.

#### Psalm 139:13-16

The section begins with for, showing the connection to the previous verses that described how impossible it was to hide from God.

For it was you who formed my inward parts. The God of all knowledge and constant presence had the care and concern to personally form the child in his mother's womb. It speaks of the fact that God knew David from before his birth, as a child conceived and developing in the womb. That fact that God knows and cares for children in the womb means that God's concern for life begins at conception. It means that God's people have a responsibility to also know and care for children in the womb. It is common to argue for the moral right to abortion because the mother has the right to do as she pleases with her own body. Psalm 139 demonstrates that God sees another person in the mother's womb. Christians, however, should not judge others. The matter rests between the mother and God; the views of others are irrelevant.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. David the Son of Jesse was a remarkable man. He was a shepherd, a special forces soldier, a hero, a poet, and a king. In some respect, here he also added scientist to his accomplishments. With the mind of a trained biologist but the skill of a poet, David declared that he was fearfully and wonderfully made. The workings of the human body are stunning in

their design and execution. Far more is now known than David ever knew about how humans are made and develop, and it should fill people today with even more awe and praise than David ever had. Spurgeon commented, “The psalmist had scarcely peered within the veil which hides the nerves, sinews, and blood-vessels from common inspection; the science of anatomy was quite unknown to him; and yet he had seen enough to arouse his admiration of the work and his reverence for the Worker.” And again, “If we are marvellously wrought upon even before we are born, what shall we say of the Lord’s dealings with us after we quit his secret workshop, and he directs our pathway through the pilgrimage of life? What shall we not say of that new birth which is even more mysterious than the first, and exhibits even more the love and wisdom of the Lord.”

**I am fearfully and wonderfully made.** The statement helps the worshipper to marvel over the mysterious process of a developing baby. The word translated ‘wonderfully made’ (Hebrew *nipleti*) has a slightly unusual spelling (the expected spelling is *niple’ti*), which favours the ESV footnote: “I am fearfully set apart.” This takes the word to be the term for God setting his people apart: <<***But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people live, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I the Lord am in this land***>> (Exodus 8:22), <<***But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him***>> (Psalm 4:3), or making a distinction between them and those who are not his people: <<***But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing shall die of all that belongs to the Israelites***>> (Exodus 9:4), <<***But not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites – not at people, not at animals – so that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel***>> (Exodus 11:7), and: <<***For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth***>> (Exodus 33:16). The faithful person singing this, who in the OT would be the child of faithful parents, can affirm that God set his special love upon him from the earliest stages of his personal life: <<***Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God***>> (Psalm 22:9-10), and: <<***For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother’s womb. My praise is continually of you***>> (Psalm 71:5-6).

**Intricately woven in the depths of the earth.** Here David used the phrase the depths of the earth to refer to any mysterious, unseen place. The process of a baby’s formation in a mother’s womb is as unseen and mysterious as that which happens in the depths of the earth. Maclaren commented, “The mysterious receptacle in which the unborn body takes shape and grows is delicately described as ‘secret’ and likened to the hidden region of the underworld, where are the

dead. The point of comparison is the mystery enwrapping both.” Spurgeon added, “Much of the formation of our inner man still proceeds in secret; hence the more of solitude the better for us.”

In the depths of the earth. As a parallel to in secret, this would be a poetic expression for the darkness and secrecy of the womb.

The work of God in fashioning the body of the individual has made some wonder about the presence of birth defects, and what that may mean regarding God’s work. Such birth defects should be regarded as injuries to God’s original design, and even as a person may be injured outside of the womb, so they can be injured while still in the womb and in the process of formation. Such injuries are the result of the fall and the corruption it introduced into the world, yet still the eye of faith can see the hand of God at work in what defects or injuries he would allow in his providence.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. What David (and others) could not see, God could see perfectly. This is another demonstration of his perfect knowledge and care.

In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. God’s perfect knowledge did not only extend to the past, before David was born. It also extended to the future, and God knew David’s days as if they had been written in a book. Paul had a similar view as to how the Lord determined life for each person: <<*For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life*>> (Ephesians 2:10).

### Psalm 139:17-18 - How Precious Are Your Thoughts to Me!

These verses provide the right response to the vast extent of God’s thoughts (v.6). Verse 18 seems to picture the hopelessness of trying to count God’s thoughts: the number is so large that one would fall asleep; and even so, God will not abandon his faithful.

17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!

How vast is the sum of them!

18 I try to count them – they are more than the sand;

I come to the end – I am still with you.

### Psalm 139:17-18

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! Considering how God knew and cared for him filled David with amazement and adoration: <<*He does great things and unsearchable, marvellous things without number*>> (Job 5:9). It is precious

that God should think of people at all; it is beyond precious that he would think well of them and think so often of them. The root meaning of the word rendered **weighty** or **precious** is weighty. The singer would weigh God's thoughts towards him, and finds that they weigh down his scales. Spurgeon observed, "He is not alarmed at the fact that God knows all about him; on the contrary, he is comforted, and even feels himself to be enriched, as with a casket of precious jewels. That God should think upon him is the believer's treasure and pleasure."

**I try to count them – they are more than the sand.** David used a powerful image to illustrate the idea of how often God thinks of individuals. One could imagine standing on a shore and wondering just how many grains of sand fill the beach - yet God's thoughts are more in number. Spurgeon commented, "Thoughts such as are natural to the Creator, the Preserver, the Redeemer, the Father, the Friend, are evermore flowing from the heart of the Lord. Thoughts of our pardon, renewal, upholding, supplying, educating, perfecting, and a thousand more kinds perpetually well up in the mind of the Most High." And again, "You know that people are very proud if a king has merely looked at them; I have heard of a man who used to boast, all his life, that King George IV - such a beauty as he was! – once spoke to him. He only said, 'Get out of the road;' but it was a king who said it, so the man felt greatly gratified thereby. But you and I, beloved, can rejoice that God, before whom kings are as grasshoppers, actually thinks of us, and thinks of us often."

**I come to the end – I am still with you.** Day or night, David thought of God because he knew the greatness of God's thoughts to him. At the waking of the day, the wonderful presence of God was still with him.

### **Psalm 139:19-22 - Please Slay the Wicked!**

Sadly, not everyone delights in God and in his knowledge and presence: the wicked person, who joins with men of blood, i.e. those who ruthlessly shed blood, who speak against God with malicious intent, is someone who actively opposes God and his gracious purpose; refer to the comment made on Psalm 1:1. When God displays his justice in the earth, if these people will not repent, he will indeed slay them; until then, the faithful do not want to be identified with them; refer to the comment made Psalm 104:31-35. This loyalty to God goes so far as to own God's attitudes: <<***The boastful will not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers***>> (Psalm 5:5), and: <<***For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face***>> (Psalm 11:7); refer to the comments made on Psalm 26:5, 31:6, 101:3, and 119:113.

- <sup>19</sup> O that you would kill the wicked, O God,  
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me –
- <sup>20</sup> those who speak of you maliciously,

and lift themselves up against you for evil!

21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?

And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

22 I hate them with perfect hatred;

I count them my enemies.

### Psalm 139:19-22

O that you would kill the wicked, O God. David abruptly shifted from a spirit of wonder and adoration to intense prayer against the wicked and against bloodthirsty men. It was not primarily because these men opposed David, but because they opposed God: those who speak of you maliciously. David's adoration filled him with zeal for God's honour: <<*I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today*>> (Acts 22:3). Kidner observed, "The abrupt change in the psalm from reverie to resolve is disturbing, but wholly biblical in its realism." Spurgeon added, "Crimes committed before the face of the Judge are not likely to go unpunished. God who sees all evil will slay all evil."

Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? David was undeniably God's partisan. He wanted to be on God's side, and therefore even allowed himself to hate those who hated God: <<*You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the Lord*>> (Psalm 31:6). In fact, David boasted I hate them with perfect hatred, regarding them as enemies. In this David went against a spirit also evident in modern times – against the idea that someone can love God without hating evil. In this sense it is entirely possible for a person to be too loving, and it corrupts their claimed love for God.

Such concepts may cause some confusion and a dilemma for Christians for Jesus said: <<*You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*>> (Matthew 5:43-44). Yet Jesus also said: <<*Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*>> (Revelation 2:6). The idea is to show both love and compassion for the individual and yet hate what they do and stand for.

### Psalm 139:23-24 - Search Me, O God!

In view of these reflections, the members of the congregation invite God to continue his work of 'searching' and 'knowing' their hearts. This will expose any grievous way, i.e. aspects of character that lead to grief, and will lead the faithful in the way everlasting, i.e. the way that God loves: <<*for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish*>> (Psalm 1:6).

- 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my thoughts.
- 24 See if there is any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.

#### Psalm 139:23-24

Search me, O God, and know my heart. David came to the God of perfect knowledge and constant presence knowing he was also a God of love, and could be trusted to search him and to know him at the deepest levels: <<***let me be weighed in a just balance, and let God know my integrity!***>> (Job 31:6). This is also an admission that God knew David better than David knew himself, and that he needed God to search and know him. David took his theological understanding of God's nature and attributes and applied it to his own personal discipleship. The nature and attributes of God were not mere theories; they were guides to David's spiritual growth. Maclaren commented, "Very beautifully does the lowly prayer for searching and guidance follow the psalmist's burst of fire. It is easier to glow with indignation against evildoers than to keep oneself from doing evil. Many secret sins may hide under a cloak of zeal for the Lord."

Test me and know my thoughts. David wanted God to examine him: <<***The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, but the Lord tests the heart***>> (Proverbs 17:3), and look for any anxieties that David might have had. Such anxieties could be evidence of unbelief or misplaced trust.

See if there is any wicked way in me. David opened his soul bare before God, asking if there was any unknown or unperceived sin. This showed how much he cared for holiness in his life, and how humble he was in recognising there could be an unperceived wicked way within himself.

Lead me in the way everlasting. David ended this majestic psalm by declaring his destination - the way everlasting. Trusting the God of complete knowledge and constant presence would bring David to everlasting life. The way of holiness prayed for in the previous lines was the way everlasting. Kidner concluded, "The final words could be translated 'the ancient way' as in Jeremiah 6:16; but the majority of translators would appear to be right in rendering them the way everlasting, in contrast to the way of the wicked which will perish."