

## Psalm 139 - Ready to face adversity

A regional newspaper wanted to report on a bushfire that was blazing nearby, so they sent out a brave journalist to fly up in an aircraft and take some photos of the blaze. They rushed him out to the local airport, having told him there'd be a plane sitting on the tarmac waiting to take off. He jumped in the small aircraft and as they ascended, he gave instructions to the pilot, "Now I want you to fly over the bushfire, up over the billowing smoke and down towards the blaze so I can get some good photographs." The pilot turned to him and said, "So you're not my instructor?"

Now the perfectly clear connection between that story and Psalm 139 is that we are *Ready to face adversity*.

The adversity David is facing, seems to be a matter of life and death, as he flees those who want his blood,

<sup>19</sup> If only you, God, would slay the wicked!

Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!

So David is writing from the midst of great hostility. But as we take a step back, we find these absolute treasures in verses 1 to 18, and we see that David is readied and prepared for whatever lies ahead. God knows him, God is with him, and all his days are ordained by his loving Father.

### Let's pray

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God. How precious is your word. We thank you for these words of comfort and assurance, and ask that they would ready us, to trust you when adversity strikes.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

The psalm is neatly divided into 4 sections of 6 verses each, which we'll look at one at a time.

- 1-6 – God knows me
  - *O LORD, You have searched me, and you know me*
- 7-12 – God is with me
  - *Where can I flee from your presence?*
- 13-18 – God is all sovereign
  - all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.
- 19-24 – God is all holy and just
  - If only you would slay the wicked, O God!

We also see the bookends at the start and the finish of the psalm with this, "Searched and known" – in verse 1, and in the final prayer of verse 23 – and they give us a clue to the big idea of the psalm.

Psalm 139 has some of the most comforting words in the Bible.

### God knows me v1-6

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, You have searched me, and you know me.

<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit and when I rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from afar.

<sup>3</sup> You discern my going out and my lying down;  
you are familiar with all my ways.

The focus is on God's knowing. We see

- Know v1
- Know and perceive v2
- Discern, familiar v3
- You know it completely v4
- Such knowledge v6

The doctrinal word here is that God is omniscient –all-knowing; but the picture we have is far more personal than that – it is a relationship of real tenderness and intimacy.

In the first instance here, it's the relationship between God and his covenanted king, David, but supremely it's Jesus who can sing the Psalm and say in Matthew 11:27

*No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son.*

But Jesus went on to say, *No one knows the Father except the son, and those to whom the son chooses to reveal him.*

It is because of the revealing work of Jesus, that we can apply verse 1-6, not only to King David, but also to ourselves.

In Christ, every believer comes to known by God, with an intimate, personal knowledge, and the privileged relationship of being a son or a daughter.

It's important to see the difference between the truth that God knows everything and everyone, and the knowing of those who are in Christ – a personal knowledge of commitment and relationship.

Many of you would know my wife, Jen. She comes along to church here, you might see her on the door, but you don't know her, in the same way, that I do, in the privileged relationship of her husband. I know her, and I am known to her. She knows how to be kind to me. She knows when I need to get out of the house and go for a run. She knows when I need to spend time with my friends. A number of years ago we got a small inheritance from a relative, and my wife used the money to pay for my friends and I to go hiking in the south-west alps of Tasmania. She knows me with a kindness, tenderness and intimacy of relationship.

David responds to God's knowing of him in verse 6 is,

*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.*

How privileged it is to known by the creator of the universe. And yet the most terrifying words a person could hear from Jesus on the last day would be, "Away from me. I never knew you."

Let's have a look at verses 7-12

### **God is with me (v7-12)**

<sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

<sup>8</sup> If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

<sup>9</sup> If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

<sup>10</sup> even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.

In the same way, the psalm speaks not just of a knowing, but a personal knowing, here we see not just that God is present everywhere, (omni-present) but that he is present **personally** with his king. David is not simply saying he cannot find any place in the universe where God is not; he is saying he cannot find any place where God is not *with him*.

I love the language of verse 10, “your right hand will hold me fast,” which speaks of a confidence and security that Jesus draws upon in John’s gospel.

<sup>28</sup> *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.* <sup>29</sup> *My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all<sup>Ⓞ</sup>; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.* (John 10:28)

Safe and secure in the Father’s hands. Safe and secure in the hands of our saviour.

David needed to know the confidence of God’s presence and security in the hour of darkness.

(Verse 11) *If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me, and the light become night around me,”*

In Psalm 88 David speaks of a darkness which is suffocating and debilitating,

<sup>16</sup> Your wrath has swept over me;

your terrors have destroyed me.

<sup>17</sup> All day long they surround me like a flood;

they have completely engulfed me.

<sup>18</sup> You have taken from me friend and neighbour—

darkness is my closest friend.

It is in the hour of darkness that we most need to know that God’s right hand will hold us fast.

I wonder what *darkness* looks like for you? We get a clue of the adversity David faces in verse 19. But with what do you associate darkness - or inner turmoil?

Conflict in an important relationship? The darkness of loneliness? A loss of relationship? A struggle with persistent sin? Bad news from the doctor?

I do not presume to know the darkness or adversity you’re facing, but I do know the truth of Psalm 139, that God is with us and his right hand will hold us fast.

<sup>8</sup> If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

And so while these verses are nice and comforting to read on a Sunday morning, when the hour of darkness comes, these words are absolutely essential.

For what do we really want at our lowest moments?

Do we not want someone who knows us and understands us? Someone to be with us. Psalm 139 tells us that this is exactly what we’ve been given.

In the **darkness** God will keep me  
He will stay and never sleep  
In the darkness God is brighter  
Though the **night** is long and deep

All this day Your hand has held me  
God of Heaven, by my side  
Thank You, Father, for Your goodness  
You will hold me through the night

<https://www.cityalight.com/the-night-song-3/>

Jesus knew what it meant to face the hour of darkness. When the wrath of God was poured out upon the cross. Darkness descended, but he won for us an eternal security, and the indwelling presence of God's Spirit.

<sup>28</sup> *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.* <sup>29</sup>

A number of years ago I was sitting with my sister-in-law and she passed to me her newborn child. Knowing I was holding very precious cargo, I made sure his neck was supported as he nestled securely in my arms. The only problem was we were sitting in the back yard of my mother-in-law, and she had a very well-worn picnic setting. For no reason at all, the bench seat I was sitting on collapsed and I fell backwards, still clutching the newborn baby. Of course, my thoughts were not at all for own safety I turned my body to shield the infant and cushion the fall, so that he was protected and safe.

What a deeply precious truth we have here in Psalm 139. We will still face the darkness, but safe and secure – *his right hand will hold us fast.*

### **God is all sovereign (v13-18)**

- <sup>13</sup> For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- <sup>14</sup> I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.
- <sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place,  
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
- <sup>16</sup> Your eyes saw my unformed body;  
all the days ordained for me were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.

It's good for us to think through the intimate level at which God is involved in our creation – knitted together in my mother's womb – forming our lungs, stitching together our veins and arteries, shaping our hands and fingers. David responds with praise – and so should we.

But what's striking, is that it's not just the days before our birth, where God is intimately involved, it's every day which follows. Verse 16 is my favourite verse in the Psalm but is also the one with which I most struggle,

*all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*

It would have been easy for David to trust in the days ordained day for him, in God's sovereign hand, when he killed Goliath, conquered foreign armies and was anointed as God's king. But what about the days where he stood on the rooftop and looked with lust at the woman next door. Where he invited her into his bed. Where he organised for her husband to be killed.

Surely those days weren't ordained?

Well we know the Bible teaches us absolute responsibility for our actions, but what we see here, is that we cannot fall out of God's plans for us. Not only did he knit me in my mother's womb, but he has mapped out every day of my life. My days are not left to randomness or chance, they are planned and ordained. For me, this is a massive relief, knowing that in whatever circumstances or adversity I face, I can trust that all my days have been ordained by my Father in heaven.

Now I know it's pretty easy to trust God in the good days.

We've just had a week in the Blue Mountains for at the Katoomba Easter Convention. Rich teaching from God's word. Singing His praises. Special times with family and friends. Misty mornings. Standing on mountains. Trendy little cafes.

Thank you, Father, for the days you have ordained.

Driving back from Katoomba another car ran up the back of us. Thankfully, no one was hurt, but I've spent the last few days on the phone to the insurer, I had to do a police report, chasing the driver who didn't pull over, organising repairs, hire car – there's a lot of mucking around. Now at the time, did I think, I can rest knowing that this day, this hour, this moment is in God's hands? It was only a few days later when I thought, that's right I'm doing this sermon on trusting that God is with us; he knows me; he ordains all my days.

I wonder if it's a mark of Christian maturity, that we are able to trust in God's sovereign work right in the midst of adversity.

Here's the event, and often it's days or weeks later, that I come to the point of accepting, or acknowledging God's sovereign hand. By God's mercy, I would love to come to be able to trust him, with full confidence in his goodness, at the very moment, when adversity strikes. I know I've still got a long way to go.

I am greatly encouraged by the godliness of the men in my Bible study group who show me that they can keep trusting God in the days where,

- you lose your job
- you find out you have a chronic health condition
- your children choose not to follow Jesus
- you say goodbye to a dear friend

- *All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*

This psalm invites us to trust God in every day, in every event, to know that he is with us, and to rest in his sovereign hand.

Well we come to the final section in v19-24, where we see the adversity that **David** is facing

### **God is all holy and just (19-24)**

<sup>19</sup> If only you, God, would slay the wicked!

Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!

<sup>20</sup> They speak of you with evil intent;

your adversaries misuse your name.

<sup>21</sup> Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD,

and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?

<sup>22</sup> I have nothing but hatred for them;

I count them my enemies.

There's some pretty strong words there. Do you think we can jump in directly and apply them to ourselves?

We certainly want to see an end to wickedness in Ukraine. We cry for God's justice in this world and we mourn when God is not given the glory he is due.

But if we say, "At last a verse that justifies my hatred for my own enemies. If it's good enough for David, it's good enough for me" – we're probably on shaky ground.

We need to be mindful that David speaks from a different theological time zone to us. In the old covenant, the enemies of God, were enemies of Israel. Yet in the light of the new covenant, the enemies of God are redefined.

- In one way, we are all enemies of God for whom Christ died.
- In another way, the enemies of God are identified as sin, death, the world and the devil.
- Jesus tells his disciples, "Love your enemies. And pray for those who persecute you."

The new covenant certainly provides a different perspective as we come to this part of the psalm. Clearly, these verses are a call for justice. We can be confident that on the last day, Christ will return, as judge of the whole earth, and his justice will be final.

"For he [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:31)

As we read this section we are reminded of God's justice, and holiness, but we must also see our own sinfulness and wickedness. It makes sense that the psalm concludes with verses 23 and 24,

<sup>23</sup> Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

<sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.

These verses make a great prayer of confession. A great prayer for us to pray each day, or when we come together as a church. It's important for us to acknowledge **our** sinfulness and wickedness.

However, the Christian also know that Jesus sings this song of the psalms perfectly, so that when we are searched, because we are in union with Christ, nothing is found offensive to our Father. His promise for the new covenant in Jeremiah 31, is that, "I will remember your sin, no more."

## Conclusion

Psalms 139 is an invitation for us to trust the God who knows us, is with us, ordains all our days, and will come with justice. We are safe and secure in the hands of our Father, we are safe and secure in the hands of our saviour – even in the darkness.

<sup>9</sup> If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
<sup>10</sup> even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.

I don't know what adversity you're facing today. I don't know what trials we will face tomorrow, but we do not need to fear. Trusting God, we are readied to face any adversity that comes our way.

*And we therefore will not fear, though the earth should change! Though mountains shake and tremble though swirling waters are raging, God the Lord of hosts is with us, evermore.*

### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your intimate knowledge of every one of us. You know the depths of our thoughts, hopes and fears. We thank you that there is no place in the universe, be it ever so dark, that can separate us from your love and care. We thank you for your infinite wisdom with which you knit us together and ordain all our days. And we thank you that you rule with justice. May we find safety and security, resting in your hands.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.