

God & Life

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 May 2023

Preacher: Zac Story

- [0 : 0 0] I was about to head up when I realized that the sermon I was holding started on page three, so I realized I might be missing something. Greetings.
- It is indeed good to be in the Lord's house on the Lord's day and with the Lord's people because it's all about the Lord.
- Amen. Thank you for that. Indeed, it is all about the Lord, and that is the first context of my sermon today and one that all sermons share. We are a people renewed in Christ and now regularly come together to praise him, part in song, part in prayer, but also in part to learn and apply his word.
- We are here to read and understand the words that God himself has given us, words that create a consistent, fulfilling message of how the creator God of the universe has revealed himself by maintaining a personal and passionate relationship with us, beginning with the very material that we are made of, to Adam, through the patriarchs, the prophets and kings, and most importantly, through God's own entrance into his creation in the form of Jesus Christ, who is not only the fulfillment of Yahweh's revelation, but is the means by which all of God's scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, can be understood to its fullest intellectual, personal, and salvific sense.
- Praise be to God that we are here to worship in his era, in his epoch, in the last days, in which our God's story of everything is heading for its good, true, beautiful, and God glorifying conclusion.
- [1 : 5 5] Indeed, it is good to be here today. But yes, the first context is a study of God's word in God's world by God's witnesses. The second context for the sermon is the walk for life, which is happening this coming Saturday.
- As we have explained today and the past few weeks, the walk for life is an annual fundraiser for the Life Network, our local network of pregnancy centers that always attempt and often succeed to provide the kind of support for mothers, fathers, and children that A, truly helps people as only attempts based on biblical understandings can, and that B, the world, the flesh, and the devil deem intolerable and worthy of destruction.
- Because of those two contexts, I will seek to exposit Psalm 139 in two ways. First, I will walk through the text from beginning to end, seeking to articulate how it is intended to be understood, and not just generally as the word of God at its time of writing, but through the further revelation provided by our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.
- Second, I will circle back to the passages that have implication for the abortion debate that we are involved in. May Yahweh bless this effort. And just for those who don't know, I go back and forth between the general term God that we often use as a name, but also the name of God given in the Bible, Yahweh.
- So, that's what I mean there. Before I get started, I need to make two important caveats. The first is that I am, as is, a lay person with no direct theological training.
- [3 : 3 3] I am attempting to be responsible for what gifts I may have been given at my local church, but that does not mean I am not vulnerable. Probably means the opposite. Related, any sermon has two possible lessons.

The first is whatever the one preaching intended the lesson to be, and if that preacher did things right, then that is the lesson that will take place. If not, though, then the possible lesson made actually is, to apply James 3.1, that not many of us should become teachers.

A congregation should never be so lacking in knowledge that it cannot stand up against at least the worst errors, and I believe that this congregation is not lacking. All that is to say is in one sense what you all already know.

I am not infallible. I am very capable of messing up, at least in part and not in whole. So please be Bereans with me. Search the scriptures with me so that, through the Holy Spirit, our individual giftings and God's word, we will be a refiner's fire for each other.

And that being said, most of this psalm is really easy. One part makes it very hard. So, definitely on this one, feel free to be a refiner's fire with me.

[4 : 50] With that, let us stand to read God's word and then pray. Please open your Bibles to Psalm 139, which starts on page 521 in your pew Bibles.

Psalm 139, page 521 in your pew Bibles. Psalm 139, Listen to the word of God.

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?

[5 : 59] 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 part of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me.

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 bright as 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 and was being made in secret. Intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance.

In your books were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me when as yet there was none. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

[7 : 01] If I would 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! 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 gravest way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. So, reads the word of Yahweh. Let us pray. Our Father in heaven, sovereign above all, the Father of the triune God, with Jesus our Savior and the Holy Spirit who dwells among us, thank you for this time.

May we use it well. May your Spirit be an enabler for all of us here that we all in our parts here in this congregation are able to learn and understand and praise you.

[8 : 18] May your Holy Spirit also be a discerner. May everything that I say that is good and fruitful be remembered and be applied. May everything that is not be forgotten and put to no values.

In your precious name I pray. Amen. Amen. The first part of this psalm is its title. To the Choir Master.

Oh yes, you may be seated. Sorry. The first part of this psalm is its title. To the Choir Master, a Psalm of David.

I won't say much about this except to let you know that scholars discuss and debate these titles often. The Bible is a book that can be both understood by the simplest thinker and yet also give the deepest thinker lifelong intellectual endeavors.

The discussion about the titles of the psalms that goes on in the background are evidence of this. I will point out that, at least for the sake of politics, instead of being read as a psalm of David, it is possible to read it in a variety of ways that are more akin to David-like than specifically authored by David.

[9 : 27] That's okay, partially because for the purpose of the psalm, it does not matter, as consistent as it would be with the biblical understanding of David to have this psalm be written by him.

As scholars like Tremper Longman point out, Tremper Longman III, in his commentary on the psalms, page 28 for him, the psalms are for communal worship.

They are meant to be sung by the people. They do not require deep understanding of the author, even if it helps. Both Amazing Grace and It Is Well With My Soul are plenty powerful, as is, without the admittedly incredible tales of their authors, and they were never guided by the Holy Spirit to write scripture.

In fact, David-like might even be a better fit for this idea, causing us to focus neither too little nor too much on the actual David. I don't mean to make too much of this, but in a world where the authenticity of the biblical record is constantly under attack, a little sobriety about the textual discussions now avoids shock later when it's more dangerous.

To end this portion, I will say that, even in such discussions, it is clear that the title is part of the divinely given and protected canon of the Bible, and its meaning is never so vague as to not be of help.

[10 : 39] Indeed, all the potential David-like interpretations all point to the historical figure of David as a potential guidepost for the kind of thinking and trials that are found in this psalm.

The next section is verses 1 through 6. Here's the word of God. 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. So reads the word of God.

There are two important aspects that I noticed in all verse sections of the psalm. One is the supreme quality and nature of our God and the other is the author's experience of that quality and nature.

[11 : 41] I should be careful calling them two different categories though for they are always intertwined. Unlike in Genesis where the account is a description of what Yahweh is doing in a third person distant perspective, this psalm is, for much of it, the author's reflection on and experience of those qualities and nature.

In this passage, the psalmist sees his God's all-knowing nature. Yahweh knows his actions, his thoughts, his speech, his patterns, and even his personality.

Further, the psalmist indicates that it's not simply knowledge of the present. In verse four, the psalmist points out that God knows the whole of what he is thinking before he can even get the words out to explain it.

Further, this knowledge is not purely factual as if it is to come merely from the most sophisticated observer and prophet ever known. This knowledge seems to be at least in part because of God's actions.

As the psalmist puts it in verse five, God has hemmed in the psalmist and has put his hand on the psalmist. Hem is often a sewing term and won't be the last sewing term that we will see in the psalms.

[12 : 56] At its most vague, it seems to mean to border something. But with the complimentary phrase about the hand, the active sewing term makes more sense. In a way similar to how a seamstress would stitch in a professional bordering section to an item of clothing, so does Yahweh create a border to the being of the psalmist.

Yahweh is actively defining the qualities, thoughts, and actions of the psalmist. However, the psalmist can only contemplate this so far before he has to admit his own ignorance.

In verse six, he points out that such knowledge, both active and passive, is ultimately too much for him to fathom, even when the psalmist is only discussing God's knowledge of just the psalmist.

There is a lesson here for all of us in this. Even when it comes to our own selves, we will never come close to knowing what God knows about us. One thing beyond noticeable in our era is how much we are told that we are the best knowers of ourselves.

It is we who can look inside ourselves and upon our experience and judge who we are with such assurance that we can demand that the rest of the world act accordingly.

[14 : 09] It is a view that is as worldly as it is wrong. Yahweh is the one who best knows us, not ourselves. If we want to know ourselves, we need to use the psalmist as the example, focusing on God in order to know who we are.

Next, verses seven through twelve. Here reads the word of God. Where shall I go from your spirit or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to the 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 part of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me.

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 bright as day for darkness is as light with you.

So reads the word of God. This section is much like the past one, but focuses less on Yahweh's knowledge and more on Yahweh's perpetual presence. No matter where the psalmist goes, Yahweh is there.

[15 : 15] The psalmist does not suffer from a lack of imagination on this. Not only are the extremes of our terrestrial earth brought up, but even the regions that are beyond this life are mentioned.

Whether the psalmist goes to where those who die, Sheol, or never die, heaven, go, God is already present. It is not just about God being everywhere, though.

It is also about how nothing can be hidden from Him. There is nothing that can be known that God doesn't know. Man, both male and female, can hide from each other in the dark, but God, as the creator and sustainer of both man and the dark, has no such difficulty.

Yahweh's ability to know and His ability to be present are at least sometimes one the same. The idea of God's knowledge being active is also present here.

It is not just that God is wherever the psalmist is and is aware of His presence there. Rather, as the imagery in verse 10 indicates, it is also that God has, A, caused Him to go there, and B, sustains Him there.

[16 : 22] No matter where the psalmist goes, He is led and He is held. Next, verses 13-16.

Here are the words of God. 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 books were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. So reads the Word of God. The first word of this section, for, has logical significance.

It suggests that of all the discussions of the psalmist's experience of God thus far, this is the most important one. This is the one that makes sense of God's knowledge and God's presence addressed in the last two sections.

[17 : 29] Yahweh knows the psalmist so intimately because Yahweh made the psalmist and not in some abstracted sense. The theme of God's direct action on the psalmist reaches a new height with how he formed him, how he formed the psalmist in words parts and knitted them together.

The theme of God's presence is continued in how the psalmist's frame was not hidden. God sees the psalmist as he creates him. The theme of God's knowledge is not merely continued but greatly enhanced as well.

Yahweh does not only know the psalmist through his act of creating him, God knew every day of the psalmist's life before even one of them began. God's intimate creation of the psalmist is not merely an event by itself, rather, it is part of a much larger plan written out well in advance.

God planned the days in which the psalmist would be formed and then formed him on them. It is little wonder that the psalmist wonders at God's knowledge after saying this. On that note, verses 17 through 18, here's the word of God.

So reads the word of God.

[18 : 48] After reflecting on how Yahweh has planned out and created the psalmist, the psalmist is now rightly amazed. The psalmist has been discussing things from just his own perspective, but yet all the knowledge that Yahweh has about that alone is more than enough to indicate the sheer amount of knowledge God has.

And such knowledge isn't just fun facts. It is personal. It is knowledge that gives us precious insight into who is the psalmist, and by extension, who we ourselves are.

This is a great time to stop and point out what a blessing this was and is to have in the form of corporate music. This was meant to be sung publicly. It is right to discuss the psalms in reference to the psalmists.

After all, they're the ones that wrote them. Still, it is important to point out in the act of worship that the psalm was designed to take place in, the psalm is no longer just about him. It is about us.

The psalmist's reflection becomes our own. We don't have to ponder his amazement at Yahweh. We can be amazed along with him. Anyway, the psalmist also mentions the quality of God's knowledge.

[20 : 01] It is not just vast knowledge, but precious knowledge. The quality of it is just as amazing as the quantity. Still, the main focus seems to be quantity. In verse 18, the psalmist points out that if he tried to count out God's thoughts, their sand-like quantity would cause him to fall asleep while counting them.

And once he wakes up, God will still be on his mind. Next, verses 19 through 22. Here's the word of God.

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 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. So reads the word of God.

This is easily the hardest section of the psalm. I should say, at least for me, I should not be prideful and acting as if the rest is just easy. Like, oh, I got this. But this is the one that made...

[21 : 16] Yeah, this is the one that pushed me to try harder. This is easily the hardest section of the psalm for me, especially, and I think, especially for the Christian conscience. It is also a very powerful section.

As Tremper Longman III puts in his commentary on the psalms, it is what makes this psalm more one of lament rather than one of praise. It may seem like there is a change in tone and theme.

What happened to all the wonder and praise? However, much of the context for the psalmist's anguish is already laid out. All the passages of this psalm thus far have made clear that Yahweh has incredible total knowledge of the psalmist.

Yahweh planned out the life of the psalmist. Yahweh formed the psalmist. Yahweh knows what the psalmist does and thinks. Yahweh knows where the psalmist always is and leads him to wherever that is.

Yahweh's knowledge of the psalmist includes everything the psalmist knows about himself and more. And, as the purpose of the psalms may clear as corporate worship, Yahweh also knows the same about everyone else.

[22 : 19] In other words, this means that Yahweh also knows the same about the wicked that are afflicting the psalmist. And he knows the character of the psalmist. God knows that the wicked are afflicting the psalmist and God knows what the psalmist thinks about them.

And yet, they are still here. And yet, they are still tormenting the psalmist. In more other words, the first 18 verses of this psalm actually serve to set up the reason for the psalmist mourning and venting.

God not only has full knowledge of the situation, but has intended it. And the psalmist wants the situation to end. Note that the psalmist is not being unbiblical in his thinking, at least according to the amount of the Bible that existed at the time.

The Bible was written over a period that lasted well over a thousand years, and to be faithful to God was to be faithful to what was provided by God at the time that one lived. The psalmist did not have Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, but he had at least the first five books of the Bible.

One of them is Leviticus, and in chapter 24 of that book, we read Yahweh himself stating that a person who curses his name shall be stoned. And what does the psalmist point out about the wicked?

[23 : 39] The psalmist would also have the Ten Commandments, with one of them being not to take God's name in vain. The psalmist seems to accurately understand the severity of the evil taking place.

Further, there is no indication that what the psalmist is saying is wrong. In fact, since this understanding has been enshrined in the Bible by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we have the opposite.

God wanted his people to read this section. He wanted them to sing that section, and he wants us to at least read it now. Still, there seems to be something off to the Christian who thinks that that reaction is not quite the faith that we are taught to show others.

And we are right to think this, at least if we do so for the right reason. And that reason is this. Jesus changed things, and we have a record of those changes in the New Testament.

In Matthew 5, 38 through 42, we read Jesus preaching the following. Here reads the Word of God. You have heard it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

[24 : 50] But I say to you, do not resist the evil one. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. So reads the Word of God.

The Old Testament has plenty of examples of eye for eye, tooth for tooth thinking. One of them is possibly my favorite prayer life passage. In Exodus 21, 22 through 25, we read the following.

Here reads the Word of God. When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall oppose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine.

But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

[26 : 01] So reads the Word of God. Eye for eye justice is given to Moses for the people by God multiple times in the Old Testament. But that is the very law of Jesus, who is God incarnate, is saying, no longer applies, which is an even bigger event if one believes that the Mosaic Law was one unit, as many modern scholars think, and that arguably the James who wrote the book of James, see chapter 2, verses 10 through 13, thought as well.

Jesus is making the kind of changes that only our Lord and Savior can make. But, relevant to our main passage, Psalm 139, Jesus continues in the Sermon on the Mount.

In Matthew 5, 43 through 48, we read Jesus preaching the following. Here reads the Word of God. You have heard it was said, you shall love your enemies, you shall love, sorry, you have heard it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others?

[27 : 28] Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. So reads the Word of God.

Now, the scholars who wrote the study notes in my ESV study Bible rightly point out that, to the best of my knowledge at least, that we are nowhere told in the Bible to hate our enemies, at least not in that exact wording.

The problem is that we have verses 21 and 22 of Psalm 139 and we have no biblical condemnation of them. Rather, they are enshrined in the Bible in a song meant to be sung by the people.

In the Old Testament, we do read of, even if we don't have those exact words that Jesus says in the Old Testament, we do read of a form of righteous hatred of the enemy that is condoned.

And in the New Testament, we read our God and Savior, Jesus Christ, changing that. So, why is the conscience of the Christian rightly concerned by passages about slaying the wicked and hating our enemies?

[28 : 34] Because we have been given a new covenant by which to live by. It was right for the psalmist to say what he did at that time, but that was at a time before Christ died for our sins. Back then, they had to look at the law and the temple.

Now we get to look upon Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit. The trade-off is well worth it. Let me be clear that this doesn't change the fact that all scripture is capable of equipping us for the Christian life.

See 2 Timothy 3. including the sections that have to, at least more than others, be interpreted through the lens of Christ and the New Testament saints carried along by the same Holy Spirit that carried along the writers of the Old Testament.

For example, in the section from Exodus we recently read, the pro-life one that I'm a fan of, what has not changed is that the pre-born are called children and are worth being protected.

The same is true for the Psalms. To me, this portion of Psalm 139 gives us a fuller picture of God's knowledge of all and gives us better knowledge of who we ought to be.

[29 : 42] As God's community, may we, while loving our enemies, never be a part of their evil schemes. In that sense, at least, may we share the psalmist's acknowledgement and detestation of evil, just not at the expense of showing Yahweh's mercy to the one imbuing said evil.

Side note, I am very grateful for the discussion this morning with James and Steve on this, and even Carrie said something. That was cool. Unfortunately, one of the weaknesses of writing down your sermons is that it's difficult to enshrine that.

So if you want other people that are discussing this, I encourage, sorry in advance to you too, but to talk with James and Steve as well, and I'm grateful for their insights this morning and discussion. Now back to the Bible and back to the last section of this psalm, verses 23 through 24.

Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. Sorry, there's an exclamation mark. Let me try that one more time. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts and see if there be any gravest way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

So reads the word of God. This passage is much easier on the Christian than the last one. I apologize that that's a prideful sentence. It is possible that the psalmist believes that he has committed no wrong in his current situation and is seeking vindication, but this passage goes farther than that.

[31 : 12] The psalmist is not only asking to be seen as right in this situation, rather, he is requesting that the same God who has such manifold, deep, personal, active, and wondrous knowledge of him, refine him.

Find me at where I am wrong and lead me to where I am right, is what I believe the psalmist is saying. The psalmist clearly does not want to be one of the wicked, and it is God's ability to search, convict, and lead him that will prevent him from ever becoming one of the wicked.

The same is true for us, but by an order of magnitude of greater intensity. With the Holy Spirit, the third person of the one being that is Yahweh, treating our bodies as a temple, thanks to the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made, the intensity of that search is only greater, but Lord willing, so is our desire to undergo it.

Now, this was supposed to be a topical pro-life sermon. I hope that I showed y'all that one does not need to have a topic in order to have a sermon, just God's word and willingness to study it.

However, there is a reason that one section of the psalm has become a classic pro-life text. Going back to verses 13 through 16. Here is the word of God.

[32 : 33] 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 books were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none.

So reads the word of God. As I said before, the four in this section indicates that it is the main line of reasoning and reflection. The psalmist's other insights make sense to him because of what he says here.

And what he says here in a myriad of ways is that he was formed in the womb. It was his inward parts that were formed. It was him that was knitted together. It was his unformed substance that was seen.

It was his frame that was not hidden. It was he that was being made in secret. No wonder that the soul knows that God's works are wonderful. His first moments of being alive were a direct experience of God's works.

[33 : 40] And his body will always be one of them. The same is true for us and the same can be sung for us. The psalmist has no problem seeing that his existence started in his mother's womb and that existence was pivotal for many of his understandings of God.

May we not have a problem with that either. I wish I had time to address how this understanding is manifest in God's created order from the incredible design of the placenta to the fact that babies are born with accents.

Perhaps next time. For now, let me just say that the word of the creator God of the universe is always at harmony with the way the world actually is. This issue is no exception.

So let me end with some brief application. What can be done? Right now, we are trying to help raise the funds needed to support the Life Network through the coming year. Any little bit helps.

And any little bit will be seen by God and if not by us. Add, there's also plenty of volunteer efforts as well that will, that can be of much value. Most importantly though, be like the psalmist.

[34 : 49] May we let the God who once came in the form of the pre-born work in us and refine us. And may we too be amazed at what he has done and continues to do. Let us pray.

O Yahweh, O triune God, O Father in Heaven, O Jesus our Savior, O Holy Spirit that dwells with us, thank you for this day.

Thank you for your precious word. Thank you for the ability for us to discern good and evil. And thank you that despite knowing the evil in us, you died for us.

You came to this life and you died for us so that we are vindicated by you and that we no longer have to live in those ways, no longer have to live in an eye for eye, tooth for tooth world, but can live under your mercy and project your mercy out.

May you be with us, may you bless us, may you refine us. In your precious name I pray.
Amen. Amen. Amen.