

Known by God

Psalm 139

October 11, 2026 — New Baptist Church
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Opening: A Hotline for Emergencies

We are studying some of the most beloved psalms in Scripture, and our psalm today, Psalm 139, is among the most loved.

When I was very young, there was a popular Bible and prayer tool called the “Emergency Bible Hotline Numbers.” A life situation would be paired with a Bible verse. When you were worried, you would dial 1 Peter 5:7 — *“casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”* When you were lonely, you would dial Deuteronomy 31:8 — *“It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”*

As I have grown in the knowledge of God’s Word, I have found that certain passages have become my own go-to passages in emergencies — for myself and for others. When someone is overwhelmed, I turn them to Matthew 11:28: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* When someone is struggling with sin, I dial Psalm 51 — *“Create in me a clean heart”* — or 1 John 1:9, where we are told that he is faithful and just to forgive us. When someone is in deep grief or heartache, I share Psalm 34:18, that the Lord draws near to the brokenhearted. When someone is in the grip of depression, I turn to the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19. When someone is alone and afraid, I go to Psalm 23.

Psalm 139 is like a Swiss Army knife for Bible emergency hotlines. It has become a go-to number to dial for people struggling with the death of a loved one, for those looking for an Old Testament argument for the life that survives the grave, for conversations about the value and sacredness of human life, and for those simply in need of assurance and comfort in God’s knowledge, presence, and power. It is a beautiful and amazing psalm. And as we walk through it today, I hope you will find comfort in it and that it will become a speed-dial number for you in your own life emergencies.

The Psalm and Its Setting

Please open with me to Psalm 139. At its start we are told: “*To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.*” There are no markers in this psalm that tell us exactly when in David’s life he wrote it. It could have been written when he was a young shepherd out with his flocks, or it could have been written when he was old, looking at the nearness of his own death. The psalm fits both occasions.

For me, I imagine David sitting out under the vastness of the night sky, contemplating who God is and what his being God means for David’s being David. In his contemplation, David states four truths about the nature of God that he finds great comfort in. I hope you will too.

Truth One: The Lord God Almighty Is Omniscient

He is all-knowing. He knows all things.

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. (Psalm 139:1–6)

What does this passage tell us about God? It tells us that he knows all events and all creatures. He knows the past, the present, and the future. He knows every detail in the life of every being in heaven, on earth, and in the grave. Nothing escapes his notice, nothing can be hidden from him, nothing is forgotten by him. He never errs in his knowledge, never overlooks anything. God knows everything — everything possible, everything actual. He is all-knowing.

And because God is omniscient, David says he knows *me* intimately. He knows my ways, he knows my thoughts, he knows my words even before I speak them. He knows me. And he knows you. For David, God’s all-knowing nature does not produce fear, anxiousness, or worry, but rather comfort and wonder: “*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.*”

In those moments when you think or feel that no one knows what you are going through, God knows. There is nothing you are going through, nothing you are feeling, nothing you are fearing that has escaped his notice. He knows you.

That is Truth One. The Lord God Almighty is omniscient. He is all-knowing.

Truth Two: The Lord God Almighty Is Omnipresent

His presence is everywhere.

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! 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 cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. (Psalm 139:7–12)

We might put it this way: even if I go to the other side of the world, you are there with me. Your right hand shall hold me.

Not only does God know — he is present in every place at every time. There are no bounds or restrictions upon the presence of God. I personally cannot wrap my mind around that truth, and neither could David. He asks the question: *Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?* And the answer is: nowhere. If I go way up into the sky, you are there. If I go way down into the earth, you are there. If I flee to the other side of the world, across the horizon, you are there. Even in the darkest of nights, it is not night to God. Nothing shields his presence; nothing blocks his gaze.

Again, this is a great comfort to the psalmist. The Lord is with me no matter where I am, even in those places and times of deep darkness.

And in this pondering of God's omnipresence, David makes a remarkable connection. God, are you even present in the grave? Are you even present with me when I die? He discovers that not even Sheol — the realm of the dead — is beyond God's presence. Even on the other side of the cross, David realizes that death itself does not separate us from God. Even in the darkness of the tomb, God's right hand still holds him.

The Lord God Almighty is omniscient and he is omnipresent.

Truth Three: The Lord God Almighty Is Omnipotent

He is all-powerful.

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139:13–16)

How powerful is the Lord? For David, God's power is revealed in the mystery of life itself. God formed us in the womb. Before anyone else knew us, God knew us. Before we could plan a single day of our lives, our days were already known to him. And in his numbering of our days, this passage reminds us that the Lord alone has the authority and power to give life, and that he alone has the authority and power to take life. This is important to be reminded of.

Often, when a loved one dies, those who remain carry guilt. They look back and wonder whether they could have done more, whether they made the right decision, whether things might have turned out differently. We are not to carry that burden. And if you do carry that guilt, please listen to what this psalm is saying: God is God and you are not. We do not possess his knowledge, his power, or his wisdom. Yes, we are responsible to love and to act faithfully with the knowledge we have, but we are not responsible for knowing everything or controlling everything. Sometimes trusting the Lord means surrendering to him what was never ours to control.

For me personally, this theological truth of God's authority and power over life shapes how I live. It says to me that all human life is sacred because it is a gift of God. From the unborn child to the person who has lived many years and is nearing the end of life, every human life is sacred — a gift from God that is to be received with thankfulness, which means doing what one can to help that life thrive, young or old.

But God's authority over life and death also means trusting him when a loved one nears death. There is a time to fight for life, but there is also a time to provide comfort to the dying. The Bible tells us to do both, and in both situations we need wisdom, prayer, good counsel, and compassion. And that wisdom — the wisdom of knowing what to do — brings us to the fourth truth David prays.

Truth Four: The Lord God Almighty Is Omnisapient

He is all-wise, possessing perfect and infinite wisdom.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.
(Psalm 139:17–18)

Not only is God omniscient, knowing all things — he has the wisdom to perfectly accomplish his good purposes. The word “thoughts” here is David’s way of talking about the wisdom of God. He is saying, “*How precious to me are your designs, your plans, your purposes, your wisdom. How vast is the sum of them! Your wisdom, Lord, is something I cannot grasp — it is so vast — but I know that your purposes are precious.*”

David is saying what I often hear people say when life gets hard: *I know God has a purpose in this. I hang on to that. It gives me hope. I know he is at work in this tragedy. I know he is at work in my life. I know that what he is doing in this world is bringing us to a place and time when his glory is fully manifested.* These things — these purposes of God — are precious. And at the same time, they are a mystery. “*If I would count them, they are more than the sand.*”

But even when I do not understand everything that God is doing, here is what I do know: *I awake, and I am still with you.* On one level, this is simply the comfort of survival — you are going through something you see no way through, but because of God’s wisdom, his designs, his purposes, you are going to get through it. But I also like to read this as a promise of redemption and resurrection. There is a riddle running through this psalm. If God knows all things, is present everywhere, possesses all power, and is infinitely wise, then what is he doing about death? What is he doing about the darkness of the grave? David does not yet know everything that we know through Jesus Christ, but he knows enough about God to trust him, even in the face of death. And we, standing on this side of the cross and resurrection, know that God’s purposes extend beyond the grave.

Bringing It All to God

Because this is who God is — a God who knows all things, who is ever present, all-powerful, and infinitely wise — David can bring to him every burden and every problem he has. Even those that look like dead ends with no way out. Even those burdens and problems that seem impossible.

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.
(Psalm 139:19–22)

When we read such a passage, we are often shocked. *“I hate them with complete hatred.”* What are we to do with that? Clearly, evil things are happening around David that are causing him to grieve. So what does he do? He brings both the people and the things that grieve him to the Lord and submits them to God’s judgment. He does this because God alone is perfectly all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present, and infinitely wise.

And we are to do the same in every situation. The apostle Paul puts it plainly: *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”* (Philippians 4:6). Why? Because God is all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present, and infinitely wise. Simply put, there is nothing going on in your life that God does not know about, that God cannot change, and that God cannot bring you through.

Therefore, trust the Lord. Trust him with your life, trust him with what you are going through, trust him with your failures, and trust him with your future.

The Psalm’s Great Turn

This is how David ends the psalm, and it is worth slowing down to notice what has happened. The psalm began with a theological truth: *“O LORD, you have searched me and known me!”* And now it ends with that truth becoming deeply personal, with David willingly placing himself under God’s loving authority.

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! (Psalm 139:23–24)

That is trust. *I know this is true of you — and so I trust you with it.*

I trust you with my heart: *“Search me, O God, and know my heart!”*

I trust you with my thoughts: *“Try me and know my thoughts!”*

I trust you with my actions: *“See if there be any grievous way in me.”*

And I trust you with my future: *“Lead me in the way everlasting.”*

When you do not know what to do, God knows. When you feel alone, God is present. When you are powerless, God is not. And when you cannot understand what God is doing, you can trust his wisdom.

Closing: This Side of the Cross

Throughout this psalm, there is a sense that David could see Christ. I do not know how clear that sight was, but he knew that according to God's good wisdom and power and knowledge, God was doing something that dealt with death — with Sheol, with darkness, with judgment and sin. We, standing on this side of the cross, can bear witness to the fulfillment of that vision.

The wisdom of God proclaimed in this psalm was ultimately manifested in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose again, so that through him we have the promise of everlasting life. And when the darkness of death comes, we can trust that we will awaken in the presence of the Lord, held securely by his hand.

If you do not know the Lord, if you have not surrendered your life to him, I invite you to make David's prayer your own: *"Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. And the sin that is in me — please forgive, and lead me in the way everlasting."*