

## “God’s Promised Presence”

**Lesson Text:** Psalm 139:1–12 **Background Scripture:** Psalm 139

**Devotional Reading:** Exodus 33:12–23

### Psalm 139:1–12 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>You have searched me, Lord, 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. <sup>4</sup>Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. <sup>5</sup>You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. <sup>6</sup>Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. <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. <sup>11</sup>If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” <sup>12</sup>even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

### TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To list the things that God knows based on Psalm 139:1–12.
- **Biblical Principle:** To explain how David saw the relationship between God and man His creation.
- **Daily Application:** To create a nightly reminder of God’s loving care.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Human Limitation

The progress of technology has facilitated an interconnected world. The sheer volume of information that is available thanks to the internet is staggering. But the wealth of knowledge also serves as a reminder of humanity’s limitations in experiencing every corner of the globe within a single lifetime. Visiting every country might seem possible. But with approximately 4 million cities and towns across the globe, we realize that just seeing a country will not give us the experience of all those varied places—let alone lightly or uninhabited regions.

Moreover, humanity has only begun to explore the vast expanse of space and the depths of the oceans. In this regard, when we consider the smallness of our plot of land on earth compared to the vastness of space and the oceans, we are reminded of humanity’s limited ability to explore. In today’s lesson, the psalmist offers insight into this.

### LESSON CONTEXT

Although one ancient manuscript ascribes Psalm 139 to a man named Zechariah (not the prophet) sometime in the 700s–600s B.C., most scholars accept the traditional attribution to David. According to Scripture, David was a man who sought after the very heart of God (1 Samuel 13:14), exemplified by his demonstration of faith when he faced Goliath (17:47). He was a man of integrity who chose to trust in God when presented with an opportunity to kill Saul in a cave (24:8–10). Even after conquering his enemies and receiving the promise that his kingdom would be established forever, David remained humble (2 Samuel 7:18).

Some difficulty confronts us when reading this psalm because there is no reference to a particular historical circumstance. This means that a specific historical context, even in David's life, cannot be determined. Second, a thorough examination of Psalm 139 reveals complexities in its structure that complicate a straightforward interpretation of David's intent.

To analyze the psalm's content, some scholars have proposed dividing it into sections of praise (vs. 1–18) and lamentation (vs. 19–24) based on the initial expressions of gratitude followed by anguish. These can further be broken into four stanzas of verses 1–6, 7–12, 13–18, and 19–24, which can aid in understanding the text.

And finally, the text assumes that David was beset by wicked adversaries opposed to him and to God. These individuals harbored animosity toward God, profaned his name, and spoke maliciously against him (Psalm 139:19–22, not in our printed text). Furthermore, David implored God to probe his innermost being and guide him toward eternal life (139:23–24, not in our printed text). Today we will study David's first 12 verses (139:1–12) regarding God's complete awareness.

### **Unsearchable Knowledge: Psalm 139:1-6**

In these first four verses David introduces God's complete knowledge, often referred to as His omniscience, which is the attribute that encompasses His infinite awareness and understanding of everything that has ever happened, is happening, or will happen. Jesus' knowledge of people's inner lives is one marker of His divinity recorded in the Gospels (examples: Matthew 12:25; Luke 5:22; John 4:16–19). God is entirely aware of all things. But David did not set out to write a doctrine of God's knowledge. David assumed God's omniscience as fact and did not make an argument to convince others. David's intention was not to teach about God's infallible, complete knowledge, but instead to marvel at it in awe and respect it (see 139:7–12, below).

We might think of these first four verses as beginning a courtroom drama, with the Lord trying the evidence of David's character (you have searched me ... and you know me). The Hebrew word translated searched is the same expression employed to describe a cross-examination in a judicial context (Proverbs 18:17). God is the judge who has meticulously scrutinized and comprehensively understood all the evidence required to judge the heart's motivations. He possesses knowledge of both public and private aspects of one's life, from their travels (*my going out*, Psalm 139:3) to their rest (*lying down*), as well as the things we say (v. 4) and do.

### **1. What was David's opinion of God's knowledge? (Psalm 139:1-4)**

#### **What Do You Think?**

How do you feel knowing that God knows you?

#### **Digging Deeper**

How can acknowledging the sinful parts of yourself that God already knows prepare you to grow by the Spirit's leading?

Here David's focus shifts from the pure fact of God's knowledge to the action He takes with this knowledge. God knows what is best for us and does all He can to guide us that way. He besets us in

*behind and before* and puts His hand on us to steady us and direct us. The word translated “hem” means enclose, or “to guard a valuable object,” so God’s knowledge and guidance are for our protection. What should be our response to this? We should be overwhelmed by the height and depth of God’s knowledge and be thankful that He knows us perfectly. “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me” David exclaimed, too (*lofty*) grand for me to (*attain*) achieve. David portrays this phenomenon positively, evoking a sense of awe and amazement toward God.

## **2. What did David mean when he said, “You hem me in” (Psalm 139:5-6)?**

### **Unavoidable Presence: Psalm 139:7-12**

Here David makes the transition from God’s omniscience (knowledge) and care to God’s omnipresence (presence everywhere). David was theorizing in his own mind, or perhaps talking to God when he asked *where can I go or run from Your presence?* This knowledge of God’s presence might be a source of both comfort and concern to David, because we know David made some mistakes in his past, and so have we.

So, if God knows so much about us, perhaps the wisest thing is to run away and hide, but wait... all “escape routes” are futile. Man can certainly not escape the Divine presence by ascending into the heaven of Heavens (v. 8). Descending into the lowest imaginable depths of the dead and making your bed there is a very unlikely possibility, and it will not alleviate either the comfort or concern that David has regarding the presence of God.

In verse 9 we see that God is there; even if we (*rise on the wings of the dawn*, a metaphorical reference to sunbeams, the incalculable velocity of light) travel at the speed of light to the east or west, His hand will catch us and tenderly lead us.

## **3. What did David say about God’s unavoidable presence? (Psalm 139:7-10)**

### **What Do You Think?**

In which current situations do you find God’s presence in your life comforting?

### **Digging Deeper**

Do you find his presence alarming in others? Does this suggest that a new course of action would be wise for you?

We cannot hide even in the darkness, for even opposites such as *darkness* and *light* make no difference to God’s knowledge of our physical and spiritual locations and status. God wants to walk with us and guide us, because His plan for us is the very best. Why should we want to run away and hide? Adam and Eve tried it and failed (Gen. 3:8), and so did the prophet Jonah, who only went from bad to worse. We need God’s presence with us if we want to enjoy His love and fulfill His purposes. (See Isa. 43:1-7; Ps. 23:4; Matt. 28:19-20.)

## **4. What does hiding in the dark do for people? (Psalm 139:11-12)**

## **What Do You Think?**

What darkness would you like reassurance that God sees through?

## **Digging Deeper**

What difference does it make that Jesus has been revealed as the light of the world, which the world cannot understand (John 1:5, 9–10)?

## **CONCLUSION**

### **God's Presence and Knowledge**

The vastness of the world's information and the multitude of places yet to be explored can be exciting and terrifying; God's boundless wisdom and presence provide solace to believers in either and all cases. Even if humanity were to one day journey to the surface of Mars, God's omnipresence ensures that He is already there. For those who trust in Him, the omniscience and omnipresence of God offer a sense of security and salvation. It is essential to recognize that God did not create the universe only to abandon it to its own devices. Rather, He is actively involved and present in every aspect of creation. There can never be too much to know for the infinite God.

David acknowledged his inability to comprehend all knowledge, which underscores the incomprehensibility of God's omniscience. And it's uncertain whether, in the writing of this poem, David was reassured or troubled by God's full knowledge and relentless presence. But these characteristics certainly did comfort David in other cases.

Like David, we might find ourselves in a situation when God's knowledge and presence make us uneasy. Or we might unreservedly embrace these attributes as comforts in our present circumstances. In either case, we can strive to know God better and to praise Him, offer Him our confusion and anxieties, and ask Him for help against all the evil we confront.

## **PRAYER**

All-knowing and all-present God, we lift our hearts to you. May we take comfort in knowing that You are always with us and will never be surprised by anything we think, say, or do. Help us glorify You in all things so that Your presence and knowledge are a comfort and not a warning to us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## **THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

Take comfort in God's unsurpassed knowledge and presence.

## **ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON**

Next week's lesson is titled "Jesus' Ancestry" and explains the importance of that ancestry. Study Ruth 4:9–17; Luke 3:23, 31b–32.