

### Psalm 139. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 3 December 2014.

Well, we have more or less come to an end of our series of talks based on the Book of Psalms. The set psalm for this morning is Psalm 139. In that our psalm – as many others – is reasonably long, I shall again read only part of the psalm; in this case, mainly from the first section:

A Psalm of David.

O Lord, you have searched<sup>1</sup> me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; you understand my thought afar off.<sup>2</sup> You ... are acquainted with all my ways ... there is not a word on my tongue, but lo, O Lord, you know it altogether ... Such knowledge is too wonderful<sup>3</sup> for me;<sup>4</sup> it is high, I cannot attain it.<sup>5</sup>

Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?<sup>6</sup> ... If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there ... your right hand shall hold me. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night' ... the darkness and the light are both alike to you ...

You formed my inward parts; you wove me together in my mother's womb. I will praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made ... Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed.

To some extent, in this psalm David applies to himself personally words spoken many years before by the mother of the man who God used to pick him out and anoint him as His (God's) chosen king over Israel. For in her prayer of thanks at the birth of Samuel, when warning against arrogance and pride, Hannah had celebrated the fact, and I quote, that 'the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by Him actions are weighed'.<sup>7</sup>

But, in our reading, David is concerned, not with God's knowledge of all things<sup>8</sup> in some abstract sense, but with God's detailed and intimate knowledge of himself as an individual. And in our passage, David focuses on the way in which the Lord's eye was upon him at all times ... on the way in which the Lord saw him, not only in the present, but in the past, even before he was born.

Some 3,000 years before there were ultrasound prenatal scans, David wrote, 'Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed' – a reference to the embryo in the womb. He was reflecting on the fact that, although in his mother's womb he was well and truly hidden from the eyes of men, he was not hidden from the eyes of God.

But he knew that God had done more than merely *view* him then, and spoke of his body having been carefully fashioned by God as the divine potter and interlaced by God as the divine weaver.<sup>9</sup>

'I am fearfully and wonderfully made', he said.<sup>10</sup> How true. Today, with our greater medical knowledge, we are able to appreciate this more than David ever could. To take just one example, I was astonished to read that there are about – wait for it – 60,000 miles of blood vessels (long thin tubes) in the human body ... and I have checked this fact carefully! Incredible as it may seem, if stretched out, they would reach around the Earth two-and-a-half times! And what is more, the heart, beating all of 100,000 times a day, pumps somewhere in the region of 2,000 gallons of blood through those vessels every 24 hours.<sup>11</sup> Yes, David, 'fearfully and wonderfully made' alright!

But David was clear that God also knew all about him in the present ... that God knew his every action, word and thought – wherever he was and whatever he was doing from one end of the day to the other.

'You ... are acquainted with all my ways', he began.

The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel denounced Israel's leaders of his day who secretly worshipped many forms of idolatrous images and pictures 'in the dark', brazenly declaring as they did so, 'The Lord does not see us'.<sup>12</sup> How wrong they were, as they were soon to find out!

These elders were just like some children of whom I read some time ago – who were lined up in the cafeteria of a Christian school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large pile of apples. A card stood alongside, which read, 'Take only *one*. Remember, God is watching!' Moving along the lunch line, at the other end of table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies. Reaching that end, one child whispered to another, 'Take all you want. God is watching the apples'. No way, David would say, He is 'acquainted with all our ways'.<sup>13</sup>

But it is not only our actions which are picked up by the beam of God's searchlight. 'There is not a word on my tongue', David added, 'but lo, O Lord, you know it altogether'.

And my Bible offers many historical instances to prove it. I have only to think of the occasion when the Lord heard the unwarranted criticism which Miriam and Aaron levelled against their brother Moses in the wilderness,<sup>14</sup> or the

time when He heard the lies which Elisha's servant Gehazi told Naaman, the Syrian commander,<sup>15</sup> or the instance in New Testament days when He heard the lies which Ananias and Sapphira told the apostles.<sup>16</sup>

But it is not only our actions and words which are known to God. Even the inmost recesses of our minds are like an open book before Him. 'You understand my thought afar off' is how David put it here. 'The Lord searches all hearts and understands all the imaginations of the thoughts', is how he expressed it elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, to whom I referred a few moments ago, delivered God's word to the people of Israel, 'I know the things that come into your mind'.<sup>18</sup>

And if we are honest, we would admit that we would each blush for shame if our inward thoughts were visible to other people, but there is no escaping it – all our emotions and our desires, all our feelings and fantasies, are fully known to God.

One of the epistles of the New Testament gives it to us straight, 'There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and laid open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account'.<sup>19</sup> And the word translated 'laid open' there pictures the head being thrown back so as to expose the neck. That is, everything about us is exposed and open to God's inspection. Nothing escapes His scrutiny! Nothing can be concealed from Him! God sees all we do, hears all we say, and knows all we think.

And then, to cap it all, David makes it clear that neither distance nor darkness can provide us with a hiding place from God.<sup>20</sup> First, distance. 'Where can I flee from your presence?', David asks – not, mark you, because he is looking for any answer,<sup>21</sup> but simply to make a point. 'If I take the wings of the morning', he proposes, 'and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there ... your right hand shall hold me'.

His expression 'wings of the morning' refers to the very first beams of morning light in the east. If, David says in effect, I could fly at the speed of light (now known to be 186,000 miles per second) and so, in a fraction of a second, could zoom to the far side of (what was to him) the great sea to the west (the Mediterranean – the world's largest inland sea<sup>22</sup> – ... if I could fly to the far side of that sea, I would, David says, still find myself held tight by the same hand which is on me now, ruling and overruling all affairs of my life.<sup>23</sup>

As far as darkness is concerned, 'if I say', David adds, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night" ... the darkness and the light are both alike to you'.<sup>24</sup>

No, neither distance nor darkness can provide us with a hiding place from God. Though we cannot see Him, He can always see us.

But the amazing thing is that the God who knows both us and our sins through and through, still desires to have a relationship with us – and was Himself willing to pay the price of removing the sin barrier. I am reminded of a verse of a hymn some of us sing occasionally on a Sunday morning:

All thy sins were laid upon Him,  
Jesus bore them on the tree;  
**God, who knew them, laid them on Him,**  
And, believing, thou art free.<sup>25</sup>

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## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> The word implies thorough investigation.

<sup>2</sup> David was aware that the Lord not only knew his every thought, v. 2, but that the Lord had His own thoughts – revealed in His word – and these were so exceedingly precious to him that they caused him to gasp aloud in wonder, v. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Extraordinary, surpassing.

<sup>4</sup> The extent and range of that knowledge filled David with a tremendous sense of awe; it was altogether 'too wonderful' for him.

<sup>5</sup> 'I cannot master it'.

<sup>6</sup> Compare the word spoken by the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah, 'Am I only a God at hand, says the Lord, and not also a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? .... Do not I fill heaven and earth? says the Lord', Jer. 23. 23-24. (The Bible speaks of the earth being filled, not only with God's goodness, Psa. 33. 5, with His riches, Psa. 104. 24, with His steadfast love, Psa. 119. 64, with His glory, Isa. 6. 3, and with His praise, Hab. 3. 3, but here with His presence.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Sam. 2. 3.

<sup>8</sup> 'Even the hairs of your head are all numbered', Matt. 10. 29-30 – though, alas for me, the God who so closely monitors their number doesn't replace them when they fall out!

<sup>9</sup> 'You *formed* my inward parts; you *wove* me *together*'.

<sup>10</sup> When Moses complained to God that he couldn't speak eloquently enough to lead Israel out of Egypt, God fired back the question, 'Who made man's mouth?', Exod. 4. 11.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see ...

<http://science.nationalgeographic.com/science/health-and-human-body/human-body/heart-article.html>,

<http://www.circulationfoundation.org.uk/help-advice/vascular-health/the-circulatory-system/>

and <http://skeptics.stackexchange.com/questions/15582/are-there-60-000-miles-of-blood-vessels-in-the-human-body>.

Also, you get a new stomach lining every three to four days. If you didn't, the strong acids your stomach uses to digest food would also digest your stomach.

<sup>12</sup> Ezek. 8. 7-12.

<sup>13</sup> Make no mistake: 'the Lord looks down from heaven; He sees all the sons of men. From the place of His dwelling He looks on all the inhabitants of the earth ... He considers all their works', Psa. 33. 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> Num. 12. 1-15. Moses said nothing. But the Bible notes, 'and the Lord heard it' – and He did have something to say!

<sup>15</sup> 2 Kings 5. 21. Gehazi obtained garments from Naaman by a lie, and as a punishment was given another 'garment' by the Lord – he was clothed with leprosy! And his new 'garment' lasted much longer than the two changes of clothing he had received from the Syrian commander. It lasted him for the rest of his life, and was later worn by his descendants after him, 2 Kings 5. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Acts 5. 3-4.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Chron. 28. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ezek. 11. 5. God is addressed by the apostles as 'You, Lord, who know the hearts of all', Acts 1. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Heb. 4. 13.

<sup>20</sup> It is the consciousness of sin which leads men to hide from God, like Adam among the trees of the garden.

<sup>21</sup> David wasn't asking where he might 'flee' to escape from God's presence – as on numerous occasions in his early life we are told that he had 'fled' from the envy and rage of the then King Saul, 1 Sam. 19. 10, 12, 18; 20. 1; 21. 10; 27. 4. To flee from God's presence was the very last thing David wanted to do, Psa. 16. 11. Indeed, for his own part, David would far rather hide 'under the shadow' of God's wings than hide 'from' Him, Psa. 17. 8-9 (compare Psa. 27. 5; 31. 20; 143. 9).

<sup>22</sup> Stretching for some 2,400 miles from east to west.

<sup>23</sup> I remember reading of an atheist who once told his child – a daughter as I recall – to write out several times the statement that 'God is nowhere'. But that, without realising its significance, his little girl inserted an extra space – leaving her father to consider a very different claim – that 'God is now here'. I cannot vouch for the truth of the story but I can vouch for the truth of the point being made.

<sup>24</sup> Darkness may be the friend of wicked men, John 3. 20, but it is transparent to God; 'There is no gloom or deep darkness where evildoers may hide themselves', Job 34. 22.

<sup>25</sup> 'Rise my soul! behold 'tis Jesus', by J. Denham Smith (1817-1889).